

# **Appalachian Cure**

*by*  
***Mandy Rogers***

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## **Dedication**

For all journalists who uncover truths and tell stories that touch all our lives... may they uncover their own romance stories in the pages of others.

## Chapter One

Kaycee Wilder rolled her head for the umpteenth time in the last three hours as the bus hit another rut in the rural Kentucky road. Her shoulders and head ached, and her back was really starting to bother her. It had been way too long since she visited her chiropractor. Why hadn't she gone before starting out on this summer project? She had taken a bad fall suffering a compression fracture in her lower back, and ever since had chronic back pain.

It was one of the reasons she had decided to leave her job as a fulltime documentary producer for PBS and take a teaching job at a small private college in Wisconsin. She loved working with the students, and the film department in the school was excellent. Plus she could still take on documentary projects, but she chose the subject and set her own pace.

As yet another huge pothole tortured the bus's suspension and sent a shockwave of pain up her spine; she asked herself again, "what was I thinking taking the bus from Lexington?" She should have gone with her first instinct, rented a four-wheel drive vehicle and driven herself. But as she berated herself again for 'Going Greyhound', she remembered the words of her contact at the Appalachian Development Commission.

"Oh honey, you get lost or break down in the back hills of eastern Kentucky you might never see civilization again. Just fly down to Lexington and then take the bus to Harlan and Doc Chase will pick you up there and take you to the clinic in the hollow. That's the best way—that's what we do with all the med students we send him." Gloria had said.

"And this doctor knows he's getting a filmmaker instead of a medical resident this summer?" Kaycee had asked.

"I sent your whole file down and told him personally your specialization was different from

anything he'd had before."

Kaycee wondered once again through her fatigue what this doctor was like. She imagined he was older and figured he had to be someone special to spend 10 years working in the poorest region of the country trying to keep a clinic open. She didn't know much more about him or the people of the hollow because she'd had so little time to research her topic. Normally she spent several weeks on research before taking on a documentary project, but this was an exception.

She eased her head back on the headrest and thought back to the circumstances that had brought her here. She still had a bitter taste in her mouth. This was not what she had planned for her summer.

Kaycee had been so excited about the project she'd been working on since January. She usually decided on a topic for her creative projects in the spring semester and did her research and set-ups. Then she'd shoot over the summer, and write and edit in the fall. She found doing just one project a year, rather than the three to four she had typically done for PBS was much more fulfilling. Now she was able to do much more of the work herself. Sometimes she'd have a photographer help her with the shooting, especially with her back, but most of it was a one-woman-show. Her college had been extremely supportive with resources and the documentaries aired on the PBS station run by the communications department at the college. This would have been her third project as an independent producer, and both of the other two had been award winners. They also had aired on many of the other PBS affiliates across the network.

Damn, she was disappointed. She had spent three months setting up her inside look at the juvenile justice system in Wisconsin. She had finally received permission to follow two juveniles from arrest through the Milwaukee court system and into juvenile detention, if that's what happened. No one

had ever been granted the access she was going to get. She had imagined the follow-ups she'd be able to do five and ten years later. She was all set to go three weeks ago, when she was shut down. She could still hear her Dean's words.

"Kaycee, I'm so sorry. We just don't have the funding for you this summer. Every department's had to cut at least five percent from its budget. I won't cut positions, and that means a chunk of funding for creative work and research is getting the ax. You've had generous support the last two years, and I have to spread what little money there is around this summer."

Kaycee had been shocked and then had argued hard for her project. She had tried to explain this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. She was sure the film would go network when it was done, which meant the school would recoup most of its costs. But the dean was adamant.

"If you can find other upfront funding, go for it. But I'm sorry. It's not coming from here."

Yeah, like she was going to find 20-thousand dollars just lying around. Even if she contacted her old colleagues at the network, she knew no one could come up the funding in three weeks. It was practically the end of the fiscal year. Budgets were always tight at PBS the last two months of the budget year. It had taken very delicate negotiations to get access to juvenile cases and a delay would blow the whole thing.

Then she learned the real reason *her* funding was being cut, instead of someone else's. "I do have an alternative for you," the dean had said.

"The Appalachian Development Commission is offering a substantial grant for someone to spend the summer in eastern Kentucky, documenting the work of an amazing medical clinic down there. Normally the grant goes to a medical student or resident to intern at the clinic, but no one applied this year, and the ADC thinks if the clinic and its

doctor received a little publicity, it might get more applicants next year, not to mention more federal funding."

"I did my time in Kentucky, including covering the coal mining towns in Appalachia. One tour of duty down there is plenty. No thanks," she responded adamantly. She had been a reporter at a Lexington TV station right out of college. Kaycee shuddered at the poverty she had seen in eastern Kentucky when she'd had to go down into the region to cover a coal mine disaster or a strike. She had lived a very sheltered middle class life, surrounded by a loving family. She was completely unprepared for the things she saw in her first years as a reporter, before she moved into documentary work. The worst of it was the human suffering in eastern Kentucky. The children especially tugged at her heart and their faces still haunted her in rare quiet moments.

"Now, Kaycee, don't be so quick to dismiss this opportunity. I happen to have a friend at the ADC, and we have the inside track on this grant if I can guarantee *you* on the project. You do know we haven't asked you to bring in any grant money since you've been here—we've been more than generous with your prior projects. I can say with certainty that landing this grant would go a long way toward guaranteeing you tenure in two years when you go up for it," the dean had said pointedly.

So there it was, academic politics at its best. It was Kaycee's first head-on collision with the political wall that was part of every college and university. Needless to say, she'd come away damaged. At first she had been furious, now she was just resigned. It certainly was a generous grant--\$50,000 to the college or university the medical resident, or in her case faculty member, came from, and all expenses paid, plus a small stipend for the three months spent in Crystal Creek Hollow. In fact as she learned more about the program, she was really surprised

there had been no applicants this year. When she had asked Gloria about that, the ADC woman had been a little vague.

"Well, it's not exactly a summer at the beach you know. These days' medical students and residents all have stars in their eyes—they want to specialize and work with the most high tech equipment and challenging cases. Getting them to think about family practice in small rural communities is getting tougher and tougher. That's why we need to show them what a difference they could make."

Gloria's plea had been impassioned, but Kaycee had sensed there was something the woman wasn't saying. "And???" Kaycee had asked.

"OK, well, Doc Chase is a bit of a task master. He's a great teacher, but he doesn't tolerate incompetence and is sort of set in his ways. He's there first as the desperately needed doctor, and only secondly as a mentor for the med students. But hey, you won't have that problem, because you're not a med student!" she had added cheerfully.

Kaycee groaned as she recalled Gloria's description of this Dr. Chase. Forget what she had been thinking earlier. He was probably some crotchety old guy who would be a pain in the butt to work with. Little did she know that he was going to be a pain in the butt alright, literally.

She decided she would get the job done as quickly as possible and get out of there. Maybe she could still salvage some of her summer, if not her summer project. She turned to look out the window. She had forgotten how beautiful the mountains of eastern Kentucky were. But that beauty hid such poverty and hopelessness. She remembered going into some of the small communities to cover stories and thinking she'd stepped back in time. Some homes had no electricity, some even no indoor plumbing. Many families grew much of their food



and kept animals for eggs and milk. The men worked the mines the same way their fathers and grandfathers had. And when the mine shut down in a town, the town often went with it, for in mining towns, the mining company owned everything: the houses, the store, the town government, and people's livelihoods.

The bus headed into the valley that snuggled the city of Harlan. It was one of the larger cities in eastern Kentucky and looked much the same as any small city with its white steepled church, brick city hall, and a McDonalds on the corner. Kaycee was relieved to see the bus station in sight. She only hoped that the final ride to Crystal Creek wasn't too much further.

Three hours on this bus had already strained her back and thinking about how she ended up here had strained her mood. She knew she needed to shake off her negativity and frustration. She was normally a very positive person. It wasn't the fault of anyone here that she wasn't in Milwaukee right now. Besides she had to admit this was a worthwhile project. She had the chance to do some good and bring the plight of these people to public attention. Maybe she could send away some of the shadows that still troubled her from her first experience in this region more than a dozen years ago.

Dr. Daniel Chase leaned casually against a pole in the bus depot arrival area. He whittled away at a small piece of wood. He had a bemused expression on his face as he recalled the parting words of his longtime medical partner.

"Now be nice to her, Dan. I know you hate it when the ADC sends women medical residents, but I'm sure she'll be fine. Just remember, I'm a woman and manage to deal just fine!" Glenda Williams did manage to deal just fine. She was in her forties and had four children to look after. Her husband was a mining engineer and had been killed years ago in a mine collapse near Harlan. She had come back to

the hollow to be with her family. She had been a nurse practitioner in Harlan and was the only medical care around when he came to the hollow to start the clinic. They'd built up the clinic together, and she'd been with him ever since, which meant she knew exactly how to deal with his moodiness.

"You mean you manage to deal *with me* just fine!" he said chuckling. "You know why I don't like women residents—the last two we had were more interested in learning how to get me into bed, than the patients out of bed!"

Glenda laughed. Her boss had a very dry sense of humor. It was true the two young women who had come in the last seven years of the ADC program had developed instant crushes on Dan and drove him nuts. Of course, she could understand why. The 37-year-old doctor was one of the best looking guys she had ever seen. He was well over six foot, with an athletic, muscular build honed from the years of outdoor life in the hollow. He had thick dark wavy hair that he wore on the longish side, and he typically had at least a day's growth of beard. And then there were those eyes—deep brown that would hold your gaze with intense interest. He was the definition of ruggedly handsome.

Glenda had often thought to herself if she hadn't been grieving the loss of the love of her life when they met, she'd have been attracted to Dan. But instead he became a good friend in a time of need and she became his partner in the clinic. They were the only medical help for 60 miles around, and given the difficulty of traveling those 60 miles, they were the only medical help period.

Glenda looked again at this quiet man who gave so much to the people of the hollow, and wondered at his own dreams. She hadn't seen him show real interest in any woman since he came here ten years ago. It was all about the work. He was a taciturn, sometimes downright cranky man, except with his

patients. Then she saw a caring she couldn't describe. It was like he felt their pain and knew instinctively how to make it better. When he lost a patient, as happened in the hollow, it was like he lost a piece of himself. She guessed she probably knew him better than anyone, and even she didn't know him that well.

But she did know him well enough to know he wasn't thrilled with ADC sending him another woman. They always welcomed the help of the med students or residents, and Dan considered it a chance to entice another doctor to rural, family medicine where the need was so desperate. But it was hard, serious work here, and he had little tolerance for complaints, emotions and certainly not flirting.

"I'm just saying, keep your ego in check Doc, she may not fall at your feet drooling as soon as she sees you! Give her a chance and don't growl at her the whole trip back here." Glenda had teased him. He had laughed out loud at that. The sound warmed Glenda's heart, she didn't hear it often enough.

"OK, you're right. I guess that did sound a little arrogant. Hold down the fort Glenda, if the bus is on time, we'll be back in about three hours." He headed to the old pick-up truck and hit the road, a smile on his face.

Now he looked up as the Lexington bus pulled in. *OK here we go Glenda, she gets one chance, but the first inkling of flirting...* he thought.

Kaycee grabbed her well-worn briefcase and slung it over her shoulder, wincing again at the pain in her back as she absorbed the weight of her laptop and other paperwork, plus all the digital video tapes she'd need. She had decided to bring the small digital video cameras instead of shooting film because they were lighter and more maneuverable and she had no idea if there was any place to get her film processed around here. She stepped down off the bus, looked around briefly and

then went over to get her bags.

Dan watched as she walked off the bus. At first he didn't think she was the one he was waiting for, but almost wished she was. She looked like she could still be in her twenties, but her eyes held the experience of more years. She was dressed very practically in jeans, a t-shirt and a long sleeved denim overshirt, and hiking boots. But her dress did nothing to hide the fact that she was stunning. She had shoulder length jet black hair that fell around her face in a chaos of curls and reflected the sunlight like the sheen of oil after a fresh rain. She was tall and curved in all the right places. Her eyes were a magnificent green that no emerald could match. He saw her smile as she took the last step to the ground, as if nothing could make her happier at that moment, than being off that bus. She looked around briefly and then moved to the side of the bus where the driver was unloading bags.

Dan sighed, surprised at his reaction to the woman. He hadn't felt that jolt of attraction in a long time, not since Lisa had died. The last ten years he had simply thrown himself into his work at the hollow, and healing others had healed his own wounds at the loss of his young wife. He shook his head to clear those memories and continued to watch the passengers leave the bus. He was startled when he realized she was the only woman among the dozen or so people on board. She just seemed too old to be a medical resident. Well, maybe she had come to the profession late.

Kaycee was standing with all her gear suddenly unsure what to do next. She really didn't want to haul it all into the terminal by herself with her shoulders and back aching. Then she saw him walking toward her. It was hard not to stare at the man headed her way. Tall, dark and handsome didn't begin to describe him. Check that—make it tall, dark and intense. This certainly was no crotchety old country doctor. Those eyes held her

nearly hypnotized until he spoke.

"Dr. Wilder? Dr. Kaycee Wilder?" he asked, the rich timbre of his voice washing over her.

Then she came crashing back to reality when she realized what he said. "No... no... I mean, yes, I'm... just call me Kaycee. You must be Dr. Chase," she was completely flustered and making an idiot of herself she thought crossly. Why had he called her doctor? Shit, Gloria had promised her he knew he wasn't getting a medical resident this year.

"Dan, please. Welcome to eastern Kentucky. Is this all your stuff?" He seemed quite amused by her confusion, which only made her angry.

"Yes this is it." He was reaching for her camera gear bag, but she beat him to it. "I'll get that—it's my gear. You can grab the duffle bag if you want." It came out sounding petulant and he raised an eyebrow at her, but said nothing until she winced reaching down for her camera bag. He simply took it out of her hand and then looked into her eyes capturing her pain.

"Back pain?"

Instead of graciously accepting his help, she rose stiffly and snapped, "I'm fine! It was a long bus ride. Can we just go?" She knew she was being rude and taking the miscommunication out on him when it wasn't his fault. But somehow she couldn't seem to help herself. She hurt, and she didn't like her reaction to this man. It was just one more strike against this project.

Dan was quite surprised by her reaction, wondering what he'd said. He had to smile, thinking that at least he wouldn't have to worry about her flirting. And if she chose to continue this bratty attitude, well, he had a foolproof cure for that. A good dose of his hand across her backside would be just the prescription! Then he had to clear his head when he realized the thought of her cute butt across his knee was quite appealing.

All he said was, "My truck's parked out on the

street." He lifted her big duffle bag and equipment bag as if they weighed nothing and headed around the terminal to the street.

Kaycee sighed heavily and followed. *So much for shaking off my negative attitude*, she thought. If only she could just turn back the clock 15 minutes and start over with him. Now she not only had to explain she wasn't the medical resident he was obviously expecting, but also she wasn't the bitch she had just acted like. This project was off to a spectacular start.

Dan had already stowed her gear in the back of the pick-up when she caught up with him. He went to take her briefcase and do the same, but she held on to it.

"Suit yourself," he said sounding more than a little peeved. But he still went around to open the door for her.

She figured she'd better start smoothing things over now. "It's just I have my computer in here and I was afraid it might get banged up in the back." Her face had softened, and he reacted to that.

"No problem." He stepped aside so she could climb up and noticed again the slight wince of pain as she reached in to put her briefcase on the floor. Before she could climb up he gently took her arm and turned her toward him. His touch was like an electric shock to her system and she instinctively took a step back. He immediately let go.

"Look, I can tell you're in pain—I'm a doctor remember? I'm afraid it's a good hour ride to Crystal Creek along rural back roads." She groaned. "Why don't you let me at least try to work out some of the strain and relax your muscles before we leave?" he asked quietly.

It was tempting, but somehow she didn't think his touch would be the least bit relaxing. And she didn't want him doing it again until she got a handle on her reactions to him. "Thanks for the offer, but you know, all I really need is a couple of Tylenol

and I'll be fine. I've got some in my bag, so we can go." She tried to smile as she said it and then quickly turned and got in the truck. She could tell he wasn't happy when he slammed her door.

Dan didn't say a word as he got in the truck. He just reached around behind her seat, grabbed a bottle of water and handed it to her, then he started the truck and pulled out onto the street, his jaw clenched.

"Thank you," she said quietly and then popped about 4 Tylenol hoping they would at least dull the pain. She sat back and surreptitiously watched him while he concentrated on the road as if she wasn't there. Finally as she saw his jaw start to relax a little, she figured she'd try a little conversation.

"So, tell me a little about your clinic."

He didn't respond right away, but finally started to talk and as he did his whole demeanor changed. She heard a deep, abiding love in his voice. "The clinic is small, attached to a building complex that also includes the school, church and orphanage. We only have four beds and one exam room. Our equipment is right out of 60's medicine, but we get by. There are a couple of boarding rooms upstairs where Glenda or I stay when we have overnight patients. One of those will be yours."

"Who is Glenda?" she asked, almost not wanting to know and then chastising herself for the thought.

"She's a nurse practitioner and my partner. She's been with me since we started the clinic," he smiled as he talked about her and again Kaycee felt that tightening in her stomach she would rather not have.

Dan didn't notice and continued. "But you'll quickly see most of the work we do isn't at the clinic, it's out in the hollow. We'll make lots of good old fashioned house calls."

Kaycee cut him off, "Dr. Chase there's something..."

"It's Dan."

"OK, Dan. There's something you need to know."

"Something other than the fact you're older than the typical resident, and stubborn like most doctors about treating yourself?" he said with a slight grin.

Kaycee sighed. He wasn't making this any easier. "I'm not a doctor of any kind. I'm a college professor and a documentary producer. I'm here..."

She stopped as he slammed on the brakes, only throwing his arm across her to keep her from flying forward as an afterthought. Then he turned angrily to her.

"What the hell did you just say?" he shouted.

"You heard me just fine. I'm not a medical resident. There was obviously a screw-up with..."

"I'll say there's a screw-up!" He made a sharp U-turn and started heading back to town.

"What are you doing?" she asked, getting angry herself. "Where are we going? I'm trying to tell you ADC was supposed to send you my file and explain everything. Clearly that didn't happen!" She flopped back in her seat, arms crossed.

"Gloria sent your file. She also knows I never look at that crap. You can't learn anything about a person from a stack of paper."

"Well you could have learned I wasn't a doctor, and wasn't here to be your little medical gopher!" she said sarcastically.

He threw her a look that definitely said shut-up or else. He pulled back into Harlan and stopped in front of a hotel next to the bus station.

"What are you doing?" she demanded again.

He didn't say a word, just got out of the truck, grabbed her bags out of the back and set them on the sidewalk. Then he came around to the passenger side, opened the door, grabbed her around the waist and set her on the ground. He pulled out her briefcase and walked to where he'd set the bags. Not knowing what else to do, she followed, now as furious as he was.



"You can stay here tonight, just have them send the bill to ADC. There's a bus back to Lexington in the morning. I wish I could say it's been a pleasure Ms. Wilder." Then without another word he stalked off, got in his truck and sped off.

Kaycee was so taken aback, he was already in the truck before she could say anything. But when she found her voice she didn't hold back. "Arrogant bastard! Are you crazy?!?" she yelled after the truck, but just ended up coughing at the dust kicked up by the truck's wheels as it skidded out of the parking spot.

## Chapter Two

Glenda was updating charts from Dan's last house call trip when she heard the truck pull up. She headed out to greet the new resident and heard Dan slam the truck door and come stomping up to the clinic alone. His whole bearing said 'don't mess with me'. But Glenda wasn't put off by the big man's anger.

"OK, what did you do to scare her off before she even got here?" she asked.

"*She* is not a doctor, she's a goddamn media producer or some such thing!" he stalked past Glenda toward his office in the back of the clinic.

"What are you talking about? What did you do with her?" Glenda asked a little worried given how angry he was. "You didn't dump her out along the side of the road or anything did you?"

Dan stopped at that, turned to look at her, and saw the smirk and finally grinned. "OK, so I'm a little worked up."

"A little??"

He chuckled and headed back to the office with Glenda following. "Why on earth would Gloria not send us a medical student or resident? What the heck are we supposed to do with a media whatever?"

"That's exactly what I intend to find out!" He was already dialing Washington.

"Appalachian Development Commission, Gloria Michaels."

"Gloria what the hell is going on?" Dan snarled into the phone.

"Hi Dan, good to talk to you too. I guess Kaycee Wilder must have arrived," she said sweetly, imaging that Dan's face was probably all red by now.

"Oh she arrived all right, and she'll be on a bus headed right back first thing tomorrow morning! Now where's my medical resident?"

"Dan, calm down. Didn't you read the file I sent—everything was explained in there," she asked, knowing the answer before he responded.

"Gloria..." he said with a warning tone.

"Oh, all right. So, I know you never read those damn files. Look, you're not getting a medical resident this summer—I'm sending you Kaycee instead, and you need to work with her," Gloria said firmly.

"Work with her for what? So she can shoot sad pictures of poor people and exploit them to get your rich donors to write a bigger check? No way!" Dan was highly protective of the dignity of the people in the hollow and he had no love for the media.

"I resent that Dan. The ADC's been very supportive of your work, and I don't think we've ever done anything to deserve that," she said quietly.

"You're right, I'm sorry. But come on Gloria, a film producer?"

"Dan, listen to me. Look at her file. She's not just any film producer. She's an award winning documentary producer. I've seen her work. It's outstanding. We need what she can do for your program and others like it," she was pleading now.

Dan sighed, "What exactly is it she's going to do?"

"She's there to produce a documentary on you and the clinic to show the difference one doctor can make to an area. We need this," she repeated. She paused unsure whether to tell him the rest and then decided she had better. "Dan, there were no applicants for the internship program this summer."

Dan's anger completely dissolved at that. He knew that meant there was simply no interest from young doctors in rural medicine. He sighed, rubbing his temples and feeling the fatigue of fighting the uphill battle to save lives in the hollow.

"OK, Gloria, you just threw the winning punch." She hated hearing the sound of defeat in his voice.

"Dan, I have a good feeling about this. She puts incredible compassion and dignity into her work. I know she can do what we need."

"That makes one of us."

"Give her a chance. Now, let me talk to her."

There was another long pause. "She's not here," he said flatly.

"What did you do with her? You didn't drop her off in the middle of nowhere down there?" she asked anxiously.

"Geez... first Glenda and now you. Of course I didn't dump her somewhere. I left her in Harlan," Dan said frustrated.

"Oh please tell me not at that rat trap hotel by the bus station!" Gloria said sounding horrified, having stayed there during site visits to set up the intern program.

Dan had a distinctly sheepish look on his face as Glenda stared him down. "Yeah, I dropped her at the Coal Town Inn. But the place has been restored, sort of, and I didn't see one rat on the sidewalk!"

"Daniel Chase you ought to be ashamed of yourself! I expect you to go get her first thing in the morning. AND I expect you to call tonight and apologize!" Now she sounded like his mother.

"And YOU should have told me!" he countered.

"I did... I sent you an entire..."

"Gloria you know damn well I didn't read the file. You should have told me on the phone when you gave me her arrival information."

"I did tell you her specialization was different from anything else you'd ever had!" she said smiling.

"Brats who play games like that down here, end up over my knee!" he teased now smiling too.

"Promises, promises!" she said laughing. "Seriously, Dan, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you'd get this riled up. But please don't take it out on Kaycee. Make it work. Hey, she's really a nice woman-- smart as a whip and a very talented storyteller. She

won't exploit you or your patients. You might even find you like her once you get to know her."

"I don't think we're talking about the same woman! And no more matchmaking!" he said sternly.

"OK, fine. Just give her a chance, please."

Dan sighed, "Only for you, Gloria. But she plays by my rules or she's gone."

"Thanks Dan. Take care, and call Kaycee."

Dan set down the phone and looked at Glenda who clearly found the whole situation entirely amusing. "I don't know what you're grinning about. It just means we keep up this insane workload through the summer!" he snapped.

"It'll be worth it to hear you try to apologize to this poor woman, who I'm sure you terrorized."

"I did not intimidate Kaycee Wilder one whit! Actually, she didn't sound like she wanted to be here any more than I wanted her here. I don't know what kind of stick she had up her butt, but she wasn't very friendly, even before my little blow-up. I know she was hurting—back pain from the bus ride I think. But still she nearly took my head off when I tried to take her bag."

"You mean the southern gentleman routine didn't knock her socks off? Poor Dan, he actually found a female over the age of 12 that didn't drool at his feet or think he's a saint!!" Now Glenda was laughing out loud, and dying to meet this woman who stood up to Dan's charm and intimidation.

"That's quite enough out of you woman!" he growled.

"Or what!? You going to put me over your knee too?" she asked tauntingly.

"Don't think I haven't thought about it over the years, Glenda! Given your impetuous side, I'll bet your husband warmed your fanny a few times," his voice softened as he said it.

She got that faraway smile she always had when remembering her husband. "That, Daniel Chase, is

none of your business! Now go on, call this Kaycee Wilder and tell her you'll be back to get her in the morning. And make it a *real* apology! I'm heading home to the kids. I'll open up the clinic in the morning, since YOU won't be here." She gave him one more smile and left the office.

"Good night, Glenda. Take care and say hi to your mom and the kids for me." He watched her go, thinking for the millionth time how lucky he was to have her. She was like the sister he never had, and even though she was seven years older, he still felt protective toward her and the kids. Of course, he knew very well that she looked out for him too. It was a good partnership.

Dan looked down at the phone and his smile disappeared. He groaned at the thought of calling Kaycee Wilder, but called information for the hotel number anyway.

Kaycee stood on the sidewalk, staring down the road long after Dan's truck had disappeared from sight, muttering curses at him all the while. Tears of pain and frustration slid down her cheeks. She finally collapsed down on her bags and put her head in her hands. She had no idea how long she was out there, looking completely lost, before the desk clerk came out and startled her with a hand on her shoulder.

"Is there something I can help you with, honey?" the comforting voice came from a grandmotherly looking woman who was barely taller than Kaycee sitting down.

She looked up at the elderly woman and wanted to pour her soul out. But she settled for a simple response instead. "I guess I need a room for the night." She could hear how pitiful she sounded and that was enough to bring back some of her spirit.

"We can do that. You just leave those bags right there. I'll get Charlie right out here to take them up. Then we'll get you settled in a nice room and you can soak your cares away in a warm bubble bath.

Now how's that sound?"

Kaycee couldn't help but smile at the woman's ministrations. And in fact, nothing sounded better than a hot tub full of bubbles. "That is the best offer I've had all day."

An hour later she was settled in a cozy room with worn carpets and a frayed bedspread, but the biggest claw foot bathtub she'd ever seen. Now up to her neck in lavender bubbles, she was finally starting to relax. Even the ache in her back and shoulders was melting away. She closed her eyes and let her mind go. Of course the place it immediately went was, 'now what?' Unfortunately the first image that came to her as she asked herself that question was Dr. Dan Chase. She willed herself to remain relaxed as she felt her anger start to rise all over again. *How dare he dump me off like so much baggage! Well he's not going to scare me off.*

At that moment the phone rang. Her first instinct was to let it ring, but there was a phone right there in the bathroom, so she answered it.

"Hello?"

"Ms. Wilder? It's Dan Chase."

Kaycee was so surprised to hear from him, she didn't say anything.

"Ms. Wilder? Are you there?" an impatient edge crept into his voice.

That's all it took to bring her anger right back full fury. "Not to you!" she snarled and hung up.

At the other end of the phone Dan just stood there looking at the phone. "She hung up on me!

Of all the nerve!" he mumbled to himself. Then he took a deep breath. OK, she's probably got good reason to be pissed. After all he did just dump her in the middle of Harlan and take off.

"Just keep reminding yourself, you're the one who didn't read the file. So, she has a right to be angry." He wasn't sure the self-talk was helping. But he dialed again, and this time he didn't give her

a chance to even say hello. "Kaycee, don't hang up!" Click.

"Damn!" he swore. The next time he dialed, the phone just rang and no one answered. He slammed the receiver down and realized he needed a new plan.

Kaycee listened to the phone ring and ring till it jangled her nerves. "Give it up already!" she snapped at the phone as if the person on the other end could hear. When it finally stopped ringing, she took it off the hook. She laid back on the bed trying to figure out what had just happened. Why did she hang up on him, not once, but twice! Yes, she was angry, but usually she went nose-to-nose with someone she had a beef with. She certainly wasn't afraid of confrontation. But this guy just set her teeth on edge, and yet... God, she was confused. There was something about him that was incredibly attractive, and it wasn't just his looks.

Kaycee decided not to decide anything tonight. She was tired and hungry and didn't care that she had no idea what she was going to do come morning. She picked up the phone, and ordered room service, which she learned from Melba, the grandmotherly desk clerk, was actually take-out from the diner across the street. Then she disconnected the phone and plugged in her computer and caught up on e-mail. By 10p.m. she was sound asleep.

She awoke early the next morning, feeling refreshed and pain free. The old bed was hard as a board, which was exactly what her back needed. She got up, dressed and went in search of coffee and some idea of what she was going to do next. She came down the hotel staircase and saw Melba already at her post—and it wasn't even 8:00a.m. She flashed the woman a bright smile, "Morning, Melba! I'm desperate for coffee."

"Morning, honey. You look bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this morning! Coffee's on across the



street at the diner, dear."

"I hope you like it strong." The voice stopped her cold. She looked toward the hotel door and there he was, leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed. It appeared she was going to have to deal with that what next question before coffee. He had that same intense gaze that was hard to pull away from. He was disappointed to see her morning smile disappear.

Kaycee finally disengaged from his piercing look, pulled herself up and continued toward the door, only barely acknowledging him. "Dr. Chase," she said coldly.

"Ms. Wilder," he responded with that annoying amusement in his voice.

She walked right past him and started across the street toward the diner. He caught up with her and moved to walk beside her. When they got to the diner he stepped ahead and held the door for her. She continued to ignore him. The sign in the diner entrance said seat yourself, so she looked for a table for one and found one in the back. She headed that way, but as she went to sit down, he was right there, pulling out her chair and then pushing her in. He then simply grabbed a chair from another table and sat across from her. She glared at him and signaled the waitress.

"Coffee, black, as soon as possible please!" she asked, trying not to snap at the waitress who was looking dreamy-eyed at Dan. He looked back at the young girl, flashed her a winning smile, and said, "Make it two."

Then he caught her chin and forced her to look at him. "You hung up on me last night," he chastised softly. She pushed his hand away from her face, but didn't look away.

"You dumped me in the middle of town!" she countered.

"Touché!" he smiled. The waitress brought the coffee and menus, but her presence went unnoticed

as the two refused to break eye contact in a silent standoff. Finally he said, "Our coffee's getting cold," and he looked down at his cup letting her have the small victory. They drank in silence for several more minutes. She was looking out the window, trying to think of anything but his overwhelming presence, and he watched her, waiting for the right moment.

When she brought her eyes back to him he gently took her hand and said, "Kaycee, I'm sorry. I was angry at the situation, and a little angry at your behavior, and I snapped. I dumped you tired and hurting, and that was wrong."

"You apologize well," she said sarcastically, not quite ready to give in to him.

"You don't accept very well," he scolded gently. She blushed at his words and looked down. She was doing it again--being bitchy for no good reason, except to keep him at arm's length. She looked up at him, the fight gone from her expression.

"You're right, that was rude after your sincere apology. I accept, and... and I admit that I probably provoked you. I don't know what got into me, but I couldn't seem to say a civilized thing yesterday. I'm sorry I was such a bitch."

"A brat is more like it," he chuckled.

"Now who's being ungracious!" she snapped back.

He held his hands up in mock surrender. "OK, OK... apology accepted, brat comment withdrawn. How is your back this morning, by the way?"

She opened her mouth to say fine, but he cut her off, "And don't you dare brush that question off with a 'fine'!" She laughed at that.

"But it really is fine this morning! Nothing like a long soak in a hot tub, and a good night's sleep on a cement mattress to work the kinks out."

"Are the beds really that hard over there?" his asked with a pained expression on his face.

"Oh yeah! But they're perfect for a bad back."

"Care to tell me why you have chronic back

pain?" he asked with genuine concern.

"It's a long story."

"Well, we've got about an hour's drive to Crystal Creek," he paused, "if you'll come back with me."

She looked at him for a long time before responding. "You're willing to let me do my job and make this documentary?"

"As long as you follow my rules to the letter," he said seriously.

She immediately stiffened, "I should have known! Let's get something straight, Dr. Chase, I don't work under anybody's rules but my own! Just stick to your doctoring, and let me worry about how to keep you from looking so overbearing, and arrogant on tape." She started to get up and leave, but he caught her wrist in a firm grip.

"You need to rein in that temper of yours, young lady. Now sit... please?" he ordered quietly. She was irritated at his use of 'young lady' as if she was a child, but since she couldn't free herself from his firm grip, she sat.

"I have no intention of telling you how to make your movie, but this is my clinic and my patients that we're talking about. It's also my community and the people are important to me. It's not an easy life there, and the area can be very dangerous if you don't know where you're going. So, there are rules, some to protect you, some to protect others."

Kaycee turned from him, arms crossed, pissed. He sounded so reasonable after her outburst. All she could think to say was, "It's not a movie, it's a documentary!" She knew she sounded churlish, and he was not about to let that go.

"OK, now you're definitely bratting!" he chuckled.

She rolled her eyes, sighed and then relented. "Fine, so we'll *negotiate* some rules. But just keep in mind, doc, I'm not one of your little medical students. I've been doing this a long time and I've been in a lot worse places than eastern Kentucky."

The way she said her last words, and the look of painful experience in her eyes made him believe her.

"Come on, what do you say, truce, at least till we get to Crystal Creek?" he held out his hand. She shook her head and laughed, the brief reflection of difficult memories gone from her eyes, and took his hand in a firm shake.

They actually had a companionable trip to the clinic, sharing interesting anecdotes about life in the hollow and life behind a camera lens. There was no talk of rules or her project, just two people getting to know a little about each other's lives.

When they arrived at the clinic she was warmly welcomed by Glenda and the two teens who helped out. Sarabeth was a shy 15-year old, the youngest daughter of one of the farmers in the hollow. She wanted to be a nurse like Glenda, and helped out as a kind of nurse's aid, cleaning the exam room and keeping the medical supplies stocked and organized. She also was allowed to assist with some of the patients. Jonesy was an impish 13-year-old who lived at the church orphanage. He instantly won Kaycee's heart when he came up to her and said, "You're pretty," and then pulled a bouquet of wilted wildflowers from behind his back.

Dan came up behind him and ruffled his hair. "You're making me look bad, buddy! I didn't think to get the lady flowers."

Kaycee looked up and winked at him, "No I'm sure you didn't, especially after our first encounter," she said softly.

The little boy didn't catch Kaycee's comment and looked up at Dan so seriously and said, "It's OK, Dr. Dan, they can be from both of us." Dan smiled down at the boy and Kaycee's heart truly melted.

Glenda came to her rescue and got everyone organized to help Kaycee get settled in while Dan dealt with the patients waiting to see him.

The next couple of weeks seemed to fly by. Kaycee wanted time to get the feel of the hollow and do some of the research she hadn't had time for before she came. When she actually started shooting, she wanted to be invisible. That meant people had to be completely comfortable with her presence, and that suited Dan just fine. He made it clear he didn't want her shooting anything until he was convinced it was OK with his patients. Kaycee chaffed at his rules, especially not being able to go anywhere outside the clinic compound alone, but tried to comply without complaint. They had a few arguments, but not many. She figured the time to start pushing the limits was when she was ready to shoot.

Dan gave her as much time as he could, showing her around and introducing her to the people of the hollow. But there were still a lot of times when he insisted she leave a patient meeting or stay behind at the clinic. Those were the biggest arguments. She had yet to follow him on one of his emergency house calls. But by the time he returned to the clinic, they had both cooled off, and she listened intently as he talked about what had happened. He liked the way she listened—always seeming so interested. He guessed that was part of what made her good at her job.

Kaycee and Glenda bonded almost immediately. Glenda spent hours talking about the work they did at the clinic and in home visits. She also shared the history of the families in the hollow. Kaycee had become a regular guest at her home for dinner, and she loved her kids. Most importantly, Glenda was a great sounding board when she was frustrated by something Dan did. Glenda understood him better than most, and advised patience in dealing with him.

For her part, Glenda was carefully watching the relationship between Kaycee and Dan. She couldn't help having high hopes that something would

develop. She liked the way Kaycee stood up to Dan, and she thought it was interesting to see Dan be so protective of her. These two were perfect for each, if they could just avoid getting on each other's nerves long enough to see it.

Glenda had told Kaycee about Dan's wife's death and how it had led him back to the hollow. Kaycee was shocked to find out Dan had actually been born and raised in Crystal Creek until age 10. But then his Dad decided there had to be something better than working the mines, so he pulled up stakes and took the family to Chicago. That's where Dan had spent the rest of his childhood, and gone to college and medical school. That's where he'd met and married Lisa, and that's where she had died of cancer. Dan had felt so helpless as she died, that he just decided he had to leave Chicago and go somewhere he could make a difference. So, he came home, and opened the clinic.

Now Glenda was debating telling Dan about Kaycee's divorce, but she didn't want to break a confidence. Kaycee had confided to her that she had been married for nearly 10 years to a Washington, D.C. lawyer. He was a power player, smooth and sophisticated, pretty much the exact opposite of Dan. Kaycee said while she was a reporter in D.C., they had been one of the 'power couples'. It surprised Glenda when Kaycee told her about him. She didn't seem the type to go for someone with so little depth. Kaycee wouldn't say much about what happened, but there was a lot of pain in her voice as she talked about it. Apparently they had divorced after she had the accident that injured her back. Kaycee had laughingly said she'd since sworn off men. But Glenda could read between the lines and knew what she'd really sworn off was the chance at getting hurt again.

Kaycee was starting to get into a routine at the clinic by the end of the second week. She'd get up early and Dan would meet her and they'd walk

somewhere in the hollow that she hadn't seen yet. She also used these times to get him to talk about the people and their lives. He had so many wonderful stories, and she was trying to figure out how to tell those stories in her documentary. These were comfortable times, when they seemed to get along like old friends. Dan had even taken her hand at times and she didn't pull away.

Then they'd come back to the clinic and the day would start. She observed both Dan and Glenda dealing with patients, and spent time chatting with people when they came and had to wait. It was her way of letting people get to know her and become comfortable with her. She spent many evenings going through records in the school library and church to learn the history of the place and the families. She knew she was about ready to start shooting.

Dan was getting ready to make one of his week long house call trips in which he visited families that wouldn't come to the clinic. She desperately wanted to go with him. This was the story she most wanted to tell. He'd already said no twice, but she wasn't giving up, much to his annoyance.

Kaycee was walking past the exam room, musing about her latest tactic to convince Dan when she saw Glenda working on Sarabeth's hand. The girl was obviously in pain.

"Sarabeth, what happened honey?" Kaycee asked, coming in to help.

"I cut myself," she cried.

A clearly frustrated Glenda said, "She was careless with the scalpels this morning. Sarabeth will you sit still, so I can see if you need stitches! I swear child, you've had ants in your pants all morning! What's wrong?"

Sarabeth instantly blushed and looked down. Kaycee was surprised at Glenda's impatience—it didn't happen often, so Sarabeth really must have been a problem.

Finally Sarabeth looked up and said quietly, "I got a lickin' last night."

"Oh for heaven's sake, Sarabeth, what did you do?" Glenda asked casually, while Kaycee listened, her jaw clenching.

"Me and ma took the shortcut home from the church meeting, and it was dark and we got lost. Pa and my brothers had to come find us. And they were plenty mad."

"Good gracious child, you know better than that! And your mother certainly does—that cut through is much too dangerous at night. You're lucky all that happened was you got lost." Glenda exclaimed.

"That's what pa said. He was real mad at me and ma. I got ten good licks with his belt," the child said as if it was an accepted occurrence.

"Your father beat you with a belt?!" Kaycee exclaimed shocked.

Both Glenda and Sarabeth looked up startled by her tone of voice.

"Yeah, he always spanks me with the belt if it's a really bad thing. But ma got the really hard spanking. Pa took her out to the barn and they were gone a long time. Ma was crying really hard when they came back." Kaycee blanched at Sarabeth's words and ran out of the room. Glenda called after her, but she was gone.

Kaycee went straight to Dan's office and burst in, slamming the door behind her. Dan was trying to get his itinerary together for his house call week and had asked Glenda to handle whatever she could.

"You've got to do something!" she demanded.

Dan looked up startled at her entrance and angry words and pacing. "What's wrong Kaycee? I'm really busy right now," he said irritated at her interruption.

Kaycee was furious, "Too damned busy to deal with Sarabeth and Ann being beaten?"

"What?! When?! What happened? Where are



they?" Dan asked alarmed at her news.

"John took a belt to his daughter and his wife last night, just because they took some shortcut or something. It's abuse, and you've got to do something. Report him!" Kaycee was really outraged and upset.

Dan sighed, relieved to know no one was really hurt and sat back down to finish his work. "Kaycee, no one was abused. John spanked them. Yes, he spanked them hard, but they deserved it. In fact, I told Sarabeth this morning when I heard, that I was damn tempted to spank her myself."

Kaycee was astonished. "You mean you condone this."

"I not only condone it, I whole heartedly agree with it. What they did was dangerous, and they both knew better, especially Ann, for crying out loud." She could see Dan was angry now, but not for the same reason. He was angry because two people he cared for put themselves at risk.

He looked up and saw Kaycee's face was flushed with anger, but her eyes looked at him with disdain. "Don't look at me like that, Kaycee Wilder!"

"It's abuse pure and simple. And not just his daughter, but his wife! That's Neanderthal!"

Now Dan's anger was directed at her, "Haven't you learned anything in the two weeks you've been here?! These people have stronger family values than all your politically correct Washington D.C. couples put together. They don't cheat, they don't lie, they don't divorce! They stay together and take care of each other. There's no stronger bond than the family ties here. And yes, the man is the head of the house—that's the way it is. He respects his wife and children, but he also takes responsibility for them. He keeps them safe! And the women here like it that way. They feel cherished and loved. Discipline is part of all that. Geez, weren't you ever spanked as a child?" He raked his hand through his hair in frustration at her intolerance.

"NO! My parents didn't believe in it," she said, confused by his attack.

"Well that explains a lot!" he said sarcastically.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she popped back.

"I'll let you figure it out! Just know this, I was brought up around here too, and I absolutely, by God, believe in the effectiveness of a good fanny warming. So, pull something stupid like Sarabeth and Ann, and I promise you, you'll get a good dose of my hand across *your* backside!" he stomped out of the office leaving Kaycee just standing there with her mouth open.

"Like hell!" she muttered under her breath still stunned by Dan's vehemence and threat.

## Chapter Three

Dan left at dawn the next morning without a word to anyone. Glenda found his itinerary on his desk along with a terse note to take care of things and use the satellite pager in case of an emergency. It was the one piece of technology he didn't try to cut corners on. There was no cell service in the hollow, and most of the homes he'd be visiting didn't have any phone service. These were the people who just wanted to be left to themselves, but they trusted him because he'd proven himself and he was one of them. If there was an emergency, the only way to reach him while he was on a house call trip was the satellite pager. He'd call in a couple times during the week when he had access to a phone.

Kaycee came down late that morning and Glenda took one look at her and had a good idea of why Dan had left so abruptly. She looked like hell. Her eyes were swollen and red from crying, and her face was tense with the pain of a killer headache. Glenda grabbed a couple of Tylenol and a glass of water and went to talk to her.

"Want to tell me about it?" she asked in her quiet way.

Kaycee gratefully accepted the pills and water and downed both. "Not really."

"Dan's gone. He left on his house call trip early this morning."

Kaycee sighed and tried to stop fresh tears. Glenda put her arms around her and just held tight until her sobs quieted. "Now tell me what happened, Kaycee. Obviously you and Dan had a big fight. And I'm gonna guess it was over Sarabeth and Ann's punishment?"

Kaycee looked at her friend. "I just don't understand how someone with so much compassion for human suffering can agree with such harsh discipline. I've seen how Dan reacts to others'

pain—it's almost like he can feel it himself. How does someone with that kind of empathy condone taking a belt to a child, or a grown woman for that matter?"

Kaycee was beyond anger now and just bewildered and hurt. She realized she had feelings for this man, but she didn't know if she could accept this.

"Kaycee, would it surprise you to know that I spank my children? I don't use a belt, but I've had the older ones cut a switch on occasion. And more than that, my husband spanked me a few times too." Glenda smiled at the younger woman's disbelief.

"Kaycee, discipline is not about anger or abuse. It's about caring—caring enough to protect someone from their own risky or unacceptable behavior. Yes, a spanking hurts, but it's a minor temporary pain compared with the permanent pain doing something unsafe can cause. Suppose John hadn't punished Sarabeth or Ann harshly and so they saw no consequences of their risky decision. Then next time they were hurt or killed taking that shortcut at night. How would John feel then? How would any of us feel?"

Kaycee was listening carefully to what Glenda said, trying to absorb it along with what Dan had said yesterday. "But Ann is a grown woman—so are you. Didn't you resent being spanked by your husband?"

"I never liked it while it was happening, but afterwards I always felt loved and secure. It also meant there was never guilt or recriminations between us. A spanking always cleared the slate. Look, it's not for everyone granted, but here in the hollow, discipline is pretty firm and consistent. As a result our kids are respectful and don't get into a lot of trouble. And most marriages are strong. You've seen the poverty and struggle here. It's a hard life, but people survive because of their families, and

they survive with a dignity and tradition that goes back a long way. You need to spend more time out of the clinic to understand the wonders of the people here," Glenda said with a quiet pride.

"Glenda, I'm sorry if I offended you. I didn't mean to. I know I certainly offended Dan yesterday. He thinks I'm just a narrow-minded city girl," Kaycee said with derision.

"No need to apologize honey, just try to understand. Dan and I grew up around here, so we have a different perspective. Don't be so quick to judge what you don't completely understand," Glenda chided gently.

Kaycee nodded and was quiet for a while. "So, how long will Dan be gone?"

"His itinerary calls for a full week."

"I really wanted to go with him. The house calls is the story I really want to tell. Listening to him describe various visits, I just know it could accomplish what ADC wants to help recruit more doctors to rural practice," Kaycee said, showing the passion for what she did.

"Actually I agree. But why don't we start with some emergency calls, before you trek out on a weeklong house calls trip," Glenda said.

"That would be great, but Dan wouldn't hear of it!"

"Well, Dan's not here now is he?" Glenda responded with a smile.

"I don't want to cause trouble between you and Dan. I seem to generate enough just between he and I," Kaycee said sarcastically.

"It's OK. Dan just wanted you to get acclimated, and get people used to your being around. It's the same way we work with any new medical resident. But by about the third week we're ready to start taking them with us. So, if I get any emergency call-outs this week, and I'm sure I will, you can come."

"You're a godsend Glenda, in more ways than

one. I'm really going to think about what you said. I want to tell the real story of the people here, and I'm beginning to see it's not a story about poor people."

"Good, you're on the right track now. I'm sending Sarabeth and Jonesy out to gather some herbs and plants I need for some of my homeopathic teas and poultices. You want to go with them? They can tell you all about what each plant is used for. It's been part of their upbringing," Glenda offered.

"Sure that would be great. OK if I bring my camera and shoot some stuff?"

"Why not? We've all been wondering *when* you were actually going to get to work!!" Glenda laughed at Kaycee's expression of mock indignation. Then she gave Glenda a big hug and went to get her gear while Glenda rounded up the teens.

Kaycee, Sarabeth, and Jonesy had a grand time gathering herbs and plants. The kids got a big kick out of seeing Kaycee work and they loved talking on camera about the plants and what they were used for. Kaycee was fascinated by how much they knew, not just about medicinal plants, but also what could be eaten and what was poisonous, or which petals and leaves made good dyes and perfumes. As they gathered each plant and they explained its use, she would also ask how they learned about it. She was surprised that nearly half the time the children would say Glenda or Dan had showed them how to use it. It turned out to be a great morning and Kaycee was pleased to get her first videotape in the can. She felt like she was finally doing something.

During the next two days Kaycee shot a lot of video around the clinic, and each day she'd walk out into the countryside with one of the kids, the caretaker or the minister to shoot the beautiful hillsides and forest, and of course Crystal Creek itself. She could use that material for filler shots.

She also helped out when she could with

patients. She quickly saw how easy it was for Glenda to get overwhelmed without Dan. It was a lot for one person. So she just starting pitching in wherever she could—holding a child's hand during a shot, cleaning and bandaging lesser cuts and bruises, taking down information and updating charts.

On Wednesday, Glenda got her first emergency call of the week. One of the hillside farmers' sons had been hurt working in the field. Glenda and Kaycee went as far as they could in the jeep and then they had to walk up the last mile. Kaycee was glad she was in good shape because it was a hike with her camera gear, even though it was relatively light. By the time she got to the field where the injured boy was, her back was balking at the load.

The boy had a bad break in his leg—the broken bone had pierced the flesh and he was screaming in pain. Glenda quickly gave him a shot for pain and a local anesthetic and then had to immobilize the leg. Kaycee started shooting, but realized that Glenda needed help keeping the boy from thrashing around, so she set the camera wide, rolled tape and went to help. She was in awe of how efficiently Glenda worked while still managing to soothingly talk to the boy about inconsequential things. Finally she had the leg set and the bleeding stopped. Now he could be moved into the house. His father carefully carried him in while Glenda held onto the leg.

It was another three hours of work to properly set the bone with the primitive pins she had to manually punch in and then stitch up the wound and cast the leg, leaving an open area around the stitches and pins. Kaycee was amazed at all she did without the benefit of a sterile operating room or any equipment. Again she found herself more involved with assisting Glenda than shooting videotape.

The boy's parents were quietly grateful. The

father promised to send vegetables to the clinic and the mother fixed them a meal while they waited for the boy to wake up from the sleeping pills Glenda had given him while she worked on his leg. Then they were sent off with two loaves of freshly baked bread. Kaycee recorded that part of the visit as well.

It was after 10:00p.m. when they headed out. The father insisted on walking them down to the jeep, which was appreciated since they were both exhausted. Kaycee was definitely feeling the effects in her back, but she had such a sense of joy at seeing the boy's leg saved, she hardly noticed the pain.

"You did good up there Kaycee. You were a big help. I don't think I could have done it alone." She looked over and saw the smile on her face. "It's a great feeling isn't it?"

Kaycee looked at Glenda with incredible admiration. "It is a wonderful feeling. Glenda that was the most amazing thing I've ever seen. You were... I can't describe what it was like watching you fight with everything you had to save that boy's leg. The work you did with practically no equipment—it was miraculous."

Glenda was deeply touched by her words. When you do things like that every day, you forget how important the work is until someone reminds you or you see it reflected in a parent's eye. "Thanks."

"Listen, you must be exhausted. You want me to drive?" Kaycee asked.

"We're both wiped out, but at least I know where I'm going, so just be that second pair of eyes," Glenda responded.

They slowly made their way back to the clinic, where the minister was waiting with hot coffee and sandwiches. Reverend Timothy Bakken had stayed in the clinic while they were gone fending off patients and doing whatever he could to help. He was a good man who loved the people in the hollow



as much as Dan and Glenda.

As they were eating and telling the story of the day, Glenda noticed the strain of pain across Kaycee's face. "How bad is your back tonight?" she asked.

"No worse than usual on a long day. I think I'm just going to turn in," she answered.

"I'm not buying that! I'm not the massage therapist Dan is, but I can probably help. I can also give you a shot of muscle relaxants that might help."

"NO! No really Glenda, it's not that bad tonight. You're tired and so am I. Besides I hate the loopy way those drugs make me feel," Kaycee said anxiously. The truth was she was absolutely petrified of needles of any kind. She'd rather agonize in pain than take an injection of anything. And she knew very well if Glenda started massaging her lower back now, she'd feel how tight her muscles were and insist on a shot.

"OK, if you're sure. But at least take a heat pad up with you," and she went to grab one out of the supply closet.

"Thanks, this will be great. Good night. And Glenda, once again, amazing work."

Thursday was another long day at the clinic, and Kaycee tried to help as best she could. Glenda couldn't help but notice how good she was with the patients, reassuring them, chatting and joking with family members, and especially making the kids laugh with her wonderful stories. She really had a way with people. It was interesting to watch her draw out some of the more reticent hollow folks, and get them to talk about what the problem was. Dan even had trouble with some folks after being here ten years, but they seemed to warm up to Kaycee almost instantly.

Glenda wished Dan had seen what she had this week. Kaycee seemed to be dropping her stereotypes and preconceived notions about the

people here daily. The more she talked with them, and got out and saw their daily struggles, the more she seemed to be gaining a deep respect for them. And there was no question, she loved the children. She spent a couple of hours every day over at the orphanage, and Reverend Tim said she often came over at night to read or tell stories to the kids.

Friday was turning out to be a pretty light day, so Kaycee thought she'd go out and shoot some more video of the open wild areas of the hollow. She told Glenda she'd get Reverend Tim or the caretaker to go with her when Glenda asked. She actually was beginning to know her way around and felt she could go by herself, but Dan had been so adamant about her not leaving the compound alone, she went to look for a hiking companion. Both Tim and Johnnie, the caretaker, were busy, but she ran across Jonesy out in the barn. Well, he's someone, I won't be alone, she thought.

"Hey Jonesy, want to come help me shoot some video?" she asked.

The boy's eyes lit up like fireworks on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. "That'd be great Miss Kaycee! Can I look in your camera?"

She laughed, "Sure. Come on, I'm going to get my gear and then we'll go."

They hiked for two hours and Kaycee was getting some great stuff. Jonesy was terrific, paying close attention to everything she did and helping her identify landmarks and unique sites of nature in the hills of the hollow. She was amazed to hear the little boy tell legends and tales of the families who lived in the hollow.

"Jonesy where did you learn all these stories, they're wonderful!" Kaycee asked.

"The old ones tell 'em. They call 'em orange history."

Kaycee chuckled, "You mean oral history?"

"Yeah—that's it. There's always stories after the barn dances, round the bon fire—it's the best part!"

the child said enthusiastically.

"Hey the next dance is Saturday... will you be my date? Please Miss Kaycee?" Jonesy pleaded.

"Jonesy it would be my distinct honor to accompany you," she said smiling.

The boy looked puzzled. "Does that mean yes?"

Now she was really laughing, "Yes, Jonesy, yes I'll go with you." She ruffled the boy's hair and was charmed by his ear to ear grin.

"Come on, kiddo, we need to get moving. We've been gone a long time. I just want to check out the area on the other side of this hill and then we'll head back."

"That's the gorge over the hill. That's a bad place. We can't go there," Jonesy said anxiously.

"What do you mean a bad place?" she asked.

"It's just a bad place. The reverend says stay away from the gorge."

"OK, now I'm curious—come on, what the reverend doesn't know won't hurt us," Kaycee said. She loved a mystery. Jonesy followed tentatively at first, and then his youthful curiosity took over and he was running ahead of Kaycee. They climbed the hill and then slowly came down the other side to the most beautiful rocky gorge. Kaycee was completely caught up in the gorgeous view and started shooting. She yelled to Jonesy to be careful because there were several rocky ledges that didn't look safe. The problem was as she warned him she wasn't watching where she was going.

She heard the loud snap of metal and felt a sharp pain on her ankle. She screamed as she fell. Jonesy came running.

"Miss Kaycee! Miss Kaycee! Oh no—trap," he cried.

Kaycee could see she'd stepped on an animal trap, and was caught fast. The trap had clamped her left foot over her hiking boot, which probably saved her ankle from being crushed. The trap was chained to a nearby rock crevice. She was in pain,

but it wasn't unbearable. The problem was the trap was closed tight with no spring mechanism that she could see, so she wasn't going anywhere without help.

Jonesy looked at her with tears in his eyes. "Bad place... we shouldn't have come here... bad place... I'm sorry Miss Kaycee, I don't know how to get the trap off.," he was muttering.

"Jonesy, it's OK honey. It's not your fault. I'm the clumsy one. Jonesy, listen to me, I need you to be strong, now. You know your way back, right?" she asked as calmly as possible.

"Yeah, but I can't leave you all by yourself. You're hurt Miss Kaycee."

"Jonesy, you have to be brave and head back to the church and bring help. Neither of us can spring this trap and I can't move my foot until the trap's off. Go now, hurry, but be careful," she said. He looked very uncertain, but finally took off, running all the way back.

It took Jonesy nearly an hour to get back. He ran into the clinic calling Glenda's name and nearly knocked Dan over as he was carrying supplies in from his trip.

"Whoa, there Jonesy!" he stopped as soon as he saw the boy's face. "What is it? What's happened?"

"Oh, Dr. Dan we shouldn't have gone there. You gotta come quick—Miss Kaycee's hurt. Come on now!" he said practically hysterical.

Dan shook the boy hard, "Settle down Jonesy! Tell me what happened."

"We was walking down in the gorge..."

"What! The gorge?!" Dan shouted.

"I know, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." he cried.

Dan took a deep breath. "Jonesy, just tell me what happened. Where's Kaycee?" he asked, fear clenching his stomach.

"She's halfway down the east side. She was taking movies and stepped into a trap. Her foot's caught bad."

Dan let out the breath he didn't realize he was holding. Thank God she hadn't fallen, she could have broken her neck.

"OK, go get Tim and I'll get my medical bag and we'll go find her," Dan said.

Tim came over bringing rope and they piled into the pick-up knowing they could only drive about half the way and then they'd have to hike in. Neither Tim nor Dan said a word, and Jonesy could tell they were angry as well as worried.

As the time passed, Kaycee was really starting to feel the pain. She was afraid to move because every time she tried, pain shot up her whole leg. But at the same time the trap was cutting off circulation and her leg was going numb. She prayed Jonesy would get back with help soon, the sun was dipping in the western sky and she didn't relish being down in the gorge after dark.

Finally as she was about to give in to the tears that threatened to spill over her lashes, she heard the most welcome sound.

"Kaycee? Kaycee where are you?" Dan called out.

"Down here, just under the ledge!" she responded, realizing with a shudder it was Dan's voice. He probably wasn't going to be too happy with her.

"OK, hang tight. We're coming down." Dan and Tim carefully made their way down the gorge to her.

"Hi Dan, welcome back?" she tried to paste a smile on her face, but it quickly disappeared at the dark look he gave her.

"What the hell were you thinking coming down here? I told you this was off limits, dammit!" he yelled.

"You never said... Ow!" she cried out as they moved the trap around to get at the release springs.

"Sorry, Kaycee," Tim said. "We have to get to

the other side of this trap to release you. Dan, you think her ankle's broken?"

"It's not broken, I can move it a little—it hurts but I can still move it. The problem is my leg's numb from lack of circulation," Kaycee answered.

"Are you finished diagnosing yourself?" Dan asked sarcastically. "Now why don't you let me be the doctor?" he snapped.

"Stop yelling at me and get me out of this damn thing!" she snapped back.

"I'll spring the trap and you've got to pull her foot out. But do it quickly, I don't know how long the release will hold." Tim said to Dan.

"OK, do it. Kaycee, let me do the work—don't try to move yourself. I need to protect that ankle until we know for sure it's not broken." Dan said much more calmly, now in his doctor/patient mode.

Tim snapped the release and Dan pulled her foot free, giving her as much support as possible. She grimaced at the pain, tears sliding down her cheeks. But she was free.

"Thank God—I thought I was spending the night here with the critters!" she tried again to smile, but the effort fell flat.

Jonesy was hovering and asked anxiously, "Is she gonna be OK doc?"

"Yes, Jonesy, her ankle's going to be fine. However, I can't speak to other areas of her anatomy when I'm through with her!"

Kaycee turned sharply to look at him and his eyes met hers full of anger. She decided now was not the time to debate exactly what he meant by that threat, but she was very afraid she knew. She broke eye contact first, and Dan went back to concentrating on her ankle.

"You're very lucky this trap caught an area protected by your heavy boot. Otherwise it could have snapped your leg. That's what they're designed to do, break the animal's leg so it can't get away. I need to get that boot off so I can take a

look. Are you ready for that? I'm sorry, but it's going to hurt when I do that." Dan said, speaking softly again.

"Just do it fast," she said quietly.

He loosened her laces as much as possible and then braced the ankle while Tim quickly pulled the boot off. The cry of pain cut right through Dan. He was not ready to face the question of why, as angry as he was with her, it was killing him to see her in pain.

With her boot off, the ankle immediately started to swell and had already turned every shade of black and blue. Dan gently examined it and confirmed she hadn't broken it.

"You're going to have some pretty nasty bruising for about a week, and it looks like it's sprained, which means you're off it for three to five days! We'll get you temporarily wrapped out here and then get you back and put some ice on it and get you something for the pain," he said stoically.

"Now that there's no constant pressure from the trap, the pain's not nearly so bad," she said, but her voice was still shaky.

"Let's get you out of here," Dan said gathering her in his arms to carry her out. She started to protest that with help she could hobble up the gorge, but one look from Dan stifled anything she was going to say. He seemed to carry her with ease, so she decided not to complain.

Once they got to the truck, Dan gently laid her in the back and told Jonesy to sit with her. He covered her with blankets and propped her foot up on a feedbag.

By the time they got to the clinic, Kaycee had worked herself into a major state of dread. Dan was as angry as she'd seen him, and she'd seen him plenty angry. She was in big trouble, and she had a feeling the throbbing in her ankle wasn't going to gain her much sympathy.

When the truck was parked, Dan and Tim came

around back to lift her out. Tim turned to Jonesy and quietly told the boy, "I think, young man, you'd best go cut a switch and wait for me in the barn. We need to discuss your excursion to the gorge."

"Yes sir," Jonesy said glumly. "I'm sorry you got hurt, Miss Kaycee."

"Tim, no please don't punish Jonesy. It wasn't his fault. I was the one who wanted to get shots down there. He warned me we shouldn't go. Please, please, don't punish him," she pleaded. She felt Dan's arms tighten around her when she mentioned that Jonesy had said don't go into the gorge area, and knew she had just cooked her own goose.

Tim had a grim expression, but didn't back down. "Kaycee, Jonesy knew better than to go into that area. It's way too dangerous. If either of you had fallen, you could have been killed. Not to mention the traps. He needs to understand there are consequences for risking his safety and yours!"

"He's not the only one!" Dan added.

Tim chuckled dryly, "Sounds like you should be more worried about your own backside, than Jonesy's!" And Tim turned and headed for the barn, not happy about what he had to do, but determined to make sure the boy didn't make the mistake again.

Dan carried her inside the clinic and headed upstairs to her room.

"Dan... I'm really..."

"Not a word!" he snapped. She hated that he was so angry with her. She also was feeling guilty about what Tim had said and Jonesy's punishment. More tears fell as she thought about what would have happened if it had been Jonesy who got hurt. She wasn't sure she could even find her way back to the clinic by herself, let alone help him.

When they got to her room, Dan set her on the bed and then went to get an ace bandage. He came back and carefully wrapped her ankle. He also had brought ice packs, but instead of putting them



around her ankle, he pulled her over to sit on his lap.

"Kaycee, do you have any idea how scared I was when I heard you were hurt in the gorge? All I could think about was your crumpled body lying at the bottom of some rock ledge," he said. Kaycee flinched at the anguish that now mingled with his anger.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say," she responded in a very small voice.

"That's not enough, Kaycee," he said quietly. Then he unsnapped and unzipped her jeans and before she realized what he was doing, he flipped her over to be face down on his lap, careful not to hurt her ankle as he did it. He sat back so her legs and head were supported by the bed, and then pulled down her jeans.

"Dan, NO! NO, you can't! Let me go! Owww!" she hollered as the first hard slap of his palm landed with a loud smack across her panties.

"You have no right! Ouch, stop it!" She yelled and cursed at him, but it did nothing to break his rhythm of steady smacks. She tried to squirm away and kick, but her struggles only hurt her ankle, and he had her held fast with an iron grip around the waist. When she tried to reach back and cover her bottom, he simply grabbed her wrist and pinned it behind her back. His hand was relentless, smacking both cheeks repeatedly and then he landed a few stinging slaps to her sit spot and upper thighs. When his hand hit bare flesh, she howled.

She finally started to cry tears of humiliation as well as pain. He was lighting a fire on her backside, and she was helpless to stop it. He hadn't said a word, but as her tears flowed, he started to scold, punctuating each word with a sharp spank.

SMACK! Kaycee SMACK! We have SMACK! rules SMACK! for a SMACK! reason! SMACK! SMACK! This SMACK! place SMACK! is dangerous. SMACK! SMACK!

"I'm s-s-sorry," she sobbed. "Please, stop, it hurts. I can't take anymore."

Dan heard the surrender in her voice and stopped, but held her over his lap for a while longer, rubbing her back and letting her cry. Then he gently pulled her up to sit in his lap and cradled her to his chest. Part of her wanted to fight his comforting, wanting to be angry at him for spanking her. But his arms felt so good, and she couldn't deny the wonderfully warm and secure feeling that enveloped her.

"Sssshh, it's all over darlin'. You're OK now," he whispered softly.

"OK says who? My butt's on fire," she whined.

He chuckled, "Good! It's supposed to be. Now how about I tuck you into bed and get an ice pack on that ankle. You're exhausted." He gently lifted her and lay her down on the bed, pulling off her jeans and her other boot. Then he tied an ice pack around her ankle.

"You want one of these for your backside too?" he asked grinning.

"You're not the least bit funny, Dan Chase! You're nothing but a bully!" She was pouting exactly like a well-spanked child.

"Yup, that's me!" He leaned down to kiss her cheek and then cupped her chin to bring her eyes to his. "Know this, Kaycee Wilder. I care about what happens to you. And if you EVER pull another stunt like today, I'll paddle your bare bottom till you can't sit for a week!" And before she could say a word he was out of the room and her door was shut.

She lay on the bed not knowing what to think. Her ankle hurt, her butt hurt, her mind was confused, and her heart was definitely awakened and demanding attention.

## Chapter Four

Kaycee awoke the next morning feeling disoriented. She wasn't sure where she was or why her head felt like it was stuffed with cotton. She rolled over and put her feet on the floor and immediately felt a sharp stab of pain from her ankle. That brought her back to reality quickly. Her ankle was still swollen and had huge black and blue marks on either side where the trap had clamped onto her foot.

As she eased the pain by raising her foot back onto the bed, the rest of the evening came back to her in vivid images. Her backside tingled as she remembered Dan spanking her. She was actually a little surprised she wasn't still sore—her butt certainly was burning up last night. She was equally surprised she wasn't furious with Dan for the humiliating way he treated her. In fact she flushed when she remembered his words about caring what happened to her. Then she really blushed when she recalled the threat of a bare bottomed spanking that went with them. She was still confused—unsure how she felt about being spanked as an adult woman. She couldn't deny the warmth and security she felt when he held her after turning her butt candy apple red.

Thinking about that warm and secure feeling led to thoughts she didn't want to have. She also couldn't deny the electricity she felt whenever Dan was around. There was definitely something between them, but she was NOT going there. She had to pull herself together and rebuild that protective wall around her heart. She was not going to let another man try and dictate her life and then betray her and leave her when she wouldn't change to suit him. She'd been down that road and it was just too damn painful for a repeat performance. She was angry at the tears that welled up at the

memory of her ex-husband and the divorce. She had sworn she'd never shed another tear over him, but even three years later she couldn't shake the deep hurt she'd suffered when she learned how one-sided her love had been.

Kaycee was pulled out of her bad memories by a knock on the door, and a much too cheerful voice on the other side.

"Rise and shine sleeping beauty!" Glenda called out as she entered with a breakfast tray and fresh ice packs. "I've got fresh juice, hot coffee, muffins and new ice packs! How's the ankle this morning?"

"No one should be that cheerful in the morning—go away, but leave the coffee!" Kaycee grumbled.

"My, my! Someone's grumpy this morning!" Glenda set the tray down on the table next to the bed and sat down at the end of the bed to examine Kaycee's ankle.

"Still swollen—that means you've got a pretty nasty sprain there. I'll go get you a couple of Tylenol to help with the pain. Dan says you are not to move from this bed until he comes to get you!"

"Well, I've got news for Dan, if I don't move from this bed right now, you're going to have to change the sheets. So help me get to the bathroom!" Kaycee said emphatically.

"OK. OK. Lean heavily on my shoulder and don't put any weight on that leg if you can help it." They hobbled to the bathroom so Kaycee could pee and then were on the way back to the bed when Dan arrived.

"The sun's barely up, and already you're disobeying doctor's orders, I see!" he said sarcastically. Then he strode across the room, swept her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. "Do you need a reminder already of the consequences of disobeying my orders?"

"Oh, relax! I had to go, and I leaned on Glenda all the way to the bathroom," she answered testily.

Dan raised an eyebrow at her tone, but didn't

say anything and proceeded to thoroughly examine her ankle, eliciting more than one squeal of pain as he attempted to move her foot.

"Kaycee, you're going to have to stay off this ankle for at least three days, so it can heal. If you stress it by putting weight on it, you'll only delay your recovery. Understand?" he asked in his doctor/patient voice.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. I'll stay off it, OK? Now how about leaving so I can get dressed?!" she snapped.

Dan simply shrugged his shoulders. He was going to ask how her bottom was feeling today, but figured with her surly attitude, the question wouldn't be appreciated, so he just left saying, "I'll be back in 20 minutes to carry you downstairs, so you don't have to spend the day in your room."

Glenda helped her with her clothes, and finally asked the question, she really wanted to ask.

"So, Kaycee, how are you really this morning?" she asked softly.

She was about to whip out another sarcastic 'fine', but one look in Glenda's eyes told her that wasn't going to cut it. She sighed heavily, "I suppose you mean about what happened when Dan brought me back? Let me guess, the whole hollow knows by now that Dan spanked me!"

Glenda laughed, "It *is* a small community! But no, no one is talking about Dan spanking you, just your little trek down to the gorge. The spanking they simply assume, because that's what would happen to any wife or child who did the same thing!"

Kaycee groaned and then was silent for a while. Glenda simply waited.

When Kaycee finally spoke, her confusion about her feelings was evident, "Oh, damn! I don't know what to think. Part of me says he had no right to do that, and I don't ever want him to do it again. But then...."

"But then another part of you knows you deserved it, and likes the fact that Dan cares enough about you to spank you." Glenda finished for her.

"Aw hell, I'm so confused. But one thing I know—I can't let myself..." she stopped before she said 'fall in love'. She didn't want Glenda or anyone to know she was even thinking in that direction. But Glenda was too perceptive not to pick up on her train of thought.

"You know Kaycee, I don't think it's the spanking you're struggling with. But if you keep yourself closed off to new feelings, you're going to miss out on something pretty wonderful," Glenda said quietly. At that moment Dan knocked, and Kaycee blushed again as the conversation stopped.

Dan carried her downstairs and set her up in the outer office waiting area with her laptop and files, and then went to work in his office. About an hour later a very sheepish Jonesy peeked in on her.

"Hi Jonesy! Come on in. I could use some company." She flashed him a big smile, and that was all the encouragement he needed to come bounding in the room.

"I'm glad you're not mad at me, Miss Kaycee. How's your foot doing?" he asked with a worried look.

"Jonesy, I'm gonna be fine! Why on earth would I be mad at you? I'm the one who insisted we go down in the gorge, remember? If anything you should be mad at me for getting you in trouble. Was Reverend Tim very hard on you?" she asked with concern.

"Naw, it weren't too bad. He switched me over my britches, so it hardly hurt!" he said proudly. "Did the doc give you a wallop in' Miss Kaycee?" he asked earnestly.

Kaycee had to grin, "That, young man, is between me and Dr. Dan! But let's say I won't be going anywhere near the gorge again!"

Jonesy gave her an exaggerated wink. "So, we're still going to the dance tonight, right Miss Kaycee?"

"Oh, Jonesy, I'm so sorry. But I'm stuck here with my foot up—doctor's orders. No walking and definitely no dancing. Maybe next time?" She hated the forlorn look he gave her.

"But you promised to be my date," he protested.

"Well then, we'll just have to see that she keeps that promise, won't we buddy!" Dan chimed in at that moment. He had been standing at the doorway listening to the conversation.

"Yeah!! It's OK you can't dance, we can watch and listen to the music, Miss Kaycee. Come on, you promised," Jonesy pleaded.

Kaycee shot daggers at Dan with her eyes, and he simply shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Jonesy, I'll be no fun at all at a dance tonight. All I can do is sit there like a bump on a log. Please don't be mad, I promise the next time I'll go with you."

"Nonsense, Kaycee, you don't want to miss your first barn dance. I'll have Glenda bring down a dress for you, and you can change in the exam room and then I'll carry you over to the big barn," Dan said and when she started to open her mouth to protest again, he cut her off.

"It's all settled. Not another peep out of you. Jonesy, you better head over to the dorm to get ready for your date!" Dan said with a self-satisfied smile. Jonesy tore out of the clinic and headed to the orphanage to get ready.

"Well, you're quite pleased with yourself I can see," she said with dripping sarcasm.

"Oh come on, Kaycee, lighten up! You could see how much this meant to Jonesy. That boy hasn't had much good in his life, it won't kill you to let him keep you company tonight," Dan chastised.

Kaycee was embarrassed by his words and realized she was being selfish. She only wanted to

avoid the looks and whispers of people tonight. She wasn't thinking about Jonesy's feelings at all. That boy had worked his way right into her heart, and she'd do anything for him, including deal with the humiliation of everyone knowing how stupid she had been.

"You're right, I'm sorry. Of course I'll go. There's just one problem. I didn't bring a dress and in fact I only own a couple. They're not very practical for my work," she said, flushing even more.

Dan chuckled, "Figures! I'll ask Glenda to have her oldest girl bring something over. You two are about the same size."

Kaycee let his comment pass, but she was disturbed to find it hurt a little that he obviously didn't think of her as very feminine. She tried to go back to work, but thoughts of Dan and getting dressed up for a dance tonight clouded her thinking. The harder she tried to shut him out, the more he seemed to creep in. It was frustrating. She didn't want to be thinking about him, about them. She was not going to let Dr. Daniel Chase weasel his way into her heart! At least that's what she told herself, over and over again.

About 6 that evening she was in the exam room putting the finishing touches on her hair when she heard a knock on the door.

"Kaycee, your date's here darlin'" Dan called.

"Come on in, I'm just about ready." She was sitting on a chair and could just barely see the mirror from that low, but she knew there'd be trouble if Dan caught her standing to put on make-up and play with her hair. As she took one last check, she decided the reflection wasn't too bad on the whole. Glenda had brought a pale yellow sundress with small green flowers that set off her eyes. The sundress looked great with her dark hair and the tan she'd picked up in the last few weeks from spending so much time outside. Glenda also brought her some yellow ribbons for her hair. She



used them to loosely tie her black curls back off her face, which made her eyes appear even bigger. She had applied some light cosmetics. She was very skilled with make-up from her days on TV, but now she used it sparingly, if at all. The total look was simple and stunning, and that message was written all over the faces of Dan and Jonesy when they both walked in. For several minutes, either of them said anything.

"What's the matter guys? Have I got dirt on my face or spinach in my teeth? Why so quiet?" she asked genuinely concerned something was wrong with the way she looked.

Jonesy recovered first, "No, no Miss Kaycee. It's just you look so pretty—we're plumb struck." Jonesy shyly pulled his hand from behind his back and offered her a bunch of daisies.

Kaycee rewarded him with a winning smile that finished the job on Dan's heart. Since his wife had died, no one had reached into his deepest depths and touched him the way she had somehow managed to do. He shook his head in wonderment at this feisty beauty that at various turns made him so mad he could throttle her and then want to gather her in his arms and never let go. She was giving Jonesy her full attention and didn't see the look in Dan's eye. It was just as well because it probably would have scared the hell out of her.

Dan cleared his throat. "Well folks, we better get going. Jonesy, you get Miss Kaycee's bag, and I'll help her out." Kaycee stood, and Dan took one of the daisies in her hand and placed it in her hair. The simple gesture sent a shiver up Kaycee's spine as he softly caressed her cheek with a touch as gentle as a summer breeze. Then he whisked her off her feet and started to carry her out to the truck.

"You know all you need to do is give me a shoulder for support, and I could walk!" she said stiffly, trying to ignore the raging heat suffusing her body as he held her close in his arms.

"Doctor's orders! No walking, remember? And no dancing tonight either, understand?" Dan said with mock sternness.

"Yeah, like I'm going to be light on my feet with this ankle!" she replied sarcastically.

Dan carried her to the passenger side of the truck and sat her down. As he bent over to fasten her seat belt, he whispered, "You know, just once you could say 'thank you' instead of complaining every time I carry you somewhere!"

"That's because I *could* walk with a little support and I need to get back on my feet quickly!" she popped back at him. But when she looked at him he merely raised one eye brow in an expression that said 'don't push it'.

"Oh, alright.... sorry. Thank you kind sir for providing transport to this poor lame soul!" she said in an exaggerated voice.

He just laughed, "You know one of these days that sassy mouth of yours is gonna get you in big trouble, young lady."

She smirked, "I got news for you Doc, this mouth has been getting me in trouble since I learned to talk!"

"That doesn't surprise me one bit!"

When they got to the barn it turned out to be a big tobacco curing warehouse where several of the farmers dried their tobacco leaves. But since the tobacco plants were still months from harvest and hanging, it was empty and perfect for a Saturday night dance. Dan pulled up close to the entrance and came around the truck to help Kaycee. She looked up at him with pleading eyes, "Please Dan, I feel foolish enough about yesterday without calling more attention to myself by having you carry me in. Can't you just give me a shoulder to lean on and let me walk this once?"

She looked so pitiful as she asked that Dan couldn't say no. "OK just this time. But I expect you to lean heavily on me so that ankle bears practically

no weight. Any attempts at carrying your own weight, and I'll haul you over my shoulder and carry you like a sack of feed while I land a few good hard smacks across your fanny. Got it?"

She sighed heavily at his overbearing manner and the threat, which immediately brought to mind the painful lesson she learned at his hand last night. She answered through clenched teeth, "Yes, I got it!"

Kaycee quickly realized she needed his strong support as soon as she stepped down on her injured ankle. It was still really sore, so she had no problem leaning heavily on Dan as they walked in. Jonesy took her other hand possessively and walked in beside her with a grin as wide as the Mississippi River.

Dan guided them discreetly over to a side wall where there were chairs set-up. Kaycee looked around at the big room and breathed in the sweet smell of cured tobacco mingled with the delectable aroma of fresh baked goods and strong coffee. The big space was softly lit with candles and lanterns—there was no electricity in the building. The plucky tones of bluegrass music competing with the laughter of children and warm conversation of neighbors surrounded her like a cozy blanket. As Dan helped her to one of the chairs and then pulled another over so she could prop her ankle up, she thought how glad she was that Dan insisted she come. Even if she couldn't join in the stomping and twirling on the dance floor, she knew she was going to enjoy watching people she'd only seen working hard, relax and have some fun. She couldn't help but be enveloped by the sense of community and family in the room.

Jonesy stuck close to her side, even though she tried to get him to go join in some of the games and dances. He happily told anyone who came over to see how she was doing that he was her date. Kaycee was surprised at how the people of the

hollow treated her tonight. She had expected to be the subject of whispers and comments after her stupid expedition into the gorge. In her three weeks here she had tried to get to know as many folks as possible and make them comfortable with her. She knew if she wanted to tell the true story of people here and how important the clinic was to their lives, she had to get them to allow her inside their lives. She had always been good at getting people to open up and this place was no exception. But her past experience when something she had done brought the spotlight her way was completely different from what she experienced tonight. People were warm and open, coming up to her and mildly scolding or telling their own stories about adventures in the gorge. She was a little overwhelmed by the caring they showed, although she did blush every time someone felt free to express the hope that Dr. Dan had tanned her fanny for taking such a risk. Still it was hard to believe she had worried about being humiliated by coming tonight. She decided she should have known better, given what she'd learned about people here, but it was hard to forget her horrible past experience.

In Washington, D.C. when she left her high profile reporting position at the station to become a research assistant at PBS she quickly became "the talk" of the power party circuit. But, when those people talked about you it was with hushed whispers and pitying looks. She remembered all the rumors that she must have been fired because no one would walk away from a job like hers. Pretty soon, when she was no longer covering the center of power, she fell off the A-list. And when she fell, so did her husband.

She could still feel the pain of his lack of support. He was furious when she told him she wanted to leave daily political reporting and work on documentaries. He had never accepted her decision and put her down constantly for making 'the biggest

mistake of her life'. That had been the beginning of the end. But even with his reaction, it still had taken a long time for her to realize he loved her fame and power as a top D.C. reporter more than he loved her. She had complimented his position as a hotshot D.C. attorney, and they had quickly become one of the power couples on the circuit. Kaycee had always hated the D.C. party scene, but she had to take part to do her job. That was how she met David, her husband, and he had always made it easy. She hadn't realized how much of their lives together were caught up in the whole D.C. power thing until she lost her position there. When they had started to be dropped from party invitation lists, the fighting had started.

Then, as she worked her way up to award-winning documentary producer at PBS her status climbed again, but she didn't need the circuit to do her job, and with the amount of traveling she had to do, she simply begged off. David just got angrier as he had to go play his power games stag. Finally when she got hurt on a documentary shoot he told her the truth and laid down an ultimatum. He had found someone else and had been having an affair, but he'd still give her a second chance if she quit her job. He'd give her a second chance!! God, the gall of that man!

That's when Kaycee had seen how really bad things could get in Washington when you were the center of scandal. She was completely isolated and ostracized. David had been the real power player, and he kept the circuit people with him. She had quit her job alright and filed for divorce, and then she had left D.C. in disgrace as far as the 'important people' were concerned. Three years later it all still felt like a knife in her gut, the pain was so real. She still didn't understand how she could have been so wrong about David, and how she got so caught up in a lifestyle that she cared so little about. Her last five years in D.C. had been like a bad nightmare

except for the documentary work she did. Somehow, the worse her home life became, the better her work was.

Kaycee hadn't realized how far away she'd been until someone took her hand and she heard a soft, gentle voice. "Kaycee, are you in pain, honey? Do you want me to take you back to the clinic?"

She was startled to look up and see Dan bent down in front of her with a very concerned look on his face. He had been keeping an eye on her as he worked the room, talking with folks and dancing with all the ladies. He got worried when he saw an expression on her face of severe pain, and tears pool under her lashes.

Kaycee blinked away the tears she refused to shed and brought her focus back to the present, shaking off her thoughts and the inner hurt that went with them. "Dan, no, I'm fine. I just um... never mind. I'm fine really. Go back to the dance floor, I like watching you kick up your heels." She pasted a smile on her face and tried to pull her hands from his. But he simply tightened his grip.

"I've warned you before about lying to me, Kaycee Wilder!" he said lightly, but the intense look in his eyes said 'tell me what's wrong'. Kaycee was unnerved by the intensity of his gaze and looked away, pulling harder to release her hands, and succeeding this time.

"Really, Dan, I'm fine. Just a momentary lapse into a pity party. But really, I want to stay," she said and really meant it. He relented and left as Glenda and her kids came up to sit with her for a while. As he walked away, he was haunted by the depth of the pain he'd seen in her eyes. Then he was surprised to find he was angry, wanting to strike out at who or whatever had put it there.

Kaycee quickly got back into the spirit of the evening and was enjoying herself. About an hour later, Jonesy had gone to get her some punch and goodies to munch on, and she was actually sitting

alone for the first time all evening. She was watching Dan spin another woman around the dance floor. She was quite impressed, he was an excellent dancer. She smiled as the current young lady to be his partner looked up at him with big goo goo eyes, and he was focused completely on her, just as she'd seen him focus on each patient he was with. He was clearly the catch of the county, and she just bet he hated that. She couldn't help but chuckle at his expense.

Kaycee was so engrossed in the little drama on the dance floor she almost didn't notice the big man striding toward her with a determined look on his face. He looked like he'd just come out of a winter in the mountains. He was tall and muscular, with a beard and longish, kind of wild, dark hair. He was wearing worn jeans and a flannel shirt with a hunting vest. His eyes were almost black and were piercing holes in Kaycee as he headed her way. This guy was definitely intimidating, and everyone was making way for him as he crossed the room.

When he got to where Kaycee was sitting he glared down at her, and growled, "So you're the one who ruined my trap! What the hell were you doing in the gorge anyway? Any fool knows to stay away."

Kaycee was not about to deal with this looming hulk from her lowly sitting position, so she took a deep breath, stood and responded, hoping her voice didn't come out as a scared little squeak. "If you're referring to that monstrosity that nearly crushed my ankle, yes I was the one caught in your damn trap. And if it's ruined, I'm glad. Those things ought to be outlawed!"

He snarled, "You're just damn lucky I didn't find you. I'd have stripped off a few layers of your hide little girl! So what, you're one of them damned tree huggers who'd rather save critters than people?"

"No, but that trap is cruel and cowardly. What's the matter, don't have the guts to hunt with a gun or better yet, bow and arrow?" she snapped back,

her anger overcoming her fear.

"You better watch your mouth little girl! What do you know about it anyway? You're just some city girl who's probably never had to hunt to survive! We live off the land here," he said with derision.

"I'll tell you what I know about it. I was trapped by your stupid metal jaws for over an hour, in pain and afraid—just like the animals you trap. I know why some animals are so desperate they chew off their own legs to escape. So don't try to tell me I don't know what I'm talking about—those traps are cruel and inhumane!"

He surprised her then by stepping back and chuckling. "You certainly are quite the spitfire aren't you?" His reaction was so unexpected, she was speechless. But then his eyes narrowed again. "Just be warned, little wildcat, stay away from the gorge and caves, and my traps, or you'll be damn sorry."

At that moment Dan walked up. He had stepped outside for a few minutes and missed the beginning of the confrontation, but it looked like things were heating up since Kaycee and John were nose to nose scowling at one another, so he figured he better step in. He stood beside Kaycee and put an arm around her. She wanted nothing more than to melt into the strength of his arms, but she stood strong.

Dan said quietly, "Big John, Kaycee learned her lesson with a sore ankle and a sore butt. So, I think you can back off." Kaycee stiffened and blushed yet again at the mention of her spanking, and when John chuckled, she bristled.

"I hope so, Dan, because if I catch her messing with any more of my traps, I'll personally blister her backside so she can't sit for a week!" And before Kaycee could spout back at him he turned on his heel and left the dance. She turned on Dan instead, whispering furiously.

"How could you?! It's bad enough you spank me like a child, but to tell that infuriating man! Who the



hell was that anyway?"

Dan could see her bravado was fading and she was a lot more shaken up by the encounter than she was letting on. He firmly took hold of her shoulders and sat her down. Now her hands were shaking. He took her hands in his and stilled them. "Kaycee, relax. You're OK. Big John wouldn't really hurt you, he's more bluster and intimidation than action. He came here to the hollow about six months ago to be left alone. He's from around here, and came back after some heavy duty time in the military and law enforcement." Dan was pleased he didn't have to lie to her, even if he didn't tell her everything.

She took a deep breath and seemed to calm down. "I have to say there's not too many people around here who'd go toe to toe with Big John." Dan was grinning now.

"Yeah well, he ticked me off and apparently when I get angry, I also get stupid!" she said sarcastically. "God, he was big and mean looking! What was I thinking?"

"I told you that mouth of yours was trouble! How about I take you out of here? I think you've had enough excitement for one night, and Jonesy looks like he's about had it too."

Kaycee looked over at the young boy who trod slowly toward them with a plate of food. He did look beat, but his face brightened when she smiled at him. "Hey Jonesy, what do you say we make those cookies and cake to go? I don't know about you, but I'm ready to call it a night. I didn't get much sleep last night."

"I'm ready, Miss Kaycee. Dr. Dan, you carry Miss Kaycee and I'll carry the cookies!" Jonesy said in a serious man-to-man kind of tone.

"Good plan, Jonesy." Dan said with equal seriousness, while Kaycee tried to keep from bursting out laughing. She was tired, and her ankle was throbbing, so she didn't complain when Dan

picked her up and headed out the door. She simply put her arms around his neck and lay her head on his broad chest contentedly, even as she thought how secure she felt in his arms. If she or Dan had seen some of the knowing looks and smiles as they walked out, neither of them would have been so comfortable.

## Chapter Five

Sunday Kaycee was pretty much on her own. Dan had come by in the morning to bring her downstairs and get her some breakfast. He had invited her to drive into Harlan with him to pick up some supplies, but she had declined when he told her that, no, he wouldn't allow her to walk around and shop a little. Her ankle felt much better today, but Dan was adamant, so she decided she'd just hang around the clinic and catch up on her reading. Glenda was home with her family and Reverend Tim had gone to a neighboring church to preach after doing his own Sunday service.

Kaycee was relaxing on the front porch of the clinic when one of the orphan boys, Charlie, ran up screaming for help. "Dr. Dan! Dr. Dan! We need help! Where's Dr. Dan?" the boy cried.

"Calm down, Charlie, Dan isn't here. What's wrong?"

"It's Jonesy... he fell in the pond where we was fishing! He can't swim and something's pulling at him! Please you gotta help us Miss Kaycee!!" Kaycee went pale at the mention of Jonesy. She was immediately up and heading down the porch stairs as fast as she could hobble.

"Show me where, Charlie," she said with a calm she didn't feel. They moved as fast as her ankle would allow. Her fear that Jonesy would drown overcame her pain. But it still took them more than 5 minutes to get to the pond behind the church. Kaycee didn't hesitate. She kicked off her shoes and dived in. The weakness in her ankle slowed her down, but she still managed to reach Jonesy in a couple of minutes. He was bobbing up, trying desperately to get his breath. But something was definitely pulling him down. She dove under and could barely see in the murky water, but it looked like he was tangled up in seaweed. She did her best to free him until she felt her lungs would burst and

then she came up for air. Jonesy went back under and didn't fight his way back up. She dove down again and was finally able to free him. The water was ice cold and she could feel her movements begin to slow down. She knew from her life guard training that hypothermia was a real danger for both of them. She had to get them out of the water, but exhaustion was overtaking her. She headed to shore with Jonesy in tow, all the while praying he would be OK.

With the help of the other boys she dragged him out of the water and immediately began to clear the water from his throat and lungs and then started CPR. She was never so glad for those summers spent life guarding at the beach in high school. Finally Jonesy coughed and started to breathe. Both she and Jonesy were shaking badly from the cold water, and shock was still a possibility. They needed blankets and dry clothing fast. Fortunately, Tim arrived at the pond at that moment to see what all the yelling and commotion was about. He raced back to the orphanage with one of the boys and they came back with warm blankets to wrap up Jonesy and Kaycee.

Through chattering teeth Kaycee could barely get out her words, "C-Carry Jonesy back to the clinic. He n-needs to g-get out of those wet things. He was in the f-frigid water a long t-time—hypothermia... Also n-need to t-tend to those scratches he's g-got."

Tim looked at her. "What about you? Your teeth are chattering so hard, you're drowning out the crickets! You need to get dry right away too."

"I'll f-follow you over, I j-just need to catch my b-breath for a minute."

"How about you don't move. I'll carry Jonesy over and then come back for you. I can see from here you've aggravated that ankle—it's swollen up as bad as it was Friday night," Tim said.

Kaycee looked down at her ankle and it was big

as a house. But she was so cold, she was numb and didn't even feel it. "J-Just t-take J-J-Jonesy. I'll b-be f-fine in a m-m-minute."

Tim bundled the boy up and headed back to the clinic. Dan was pulling up as he got there.

"What's going on? What happened to Jonesy?" Dan was doing a cursory exam as Tim carried him in.

"Déjà vu, buddy. We need to get Jonesy warmed up, but he'll be fine. You need to go get Kaycee. She's by the pond. Jonesy fell in and she went in after him. That water's coming from the mountain spring and it's cold as ice." Tim told him.

"Get him out of those wet clothes and into a warm bath—not too hot at first, then we'll keep upping the temp until his body temperature is back to normal." Dan said and then he was out the door in a flash. He got half-way to the pond when he saw her. She was wrapped in a blanket, shaking like a leaf and limping badly. He ran to her and scooped her up into his arms.

"Dammit woman, what were you thinking?" he said harshly.

Kaycee was shaking so badly she could hardly speak. "I-I-I w-was saving J-Jonesy. H-He was d-drowning." Dan decided any further interrogation could wait till she was warmed up and then he might just warm her bottom!

They got into the clinic and Tim already had Jonesy stripped out of his wet clothes and warming in the physical therapy spa tub. Dan told Kaycee to strip down and went to get more blankets. When she was dry and wrapped up, her body temp stabilized and he decided she wasn't at risk for hypothermia. He checked out Jonesy's scratches and was relieved his body temperature was warming up fast and the color had returned to his face. Jonesy was also talking and Dan started to get the whole story of what happened. Then he examined Kaycee's ankle and her hands and arms

which were pretty scratched up too from fighting with the seaweed.

"You're both going to need tetanus shots—there's all kinds of bacteria and crap in that water. Kaycee you've set back your ankle recovery at least several days. Why didn't you send for help? The Millers are right up the road for goodness sake. Don Miller probably could have gotten there faster than you with that bum ankle!" Dan was getting angry.

"Stop yelling at me!" At least her teeth had stopped chattering and she could get out a coherent sentence. "Jonesy was drowning. I'm a trained life guard, dammit, and I knew there wasn't time. I knew exactly what I was doing—so just get off my back!" she shouted back.

"I would have thought a trained life guard would know better than to go into ice cold water. You both could have passed out from hypothermia!"

"Dan, he was tangled up in seaweed and it was pulling him down. I had to go in. I knew how long I had in the water before the cold affected me, OK." She'd had enough of his chastisement for saving someone's life, and without thinking hopped down off the exam table right onto her bad ankle which immediately gave way. She would have collapsed hard on the floor if Dan hadn't caught her.

"That's it!" Dan hauled her up over his shoulder and carried her upstairs. She could only yell at him because her arms and legs were tangled up in the blankets. When he got to her room, he sat down on the bed and flipped her off his shoulder and down across his lap. He pushed up the blankets to reveal her bare backside.

"Don't you dare! Oww!" she yelped as his hand came down hard on her unprotected cheeks. "Ouch! Stop! Why are you spanking me?! Owwww!" He gave her a dozen hard spanks and then pulled her up and set her down next to him none too gently. She hissed when her stinging butt hit the bed.

"Because you're stubborn, and you don't think

before you act! And that's gonna get you killed around here! If I have to spank you every day, I'm going to get that through your thick head! There were other ways to save Jonesy without putting your own life at risk." Dan was up pacing, he was so angry. "Oh, just lie down and bundle up! Don't move from that bed. I'll bring up the tetanus shot and some hot tea," and he stalked out.

Kaycee just sat there for a minute not knowing what to think. She was stunned at his reaction. She had only done what she had to, to save Jonesy's life. He had spanked her again! Damn his over-protective, domineering, arrogance! She laid down and curled up into a fetal position, trying to warm up the rest of her body, to match the heat in her rear.

When Dan finally calmed down, and had finished with Jonesy and sent him back to the orphanage with Tim, he headed back upstairs to bring Kaycee hot tea and give her the dreaded tetanus shot. He found her curled up into a little ball, sound asleep. His heart clenched at the site. She looked so vulnerable. He watched her sleep for a while and then figured he'd try to give her the shot without waking her. The blankets were loose around her, so he slid them up to reveal her bare backside. He couldn't help but notice the still pink handprints on her bottom cheeks. Maybe he shouldn't have spanked her, he thought. She was only trying to save Jonesy, knowing that no one else was around. *No dammit, I'm not going to second guess myself—there were other ways to save the boy without nearly killing herself!* he told himself.

He swabbed her hip with the alcohol pad he'd brought. Then he eased the needle in. She whimpered in her sleep, but his soothing voice settled her right back into a deep sleep. She was truly exhausted by her ordeal, and their confrontation afterwards. Dan just shook his head. Even if she did deserve a spanking, he normally

didn't lose it like that. This woman just seemed to know how to push his buttons. But he knew it was much more than that. While his head rationalized one thing, his heart knew that he couldn't bear the thought of losing her, and every time she risked her safety, it absolutely drove him crazy.

Kaycee woke early the next morning and as she tried to move, she wondered when she had been hit by a Mack truck. Her muscles ached, her ankle throbbed and when she rolled over on her back she winced at the bruise on her hip, not at all sure where that came from. Her mind went back to the events of Sunday and she realized that the struggle to save Jonesy in the icy cold water had to be the reason her muscles ached. She knew she had aggravated her ankle injury running to the pond and walking back. But why was her backside so sore? Surely she wasn't bruised from the spanking Dan gave her. It wasn't nearly as hard as the first time, even though this time he spanked her bare bottom. She blushed at that thought, but this time it was anger that brought the same pink color to her face that Dan had brought to her bottom cheeks last night. She definitely did not think she deserved a spanking after the hell she'd gone through to save Jonesy. So maybe there might have been other ways to save him, but she had only been here three weeks. She followed her instincts—trained instincts. She was damn tired of Dr. Daniel Chase treating her like an idiot or petulant child!

It was that mood that Glenda walked into when she came to check on Kaycee. "I hear you had quite an adventure yesterday! According to Charlie and Jonesy, you're a hero."

"Yeah, well have them tell that to Dan!" she snapped.

"Uh Oh! Let me guess, he couldn't get past the part where you ran down to the pond on your bad ankle and jumped into ice cold water?"

"Bingo! That man is insufferable! And I swear if



he smacks my butt...." she stopped embarrassed by what she'd just confessed.

Glenda smiled and sat down on the bed by Kaycee. "Kaycee, sweetie, I don't know if it's any consolation, but he's just as cranky as you are this morning! The fact is, if you haven't noticed, he cares about you and when you get hurt or put yourself in danger, he can't stand it," she said gently.

Kaycee had tears in her eyes, "But I really didn't see that I had another choice yesterday. Hell, he would have done exactly the same thing in my shoes. Besides, I knew what I was doing, I was a life guard for crying out loud, every summer in junior high and high school! But he doesn't listen—he just started yelling at me and then spanked me. Dammit, I was freezing and exhausted—my ankle was throbbing—and he's just yelling," she said wiping away angry tears.

"He was scared for Jonesy and for you," Glenda said quietly.

"You know what, I don't care. He was angry and he lost control, and my butt paid the price. And that's not going to happen again!" she snapped.

Glenda got up smiling to herself, thinking Kaycee wouldn't have much say if Dan decided she needed another spanking. Glenda also doubted that Dan actually lost control—that wasn't like him, no matter how angry he was. Kaycee needed to understand that Dan hadn't spanked her for following her instincts, but for her impulsiveness that ended up putting her in risky situations without thinking her actions through. But now was not the time to try and point that out, so Glenda switched to a safer topic.

"How do you feel this morning? How's the ankle?" she asked.

"Honestly, I feel like crap! My muscles ache, my ankle's absolutely throbbing and I've got this bitching bruise on my right hip that I have no idea

how it got there!" she complained.

"Looking at the scratches on your arms and hands, Dan probably gave you a tetanus or antibiotics shot last night. That pond is full of all kinds of bacteria that could lead to infection on open cuts. Actually, if he gave you a tetanus shot I'm surprised you don't remember, because those things are pretty painful. Anyway, what do you say to a day in bed? Just relax and stay cozy and I'll get you some prescription strength Tylenol for pain."

"You know what, that sounds great. I really don't feel like moving much at all today. How's Jonesy, by the way?"

"You know kids! He's fine and telling stories about his big trauma, and your heroic rescue!"

Kaycee smiled for the first time that morning. "Thank God—I gotta tell you Glenda, when he went under that last time and didn't come up, and I couldn't get him free from the seaweed on the first dive, I was so scared," she shuddered at the picture in her mind.

Glenda put a hand on her shoulder, "You did good, Kaycee. He owes you his life." Kaycee looked into the older woman's eyes and knew for the first time what she had to feel so many times when her medical skills saved a life.

"Take it easy today. I'm sure Dan will be up later. He had an early home visit, but he should be back in a couple of hours." Glenda said as she was leaving.

"Glenda wait! Do me a favor and run interference with Dan. I'm afraid if he comes up we'll just argue, and I'm not up to that today... please??" she pleaded.

Glenda sighed, "OK I'll do the best I can, but I'm guessing I can't keep him away all day. He worries about you."

"No he lords over me—there's a difference!" she answered angrily.

Glenda just shook her head and smiled. Dan had

his work cut out for him with this feisty woman—she was really pissed this time.

It turned out Dan was away most of the day. His emergency call was a bigger problem than first thought, so he didn't get back until after five. Glenda could see he was tired. His first question was about Kaycee. Glenda told him she had spent the day in bed and explained that she just checked on her and took her some dinner. She was feeling much better.

"Good, I think I'll just stick my head in and see her before I go home." Dan headed toward the stairs, but Glenda put a hand on his arm to stop him. He turned to her with a puzzled look.

"Dan, let her be today, OK?" She could tell by the expression of surprise on his face, he had no idea of the confusion and turmoil Kaycee was feeling.

"Just trust me on this one. She needs some time to work some things out in her mind, and right now seeing you isn't going to help that. And to be honest, Dan, I think you need to get your own mind clear about her too."

Dan was about to make some flippanant remark, but the look in her eyes stopped him. She was completely serious. "What's this all about Glenda? Did Kaycee say something?" he asked, now confused himself.

"She said a lot of things, none of which I'm sharing with you, except that she asked me to run interference and keep you away today. I'm sorry," Glenda said quietly wincing at the flash of pain that crossed his eyes.

"What the hell?!" He ran his hand through his hair in a gesture of frustration. "I'll tell you what, I'm going to straighten this out once and for all!" He was angry now and started up the stairs.

Glenda called after him, "Dan, don't! You're tired and angry—you'll only argue which is what she wanted to avoid. Go home—cool off and think about

things. Then come back fresh and rested tomorrow and try to talk to her. You'll only say things you'll regret tonight, and then so will she."

Dan stopped at the top of the stairs and didn't move for a long moment. Then he turned and stomped back down. "Screw it! If she wants to sit up there and pout, let her. I'm through worrying about Miss Kaycee Wilder. She's so damned convinced she can take care of herself—let her, because I'm done!" He stalked out of the clinic and slammed the door.

Glenda finally released the breath she'd been holding. Her hope that those two could get past their differences to see how much they really had in common was diminishing. Maybe the best they could manage at this point was to get through the rest of the summer without killing each other. Glenda went up to tell Kaycee she was leaving and locking up, and that Dan was already gone. Kaycee's thanks sounded sincerely relieved.

Over the next couple of weeks Kaycee and Dan's relationship deteriorated to polite professionalism and avoidance. By Wednesday Kaycee had gotten back on her feet, although she still limped a little, she was at least up and around. She had decided the best thing for her was to get this project done as quickly as possible—so she started shooting everything she could. With everyone else she was warm and engaging, still interacting with patients and helping out whenever she wasn't shooting. But around Dan she was stiff and formal, always respectful, but there was little of the warmth, friendship or even butting heads that had been so stimulating. And Dan was no better, reacting to her seeming indifference with his own cold shoulder. Glenda wanted to knock their heads together. She caught the unguarded looks of admiration and even wistfulness as they watched each other work when they were sure the other one wasn't looking.

Despite her strained relationship with Dan,

Kaycee had fallen in love with the project and the people it was about. Every day brought something new that she marveled at in the hollow. Their lives were all about the simple, important things in life—the love of family, traditional values, loyalty and honest hard work. Kaycee knew that her documentary had to bring out the quiet dignity of these people and how the clinic was part of the community, not some charity case for those poor, ignorant people of Appalachia. She was discovering that rural medicine was about the one-on-one relationships with the families in the area that Dan and Glenda had built up. It was about understanding their needs and their whole lives, and fitting into those lives, not changing them. It was about little miracles performed under extraordinary circumstances sometimes.

Kaycee had now gone on about a half-dozen emergency or follow-up home visits, but she knew to really finish the documentary, she had to follow Dan on one of his weeklong house call trips. Given the tension between them, she wasn't looking forward to even asking him, but she knew she'd get her best material and she wanted to go desperately. When she talked to Glenda about the best way to approach Dan about it, Glenda had laughed and told her that first she had better learn to ride a horse because his next set of rounds was done mostly in the high country of the hollow, and that just wasn't accessible by vehicle.

Kaycee cringed at the thought. She wasn't afraid of the big animals, but she'd never ridden a horse—never even been on one. The closest she'd ever come was the pony rides at the state fair. She wasn't sure what to do or who to ask. Dan and Glenda were out of the question. They were just too busy, and she wasn't about to ask Dan for the time of day! So she sought out Tim to see if he had any ideas.

"Kaycee, I'd be happy to teach you to ride. You

need to know enough to go trail riding, not compete in a rodeo. We should be able to accomplish that by the time Dan leaves for his next house calls trip," Tim told her.

"Tim, you're such a sweetheart! Are you sure you have time with running the orphanage and the church, and it seems like everything else around here!" Kaycee responded with some excitement.

"Listen, Kaycee, it's the least I can do after all you've done for the boys at the orphanage. They adore you and the time you spend with them. They love your stories and your special attention. None of that was part of your assignment here, but you've made it a priority that no one else who's ever come here has. Teaching you to ride is the easiest way I could pay you back." Tim was so sincere, Kaycee actually blushed under his praise.

They decided early mornings would be the best time for both of them, so 7am the next morning, Kaycee was out in the barn getting her first lesson on the care and handling of horses. Tim insisted she learn how to take care of the animals and saddle them up before she learned to ride, but Kaycee didn't mind. She was immediately drawn to the majesty of the animals, and liked the process of caring for them. It helped her develop a relationship of sorts with the mare she would eventually learn to ride. Tim was a patient teacher and full of praise for the way she took to horses as if she'd been around them all her life. He watched as she related to them, just like she did to people. Her ability to put people at ease quickly translated to the horses as well.

Tim and Kaycee worked together for two hours every morning. They quickly settled into an easy, comfortable routine. Tim reminded Kaycee a lot of her older brother. She found out a great deal about how he came to the hollow to do six months of mission work, and now 10 years later was still here. He told her he'd found peace and God here in a way

he'd never experienced before. She told him about her marriage and divorce, and her move to teaching. She found talking to him was therapeutic. He was an excellent listener, and then added quiet insights that always made her think. When they weren't into heavy topics, they laughed and joked, and just generally enjoyed one another's company.

Dan noticed Kaycee was joining them later and later in the clinic in the mornings. Finally on about the fourth morning, he asked Glenda what was up with Kaycee. "She keeps joining us later each morning this week. Is she feeling OK?" he asked concerned.

"If you weren't so damn stubborn you'd be asking her this question, not me!" Glenda shot back.

He gave her his 'don't give me grief' look and she decided maybe she could get things back on track between the two of them if he felt a little jealousy. Glenda was a hopeless romantic, and loved playing matchmaker!

"As far as I know, she's fine. She's been up and out early every morning with Tim. I don't know what they got going on, but they've been hot and heavy into something all week." She devilishly gave extra emphasis to the 'hot and heavy' phrase and then carefully watched Dan stiffen and scowl at what she said. Good, she thought, now maybe he'll come down off his high horse and do something before that girl gets away.

"Well at least she can't get into too much trouble with Tim," he said crossly, and then wondered why he was suddenly angry. His mood didn't improve when Kaycee came breezing in, her cheeks flushed and hair tousled with a huge grin on her face.

"What an incredible morning! It's going to be a gorgeous day!" she exclaimed. Kaycee was exhilarated because she'd been able to saddle the mare all by herself this morning and as a reward, Tim let her actually ride her around the coral. Tim

said she had a natural seat on a horse, and she had loved being on the powerful animal. Dan just glared at her back as she dashed upstairs to shower and change before coming back down to work.

After that morning Dan found himself watching more closely whenever Kaycee and Tim were together. He noted the light easy manner they interacted, laughing and casually touching an arm or shoulder. He hated that he was so conscious of every moment they were together and it rankled him that as easygoing as she was with Tim, she was just as stiff and uncomfortable around him. The green-eyed monster was growing inside Dan, but he'd never admit that was the reason he was so cranky.

After about three days of walking and trotting around the coral, Tim decided Kaycee was ready to take on a trail, so they set out together for a morning trail ride. He decided it would also be a good time to talk about the one subject they'd avoided in all their conversations.

"So, Kaycee, when are you going to give Dan a break," he asked casually.

"Huh? What do mean give Dan a break? I've thought about breaking his nose a couple of times, but I'm guessing that's not what you mean!" she hoped she could duck the question with humor.

"Sorry, kiddo, you can't deflect the question that easily. I mean you guys were getting along great I thought, and now it's like somebody left the refrigerator door open whenever you're both in the same room. What happened?"

She sighed and wasn't happy that he was probing into the bruised area around her heart. She was quiet for a while and then said softly, "I don't know, Tim. I guess we just don't see things the same way."

Tim thought he had a pretty good idea of what she was thinking after all the talks they'd had, but he wanted her to put it into words because he



wasn't sure she really knew what was behind her feelings. "Like what things?"

"Just things... I don't really want to talk about this. Can't we just enjoy the ride?" she pleaded.

"OK. I just want to say one thing and then I'll let it go. Don't assume that every man who shows an interest in you wants you to be something you're not, like your ex-husband did."

She turned sharply to look at him, hurt in her eyes. "I don't!" she said defensively, and then added quietly, "But I have learned to stay away from bossy, domineering men, who want to run my life."

"Is that really what you think about Dan?" he asked surprised. When she didn't answer, he suddenly had a thought. "Dan spanked you after the gorge incident, didn't he? Is that what this is all about?"

She blushed and shifted uncomfortably in her saddle, but didn't say anything. "Kaycee, I'm a little surprised that after all the time you've spent here, you don't understand folks better." She looked at him with a puzzled expression, but still didn't say anything.

"Dan didn't spank you to be domineering or bossy, he spanked you because he cares about you and didn't want anything to happen to you. You gave Dan and me at least a dozen new gray hairs when we heard you were hurt in the gorge. And I'm here to tell you, young lady, if Dan hadn't tanned your fanny, I would have!" Tim told her.

Kaycee looked miserable. Tears she didn't want to shed were pooling under her lashes and feelings she didn't want to acknowledge were demanding attention. She wouldn't let herself remember the secure, cared for feeling she had experienced after Dan spanked her. It had been such a contrast to the fear and guilt she felt while she was caught by the steel trap that had captured her foot in the gorge. But the demons of her marriage got in the way of

truly understanding why Dan had done it, not once, but twice. She couldn't get past the feelings that here was another man determined to run roughshod over her life who would eventually betray her when he couldn't mold her into the woman he wanted.

Kaycee was so lost in her thoughts, she didn't realize they had arrived back at the coral until her mare stopped and snorted to get her attention. She dismounted and turned to find Tim standing right there with compassion in his eyes. He gently held her and said, "Kaycee, I'm sorry if what I said brought all that pain into your eyes. I just hate to see someone who gives so much to other people, close herself off to something wonderful. Dan won't hurt you, I wouldn't let him."

She gave him a hint of a smile as he reached out to caress her cheek and lightly kissed her forehead. They took their horses to the barn to take off the saddles and rub the animals down.

Dan was heading out to the barn when he saw them. He couldn't hear what Tim said, but he saw the caress and kiss, and the way Kaycee smiled. He felt a sharp stab in his gut, as he assumed the intimate gesture meant he had lost her for good. Hell, he thought angrily, I never had her in the first place! But that thought didn't make the surprising sense of loss feel any less empty. He raked his hands through his hair and tried to clear his head. It didn't help much except to make him realize he wasn't willing to jeopardize his friendship with Tim by brooding over Kaycee. It was time to admit he'd had feelings for her, but had been too stubborn to do anything about it, and now it was too late.

Over the next few days Dan stopped barking at people, which everyone appreciated. But Glenda noticed that even though he tried to be his normal, buoyant self with people, his easy smile didn't quite reach his eyes. As he planned the itinerary for his next house calls trip, she noticed the lack of that spark he normally had in anticipation.

Kaycee was simply relieved that Dan seemed less cranky, and annoyed all the time. He even smiled at her and joked around a little like he had when she first arrived in the hollow. She knew he was planning his next trip and decided his changed mood made it the right time to approach him about going along. She and Tim had been trail riding every morning for the last five days and he told her she was ready. So she went into his office, to plead her case.

"Dan, have you got a minute to talk?" she asked tentatively.

He looked up at her and couldn't help that tingle of electricity he still felt when he saw her. She truly was a natural beauty who had no idea how attractive she was. "Come on in. I was just finishing up some charts," he said hoping his voice and eyes didn't betray what he was feeling.

"Dan, I just wanted to say how much I appreciate all the access you and Glenda have given me. I know I've got some great stuff and I think I'm almost done shooting." His stomach clenched—he was sure she was coming to say she was leaving. He was shocked at how much that prospect bothered him, even though they'd been little more than polite strangers the last few weeks.

"Look I know things haven't exactly been smooth sailing between us, but I need to ask you a huge favor to finish this project." He didn't say anything, afraid the relief that she wasn't leaving yet would be obvious in his voice. He just raised his eyebrows, inviting her to continue.

She hesitated just briefly, a little annoyed that he wouldn't respond, making it harder for her. "I really need to go with you next week on your house calls trip. I want to show how much of what you do is the one-on-one relationships you have with the people here. You and Glenda have become part of their lives, and don't expect them to change for you—you adapt to their needs. I think that's such

an important part of rural healthcare like this. Please, let me come with you so I can bring that part of the story to people outside the hollow."

Dan was touched by her words and the understanding they conveyed. He realized he would probably have enjoyed her company on this trip, but... "Kaycee, I know there's been tension in the air the last few weeks. But I want you to know that has nothing to do with what I'm about to say. I'm very sorry, but I just can't take you with me."

"But..."

"The answer has to be no."

## Chapter Six

Kaycee was furious with Dan's answer. She was convinced he was just saying no out of spite. She had gone on several emergency home visits and proven she could do what she needed without getting in the way. She had even helped on some cases. There was no good reason for her not to come with him on his house calls trip except pure stubbornness on his part! She turned on her heel and was almost out the door when she felt a firm grip on her arm. She looked back to find that Dan had come around the desk and stopped her.

"Kaycee, don't do that! Don't just stomp out of here, angry. Let me explain," he said firmly. She was about to fight him, but realized she'd only be hurting her chances of changing his mind. So she allowed him to guide her back to a chair and sat down. He sat across from her rather than going back behind his desk.

"I would be more than happy to let you come if I weren't going into the high country. It's rough country up there. I can only take the truck so far and then I go the rest of the way on horseback. Many nights I camp out, and I have to spend hours in the saddle trail riding. You told me when you first got here that you didn't ride. That's why I can't take you—because you don't know how to ride. And that's the ONLY reason. OK?"

Kaycee looked at him blankly for a minute still not quite sure she had actually heard him right, and then completely startled him by laughing out loud.

"What the heck is so funny?" he asked annoyed.

"For someone who's so in tune with his patients, you don't notice much else going on around here, do you?" she asked still grinning. Now it was his turn to have a blank look on his face. "What do you think Tim and I have been doing for two hours every morning the last couple of weeks?! Geez, Dan, open your eyes! He's been teaching me to

ride, and we've been out on the trails every morning, and even a couple of afternoons this week. Red Dawn and I are good buddies now."

Dan's mouth just dropped. "You mean that's what... you and Tim... horseback riding?"

"Of course, what did you think we were doing all that time?" she asked as if any other answer was ridiculous. "Tim says I have a natural seat, and should have no problem keeping up with you. He says I'll probably be a little saddle sore the first couple of days since I'm not used to riding more than a couple hours at a time, but he didn't think that would slow us down. So, what do you say doc? No more excuses now!"

Kaycee smiled at him brightly with the excitement of a child, and he melted. Warmth she hadn't seen in his eyes since her first week there was back. It made her a little nervous. She had felt pretty safe from any feelings as long as they kept their distance, but this was going to be eight or nine days in close quarters. If he tried to resume their previous friendship, she wasn't sure she could resist a second time, especially without the anger that had fueled her the first time she backed off from him.

"You're right, no excuses. If Tim thinks you're ready for the trail ride, you're ready—he knows where I go and how rough the terrain is. Personally, I'd be happy for the company and I can always use an extra hand. Maybe it'll give us a chance to clear the air," he said looking at her intently.

"Sure..." she said noncommittally. "So, I guess, I'll go start packing my gear and stuff. We leave day after tomorrow right?"

"Early—usually around five a.m." He smiled to himself as she left. Horseback riding! All this time he'd been jealous over a horse! How the heck did he manage to get things so screwed up he wondered. Then he remembered when he had first asked what she was doing and Glenda's answer. Glenda! Damn that woman, he chuckled. She had been determined

to get Dan and Kaycee together since she first got here. He'd bet anything she knew exactly what Kaycee and Tim were doing and had been deliberately vague to make him jealous. It was high time he took that woman in hand.

Dan found Glenda in the exam room replacing some of the supplies used during the day. He walked in and closed the door. She turned startled by his sudden appearance. "Hey Dan, I'm just getting us ready for tomorrow. Did you finish up those charts?" she asked as she went back to work.

"Actually I was interrupted by Kaycee. She wants to come on the house calls trip," he said casually.

Glenda smiled, but asked innocently, "So, you going to let her?"

"Well, originally my answer was no, but then I found out something interesting. It turns out she's been learning to ride. Tim's been teaching her the last two weeks... mornings!" he said pointedly.

"Imagine that! Well I guess there's no reason not to have her along, huh?"

"You're feeling pretty pleased with yourself, aren't you young lady?"

At the tone in his voice, Glenda stopped what she was doing and turned to look at him. She could never mask her emotions and the devil was in her eyes. "What are you talking about, Dan?"

"I'm talking about the meddlesome way you've been trying to get Kaycee and me together since she got here. And your little attempt to make me jealous over Tim. It worked too. So well, I was convinced the two of them were a couple and had backed off completely!"

"Ooops!" she laughed. "Oh, come on, Dan, it was just a little harmless matchmaking." But as he started advancing on her she backed up right into the exam table.

"You know, my dear, I think it's high time someone took you to task for your 'harmless'

meddling," he said ominously. Then he grabbed her arm and pulled her over to the straight backed chair in the room. It wasn't until he sat down that she realized his intention and started to pull away.

"Daniel Chase, you wouldn't dare!" she squealed, still laughing as he pulled her over his lap.

"Glenda, I should have done this years ago!" he was grinning as he smacked her butt firmly, but without much force.

"Let me go you big lug! Owwww!" she yelped as he landed a particularly sharp slap to her rear end. But, most of the spanks just left a slight sting. He was clearly not putting his full strength into it, but that didn't stop her from kicking and squirming to get loose. After about a dozen smacks he let her up.

"I can't believe you just did that!" she tried for outrage, but couldn't pull it off, she was still laughing, although she did reach back to rub her backside.

He looked at her warmly, "Just let that be a warning! The next time you decide NOT to let me stubbornly mess up my own life, I'll have to give you a real spanking!" He kissed her on the cheek, and whispered, "Thanks for taking such good care of me." Then he left.

Glenda smiled sadly as he left. No one had spanked her, playfully or otherwise since her husband died. God, she still missed him. And she didn't want Dan or Kaycee to have to live with the same loneliness she felt at times when she thought about him. They were both good people who deserved more. It never really occurred to her that she deserved more too. She always figured she was lucky to have had one love in her life. Besides, she was happy and fulfilled with her family and the clinic... it was just sometimes... She shook her sad thoughts away, rubbed her backside once more and went back to work.



Two mornings later, just as the sun was rising over the hollow, Dan and Kaycee set out. The truck was loaded with medical supplies, camping gear, and camera equipment and the horse trailer was hitched to the back with Red Dawn and Black Star, the gelding Dan rode, inside. It was very slow going up the dirt road that took them into the high country, so it was after 10 before they reached the Anders' farm which was their first stop. Dan checked on the Anders' teenage son--Dan had set his broken arm six weeks ago. It was time for the cast to come off. Dan even checked over a couple of the farmer's cows who were due to calf soon, which amused Kaycee. She thought it was funny that he treated the animals just as if they were human mothers about to give birth. Dan caught her grin and asked her how else was he supposed to treat them?

They unloaded everything at the Anders farm and got it ready to pack up on the horses the next day. They let the horses loose in the pasture and spent the night with the Anders, and then were up at the crack of dawn the next morning to load up the horses and begin their trail ride. The first stop was the Wyler cabin about three hours up the trail. Tim Wyler and his son John made incredible wood furniture. Kaycee marveled at the craftsmanship and the patience as they worked with simple hand tools. The pieces were beautiful and she was sure he didn't have to sell many to keep his family fed and clothed.

At the Wyler's, they ran into their first case of the mystery illness. The Wyler girls, Tammy Lynn and Margie were both feeling poorly. The girls were just six and nine. Their mother had said they were listless, had little appetite and were running fevers. She also said they seemed to bruise very easily—just bumping into something would cause a black and blue mark. Dan was puzzled. He checked for

insect or tick bites, thinking perhaps they had contracted Lyme disease from a tick bite. But there was no sign of anything. He took some blood samples to have tested and then left the family with some Tylenol to bring down the fever and high powered vitamins to try and build up their energy.

As they mounted up and left the cabin in late afternoon, Kaycee could tell Dan was extremely troubled. "Dan you look really worried. What do you think is wrong with those girls?" she asked.

"I won't know until I get the results of the blood tests, but the symptoms are very disturbing. The fever could be a sign of infection, but they have no rashes or skin marks other than the bruises. Kaycee, I don't want to speculate, because quite frankly, my speculation is scaring me right now."

"Will the blood samples be OK for so many days?" she asked curious.

"Yeah, I have refrigerant packs that will keep them cold until I can get the samples to Harlan to ship off to the lab in Lexington," he answered distracted by his medical mystery.

They rode for another three hours, slowly picking their way along the rocky trail. Kaycee was grateful when Dan finally said they should stop and set-up camp for the night. He chuckled as she climbed out of the saddle and walked funny for a few minutes. She promptly scowled at him and started unpacking what they'd need for camp. She was worried, though, because she hadn't counted on the long hours in a saddle being so hard on her back. Since she'd only ridden two hours at a time previously, and then come right in for a hot shower, her back hadn't really bothered her. But after six hours riding today, she was more than just a little stiff. She was hurting. She didn't want to complain to Dan though, for fear he'd send her back. They had fallen into a comfortable routine the last couple of days, and she didn't want to ruin that. She was relieved that the tension was gone and they seemed

companionable again. She was also getting great stuff on camera, and knew there would be more to come. So she suffered in silence, letting him think she just wasn't used to this much time in the saddle.

Dan surprised her by whipping up a delicious meal of pork and beans with biscuits over the camp fire. They sat quietly watching the fire for a while, and then Dan made notes on his visits to the Anders and Wylers while Kaycee made similar notes on the video she'd shot. They both were ready to turn in early. Kaycee was actually glad to have her bedroll laid out on the hard ground, because it was the best thing for her back.

The next day the routine was the same, but each home they visited had an interesting case or story. They visited the cabin of an older man who lived alone. He was fine, but was concerned about two of his horses. When Dan examined them, both animals were full of stomach tumors. He could feel them from outside the animals. Kaycee watched tearfully as Dan put the animals down with an injection. She had never seen anything like that and was very quiet when they mounted up and moved on. She had videotaped Dan doing it and the camera had captured the heartbreak in his eyes as he euthanized the horses. She also noticed that worried look on his face as they rode to the next home, but he clearly didn't want to talk about it.

By the time they reached the third cabin of the day, they had been at it nearly twelve hours. The fatigue was etched in Dan's face, and Kaycee was hot, tired and in pain. She managed to hide it from Dan because he was so preoccupied, but when they dismounted she felt a sharp stabbing pain that caused her to gasp and her face stiffened. Dan was instantly by her side.

"Kaycee, what's wrong? Are you hurt?" he asked concerned.

Damn, she thought. She steadied herself and

then turned to face him, trying desperately for a smile to reassure him she was fine. "No, no, I'm fine. Just a little saddle sore you know—12 hours on a horse in two days is almost more than I've spent total since I learned how to ride."

He took hold of her arms and looked her over skeptically. "Kaycee, don't lie to me. Now tell me what's wrong."

"Honestly, Dan, I'm fine. Stop being such a worry wart. Let's see to the folks who really need your doctoring!" she said lightly and tried to pull out of his grasp.

He tightened his grip on her arms and forced her to look into his intent gaze. He spoke softly, but there was no doubt about the threat in his words. "You better be telling me the truth, young lady, because if you're lying about your health, I promise you your backside will be plenty sore *before* you get back in that saddle. Understand?"

At that moment the couple who lived in the cabin came out to greet Dan and he let her go. Kaycee was immediately relieved because another second and she probably would have told him everything. She hated when he got that intimidating look that she couldn't break away from, but she was not about to get another spanking.

Dan was quickly drawn into the family he was visiting. This time it was the woman's mother who was ill. The older woman had some of the same symptoms the Wyler girls exhibited. Again there was really nothing Dan could do for the woman, and since she was in her 80s she was much more vulnerable to the fatigue and aches of the illness.

Kaycee and Dan stayed out in the family's barn that night. Dan was watching her closely, but didn't say anything. She tried to divert his focus from her to the mystery illness they had now seen at two homes. "Dan, doesn't the fact that we've seen it twice now point to some environmental problem? I mean couldn't the water or soil be contaminated

with something? Maybe we should contact the EPA, or even the CDC. This could be something dangerous."

"Whoa! Slow down there, girl. First of all we only have three people sick and while their symptoms are similar, they could still be very different illnesses. And secondly, the last thing we want is a bunch of federal investigators crawling all over the hollow. These people live up here in the high country because they want to be left alone. Some nosey feds come up here, and they just might get shot."

"Well, shouldn't we at least take some water and soil samples to test ourselves? I mean, if there is some kind of contamination, we shouldn't wait until everyone's sick. The young and old are usually the first to fall victim to a contagion because their immune systems are weaker, right?" She was getting worked up now, and didn't understand why Dan wasn't more agitated.

"Who's the doctor here? I thought we agreed way back when that I would do my job and you'd do yours, and we wouldn't try to tell the other one how to work. Remember that conversation? Now relax, we'll get the blood samples to the lab and go from there. These people didn't get sick overnight, and we're not going to find the answers overnight either."

"But, don't you think...."

"Kaycee, I can barely think about anything I'm so tired. So, how about you and I get some shut-eye? You look as exhausted as I feel."

Kaycee decided she was fighting a losing battle tonight, so she sought relief for her aching back on the hard ground, and prayed a night's sleep would ease the strain. Unfortunately, come morning, she not only wasn't better, she was in real trouble. When she tried to sit up, she couldn't move. She moaned and writhed in pain—her back was in full spasm.

Dan had gone out to the well to wash up and when he came back to wake her, he heard the moan of pain and rushed to her side. Her face was chalk white and a mask of pain.

"Dan, help me," she whispered. "My back... spasms... can't move..."

"Kaycee... look at me—focus on my eyes," he said gently, but firmly. "You need to tell me how you originally injured your back before I can help you."

"Three years ago... shooting Navy SEAL team training. Repelling... lost my grip and fell... cracked lower vertebrae... doctors fused my lower spine. Oh God, pain's unbearable... Dan, please, do something," she pleaded, tears flowing freely down her cheeks.

He cursed under his breath when he heard the extent of her injury. How could she be so stupid to think she could ride these trails for hours on end? But he clamped down on his anger—that was not what she needed now. "OK, Kaycee, just hold on, honey. I need to roll you over and then I'll get a muscle relaxant into you so I can examine your back and see what kind of damage you've done."

She clenched her teeth and seemed to go even paler at the mention of moving, but she knew it had to be done. "Just let me do the work, don't try to move yourself. Remain as still as possible and let me turn you over." She nodded trying to get herself under control. She couldn't help crying out in pain when he turned her over. He pushed up her shirt and very lightly started probing the muscles in her lower back, but she cried out in pain even at his light touch. Her muscles were like solid granite—he couldn't ever remember feeling anything so tight. No wonder she was in excruciating pain. He got his medical bag and injected a strong dose of a muscle relaxant and then gave her a sedative. She finally started to relax a little and her face wasn't quite so drawn in pain. Eventually, she drifted off, and he

was able to start working her back muscles in earnest. It was clear she was going to be flat on her back for at least a couple of days.

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It was several hours later when she stirred. She opened her eyes and was completely disoriented. She started to move, but immediately felt firm hands on her shoulders and a very gentle voice telling her not to move. She looked up into the eyes of a man she didn't recognize and started to panic, until his calming voice quickly reminded her of where she was and what had happened.

Jonas Tyler was a big, quiet man. He and his wife were in their early 30s and had been together more than 10 years, but had never been able to have children. Jonas hunted and trapped in the high country, fashioning animal hides into tooled leather goods that his wife stained and painted with beautiful prints.

As Jonas looked at Kaycee, he could see the ravages of pain in her eyes and face. He told his wife to bring cool water and a rag to wipe the beads of sweat that gathered on her forehead as she endured waves of pain.

"Doc Chase said he'd be back before you woke. He'll be sorry he wasn't. Is there anything we can do for your pain?" he asked.

"I'm so sorry to put you out like this. You have enough to worry about with your mother-in-law sick, without some stranger collapsing on you," she said through her tears.

"Now, we'll have none of that. You're hurt and you'll stay here as long as you need. So, you can just stop your fretting 'bout putting us out," Jonas said firmly. His wife came in at that moment with cool water to bathe her brow and to drink.

"Libby, you tend to the girl while I go after the doc. He needs to get back here and do something for her suffering. No creature should have to suffer

like that." And with that Jonas left the cabin before Kaycee could tell him not to pull Dan away from other patients, which is where she hoped he was.

It was another hour before Jonas got back with Dan and by that time Kaycee was almost out of her mind with pain. The drugs had worn off completely and despite the massage therapy Dan had done on her back, she was still nearly stiff as a board. Tears were coursing down her cheeks and she was practically crushing Libby's hand as the woman tried desperately to comfort her.

When Dan knelt beside her all he could see was the pleading in her eyes for relief. His jaw clenched in anger while he worked swiftly, but carefully to inject her with more muscle relaxants. He had thought that while she was sleeping he could get to a neighboring cabin and check on folks there. He hadn't counted on two more sick children, including a two year old so weak she could barely move. He was so worried about the baby he lost track of time and missed the time when Kaycee's drugs would wear off. So, at this moment her pain was his fault and he was angry with himself.

Once her body began to relax a little as the pain lessened, she could see his anger and frustration. She assumed it was directed at her and figured she deserved it. "I'm so sorry, Dan, but it's been over a year since my back went out. I thought this kind of spasm was behind me."

He looked at her and just wished he could make all her pain go away. "Kaycee, I never should have left you. I'm the one who's sorry. Those drugs never should have worn off, and they wouldn't have if I'd been here, dammit." He was agonizing over her pain and seeing him that way was pulling at her own heart.

It was Jonas who brought them both back to reality. "Seems to me you're both spending time worrying about what's already done. I'm thinking we best focus on what needs doing."



Dan and Kaycee both looked at him as his simple words sunk in. "You're right, Jonas. Kaycee, when you've gone into spasms before, how long were you flat on your back, and what do you do about it?" Dan asked, sounding more like the doctor he was.

"I'm usually out of it for 48 to 72 hours. 24 hours of drugs and then intense physical therapy and finally a visit to my chiropractor. Jonas and Libby, I'm so sorry, but the one thing I know from past experience is I can't move for at least two days."

Jonas smiled slightly, "Libby, I think this one's nearly as stubborn as you. Now I already told you, young woman, there'd be no more fussing about putting us out."

"Oh, she's stubborn alright!" Dan chimed in, and Kaycee gave him a look. But he was glad to see her responding to something more than pain. "Jonas, you still have that tractor with the flatbed wagon?"

"Sure doc. You thinking of moving her anyway?"

"No, Kaycee stays right where she is for at least the next 48 hours. But I'm very worried about Miz Betsy here and the Childers baby. They're both very sick and very weak. I want them in the clinic and I need to get their blood tests to a lab right away. I'm going to call Glenda and have her come and then have you drive them back to the clinic in the wagon. Glenda can monitor them along the way," Dan said.

"Whatever you say, doc. Is Ma Betsy gonna be OK?" Jonas asked, now concerned.

"I don't know, Jonas—I'm just not sure about what's wrong with her or the four sick children we've seen. But I'm going to do everything in my power to find out."

"That's good enough for me, doc."

The next several hours were a flurry of activity. Dan used the satellite phone to contact Glenda and fill her in on everything that had happened. He gave her instructions about what drugs and equipment to

bring. She said she'd borrow an ATV, and since she would be making a direct trip to the Tylers instead of the circuitous route Dan and Kaycee had taken, she expected to be there in five or six hours.

Kaycee was vaguely aware of people coming and going, but the drugs made her feel fuzzy and finally she just slept. Dan kept massaging her back muscles, hoping to loosen her up to the point where the spasms ended sooner, rather than later, but she was so tight it was difficult. His hands were cramping and he finally had to stop for the time being.

By the time Glenda arrived, it was nearly dusk, and they all agreed to wait till morning for the trip back. She was thoroughly briefed by Dan, and had no more idea than he did, about what was causing the children and older woman to get sick. But, they agreed on all the tests and treatment she should try when she got the baby and woman back to the clinic. Glenda had also brought the stronger muscle relaxants he had requested for Kaycee. She could tell Dan was almost as worried about Kaycee as he was about the others. She could also tell he was frustrated that Kaycee hadn't told him she was having problems. With his skills in massage therapy he probably could have prevented the spasms with nightly rubdowns. Of course if they'd had any idea how serious her back injury had been, they never would have let her go in the first place. Glenda was surprised that Kaycee didn't know herself what a strain several days of trail riding would be.

The next morning Jonas, Glenda and her two patients were off. Libby decided to go with them, so she could help take care of her mother. Glenda was glad to have the help since she'd be on her own for a few more days until Dan and Kaycee got back.

Kaycee was still sleeping when Dan came back in. It seemed the only time her face was relaxed was in sleep. He couldn't help thinking how lovely she looked and how vulnerable. He reached down

and brushed back a wayward curl. He hadn't thought it possible that one woman could set off so many emotions in him. She could make him laugh one minute, and furious the next, but always, she made him happy. He was startled at the thought. But it was true he realized—whenever he was with her, he was happy. He leaned down to brush her lips with his and she made a small sound of pleasure in her sleep.

The day passed quietly with everyone gone. Kaycee and Dan talked about little things, big things, and nothing. He read to her and sometimes they just enjoyed each other's company in silence. Dan kept her drugged again and worked hard on her muscles until his hands were so cramped he could barely move his fingers. But at last the drugs and massage seemed to be working and by the evening, she was starting to loosen up. He figured by morning she might be able to move a little.

Sure enough, the next day she was able to sit up. From this point she knew the series of exercises she needed to do to get her mobility back. They were painful, but nothing like the pain she'd experienced with the spasms. Still, Dan flinched as he watched her push herself, but she refused to let him drug her. She told him she wouldn't know how far to go without feeling the pain, and he knew she was right. She exercised to exhaustion and then fell back into a deep sleep.

That was her routine for the entire day, but by nightfall she was sitting up in a chair and could eat dinner with Dan. She told him she should be up and around by the next day. She didn't think she'd be ready to ride for another day or two. She knew he wanted to check out the last two homesteads on his route to make sure there were no more cases of the mystery illness, so she told him to go ahead and pick her up on the way back. Jonas was due back any time, so if she had a relapse or got into trouble, he'd be there to help.

Dan was reluctant to go, but agreed when she admitted she knew how to inject herself with the muscle relaxant drugs if she had a problem. Of course the admission brought her a sound scolding for not having her auto-injector with her. Dan also promised a lengthy 'discussion' of this whole incident when he returned. Somehow, she had a bad feeling that he wasn't going to be doing much talking during this 'discussion'.

## Chapter Seven

Dan rode off early the next morning, and Jonas was back by midday. Kaycee was up and walking around, cleaning up the cabin when he arrived back. She had quite a time convincing him that it was OK for her to be out of bed given the condition she was in when he left. But he finally accepted her word, mumbling there'd be hell to pay if Dan came back and said she was not supposed to be out of bed. He warned her to make sure she didn't overdo and then went out to catch up on the chores. He worked late and definitely appreciated the hot meal she'd put together for him when he came in. Jonas was a man of few words, but she found the silence as they ate companionable. Jonas liked the fact she didn't seem to need to fill the spaces with useless chatter.

The next day, Kaycee was ready to try riding again. Despite Jonas' misgivings, she saddled up Red Dawn and rode for about 20 minutes. It wasn't much of an endurance test, but at least she could sit the horse and make it a short distance down the trail without pain. Dan had said it would probably take about six hours to make it back to the truck taking a direct route, but he promised frequent stops, so Kaycee figured she could make it.

Dan had expected to be back by late afternoon, and they planned to get about half the ride out of the way that day and then get an early start and be back at the clinic by 1 or 2pm. When Dan finally rode up, Kaycee took one look at the weariness in his face and made a decision that they weren't going anywhere.

"How did it go? Any more cases of the mystery illness or any other problems?" she asked first.

"Another sick child—the Warrens' youngest, six year old Wendy. And I had to put down three more animals, all with tumors I could feel right through their skin, just like old man Simpson's horses. Something bad is happening. We've got to get those

blood tests done," he told her, the worry in his voice overshadowing the exhaustion. "How are you doing? You look like you're moving much better."

Kaycee knew Glenda would do everything possible to get the test results as soon as possible, so she played her trump card. "I am moving better, but I tried to ride this morning, and I really think I need another day before we hit the trail. I know you want to get back, but I just can't do it yet." She looked pointedly at Jonas warning him not to contradict her, but it wasn't necessary, he knew immediately what she was doing, and he approved.

Dan actually looked relieved and agreed that they should wait till morning. They all ate an early dinner and then sat quietly on the porch enjoying the summer evening. Dan fell asleep in a chair updating his notes and charts. Kaycee just watched him for a while. It was so quiet, she was startled when Jonas spoke.

"That was a good thing you did. Dr. Dan needs rest."

"He looks so exhausted and worried. I swear he physically feels the pain of his patients," she said, her eyes not leaving Dan's face.

"Does he know how you feel?" Jonas asked.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she responded uneasily.

"That you're in love with him," he said quietly.

Kaycee's head snapped around to face Jonas, denial on her lips, but as she looked into the simple honesty reflected in his gaze, she couldn't say it. "Oh God, Jonas, please don't say that. I can't be in love with Dan... I can't be in love with anyone. The wounds of my divorce are still too fresh." She put her head in her hands.

"Kaycee, you're not alone in your feelings. You were in too much pain to see the anguish in Dan's face when you were hurt. I don't know what's happened in the past, but I do know Dan would never hurt you."

"I didn't think my husband of ten years would either, but that didn't stop him," she said bitterly, and walked away. Jonas watched her go sadly, thinking how much pain both she and Dan had suffered, and thanking God for his Libby.

The next morning, Dan and Kaycee got up early, packed the horses and hit the trail by 7am. Before they left, Jonas quietly said to Kaycee, "You *can* learn to trust again." The smile she gave him as they headed out didn't quite reach her eyes, and it was clear she didn't believe him, even if the sentiment was sweet.

Dan and Kaycee ended up riding about four and a half hours that day. Kaycee tried to tell Dan she could probably make it all the way, even though her back was starting to really protest, but Dan insisted they stop. And he reminded her he was an expert at reading pain in a patient's eyes.

They started out early again the next morning and made it to the truck in a couple of hours, loaded the horses in the trailer, and were back at the clinic by early afternoon. It was a quiet trip, with both Dan and Kaycee lost in their thoughts. When they got close to the clinic, Kaycee said, "I know you want to check in on Betsy and little Janie as soon as we get back, so I'll unload the horses and get them settled back in the barn."

"Sounds like a plan," he said. When they pulled up to the clinic Dan got out of the truck, grabbed his notes and medical supplies, and Kaycee came around to the driver's side and then drove the truck and trailer on down to the barn. She actually enjoyed caring for the animals. She unloaded both horses and led them into their stalls in the barn, fed and watered them, and then started rubbing them down. She normally talked to a horse while she was brushing him—Tim even kidded her about it, but this afternoon her thoughts were elsewhere.

Kaycee couldn't get Jonas' words out of her mind. She certainly respected and admired Dan,

and this trip had brought them back to the comfortable friendship they'd enjoyed when she first arrived. But in love with him? No, that just wasn't possible! Heck, she wasn't even attracted to him...

'Liar!' a small voice in the back of her mind chided her. OK, so maybe she could admit he was very good looking, in that rugged sort of way that appealed to her. But in love? They hadn't even so much as kissed. How could she possibly be in love?

"Keep it up and you're going to brush the hide right off Red Dawn." Dan had been leaning against the barn doorway for several minutes watching Kaycee as she slowly, almost sensually, brushed the mare's coat to a glistening shine. Kaycee had been so lost in thought that Dan's voice made her jump and drop the brush.

"Don't ever do that again! You scared the life out of me!!" While her voice was firm and scolding, all she could think was, *please don't let my thoughts be written on my face!*

"Sorry, I didn't mean to sneak up on you, but I've been standing here for a while now," Dan said smiling at her blush.

"So how are Betsy and little Janie doing?" she asked now that she'd recovered her breath.

"Both are stable, but still very sick. And now, young lady, you and I have some unfinished business," his said sternly.

"But Dan, please..."

"Kaycee, there's no discussion here. I clearly warned you about what would happen if you put your health or safety at risk again. You did, and you lied to me in the process, and now I fully intend to keep my promise. The only question now is, are we going to do this the easy way or the hard way?"

She watched as he crossed to the tack bench and sat down, motioning her to follow. Her feet seemed to move her toward him of their own volition, while her brain was screaming she did NOT want another spanking.



"Dan, please, we've finally gotten our friendship back on an even keel after the last time you... you..." she faltered at saying the word.

"Spanked you?" Dan filled in the blank.

"Yes, dammit! Now, can't you just forget it this once? Don't you think I suffered enough when my back went out?" she snapped at him.

"Apparently, the agony you suffer wasn't enough of a deterrent, because you were willing to do something stupid like ride the trails for 12 hours a day! And then to lie about the pain you were in when I could have helped you and probably prevented your back from going out completely is asinine!" Dan scolded.

"I was afraid you wouldn't take me or would send me back if I told you the truth. I'm sorry I caused major problems on your trip," she responded contritely.

"You're damned right I wouldn't have taken you if I had had a clue about the type of injury you suffered to your back—you don't mess around with fused vertebrae. You could end up right back in surgery, and what's worse is I think you knew that!"

"I... I didn't... I mean, I didn't know it would be such a strain," she practically whispered.

"Bullshit!" He grabbed her arm and pulled her close enough to unsnap and unzip her jeans and then she was tossed across his lap. He tugged her jeans down, but as he pulled at her panties, she started struggling with all her might, begging him not to bare her bottom. However, Dan was determined this was going to be a spanking she didn't soon forget, so in no time her panties were down around her knees and she felt the first stinging blow of his palm against her naked fanny.

She was squirming and kicking, but he held her tight to him with a steel grip around her waist. So every painful smack found its mark. He was unrelenting, smack after blazing smack was setting her backside on fire, to match the fire in her cheeks

at the humiliation of getting a bare bottom spanking.

She screamed at him to stop and let her go, but her shouts were ignored. And when they changed to cries of pain and pleas for the spanking to end, still his hand came down hard on her backside and thighs. Finally she was simply a limp, mass of sobs as she gave in to the spanking. When he felt her release, he gave her another ten hard slaps to her sit spot and then stopped. He gently began rubbing her back and very red bottom and murmured words of comfort. As her sobs dwindled to sniffles, she tried to get up, not wanting to be comforted by the same hand that had just caused so much stinging pain and humiliation. She pulled away from him only to end up sliding off his lap and landing hard on her butt on the barn floor, which brought another yelp of pain. She scrambled to her feet and tried to escape the barn, pulling up her jeans and panties as she went, but before she could get through the door she was grabbed from behind and lifted off her feet in huge bear hug.

"Oh no, you don't!" he said with a slight grin, which just served to reignite her fury.

"Let me go damn you! I hate you for doing this to me! Just let me loose, now!" she kicked and clawed like a wildcat, but he didn't flinch. Her tears were flowing freely again, and she quickly ran out of steam and stopped fighting. When she settled, he set her down, turning her to face him, and gathered her in his arms. As much as she wanted to pull away again, she couldn't. The warm embrace of his arms was too enticing, but she wasn't completely ready to give in to him yet.

"I hate you," she repeated softly, almost as a whimper. "Why do you spank me?"

"You know you don't hate me, and you know exactly why I spank you. But let me make sure the message is clear. I can't stand back and do nothing when someone I care about—in this case care a lot

about—recklessly ignores her health or safety," he softly chided her. Then he pulled back and caught her chin in his fingers, lifting her eyes to his, as he caressed away a tear.

"This wasn't the first time I spanked you, and my guess is it won't be the last. You have to decide if you can live with that because I want a damned site more than just friendship from you." Then he leaned down and ever so lightly brushed his lips against hers. The touch was barely there but it ignited a fire inside Kaycee that was quickly obscuring the burning sensation in her butt.

Dan let her go and stepped back to see the impact of the kiss and as soon as he caught the longing in her eyes, he recaptured those trembling lips in a long sensuous kiss that Kaycee was certain had turned her knees to jello. But when he released her, her smoldering forest green eyes held as much fear as passion.

"Dan, please don't do this. I can't handle it," she whispered, her voice hoarse with desire. This time, he immediately let her go and their eyes met for one final spark of passion and then she was gone. As Dan watched her flee with the speed of a new colt, he felt a stab of emptiness where her scorching desire had burned down to his soul.

The next few days, Kaycee studiously avoided being alone with Dan. She needed the space and time to sort through her confused emotions, and Dan seemed to instinctively know this, so he didn't push her. But the more Kaycee thought about how she felt, the more confused she became. As much as she wanted to deny it, when she thought about Dan spanking her (and she thought about it a lot!) she didn't feel anger or outrage. She felt a sense of security and caring that she never had with her husband. He cared enough to take her in hand when she did something harmful to herself, and even she had to acknowledge that she had a penchant for acting first and thinking about the consequences to

herself later. But was he trying to save her from herself or mold her into someone he wanted her to be? And if she didn't change to suit his taste would he simply betray her or reject her? Those questions constantly nagged at her because of how badly she'd been burned by her ex-husband.

Overshadowing all those feelings and doubts was the strong attraction she knew was real. There was an electricity between them that she couldn't rationalize away. She could still feel the heat just thinking about his kiss, and just thinking about his kiss reignited the desire behind it. Still, with the passion came the fear. What if she gave herself to this man and he stole her desire and passion, but never opened his heart? What if she was as wrong about Dan as she had obviously been about her husband? As that doubt raised its ugly head, Kaycee thought back to Jonas' words, 'You can learn to trust again.' Could she really learn to trust again? The thought was much too scary. Better to play it safe and not get involved.

As Kaycee was resolving herself to back off and stay backed off, Dan was making just the opposite resolution with equal determination. He had let her off the hook, by backing off, much too easily he decided. But since he had, he figured he'd let her have some breathing room for a couple of days. After that he vowed to find out who had hurt her so badly that a simple kiss could bring such fear to her beautiful green eyes.

At the clinic, all the focus was on the two patients with mystery symptoms. Betsy and Janie were getting better, but not much. Jonas' wife Libby had been a great help seeing to their needs and providing comfort. But, Glenda and Dan were absolutely stumped as to what was making the two, and the other children, so ill.

"Dan, don't you think it's got to be some kind of toxin? I mean to have so many families struck with a similar illness—it's got to be something in the air

or water, or maybe even soil. We should be gathering samples to test. I don't think we should wait for the blood tests to come back," Glenda said.

Kaycee walked in on the conversation and agreed. "I tried to convince him we should take some water samples at least while we were out there. Why are you ignoring the obvious, Dan?"

Dan looked at both women and knew he had to get them to back off. If he took samples and found what he expected, there would be feds crawling all over the place, and he'd promised he wouldn't let that happen. Of course he'd made that promise before kids started getting sick. As Kaycee and Glenda watched him struggle with some inner dilemma, they had no idea how torn he was. "Look, you know, Glenda, how closed the people in the high country are. We've spent years building a trust that allows us to even visit, let alone take a child and a grandmother and bring them to the clinic. If I go up there and start acting like an investigator, taking soil and water samples, they'll just close ranks again, and we'll have to start all over. Let's just wait until we have a solid reason. The blood tests should be back tomorrow." He walked away ending further discussion.

"Why is he being so stubborn about this? I can't believe the folks I met would do anything to stop him if he was just trying to find out what was making their children and animals sick," Kaycee asked.

"They wouldn't. I don't know what's going on with Dan. He's usually the one who charges full steam ahead, doing everything in his power to help these people," Glenda said puzzled.

The next day the results of the blood tests finally came back. Dan took the call from the Lexington labs, and heard the words he'd prayed he wouldn't.

"All the samples had traces of one, two or all three of the chemicals I listed. Probably the one

causing the illness is benzene. The samples also show low white counts, as you predicted. Do you want me to forward the results directly to the state EPA, or will you do it with your water and soil samples?" the lab tech asked.

"No, don't send anything to the state—we'll send everything from here. I... uh.... I don't want to risk materials getting separated and lost in the bureaucracy in Frankfort." Dan replied, angry that he had to lie.

The lab tech laughed, "Yeah I know what you mean. That's probably the best idea. I'll Fed-Ex out the paperwork today, so you'll have it tomorrow. Should I send it to the post office in Harlan like always?"

"Yeah, I'll ship everything from there. Thanks."

"Good luck, man." The lab tech hung up leaving Dan sitting in his office chair, feeling numb. When this whole thing started six months ago, he didn't really believe the people in the hollow were at risk—that's the only reason he went along. Now he was in too deeply to pull back, but he couldn't just sit back and do nothing. He reached into his bottom drawer and pulled out the special cell phone he'd been given and hit the single speed dial number it reached. The phone barely rang before it was picked up, the voice on the other end growling, "This better be important!"

"How about half a dozen kids and a grandmother with cancer, and several animals dead? Is that important enough?" Dan snarled into the phone.

"Damn! Contamination?"

"Yeah, water is my guess—benzene is the worst of it. It's a known cause of acute myeloid leukemia and that's what we've got." Dan said with resignation.

"Alright we've got to buy more time, so collect samples and issue boil orders—whatever you need to do. But no reports yet, understand? Otherwise

everything will be blown."

"I don't care anymore—I've got sick kids!"

"So treat them, but no reports—we're too close to the jackpot."

Dan just disconnected the call, and shuddered. He was going to have to lie to the others, and he hated that. But he also knew he had to keep everything under wraps for a while longer. He pounded his fist into the wall in frustration.

"A broken hand isn't going to solve anything!"

Glenda noted as she walked into his office and then proceeded to examine his hand to make sure he hadn't really broken anything. "So I assume you got the blood test results and they're bad since you usually don't go around punching walls."

"They're inconclusive—that's what they are! We still don't know why these kids and Betsy are sick. The only new info we've got is they all have low white counts, which along with their other symptoms makes me think leukemia, or something similar." Dan said, refusing to look at Glenda as he lied.

"Oh God, leukemia? But with so many cases in a concentrated area, how could the blood samples not show some kind of contamination? You don't find a cancer cluster like that without an environmental cause."

"I don't know, that's what's so frustrating. Anyway, I suggest we try chemotherapy with Janie and Betsy and see if helps. I'll order the drugs from Harlan Regional Hospital. Meanwhile, I'm going to send Jonas to collect water and soil samples from every home where there was a case, and we'll see what we can find. But, those tests take forever. It could be weeks before we know any more."

Kaycee walked in on the tail end of the conversation. "Hey, I've got a good friend at the EPA labs in D.C. I bet she'd expedite your tests and get them back in a few days."

"NO!" Dan snapped, surprising both Glenda and

Kaycee. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap—this whole thing is just getting to me." He raked his fingers through his hair as he took a minute to think of a reasonable explanation for not sending the samples to the quickest possible testing site.

"We've got to follow proper protocol, especially since we could be dealing with a major hazard. If we've don't we might jeopardize getting it cleaned up," is what he came up with, but both women looked skeptical.

"Since when do you follow protocol, Daniel Chase?!? You've been blowing off every reg in the book for as long as I've known you," Glenda exclaimed.

"I'm sure my friend would do the tests on the Q-T, so at least you'd know what you were dealing with. Then you could still send through proper channels." Kaycee chimed in.

"Look, I just need you both to trust me on this—we do it by the book!" Dan said firmly, and stalked out of the room.

"You've known him a lot longer than I have, but it seems to me that was not typical behavior for Dan--something else is going on here," Kaycee said.

"Yeah, but we're not going to get it out of Dan. In ten years I've never known him to be anything other than completely forthcoming. If he's holding something back, he's got a damn good reason," Glenda responded. Both women walked out of the office thinking about how they'd find out what was really going on. But, very soon Kaycee would have something else much more important to fill her thoughts.

The last couple of mornings Kaycee had been getting up before dawn and climbing the hills around the clinic to a high spot where she could video tape the sunrise over the hollow. It was beautiful to watch the golden rays pierce through the morning fog of low lying clouds and set the hillsides a fire with the gems of glistening dew. She



wanted the perfect sunrise to open her documentary. Once again, she had her camera set-up on shutter mode that would take a couple of frames of video every minute, so she'd have a fast motion record of the start of the day. She loved the solitude of being up on the hill so early, and the beauty Mother Nature painted across the sky filled her with a sense of well-being. That was how Dan found her the next morning.

He didn't want to startle her, so he called out softly when he reached the top of the ridge, "Kaycee?"

She still jumped at the sound of her name. "Dan! What brings you up here this morning?" She turned to look at him and found a very troubled expression. "What's wrong?"

"Kaycee, let's go sit down on those rocks over there. I need to talk to you," he said quietly.

"Oh come on! No way! You can't be upset that I came up here alone after all this time. I know exactly where I am and how to get back. I'm within sight of the compound, and I always leave a note telling exactly where I am," she said defensively.

"I know, how do you think I found you?" Dan said with a slight grin, but it quickly disappeared.

"Well, if you think you're gonna spank me, forget it, buddy! I didn't do anything risky. So I'll just stay right here, thank you."

Now, Dan chuckled, but his somber expression returned again quickly. "Kaycee, I'm not here to scold you, although I still don't think it's a good idea for you to go anywhere alone. Please come over here and sit down, I have some bad news."

Kaycee heard the compassion in his voice and saw the worried look in his eyes, and paled slightly. "What is it? You look so serious."

"Kaycee, I don't know how to tell you this... I just talked to your brother.." Dan began hesitantly.

"Mark called the clinic? Oh God, is it Mom? Dad?" Her hands began to shake.

"Kaycee, your Dad had a massive heart attack. He's unconscious and in critical condition. Your brother says they don't know if he'll make it."

"No.... No...." Kaycee's face lost all color, her legs buckled under her and she collapsed into Dan's arms.

## Chapter Eight

Dan carried Kaycee over to the large rock formation and sat down with her on his lap. He took her hand and began rubbing it gently. "Kaycee? Kaycee, honey I need you to look at me." When she continued to stare straight ahead, tears flowing unheeded down her cheeks, he cupped her chin in his hand and turned her face to look at him. When he'd broken through her stare so that she was looking directly at him, he continued.

"We're going to get you to Milwaukee as soon as possible. Glenda's checking flights now, and Sarabeth is packing a bag for you. We need to head back to the clinic, and you can call your brother and get the details, as well as let him know when you'll be there." Dan spoke in the same calm voice he used with patients. He could see she heard the words, but wasn't sure she understood him. So, he got up and led her back to her gear so they could pack it up, and then he held her steady as they hiked down the hill, keeping her from stumbling and falling.

When they got back to the clinic, Glenda embraced her and held tight as more tears flowed. She had her booked on an 11:00a.m. flight out of Lexington, so they'd barely have time to call her brother, and then they had to get on the road. Dan said he'd drive her directly to the airport. Then, they called her brother at the hospital.

"Mark, this is Dan Chase. We spoke earlier this morning. I have Kaycee here." He handed the phone to Kaycee.

"Mark... Oh, God, Mark..." It was all she could get out before her voice was choked with sobs.

"Kaycee, sweetie, I'm so sorry I'm not there to talk to you in person and bring you here. Kaycee, I'm not going to lie to you—you need to get here soon. It's bad."

"But... how? I mean Dad's always been... I just..."

She just couldn't put together a coherent sentence. Dan put his arms around her for support.

"I know, I know kiddo—he's always been a rock, healthy as a horse. I don't really understand it either, but Mom's in no shape to explain anything right now, so the whys are just going to have to wait. Just get here, hon, we need you—Mom needs you. Take care getting here, OK? Now put your friend Dan back on the phone," Mark said calmly.

Kaycee handed the phone over looking stunned and pale, her whole body shaking.

"Mark, this is Dan, what can you tell me about your father's condition?" Dan asked.

"Dan, they're not telling us much except that he's had a massive coronary and they say it caused a lot of damage. He hasn't regained consciousness since it happened and right now he's got more tubes and wires attached to him than my computer network," Mark said sounding exhausted himself.

"I'm sure they've told you the next six to 12 hours are key. We'll get Kaycee there as soon as possible. She's on an 11a.m. flight, which puts her in Milwaukee at about 12:30 your time. Should she grab a cab to the hospital, or will you have someone pick her up?" Dan asked.

"Her aunt, mom's sister, will pick her up and bring her here. She's not driving to the airport from there right?"

"No, it's about a three hour drive, and I'm taking her. We've got to go now though, or she'll miss the plane. I'm so sorry about your Dad, we'll all be sending our prayers to your whole family."

"Thanks, and thanks for taking care of my sister through this."

"Not a problem, Kaycee's become pretty special to us down here."

Dan hung up the phone and turned to Kaycee. She was wide-eyed, pale and scared. He took her in his arms and just held tight. She began to sob, her whole body shaking with each heartrending cry.

After a couple of minutes, he simply picked her up and carried her out to the truck. He gently set her down in the passenger seat and buckled her in. She looked so lost when he let her go, he almost didn't head for the driver's side, but he had no choice.

The drive to the airport was silent except for Kaycee's sniffing. Dan wasn't going to lie to her and tell her everything was going to be alright because it certainly didn't sound that way. And he simply couldn't think of anything else to say to her, so he left her alone with her thoughts, memories and fear.

When they finally got to the airport, Kaycee seemed to understand the urgency of getting her ticket and checking in, so she didn't miss the plane. It was almost a relief to concentrate on something other than the possibility of her father dying. When she was at the security check where Dan had to leave her, she turned to him and threw her arms around him again. He just held her for a few more minutes and then she raced through the metal detector and was running to her gate. He watched her go, his heart heavy with her fear and pain. In the nearly two months she'd been with them, the one thing he had learned about her was how deep her love for her family went. If her father died, it would tear her apart on top of whatever other hurt she was already carrying. He left the terminal with a prayer on his lips.

Kaycee just made the last call for boarding and quickly stowed her bag and collapsed into her seat. Thankfully she had a window seat near the front of the plane, so she could turn to look out the window and avoid eye contact or conversation with other passengers. She had no idea how she was going to make it through the next two and a half hours, alone with nothing but her thoughts and fears.

But the time turned out to be good for Kaycee. She used it to get herself under control, thinking about the need to be strong for her mother, and for Mark who was shouldering the whole burden right

now. She even smiled as she thought about her older brother. Mark was so much like Dad—he had the same quiet inner strength tempered by a warm smile and compassionate eyes. Mark was five years older than Kaycee, but they had always been close. He had been more protective of her even than Mom and Dad.

She could still remember him standing next to her father, his arms crossed against his chest, just like Dad, as she came downstairs dressed for her first date at age 15. She had been wearing a pink t-shirt with sequined hearts on it and a short denim skirt. Before her Dad could get a word in, Mark had jumped all over her.

"You're not going out of the house like that young lady! That skirt's too short, the t-shirt is too tight, and since when do you wear make-up?"

She had simply looked at him and then stuck out her tongue. "Mom said I looked very nice, and I've been wearing make-up for a year big brother... so why don't you just go back to college and leave me alone!"

Dad had snickered at Mark's response to his little sister growing up, but then he had started in on the details of the date—who was the boy, how late would they be out, where were they going, etc. By the time her date had actually arrived, Kaycee had been ready to shoot them both. Her Mom had told her years later that she sat them both down after Kaycee left and told them if they kept up that kind of interrogation every time she went out, she was likely to end up becoming a nun!

The truth was that Mark had always been there for her, as much as her parents had. They were all very close, and even though they didn't get together as often as they'd all like, they still were very much a part of one another's lives. Mark was a vice president for finance at a big Chicago sports marketing firm. He traveled a lot, and was still single at 41, much to their parents' dismay, but he

always claimed no girl could ever match up to his mother and sister. Both of her parents were retired and enjoyed their springs and summers in Milwaukee and winters in North Carolina. They all managed to get together for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and usually at least once during the summer. She loved the time they spent together as a family. It was always filled with laughter and love. She and her brother teased each other unmercifully and constantly tried to outdo one another with silly pranks.

But when times were tough, Mark was her rock. When she had injured her back, her mom had flown out to Colorado where she was hospitalized and stayed with her until she could be moved. But it was Mark who sensed something more was wrong than just her injury, and Mark was the only one who knew the whole story of her divorce. She was just too hurt and ashamed to tell her parents of her husband's betrayal. When she first left Washington, before she started teaching, she had spent about a month with Mark in Chicago and he had simply taken care of her until she was ready to start taking care of herself again. Mark was the only one who knew how truly devastated she had been by the whole mess and how much it still affected her. Her parents had sensed there was more to the story than just two people growing apart, but they didn't push. She knew, though, how disappointed they were at not having any grandchildren.

As the pilot announced they were preparing to land in Milwaukee, Kaycee steeled herself for what was to come. It was her turn to be the strong one, for her Mom and for Mark. He deserved the chance to have a shoulder to lean on for a change. Since she had carried on her bag, she headed straight for the exit area. But she didn't get past the entrance to the main terminal. As soon as she reached the open area before the security check, she saw him. She stopped cold when she saw Mark. She took in

the red rimmed eyes, slumped shoulders and pain etched in his very being. At that moment, she was grateful that she had taken the time to pull herself together because she could see Mark was devastated. She didn't have to be told—it was written all over his face. Dad had died. As the realization struck her, Mark noticed her for the first time, seeing that she had stopped and was simply staring at him. He quickly walked to her and enveloped her in his arms, but he was holding on to her as tightly as she held onto to him. It was several minutes before they broke the embrace. When she looked up at him, tears were streaming down his face, but her eyes were strangely dry. She felt as if she was suddenly empty and hollow with nothing, not even tears left.

"When?" she asked in a whisper.

"About 90 minutes ago. Kaycee, honey, I'm so sorry... but none of us really got to say good-bye. He never regained consciousness. He went into cardiac arrest again, and they couldn't get his heart restarted," Mark said quietly, more tears falling silently down his cheeks. Kaycee embraced him again and then led him out of the airport.

"Let's get to the house, I want to see Mom," she said. They grabbed a cab because Mark had been too upset to drive. On the ride to their childhood home, Mark gathered Kaycee in his strong arms, worried that she seemed so calm, too calm.

When they got to the house, friends and family had already gathered and were helping her Mom answer phones, make tea, and all the other things you do when a loved one dies. Kaycee and Mark were bombarded as they walked through the door with hugs and tears from well meaning people, but all she wanted to do was see her mother. When she finally got through to the living room she saw her mother sitting in her dad's favorite chair absently rocking, looking pale, and small, and very lost. Kaycee almost didn't recognize the woman who'd



given her so much strength and comfort through her life. Her mom was clearly in shock—they all were. None of them could begin to understand how a healthy, vital man like her father, dropped dead of a heart attack at age 67.

The next few days passed in a blur. Kaycee was a whirling dervish of activity—making arrangements for the funeral, notifying friends and family, seeing to every detail. Several people commented on how well she was holding up and wasn't her mom lucky to have her around. But Mark was starting to worry about her almost as much as their mother. Kaycee seemed to be keeping everything bottled up. During the funeral service, when Mark gave the eulogy there wasn't a dry eye in the church, except for Kaycee. She barely shed a tear during the entire service or at the graveside. It was as if she was hiding her grief beneath a façade of being Miss Cheerful and Efficient.

The only time she seemed to let her guard down just a bit was when she talked with her doctor friend from the clinic. Dan had called her every night since she had let them know her Dad died. Sometimes the conversations were very short, other times they seemed to last for more than a half-hour. Occasionally she'd hang up with her cheeks wet with tears, but most often she had a slight smile on her face as she thought about some little anecdote Dan had told her about a patient or Glenda or even Jonesy and the other boys at the orphanage.

Early Tuesday morning, as Kaycee sat out on the front porch, drinking coffee she realized it had been a week already since her father's funeral. Mark had to leave for high level business meetings with an important new client that he had no idea how he was going to concentrate on, but promised to return on the weekend. Their mom was showing signs of life again as the shock and numbness were starting to wear off. They'd still find her in a room

sometimes crying over some object or picture that had brought back a memory, but she was starting to talk about what she was going to do now, and that was healthy. The only one who seemed immune to her grief was Kaycee. Mark was getting very concerned that the longer she held back her feelings, the more damage the flood would do when the dam finally broke.

When Mark got back to Milwaukee late Friday, he decided it was time to push Kaycee a little. She'd been away from Kentucky for more than two weeks now, and it was about a month before classes started for her. But she'd made no mention of what she was going to do. However, she had talked a little about her project and Mark could tell it had become very important to her. He also wondered about her relationship with the doctor who still called every night. The man obviously cared a great deal for Kaycee, and Mark wondered if maybe his sister was finally ready to move on from the mess of her divorce. But first he had to break through that shell of protection she had climbed into. And he wasn't even sure he was the one to do it because his own pain and sense of loss was still so incredibly intense.

After their mom had settled in for the night, Mark went in search of Kaycee and found her sitting on the back steps staring up into the sky. The sight tugged at his heart as it brought back yet another special memory. He could see her all wide-eyed and pig tailed, straining her neck to look up as their Dad pointed out the various constellations and planets.

"Remember how Dad used to quiz us on the stars... Find the North Star, now Orion... Where's Venus?" Mark mused quietly, his eyes growing moist for the hundredth time in the last two weeks.

"It's a wonder we didn't have permanently strained necks, we spent so much time looking up at the stars, dreaming of what life was like out there in space, or on other planets. Remember the

game we used to play conjuring up aliens from other planets given the conditions on those planets. God, how many other kids were astronomy experts before they were eight years old?" Kaycee reminisced.

"We certainly managed to journey to some amazing places from this back yard." They were both quiet for a while, gazing at the stars and silently sharing memories of a more innocent time in their lives. Finally Mark broke the silence.

"Kaycee, honey, how are you doing? I'm worried about you."

Kaycee heard his words, but as with many conversations of late, had a hard time putting meaning to what he asked. So, she responded in the same way she had to all the other well-meaning people who asked the same question.

"I'm fine."

Mark came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. When he started to massage her muscles he wasn't surprised to find she was strung as tightly as a newly tuned piano. "Kaycee, this is me you're talking to, not one of the sweet old aunts or fussy neighbors. I really want to know what's going on in that head of yours," he said with a little more firmness.

"Mark, honestly I don't know what I'm feeling. I just seem to be in a haze, like I'm sleepwalking, but can't quite wake up," she responded flatly.

"Well, have you thought at all about what you're going to do next? Are you going back to Kentucky to finish your project, or home to Eau Claire? As much as I know Mom loves the company, you can't just stay here and do nothing. And what about this Dan guy who's burning up the phone lines every night? He seems like someone special, and he certainly cares for you."

Kaycee sighed. She couldn't deny how much she'd come to rely on Dan's calls as a lifeline. They meant a great deal to her, but beyond that she

couldn't even begin to fathom what happened next. "Dan is special—he has to be to do what he does. But I just don't know where we're headed. I mean one minute he's this gentle, compassionate guy that I think... wow, and then the next he's sp..." She cut herself off, surprised at what she'd been about to tell her brother. But Mark's curiosity was peaked.

"The next he's what?"

"Never mind—we're just friends."

At that Mark swung her around to face him. "Oh no, you don't! You're not getting away with the old 'we're just friends' routine. Come on spill it, sis! Just what's going on down there in the foothills of Kentucky?" he teased.

Kaycee blushed and looked away. "Kaycee Lynn, you're blushing! You never blush. What's the story?"

"I'm just not ready for anything serious, Mark. We're so different, but there's this thing between us—I don't know how to describe it. It's like when he touches me, I feel all hot and tingly. He definitely wants more than just friendship, but I don't know. Then there's the... well, um... he um..." Kaycee drifted off and Mark didn't know what to make of her hesitancy. There was clearly something she wasn't telling him.

"Kaycee, what is it?"

She looked at him and could see concern in his eyes which she needed to dispel. "It's just that he... I mean if I... Oh hell!" she spit out.

"Kaycee..." he drew her name out in that way he had of warning her he was about out of patience.

"OK, OK. The problem is Dan spans me," she said sheepishly, looking down at her feet. When she didn't get any response from Mark she finally looked up at him. His stunned look slowly turned to a grin and then he just laughed right out loud. She punched his arm in outrage. He couldn't help continuing to laugh even as he rubbed his arm. "It's not funny, you jerk! He spans hard; it hurts!"

"Good! If anyone needs someone to keep her in

line, it's you. Believe me, I've been tempted to put you over my knee any number of times over the years. In fact, the only thing that kept that fanny of yours from getting blistered when you were a teenager was Mom's calming nature. Because I told Dad many times that he should tan your hide but good! And the risks you took when you were making your documentaries for PBS nearly drove me crazy. When you injured your back repelling with the Navy SEALs for God sake, I was really ready to let you have it! And I would have too, if you hadn't had all the other stuff going on with your marriage!" he told her, getting quite worked up.

"You sound just like Dan! He's always harping on me about not taking care of myself or doing something risky," she groaned. "How about a little sympathy?"

"You mean for Dan, having to put up with your antics?" he teased.

"Oh, you!! What happened to my big brother, the protector?" she pouted.

"He's right here, thoroughly enjoying the fact that his little sis finally found a man who could handle her! Although I must admit, I'm a little jealous given how long my palm's been itching to paddle your backside. Maybe since your butt's not virgin territory anymore, I'll just have to make up for lost time," he said still grinning, with a threatening gleam in his eye.

"Don't even think about it!" she said looking horrified that her brother lined up so squarely with Dan. He laughed again at her expression.

"Well, I have to say of all the things I thought you might say about Dan, that was certainly the last thing I expected to hear. But, I must say the guy is growing in my esteem by the minute."

"Men! You're all the same!" she said exasperated.

His expression turned serious, and he gently turned her back to face him, "No, only the ones who

care about you, brat. Kaycee, you're smart and funny and beautiful, but you rush in headfirst too often without thinking about the consequences to your own health and safety," he said softly. Her anger melted and she laid her head on his broad shoulder as he enveloped her in a secure hug. He kissed the top of her head and whispered, "Thank you."

"For what?" she asked not moving from the security of his arms.

"For making me laugh again. After the last three weeks, I wasn't sure I still knew how." She knew exactly what he meant, and it had been nice to think about and talk about something else for a short while. "So, sweetie, what do you think? Time to go back to Kentucky, finish your project and face up to your feelings about Dan?"

There was that question again, now what? She pushed out of Mark's arms and looked up at him. He was easily as tall as Dan, and she had to admit, her brother was one gorgeous guy. But he was also relentless, and right now he had captured her gaze with that questioning look that said, 'it's time to get moving again'. Still that didn't stop her from trying one more stall tactic.

"But what about Mom? Do you really think she's ready to be alone in this house?"

"No, that's why I've asked her to come back with me to Chicago for a while, and she's agreed once you're headed back," he told her.

She looked at him and again thought how much he was like their father. "So you can take care of her, like you did me after my divorce. Mark, you're a saint, and I love you."

"I love you too, sis, and more than anything I want to see you happy again. Dad would want that too. He wouldn't want you putting your life on hold because of him," he said gently.

She blinked back the tears at his words. He wished she would just let go, let it all out, but she

wasn't ready yet. "You're right, it's time to head back to Kentucky. I have less than a month before I have to get back to Eau Claire for the start of classes. And this project is important to me. I do want to finish."

"And Dan?"

"One step at a time, big brother. Come on, let's see if I can get on a flight Sunday," she said feeling as if she had a purpose for the first time in three weeks.

## Chapter Nine

It was a tearful good-bye to Kaycee at the Milwaukee airport for Mark and their Mom. They were driving down to Chicago as soon as they left her at the security checkpoint. She headed to the gate to think about her trip back. She tried to focus on the documentary and what she still had to shoot before she left Kentucky for good. But every time she tried, her thoughts went to Dan. She was actually looking forward to seeing him again, but she was nervous too. They had grown much closer through their nightly conversations, but she wondered if it would be awkward when they were face to face. Somehow there was anonymity of expression over the phone that would be lost once they were back together. Also she would have to deal with the electricity of his touch. She was not sure how much longer she could resist Dan's advances, or how much longer she wanted to.

Kaycee had told her brother she called Dan and let him know she was coming back, but the truth was she hadn't let anyone in the hollow know. She decided she would rent a jeep and drive down herself from the airport in Lexington. They could use another 4-wheel drive vehicle at the clinic anyway, and she wanted a few hours by herself before dealing with everyone... before dealing with Dan. Mark would be pissed if he knew she was driving all the way to the hollow alone, and Dan would probably be unhappy when she just showed up, no warning. But it was going to be hard dealing with the condolences and sympathy all over again, and she just wanted some time to herself without anyone fussing over her. But her unannounced arrival was about to be thwarted.

As soon as Mark left Kaycee he used his cell phone to call Dan—he wanted to catch him before he supposedly left to pick-up his sister.

"Dan Chase, Crystal Creek Clinic."



"Dan, hi, it's Mark Wilder, Kaycee's brother. Working on a Sunday, huh?"

"Yeah, you know how it is. How are you doing? I'm really sorry about your Dad." Even though he had talked to Kaycee every night, he hadn't talked with Mark since that first day.

"Thanks Dan, it's been tough, but we're getting there. Mom's still having a pretty hard time. She's coming to stay with me in Chicago for a while. Actually it's Kaycee I wanted to talk to you about. I know you've been talking to her every night, and those calls have meant a lot by the way. But I'm worried that she's still holding most of her grief inside. She barely shed a tear at the funeral, and has been acting like this tower of strength through the whole ordeal. I know her fortitude has helped our Mom immensely, but I'm afraid of what will happen when it all really hits her. I've been trying to get her to open up, but she just hasn't been ready to deal with it. So, I just wanted to warn you, she may implode on you when you least expect it. She's gonna need a strong shoulder to cry on when she finally lets go."

"I'll keep a close eye on her. I'm really glad to hear she decided to come back and finish the project, I think that's a good sign. I was afraid from the tone of some of our conversations, she might not. So when is she headed back to the hollow?" Dan asked.

"You mean she *didn't* call you? Dammit, I'm gonna strangle that girl!" Mark exploded. "Dan, she's on a plane back to Lexington in the next half-hour. In fact, I wasn't even sure I'd catch you before you supposedly left to pick her up. She told me she'd called you and you were coming to get her!"

"Even if I left this minute, I'm sure I'd miss her. It takes at least three hours to get to the airport, and there's a huge bluegrass festival in Lexington this weekend, so traffic will be a nightmare. Mark, I

gotta tell ya, that sister of yours can be a willful brat who doesn't have a clue about what's good for her!" Dan said sounding just as frustrated as Mark.

"You don't have to tell me that, although from what I hear, you don't hesitate to take her in hand when she pulls something like this."

Dan was surprised at Mark's comment, and trying to judge whether his tone of voice indicated approval or not. "I'm surprised she would tell you about that," he said cautiously.

"Make no mistake, my sister and I are very close, and she tells me everything, eventually," Mark responded with a warning in his voice. Dan misinterpreted that as disapproval, but didn't back down.

"Look Mark, I know you and Kaycee weren't spanked as kids, and your family didn't believe in it. But down here, we're all raised with a firm hand, and I happen to believe that you're never too old to learn a lesson from a good, old fashioned paddling."

"Dan, I..."

"No, let me finish. Kaycee has a penchant for going off on risky adventures without a thought for her own safety. She also doesn't take care of herself—she's too focused on her work, or everyone else's problems. Well, I just can't sit back and let her put herself in danger. I care about what happens to her, and if that means I have to turn her over my knee and smack her bottom to get her attention, so be it!"

"But, I..." Mark tried again to interrupt Dan's tirade.

"Look, you can come down here and kick my ass for spanking your sister if that's what you want to do, but as long as she's down here under my responsibility, nothing's going to stop me from taking her in hand when she goes off on a wild hair."

"DAN!" Mark yelled this time and finally was able to finish a sentence. "The only reason I'd come

down there to kick your ass is if you hurt my sister. But as for spanking her butt—by all means, have at it! As I told Kaycee, I've been sorely tempted for years to turn her impetuous backside a rosy red. Kaycee is a wonderfully special woman, but she needs someone to watch out for her. Now, she'd probably deck me if she heard me say that, but it's true. And from what I've seen and heard, you could be a prime candidate for the job."

Dan was now laughing. "I would have loved to hear Kaycee's response when you told her that!" Then he turned serious, "Mark, I'd really like to be more than just a friend to your sister, but I can't seem to get past the wall she's put up around her feelings. She actually gets a look of fear when I try to get too close."

"You can thank her ex-husband for that! He turned out to be a total ass—in fact to be honest, I thought he was an ass right from the start. I only hoped for her sake I was wrong. Unfortunately, my instincts about him were right," Mark said, still getting angry whenever he thought about what David had done to her.

"Whoa, wait a minute! What ex-husband? Kaycee was married?!?" Dan asked shocked.

"Shit, she never told you! Jeez, Dan, no wonder you're confused. Look, I'm really sorry. I don't think it's my place to go into details, but I will tell you, she was married for ten years to a jerk who didn't really know her, and betrayed her. He was a hot shot D.C. lawyer who turned out to be all flash, and no substance. I swear if I ever see him again, I'll kill him with my bare hands for what he did to Kaycee!" Mark growled.

Dan was stunned. He knew someone had hurt her, but had no idea she'd been married, for ten years! And then his anger kicked in. He had lost the special woman in his life to cancer. It made him furious that someone would throw away another special woman like Kaycee.

"When did they get divorced? Was it very recent?" Dan asked with the quiet control that kept his temper in check.

"It's been three years, but she's been a hermit when it comes to men, since it happened. When she first left D.C. she was a mess—a complete wreck. She stayed with me for about a month to pull herself together. Unfortunately, part of that process included building that wall so she didn't get hurt again, and doesn't make the same mistake. She still doesn't trust her own instincts and judgment. She won't make it easy for anyone to get past her castle defenses." Mark responded sadly.

"Well, I'm certainly not ready to give up on us, so I guess I'll just have to shine up the old armor and prepare to gently storm the castle walls. Seriously, Mark, I promise I'll keep a close eye on her, and won't push too fast. And it won't just be me here looking out for her. She's touched a lot of lives down here—even I didn't realize how many until I started telling people where she was and why."

"That's Kaycee. OK, I guess I'll try to worry a little less up here. If you need anything, or she needs anything, call me. My office always knows where to find me. Dan, I'm trusting you with one of the most important things in my life—take care of my little sister," Mark said with such depth of emotion, Dan could almost feel the bond between sister and brother right through the phone line. He understood that kind of closeness—it was the same kind of family connection people in the hollow felt. Maybe he hadn't given her enough credit for being able to understand the importance of family life here. Then he wondered how someone who was brought up with such strong family values could end up married to a guy her brother described as an ass with no substance. "Well", he thought to himself, "I've got five plus hours to ponder that while the subject of my meandering thoughts travels here."

And five hours to decide if she gets a welcome back spanking when she arrives!!"

Five and a half hours later, Kaycee was no closer to a determination of how to handle things with Dan than he was with her. Once she got through the traffic nightmare in Lexington, the drive would have been peaceful if she could have redirected her thoughts. It was a beautiful early August day, and she drove with the jeep top down. But as she drove up on the outskirts of the hollow, she was as confused as ever. She decided the ideal would be if the clinic was deserted and she could just arrive unheralded and not have to face anyone until morning. She was exhausted from a full day of travel, and three weeks of emotional turmoil. All she really wanted was the quiet of a hollow hilltop at dusk and her comfortable bed in her small cozy room. The rest could wait till morning.

The delightful picture she'd painted for herself blurred and disappeared as she pulled up to the clinic, and standing there, looking deceptively casual as he leaned up against a porch column, was Dan. She groaned inwardly and put her head down on the steering wheel, briefly wondering what would happen if she just zipped up the jeep top and stayed inside. But she quickly dismissed that idea, gathered her stuff and got out of the jeep, heading to the clinic.

She put on her cheeriest face, "Hi Dan, I'm back!" she said with a lot more confidence than she felt.

He maintained that slightly bemused expression which drove her crazy. "So I see." He still hadn't moved from his perch on the porch, arms folded across his chest.

She decided the best defense was a good offense. "Before you say a word, let me explain."

"By all means," he responded, raising one eyebrow.

"I know I should have called and let you know I

was coming today. I didn't tell you last night on the phone because I still didn't know. My brother and I had a really long talk after our phone conversation. The last three weeks have been hell, and I just needed a few hours to myself before I faced another onslaught of sympathy and fuss. So, please don't be mad. I was fine driving myself down here, and the time on the plane and on the road alone were a big help. Forgive me?" she asked in her best 'sweet little girl' voice.

He watched her for a couple of minutes saying nothing, and then he decided. "Not just yet," he said and she immediately picked up the threat in his voice and the gleam in his eye. She turned to run, but he was down the steps and had her around the waist in an instant. He put one foot on the second step and bent her slightly over his thigh.

"Dan, no! Please... you wouldn't!" she cried, trying hopelessly to get away. But her protests weren't all that vigorous. Somehow she knew he wasn't going to really spank her hard. His palm landed with a smack across the seat of her jeans. It was more noise than sting. Then a second smack fell.

"That's for leaving me here worrying for six hours about your traveling alone!" he said gruffly. Then he gave her two more spanks. "And that's for lying to your brother, telling him you did call me!" Then he stood her up and gently caressed her cheek, "Now, all's forgiven. I'm glad you're back," he said so softly it was almost a whisper.

She was mesmerized by the depth of feeling she saw in his eyes. His gaze never left hers as he dropped the lightest of kisses on her lips, and then he took her in his arms and just held her, willing her some of his strength. All the confusion and emotional upheaval she had been experiencing seemed to melt away for the few precious moments he simply held her in the early twilight of a hollow evening. All she felt was strength and security—the

two things she'd had so little of the last few weeks.

Kaycee finally pulled away just enough to look up into his eyes. "Thank you." she whispered, and brushed a light kiss on his lips.

"For what?" he asked.

Her voice was choked with emotion as she answered. "For being my port in the emotional storm of the last three weeks. Your calls kept me together, and gave me something to look forward to. I'll never forget what you did for me by calling every night."

He smiled at her, "You make it sound like that's the end of something. I was kinda hoping it was just the beginning."

Kaycee saw his smile and heard the light tone in his voice, but his eyes smoldered with something much more intense than humor.

"Dan, I...."

"Ssssh. I don't want a response to that comment tonight. Right now you're tired from a long day of travel and wrung out from three brutal weeks. How about I run your bag up to your room and then let's climb the hill and watch the last of the sunset from the overlook?"

"Best offer I've had in a while," she said clearly relieved that he'd changed the topic.

As they hiked up the hill just east of the compound, Dan reached for her hand and she gave it, feeling comfort in the simple gesture of holding hands. Neither of them said a word. When they got to the top of the hill, he led her over to a grassy spot near one of the rock formations and sat. He pulled her down in front of him so he could put his arms around her and she could lean back against his chest. She let him make her comfortable while she felt much of the tension in her bearing seep away in the security of his arms watching the setting sun brush the sky with soft pinks, blues and purples and then with an artist's eye add just a slash of vibrant orange. She breathed deeply of the

fresh mountain air and felt at peace for the first time in what seemed forever. As the sun dropped lower and the first stars appeared in the sky, she realized she'd never be able to look at the night sky quite the same way again. Star gazing was more than just a special childhood memory now, it also made her sad to think of what she'd lost.

She was surprised as Dan reached up and with his thumb, wiped away a tear that ran silently down her cheek. She hadn't realized she was crying. She thought about the fact that she hadn't shed many tears since that day when the call had first come to the clinic. She knew there were more tears waiting to be shed, but she still wasn't ready to let go. It was more than just being strong. In the pained logic of those grieving loved ones, she thought somehow if she didn't let herself feel the agony of her loss, maybe she wouldn't truly lose her father.

Kaycee finally just pushed all thought and feeling away to simply bask in the beauty of her surroundings and the reassuring warmth of Dan's arms. The sun was completely gone and darkness was settling over the hollow when Dan silently rose and again took her hand, leading the way down the path to the clinic. He led her inside, but at the bottom of the steps up to the bedrooms, he stopped. He turned her toward him and took both of her hands. He brought her hands to his lips and kissed them and then lightly kissed her forehead.

"Good night, Kaycee. Get some rest, honey. I'll see you in the morning." He turned and left as she watched. She was grateful he didn't look back because she didn't want him to see how affected she was by his gentleness and compassion of the evening. She was overwhelmed with feelings for this man who had known exactly what she needed tonight and delivered with style. She had needed his warmth and human contact. If he had pushed it, she probably would have let him take her to bed, but it would have been for the wrong reason. They



wouldn't have made love, they would have had sex so she could feel alive again. And then come morning there would be nothing but regrets. He was smart enough to realize that, and gentleman enough not to take advantage of her vulnerability.

Kaycee wouldn't have been surprised to know Dan had very similar thoughts as he hiked up to his cabin. He was very concerned about how fragile she seemed. He read her signals and knew if he had given even the slightest encouragement, she would have fallen into bed with him. His desire for her was growing almost beyond what he could control, but his need to protect her was even stronger. The last time he'd felt that combination was for his wife he realized with a jolt. Was it possible to fall deeply in love twice in one lifetime? He knew one thing for certain, she had definitely reached in and touched him in places that he'd long forgotten about.

The next couple of days were easier than Kaycee thought they'd be. She should have known that the people of the hollow would comfort in a time of loss with the same quiet dignity they lived their lives. There was none of the sympathy that felt more like pity and the fussing that she had smiled at with clenched jaw, while silently wishing for solitude. That was how friends and family that had known her dad all their lives, and saw her still as the child they'd watched grow up behaved. People here simply came by and offered a hug or an arm around her shoulders. There was compassion in their eyes and support in their smiles. Their words were spare, but comforting.

When she first saw Glenda the woman wrapped her in a warm embrace and just held on. "Whenever you need another one of these, you just say so, sweetie. And when you're ready to talk, I'm here, OK?"

"Thanks, Glenda. I really missed you guys."

"Well, we sure missed you and that sunshine smile of yours. And let me tell you, Dan's been like

a lost puppy dog ever since you left—moping around with a sad look in his eyes."

"Glenda, he called me every night in Milwaukee. I don't think I would have survived the last three weeks without those calls," she said earnestly, but there was confusion in her eyes.

"But now that you're back, you're not sure what you want or how you feel," Glenda summed up Kaycee's state of mind perfectly. She didn't know how to respond, so she kept quiet.

"Kaycee, honey, it's time to move on with your life. You can't stay walled up behind those defenses you've built up. The only thing being safe gets you is lonely. Dan's a good man, and I wouldn't want to see him hurt. Just like you, he's been through the wringer once with his wife's death. Don't wait too long before you decide if you're gonna let him into your heart because he's already half in love with you whether he'll admit it or not. The longer the uncertainty lasts, the more likely one or both of you will get hurt." Kaycee saw the wisdom in her advice, but also knew how tough it would be to take it.

At that moment Dan walked into the lounge, saving Kaycee from having to respond, which was good because she had no idea what she'd say to Glenda. Dan came up behind Kaycee and put his hands on her shoulders, asking how she slept and what she was doing for the day. Glenda simply shot her a look that advised again, 'make a decision'.

Reverend Tim was also there for her, letting her know whenever she wanted to talk, he was available. But he could clearly see she was still very much in the denial phase of grief. He'd been keeping in close touch with Dan discussing their nightly calls to help Dan say the right things and provide the comfort she needed. Tim was especially strong in grief counseling, and reinforced her brother's concerns that when her father's death hit Kaycee, it would hit hard and she would need someone to cling to. Dan was ready to be that

someone.

Kaycee figured the best way to handle her mixed up feelings was to throw herself into her work and let the other things percolate in the back of her mind. Somehow she hoped her subconscious would have more luck sorting through her emotions than her conscious mind. She went through all her logs to see what she had in the can and what still needed to be shot. As she started going through her video her producer mind was fashioning the story she would tell. She realized she needed more video of everyday life in the hollow. So she decided to spend a couple of days at neighboring farms with two families she'd come to know well.

Late the second day Dan was wrapping up with his last patient. He turned to Glenda, "Shouldn't Kaycee be back by now? I thought she said she'd be back in the early afternoon. We were going to take a walk down by the pond, and maybe go for a swim."

"She told me she'd probably be back around 4 or 4:30. I didn't realize it was so late, it's after six already," Glenda said sounding worried. "Do you think we should head out and look for her? She was just going up over the hill to the Bailey's place."

"I'm sure she probably just got wrapped up in her shooting, or maybe Maryanne asked her to stay to supper. Listen, it's been a long day, Glenda, why don't you go ahead home to the kids. I'll take a walk up over the hill and just make sure she's OK. I'm heading that way anyway," he said trying to cover his concern.

Dan had just crested the hill and was facing the fork in the path which led to his cabin when he saw her stumbling toward him, tears streaking down her dirt smudged cheeks and what looked like blood all down the front of her shirt. He flat out ran to her, but before he could say anything she grabbed his arm and was dragging him down the trail.

"Dan, thank God!" she sobbed. "You've got to

come with me. You have to save him... please don't let him die."

"Kaycee, stop! Save who? What happened? Are you hurt?" He swung her around and gripped both arms to hold her fast while he did a cursory examination. She was practically hysterical and wrenched free. She ran back down the path, begging Dan to follow and do something. He thought if she was hurt and bleeding, she wasn't hurt badly because she was running quickly and used incredible strength to pull free of his iron grip. A few feet ahead he saw her collapse to her knees and cradle something. When he got closer he saw she was holding a fawn with an arrow through its neck.

"Please save him, Dan—he's just a baby. He's too young to die! Who would shoot such a precious little animal?" she choked out through her tears.

Dan checked the animal's pulse and then looked at Kaycee. The misery and pain was carved into her face as if sculpted by some malevolent artist. Her eyes, swimming in tears, pleaded with him to bring life to the small creature. Dan very gently lifted the fawn's head off her lap and set it on the ground. He took both of her hands in his and softly told her the fawn was dead—it was too late.

"Noooooooo!" the guttural cry came from down deep inside and shattered the peace of the evening stillness—she didn't even recognize the sound as coming from her. All the grief she'd pushed down for so long exploded out of her like a river of molten lava. Dan realized immediately that finding the dying fawn had triggered her release of all the pent up emotion surrounding her father's death. She clung to him as if her very life depended on it, her whole body racked with sobs. She cried so hard she made herself sick, but Dan just kept holding her, encouraging her to let it all out, and comforting her as he might a child.

When she finally started to settle down a little,

he loosened his hold on her and got up. Then he gathered her back into his arms and carried her to his cabin. She curled up into a tight little ball in his arms and just kept asking over and over, "What am I going to do without him?"

Dan carried Kaycee inside his cabin and took her back to his bedroom. He laid her down on his bed and then lay down behind her, pulling her back to fit against his chest. He put his arms around her and held her as she cried off and on through the night, his heart breaking right along side hers.

## Chapter Ten

It was dawn before Kaycee finally drifted off to sleep, physically and emotionally spent. Dan had tried a couple of times during the night to get up and grab his medical bag to give her a sedative, but she wouldn't let him go. She had clung to him as if she was drifting in the ocean and he was the only life preserver. He empathized with the depth of her grief—he knew what that kind of pain felt like, and it tore him apart that he couldn't protect her from it. But he consoled himself knowing that she had finally taken the first step toward healing the gaping wound left by the death of someone close. He also remembered that that first step was a doozie—like stepping off a cliff.

She was turned facing him, curled up against his chest. They were both still completely dressed. Her jet black curls randomly framed a face that showed the ravages of an all night crying jag. Her eyes were swollen, her cheeks and nose bright red and her lips battered by nervous biting. Sleep didn't yet provide the peace she needed. But the truth was she had never looked more vulnerable or beautiful to him. He softly brushed his lips over her silken hair and slowly extricated his arms from around her, careful not to wake her. He got up, slipped off her shoes and covered her with the homemade quilt that had slipped to the floor after an unsettling night.

He watched her for a while longer, allowing himself a faint smile as he thought it wasn't exactly how he pictured their first night together. But the smile faded into a much deeper expression when he realized how right she looked here in his cabin, in his bed. It was disconcerting to think how natural it had been to bring her here, not just because his home was closer than the clinic, but because he wanted her here. He wanted her here not just for one night, but always.

*Whoa, he thought, get a grip there doc! One*

night of a shoulder to cry on, a few phone calls and a couple of kisses didn't necessarily translate into a lifetime commitment. 'Why not?' that annoying little voice inside him asked. A grin tugged at the edges of his mouth. "Why not indeed?" he muttered as he left the bedroom to make coffee and check in with the clinic.

He called Glenda at home—it was barely 6a.m. but with four kids, she was up. He explained what had happened and assured her that Kaycee would be OK. He told her he was staying with her for the day, and Glenda agreed that was best. She could handle anything at the clinic and would call if there was an emergency and he was needed. Then he called Tim, who was also up since he lived in the orphanage house. They agreed that Tim would drop by in the afternoon to see if Kaycee wanted to talk. For now Tim told him, just keep holding on and let her purge everything she'd been holding in since her father died.

After Dan hung up with Tim he thought he should try to catch some shut-eye himself since he'd been up all night, but he was too wired. So he went out on the porch to drink his coffee and think. He thought about the intensity with which Kaycee loved her family. He understood that kind of love. When his parents had been killed in a car crash, he was devastated. But he'd had his wife Lisa to get him through. His parents had died before she got sick. Without her husband, Kaycee didn't have that support of someone who wasn't grieving as deeply as she was. Her husband—ex-husband, he corrected himself. That still sounded strange to him. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't match the woman he knew with a high powered D.C. reporter married to a big name D.C. lawyer.

He didn't understand how someone with so much capacity to give and love could end up married to someone as shallow and asinine as her ex-husband apparently was. How could anyone not

see beyond the glitz and glamour of a job to the real, down-to-earth woman he had come to know? He had seen her with the people here, with the children, and watched her leave all her stereotypes and preconceived notions behind. She gave and gave without expecting anything in return. She listened for hours to the stories people here told. She treated them with the respect they deserved. And in return she had earned their respect and love. They had opened their homes and lives to her and her camera in a way Dan had never imagined possible. He remembered how hard it had been to get beyond the suspicions of people here his first year, and he was born here. But in just a few short months, she had slipped beneath the defenses they built up to keep the outside world at bay, and made herself at home.

Dan again thought that he wanted her to make herself at home here permanently. He could deny it and rationalize it all he wanted, but the truth was bluntly staring him in the face. He was in love with Kaycee, and he wanted to make a life with her.

"So, doc, do you often let Mack trucks drive through your bedroom, because I sure feel like I was hit by one."

Dan turned startled to have his thoughts interrupted by the very voice he was thinking about. For just a second all that he was feeling was reflected in his eyes, but then he masked it. Still that second was enough for Kaycee to see and she nearly flinched at the intensity of feeling she saw. He drank in the vision of her for a long moment before saying anything. Finally she broke the contact and lowered her eyes, not ready to deal with all that was there between them.

He decided to pick up her light tone. "Oh, I don't know, I think you look kinda cute all tousled and rumpled," he smiled at her and reached up to brush a curl back out of her eyes. "I thought you might sleep a little longer," he said.



She didn't say anything, not sure how to tell him what last night had meant to her. She felt empty this morning, but light, as if a lead weight she'd been carrying around inside had suddenly been taken away. There was a sadness in her heart, but she was relieved to finally feel something. She hadn't realized how hard it had been trying to keep all her emotions clamped down inside her. Dan had provided her with a safe place to finally let go. She realized that safe place was not just here in his home, but in his arms. Maybe Jonas was right. It was time to trust again, and this man was one she could give her trust, and her love, and he would treat it as a precious gift. This too she felt in her heart.

"Dan, I don't know how..."

"Ssshhh. It's OK, honey." He put a finger to her lips and then gathered her in his arms, softly caressing her hair. He held her briefly and then dropped his arm down to her waist and guided her back into the cabin. "Come on, let's get you some coffee and something for that headache that's got your forehead all wrinkled up and serious looking."

As they went back in she looked around the cabin, really seeing it for the first time. It was funny, she thought, that she'd never been up here. It was a terrific place—lots of glass with spectacular views all around. It was very open with a big room that served as living room and dining room. It had a rustic feel to it, but there were homey touches everywhere, and lots of pictures. Dan with his family, with patients and then she saw the pictures of him and his wife. She had an almost ethereal look to her, as if she was crafted from the finest porcelain. She had light blue eyes that sparkled with fun and gorgeous long strawberry blonde hair that fell in perfect waves down her back. In the pictures with her, Dan looked much younger and more carefree. Her lingering illness and death had put a look in his eyes that said here is someone who has

known great love and great sadness, and has gained wisdom from both. They looked so happy that it tugged on her heart to think he had lost that. She also knew why he had known just what she needed last night and why he had been such a safe place for her to let go of her grief.

Dan came back into the living room as she was holding his favorite picture of him and Lisa. He watched her face acknowledge the love that radiated from every part of their being and empathize with the pain of losing that love. He also saw just a twinge of regret he had to believe came from the realization that her marriage hadn't had that same true happiness. She felt him watching her and turned. She would have been embarrassed to be caught invading the intimacy of that moment captured on film, but his look gave her permission. It was almost as if he wanted her to share in the wonder of his first love. He walked toward her and handed her coffee and a couple of aspirin.

"She was very special, wasn't she?" Kaycee asked as she swallowed the aspirin and savored the coffee.

Dan put his arms around her waist and pulled her back to lean into his chest, and then looked over her shoulder at the picture. "Yes, she was."

"You don't know how lucky you were to find a love like that."

"Actually, I do." He took the picture from her trembling hand and set it back on the table and then turned her to face him. "What's truly amazing is I think I may be that lucky twice in one lifetime."

He didn't try to mask his feelings for her now and as she looked into his eyes, for the first time she wasn't afraid of what she saw there. Slowly, he brought his mouth down on hers. She opened to him. The kiss started softly, but quickly deepened with the urgency they both felt. There was a greedy longing for each other that exploded in that kiss. Without releasing her lips, he gathered her up in his

arms and carried her back to his bedroom. They tore each other's clothes off, still not separating, almost as if they were afraid something would be lost if they broke contact. The hunger for more carried them like a tidal wave tumbling onto the bed. Their hands and mouths devoured every part of each other. Their bodies were so hot they might have worried about spontaneous combustion if they could think about anything other than satisfying the need and the want.

When he finally moved inside her, they rode their passion in perfect rhythm as if their bodies were made for just that moment. They climaxed with a blast of desire neither had ever felt before. He stayed inside her as they collapsed back to earth, exhausted by the frenzy of their lovemaking. She exalted in the feel of him inside her—he fit her and she molded to him. He played with her hair; she used her tongue to explore his chest and smiled when she felt him aroused again inside her. But this time they took it slowly, enjoying every sensation in each other's body. They gave pleasure and they took pleasure and still they wanted more.

Dan had never been with a woman who was so responsive to his every touch. Her body was magnificent as he knew it would be. Her skin was like fine silk to his callused hands, but she seemed to revel in the roughness of his fingers against her. He wanted to give her all the pleasure she had denied herself for so long. When he explored the full length of her body with his mouth, she arched in response, crying his name and begging for release. And her touch brought him to the edge time and again. The feel of her, the smell of her, the taste of her—he wanted it all.

It seemed like hours before they were sated. He lay limply on his back, his arm around her shoulders. She was snuggled into the curve of his arm with her head on his chest, thinking she could quite simply stay like that forever. Finally, she lifted

her head and propped it up on her elbows, which dug into his chest, but he didn't seem to notice. She had one of those satisfied smiles on her face and a warmth in her eyes that he drank in like a man dying of thirst.

"Wow, doc, that's a hell of a bedside manner you got there," she said grinning.

"It's amazing what you can do when the patient cooperates!" he said smugly.

"Is that what you call the last couple of hours? Cooperation?" she said trying for a tone of outrage.

He reached down and smacked her bare bottom. "Don't be a brat!" he said as she pouted and made a show of rubbing the injured area. He kissed the tip of her nose and then rolled her over fully on top of him. "I call the last couple of hours spectacular. Now close your eyes and get some sleep... doctor's orders... or I'll give you a real reason to pout!" He put his hand on her bottom to reinforce the point. She looked up at him, stuck out her tongue in a completely bratty pose and earned another smack, this time with some sting behind it.

"Ow! That one hurt! Is spanking part of your lovemaking too?" she whined.

He chuckled, "Only when the beautiful woman in bed with me turns into a brat! Now go to sleep." He stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head. She sighed loudly and was fast asleep in minutes. He closed his eyes and thought if she was very good, she just might find out how spanking could be a very sensual part of their lovemaking. He fell asleep with a smile on his face.

It was about three hours later when they were awakened by someone calling out.

"Hello? Kaycee, Dan? Anybody home? It's Tim. I knocked but there was no answer. Where are you guys?" Tim had knocked several times and gotten no response, so he opened the screen door and called inside. He was walking into the living room when he heard the scrambling and stumbling from

the bedroom.

"Oh God! It's Tim!" Kaycee whispered. She and Dan both tried frantically to get up and out of bed, but got tangled in the sheets and were pulling in different directions.

"Ow! That was my stomach you just kicked!" Dan snarled.

"Well, my arm's practically being pulled out of the socket, you oaf! Move this way or we'll never get untangled," Kaycee snapped back. But when Dan tried to move in the same direction as Kaycee, their momentum pushed her completely off the bed and she landed on the floor with a thud.

"Dammit! Now look what you did! I'll be black and blue by tonight," she yelled at him. But when she turned to give him the evil eye, a huge grin split his face and he couldn't hold back the laughter.

"I gotta say you look damn cute dumped naked on my floor!" She wanted to be furious at him for making fun of her, but a smile was cracking through her anger and soon she was laughing too.

Tim meanwhile pretty much heard the whole exchange and realized what was going on. Well, it's about time those two got it together he thought.

"Everything alright in there? Should I come in to offer assistance, or maybe a blessing?" he said the amusement obvious in his voice.

"Uh, we were asleep, Tim. We'll um... be right out," Kaycee said blushing from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. Dan was more direct.

"Step one foot in this bedroom, and your ass is grass!" he warned. Tim laughed.

"Well, I've heard of all kinds of grief counseling, but this is a new one." In response he heard giggling from the bedroom—actual giggling.

"Tim's never gonna let me live this one down," Dan groaned.

"You got that right, buddy!" Tim called out.

"You know you could make yourself useful out there and throw some eggs and bacon into a pan.

We haven't eaten since lunch yesterday," Dan called back.

"You two have been at it since lunch yesterday?!?" Tim said exaggerating an incredulous tone.

Kaycee picked that second to walk out into the living room, and again blushed from head to toe.

"Sorry, Kaycee, I didn't mean to make you blush. I just came by to see how you were doing, but obviously Dan has everything well in hand." Tim was grinning from ear to ear.

"You know Rev, you usually have better timing than this!" Dan said as he also walked into the living room with his jeans undone and his shirt inside out.

"And, you usually manage to dress yourself a little better, my friend. Now how about I start things in the kitchen while you two really pull yourselves together?" Then, he walked to the kitchen shaking his head, "Imagine two of my favorite people sinning right in broad daylight. I'm shocked and dismayed!" Tim mocked in his thickest southern preacher accent.

"See what I mean? I'll never live this down!" Dan said laughing.

"I'm going to grab a shower." Kaycee said sheepishly, trying to slip away. Dan grabbed her around the waist and kissed her.

"Want me to come and wash your back?" he whispered.

"Dan! For God's sake, don't you think I'm mortified enough!" she whispered back. "Tim, I'm so sorry," she said quietly to him.

He looked back at her and grinned. "It's OK, Kaycee. If you need him to wash your back, I can handle things here in the kitchen!" then he laughed as Kaycee turned even redder, which he didn't think was possible.

"Oh! Men!" she wiggled out of Dan's arms, glared at both of them and headed to the bathroom at which point they heard a door slam. Then they

both laughed.

"Well, I'm glad to see you two finally stopped bickering long enough to do something about the sparks that flew every time you were in a room together. I was beginning to think an innocent bystander was going to get burned!" Tim teased.

"Very funny!" Dan said taking out onions, mushrooms and cheese to spice up the eggs.

"Seriously buddy, I'm happy for both of you. Now, how's she doing with the other?" he asked all traces of humor gone.

Dan, too, sobered at the question. "She looked pretty ragged this morning but at least that fragile, brittle look was gone. She shattered the glass holding back her emotions and let it all out. I think it left her pretty empty, and I guess that's part of what happened this morning. Did I take advantage of her vulnerability? Damn, I swore I wouldn't do that!" Dan cursed himself.

Tim put a hand on his shoulder. "No, you gave her your love to help fill that emptiness, and she in turn filled some of yours that you've been carrying around for a long time," he said quietly. The two men worked companionably in the kitchen and 20 minutes later when Kaycee came out, there was a veritable feast on the table. Dan took one glance at her, looking freshly scrubbed and very young with no make-up and her wet hair combed back from her face, and he was ready to put food aside again. But Kaycee was starving and dug right in, the enjoyment glowing on her face.

"Kaycee, for a look like that, I'd cook every meal every day!" Dan said.

"You've got a deal!"

"Hey, I cooked the bacon and made toast!" Tim pointed out.

"Great, you can help him!" she said laughing. They kept the conversation light during the meal. When they'd all eaten till they were stuffed, Kaycee started clearing the table. "You guys cooked, I clean

up!"

"No argument here. I'm going to take a shower," Dan said.

"I'll give you a hand, Kaycee, even though I did make the bacon and toast," Tim said pouting slightly that all the praise went to the eggs.

"And it was truly the crispest, most delicately flavored bacon that ever graced a plate of eggs. And the toast—my God, it was browned to perfection with just a kiss of butter to enhance the palate's experience!" Kaycee teased in her haughtiest voice.

"OK, OK, so there's not much you can do to screw up bacon or toast—I get it!" Tim conceded laughing. They carried the dishes out to the kitchen and Kaycee started washing while Tim put stuff away. After about ten minutes of comfortable silence, Tim decided it was time to find out how she was really doing.

"So, Kaycee, how are you feeling, really?" he asked with that wonderful compassion in his voice that she'd heard when he'd consoled others.

She stopped washing dishes for a moment to think—take stock of her feelings. There were so many emotions banging around inside her it was hard to focus on what she was feeling. She realized she'd been running from any feeling at all for a long time—not just since her father died, but all the way back to the break-up of her marriage. She looked at Tim then, "I think I've been running this marathon, thinking only about taking the next step, making it around the next bend. Like a long distance runner, I just wouldn't let myself feel the pain, or anything else. Whenever emotions got close to the surface, I would push myself harder to run faster." She was surprised as Tim reached out to wipe a tear from her cheek. She hadn't thought there were any left after last night.

"You can stop running. Last night you crossed the finish line," he said.



"Yeah, that's kind of how I feel today. I feel lighter and amazingly unburdened. I feel a great sadness and sense of loss, but there's also a happiness and sense of belonging. And there's some uncertainty—now that the race is over, now what do I do?" She felt strong arms encircle her waist and leaned back into Dan's chest. He smelled like a fresh spring rain, his hair still wet from his shower. For a moment she just enjoyed the warm, secure feeling of being in his arms. But she knew she had to tell them both the truth. Her marathon of emotional void hadn't started with her father's death, but they knew nothing of her marriage and divorce—or so she thought.

She turned in Dan's arms and looked up at him and then over to Tim. "Let's go sit out on the porch, there's something I have to tell you both." Dan took her hand and led the way, after sending Tim a look that said I think I know what's coming next. Tim followed with no idea of what Kaycee was about to say. Dan sat on the porch swing and tried to pull Kaycee down in his lap, but she moved away to sit alone on the porch railing. She needed separation to tell Dan about her failed marriage. Tim sat in another chair. Kaycee looked out into forest—the view was spectacular, but she didn't see it. She was in another place—a place she hadn't been in more than three years. Tears glistened as she saw her ex-husband's face and heard the words of betrayal again. Her voice was flat, but the expression on her face read nothing but pain. Dan felt the anger build as he listened to the details her brother wouldn't give him. Her fall and the weeks in the hospital; then her return to Washington and her husband's ultimatum—quit her job or the marriage was over; next the admission that there was someone else and the marriage was already over; and finally the devastating realization that there had never really been a true marriage of souls in the first place—he had married an image and never knew the woman.

When he finally realized who the woman was, he had rejected her.

When she finished, Kaycee looked at Tim and then Dan expecting to see the same sense of failure and rejection she felt, but it wasn't there. There was no pity either. Tim just looked sad, and Dan was clearly angry. When she looked at him with such vulnerability and pain, he rushed to her and held her so tightly she almost couldn't breath. As she listened to him rage at her ex-husband, she was again racked with sobs. But this time she didn't cry for what she'd lost, but for what she never had. In the middle of Dan's tirade, Tim put a hand on his shoulder and whispered, "Your anger is justified, but it's not what she needs right now."

The anger immediately passed through him, as if blown away by a gentle breeze. He loosened his hold on Kaycee and picked her up and carried her back to the porch swing, setting her on his lap. This time, she snuggled closer. He rocked her as a parent comforting a hurt child. No one spoke for a very long time. But the faint sounds of forest life enveloped them in a soothing cloud of almost quiet.

## Chapter Eleven

That night, after Kaycee's revelations about her marriage and divorce, Kaycee and Dan had merely slept in each other's arms, too exhausted by the emotional upheaval of the previous 24 hours to do anything more. There had been a lot more talking out on the porch when Kaycee had settled down again, but she had talked about her father, not her ex-husband. There were as many smiles as tears while she related stories from her childhood about the man who had been such a force in her life.

The next morning, it was Kaycee who was up early. She slipped out of bed and took her turn to watch Dan sleep. His face had a boyish innocence when he slept. The slightly furrowed brow which reflected the worries over his patients and survival in the hollow was relaxed. His thick, wavy hair was the color of rich coffee and fell carelessly over his eyes. She gently brushed it back and pressed her lips on his forehead for the softest of kisses and then got dressed.

Kaycee made strong coffee, poured a cup, grabbed an apple and headed back to the clinic. She wanted a shower and fresh clothes, and she wanted a little alone time. It seemed as if she had been holed up for days rather than about 36 hours. She was a little nervous about seeing Dan later when he arrived at the clinic. Would it be awkward once they were out of the protective cocoon of his cabin? And now that she had some space and distance, the old doubts started pricking the back of her mind. What did he really want, and could she give it? Would she be rejected if she couldn't? *Damn David for destroying my ability to trust!* she thought angrily. She pushed the doubts away and just focused on Dan and what she wanted from him—what she could give him. The problem was she wasn't sure of the answer to either question.

Kaycee was surprised when she arrived at the

clinic. She had been so deep in thought that the trek back had taken no time at all. It was still early, and since there were currently no overnight patients, no one was there. She went up to her room, showered, changed and grabbed her camera gear. She wanted to capture more of the majesty of the hillsides kissed by the first rays of sunshine. While she had shot a lot of the natural beauty of the hollow, she somehow felt that she might see it differently through eyes not clouded by suppressed emotion. *Oh, hell, why don't you just admit it girl, she thought to herself, you want to see it through the eyes of love! You've fallen hard for that doc!* She had to wonder how it happened. She had been so protective of her heart, swearing she'd never give it again for fear of having it stomped on twice. Yet here she was falling in love with a man who was married to a place, a people who desperately needed him.

She sighed heavily and then looked down into the hollow from the top of the hill near the clinic compound. It was breathtaking. She let the process of setting up her camera and shooting distract her from her more intense thoughts. She shot video from every angle, each view more glorious than the previous. Finally, after about an hour she was ready for a break. She sat down to eat the apple she'd brought and then she saw it. Standing up on a ridge across from her hillside was a magnificent white stag. He was huge and looked down on the hollow as if he was king of all he surveyed. She quietly moved back to her camera and zoomed in on the majestic animal. Just as she started to shoot he looked toward her, posing in defiance and pride, much like the people here in the hollow. It was an incredible moment and she was so caught up in it, she didn't notice the critter that had invaded her corner of the world.

Kaycee still held the uneaten portion of the apple, forgetting to drop it as she videotaped the

white stag. The next thing she knew, she felt a sharp pain in her hand as little teeth sunk into the tender area between her thumb and index finger. She let out a yelp and shook off the raccoon that was holding on for all it was worth. She sent the animal flying as she swept her arm in a wide arch to get the little bandit to let go. It finally let go, tearing flesh as it released her hand and landed on all fours, scampering off.

Sadly when she looked back to the ridge the stag was gone, but she was fairly certain she had gotten some great shots. The bite on her hand hurt and was bleeding slightly, but she wrapped it in the bandana she had around her neck and continued to work. She finally headed back down the hill to the clinic about an hour and a half later. She was so pleased with the video she'd gotten, she barely noticed the pain in her hand. When she got back there were about a half-dozen patients in the waiting area, so she knew Dan and Glenda were probably tied up. She figured that was good. She could clean the raccoon bite and put some antiseptic on it herself without having either of them make a big fuss, which they inevitably did.

"Hey you're back! We were wondering what... Kaycee, what did you do to your hand?" Glenda caught her just as she thought she had slipped by on the way to grab the First Aid kit.

"Oh, it's no big deal. A raccoon stole my breakfast and wasn't satisfied with just a half-eaten apple. It decided it wanted a taste of my hand too! But, it's nothing to fuss about. I'll just..."

"Kaycee, get into exam 1 immediately and let me take a look. We don't mess around with wild animal bites. How long ago did this happen?" Glenda demanded all business now.

"Oh, I don't know, maybe an hour or so. Listen, really it's not that bad. You've got a waiting room full of patients who really need you." But Glenda didn't hear a word she said beyond the time of the

bite. She quickly unwrapped Kaycee's hand and led her over to the sink in the exam room. She thoroughly cleaned the wounds left by the raccoon's teeth.

"Kaycee, I need you to tell me everything you remember about the coon. Was it overly aggressive? Was it foaming at the mouth?"

"I don't think so. But I didn't even see it until it had its teeth in my hand. I was shooting this incredible white stag. Oh, Glenda, wait till you see the pictures," Kaycee told her excitedly.

"Dammit Kaycee, focus! This is important!" Glenda snapped. Kaycee looked at her in complete surprise. Glenda rarely lost her cool. It was so rare in fact, that her raised voice brought Dan in from the other exam room.

"What's up in here, I can hear you two next door... Kaycee, what happened to your hand, honey?" Dan took her hand from Glenda and when he looked at her, Glenda's eyes confirmed his first suspicion looking at the wound.

"You two look like I just tested positive for some awful disease! What is the big deal? I tangled with a raccoon, and it won. Now is one of you going to bandage me up or do I have to do it myself?" Kaycee asked trying to lighten things up, but her attempt at humor fell flat.

"Glenda, prepare a rabies immune globulin injection and vaccine booster," he said and then turned back to Kaycee. "The big deal is a lot of the wild animals around here carry rabies. Since we don't have the animal to test, we've got to treat you as if you were exposed."

Glenda came back with two syringes and Kaycee immediately turned as white as the sheet on the exam table. She tried to pull her hand out of Dan's grip, but he held on firmly. "Kaycee, it's OK, the treatment is practically full proof. You're going to be fine," he soothed. But she just looked more panicked at his words.

"Dan, I don't think it's the thought of rabies that scared her. Our intrepid reporter here is petrified of needles," Glenda said quietly.

"Is that true, Kaycee?" Kaycee didn't answer, she just looked wildly from one to the other, thinking only of getting out of that exam room.

"Haven't you ever noticed how she flinches or turns pale every time she watches you or I give someone a shot?" Glenda continued.

"Well then, you'll be damn glad you got that rabies vaccine before you came because otherwise you'd have to go through a painful series of vaccine shots in addition to what we need to do now. I promise I'll try to make..."

Glenda was watching Kaycee's eyes as Dan spoke and cut him off, "Kaycee? Kaycee, you DID get the rabies vaccine like you were supposed to before you came, right?" she asked sharply.

When she didn't answer right away, Dan pressed her. "Kaycee, answer the question." She looked down at her hand and when she finally looked up her eyes glistened with tears.

"I... I meant to... it's just... I..."

"Dammit Kaycee!" Dan exploded. "Don't you ever follow instructions for your own good!?"

"I'm sorry... I thought..." she was crying now, mostly because she had once again disappointed Dan and Glenda.

"You thought what? The rules don't apply to you? You're super-human and can't die from rabies?" he raged.

"Dan, settle down. Yelling's not going to undo what's been done. Let's just get her treated. It's already been more than 90 minutes since she was bitten," Glenda said calmly. Then she turned to Kaycee and in the same calm voice explained what was going to happen. "Kaycee potential rabies infections are very time sensitive. The sooner we get the immune globulin into the wound the better. We need to inject it right into the area where you

were bitten." Kaycee visibly flinched at hearing that and began to tremble. That drained some of Dan's anger and he began rubbing her arms, as if trying to warm her up.

Glenda continued, "Then we've got to give you the first of five rabies vaccine shots. The other four come in 3, 7, 14 and 28 days. I'm sorry, sweetie, but rabies treatment is not at all pleasant." Kaycee didn't say anything, but merely offered her wounded, shaking hand for the first shot. Glenda was about to administer it, when Dan stopped her.

"I'll do it. You take her other hand and hold tight," he said quietly. Kaycee looked up at him, the trust and silent regret in her eyes. He tried to smile reassuringly at her, but it wasn't in him. He was angry and worried. Glenda took her other hand, and cupped her chin to turn her away from what Dan was doing. But the distraction did little to deflect the pain and fear as the needle went into her already throbbing hand. She grimaced and couldn't help the whimper that escaped her lips. Then Dan took the other syringe. He unbuttoned the top few buttons of her blouse and slipped it off one shoulder. He cleaned an area in the front of her shoulder as she shuddered.

"Kaycee, the vaccine shots have to go into your deltoid or shoulder muscles," Glenda explained as Dan slipped the second needle in. Again Kaycee stiffened in pain, and Dan felt his own stab of pain in his heart. When he finished he viciously tossed the syringe in the medical waste can, ripped off his rubber gloves and stalked out, yelling over his shoulder for Glenda to bandage her up.

Kaycee called after him, but Glenda stopped her. "Let him go. He needs to blow off some steam. That was a pretty foolish thing to do, kiddo, even if you do hate needles. Rabies is as deadly to people as it is to animals, especially if it's not treated immediately and correctly. But it's completely preventable with the vaccine and the immune



globulin shot."

Kaycee looked absolutely miserable. "I don't know what's wrong with me. It was totally stupid not to get the vaccine. I just kept putting it off and before I knew it I was on my way here so I just figured I'd get it here... and then there was the whole bad beginning and I just kind of forgot about it." Her explanation sounded lame even to her own ears, but it was the only one she had. "Do you think Dan will ever forgive me for being such an idiot?" she asked in a very small voice.

Glenda just shook her head. "You still don't get it do you? He cares a great deal for you. It nearly kills him to see you in pain, and he knows how painful those vaccine shots are. You also scare him to death when you don't take care of yourself. He already lost one woman he loved to a ravaging disease he was helpless to stop, he couldn't survive losing another."

Glenda's words hit Kaycee hard. "That's why he spansks me..." she whispered almost to herself, realization dawning.

"Yes, that's why he spansks you. And my guess is when he gets back, you're gonna get your fanny roasted but good, my dear!" Glenda said smiling for the first time since Kaycee had come back that morning.

Kaycee knew Glenda was right. It wasn't like she hadn't been warned often enough about the consequences of risking her health or safety. Well, this time she'd try to accept his spanking and the love that went with it without fighting. When Glenda finished bandaging up her hand, she decided to just go up to her room and wait for Dan to return. It was going to be a long, difficult wait.

Dan stomped out of the exam room with fire in his eyes and marched right through the waiting area to the stunned looks of patients who rarely saw him mildly upset, let alone furious. It didn't take long for the murmured speculation to settle on Kaycee as

the cause, and then the knowing smiles to cross their faces. These people cared as deeply for Dan as he did for them, and most of them were rooting for Dan and Kaycee to get together. But Dan was oblivious to the mini-drama he created and slammed out of the clinic, nearly running Jonesy down in the process.

"Dr. Dan? What's the matter Dr. Dan?" the boy asked.

"Not now, Jonesy!" Dan snapped, not even looking back to see the hurt look on the boy's face. Dan just kept walking and when he finally stopped to catch his breath he realized he was up on the hilltop where he'd had to tell Kaycee about her father's heart attack. He looked over to the rocks they'd sat on while he had tried to comfort her. He remembered how she'd looked before he told her—shooting in the early morning with the wonder of a child seeing her first sunrise.

"What am I going to do with this woman?" he asked aloud. He raked his hands through his hair as no answer was forthcoming. He had been on an emotional thrill ride ever since she came to the hollow... anger, frustration, passion, caring, joy, sadness... she brought them all out in him with an intensity he hadn't known in a decade. He was pretty sure he was in love with her, but how could he want to strangle someone he loved as often as he did Kaycee. He shook his head and chuckled with that dry humor that isn't really funny. Life with her certainly wouldn't be boring—but it might be a contest to see whether she killed herself before he did her in.

He took a deep breath of the fresh mountain air and let the quiet peace of the hollow flow through him. Although he wondered if maybe he shouldn't hold on to some of his anger to put into the spanking he was going to give her when he got back to the clinic. She was in for a rough two weeks with three more vaccine shots in the next 14 days.

Both her shoulders were going to be sore for a while, not to mention her hand. And with her fear of needles, it was going to be doubly hard. He didn't look forward to seeing that look of pain and fear again. But he couldn't let that thought deter him. He'd promised her a spanking every time she put herself at risk, and this was the worst by far. Part of loving someone was being consistent, and constant. Whether she'd admit it or not, she needed someone to take care of her, and by God he was going to be that someone! With that firm resolve, he headed back to the clinic to give Ms. Kaycee Wilder the spanking of her life.

Kaycee figured she'd waited a little over an hour when she heard Dan's heavy steps coming up the stairs. She silently prayed that she hadn't done irreparable damage to their relationship this time. She almost wanted a spanking to clear the air between them... almost. When he walked into her room she looked up at him tentatively, relieved to see most of the fury was gone from his look, but she couldn't mistake the firm resolve she saw. Even that, though, didn't bring the tears to her eyes; it was the love behind that resolve that was her undoing. She flew off the bed and into his arms.

"Oh, Dan, please forgive me! I'm soooo sorry I was so stupid," she sobbed.

He held her tightly, rubbing her back, "I know sweetheart, I know, and I'm sorry as hell about what you're going to have to go through," he crooned.

After a few minutes she pulled back from his embrace and looked up at him. "Are you going to spank me now?" she asked quietly.

He gave her just a hint of a smile, "What do you think?"

She looked down at her feet and whispered, "OK, I'm ready."

His eyes widened in surprise. He tipped her chin up so her eyes met his, "That's my girl," he said

softly and gently kissed her forehead. Then he stepped away to reaffirm his own resolve. He unbuckled his belt as her eyes now widened in surprise and fear.

"I want you to take off your shorts and panties and bend over the bed," he said sternly.

"Please, Dan, no... not your belt," she pleaded her voice barely a whisper. "Can't you just use your hand like before?"

"Not this time. You need to understand how reckless you were. You need to know I'm NOT going to let you hurt yourself." The determination in his voice cut off any further pleas. She walked over to the bed, looked briefly over her shoulder to see him double up his belt and slap it once against his thigh as if testing the sting it would soon bring to her backside. Tears were already coursing down her cheeks as she bared her bottom and bent over the edge of the bed.

Dan almost lost his resolve at her look, but then he thought about the sight of her in the bed, dying the slow, horrible death of rabies. At that picture he raised the belt and brought it down hard across her bottom. She was breathless at the first stroke—the burning pain was much worse than anything she'd imagined. The belt whistled through the air and struck again with equal force, and she howled in pain. But, she never begged him to stop, she just sobbed and cried out as the thick leather thrashed her bottom again and again.

He cracked the belt 30 times across her bottom and thighs until they were a deep purple. She'd have bruises for a couple of days, but this was a lesson he wanted her to remember. Finally, he threw the belt to the floor and went to sit by her on the bed. He gently rubbed her back and lightly massaged her sore backside. "Ssshhh, honey, it's all over now," he soothed. "All's forgiven, you're OK."

When she settled a little, he helped her up and pulled her onto his lap, cradling her in his arms. She

looked up to see the forgiveness and love in his face, and saw that he too had tears in his eyes. "Please, Kaycee, don't ever make me do that again," he whispered hoarsely. She buried her face in his chest, putting her arms around his neck and he slowly rocked her until she finally fell asleep. He was nearly as exhausted as she was and so after he laid her down on the bed, he laid down next to her, holding her close against him and quickly fell asleep himself.

When Kaycee awoke a couple of hours later, she was alone, but she knew that Dan hadn't left that long ago. She could still feel the warmth of his embrace, and that smell of fresh air, outdoor ruggedness that was his alone clung to her, letting her know he'd held her close as she slept. Her lips curled into the slightest of smiles at the thought of waking to his presence even though he wasn't physically there. Then she rolled over and reality came crashing through her pleasant thoughts. She groaned with even the slightest movement. *I wonder what the other guy looks like?* she thought sardonically. She ached all over. Her hand was throbbing, her shoulder was sore, so she couldn't use either hand to reach back and rub the sting out of her very tender backside.

The thought of getting up and trying to do some work held no appeal, so she turned onto her side and went back to sleep, which she figured was about the only respite she was going to get from her aches and pains. As she drifted off her last thought came with a bit of amazement. She wasn't the least bit angry with Dan for spanking her so hard. In fact she felt lighter knowing he had forgiven her and lifted her own guilt at her own stupidity. She again marveled at the safe and secure feeling she got from allowing someone to take care of her.

Kaycee ended up spending most of the day in bed. Dan brought a tray up with dinner and they ate

together. He talked about his day and then they talked about her documentary and what she still had left to shoot. It was comfortable conversation and Kaycee was glad. There was none of the awkwardness she'd worried about. When she drifted off to sleep again, Dan sat in his chair just watching her for the longest time. He thought again, he could do that for the rest of his life. He finally climbed into bed with her and again just held her close to him. They fit together well, and somehow he had to make sure they stayed together.

During the night, she stirred a couple of times with nightmares—at least one over her fear of needles. The comfort of his arms and soothing words settled her back to a restful sleep each time. But they brought home to him how vulnerable she was and how much she needed someone to care for her—almost as much as he needed someone to care for. She was strong and fiercely independent, but she also had an innocence and openness that left her open to be hurt. It was that side of her that reached into his heart and begged for protection. And he was determined to keep it safe and loved.

Kaycee slept late the next morning, the exhaustion of all that happened over the previous three days finally consuming her. When she awoke again she was alone, but she knew Dan had stayed with her through the night. She got up and was relieved to only feel a dull ache in her hand and bottom. Her shoulder was much better. She showered and went down to the clinic. Glenda was hustling from exam room to exam room handling the dozen or so patients by herself.

"Hey sleepyhead! How's the hand today?" she asked as she brought in the next patient, and pulled his chart.

"Better, thanks. Where's Dan? Are you by yourself?"

"Yeah, he had an emergency –all three of the Jensen kids are running high fevers and are covered

with some kind of rash. He was off early this morning and won't be back probably until very late tomorrow or the next morning."

"Oh, I hope the kids are OK. I'll give you a hand as soon as I get some coffee in me."

"That'd be great—just take it easy on that hand. I'll check it and re-bandage it as soon as we get a free minute," Glenda said, noting the disappointment on Kaycee's face that Dan was gone.

For the next two days, Kaycee fell back into her routine at the hollow—helping out in the clinic, spending time at the orphanage with the kids, and logging her video. She couldn't do a lot of shooting because of her hand, but as she logged her video, she realized there really wasn't much more she needed. As she watched life in the hollow and the amazing work of Dan and Glenda play out on her computer screen, she knew she had an incredible story. What she didn't realize was how much this place and the people had come to mean to her. She thought it was her usual storyteller's eye that was shaping the documentary, but this time it was a special love and understanding of the people that would guide her. She wasn't aware of it yet, but leaving here would be one of the hardest things she'd ever do.

As Kaycee started to roughly draft her story, she realized she needed closure on what happened with the children and animals that got cancer. She knew from Dan's phone calls while she was in Milwaukee that the children, Betsy and two other adults had leukemia and were being treated with chemotherapy. In all, they had ended up with 13 cases among nine families. Dan had told her that all the people living in the high country had been boiling their water as a precaution since the leukemia was diagnosed. But she never found out what the water and soil tests showed. She needed the source of the contamination and needed to get

back up into the high country to show how the children were doing.

Later that evening, she was having dinner with Glenda and her family and asked the question. She was disturbed by the answer.

"Can you believe it? We're still waiting for the test results from the state lab! We still have no idea what caused all those people and animals to get sick. But, there's no way it just happened. There has to be some contamination. I'm betting on the water since we've had no new cases in the last couple of weeks, and folks have been boiling their water for about a month now," Glenda answered as she managed to mediate a dispute between two of the kids over the last piece of ham and pour more coffee for herself and Kaycee.

"What do you mean you still haven't gotten the test results?! That's crazy—even with bureaucratic red tape those results should have been back in a week to ten days max. I know, I've had water and soil samples tested before. Something's not right here, Glenda."

Glenda now gave Kaycee her full attention. "That's strange. I guess I hadn't thought much about it because we were so caught up in treating everyone. Dan was handling the tests, so I kind of forgot about them. But you know the couple of times I did ask him about the results he just snapped at me that these things take time—so I got smart and stopped asking."

"He acted funny when we talked about testing and contamination way back when we first discovered the illnesses," Kaycee said almost to herself.

Then Glenda chuckled, "Oh listen to us—we sound like a couple of conspiracy nuts. I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation. We'll ask Dan tomorrow morning when he gets back. Oh, by the way, the Jensen kids are fine, just an allergic reaction to some wild berries they ate."



But Kaycee didn't really hear what Glenda was saying. The journalist in her was thinking disturbing thoughts that the woman in love didn't want to have.

## Chapter Twelve

Kaycee woke early the next morning after a restless night. She couldn't get the questions out of her mind--why Dan hadn't gotten or hadn't revealed the water and soil test results? Her dreams had been plagued with images of Dan the caring doctor deliberately killing his patients. None of it made any sense. Everything she had seen with her own eyes told her he would do anything for the people of the hollow. He just didn't have it in him to harm them. So what was going on?

She was absently brushing her hair, deep into her unsettling thoughts, when there was a knock at her door, and she heard his voice. "Kaycee, are you up?" he asked as he opened the door.

She turned to look at him, and the doubts just seemed to evaporate in the joy of seeing him. She flung herself into his arms and held on so tight, he thought she might break a rib. He whispered in her ear, "I missed you too."

Then she looked up over his shoulder and noticed Glenda behind him. "Hey, how about some privacy?" she asked smiling.

But Glenda wasn't smiling at the reunion, and Dan released her at that point, suddenly somber too. He looked at her confusion and said quietly, "It's day three Kaycee."

She immediately paled. Day three—rabies vaccine. She looked down and saw Glenda had the vial and syringe in her hand. She turned away and took a deep breath to control her fear, and then she went over and sat on the bed. Dan was right beside her with an arm around her shoulders. "We'll make it as quick as possible. Take a couple more deep breaths, honey," he said softly. While he talked he unbuttoned her blouse and slipped it off her right shoulder. The first shot had gone in the left because it was her right hand that the raccoon had bitten. But she stopped him.

"No."

"Kaycee, we have to do this—no is not an option," he said firmly.

"No, I mean not my right shoulder. I'm just getting to the point that I can shoot again with this hand. Do in the left again."

Glenda responded, "You're probably still bruised from the last one in that shoulder. That will only make it more painful."

Kaycee looked up at her with tears about to escape her pleading eyes. "Just do it," she said in a breathless whisper. Dan nodded at Glenda and turned Kaycee to face him. While Glenda slipped her blouse off the other shoulder and swabbed the area with alcohol, wincing at the ugly bruise still there, Dan brought his lips down softly to Kaycee's and kissed her. The kiss was intoxicating but couldn't prevent the shudder of fear and pain that passed through her as the needle slipped in delivering the second life-saving vaccine dose.

Glenda silently slid out of the room as soon as she was done, leaving Kaycee in Dan's arms. He held her until she stopped shaking and then they made languorous love taking time to appreciate each touch. When they lay sated and happy, Dan asked, "So, have you behaved yourself while I was gone?"

Kaycee smiled at the question, "Of course, don't I always?" she answered innocently.

He laughed, "Yeah, right!" and lightly swatted her bare bottom.

She pouted. "Honest, I've been a very good girl. In fact, I've been so good, I think I deserve a lollipop from the doctor," she purred.

"Mmmmm. I have another idea." She was lying on top of him, her elbows propped on his chest. He pulled himself up into a sitting position and swung her around so she was lying over his lap. As soon as she found herself in the familiar position, she started to protest.

"You're not going to spank me now! I didn't do anything!" she exclaimed struggling to get off his lap.

"Relax Kaycee. Trust me, you're going to like this. Not all spankings are for punishment. It's time you received a good girl spanking," he whispered in her ear as he massaged her buttocks. When she started to relax under his gentle hands, he lightly smacked her bottom. There was only a slight sting in his swats and after about a half dozen he was rubbing the sting away. She loved the sensations she felt. When he started spanking her again his swats were a little harder and after about a dozen her backside was definitely warming up, but that wasn't the only place she was heating up. She raised her hips to meet his spans, feeling his arousal under her stomach as she neared climax. Then she felt his fingers exploring her sex and she exploded right over his lap. Now, it was her turn to release his passion and she scooted down to wrap her lips around his aroused manhood driving him over the edge.

Kaycee hadn't ever considered herself very inventive or aggressive in bed, but then neither was her ex-husband. She had never reached the heights of passion that she experienced with Dan and the sensations he created brought her immense pleasure. What's more, he told her in so many ways that she excited and pleased him. When they came together, she had no doubts about how she felt and what she wanted. If only she could hold on to that certainty.

He was holding her to his chest, stroking her silky hair. "Kaycee?"

"Hmmm?"

"Move up to the cabin with me."

She stilled at his statement and then turned to face him when he loosened his hold on her. She looked into his eyes and saw once again that depth of feeling that captured her and frightened her a

little.

"Are you serious? You want me to move in with you?" she asked, somewhat incredulous.

"Very serious. You don't have to sound so shocked."

"I... that is I..."

"Well now this is a first—Kaycee Wilder at a loss for words. I want you close. Is that so hard to understand?" he asked.

"No, I feel the same way. It's just..." she paused and he waited, not rushing to fill the silence, but appreciating that even silence was comfortable with her.

"It's just that I have to leave in a couple of weeks. Won't living together just make that harder?" Tears glistened in her eyes as she asked the question.

Her words sliced through him like a scalpel through flesh. The thought of her leaving was devastating, but he knew she wasn't ready yet for him to ask her to stay. Maybe if they stayed together during the days she had left, she might be when the time came. All he said was, "You know my dad always told me when I was growing up here that you don't worry about how to cross the next stream or gully until you get to it."

She laid her head against his chest for a while, not saying anything. About the time he thought she'd fallen asleep she said, "OK." He smiled and tipped her chin up so he could kiss her.

"You know, of course, that we'll be the talk of the hollow!" she grinned as she made the observation.

"Honey, we've been the talk of the hollow since you got here. The folks around here have just been wondering what's taken us so long!"

That evening after Dan and Glenda finished with the patients for the day, he helped Kaycee pack up her stuff and they loaded it into her rented jeep. Glenda was grinning from ear to ear as she watched

the process, but they both gave her pointed looks that clearly said, 'don't say a word'. So she wisely kept her mouth shut, still, she couldn't hide her happiness that they were finally together.

Once they got to the cabin, Dan hauled her suitcase and trunk into his bedroom and made room in the closets and drawers for her stuff. She settled her camera gear, computer and files into his office. Then they made dinner together and ate out on the porch, watching the first stars appear. They talked about their respective days and plans for tomorrow. It was so natural and comfortable, they both felt as if she'd been staying in his home all summer.

The only awkward moment came when Kaycee asked about the water and soil test results. She watched Dan's jaw clench briefly and then he brushed the question off and changed the subject. When she thought about it later, it bothered her, but tonight, their first night living together, she shook off her unsettled feelings. They mutually decided to turn in early and enjoyed a night of exploring each other's bodies, finding the unique spots of pleasure.

The next morning, Kaycee awoke chilled without Dan's warm body cradling hers and disappointed to be alone. She thought the whole idea of moving up to the cabin was so she wouldn't wake up to an empty bed, and she intended to find Dan and tell him that! She grinned as she threw on her robe and padded down the hall in her bare feet. As she neared his office, she heard him talking and then was surprised to find the door closed. She was about to knock and go in when she heard him shouting into the phone and his words sent shivers down her spine. She carefully opened the door just a crack so she could hear better, even though her first instinct was to cover her ears and go back to bed.

"Dammit, John I can't keep covering for you!" Dan shouted into the phone. "Yes, it looks like

everyone's going to recover, but that's not the point. We could still have people getting sick—it's cancer for God's sake!"

Kaycee's heart squeezed as she listened to Dan's side of the conversation.

"Yeah, but they've been boiling their water for nearly a month now! They want to know when they can stop and why they got sick. I hate this lying—and now I've got Kaycee on my back too. Don't forget she's a reporter." Dan had lowered his voice, but she clearly heard every word.

"I moved her up here to the cabin so I can keep a close eye on her, but I don't know how long I can keep dodging her questions. You've gotta wrap this up now, or it's gonna blow wide open! I'm not keeping those test results under wraps much longer—I don't care what it costs us."

Kaycee felt a sharp pain in her very soul. Tears fell down her cheeks. She knew at that moment she loved this man because his betrayal hurt so deeply. If she hadn't heard him with her own ears she never would have believed he could be part of something that would harm the people here. And she certainly never would have imagined that the love he had given her was all an act to distract her. She ran back down the hall and into the bedroom. She needed time to think.

She decided to jump in the shower and hope he left her alone. As the hot water jets cascaded down her body she was able to clear away some of the emotional pain and think. She realized she had to find out what was going on. Maybe it wasn't what she thought. But her mind quickly told her that was her heart talking—if there was just a misunderstanding why didn't she simply confront him and clear things up? Because Dan's words were unmistakable, the journalist inside her said. She started to get angry and her anger helped her focus on a plan.

In his office, Dan slammed down the satellite

phone. He couldn't keep this pretense up much longer. He had actually been able to put it out of his mind the last few days with Kaycee, until she'd brought up the test results last night. He was lying to people he cared about and to the woman he loved. Would they forgive him when they found out the truth? He thought about how hard it had been to win their trust, and Kaycee... her trust was such a fragile thing after what she'd been through with her ex-husband. Hell, for all he knew he didn't even have it yet, and when this broke, he was sure he'd never get it again. *Damn! How did I let this get so out of control?* he raged at himself. He took several deep breaths, needing to calm down before he faced Kaycee again, and that's when he heard the shower running. He decided to go out and make coffee.

When the coffee was made he grabbed two cups and headed to the bedroom, steeling himself to act as if nothing was wrong. The shower was still going. He knocked on the bathroom door and opened it. "Want some company? I come bearing coffee," he said amazed at the light tone he heard in his voice.

Kaycee closed her eyes against the anguish she felt and somehow managed to match his tone. "Coffee yes, company no, or neither of us will get anything done today."

"Good point," he said relieved. "I'll leave the coffee on the counter. And how about getting out of there before you use up all the hot water, lady?!"

She turned off the water, took a deep breath and came out. "I'm done and there's plenty of hot water left, so there!" She couldn't meet his eyes, but knew he was drinking in her naked body in that intense way he had that seemed to capture her very soul. But she couldn't let him, not this time. She had to keep her distance until she found out exactly what was going on. So, she set her plan in motion.

"Dan, I've got to go into Harlan for a couple of days to do some special video processing and



uploading at the A-D-C office there. Do you think Tim would mind if I took Jonesy with me? I'm sure he'd enjoy the trip and I could use an extra pair of hands." She was pleased at the casual sound of her voice.

Yesterday, Dan would have been distressed at the thought of her spending two of her last precious days here away from the hollow, but right now he was actually relieved at the thought. He needed to pull himself together and get his focus back. "I'm sure Tim wouldn't mind, and you're right Jonesy would love the trip." He came to her then and pulled her into his arms, desperate to touch her. "I'll miss you."

She couldn't fight the feelings he brought out every time he touched her, no matter how much she wanted to. She needed his comfort and reassurance at that moment more than anything else in the world. So she held onto him as tightly as she could. They stayed like that for several minutes, both so caught up in their own emotion and deception, they didn't notice the awkwardness and anxiety in the other.

While Dan was showering and dressing, Kaycee packed an overnight bag and gathered up her gear and tapes. They loaded everything into the jeep and headed down to the clinic, each lost in their own thoughts. When they pulled into the clinic, Kaycee said, "I'm going to leave as soon as I have everything together. I'll stop in to say good-bye before I go."

"Sounds good—see you in a bit then."

She watched sadly as he hopped out of the jeep, not looking back. For the hundredth time that morning she said a silent prayer that she had it wrong—that there was a completely logical explanation for what she heard this morning.

Kaycee had no trouble getting Jonesy to come with her, although she hated lying to the boy and Tim about where she was going. But she didn't have

a choice. An hour later with Jonesy's stuff loaded into the jeep and good-byes said, she was ready to hit the road. Jonesy was talking a mile a minute and she just let him go on until he stopped suddenly.

"Hey, Miss Kaycee, we're going the wrong way, and why are we stopping at the Miller place?" he asked.

"I'm borrowing Don's ATV," she said.

"Oh, Miss Kaycee!" Jonesy started to laugh, "We don't need the ATV to get to Harlan, it's good roads all the way."

"I know," she said and got out leaving the boy looking confused and a little worried.

After Don Miller hooked up his ATV and trailer to the back of the jeep, Kaycee thanked him and got back in. She gave Jonesy a quick look that said 'don't ask' and backed out. After they were out of sight of the Miller home, Kaycee pulled over and looked at Jonesy.

"OK, kiddo, time for an explanation. We're not going to Harlan, at least not yet. We have sort of a secret mission to do first. I need you to promise you won't tell anyone where we went when we get back."

Jonesy looked at her so earnestly, it nearly broke her heart to be pulling him into her intrigue. "Not even Dr. Dan or Reverend Tim?" he asked in a very small voice.

*Especially not them!* she thought. "Not even them—this has to be our little secret. Can you do that?"

"Sure, anything for you, Miss Kaycee. So where are we going?" he asked, starting to get excited at the thought of an adventure.

"We're headed into the high country to visit a few families and take some water and soil samples. I'm pretty sure I know where I'm going, but I'm counting on you to back me up, OK?"

"You bet!" he agreed. "But, can we tell the folks up there what we're doing?"

"Not really. Just follow what I say, and don't tell anyone that Dan and Tim don't know we're up there. I know it's tough to tell a lie, Jonesy, but this is a super secret job, so it's OK."

Jonesy was so caught up in being James Bond junior he didn't even blink at the thought that she was telling him to lie. They made good time in the jeep. It handled the rugged roads better than Dan's truck, so they were able to take it further up into the high country before they had to leave it for the ATV. During the hours they drove, Jonesy kept up an easy chatter that Kaycee tried to concentrate on so she didn't have to think. He was a great navigator, so just four hours after they left, they arrived at the Wyler farm.

Tim Wyler greeted Kaycee warmly and expressed his sadness over the death of her father. He was happy to let her check on the girls and take some more video. They talked about how the girls were feeling and how tough the chemotherapy was, but he said Dan made it as easy as possible by coming to the farm every two weeks to administer the drugs. Kaycee got the video she needed and then mentioned that Dan needed some new water and soil samples, so she'd agreed to get them. No problem, Tim said and then invited them to stay for an early supper. She and Jonesy stayed for a quick meal and then headed out toward three other farms further north.

Kaycee had decided to avoid Jonas Tyler's place. As much as she wanted to see the Tylers and check on Miz Betsy, she was concerned that Jonas was a little too perceptive. She was afraid he'd see through her deception and contact Dan.

They reached the next stop at about 6pm, and Kaycee again went through her routine, gathering video and water and soil samples with Jonesy's help. They bedded down in the family's barn and were off again after a hearty breakfast to visit two more neighboring homes, collecting the last of the

samples Kaycee wanted. By noon they were headed back to the jeep and at 3pm were on the road to Harlan.

They pulled into town a little after 4pm, and Kaycee headed right to the Appalachian Development office. She wanted to call her EPA friend and get the samples shipped to her ASAP. She figured she'd also better call Dan and let him know they were going to be late getting back. So, while the office secretary kept Jonesy occupied, she got busy.

Her friend at the EPA agreed to expedite the tests and wait for her call for the results. Kaycee promised to tell Greta everything once she knew more, but for now she was just calling in a favor, and Greta owed her a big one for sitting on a story a couple of days. Then she got ready to call Dan. She had managed to keep so busy the last 48 hours, she hadn't thought about him or their situation. She had to push back her feelings for at least a couple more days until she got back the test results. She dialed the clinic.

"Dan Chase, Crystal Creek Clinic." He sounded harried as he answered.

"Hi Dan, it's Kaycee. I just..."

"Kaycee, thank goodness. I was getting really worried. Where the heck have you been?!" he demanded.

"I... what do you mean where have I been? I've been here in Harlan working my butt off. Sorry I didn't think to call last night, but Jonesy and I worked really late," she explained wondering what he meant.

"Kaycee, I tried to call you at the hotel last night and they said you weren't registered. Then I called the ADC office this morning and they said they hadn't seen you. Honey, what's going on, where have you been?"

*Damn!* she thought. She should have known he would try to call her last night if she didn't call him.

Time to think fast—then it came to her in a flash. "Gosh, Dan, I'm so sorry. We've been working and staying at the director's home. It's a mess here—they're renovating or some such thing, so there was no place for me to do anything here. But Melissa had everything I needed at her home. I didn't mean to worry you, honest. It was really thoughtless of me not to call last night." She chewed on her lower lip as another set of lies slid out, compounding her breach of trust.

"Well, how come the receptionist over there said she hadn't seen you and Jonesy?" Dan asked, still skeptical.

"Oh that, well she was off yesterday when we came in, so technically she hadn't seen us till late this afternoon when we brought some stuff over to the office. Listen Dan, I've still got a couple of hours work here before we head back. I just wanted you to know we'll be late. Can you let Tim know? And do you want me to stay at the clinic tonight so I don't disturb you when I get in?" she asked, hoping to distract him from his interrogation about where she'd been.

"Hell, no! The only thing that disturbs me is not having you here. So, hurry up and finish your work and get your cute little butt back here!" Dan said chuckling.

She laughed too, "OK, doc, you got it! See you between 9 and 10pm." She hung up before he could ask any more questions and thought about the mixed feelings running around inside her. There was a part of her that frantically wanted to get back to him, and yet most of her dreaded the pretending and lies. She hated that she couldn't stop loving him despite his betrayal of her trust. *God, how do I manage to fall in love with these men who only want to use me or change me?* she asked herself. Two days. She just had to get through two days and then she'd have the test results and could go from there.

## Chapter Thirteen

It was nearly 10pm when Kaycee and Jonesy pulled up to the orphanage building. Jonesy had fallen asleep almost as soon as they drove out of Harlan, leaving Kaycee alone with her thoughts. It was not exactly the place she wanted to be. She couldn't remember ever being so conflicted and confused. Her heart just couldn't accept what her ears had heard and her brain was telling her. She knew she was desperately clinging to a thread of hope that there was a reasonable explanation for the phone conversation she overheard.

Kaycee just sat behind the wheel of the jeep, looking at Jonesy's face, so peaceful in sleep. She wished for just a moment she could return to that time of childhood innocence. She was startled to hear her thoughts given voice.

"He looks so peaceful, almost angelic, in sleep, doesn't he?" Tim asked. He looked at Kaycee and couldn't help but notice the exhaustion in her face and something he couldn't quite describe in her eyes.

"You, on the other hand look wiped out. Did you get everything done?"

"Yeah, but it's been a busy two days. Jonesy was a great help." She paused for a minute and then looked at Tim. "Tim, how well do you know Dan?"

If he was surprised by her question, his face didn't show it. "Well enough to know he's in love with you. You don't doubt that, do you?" Kaycee had to look away from Tim's penetrating gaze. She wanted so much to say 'of course not', but Dan's last words on the phone call rang in her ears, *'I moved her to the cabin so I can keep an eye on her'*. Not because he loved her, but because he wanted to make sure she didn't get in the way of whatever was going on.

There was no mistaking the look in Kaycee's

eyes now, Tim thought. There was doubt and the pain of mistrust. He just misinterpreted the cause. "Kaycee, look, you've been through a lot this summer. And from what you told us, your ex-husband gave you a lot of reasons to be afraid to trust or love any man. But I promise you, Dan won't ever hurt you like that. Let go of your fears, and give in to the feelings you have. You won't be sorry."

He was so genuine, and Kaycee was desperate to grasp onto his words. She smiled through her tears. "Thanks, Tim. Please don't say anything to Dan about this conversation. You better get Jonesy up to bed."

Tim reached out and gave her shoulder a squeeze with a last comforting look, and then went around the jeep and gently gathered Jonesy into his strong arms and carried him inside the orphanage. Kaycee watched him go, and decided she couldn't put it off any longer. She had to head up to the cabin.

As she pulled up into his steep driveway, she saw him sitting on the porch swing, sound asleep. She thought ironically that he had the same boyish innocence in sleep that Jonesy did. For that moment she simply shut off her brain and let her heart rule her thoughts and feelings. She walked up the porch steps and gently shook his shoulder to wake him. He awoke enough to register her face, and reached up to pull her lips down to his. He kissed her and whispered, "I'm glad you're home. I missed you." Then he started to drift back to sleep. She blinked back more tears and pulled him up.

"Come on doc, you don't want to spend the night out here. Let's get you to bed." They stumbled through the living room, back to the bedroom. She managed to help him over to the bed and he tumbled in, shoes and all. She took off his sneakers and jeans and then barely had the energy to do the same for herself before she exhaustedly collapsed

beside him. She went to sleep almost as quickly as he did.

She woke early the next morning, and quietly rose and dressed so she didn't disturb Dan. When she went into the bathroom to brush her teeth and hair, she almost didn't recognize the image looking back at her in the mirror. The woman who had been almost blissfully happy just a few days before had been replaced by a sad, wild-eyed stranger. Her eyes were neon signs proclaiming her confusion and hurt. She had to do a better job than this of concealing her emotional turmoil if she was going to keep Dan at arm's length for the next few days. She splashed water on her face hoping somehow she could just drown her pain, and then went out to make coffee.

She was leaning against a porch rail sipping her coffee, her mind blank, when she felt firm hands on her shoulders. She stiffened just for an instant and then willed herself to relax. He began kneading her tight muscles and she eventually gave in to his ministrations. "Honey, you're so tight back here, did you overwork your back again?" he asked.

"No, I think I'm just a little stressed over getting this project done. That feels good. Did you sleep well, you looked so tired last night when I came in."

"Yeah, sorry I fell asleep on you. It was not the welcome home I had planned. Of course we could always pretend you just got back!" he said as he nuzzled the back of her neck.

Kaycee wanted nothing more at that moment than to let all her worries slide away in the comfort of his arms. But instead she said, "Don't tempt me. Neither of us would get any work done today if we did that! You may have time to laze around, but I have things to do!" she said sarcastically.

"Laze around?!" he protested and promptly swatted her backside.

"Hey! Keep your hands to yourself, doc!" she exclaimed.



"I ought to really take my hand to your backside, young lady, for not calling the other night and worrying me!" he said sternly.

She turned to look at him and was relieved to see, despite the firm set of his mouth, his eyes were smiling. She grinned up at him, placed a quick kiss on his cheek and impishly said, "But you won't!" Then she scampered inside, just missing a second swat aimed at her retreating butt. He shook his head laughing and followed her inside.

"It's obviously been too long since I paddled that cute butt of yours."

"Forever is not long enough for me," she said, backing up as he advanced on her.

"You could never behave that long..." he pointed out, chuckling. "But I'm willing to wait it out," he added softly in a serious tone, watching her reaction. Kaycee heard the change in his tone and felt herself once again trapped in his intense gaze. Suddenly, she was really nervous, still backing away even though he had stopped moving toward her. When she backed into the dining room table, she stumbled slightly, turned and fled to the kitchen.

"I... uh... I'll start breakfast..." she called over her shoulder. He sighed as she disappeared. Clearly his hunch was right. She was not ready to consider any long term commitments. He shoved his hands in his pockets in a gesture of frustration and headed for the shower.

Kaycee didn't relax until she heard the water running. She shuddered as she realized all it took was his look or touch to make her forget everything, except how much she cared for this man. She went through the motions of making breakfast—juice, fruit, toast, hot cereal. She set everything out on the table and was playing at eating when he came out. She glanced up at him and inhaled the scent of fresh outdoors that seemed to cling to him after a shower and shave. She truly didn't know how much longer she could last being

torn between what she felt and the doubts created by what she heard. She was so lost in her own dilemma she almost missed his words that unknowingly delivered another sucker punch.

"I hate to have to do this the day after you get back, but it's time to administer the next round of chemo drugs. I'll probably be gone two to three days. Do you want to come with me and see all the folks up in the high country again? I can borrow a couple of ATVs so the trip wouldn't strain your back."

She only heard his first sentence. He was going to the farms she had just left two days ago. Certainly someone would mention her visit and gathering samples. She was about to get busted! Maybe she should just tell him now—confront him with the phone call she overheard and the questions that had plagued her ever since. No, she couldn't do that. If he was somehow tied up in whatever was making people sick... She still couldn't finish that thought. It was so abhorrent and went against everything she knew about Dan. She had to wait for the test results, so she had more to go on. All she could hope was that she'd have what she needed before he got back. At least while he was gone, she'd be able to think more clearly.

"Kaycee!?" he yelled, startling her out of her reverie.

"What? Don't yell at me like that!" she answered testily.

"Well, don't fade away in the middle of a conversation! I asked if you wanted to come with me while I give the chemotherapy treatments," he said chuckling.

"Oh, well, I'd love to see those folks again before I leave, but I've got so much to do here. You know, logging my tape and shooting the last few things I need, plus re-shoots of some stuff that didn't come out as well as I'd hoped. So, I better stay here," she said, pleased that her voice

betrayed none of the panic she was feeling. Time was running out on them, she could feel it.

He looked at her for a while, but decided not to push it. Somehow he'd thought she'd jump at the chance to get back up into the high country for a follow-up visit, especially since she didn't get to shoot much because her back went out. So, was she simply afraid of that much time alone with him? It was a depressing thought for his crusade to get her to stay in the hollow permanently.

"OK, but I'll miss the company! I'm headed down to the clinic to load up and should be heading out in an hour or so. Will I see you down there before I leave?" he asked hopefully.

"Definitely. I'll just clean up here, grab a quick shower and be down." She rose to start clearing the breakfast dishes, noting that they'd barely touched the food she laid out. He rose and stood in her path, kissing her deeply. She responded, wishing her hands weren't full of dishes, so she could hold him tightly.

When he released her lips he whispered in her ear, "I love you Kaycee. No matter what happens, don't ever forget that." Then he turned and left the cabin. She stared after him, very concerned that he'd just confirmed her doubts and fears that he was into something bad.

Dan and Glenda were loading the last of his supplies into the truck when Kaycee pulled the jeep into the clinic lot. She saw that he had borrowed an ATV, which would bring him back sooner. She just prayed that when he returned she had some answers. He gave Glenda a last few instructions and then turned to Kaycee.

"One last chance to come along?" She dropped her eyes and simply shook her head. "OK, how about trying to stay out of trouble while I'm gone?" he said lightly.

She tried to match his light tone, "What you don't know can't hurt my ass!"

"Wanna bet?" he threatened and then grabbed her and pulled her close. He seemed to sense the foreboding she felt that nothing would be the same between them. He just held her and then finally climbed into the truck and took off. Tears swam in her eyes, and she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"You two seem to spend less time together since you moved into the cabin then you did before. Is everything OK, Kaycee?" Glenda asked, concerned.

"Yeah, yeah, we're fine. I'm fine. Listen do you need some help in the clinic before I start logging tape? I could use a break from it."

Glenda watched her closely and noted that she was avoiding eye contact. She also looked like it was an incredible strain to remain composed. At first she assumed it was the separation from Dan for another few days, but now she wondered if something more was going on. Well, maybe the distraction of clinic patients would take her mind off her own problems.

"Sure, I'll never turn down an offer of help when I'm flying solo," she said.

Kaycee was always amazed at how quickly time passed when she assisted in the clinic or was shooting Dan and Glenda working. The variety of problems people brought to them was fascinating. And often as not, the solution wasn't medical. But the common sense advice and herbal or other alternative remedies flowed out of Glenda as easily as the medical ones. It was incredibly hard for her to imagine that in about 10 days or so, the only part these people would play in her life was on videotape. She was surprised by how sad that thought made her.

By late afternoon, things had actually settled down at the clinic, so Glenda shooed her off to go work on her own stuff. Kaycee grabbed her camera and computer and headed to one of the hilltops to work and watch the sunset. Glenda called after her to join them at the house for dinner, and she

agreed.

The next day was much the same. Kaycee worked with Glenda in the clinic all morning, listening to problems, making notes in charts, and comforting family members. It was much busier than the day before, so neither she nor Glenda got a break all day. Glenda tried to send her off to do her own work in the afternoon, but Kaycee was not about to leave Glenda by herself with a waiting room full of patients.

It was after five, and both women were dead on their feet, when the call came. Kaycee answered the phone, and immediately paled when she heard the voice on the other end. Two days working in the clinic, without Dan around, had allowed her to shut her own troubles into a box in the corner of her mind and forget about them.

"Kaycee, it's Greta. I have your test results, and we've got some serious talking to do." Her EPA friend was all business, and Kaycee knew that was bad.

"That doesn't sound good," she answered.

"It's not. Kaycee, you've got to tell me where these samples came from. We need to get hazmat clean-up teams there ASAP."

"My God, Greta, what did you find?"

"The water samples, which I assume came from drinking wells, are loaded with chemicals. The combination of chemicals makes me think it's waste from mining operations—coal, iron ore, or some other underground mining. The bad boy in this toxic soup is benzene. Kaycee, it's a dangerous carcinogen, and there's enough in those samples to kill a horse, so I can just imagine what it's doing to the people who drink it."

Kaycee's mind was reeling. She couldn't tell Greta how right she was, but the images of animals loaded with tumors, and sick children crowded her mind. Despair was her first reaction, but it was slowly replaced by anger.

"Greta would there have to be active mining going on for the water to get contaminated? I mean how could this happen?" she asked.

"It's more likely that it's old waste from an abandoned site. Mining companies are required by law to transport their hazardous waste to an approved disposal site. But that's an expensive proposition. So a few unscrupulous companies just bury it in old abandoned shafts, especially as they near the end of the useful life of a mine. Over time, those barrels can corrode and leak. In this case it looks like they leaked into the underground water table or spring that supplies these wells. Kaycee, you've got to tell me where these samples came from."

"I promise I will Greta, but you've got to give me 48 hours. I can tell you that no one's drinking contaminated water right now—they're all boiling it..."

"But you have sick people and/or animals, don't you? That's why you asked for the rush testing. Kaycee, you can't fool around here. This is serious, and if we are talking about an illegal dump site, it's dangerous!" Greta insisted.

"Believe me, I am not underestimating the seriousness or the danger, but I need 48 hours. Then, you get everything. Just one more question. If someone sent similar samples to a state EPA lab, how long would it take to get the results?"

"Probably a week to 10 days max, why?"

"And once those results came in, wouldn't the lab have to report them to someone in government?"

"Not necessarily. It depends on state law. Some states allow either the lab or the person who sent the samples to make the official report. The idea is that if the party involved makes the report, all the data comes in together, and there's less likely to be bureaucratic foul-ups."

"Thanks, Greta. 48 hours, no more, I promise.

But please give me that long?" Kaycee pleaded with her friend.

"Against my better judgment—I'll give you two days. But if I don't hear from you, I will analyze those samples for clues to your location. I will trace this number. And EPA hazmat teams will descend on you like the wrath of God! Are we clear, my friend?"

"Greta, I don't doubt one word you said. I'll be back in touch."

"Kaycee, please be careful," and she hung up. Kaycee was stunned. The thin threads of hope that Greta would tell her something that let Dan off the hook had snapped. The water was contaminated and he had to have known, unless he just never sent the samples in. Either way he was covering for someone, probably some mine owner illegally dumping, and letting his own patients get sick. Her anger grew from a small flame to an inferno, burning through the hurt and despair she felt. She had to find the source of the contamination. If she could, then clean-up could be focused and maybe the invasion of feds into the hollow would be minimized. She knew how important privacy was to these people, and she didn't want to invade it any more than absolutely necessary to make their water safe again.

Glenda came out of the exam room at that point rubbing her temples. "What a day! I'm exhausted. You must be too. Want to come up to the house for dinner again? I think Mom's making her famous fried chicken. And if Dan's not back by now, he won't come in until tomorrow." She opened her eyes and looked at Kaycee. She could see the strain of the day in her eyes too, or at least she thought it was the strain of the day.

"Thanks for the offer, but I think I'm just gonna head up to the cabin and veg out for a while. Listen, do you think you'll be OK tomorrow? I've got some stuff I need to re-shoot at some of the neighboring farms, and I'd like to get an early

start." Kaycee hoped Glenda was too tired to see through her lie.

"No problem. I can't thank you enough for yesterday and today. I'd say I'm sorry if it put you behind, but I'm not really, if that means we get to keep you here for a couple more days! You going alone? You know, even after all this time, Dan still worries when you're out by yourself."

"Yeah, I know all about the worry-wart. I'll probably take Jonesy with me to help, so tell Dan not to worry. I'll probably be gone all day, so I'll see him at the cabin tomorrow night." Kaycee was relieved Glenda didn't seem to pick up on anything unusual.

"OK, I'll tell him. I'm just going to clean-up a little and lock up, so you can take off. See you tomorrow night maybe. And thanks again, Kaycee." Glenda headed back into the exam rooms and Kaycee escaped the clinic, heading to the cabin. She had a long night of research before she headed out tomorrow morning.

By the time she reached the cabin all her emotional energy was focused on finding the source of the contamination. It occurred to her that the first thing she should try was searching Dan's office. She knew she hadn't thought of it before because she was afraid of what she might find. But now she knew the worst, and there was no reason not to learn everything she could. She went through all his files and desk drawers, but found nothing. He didn't own a computer, so the only thing left was his office safe, but she had no idea how to get in. So she moved to plan B. She figured there had to be maps of the underground mining sites, and these days it was likely they were accessible some way on the Internet. So she plugged in and wired up her laptop and went to work.

Fortunately, one skill that came in handy as an investigative reporter and producer was manipulating government data bases. She was an



expert at finding a way into sites that may or may not be accessible to the public. It took her more than two hours, but finally she got into the state OSHA site that had maps of most of the underground mines to mount rescue efforts in case of a cave-in. It took her a while longer to find the ones in the hollow area, but eventually she did. Next she had to figure out how to match-up surface map coordinates with the underground mine shafts. It was well after midnight when she concluded that the place she needed to head at first light was the gorge area. From what she could tell, the cave entrances down there were actually abandoned mine shafts. That would be where she'd begin her search. The maps told her which shafts were likely still standing, and which had long since collapsed. It would be dangerous she knew, but if she could track down the illegal dump, it would save the people here a lot of hassle from federal EPA inspectors.

Kaycee couldn't help but think about the first time she went down to the gorge. Had it only been three months? Her life had been transformed since then, and now... She had been so scared with her ankle caught in that animal trap and then Dan had rescued her. That was the first time he spanked her—the first time she'd ever been spanked. She was conflicted then too, wanting to hate him, but at the same time loving the secure, cared for feeling she experienced as he comforted her. That was when she started to fall in love with him. She shook her head hard to clear the memories and bring her focus back to the present. Whatever she felt was over—it didn't matter now. At least that's what she told herself, while the little voice from her heart scoffed.

She packed all her belongings into the jeep. She knew she couldn't come back to the cabin, no matter what she found. She loaded her backpack with the essentials she'd need for her hike into the

gorge, and included her mini-camera to document anything she found. She finally laid down on the couch to catch a couple of hours sleep before dawn. She just couldn't bring herself to sleep in the bed she and Dan had made love in.

First light came streaming through the cabin windows about three hours later. Kaycee hadn't really slept, but she did manage to doze off a couple of times between tossing and turning. She got up, showered, grabbed a quick breakfast that tasted more like sawdust, and headed out toward the gorge.

At the same time, an equally angry and determined Dan was loading up the ATV to head back to the truck, and then to the clinic. He was furious that she had risked everything coming up here on her own to get water and soil samples. What was she thinking?!? And to drag Jonesy into her lies! God only knew what she'd found out and who she had told. But if she brought the feds down on them now, it would ruin everything! All those people and animals would have suffered for nothing.

During the last two days since he'd first been told she was up here, he'd also realized how little hope there was for their relationship. She couldn't learn to trust again. He knew how unfair that assessment was given the fact that he too had lied, but in his case, the trust wasn't his to give. If he had told her or anyone the truth, he could have put more lives in danger. But she didn't even have enough faith in him to ask him what was going on when she had suspicions.

Well, he'd tell her everything now, and just pray that it wasn't too late to stop whatever she set in motion. And then by God, he'd send her back to Wisconsin with one blistered butt!

## Chapter Fourteen

With the jeep, Kaycee was able to drive nearly to the top of the gorge area in about two hours. When she couldn't go any further, she grabbed her backpack and computer maps. There were more than thirty abandoned shafts in and around the hollow, but Kaycee had put her research skills to further use last night, and narrowed her search to three likely sites. According to the National Geological site, only about a dozen shafts crossed the underground spring that fed the wells in the high country. When she checked the safety and environmental records of the various owners, she found one company that had been cited several times for EPA violations. She figured she'd start with that company's old sites. She doubted she'd get to check out more than three sites today anyway.

If her calculations were correct, the first should be about halfway down the gorge, so she started her hike. When she got to the shaft opening, she was disappointed to find it blocked. There was no way to get in and it looked like it had caved in years ago. She decided she'd move on to the second site, and look for a topside entrance to the first mine shaft if she didn't find anything at the other two.

The second shaft was a mile further down. It was a steep climb and Kaycee nearly slipped several times. She certainly understood why this place was off limits. Finally she made her way to the shaft opening and found it still accessible. With a high powered flashlight and chalk to mark the walls along the way, she ventured in. She went just a few feet and was enveloped by an inky darkness that reminded her of a winter night with no moon. The air smelled stale and the walls closed in on all sides and from above, but still she followed the coal cart tracks deeper and deeper into the shaft. She explored several tunnels, each time coming up

against a road block, usually a cave-in. After about two hours she was desperate for fresh air, and followed her chalk markings out.

She figured she had just enough time to check out the third mine site before it would be too dark to hike out of the gorge for the night. According to her map and compass she needed to head about two miles west. When she got to the third site, she found something right off the bat—footprints. Someone had been here recently. She considered for just a moment going back for help, but only for a moment. As it turned out, that would have been a smart move, because as she entered the third shaft, two pair of eyes watched closely. Both were angry at her intrusion, but only one was also concerned for her safety.

Kaycee made her way inside and decided the easiest thing to do was simply follow the footprints. She figured she'd hiked about a half-mile inside when she saw what she thought looked like a light ahead. She quickly moved toward it, and suddenly found herself in a large cavern flooded with light. In the center of the room were dozens of stacked barrels. She saw that several different tunnels converged on the large space. Obviously the company had transported all its hazardous waste here. As she walked around the barrel stack she saw the problem. At least a half-dozen of the barrels sitting on the ground were leaking. She pulled out her video camera and started to shoot. She was so absorbed in her task she never heard another set of footsteps enter one of the tunnels. When she had her back directly to that tunnel, he struck. She never saw or heard him coming. She just felt a flash of pain at the back of her head, and then everything went dark.

Outside, John watched her enter the shaft and cursed. What the hell was she doing down there? And, how did she find the right one? He was sure this was the day that slimy bastard Pinkert would

show up and he'd nail him. But she could blow the whole thing, not to mention get herself killed. Just as he was about to abandon his surveillance post and go after her, he saw Pinkert follow her in. Damn!! Now she was in real trouble. He let Pinkert get inside and then moved as quickly and quietly as possible toward the shaft opening, but he was still a good 15-20 minutes behind because he had been so far away.

Inside, Drew Pinkert looked down at the fallen girl. "Nosy reporters!" he scoffed. He took her camera and then proceeded about the task he'd come for. It was time to get rid of the evidence. He'd been lucky for a dozen years, but he could feel this whole operation closing in on him, and with the barrels leaking, someone was going to discover his hazardous stash. So he was going to dynamite the whole thing and collapse the cavern and access tunnels. Little miss reporter would just disappear, and when they found her jeep up at the gorge's entrance they'd just figure she was another victim of the gorge. Stupid girl, coming here alone!

When he finished setting the charges he noticed she was stirring. He didn't want to put a bullet in her on the off-chance that her body was ever found. But he could still make sure she never got out. He shot into the ceiling beam and brought it and other debris crashing down on her chest. "Just try to get out of here now, missy! You've got about 10 minutes before this whole place is blown to bits!" With an evil smirk he headed out one of the tunnels.

Kaycee heard his words through the pounding in her head and pressure on her chest. Luckily, he didn't look too closely at the beam that fell. It would have certainly crushed her had it landed full weight on her. But a couple of rocks fell first, propping it up on one side. She was trapped, and badly bruised on her right side, but she could breathe. Still as she looked around, she wasn't sure how much longer

she'd survive. The beam was much too heavy to move and she couldn't maneuver out from under it. All she could do was watch the timer tick down on the explosives.

John was halfway down one of the tunnels when he heard the gunshot and the ceiling debris crash down. He forgot about trying to approach silently and ran flat out toward the cavern. He arrived just as Pinkert was fleeing. He wanted desperately to go after him, but then he saw Kaycee alive and took in the planted dynamite. He could see she was trapped; what he needed to know was how badly she was injured. Damn, Dan was NOT going to be happy about this! He approached her slowly, bent down, and smiled to try and put her at ease.

"You don't take warnings very well do you?" he asked. When she tried to turn toward him he stopped her, "No! Don't move a muscle until we figure out how badly you're hurt."

She was dizzy from the blow to her head and tried to focus on his words and face, but it took her a minute to recognize the burley man with the scruffy beard. "Big John? From the dance?" Her voice was weak and obviously she was laboring to breathe.

"Actually, it's U.S. Marshal John Chase. Now ssshh, don't try to talk. Conserve your breath," he said as he began to move her arms and legs to see how mobile she was.

"Dynamite... you've got to get out..." she said breathlessly.

"I'm well aware we're on a short timetable. But when I go, you're going with me. Dan would never forgive me if I left my future sister-in-law behind!" he grinned at her look of astonishment. "You mean to tell me that brother of mine hasn't asked you yet?" He kept the banter going, trying to take her mind off their predicament and the pain she was going to feel when he tried to move her.

"Brother? You and Dan? Marshal?" Each question

came out as a hoarse whisper—he was worried that her breathing was getting shallower.

"Kaycee, we'll go through the family tree when we get out of here, right now I need you to concentrate on your breathing. Tell me, do you feel pain in your chest or just pressure?"

"Mostly pressure... little pain on right side... maybe cracked ribs..." she answered wincing as he gently probed the area on her right side where the beam hit.

"OK. Here's what we're gonna do. I don't think I can disable all those timing devices in the six minutes we have. But I can use that other beam over there to winch up this one, probably just enough for you to slide out. I know it's gonna hurt like hell moving yourself, but I can't hold up the beam and pull you out. Can you do that?"

"Go... not enough time..." she answered.

"Hell woman, you *are* as stubborn as Dan said. Now on three, get ready to pull yourself completely clear. I won't be able to hold it up for long. Here we go, one, two, three!" John heaved with all his might and the beam lifted just a couple of inches, but it was enough for Kaycee to get out. She gritted her teeth and slid clear, moaning in pain at the movement. But as soon as she was free she could breathe more easily. John let the beam drop, and glanced at the timers—3 minutes, "We gotta go now!"

Kaycee was trying to stand, but she was so dizzy from the blow to her head she nearly fainted. John scooped her up in his arms and started to run. She pointed to the tunnel Pinkert had escaped through, figuring it would be the last to collapse. They could just see daylight when the first explosion came, followed by four more that propelled them the last few feet out of the mine shaft before it caved in completely. They lay on the ground dazed, but safe, or so they thought.

John slowly got up and moved over to Kaycee,

who was also trying to get up. "Kaycee, stay down until I can examine you. I want to make sure nothing's broken, especially any ribs that could puncture a lung."

"I would feel it, if I'd broken something. Right now, my head is the worst of it." She reached back and felt blood as well as a huge knot on the back of her head. John helped her into a partial sitting position braced against his chest so he could examine her head wound. "It's lucky you're so damned hard-headed! What *were* you thinking coming down here?! And by yourself!! Of all the stupid, asinine things to do!!"

"Gee, don't hold back—tell me what you really think! Ow! Careful!" she said angrily as he prodded the large lump on the back of her head.

"Sorry. And I *think* it's a good thing for you that you're already so banged up, because otherwise I'd go cut several switches and wear out every one across your backside!"

"And here I was beginning to think you and your brother had nothing in common!" she snapped.

John chuckled at that, "Oh that's right, Dan has had your butt over his knee a time or two hasn't he! Well, my dear, I guess I'll just have to be satisfied with knowing that by the time he's done with you, you probably won't sit for a week!"

Kaycee seemed to deflate at the mention of Dan's name and suddenly she looked so sad. "More like a month, and even then he'll probably never forgive me," she muttered mostly to herself.

John stopped examining her head for a minute and turned her to face him. He gently tipped her chin up so her eyes met his softened expression, "Kaycee, there's nothing you could do that he wouldn't forgive. That's what love means, and he loves you, heart and soul."

Tears pooled in her eyes and she tried to look away from his gaze, which seemed to have the same power Dan's did to look right down into her



very soul, but he wouldn't let her escape. "John, I didn't trust him. I thought he was in the middle of all this," she whispered.

"He was. He just happened to be on the side of the good guys. But he still had to keep things from you and everyone else. I'm sure he's as worried about betraying your trust as you are his. I do know one thing, nothing's gonna be resolved sitting here, so what do you say we get out of here?"

"Not so fast!" Pinkert came out of the woods with a gun pointed at John and Kaycee. "Don't move, Chase, or she's a dead woman. You two are harder to kill than a cat with nine lives."

"Pinkert, I've got a dozen federal marshals standing by ready to swoop in on this area—you'll never get out of here alive unless you put the gun down now," John said confidently.

"Nice try, Chase, but if that were true they'd have come running at the explosion. Now here's what's going to happen. You, miss nosy reporter, are going to stand over there at the entrance to the mine shaft, while I take care of your marshal friend.

"I can't," Kaycee said and both men just stared at her. "My... uh... my legs. I can't walk—that's why John had to carry me out." John gave her a look that clearly said she had better know what she was doing, and then turned to Pinkert and backed up her story.

"It's true. The beam that fell on her caused, at least, temporary paralysis."

"Fine. Carry her over, but I want her over there in the mine entrance." John gently picked her up and carried her over to the shaft opening. When his back was to Pinkert he mouthed the question, "What are you up to?"

She responded with, "Ankle holster?" He nodded, thinking, smart girl, he could go for his ankle gun when he set her down. "Right or left?" she mouthed. "Left," he responded. So when he set her down, she made sure his left side was shielded

from Pinkert, but before he could grab the small .22 caliber handgun, she had it.

"What?" he mouthed. "Get him turned around," she whispered. He wasn't at all happy with the plan, but any more discussion would arouse suspicion. He just hoped she knew how to use a gun. She certainly seemed calm and under control. John stood up and walked out and around Pinkert, so his back was to Kaycee. Pinkert had no trouble turning his back on a woman he believed was helpless.

"So now what, Pinkert? You shoot me?" John baited.

"Yes, actually, that's exactly what." He lifted his gun and pointed it at John's head. Kaycee rose, aimed and fired three shots into Pinkert's back. His face was frozen in a look of shock over the death he never saw coming. Kaycee watched him fall slowly. Then, the gun slid from her hands and she started to shake. She looked at John with a face as pale as the rising moon, and eyes shimmering with the fear and shock she hadn't let herself feel until that moment. He rushed to her side and managed to catch her as her legs gave way.

Suddenly there were voices and chaos all around her. People from the hollow had finally started to make it down the gorge after hearing the blast from miles away. The gunshots had brought them to John and Kaycee's location. She faded in and out. She felt herself being lifted off her unsteady feet and carried up and up. She remembered looking up and seeing John's face, and then it seemed she was looking into Dan's eyes full of worry, concern and love. That was the last thing she remembered as she passed out.

The next few days passed in a blur. Kaycee had suffered a minor concussion and two cracked ribs, as well as some nasty bruising that made it painful to move. Dan tried to insist that she be flown to a hospital in Lexington, but she refused to go, and the federal hazmat team wanted her and John

quarantined in the clinic until they were sure they hadn't been exposed to the chemicals in the cavern. There were federal agents and EPA investigators swarming all over the place. Kaycee, John, and Dan were debriefed at least a dozen different times.

Dan also tried to stop her from working, but the reporter in her insisted on putting together the whole story. She convinced the feds to let her have her computer and tapes on the pretext that they could have all her video related to the contamination. Of course, she had no intention of turning over anything, and instead worked relentlessly to produce the story of what happened. She was careful to protect the identities of people in the hollow. And since the hazmat teams had the area cordoned off, no other reporters could get in. It took her two days in between all the questioning, and poking and prodding of medics, to pull together all her material on the sick children, and animals, plus upload what she had recovered from the camera Pinkert had taken. When she finished, she had a blockbuster story that she emailed to her old boss in D.C. He emailed her back that it not only aired locally, but had gone network, which meant it aired nationally.

The federal agents, including John, were furious when the story got out, but there was nothing they could do, although one agent had suggested that they arrest her for obstruction of justice. John had another form of justice in mind, but fortunately for Kaycee's backside, they were quarantined in separate rooms!

The glare of publicity guaranteed that the area would be cleaned up quickly, with as little disruption to life in the hollow as possible. Kaycee made sure of that in the way she put her story together, portraying the dignity and humanity of the people there—the innocence of life shattered by one company's greed.

Kaycee was finally released from quarantine

three days after the explosion and shootings. She was still sore from her bruised side and cracked ribs, and had a few stitches in her scalp to go with the lump on the back of her head. But the killer headaches and dizziness were gone. Actually, they had disappeared when the federal agents stopped asking questions. Now she had to deal with Dan. She was more confused than ever about her feelings, except for the incredible guilt she felt for doubting him. She knew he was furious with her for going off on her own through all of this, but at the same time, he had been there for her constantly the last few days, just outside the quarantine room.

She walked out and straight into his arms. The tears she seemed to be holding in finally fell freely and he just held her as tightly as he dared with her injuries.

"Sssshh, it's all over, sweetie. It's all over. What do you say we head up to the cabin to talk? We've got a lot to talk about," he said quietly. She nodded, and he led her out to the jeep, which was still loaded with all her stuff. He drove, while she sat silently in the passenger seat, wondering where to begin.

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When they got inside, Dan took her hand and led her to the couch. He sat and then pulled her onto his lap and cradled her in his arms. "Kaycee, it feels so good to have you in my arms again. I've been so worried about you the last few days." She didn't respond. She truly didn't know what to say to him. After a long silence he said, "OK, honey, how about you start from the beginning. Tell me what possessed you to go after water and soil samples in the high country by yourself."

She sighed and haltingly began telling him everything that had happened in the past week, starting with the phone call she overheard. The flash of pain across his face told her he understood

what hearing those words did to her. But he didn't interrupt her, and she went on to describe collecting the samples, getting them analyzed and then what she did when she got the results. She told him everything that happened in the cavern, although he had heard most of it from John. Then finally, she told him about shooting Pinkert and that's when she broke down completely. His brother had told him to expect a strong reaction when she finally talked about the shooting. No one with half a conscience killed a man, even under the circumstances they faced, without consequences to themselves.

It took her a while to cry herself out. Dan just kept telling her that she had no choice and she had saved both her and his brother's lives by what she did. But he knew it would be a long time before the horror of firing the gun and watching Pinkert die faded. He also knew they had a lot of work between them to rebuild trust. He sensed that their love was still strong, although she still had never been able to say the words, but love alone wasn't enough to make a lifetime commitment.

"Kaycee, honey, I'm so sorry I couldn't tell you what was going on, but lives were at stake. John was adamant that no one know who he was and why he was really here. But, if I had known what you overheard on that phone conversation, I would have told you everything. I can't imagine how that must have hurt you thinking I only wanted you here to keep you out of the way. The truth was I wanted you here so I could convince you to stay. I wanted you to share my life here forever."

"Oh, Dan, why did I doubt you? How can you ever forgive me for not trusting in your love? If I truly loved you, I would have just confronted you and asked for an explanation. But I couldn't, I was too afraid that I'd find out your love was all a sham, just like my ex-husband's. I was so ready to believe you'd reject me, just like he did. God, you must hate me for having so little faith in you... in us." She

couldn't bear to look into his eyes, knowing she'd see the pain of her betrayal, and certain that pain would kill their love. She broke loose from his arms and ran out of the cabin.

Kaycee ran smack into John who was walking up the path to the cabin when she fled. He grabbed her arms to steady her and keep them both from tumbling over. He took in her tear streaked face and the anguish in her eyes. His first instinct was to gather her in his arms and haul her back into the cabin, but the plea in her voice stopped him.

"Please, John, let me go. Please..." she pleaded in a desperate whisper. At that moment Dan appeared in the cabin doorway.

"Kaycee, wait!" he called.

"I can't face this now, please, John..." She looked truly panicked. John glanced at his brother and then back to Kaycee, and loosened his grip on her. She pulled away and fled. Dan started after her, but John stopped him.

"Let her go, Dan. She's frightened and she needs some time and space to think. There's been no time for her to deal with everything that's happened. She's been constantly surrounded by agents, medics, people from around here, even you and me," he said, firmly holding back Dan.

"You don't know what you're talking about! She's been in damned quarantine for three days—I couldn't even touch her! Now let me go after her, dammit!" Dan shouted, struggling to get loose from his brother's iron grip.

John shook Dan hard. "Listen to yourself! It's not about you right now and what you need. You've both been through hell, but she got burned a lot worse than you did. All quarantine did was trap her in a room where she couldn't get away from everything that happened. You're not going to rebuild your relationship by smothering her in another gilded cage."

His words finally sunk in, and Dan stopped

struggling, and simply looked down the path where she had disappeared. John hadn't seen his brother this miserable, since Dan's wife had died. He only hoped he was telling him the right thing. If Dan and Kaycee couldn't find their way back together, they'd both be devastated, of that much John was certain. The brothers went inside, grabbed a six-pack of beer, and talked for hours, before they both fell asleep in their chairs. Neither heard the jeep pull out just before dawn.

John woke first and went out on the porch to stretch and take in the tail end of the sunrise. That's when he saw the note tacked to the door, and the jeep gone. The note simply said, "*The only way to stop the pain is for me to go. I'm sorry. K.*"

John threw a fist into the door, "Damn her!"

## Chapter Fifteen

*Nine months later—Washington, D.C.*

Kaycee took one last look in the mirror. Her jet black curls were tamed into a graceful chignon with only a few soft tendrils framing her face. Her hair was a little longer now, so she could put it up more easily. Her make-up was subtle, but enough to diminish the sadness that had settled around her eyes over the last nine months. Her forest green silk sheath deepened the green of her eyes. It lay perfectly along her curves dropping to the floor and leaving her shoulders bare. She smiled as she thought it was actually 10 years old, but the style was timeless, and the look stunning. She added a small emerald pendant and earrings that finished the ensemble. It was hard to believe she used to look like this two or three nights a week—no, she used to dress like this. But the woman who stared back at her tonight *looked* nothing like the young, glamorous reporter a little awed by the whole Washington party scene. The woman who looked back at her now had a world of experience—love, laughter, pain and tears, that the woman who first wore this dress couldn't even imagine.

The last nine months had certainly added to that experience. When she first returned to Wisconsin, she refused to allow herself to think. She had thrown herself into the start of the academic year, focusing all her energy on her classes and the students. She couldn't bring herself to even think about the documentary, because it only sent her to the place her heart wasn't ready to go. Even the mention of her summer, sent her into an emotional tailspin. And it wasn't just Dan she missed; it was the serenity of the hollow, the families there, Glenda and Tim and Jonesy and... All of it. Every day seemed so full of life there and everything they did seemed important—elemental to living and loving



and happiness.

But it didn't take long for Gloria to start calling and bugging her about a rough cut. She needed to start recruiting soon for next summer, and she claimed she couldn't do it without Kaycee's documentary. So slowly, reluctantly, she went to work. Screening her hours and hours of tape again, writing, editing, refining, and then scrapping everything and starting again. She thought it would be painful, and it was. She tried desperately to look at her material as a third party observer but it was too personal and too compelling. It was a way to go back to a place she longed to be. All the love she felt for Dan and for the world of Crystal Creek Hollow guided her. She forgot about the objective journalist and simply told the story from her heart.

As she was drawn into the story, it helped her heal. After two months, she tried to write Dan and explain why she left. She must have written a dozen letters, but none had the words she needed to say. And she was still convinced that she had killed his love with her lack of trust. Every letter she wrote, she feared would only bring him more pain. Better that he just get over her, even if she never got over him. Any observer would have told her that by running, she only, once again, showed a lack of faith in their love. But Kaycee didn't have the experience of a real love to know that. Her only experience had been broken trust and rejection, so she didn't have the confidence to believe someone could love her enough to forgive her anything.

Kaycee's feelings were only reinforced by the fact that Dan didn't try to contact her either—she never heard anything from him after she left. To her, that was the strongest sign that he, and in fact everyone in the hollow was better off without her.

It took four months, but finally in December the documentary was done—"The Healing Spirit of Crystal Creek Hollow". Kaycee had lost all perspective on the project, and really had no idea if

it was any good. She simply knew that it was a personal story of a place and a group of people—a doctor, a nurse-practitioner and the people they shared their healing with. It was a story of miracles, some large, some small, but all precious. It was the only way she could tell the story. Kaycee burned two copies and shipped one to Gloria at the Appalachian Development Commission and she sent the other to Dan with a simple note. *"It's everything I have to give. I hope I did right by Crystal Creek."*

In only a few days, Kaycee's quiet life was turned upside down. Gloria went absolutely nuts when she saw it. She forced Kaycee to get on the next plane to D.C. and personally take the documentary around to Congressional committees, federal funding agencies, high dollar fund-raisers, and even a White House dinner. Each time it was shown, there wasn't a dry eye in the house. No one had ever brought the people of Appalachia to the public eye with such dignity and humanity before. Viewers didn't pity the people they saw, they admired them. They didn't see a doctor and a nurse sacrificing for the greater good—they saw two dedicated people giving to a community they were part of body and soul, and getting as much, if not more, in return. And nobody missed the love that the documentary maker had for this place—it was part of every frame of video and every word spoken.

PBS aired the documentary on its national network in February and response was spectacular. Gloria had funding, and applicants for the ADC internship program coming in from everywhere. Kaycee received hundreds of letters and emails from medical students ready to go back to their small hometowns or rural communities and practice. But none of it meant as much as the phone call that came shortly after she returned from Washington for the spring semester.

"Hi, this is Kaycee"

"Kaycee, it's Glenda, hon."

"Oh Glenda, it's so good to hear your voice! I wasn't sure I'd ever hear from anyone down there again after the mess I left."

"If you mean the mess of one Dr. Daniel Chase—well, that's the reason you haven't heard from me since you ran off. If you're talking about anything else, then I don't have a clue of what you mean."

Kaycee couldn't say a word. Hearing Dan's name sliced open the wound in her heart that had only just begun to heal.

"Listen, sweetie, I didn't call to rake you over the coals. So let's not talk about Dan. I called to tell you the story you did was the most beautiful picture of the hollow I've ever seen. You captured the life and people here in a way I wouldn't have thought even a native could. Everyone's seen it here and we're all so proud of you. We also hurt for you—because only someone who truly belongs here could have told that story."

The tears rolled down her cheeks at Glenda's words. But she knew she didn't belong there—she'd never belong there, because she didn't have the simple faith in people that they lived and died by.

"Glenda, thank-you. Your words mean more than you know. Please give my love to everyone."

"You already did that with your film."

Kaycee couldn't even speak. She whispered through her tears that she had to go, and hung up. She cried for a long time before she pulled herself together enough to leave her office and head home. For four months she'd had a place to put all her love, and now that her documentary was done, it had no outlet. She was left with an emptiness that she realized she'd probably never fill, and it was so much deeper than she had felt when she left her husband and life in D.C.

After the two hour documentary aired on PBS the accolades poured in. "*The Healing Spirit*" won a

national Emmy, the prestigious DuPont Award, and many other major journalism prizes. But Kaycee had begged off attending the awards ceremonies, instead having Gloria accept the awards for her. She just couldn't get her life back together if every few weeks she had to sit under a national spotlight and talk about her time in the hollow, and the wonderful work of Dan and Glenda. It was too hard on her.

Gloria fought her every step of the way, chiding her for being too modest. But even she could see that Kaycee was hopelessly in love with Dan. When Gloria tried to talk to Dan about it, he simply avoided her calls, asking Glenda to return the messages. Glenda had told her the whole story, including the fact that the only person more miserable than Kaycee was Dan. Glenda couldn't even get him to look at the documentary because he said it would be too painful. Dan was convinced Kaycee was talking about her own pain in the note she'd left, so he refused to contact her and bring her more. Glenda was ready to knock him into a wall because she knew if he would just watch the program, he'd instantly see how in love she was with him and the whole hollow. She could be happy there, but he wouldn't even give it a chance. Gloria and Glenda concluded that there were no two more pig-headed people in all the world.

Kaycee had tried to get out of this evening too, but Gloria had absolutely insisted, saying it would practically be high treason not to show up. It was the annual National Institute on the Humanities banquet, and one of the highlights of the D.C. social and political circuit. Everyone who was anyone would be there, including the First Lady who would give out the National Medals for the Arts. They were the highest honor an artist could receive, and Kaycee had been nominated for the body of her documentary work, culminating with "*The Healing Spirit*".

As she did a final spin in front of the mirror, satisfied that she looked her best, there was a knock at her hotel door. She couldn't imagine who it could be. Her brother had planned on coming as her escort, but a late spring storm grounded his flight, so she was flying solo. She went to the door and swung it open, only to be knocked breathless by the person standing there. Decker out in a designer tux, looking as good as he ever had, stood her ex-husband, David.

He swept into the room, took both of her hands and drank in the sight of her.

"Kaycee, you are stunning! Classy from head to toe. But then you always did know how to take a place by storm with simplicity. I see you're wearing one of my favorites, the Nicole Miller, isn't it? Only you could make a 10 year old design look as if it just came off the runway in Paris. How are you darling?" He embraced her as he asked.

She stayed stiff and unyielding in his arms, too stunned to speak. When he finally backed off and looked at her quizzically, she recovered her voice.

"What the hell are you doing here, David?" she asked sounding as annoyed as possible.

"Now, what kind of way is that to act to your husband and lover for ten years?" he responded with an innocence that galled her.

"Ex-husband, ex-lover, and still jerk!"

He laughed, which only fueled her anger. "I guess you're still angry? So all that warm and fuzzy feeling in your little documentary was just for show? Come on honey, we had some good times, and now that you're back on top, we could own this town again."

The irony was he was perfectly serious, and about as sincere as he had the capability of being. "I heard your escort for the evening bagged on you, so I thought you might like to go on the arm of one of the new White House counselors. It'll be like old times!"

Her anger dissolved into pity, and now it was her turn to laugh, although it was a hollow sound. "You still don't get it, do you?"

"Get what? We were good together—the up and coming power couple until you went off radar screen to make your news movies that no one watched. But you've got a winner now, and you need me."

"David, that's just it. I never needed you. I needed someone to love me for who I am and what I am—to support me and have faith in me no matter what I did. All you loved was my limelight, and what it could do for your career. You wanted the reflection of my shining star so yours looked brighter. But you never understood that all that hype meant nothing to me. It was about the work, the stories, not the spotlight. What ever happened to the hotshot political bimbo you replaced me with? What's the matter, you get burned on each other's competing spotlights?"

The expression on David's face was priceless. He truly never expected her to respond this way. He clearly thought she'd fall right back in his arms. "Kaycee, I never knew you were so bitter. I love you. That affair never really meant anything, I was just hurt by your defection."

"My defection?!"

"Yeah, you left me and my needs to follow your camera lens to every out-of-the-way hole in the wall you could find. You defected from the Beltway and left me. You know you can't go out alone in D.C.—nobody does that," he said with disdain.

"Well, *I'm* going to do that tonight. David, you're the shallowest person I've ever known in my life, and I'll never in a million years understand why I married you or why we stayed married for 10 years. But, now I know what it's like to be truly loved, and I'll never settle for anything less again. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna be late, and it wouldn't do to keep the First Lady waiting. Just make sure the door locks when you leave." She grabbed her

evening bag and the shawl that matched her dress and walked out of the room with more dignity than she'd ever had in her life.

For the first time in nearly four years, she had real confidence in herself as a woman. She finally saw David for what he was. She saw what everyone else had seen. He was shallow and selfish, and not worth the anguish and self-doubt she'd felt at his betrayal. He simply didn't have the depth to even realize he'd really done anything wrong. He hadn't diminished her by rejecting her; he diminished her by being with her. She didn't begin to reach her full potential until she left him behind. She sighed briefly as she reached the ballroom. *If only I could have had that epiphany before last summer.*

She squared her shoulders, pasted a smile on her face, and walked into the Hyatt Regency Ballroom, filled with Washington's elite.

The evening was spectacular. The Boston Pops performed with several guest artists singing and playing. There was stand-up comedy and dramatic interpretation, and then the awarding of the Medals. Kaycee was stunned to be one of the recipients, and spoke from her heart in her acceptance.

"This honor is humbling beyond belief. I don't think of my work as art—it's life. I don't create the stories I tell; I simply find them. In the case of *"The Healing Spirit"* the story found me. And I'm very gratified that it has found others as well. I've heard from dozens of medical students who will go to places like Crystal Creek and make a profound difference, not just in the lives of the people who live there, but in their own lives. This Medal is not mine, it belongs to every person who gave a little of themselves when they shared their story with me, so I could share it with others. Their lives, are my art."

After the ceremony, entertainment and dinner, Kaycee was surrounded by well-wishers. She met so many famous people, she knew she'd never

remember them all. She was also exhausted, and was relieved to finally make it to the ballroom entrance. She couldn't wait to get up to her room, slip out of her dress and heels, and soak in the huge garden tub in her suite.

"Nice speech." She stopped cold at the voice and slowly turned to see a tall, broad-shouldered man in a tux staring at her with steely eyes.

"Marshal Chase. I almost didn't recognize you without all the hair and plaid flannel," she said nervously.

"You look a little different, yourself. Let's see, the last time I saw you, you were running away, leaving my brother's crushed spirit in the dirt as I recall," he said bitterly. She winced at his words and the anger behind them. She looked at his eyes, and saw Dan's—it was the only resemblance between them, but it was enough to tear at her heart. She turned from him and would have fled, but he grabbed her arm and held her.

"Oh no you don't! You're not running this time. You and I are going to have a long talk, young lady!"

"Let me go, John. I have nothing to say to you, and you have no right to talk to me like that," she responded with more confidence than she really felt. She had to get away from him before she dissolved into tears.

"We can go quietly to the privacy of your room or I can throw you over my shoulder in front of all of D.C.'s power players and spank your silk covered butt in the middle of the lobby—but either way, we will talk!" he threatened in a low growl.

Kaycee opened her mouth to tell him where to go, but people were starting to stare, and she knew she'd never have a chance up against this solid wall of US Marshal. So she clenched her jaw and hissed, "I'm up in the VIP suites." He took her arm as if to escort her, but his grip was firm enough to ensure she'd go where he went.



John and Kaycee rode the elevator to the VIP suites in grim silence, nurturing their anger. John had released her arm once the elevator doors closed, but his force of character left no doubt that he would dominate their discussion. As the elevator approached the top floor, Kaycee resigned herself to the fact that the only way she was likely to survive this encounter without dissolving into tears, was to let him say his peace. Maybe she could just not react, let him dress her down for walking out on Dan, and then hopefully he would leave. However, John was not about to make it that easy for her.

As the elevator doors opened, John motioned for her to go first and then followed with his hand firmly at her back. When she stopped at her suite, John took her key card and opened the door, again motioning her to enter ahead of him.

"The perfect gentleman," she said snidely.

"Not for long!" he responded. As soon as he closed the suite door, he grabbed her hand and dragged her over to the couch. Before she realized his intention, he was sitting down and she was hauled across his lap. She opened her mouth to protest and yelped in pain instead when he brought his hand down hard on her bottom. She kicked and screamed, demanding he let her up.

"How dare you!?" SMACK! "Ouch! Let me go this instant, John Chase!" SMACK! "Owww! Dammit, this is designer silk! Let me up before you rip my dress!" SMACK!

"Well, if it's designer, then we better move this delicate silk out of the way!"

"NO!" she screamed as he slid her skirt up to her waist, revealing silk stockings and lace panties. He might as well have bared her bottom, because the next smack felt and sounded like flesh hitting flesh. John was determined that she feel some of the pain his brother had lived with since she left. He spanked hard, over and over again. She fought him like a wildcat, but he held her fast, landing smack

after smack to her buttocks and thighs. When her backside was a nice shade of pink, he started to lecture.

SMACK! "First you were reckless," SMACK! "risking your life needlessly" SMACK! "never thinking about those you'd devastate" SMACK! "if you were killed" SMACK! "you nearly ruined the investigation" SMACK! "with your stunt in the gorge" SMACK! "then you toss away" SMACK! "the love of a man" SMACK! "who would walk through fire for you" SMACK! SMACK! "just run away" SMACK! "no word" SMACK! "no explanation" SMACK! "just gone as if my brother meant nothing to you" SMACK! SMACK! "You are a selfish" SMACK! "spoiled" SMACK! "brat!" SMACK! SMACK! "who had no idea what's good for her" SMACK! "I'd say Dan was well rid of you" SMACK! "but unfortunately he doesn't give his love lightly" SMACK! SMACK! "and he certainly can't take it back as easily as you obviously can" SMACK!

Her bottom was a deep red before she gave any sign of giving in to the spanking. Her rear was on fire, but it was his words that brought the real pain. She stopped fighting and just sobbed—for the pain in her bottom and the pain in her heart.

Finally in a small voice she said, "You don't understand... I still love him too."

John stopped at that and then helped her up. She immediately reached back to rub some of the pain out of her bottom. She couldn't meet his eyes, staring at the floor as her tears continued to fall. He rose as well, and tipped her chin up so she had to look at him. The grim determination and anger was all gone, replaced by a sad resignation. "So make me understand," he said quietly.

"I... It's complicated," she said and turned away from him. She walked out to the balcony of her suite and looked out over the capitol city. She absently rubbed at the soreness in her backside. Damn him! He spanked even harder than his

brother.

"Dan will be sorry that he wasn't the one to spank you for going off to the gorge and nearly getting yourself killed," he said, joining her out on the balcony.

"My butt's sorry too!" she said sarcastically. He chuckled and put his hands on her shoulders. "Kaycee talk to me—it's time you talked to someone."

"I did—it's all in *'The Healing Spirit'*. Did you see it? Did Dan?"

"No. I wouldn't and Dan couldn't."

"So he hasn't seen it? I thought..." she trailed off, tears pooling under her lashes again.

"You thought what?" He turned her so she faced him.

She looked down and then met his eyes. "John, I poured all my love for Dan and the hollow into the documentary. When I... he never... I thought it was too late."

"You thought he rejected you, just like your ex!" Her head snapped up in a look of surprise. "Dan told me. Kaycee, Dan loves you and he's not your ex-husband. He couldn't watch your program because it would hurt too much. When my little brother falls, he falls hard. And he didn't come after you because he took your note to heart and refused to cause you more pain."

"NO, that's not what... God, could I mess this up any more?" She put her head in her hands and collapsed into the chair on the balcony—only to hiss and hop up when her bruised bottom hit the hard chair. She gave John the evil eye and he laughed.

"Good to know I haven't lost my touch!" He put his hands back on her shoulders and gave her his best 'US Marshal, no more nonsense' look. "Now, young lady, how about finishing a sentence, so I have a clue of what you're talking about?"

"John, I've lost the ability to trust—and love's not enough. I should have trusted Dan, had faith in

his feelings. But I didn't—I couldn't—I just don't know how anymore. That's why I left. I don't deserve his love. I didn't want to cause *him* any more pain." He took her in his arms and gently ran his hand over the back of her head, as a parent might comfort a child.

"No more knot or stitches," he whispered.

She actually smiled, "It's been nine months, John!"

"True, but all that time hasn't healed the wound to your soul—yours or Dan's," he answered softly. "I'm sorry I called you selfish and spoiled, but I believed Dan's interpretation of the note, and seeing him devastated again made me very angry at you." She didn't know what to say.

"You know, you two have an amazing knack for proving the old saying, 'Assume, and you make an ass out of you and me!'" She still said nothing. "Go back to the hollow, Kaycee. That's where you belong."

He let her go, kissed her lightly on the forehead and left.

She didn't sleep that night and by morning when she met Gloria for breakfast, she had a plan.

### *June—Crystal Creek Hollow*

"Will you get out of here! If you don't leave this minute Daniel Chase, you are going to be late!" Glenda scolded.

"Stop nagging, woman! I will get to Harlan in plenty of time—besides it won't hurt our new intern to learn some patience. I can't believe Gloria sent us another damn girl—I swear if she's match-making again..." Dan muttered, but Glenda caught the undertone of pain. It was hard to believe it had been a year since Kaycee's arrival.

"Did you check out her file?" Glenda asked.

"Gloria didn't even bother to send one this time. I guess she finally figured out it was a waste of

paper. Stop looking at me like that, I'm going!" Dan headed out to the truck, but couldn't help but think about the last time he made this trip. He had to smile at the memory of picking Kaycee up and turning around and dumping her back in Harlan when he discovered she wasn't a doctor. It still hurt to think about her, but at least he was getting to the point where he could appreciate some of their memories.

The drive to the bus station to pick up this summer's intern was uneventful. Gloria had said there were two dozen applicants for the program this year. With the extra funding generated from response to Kaycee's documentary, she was able to send five interns to clinics like Dan's. It was an encouraging development. Dan still hadn't been able to watch the program. Glenda kept pushing him, telling him it was the most amazing thing she'd ever seen. She was convinced if he just saw it, nothing would be able to stop him from going to Wisconsin and bringing Kaycee back here. But he just ignored her and said he wasn't ready.

He got to the bus station just as the coach from Lexington pulled in. He took up his usual post leaning against a pole in the depot arrival area, watching passengers get off. He had a strange sense of *déjà vu* as he watched the men disembark, waiting to see a woman. He cursed, thinking maybe this intern had missed the bus when the last guy got off, and then nothing for several minutes. Finally, she emerged—tall, slim, jet black curls in chaos around her face, and those eyes—those beautiful pools of emerald green.

Kaycee stood at the doorway of the bus just looking at him. God, he looked great. She was afraid to move, and he stood stock still, as if he believed his eyes were playing tricks on him. She took a deep breath and started toward him. "Hey doc, give a girl a..." She never got out the rest of her sentence. In two strides he had her in his arms,

her words devoured by his lips. She dropped her bag and threw her arms around him, and they didn't come up for air for quite some time. When he finally released her, he stood back to just look at her.

"If this is a dream, promise me I'll never wake up," he said.

"No dream, Dan—this is as real as it gets. I'm so sorry it took me so long to realize that," she told him.

"This is not just a visit—tell me you're here to stay, or you better get back on that bus, because I can't survive your leaving again," he said, firmly gripping her arms.

"You're looking at the director of the new Appalachian Development Commission Film Institute, headquartered in Harlan, Kentucky. Yes, if you'll have me, I'm here to stay," she answered, holding her breath as she waited for his response.

"Welcome home, Kaycee," he whispered, capturing her lips again in a deep passionate kiss.

He grabbed her bag and they walked arm in arm toward the truck. On the way he leaned close to her ear and whispered, "You know of course, when we get to the cabin, you've got one hell of spanking coming for running out on me!"

She looked up at him and smiled, "I love you, too."

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