



Too Close for Comfort
Stephanie Morris

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Dedication

To those of us who found Mr. Right when we least expected it.

Chapter One

It took him several moments, but Trevor Richmond finally came to the realization that there was a woman, naked, somewhere in his home.

He lurked in the darkness of the hallway just outside his bedroom, staring at the pool of silky clothing at his feet. A skirt stretched a splash of color across the worn carpet. Delicate, ivory-colored lace formed the skimpy outline of a pair of frilly panties. Trevor bent his large frame downward and hooked a finger inside the back of a high-heeled shoe. He lifted it to eye level and glanced at the famous designer's name etched in gold along the curvy inner arch. Its match lay haphazardly on a mat, back by the front door.

His thoughts jumped as he scowled at the shoe, still giving off warmth from its owner's foot. He became aware of the sound of water rumbling through the pipes. He squinted into the bedroom, and deeper, through the half-open door of the master bath. He caught a glimpse of his shaving mirror, shoved aimlessly away from the base, its flexible arm stretched to the limit. A layer of steam fogged the silver surface.

It seemed the female stranger was in his shower. Very wet and very *naked*.

His blood flow began to shift south. Trevor drew in deep breaths to try to fill his lungs with air to restore some oxygen to his brain. He immediately regretted the action when the rush of air brought the subtle, sexy fragrance she wore, drifting up from the silky puddle of women's clothing. The scent heated his blood even more.

He let the shoe fall back to the floor and straightened quickly. This wasn't what he'd expected when he'd turned into the driveway minutes ago and saw another car parked there. He assumed it was a member of his over-meddling, overprotective family. His mother, or one of his brothers,

or their wives, visiting from Utah. His sisters had finally wised up when it came to his love life.

If it were his mother, she would be the most formidable. She would be scurrying around, grumbling at the disarray of the house, washing his laundry, cooking enough casseroles to keep him fed for weeks—set firm in her belief that a well-made casserole could cure anything wrong, real or imagined. Or God forbid, one of his brothers wanting to crash for this weekend, determined to take Trevor out and get him intoxicated to the point where he couldn't see straight—their cure for anything wrong, real or imagined. As if with a few good meals or one night of drunkenness could help him forget everything that had happened.

He frowned at the shower door, as if he could see through it to the naked invader. Whoever this woman was, she wasn't family. His brother's wives didn't wear high dollar leather pumps, or the kind of sheer hose that shimmered against the hallway carpet. Neither did his mother. Neither did his sisters. Mrs. Hayman, his nearest neighbor in the sparsely populated town in Colorado, and about the only woman he'd bothered to become acquainted with, didn't either.

Now that he thought about it, he should have been clued in to that fact the moment he'd turned into the driveway. No one he knew drove the latest model Mercedes, or cared to. Not when a good, solid Dodge Ram pickup would do just as well.

An image of the hot wisp of a waitress who'd eyed him in the diner just outside of town yesterday surged to the forefront of his mind, stirring his blood. He'd been reminded that his hormones still worked normally, despite six months of hermit-like seclusion. Then again, that waitress didn't look as if she could afford to own the necklace with a diamond cross strewn across his coffee table. Or the expensive clothing tossed so carelessly throughout the house. Nor did that waitress have the husky sort of voice now humming Vivaldi in his shower.

His jaw tightened. He was aroused, yes, excited by the situation but at this point in his life the stranger could look like a supermodel and he'd toss her out of his bed. He wasn't in the mood to be ambushed—by an escort, by a waitress, by his friends, his family, by *anyone*. He couldn't

drown the memory of what had happened in Columbia with a round of quick sweaty sex anymore than he could drown it in liquor or his mother's home-cooked meals. And sex with anyone in this town would bring complications. There would be no impediments in this house, his life and most assuredly not his bedroom.

Why couldn't the entire world just leave him *alone*?

The pipes rumbled to a sudden silence. Then the squeak of the shower door opening as the intruder pushed it open. He took a step back, deeper into the shadows. He supposed he should say something. Now. Call out to her. Warn her of his presence. Let her know he definitely was not in the mood for what she was offering. Give her time to collect her dignity and her clothes. But that was his gentleman upbringing talking, that was his mother's scolding tone, and it was the fading of his fury that his home had been invaded—even if it wasn't legally his home, and even if the intruder wore very expensive, very sexy shoes. He hadn't been fit company for anyone in a while. Why the hell should he tip-toe around a lady who'd entered into his home, then stripped down to get naked and wet?

He stalked to the bedroom doorway. The trespasser emerged from the bathroom, toweling off her back, wearing nothing but a coat of residual water droplets.

He took in the sight before him for a few heartbeats before she noticed him and gasped. He only had a few seconds to register the sight of the toned but curvaceous dark-haired woman, with full, pear-shaped breasts. The impossibly chocolate nipples puckered, breasts swaying with each pass of the towel across her back, the glimmer of dew on the soft hair between her thighs. Only a moment before she covered that lovely caramel-colored flesh with his threadbare towel.

This wasn't the first time he'd been in the presence of a nude African American woman, but it was the first time he'd been in front of one that made him want to throw all caution aside and drag her underneath him.

* * * *

Kassady Gibson reacted by instinct. She inched toward the table lamp on the nightstand at the far side of the bed. In a small rational part of her mind she reasoned that he'd have to get over the bed to get to her, which

would slow him down. Just long enough for her to throw the bottom-heavy lamp at him. If she aimed well it would knock him out at the first blow. Or at least render him helpless long enough to dial the local authorities on the bedside phone.

She wrapped her hand around the cool base, yanked it up so hard that the cord ripped out of the wall, and hiked the lamp over her shoulder. She stilled before she lobbed it across the room. The intruder hadn't made a move. He stood frozen in the bedroom doorway looking at her with wild eyes.

Wild eyes and wild dark hair, long grown out of its cut. A scraggly shadow obscured the line of his jaw. A white T-shirt bore witness to a powerful chest. Dark blue jeans hugged his hips and legs to the ankle, revealing a pair of worn cowboy boots. He stood as still as a post, but Kassady noted the twitch of the muscles in his jaw, the heave of his chest, the way his fingers curled around the door frame. With the heavy lamp in her hand she waited and watched, feeling as if she were in the presence of a tightly wound hurricane about to change course.

"Stay back," she said in a low voice. "I'll use this if I have to. I promise I will."

He blinked. Once, twice, three times. Then shook his head as if shaking himself out of a daze. "You don't need a weapon to knock me out, lady."

Throaty words, as raw and gritty as his gaze and just as disturbing. Words that left her with no hope she had protected her privacy in time. She leaned toward the phone, praying as she did that the tuck in her towel would hold. "I'm calling the police," she warned. "If you're smart you'll—"

"*You're* calling the police?" He slid his arm down the door frame, and then he leaned a meaty shoulder into it. "Well, when you reach them, let 'em know I've got someone here, clearly in the middle of breaking and entering."

His words seemed strange. They didn't quite register. "If you leave now, then breaking and entering will be your only crime."

“Oh, I ain’t leaving, lady. Not until I know who you are, and what the hell you’re doing in my bedroom.”

“*Your* bedroom?”

“Yes. My bedroom.” He stabbed at the air with his finger. “My lamp. My bed. My shower.” His gaze and voice dropped lower. “My towel.”

She pressed the receiver against the terry cloth. He was lying. This couldn’t be his towel. This couldn’t be his bedroom. She knew the owner of this home, and he didn’t look anything like this piercing gray-eyed cowboy who lacked only a Stetson and an oversized rodeo belt buckle to complete the picture.

She thought back to her trip here, remembered the directions, recalled that she’d found the house key exactly where Dr. Breton has said it would be—hidden underneath a flower pot. No, the man before her was trying to confuse her. This was the right house. This was the wrong man. Yet the huge cowboy in the doorway looked as annoyed and put out and furious as she was beginning to feel, standing here dripping, wearing nothing but a towel.

His towel according to him

“You’re lying,” she said, struggling to keep her cool. “This house doesn’t belong to you.”

“No?”

“No,” she said, more firmly. “I know the man it does belong to, and he’ll have a say about you claiming his house as your own.”

His jaw tightened. A shadow crossed his gaze. She tightened her grip on the phone as the beeping became louder, more insistent, then clicked to a recording. *If you’d like to make a call...*

She shouldn’t be afraid. He didn’t seem to be a threatening her in any way. But he was still standing there after all. Deliberately enjoying the view and blocking her only exit.

“You’re right,” he finally admitted. “This house doesn’t belong to me. But I know the owner, and I can tell you that she won’t be happy to know a naked woman is in her and her husband’s bedroom.”

“The owner is actually a man,” she responded, ignoring the innuendo. “Or maybe he and his wife own it. I don’t know. But I have permission to be here, from *him*.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, he and I have been on the phone for months arranging this.” She tossed the lamp on the bed with more force than she intended and it bounced precariously. “We’ve been juggling our schedules, playing phone tag during finals. Three weeks, he told me. I’d have three weeks. Breton made no mention of a grumpy houseguest who never learned to knock on a—”

“Breton?” he interrupted. “Colin Breton?”

“Yes.”

“And why would Colin invite you here?” The surly man placed his hands on his hips, then gave her a once over harsh enough to scorch the skin on her body. “He has a wife expecting his first child any day now.”

Kassady stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending. The intruder was furious. There was no faking the anger in his expression, or the threatening way he leaned into the room. She stood there blinking for a minute, not understanding the conclusion he’d jumped to. It was too farfetched. It was ridiculous. It was too crazy to be taken seriously.

Her tone was incredulous when she spoke. “What did you just say?”

“You understood me correctly. Colin’s not the sort to cheat. Even with a woman who looks like you. So you’d better start talking, lady. How do you know him? And what the hell are you doing here?”

Anger began to surge through her. A drop of water slid down her back and paused above the curve of her rear end. Yet, she barely noticed. No one had ever accused her of being anyone’s plaything before. No one had ever accused her of sexual promiscuity period. Not her, Kassady Gibson, professor, lecturer. She wasn’t any man’s mistress—she was an intellectual. Perfectionist. And the only man she’d ever let get close had labeled her frigid.

But this irritated cowboy didn’t know her. Had no idea about her *upstanding* reputation. To him, she was just a naked woman standing on

the other side of a huge bed, watching his towel soak the moisture from her body.

For one brief second she allowed herself to wallow in the thought—allowed herself to fully absorb the shock of the image. For whatever warped reason, this man saw in her the ability for raw, illicit passion. It was a false impression, yes, an illusion born out of very odd circumstances and obvious misunderstanding. Yet, it was an exquisite, unnerving, almost pleasurable figment of his imagination, for she was no man’s plaything. At the moment she was no man’s plaything. She’d come to terms with that reality a long time ago. Kassady Gibson preferred the world of intellect over one of passion.

“You don’t have anything to say?” His intense gaze roamed over her body, stripping her of the towel again with all the power of two greedy hands. “Let’s try this from another angle then, sweetheart. Tell me Colin sent you to me.” His voice dropped low and husky. “As a belated welcome home present.”

The shock of his words jolted her all the way down to her toes. A *welcome home present*? As if she was some sort of sexual consort. A bedroom plaything sent to give this rough-voiced, wild-eyed man an afternoon of sweaty pleasure.

Heat surged through before her blood turned to ice—warring sensations she couldn’t define, didn’t understand. She thought of how her ex-boyfriend would fall over in amusement over this. *You are a heartless woman*, Lance had said when he dumped her a little over a year ago. *Bloodless. Cold.*

“My name,” she uttered, slamming the receiver onto the cradle as the picture shattered in her mind, “is Dr. Kassady Gibson. I teach at the University of Denver. Dr. Breton is a *colleague* of mine.” She eyed the man, the way she’d become acclimated to eyeing certain students of hers who had difficulty looking at her above chest level. “I’m here on a vacation with Dr. Breton’s permission.”

He folded his arms over his chest; his eyes narrowed. “Colin didn’t say anything to me about a houseguest.”

“Dr. Breton failed to mention anything about a grumpy boarder to me, either.” She rearranged the towel around her breasts until it held tight. “It is my understanding that he rents this cabin out to university professors, researchers and sometimes grad students. But usually for research purposes and special projects.” She took in his form-fitting jeans, the white T-shirt, the cowboy boots, the unruly hair. “And who might you be, Mr...?”

“Richmond,” he snapped, his face twisted in frustration. “And Colin wouldn’t have invited someone down here without telling me first.”

“He’s been extremely busy.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Which makes me wonder how well you know him if you haven’t heard the news.”

The cowboy glared at her, not bothering to ask for an explanation. A harsh stare. The sort of look that made her painfully aware of the bareness of her thighs below the edge of the towel, and the remaining trails of water that dripped from her shoulders down her upper arms.

“The baby Dr. Breton’s wife was expecting next month,” she continued, hating herself for buckling under but perturbed by his hard glare more,” made an early appearance. “About four days ago now.”

“*What?*”

“Several weeks premature,” she added. “According to the department secretary, Dr. Breton hasn’t left the hospital since.”

The surly man swiveled on one heel and stalked out of the room.

* * * *

It took Trevor six phone calls and a lot of frustration before he finally found the right maternity ward in the right hospital and convinced a testy nurse to track down an exhausted Colin to the line.

Trevor jumped straight to the point. “What the hell happened?”

“Trevor? Is that you?” He could practically hear Colin dragging his hand through his hair. “I meant to call you before now. It’s been rough the past several days.”

“Is Angie okay?”

“Yes, she’s good. She’s finally resting.”

He hesitated a moment. “And the baby?”

“Yes. Yes, there’s a baby.” Colin made a weird sound, a choked laugh of disbelief. “It’s a boy. Barely five pounds. It was touch and go for a little while, but the doctors think he’ll be fine.”

Trevor tilted the phone away from his mouth to allow himself a small sigh of relief outside of Colin’s earshot. His heart felt as though it were going to jump out of his chest. He curled his hands into fists, trying to ignore the clammy feel of his palms. He could feel droplets of sweat forming on his forehead, right now, here in the calm of the cabin, hundreds of miles away from the hospital and its antiseptic smell.

He hated this weakness in himself, a weakness that seized him randomly—in the shower, while he was driving, in his dreams. He hadn’t been in the emergency room with Angie and Colin four days ago, dressed in scrubs and his gloves stained with blood. He hadn’t been responsible for the life of a mother and child. There was no reason for this overwhelming sense of guilt and responsibility.

At least, not this time.

“That’s good. Real good,” he said, lowering the phone back into place and trying to force his vital signs and voice back to normal. “I’m glad things are okay.”

“I was going to call you,” Colin said, “but it all happened so fast—”

“Tell me what happened.”

“What, you want all of the gory details?”

He tightened his grip on the phone. “Every damn detail from the first contraction to the moment the baby was born.”

Colin began to relay the story while Trevor watched it unfold his mind. Trevor had delivered enough babies in his time to recognize the warning signs long before Colin, who was called “doctor” because of his PhD in Philosophy and knew only as much about female physiology as could be related to changing to oil on a truck. As Trevor listened to the tale, images of bare bulbs blinking by the power of failing generators, of women drenched in sweat and screaming in Spanish as their wombs clenched within them, as babies were born into his bare hands and washed in tainted water... Then he forced himself to remember that Angie lived in

Denver, Colorado, where the sheets were bleached clean every day and pain medication was fed to a laboring mother through a slender catheter inserted near her spine.

“...and then they took the baby away and started sticking wires all over him. It was several hours before they updated us as to what was going on. All they told us was he is four pounds, fifteen ounces, and has to be watched closely. Angie’s blood pressure has been a little out of whack so they are keeping her until it is back in a safe zone.”

Trevor nodded. “They’ll keep him until it’s around time he was due. Somewhere between thirty-six to thirty-eight weeks.”

Even as he spoke to reassure Colin, his mind was on the baby. Not even five pounds. The size of a rotisserie chicken in the grocery store. He’d held five-pound babies in his hands as they struggled to breathe, struggled to live without the benefit of antibiotics, heated incubators and ventilators.

“That’s what they told us. His lungs looks pretty good despite being premature, which they tell us is a good sign.”

“That’s a great sign.”

“You have to come down and see him, Trevor,” Colin said. “He’s small but he’s beautiful. And Angie could use you. She doesn’t trust those doctors. But she’d trust your advice. She’d believe you if you told her the baby is going to be okay.”

She’d believe you if you told her the baby is going to be okay...

Trevor held back his automatic retort. He could picture Angie staring up at him from the hospital bed, her eyes wide, her ears perked, ready to hear only what she wanted to hear. As if his being a trauma doctor somehow granted him miraculous powers of fortune-telling.

“The doctors there know the situation better,” he mumbled gruffly. “I would have to look at her chart, monitor the situation—”

“Uh-huh.”

Trevor heard the skepticism behind the sound and chose to ignore it. Colin knew what happened in South America. Colin knew—and Trevor didn’t want to talk about it. Not now, not ever. Then he heard the sound of a woman’s footsteps coming down the hall.

“You’re in excellent hands, Colin,” Trevor stated. “But while you’ve been experiencing excitement at the hospital, I’ve had a little of my own here.”

“What,” he scoffed, “did a wild animal get into the trash again?”

“I found a naked woman in my shower.”

As Colin choked on the other end of the line, Trevor turned on one heel to study the woman approaching him across the living room. *Lady* was the better term. She’d pulled her hair back with a black clip. She’d imprisoned those full breasts as well. He could tell by the way her bra held them stock-still beneath her simple green button down shirt. A leather belt cinched her linen pants at her waist, with voluminous folds which couldn’t hide the firmness and shape of those lovely thighs.

He wanted to strip her bare again. He must have looked like it, too, for an expression of embarrassment covered her features and she quickly averted her gaze, grabbed the diamond necklace off the coffee table, then dipped her head to fasten them behind her neck.

“Trevor? You still there?” Colin sputtered. “Are you going to explain that statement?”

“No, you’re going to do the explaining to me.”

“I am? How?”

“You’re going to tell me why a Dr. Kassady Gibson is standing in this living room, claiming she had your permission to stay here for three weeks.”

There was a long pause at the other end of the line. A very silent pause. A contemplative pause. A pause that made Trevor extremely suspicious.

“Kassady Gibson.” Colin said the name slowly, then pulled in a dramatic breath. “Aw man, Trev. It totally slipped my mind.”

“It slipped your mind.”

“Jeez, is it the end of July already? Yes—late July. I forgot all about it. I forgot all about her.”

Trevor could hear Colin pacing and he could imagine the sight of him, ruffled and unshaven in the glaring white corridor of the hospital.

Something was amiss.

“Yeah, yeah,” Colin continued, as if just remembering his colleague. “Dr. Gibson is supposed to be there. We’ve been planning it. I meant to tell you, but with the end of the summer session and Angie’s problems—”

“How long have you spoken with Dr. Gibson about this?”

“Well...since the beginning of May.”

Trevor turned his back on Kassady, lowered his voice and spoke deep into the phone. “If you weren’t a brand new father, Colin, I’d come up there and break both your legs and arms.”

“It slipped my mind. What’s the big deal?”

“Yeah, it slipped your mind alright. Like it slipped my mother’s mind that I loathe beef casserole. Like my brother’s couldn’t seem to remember that I don’t want them or their wives visiting.”

“This is legit. While Kassady swears this is a vacation, I know she probably brought a ton of work with her. She probably just needs peace and quiet to get it done. If you show her the basement as well as the plants I found last year, you probably won’t see her at all. She’s into botany and studying plants as a hobby. Her uncle is a world renowned botanist who is always finding a new medicinal use for plants. So just lead her to the plants and she’ll take over from there. Remember the ones I dragged you out to see in April, and you complained the entire way?”

Unfortunately, he did remember that day all too well. Colin had surprised him by showing up unannounced, using the excuse that he was there to help Trevor clear his mind. He made the mistake of agreeing to tag along with Colin on one of his nature walk. Trevor remembered the smell of the woods, the scent of spring flowers—and it reminded him of the thick, choking scent of bouquets left on mass graves.

“If this is legit,” Trevor responded, forcefully dragging his thoughts back to the present, “you could have warned me so I could leave and let Dr. Gibson have free reign of the cabin.”

“I figured we could make arrangements whatever the situation, so I didn’t bother you with it. I figured I’d let you know...” Trevor could almost hear Colin’s shoulders shrugging. “My mistake I guess I messed up.”

“You’d better enjoy that baby boy of yours.”

“What? Why?”

“Because if I find out this is a matchmaking attempt, then that baby is going to be your last child.”

“Matchmaking attempt? Do you think I would do that to an old friend who has made it clear that he wants to spend the rest of his life as a recluse?”

Yes. A trickle of fury rose up inside him. Yes, Colin would set him up. His old friend was a well meaning as the rest of his friends and family. Invading. Interrupting. Intruding upon his privacy, all *for his own good*.

“Though I have to admit,” Colin continued, apparently oblivious to the storm brewing on the other end of the line, “if I were to want to attempt to play matchmaker, Dr. Gibson would be one hell of a set-up. She’s personable, brilliant and professional. She is also the cause of more male drool than any other woman I know—hold on a second.” Colin paused as if something just occurred to him. “What did you say before about finding a woman in the shower?”

Trevor didn’t even bother to pretend that he didn’t know what Colin referred to. “You heard me correctly.”

“Naked? You saw Dr. Gibson *naked*?”

“Yes I did,” he said as the image reappeared in his mind. Colin made a sound that could only be described as a sound of exhilaration. “Trevor, do you have any idea what a stir that information is going to cause? I know some guys who’d give up their degree to catch a glimpse of the ice queen without her typical business profession attire.”

Ice queen? Trevor turned and watched Kassady push her hands into the pockets of her pants, watched the stretch of the fabric against her firm behind.

“Well,” Colin responded. “Are you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“Come on, Trevor, put the academic community out of its misery. What’s the deal? Does she look even better undressed as she does fully clothed? Are they real?”

Trevor didn’t even crack a smile. He didn’t laugh. He didn’t feel like laughing. Colin and he had exchanged much cruder comments between

them over women just as sophisticated and successful, all private speculations of the testosterone kind that would never be repeated in polite company. This time he didn't feel like participating.

"She's right here, Colin," he murmured. "Why don't you ask her yourself?"

Without another word Trevor held out the receiver. She looked surprised, then composed herself and took it. With a shift of weight, she turned away from him, giving him a fine view of a sweetly curved back.

He let his gaze slip over her narrow shoulders till he came to her slender waist, to the curves that couldn't be hidden underneath the material of her pants, working more on memory than sight to recreate the vision he'd caught a glimpse of for a few brief seconds in that bedroom.

She'd definitely concealed herself well. With more than just her clothing. The woman before him had encased herself in an air of coolness from the hairstyle she'd chosen to the designer shoes on her feet. It seemed from the instant she entered the room that the temperature had dropped a few degrees. Every well-put-together inch of her looked the part of a composed intellectual. Which judging by the conversation between her and Colin apparently she was.

Then he realized that his heart was still pounding, his palms were still damp, but for a different and new reason.

"Dr. Breton—Colin," she corrected, somewhat reluctantly, "please, you don't have to apologize. It's an understandable mix-up—"

He lips pressed together tightly as Colin interrupted her with what Trevor was certain of false excuses. She didn't know Colin as Trevor did. She wasn't aware how Trevor's family and friends liked to meddle in his life, how everyone else seemed to know what was best for him. She stretched the phone line between manicured fingers and twisted it so the cord roped around her, tightening her pants to her shapely thighs. Looking at this dark-haired beauty with a body he would love to see as a centerfold, Trevor couldn't argue that there was at least one thing Kassady Gibson could make him forget—at least temporarily. Unfortunately, she didn't look like the sort to go for hot sex on the living room floor.

“No, Colin, I insist.” Her tone changed, grew firm and decisive as she finally allowed her gaze to travel briefly to Trevor. “We are two rational adults. I’m positive we can work something out.”

Trevor sank down onto the couch and interlaced his fingers behind his head, eyeing the lady as she shifted her stance to keep her profile to him. She was dealing with Colin’s fake guilt with understanding and a hint of edgy impatience. He figured she was a woman who didn’t like the unexpected, who hated surprises, who did her best to control the world around her to operate at her speed and her rules.

Well, he had his own rules to live by these days. And they didn’t include a smooth caramel-skinned woman who bathed with—he closed his eyes to breathe the fragrance a little deeper—with coconut scented bath wash.

“Here.”

He glanced up into eyes that had the ability to hold him captive. The diamond necklace swayed against her throat, resting in the delicate hollow at its base.

“Here,” she repeated, holding the phone out to him. “Colin wants to talk to you again.”

He took the receiver from her hand then cradled it between his neck and his ear. “Yes?”

“She feels the two of you can work something out.”

“No doubt you counted on that.”

“It’s three weeks, Trevor,” Colin said. “You can’t handle that?”

Stated like a dare. Trevor let his gaze roam over her body. She thrust her hands in her pockets. Now she meandered around the room, looking as though she suddenly had interests in small knickknacks around the room.

“Colin,” he grumbled, “you didn’t leave me much of a choice.”

“Good. Great, Trevor. Listen, the pediatrician just walked into Angie’s room. I have to go.”

“Yeah right. This isn’t over by a long shot, Colin.”

“I’ll send Angie your love.”

“You do that. And keep me posted. He hung up the phone and eyed the problem standing before him.

He'd been dishonest with Colin. It wasn't going to be easy to work things out. He had projects to finish. He couldn't leave the cabin without abandoning them. Although Colin's generosity in allowing him to stay here had given Trevor the ability to live cheaply the past several months, he still had to pay for food and other expenses from his savings. That balance was fast approaching zero. He couldn't afford to move away for three weeks. He couldn't afford to crash in a hotel, even a cheap one. There was no place else he could go that wouldn't invite questions about his future, that wouldn't require explanations, involve him in complicated explanations, in unwanted guests, in casserole dinners.

This woman who'd come to stop behind the recliner, this woman who braced her manicured hands on back of the recliner, this woman with the steady, whiskey-colored gaze and the voluptuous body had more rights to be here than he did. She had real work to do.

"Seems you are correct," he said as he stood up and rested his hands on his hips. "You do have permission to shower in my bedroom."

"Seems you are correct as well," she retorted, folding her arms over her chest. "You didn't *have* to knock before barging in on me."

He could see her waiting for it. An apology. Remorse. He couldn't muster either over the growing feeling of annoyance. "I didn't barge in."

"No. I supposed you didn't." She filled her lungs with air, making those magnificent breasts strain against the material. "In any case," she added quickly, "we seem to have a situation here, Mr. Richmond."

"Call me, Trevor." He narrowed his eyes upon her. "And I'll call you...Kass."

"Kass!"

"Yes." He allowed a humorless grin, for he'd chipped away some of her hold on her composure—he all but saw it break and fall to the ground. "It seems the only reasonable thing to do," he explained, "seeing as we're going to be roommates."

Chapter Two

Kassady bit back the sound of protest that surged to her throat but not quickly enough. A high pitched squeal escaped her.

Kass? He was going to call her *Kass*?

No one called her Kass. Well...almost no one. The name reverberated inside her, echoing through her past. The last person who'd called her Kass had been her grandfather—and he had died when Kassady was nineteen years old.

"Mr. Richmond," she said, forcing her senses back to normal. Most people I know call me Dr. Gibson. It that's too much of a mouthful for you, Kassady would be fine."

"I can get my tongue around quite a few big words, Dr. Kassady Gibson." His humorless grin turned brittle. "You'd be surprised. But it's definitely Kass for you. I think it fits you just fine."

Then the impact of his shadowed gray gaze stripped right through linen and silk for the umpteenth time since she'd entered the room, heating the surface of her bare skin in a way that baffled all reasonable explanation.

"In any case," she continued, ignoring the tingling of her flesh, "I don't think it is such a good idea to share this cabin."

"It is the only solution. Colin would skin me alive if I carted you off to a hotel or scared you away completely."

She gave him a level gaze and he met it squarely. Scare her away? Ship her off to a hotel? Well. A knot of anger settled into her chest. This jerk didn't seem to realize that it was *she* who had the upper hand. She was the one who'd obtained permission from Dr. Breton to finish up work without distraction. *She* was the one who'd made painstaking efforts to reserve this cabin, to take three weeks before the fall semester began and

the opportunity to relax a little slipped away. This cretin looked as if he didn't have a care in the world. And according to Dr. Breton, Trevor Richmond wasn't here to do anything worthwhile.

"I don't intend to be scared away. I have some important work to do the first week that I am here." She forced her voice to remain even and cool. "I need peace and quiet. After that, I plan to get in three weeks of rest and relaxation. I also understand that there is a plethora of flowers Dr. Breton thinks I would be interested in studying as they might help my uncle."

"Yes. Colin mentioned all of that."

"So you see, this is the perfect location for me to do all the things I need to do. A motel is *not* an option."

She waited for him to offer to leave. She didn't know how much clearer she could get, short of telling him to leave outright. It wasn't in her nature to be so rude. But after all, he was just "crashing" according to Dr. Breton. Taking care of the place in Colin's absence. She had legitimate work to do. Instead, he studied her, from her necklace to her feet.

"I've got to say, Kass, you don't look like any college professor I had."

She frowned. He must have been expecting bad teeth and thick glasses. "You mean to tell me you actually attended college?"

His laughter sent a shiver through her. The rich timbre was like nothing she'd ever heard before.

"You're sexy when you're mad."

She arched a dark brow in his direction. "I'm not mad."

"Oh, yes you are. You disguise it very well, but you're as upset at this entire situation as I am."

She raised her other brow at his level of honesty. She was a little upset about it all. She was annoyed that the situation hadn't gone as planned. She'd always had very little tolerance for mistakes, even little understandable one's like this.

"Anger will not solve the problem," she said. "And we *will* solve this problem."

“You won’t be happy until I agree to pack up all my belongings and get the hell out.”

Yes. Yes. That was precisely what she wanted. She worked best in solitude, like at three in the morning when all the graduate students had finally abandoned the study hall, leaving her alone with her books and her thoughts. Even here—especially here, in an unfamiliar place—she needed time to work, she needed a place to work, and she didn’t need some flirtatious cowboy hovering around disrupting her focus.

Still, the summer session in etiquette she’d been sent to as a teenager had pounded its lessons into her hard, and she felt a blush of shame at his blunt—but correct—statement.

“Mr. Richmond, I didn’t say that.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I can see it in your eyes.”

“You’re imagining things.”

“Nah, I’m a pretty good judge of character. I wouldn’t blame you for wanting me to disappear. I wasn’t exactly the welcoming committee back there in the bedroom—”

“Let’s just pretend that didn’t happen and take things from here and now.”

Kassady cleared her throat, tugged on the hem of her blouse. He would bring up that little bedroom scene, wouldn’t he? He did it on purpose, to unnerve her. Well, all her professional life she’d been known for her coolness under pressure. All her professional life she’d been known for her ability to think complex situations through. Granted, those complex situations were usually related to work—and not necessarily the human sort. Still, she’d be damned if it would take the memory of a moment of nudity under the eye of an unpredictable cowboy to interfere with her powers of clear thinking.

“We’re both adults,” she said evenly. “Surely we can work something out.”

“I thought my original idea was just fine. The house has two bedrooms. Enough space for two people to share for a few weeks without stepping all over each other.”

He stood up and sauntered closer to her. He was really tall. She was used to being eye level with most men, or slightly taller. It helped, in her testosterone-driven business, to be born a tall, long-legged woman. But with this guy, she had to tilt her head back to stare into his eyes. Eyes that were a really startling shade of gray. And full of strange, shifting shadows.

There was no logical reason for the sudden jumping of her heart, the clamminess of the palms of her hands. She flattened them against her thighs and wondered if the teenager in the coffee shop had slipped something extra into her coffee this morning.

“I’m not going to lie to you,” he continued. “This ain’t going to be easy, Kass.” He’d lowered his voice to a sexy, rough rumble. An intimate husky sound, as if he were whispering to a wild and scared animal. “I’ve gotten used to my own company. Don’t have much patience for visitors.”

“Now, there’s a newsflash.”

His lips quirked—a strange little move, charming, but with only the barest trace of humor. “Stay out of my way,” he started softly, dangerously. “I’ll stay out of yours. That’ll be our deal.”

She didn’t answer right away. She took a deep breath and stepped back, out of the sphere of physical influence this man radiated. He was a large man, in more ways than just physical. The free-spirited, new graduate student of hers—Evelina something—would say that he had an angry red aura around him. An intense circle of sensation that grew stronger the closer he came.

He was a safe distance away now. But still she felt that magnetic pull. It would not be easy to avoid this man. The cabin was simply not large enough. Then again she reasoned, she’d be spending most of her time in the office Colin said existed in the basement. He’d have no reason to bother her there.

Of course, she had no clue as to what he’d be doing with his time. Puttering aimlessly around the house? Drinking beer? Watching sporting events? She knew nothing about free time. She hadn’t taken a vacation from work in more than two years—even now she was actually going to work during the first week. She’d never been unemployed except when

she'd been in school, and then she'd spent every waking hour with her nose in a book.

She tried to shake off the speculation. What Trevor Richmond did in his spare time wasn't her concern. The fact remained that she had work to do—lot of work. If she didn't get started this would turn into another year where she didn't take a real vacation.

“All right,” she said, nodding once. “We'll see how this works out.”

“Good.” His nostrils flared. “You can take the master bedroom. I'll move my stuff out.”

Miss Carliner's etiquette course drifted through her mind. “No, I won't take the room you are already occupying. It wouldn't—”

He cut her off with a swift pass of his hand. “It's for my own good. I won't lie on that bed again, Kass, without seeing a certain caramel, wet-skinned vision floating out of the bathroom.”

With that, he spun on one heel and disappeared down the hallway, leaving her with that image in her mind. The image of her standing naked, dripping wet and completely vulnerable, while Trevor lay flat on his back in his bed in his unbuttoned jeans...watching.

Just watching.

* * * *

Thirty minutes later, Kassady shouldered open the kitchen door, bracing the last box in her arms. She had intentionally saved this one for last because it contained her work. At the other end of the kitchen, an open door revealed a set of stairs leading to the basement. She heard Trevor moving around long before she reached the bottom step.

He didn't spare her a glance as he collected some items off the counter of the long center island. I'll be out of your way in a few minutes.”

She slid the box onto a sturdy wooden table and eyed the basement. It was part office and part lab. Perfect for everything she planned to do. A clutter of trays lay near a sink. Brown bottles of developing chemicals stood high on a shelf against the wall. Two ropes hung from one end of the ceiling to another. A few photographic prints still swayed, drying, from the rafters.

She tried to keep the tone of incredulity out of her voice as the significance of the items registered. “You’re a photographer, Mr. Richmond?”

He snatched down a print as she neared it, then brushed by her. “It’s just a hobby.”

He clutched a pile of prints against his chest as he gathered the trays under his arm. There was a strange, tight look on his face. She felt a twinge of guilt that she might be intruding upon more of his space than she had realized.

“Look, we can share this space,” she stated, waving a hand to indicate the basement. “On the days that you need to develop, I can go out and explore a little. There’s no reason why we can’t come up with some sort of—”

“If I need a darkroom, I’ll set it up in the second bathroom.” His eyes looked bright in the light of the bare bulb shining from the ceiling. “You just focus on getting your work done.”

And stay the hell out of my way.

The words were unspoken, but as clear as a bell. Trevor stomped up the stairs, leaving Kassady alone in the musty basement, her ears still ringing.

She sank down on a stool whose padding had seen much better days and exhaled heavily, blowing a strand of hair off her brow.

Well, Kassady, you’ve blown it again.

In her lifetime she’d managed to earn a PhD, publish a dozen papers in academic journals and achieve a full professorship at a nice-sized university. But, in the immortal words of her fourth-grade teacher, she still hadn’t figured out how to play well with others.

She placed an elbow on the center island and sank her head into her hands, rubbing her forehead as if she could rub away her own mixed feelings of confusion and guilt. She’d come here, in part, to escape people. These days her idea of a vacation was to be holed up in a cabin with a weeks’ worth of work that she could easily stretch into three weeks if necessary. She spent the entire year trying to maneuver through the muck of academic politics, and the last thing she wanted to do on her ‘vacation’

was negotiate living space with some temperamental, unpredictable, stubborn, attractive—”

Attractive.

Completely against her will, totally against all expectation, a tingly heat settled over her body. She drew her bottom lip between her teeth as the heavy wave of sensation crested, filled her body, made her breasts heavy, pressed up on her throat...then, just as slowly ebbed away.

Moments later Kassady found herself sitting ramrod straight on the stool, contemplating the strange, empty ache left throbbing throughout her body and the rush of sensation that had preceded it, all with a growing sense of panic.

I’ve been working too hard, she told herself. Yes, that was it. Correcting too many papers, administering too many finals, shepherding too many graduate students through in instructions for their dissertations. She was exhausted. Disoriented from the long ride. Unsettled by the fact he had ravished her naked body with his hungry eyes. He’d gotten under her clothes...and her skin. She’d never let anyone have that sort of power over her—not even Lance. Lance, whom she’d lived with for far longer than three weeks.

Well. She hopped off the chair and slapped the dust off her hands. She looked around the basement. No point in wasting time thinking about Trevor Richmond. There’d be no love lost between them, that was certain, and not just because she’d been her usual ice queen self. He’d taken no liking to her, that had been plain enough.

With a week her work would be done, two more weeks after that her vacation would be over and she’d be out of there and the cowboy would be nothing but a memory. She took the stairs two at a time, rushed through the door and into kitchen. Her body was overheated and she needed something to drink. Trevor was nowhere in sight. She poured a cup of water after locating a glass in one of the cabinets.

She returned to the basement feeling several degrees cooler. Now all she needed to do was keep busy so she wouldn’t think about Trevor. She opened the box she’d brought in and began unpacking. A short time later she heard the buzz of an electric tool coming from the backyard. A quick

glance through the basement window revealed a large sized shed some distance away, by the edge of a grove of trees. The door was open and a splatter of what appeared to be sawdust flew out of the doorway. He was cutting something, wood no doubt, Kassady thought. More in line with her first impression of him, than his dabbling in photography. Then she forcefully pushed all thoughts of Trevor Richmond out of her mind, returned her focus to the box and plunged into the task of setting up her temporary office space.

She had no sooner placed a professional journal on the desk when she noticed tracks it left through the grit on the surface. She wasn't a neat freak but for some reason she just *had* to scrub the table clean. Right now. Rolling up her sleeves, she went in search of something to clean with. She located a rag and some gloves, then went to work cleaning the office area and the lab with a vengeance.

She was working on the last table when the basement door swung open, flooding the basement with light.

Trevor came down the stairs. "Are you still down here?" He stopped mid-step and flattened his hand on the sloping ceiling. His eyes widened as he scanned the basement. "What did you do, power wash the place?"

She wiped her brow with her upper arms and followed Trevor's gaze around the room. The entire area sparkled, screaming of cleanness. "I like a clean workplace," she said, sounding over defensive even to herself. "I'm going to be spending a lot of time down here the first week. After that you will benefit from it."

"No kidding. You've already spent most of the day down here." He met her gaze. Steadily. Boldly. "You planning to eat?"

"Eventually. I've got a lot of work to do first," she turned back to the desk, away from that strange magnetic pull he had. "I'll come up with something later."

"Something more substantial than sour *Skittles*?"

She glanced at the bag of candy she'd opened a while ago, to hold her over. "I'll eat later."

"It's already later, Kass. Almost eight o'clock."

Kassady looked toward the single basement window. Rays of dusky gray light seeped through the streaked window. It was almost sunset. She had worked for several more hours than she originally thought.

"I'll order something," she retorted. "Know a good Chinese food place?"

Trevor surprised her with the rumble of a laugh so captivating that it drew her gaze back to him against her will. She spotted sawdust clinging to his jeans. Dirt streaked his T-shirt. Through his dark careless hair she saw the tracks of his fingers. He looked well worked, rough and sweaty.

"Bonafide city girl, aren't you?" He inclined his head toward the basement window where the woods at the edge of the yard could be clearly seen. "You're in a rural area now, Kassady. There isn't Chinese take-out or a pizza joint within fifteen, maybe twenty, miles of here."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. The grocery store is closed as well. Although you could probably get some chips and soda from the gas station until around ten."

"Is there a reason why you are telling me all of this, Trevor?"

"Yes." He descended four more stairs, then leaned a shoulder against the wall. "I'm cooking up some beef," he murmured. "Should be ready in about fifteen minutes."

She suddenly noticed the aroma of cooking meat drifting down the stairs from the kitchen. A rich, appetizing and spicy scent. She spoke over the embarrassing growl of her stomach. "Is that a dinner invitation?"

"Yeah."

That was it. No explanation, no conditions, no sweet talk, no compromise. Still the offer left her strongly breathless. "I thought we were going to stay out of each other's way."

"It's dinner across a kitchen table," he said. "It's not like I'm asking you on a date."

Not even close, Kassady thought, breathing deeply through the tightness in her chest. In fact, he gave every appearance of not wanting her to join him at all. "Not the most welcoming of invitations."

"I'm short on warmth these days. Look," he continued quickly, as if he'd instantly regretted his words. "We've got some things to talk about."

House rules and all. How we're going to stay out of each other's way. And you've got to eat. I've made enough dinner for two. Are you going to join me or not?"

His arms were crossed, his face stony and unreadable. She considered rejecting the offer out of spite, but bit her tongue on the instinct. After all, she *was* hungry. Judging by the aroma now filling the basement, the food upstairs was hot and almost ready. If she didn't eat with him now, she'd be starving later and would have to spend precious time searching for something decent to eat in a town she wasn't familiar with. A town that apparently shut everything down at sunset.

Yes, that was it, she told herself. She didn't want to waste any time. "Yes," she said, removing a latex glove she'd used to clean with. "I'll join you for dinner."

"Wash up." He turned on one heel and headed up the stairs. "It will be ready shortly."

A few minutes later, she ascended the stairs to the sound of meat sizzling. Steam hissed into the air under the hood of the stove, bellowing around Trevor, who stood in front of a skillet, wielding a wooden spoon with obvious skill. His gaze skimmed over her then returned to his work. "Have a seat. This is ready."

She'd expected a hunk of bleeding steak or raw oversized hamburgers. She'd expected plastic utensils, greasy paper napkins, paper plates. Not the tender strips of sirloin and crispy vegetables he spooned directly from the skillet onto the bed of white rice molded upon the nice plate.

She looked around the kitchen for hidden white paper take-out boxes, but saw only cutting boards, dirty knives, a smattering of vegetable peelings. He'd made the meal himself. *From scratch.*

"Yes, I did," he stated scraping a healthy serving out of the skillet and onto another plate. "And since I cooked, I expect you to clean up."

She hadn't realized she'd voiced her skepticism aloud. She was too intoxicated by the savory scent of the spicy sauce, by the sight of by the food on her plate. She realized she hadn't had anything to eat all day save a cup of coffee and a croissant in the morning, and the skittle's she'd left

downstairs. She picked up a fork, speared a piece of the sirloin and let the taste fill her mouth with spices and sauce.

He swung a leg over the back of a chair and planted himself across from her. He hunched over his plate and shoveled a forkful of food into his mouth. He lifted those heavy lids of his and eyed her across the table as he chewed.

She suddenly felt like a defenseless piece of marinated beef. The table was small and the distance between them made smaller by the way he leaned over his plate. She plastered her spine against the back of the chair.

Some small logical voice in the back of her head questioned her odd behavior. She'd always been awkward with strangers, but this went beyond the usual strain of making small talk. Every time Trevor Richmond looked at her, she felt so...vulnerable. He made her shockingly aware of the way she crossed her legs. Or the way she sank her lips over the fork and pulled off the meat.

Tightening her grip on the fork, she speared a piece of something on her plate and watched it as she lifted it to her mouth yet for the life of her she didn't have any idea what she chewed. Even sitting there, as still as stone, eating his dinner, he had an aura of restless energy around him. Surging and ebbing, rolling and changing. Sitting this close to him was like standing on a rock by a storm-churned sea, waiting for the next wave to crash. She jumped as he clanked his fork against his empty plate.

"This is the way I see it," he said, leaning back in his seat. "When it comes to breakfast and lunch, we're on our own. On weekdays, we can cook dinner on alternate nights. I probably won't be around on the weekends, so you can make other arrangements for yourself."

She heard the splatter of something drop and realized it was a piece of meat slipping off her fork onto her plate.

I probably won't be around on the weekends so you can make other arrangements for yourself.

She hadn't thought about the possibility of a girlfriend. Truth be told, she'd be surprised to find him single. He was an extremely good-looking guy, if you liked the rough and unshaven look. If you liked the careless way his hair curled over his collar. The deep tan darkening his neck and

shoulders, where the T-shirt dipped to show the start of a strong clavicle, sprinkled with dark hairs. If you liked intense, restless gray eyes in a face craggy with shadows—

“It’s the only sensible way,” he continued, when she didn’t answer. “No use in having both of us buy separate food, or dividing up the refrigerator.” He looked at her half-empty plate. “You definitely aren’t a vegetarian.”

“No.”

“Then that settles that.”

“No,” she murmured, shaking her head. “It won’t.”

He arched a dark brow in her direction.

“I have unusual hours,” she explained, using her fork to trace patterns in the rice. “For the first week I’ll be working most of the day and well into the night. The rest of the time I’m here I will be out exploring.”

“You still have to eat.”

“I’ll put something together.”

“What? Candy? Soda? For three weeks?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You don’t have to be worried about my eating habits, Trevor.”

“I’m trying to work out a compromise,” he snapped. “Something that will work for both of us.”

“Trading off cooking duties is out,” she responded. “I don’t cook.”

“You don’t cook?”

“I can’t boil water,” she stated. “I didn’t know what a broiler was until I became a senior in college. I do put a very nice sandwich together every once in a while, but I tend to order take-out a lot. My schedule usually doesn’t allow for anything else.”

“You are definitely single.”

He made the statement as a fact, and she glared at him, changing the subject once again. “I’m a hardworking woman. I don’t have time to cook at home.”

“Yes, you’ve definitely got to be single,” he retorted. “Else you’re rich enough to have a cook or two at home.”

She remained silent. She didn't have a cook at home, but she'd grown up with a few cooks in her mother's kitchen. She'd made a lot of points in boarding school from the other students for learning some of the ripest Spanish and French phrases from the cooks.

"I'm beginning to figure you out, Kass," he stated softly. "I should have guessed there was no one waiting for you at home."

"You don't know me at all, Mr. Richmond."

"Yes, but I'm starting to know your type."

"Oh, really?"

He was getting up under her skin. Why did she let him get to her? How did he melt her cool exterior so easily?

"You're the sort of woman," he continued, apparently enjoying her growing irritation, "who wears an expensive diamond necklace resting on her throat."

She rarely took off her grandmother's necklace. She wore it to bed sometimes, when she was too tired to undo the clasp and drop it on the night table.

He added, in a sultry tone, "You don't wear the necklace in the shower, though."

She let the necklace drop to her collarbone. She tried to ignore the exquisite shiver that traveled through her abdomen as she gave him her iciest stare.

"As cold as ice," he said, a smile curling the edges of his mouth. "Even when I surprised you in the bedroom this afternoon, you just pulled yourself together and faced me off just like this—just plain frosty."

Her chest went tight again. She'd been called cold. She'd been called frigid. She'd even been called ice queen, but when Trevor said the words, it stung.

"You've got anger in you. I've seen that, too," he added, almost speaking to himself. "You're the sort of woman who is used to getting her way. I bet you lead the department that you work in."

"Actually, I *am* the assistant department head," she responded, slight satisfaction traveling through her at him not being completely correct. "Soon to be the department head if the current one retires as expected."

“Yet you’re still single. She let her fork drop to her plate. She felt crushed on a glass plate under a microscope, being poked, prodded and thoroughly examined. “Listen, Trevor, I think I’ve had enough of this after-dinner small talk. We *don’t* have to get to know each other. I’m only here three weeks. And my social life is none of your business.”

“We’re going to be living in the same cabin, Kass. I want to know who’s going to be visiting.”

“I’m here to work and relax,” she insisted. “There will be no visitors. Not in my bedroom or anywhere else.”

A half smile slipped across his face, and his eyes twinkled with something like humor and she wished, just once, she could keep up with the flux and surge of his moods. “That’s very good news, Kass. Excellent news.”

She didn’t like the way he said that either. She didn’t like much about Trevor Richmond. Didn’t like the way he looked at her, didn’t like his insights, didn’t like the way he talked to her and especially didn’t like the unsettled way he made her feel. “I take it,” she stated, hating how thick her tongue felt, “that you will extend me the same courtesy?”

“What?”

“No visitors in your bed, either. Not while I’m here. I don’t want to find women wandering around the kitchen in lingerie every morning.”

“Women in lingerie?”

“Yes, Mr. Richmond. I’m positive you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I know what you mean.” He stretched his arms out above his head, then linked them to cup his head. His eyes glittered between lowered lids. “I hadn’t planned for visitors at all, Kass. In case you haven’t noticed before now, I like my privacy. I’ve been guarding it tightly. Until now.”

“Liking privacy doesn’t necessarily exclude female visitors.”

“You’re a female visitor.”

“Not of the type we’re discussing.”

“No,” he said, letting his chair sink back down to its four legs. “You’re right. I don’t suppose you would be wandering around in this kitchen in the morning wearing lingerie.”

She lowered her lashes and concentrated on her food. She thought of the heavy ivory-colored silk nightgown, tucked in her suitcase. The bodice was edged in lace, however she sincerely doubted it qualified as lingerie in Trevor's eyes. "I'll make a point to cover myself up at all times."

"Don't do it for my sake, Kass. I've already gotten a glimpse of the goods. I wouldn't turn down a second time."

"Okay." Kassady swept her napkin off her lap and placed it beside her plate. "We've agreed on that. Now I have a request to make."

He looked at her in surprise. "Go ahead."

"Could you please stop mentioning this afternoon's incident?"

He arched a dark brow in her direction. "This afternoon's incident? What incident is that?"

"You know darn well what I was referring to, Trevor."

"Ahh," he said, the corners of his mouth twitching, "You mean the incident when I saw you completely nude in my bedroom."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes. That one."

"That's a tough request, Kass," he murmured, rubbing the beard scruff of his chin with his fingers. "I'm going to have to think about it."

"Haven't you had enough fun with it?"

"No, not nearly enough," he responded, the grin blossomed full and wide. "You're such a cool customer that it seems to be the only way to make you squirm." The smile dimmed. "I just like to get a reaction out of you. Proved to me you're not an ice queen."

She jumped up. The chair scraped back, heaved up and clattered back down on all four legs. *Ice queen*. He couldn't know how deeply those words cut, how potent their poison.

"Easy, Kassady," he murmured as the humor left his face. "Just a little good-natured teasing. A little banter over dinner, nothing more."

"Well dinner is over." She made a beeline to the counter. She tossed the wooden spoon into the sink. "I'll clean up tonight, but I think its best we fend for ourselves from now on."

"Nonsense. I'll do the cooking."

"No. I don't—"

“I insist. I’m going to be doing it anyway, and I always cook enough for more than myself.”

Kassady turned the faucet on, then added the rest of the dishes within arm’s reach before plunging her arms elbow deep into the greasy mess, letting the hot water burn her skin. See? She wasn’t made of ice. She could feel heat, she could feel cold. She could definitely feel pain.

“Hey, hey...”

His voice came from just behind her. The heat of his body surrounded her as he leaned over and twisted the faucet to the off position. The water temperature cooled to lukewarm. The steam that had risen from it settled. But he did not withdraw his hand. The solid warmth of him pressed against her shoulder.

“I’ll take care of the dishes tonight,” he said. “Consider it my way to make up for being an insensitive jerk.”

With those simple, honest words, he poked a pin into her pride. The anger drained out of her, leaving her limp, uneasy, and unnerved. Who was this guy? One moment he picked her apart, and the next moment he spoke to her in a voice that would calm a wild, frightened animal. She turned toward him, unwilling to meet his eyes. Yet, she saw something in the curve of his mouth, a rueful honesty. True regret.

She thrust the sponge at him. He squeezed it in his hand. She let her fingers drop before they could touch his. She knew she should leave now. Regroup. Retreat. But she lingered. Out of curiosity, she told herself. She’d never known a man to shift gears so swiftly. She wondered what he would say next, what he would do next. So she waited, her breath catching in her throat, as she kept her gaze below his chin. A streak of dirt stained his T-shirt, running from his collarbone clear across the muscles of his chest. His chest rose, then fell. Rose, then fell. Rose...

And stilled. A tense stillness. A hardening of muscles.

In a flash of panic, she stepped back. Out of his warmth. Outside the reach of his magnetic pull. She brushed by him and headed, blindly, toward the sanctuary of the dim basement. Work. She had work to do, lots of work. She stomped down the stairs and sat down at the desk. She reached for the academic journals she’d left on the edge of the desk.

Damn Trevor Richmond and his loose, easy words. She *did* have feelings and she definitely had a heart. She just knew better than to let anyone touch it.

Chapter Three

The next morning, Trevor seriously considered drinking his coffee in the nude. After all, he'd gotten an eyeful of Kass, and he figured the only way he could even the scales would be to give her equal time.

In the shower, he came to a more likely conclusion—she'd be put off by his nudity. For unlike Kass, he would definitely enjoy the experience. Just imagining the feel of her gaze roaming over him was enough to get a rise out of him. Naked, he'd have a difficult time hiding his enjoyment. He opted for boxer shorts.

About nine o'clock, she entered the kitchen, barefoot. He curled his fingers tight around a cup of piping hot coffee. A midnight blue silk bathrobe draped her figure, falling only to mid-thigh. A tangled plait of dark hair lay upon her shoulders. She looked rumpled and eminently untouchable. She blindly opened the refrigerator door, then bent over to search the contents, giving him a delightful disturbing view of a few more inches of leg.

"Good morning, Kass."

She whirled around and nearly dropped the carton of grapefruit juice clutched in her hand. She looked very different from the icy aristocrat who'd parried with him yesterday, wearing nothing but a towel. Very different from the tight-faced woman wearing the diamond necklace who'd crossed swords with him in the living room, negotiating a settlement as if she were a big-city lawyer. She looked more like the woman he'd teased into distraction after dinner last night. Vulnerable. Confused. Appealingly unkempt.

"You're in your *underwear*," she blurted.

He lifted the coffee to his mouth to hide his budding amusement at her startled response and spoke into the cup. "Yes I am."

“You’re not dressed.”

He swallowed a fireball of the brew. “Not completely.”

“But...” She struggled with words, waving the grapefruit juice carton, her gaze fixing on and fluttering away from his red boxer shorts, landing on his naked chest, then flitting away again. “But you made a promise.”

He liked her like this. She was still half-asleep and one step short of sputtering. She’d spent most of the night in the basement office, pounding away at the keyboard. He hadn’t heard her climb the stairs until nearly 3:00 a.m. He knew the time, because when he heard her, he’d been lying wide awake atop tangled cotton sheets, trying not to remember things he’d promised to forget.

Now, groggy and half-asleep, she stared at him and spoke her mind. For the moment, at least, there seemed to be no cold wall of ice between her thoughts and those wonderfully soft-looking lips. He would remember this even if he never saw her this way again. “What promise was that, Kass?”

“You said—you said there would be no walking around in lingerie.”

“For you and the non-existent women guests I’m supposed to have.” He arched a dark brow in her direction and glanced down his chest to his shorts. “Didn’t think this qualified.”

“It’s the same thing.”

He could actually see a deep red flush begin to appear on her chest just underneath her collarbone. She turned away from him, yanked a cabinet open and tucked her head inside, searching for something.

“Yeah?”

“If I were in my underwear,” she responded, pulling her head out, “you’d consider it lingerie, wouldn’t you?”

He spoke around the tightening of his throat. “Depends upon the underwear, Kass. I’d have to make that judgment call as I saw it.”

“Well,” she said, too quickly, as if she’d just realized her blunder. She slammed the cabinet closed and yanked open another. “What you’re wearing—those red silk things—that’s the male version of lingerie.”

“Is it?” He crossed one arm across his chest and shrugged. “I’ll consider myself informed then. From now on, nothing but cotton briefs.”

She made a nervous sound underlined with irritation, slapped closed another set of cabinets and opened another set. The grapefruit juice carton wobbled where she'd inadvertently placed it. He reached over her head, pulled open a cabinet, curled his fingers around a glass and held it out to her. "Is this what you're looking for?"

She eyed him warily, keeping her gaze on his neck and above. She snatched the glass, showed him her back and poured herself a generous helping of juice. He suspected, when she finished it and faced him again, that the frosty persona would be firmly in place again.

Well, he had some making up to do, and he best do it before the castle walls were fully erect. "So," he said, scalding his tongue on the coffee again. "What are your plans for the day?"

She leaned one hip against the counter and cast him an odd look. "I'll be out of your way," she said, sipping the juice. "I managed to get a lot done last night but at a cost. The idea of opening another academic journal to do research is not very appealing. So, I'm going to do a little exploring."

"At the national park?"

"Yes." She hid her mouth behind the glass. "I want to look at the plants Dr. Breton mentioned. Perhaps take a few samples and examine them. It will definitely take some time. As I said, I'll be out of your way."

He tried not to grimace. He'd made quite an impression on her yesterday. He could be a real jerk when he wanted to be.

"You will need some help finding those flowers."

She arched a brow. "I will do just fine by myself thank you very much. Dr. Breton gave me specific directions."

"Last time I checked, there were no street signs in the forest."

"I have a PhD, Mr. Richmond. I also have a good sense of direction. I'll manage."

Wasn't she ornery this morning? He let his gaze slide over the skewed robe and wondered if a good bout of lovemaking would bring back her humor.

"It's not going to be easy searching for plants you've never seen before amid those woods."

“Mr. Richmond, I have an uncle that is a botanist and I’m an avid gardener. I know my way around plants. So, I’ll do my job and you do whatever it is you do.”

He flinched at the well placed barb. He told himself not to shoot back. He deserved her response. He hadn’t put in an honest day’s work in months and his resume sat idle waiting for attention to be paid to it. Until this very moment, he hadn’t cared in the least.

“You’re in this cabin with me, invading my privacy, so I’m making it my job,” he said, trying to brush aside the thoughts of the ways he’d like to make her even more of his job.

“Yesterday, Colin told me about your interest in plants.”

“Exactly the point, Trevor. This is just a hobby for me. I don’t want to take you away from the important work I know you have to do.”

He placed his coffee cup on the counter with more force than necessary. “A few months back, when Colin was up for a weekend, he dragged me along to the park to help him search for the new species of plant he’d spotted over a year ago to see if it was blooming. I took some shots in the park while he looked for them. Colin tends to ramble on when he’s excited about something.” Trevor frowned. He’d been in a deep funk when he’d seen Colin. He’d only been back from South America for a short time, his thoughts had been elsewhere, his senses deadened, he’d been completely self-absorbed. Only now he could remember some details of those murky few weeks. “I’m sure he mentioned you then,” he lied. “Something about a fellow professor who might be interested in seeing the plants.”

“Yes,” Kassady murmured, her suspicion obvious. “Yes, that’s me. I do have an interest in the plants. If Colin described them correctly my uncle might have an interest in them for medicinal purposes.”

“Well again, if I saw your directions, I’d be able to find them. I know the woods very well since I have taken a lot of shots there.”

He picked up his coffee cup and buried his nose in it, inhaling deeply, taking in the aroma of the bitterness of the grounds, trying to make the memory of the heavy funeral fragrance of the woods go away.

She had a strange look on her face. She'd crossed her arms, hugged her biceps and stood watching him warily. "I can show you Dr. Breton's directions," she said, "but I can't imagine how that would help. He was quite specific in his notes."

"Believe it or not, Kass, I'm offering you more than just verbal guidance," he said, trying to mask the bitterness of the sip of coffee he'd just drunk, and the anger in his own voice. "I'm offering my body and my brain."

He saw the hardening in her jaw, the refusal to look over at him and the squint that let him know just how much she thought his brain was worth.

"I'm not the uncivilized beast you think I am, Kass, despite my recent behavior."

"Trevor, I never—"

"Yes, I've been a jerk. And now I'm trying to make it up to you. But you're not making it easy at all."

He turned his back on her, grabbed the sponge and began scrubbing out his empty coffee cup. What the hell was wrong with him? She must think him to be some sort of nutcase, one minute ogling her, the next angry as all get out, the next offering her help. Had he been away from human company for so long that he no longer knew how to behave? He no longer knew how to handle a cool, confident woman with the body of a centerfold?

Yeah, that didn't help. It didn't help that he had the sight of her fixed in his head, those full breasts, those puckered chocolate nipples. The slight curve to her belly and the pleasures that could be had—

No, that didn't help. It had been too long since he'd had a woman, but it was more than that. She was a cool customer, this one, but he sensed a volcanic intensity within her. The more reserved she acted toward him, the more he wanted to prod her, the more he wanted to see the flush of anger on her face, or lust, or passion, any passion at all, as long as it was directed toward *him*.

“Listen.” He turned the faucet off and wished he could turn off his libido as easily. “I’m trying to save you some time. I will lead you to the damn plants today. Do you want me to help you or not?”

He turned to face her. She had that stunned-doe look on her face again, as if he were some new species she couldn’t classify. Couldn’t really blame her. For even now, he couldn’t stop himself from engulfing her with his eyes, from the tips of her bare toes to the rumple of her dark tresses, pausing with intensity on every point in between. He studied her in the way he’d like to kiss and suckle her, if he could ever convince her to stretch out naked before an open fire and spread those legs for him.

He didn’t let his gaze falter. Why the heck should he? He knew what he wanted, even though there’d be no sex between them. He had nothing to offer a woman but heat and a lot of enthusiasm. And Dr. Kassady Gibson was clearly not the type to indulge in something as intimate and carnal as a quick roll in the hay.

“Okay,” she said in a quiet voice.

He glanced at her again, his loins hardening at her unwitting response to his thoughts.

“It will save me time,” she continued, “if you really can guide me to the plants so that I can get a few samples.”

Ah, yes. Time. Dr. Kassady Gibson had an obsession with time. Getting as much work as possible done within the shortest amount of it. He watched the film of cool professionalism drop over her face like a veil.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, prodding his own thoughts back to reality. “I can show you.” He placed the sponge on the back of the sink. “Be ready to leave within the hour.”

* * * *

For a person who had offered to help, Trevor sure did seem in a hurry. Kassady adjusted the weight of her backpack and tried to concentrate on the path through the woods, not the sight of Trevor marching in front of her. More than once, she’d stumbled against the gnarled roots and jutting rocks cushioned beneath the layer of pine needles on the ground.

She should have declined Trevor’s offer. She didn’t need him. The park ranger they’d met at the entrance had seemed very willing and eager

to help. Had she come alone, she suspected the ranger would have directed her according to Dr. Breton's instructions. A ranger would certainly have a better grasp of the lay of the land than Trevor, who by his own admission, had only wandered these paths a handful of times.

Nonetheless, Trevor was here, bulldozing his way through the wooded area, bullying her just as he had yesterday when he talked her into agreeing to share the cabin. And here she was following after him, her thoughts a mangled mess. She should be scouting the area and taking in the beauty of the greenery around her, not watching the flex of his thighs and wondering if he still wore red silk boxers underneath his khaki shorts.

"The stream is just ahead of us," he said, interrupting her thoughts.

"Good," she said. *Finally*. "Then we're close?"

"Yes, we're almost there. Need to walk upstream a ways." He eyed her with those piercing gray eyes without breaking his stride. "We've already done a little over three miles. Are you okay?"

"I'm good."

She tried to keep the edge out of her voice. It was a simple question. But she couldn't tell if he was just being considerate or doubting her ability, and she'd be the first to admit she was hypersensitive about such issues. Still, one look at her battered hiking boots and worn leather back pack should have clued him in to the fact that she'd done plenty of fieldwork.

Then, to her dismay, he dropped back to walk beside her. With a slight break in pace, he matched her gait. They strode side-by-side for a while through the piney woods in silence. The rhythm of their synchronized movements unnerved her. It reminded her, inane, of when she used to ride horses on her uncle's farm as a teenager. There'd been a connection between her and her horses, a mental link, an ability to reach each other's body language with the slightest tightening of a muscle.

Now she could feel Trevor's unease the same way she could feel the restless wind darting through the boughs. Spiraling, rushing, slowing, turning in on itself. The feeling invaded her, twisting the tightness in her belly.

The sensation unnerved her; her awareness of him made her dizzy, unbalanced. She couldn't control Trevor the way she could a well-trained horse.

Desperate for something to break the connection, she gestured to the binoculars and the long-lens camera dangling from his neck. "Planning to shoot some photos today?"

He absently caressed the camera, then shrugged. "Depends."

"On what?"

"If I get lucky."

She glanced at him sharply, for the words were rich with innuendo. For a very brief moment she wondered exactly what kind of photographer he was and, as his gaze settled on her with that shadow-eyed intensity, what sort of pictures he had in mind.

"Sometimes my subjects," he continued, without cracking a smile, "are less than cooperative."

"Oh?"

"Yes. They need a little convincing to show themselves."

She thought she saw a glimmer of humor on his face. "Really?"

"Yes." He gestured to the trees around them. "This time of the year they hide out protecting their young depending on when the eggs hatched."

"Eggs?"

"Yes. You know, bird's eggs? I take photos of birds. Humming birds, woodpeckers, wrens. Eagles or hawks if I can find them." He paused for a few heartbeats and gestured toward the netting of branches above them. "Hear that?"

"What?"

"You missed it. That was a woodpecker. Wait. There it is again."

She heard it then. A distinctive tapping sounded high in the trees. When she looked at him again, he had a slightly amused look on his face.

"I bet you a beer you didn't think I was a bird-watcher."

She knew her expression betrayed her. Bird-watching definitely wasn't on the top of her list of things she'd expected him to have for a hobby. Basketball and football, maybe. Soccer. Pool. Anything that involved a

six-pack of beer and a television set. And a red-beaded bombshell of a woman curled under his arm.

"The first time I saw you," she admitted, "I thought you were a cowboy.

"I am from Wyoming."

"So, I wasn't too far off the mark."

"No." He shot a hot glance in her direction. "The first time I saw you," he said, "I thought you were a centerfold."

She stiffened. The tingling started again. "Trevor, you promised—"

"I know, I know. Never to mention it again. It's not easy, Kass." He shrugged his shoulders then rolled his neck. "Forgetting that is."

"Try harder." She struggled to gain a few paces on him, to break the synchronicity of their gait. "How far is it now?"

"Follow your ears. It's up ahead. You know, I'm a really nice guy once you get to know me."

"You keep telling me that."

"Yeah," he said, "every time after I act like a surly roommate."

"Which has been just about every minute of the last twenty-four hours."

"Hey now—"

"Denying it, Trevor?"

"Damned right I am. Who packed you a lunch today?"

She almost missed a step. "You packed me lunch?"

"Ham and cheddar on a roll."

"Oh." She didn't know what to say, so she resorted to Miss Carliner's etiquette class. "That is very kind of you. Thank you."

"You didn't eat breakfast."

"Yes I did."

"I don't count a glass of grapefruit juice breakfast." He maneuvered around a rock rising from the foliage on the ground. "Do you miss meals often?"

"No, not really. Well..." She shrugged. "Yes. I guess I do."

"Uh-huh."

“I get involved with things,” she explained, trying not to become defensive. “I eat when I’m hungry. It all works out in the end.”

“You get involved with work, you mean.”

“Of course.”

The words came out of her mouth impatient, vaguely surprised. What else was there to be involved with? Certainly nothing else in her life. Not now, anyway. Not ever, really. Lance had seemed to understand that when they were living together. At least, she’d thought he had.

She paused and lifted her face to the breeze, taking in all the sounds. Amid the breeze was a heavy floral scent mixed with something sweet. “Can you smell that?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled, looking around. “This actually looks about the spot Colin and I were last time.”

“There. I think that’s about it.” She shifted the pack on her back and made a beeline toward a tree entwined with vines. She touched the leaves with her fingers and eyed the blossoms higher up on the trunk. “This is definitely it based on Colin’s description. I’m positive of it.”

“It is. I remember the sounds...and the smell.”

His voice sounded strangely gruff. She’d lowered herself down one knee to shrug her backpack off, but at the sound of his voice she glanced up at him. He was looking around the site, his jaw tight, his face hard with an expression she could not read. And all of a sudden, it was as if the sky had gone dark with clouds, the wind had grown cold with upcoming rain. She wondered what had happened to cause the shift in the emotional weather, and why she noticed it at all when she was usually oblivious to such things.

He said gruffly, “You need me?”

“No...no, I don’t.” She shrugged. “I’m going to take a few notes and possibly some samples for my uncle. I won’t take too long.”

“I’m off to take a few photos then.”

She watched his back as he strode away. She knew in some unscientific way, that something was bothering him. She wondered what she’d done, or if his shift in mood had anything to do with her at all. It seemed to be the place that unsettled him. She glanced around the

flourishing woods. Insects buzzed. The cool, clear water gurgled over stones. A lush carpet of grass grew luxuriant in a patch of sunlight just at the water's edge. It was a lovely spot. She wondered with a discerning pang if he'd once come here with a woman. She shook off the unsettling thoughts.

I must focus on something else.

If only she had some real work to do. If she were out here with her uncle, he would have her making observations about the surrounding flora, checking the pH and water hardness levels in the stream nearby. He'd have her test the soil for alkalinity and then collect the samples. She had to do as much as she could for her uncle who would no doubt be thrilled. While her love of plants and studying them was a hobby for her, it was her uncle's life. His passion.

She smiled to herself. Considering the equipment she brought with her, one would think it was hers as well. She had a habit of giving it her all no matter the task. She opened her backpack and started pulling out plastic bags and test tubes, turning her back on the patch of soft grass that beckoned to her.

A short time later her concentration was broken by the click of a camera. She glanced up from the edge of the stream and found a lens aimed directly at her. Above it appeared a pair of intense gray eyes, shaded by dark hair turned silver by the sunlight.

Her breath caught. She felt the fresh air on the rise of her breasts and remembered she'd unbuttoned an extra button on her blouse because of the heat. She should have worn longer shorts, something that wouldn't gape to reveal more flesh than she wanted to reveal—as her linen shorts did. But it was too late. He'd already snapped the picture and immortalized her on film. Capping the test tube in her hands, she dropped it into the holder with the others, stood up and smoothed her shorts over her thighs with as much grace as possible.

Keep this all business.

"I'm glad you're back," she said, tilting her head toward the vine-laden tree. "Looks like I need your help. Those blossoms are too high for

me to reach, and I would like to make sure that I have enough to examine so that I can do a thorough preliminary report for my uncle.”

“Ah,” he said as he lowered the camera. “So, you do need me.”

She let the comment pass as she seized a sample bag from her pack and led him toward the tree. They stood, heads tilted back, watching a wasp meander from one blossom to another. Trevor raised an arm and stretched upward, but the blossoms hung just above his reach.

“You’ll have to climb on my shoulders,” he said, discarding the camera atop the pack at his feet. Then he dropped to his knees, with his back to her.

She blinked at the top of his bowed head. He obviously expected her to just climb right on.

“Uh, Trevor,” she said, crushing an empty plastic bag in her hand. I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“What? Are you afraid of heights?”

“No.” She didn’t feel like spreading her thighs and resting her bottom behind his head. “I’ll be too heavy for you.”

“What do you—never mind. I’ve stuck my foot in my mouth enough as it is.” He twisted around, sized her up with a lazy, roaming eye. “I can hold you, Kass. Climb on.”

He turned back around and bowed his head again. She took a deep breath. If she was ever going to get those flowers, she supposed she didn’t have a choice. While this was just a hobby for her, these flowers could prove to be beneficial for her uncle and his research. So short of heading back home and hiking back here with a step stool or ladder this *was* her only choice. Not only would she kill time doing so, the action would make her look very foolish.

Her decision made, she swung one leg over his shoulders. He slapped his palm around her calf. She braced her fingers on his shoulder between his neck and her thigh, then swung her other leg over. Her shorts slid up; his hair tickled the inside of her thighs. Then he tightened his grip on her leg and made a lumbering lurch upward. Her feet left the ground. He leaned forward. She slid forward until her crotch bumped against the back

of his head. Then he rose high, hiking her up with him, lifting her up into the boughs of the tree and their twines of fragrant blossoms.

For a moment she just braced herself in the shadow of the tree branches, drunk with the scent of the blossoms, dizzy with the height and feel of his firm hands on the bare skin of her legs, dizzy with the crush of his head against her stomach and the heat of his breath along the inside of her thighs, shaking with the sensation of being off-balance, out of control of her own body in this high, fragrant place.

His voice sounded strained. "Can you reach it now?"

"Yes, I can," she said.

Back to the task at hand, Kassady.

She lifted one hand off his head and un-crumpled the bag. Peeling her other hand off his head, she tightened her thighs and started picking. "Stay still for a few minutes," she said hoarsely, "and I'll be done here as soon as I can."

"Relax, Kass." He stroked her legs, massaged her tight thighs. "You're choking me."

"Sorry."

She tried to loosen up. But her skin still tingled where his hands had touched her. And if she eased the tension in her thighs too much, her buttocks sank down deep into his shoulders. She felt, too keenly, the shape of his head between her legs, the surprising silkiness of his hair.

"So," he said, flexing his grip, "how did you get so interested in flowers? You don't strike me as the country sort of gardening girl."

"I'm not." She pulled the nearest blossoms off and stuffed them in the bag. "I grew up in Santa Monica."

"Santa Monica, California?"

"Move up a little," she said. "There are more closer to the trunk."

"Very interesting," he said as he stepped forward. "I never imagined you to be a Cali girl."

"I'm not sure if that is a compliment or an insult."

She stuffed more blossoms into the bag, ducking her head to dodge an angry wasp. "I'm finished," she announced, sealing the bag with a quick swipe of her fingers. She looked through the plastic at the stuffed bruised

blossoms and frowned. It would have to do. It would be a preliminary analysis, nothing more. She could bring a ladder or a step stool next time. But she had to get off this man's shoulders, *now*. "You can let me down."

"That was quick."

"I don't need much." She sank along with him, watching the ground as it rose to meet her, felt it hard and stable beneath her hiking boots. She braced her feet on the solid ground. He unlocked his head from the vee of her thighs, lowered his chin and swept his head out behind her, rasping the tender skin of her inner thighs, scraping the full sweep of her crotch. As she stumbled at the loss of his steadying influence, he rose up behind her and grasped her arms.

"Steady, Kass."

He drew her back against his chest. Forcing her spine straight, forcing her head into the nook between his shoulder and his jaw. She breathed heavily, felt her chest heave with each exhale, felt the heaviness of her breasts in the silk cups of her bra. Her button-down shirt gaped; she sensed his gaze sweeping downward, burning a trail through the thin material to the pucker of her nipple.

"So, Cali girl," he said against her hair, "if you like the city life so much, what are you doing here in the woods of Colorado?"

"What's with all the questions, Trevor?"

"Just making conversation."

Frustration and guilt rushed through her, adding to the massive web of tangled emotions. She was doing it again—being cold and prickly to someone who'd taken the time to help her out, who was trying to make up for past mistakes. She had to get a handle on this, to get a handle on him. She shook herself free, turned and faced him—and immediately wished she hadn't. It was hard enough to concentrate without all six feet or so of him so close to her, a big lumbering hunk of breathing, sweaty man in the warmth of a hot summer morning.

He deserved an answer, he was waiting for one, and standing here, she couldn't think of a legitimate reason not to tell him the truth.

"I suppose," she began somewhat reluctantly, "that it started with my grandfather."

“Ah.”

“He had this great big plot of land in Texas, half of it cultivated, half left to grow wild,” she explained. “He was an amateur herbalist and knew the name of every plant on his property.”

“As brainy as his granddaughter,” Trevor murmured. “You spent a lot of time there, then?”

“Not at all,” she responded. “My mother would have never allowed that. I had school. I had...lessons.”

Dance lesson. Etiquette lessons. Piano lessons.

“I spent many of my summer’s there, that’s all.”

The best summers of her life, she remembered. Not a scheduled activity for almost three months. Not a single textbook that had to be read, not a single concerto that had to be memorized. Long days bright and full of discovery by her grandfather and uncle’s side as she plucked samples for the house. Sage, thyme, rosemary, Saint-John’s wort and so many others, fragrant, mysterious and full of magic. She, her Grandpa and her uncle—when he could join them—would spend hours meandering over the property, watching a seed go from sprig to flower to fruit. Quiet, slow hours that seemed to stretch on forever.

That perhaps, was the greatest gift Grandpa and her uncle had given her; the memory of all those sweet, shared uncluttered hours. The feeling that she—tall curvaceous, big brained Kassady—had been important enough in someone’s life to merit the deep-focused expenditures of a commodity as precious as time.

“What are you thinking about?”

She glanced up at him and took a sharp, painful breath. He’d spoken in a low voice, deep and resonant, and he stood just by her side. Big. Big and breathing, warm and all *male*.

“Tell me,” he urged, “what you were just thinking of.”

“Why?”

“Your entire facial expression changed.” He traced his finger down her cheek. “You went soft, Kass. Like you were thinking of a lover.”

She sucked in a deep breath of surprise. His hand was gritty against her cheek. Then laid his hand against her jaw, a warm pressure. The world beyond him spun on a kaleidoscope of color and light.

A lover.

She knew nothing of lovers, nothing of passion, nothing of the crazed mindlessness that overcame a sane woman when she was in love. Though she'd seen it happen to her friends over the years. Such a strange phenomenon, she'd thought each time she witnessed that distinct intensity. Such a waste of energy and time, lolling about gazing into a lover's eyes. What did they see? She'd never seen it in Lance's eyes, dear, sweet, kind Lance, who had left her with such biting words.

Trevor's eyes were deep, intensely gray, a shade she couldn't recall seeing before now. Deep and full of shifting currents, strange messages, strange emotions, strange meaning—curiosity and concern and something far darker, far more needy, far more intense.

The pressure of his hand on her jaw intensified, and she felt another pressure, deep inside her, a coiling, heated sensation in the hollow of her abdomen. A fierce and sudden hungry taste in her mouth for things she'd not known in years—the touch of hot flesh, the taste of a man's sweat, the desire of sex.

The need was deep, visceral and sent shock waves right down to her hiking boots. "My grandfather," she said swiftly, trying to regain control of herself. "I was thinking of my grandfather. We had many good years together before he died."

Trevor didn't say anything. He didn't move. She could see the reflection of her own quivering response in his gaze. He made no attempt to move back and break the invisible vines that held them to the spot. His grip tightened suddenly on her jaw. "Hell, Kass. This was going to happen sooner or later."

Then he crushed her mouth with his lips.

Chapter Four

Had lightning jagged from the sky and lit the grass aflame or the river swelled with spring thaw and over ran its banks? Kassady knew she still stood in this patch of sunshine, oblivious, locked in Trevor's kiss. For in her mind all the world had stilled around her—the leaves in the trees suspended by a halted wind, the tea-colored froth of the river frozen in place, the bird's song silenced in mid-warble.

There was nothing gentle in this kiss. The bristles of his beard needled her chin as his mouth angled against hers. He stole the breath from her lungs then filled them anew with the coffee-scented heat of his own. His fingers dug and held it captive, held it still.

He held her mind captive as easily as her mouth. She stayed still—first out of shock, for nothing in her entire life's experience had prepared her for this sensation of being complete and utterly overwhelmed by the touch of a man's lips. Then, as his mouth opened, as he stroked her lips with his tongue, Trevor made a sound deep in his chest unlike any sound she'd ever heard a man make in her presence, a sound she understood only out of some previously unknown instinct—a sound of fierce wanting. The intensity of his wanting throbbed in the air around them. In her ears, in her mind, in her mouth.

He wants me.

The knowledge ricocheted through her, galvanizing her to abandon all that was left of her sensibilities, and she opened her mouth eagerly to kiss him back.

There was that sensation again—the same sensation she'd had earlier in the day when he'd fallen into step beside her—that sublime synchronicity of thought and motion. Their mouths moved against each other as if they were part of one creature knotting in upon itself. Now

awkwardness in this, no clanking of teeth, no muscled wrestling of tongues. They anticipated the other's movements with an unspoken, instinctive sensitivity, with all the ease, grace, beauty and seductiveness of a dance between two long time lovers. The more they danced this kissing dance, the more she wanted it to go on and on.

They could have been kissing for minutes or an hour. She could have kissed him all through the day and night...but then he drew a rough, cool hand up the warmth of her ribcage to the tingling swell of her breast.

With that shock of sensation, the enormity of what was happening exploded upon her. She startled. Their lips separated. She stumbled back out of his grip, off balance on the flat ground, and stared wild-eyed at the man who'd just kissed her senseless. She pressed the back of her forearm against her lips in a vain attempt to stop them from throbbing.

He just stood there, spearing her with his fierce gray gaze while his chest rose and fell at a rate that matched hers. He took a step closer.

"Uh-uh," she said, throwing up her hands to ward him off. "Stay right where you are, Trevor."

"Why, so you can start over thinking what just happened between us?"

"And breath, too."

"I don't want you to over think this. I don't want you to think. And I'll help you with the breathing part—"

"Trevor."

He stopped, curling his hands into fists. "Damn it, Kass, I want to kiss you."

"You just did."

"I just started—"

"I don't even know you." The words were true, but they felt like a lie on her throbbing lips. "I don't even like you."

"You could have fooled me."

"You caught me with my guard down. Do you usually go around kissing the shoes off unsuspecting women?"

"No." His gaze scoured her body. "And it wasn't your shoes I was trying to get off."

She realized with a shock that the hem of her shirt hung out over her belt. She still felt the shape and texture of his hand upon her rib cage, over the swell of her breast, as if she'd been branded with his palm print. With fumbling frantic fingers struggled to tuck herself back in.

"Listen," she said, her mind racing, "if this is some kind of man-in-the-wilderness, return-to-our-native-state kind of thing, find another girl. I'm not your type."

"I thought the same until about five minutes ago."

"A little sexual attraction—is natural," she stammered, not believing the things coming out of her mouth, "between two healthy people in our situation. But that's no reason to indulge in—"

"I really got to you with that kiss, didn't I?"

"I hope you didn't think by bringing me out here you could talk me into a more intimate relationship," she continued, feeling herself flush with embarrassment," because I'm not interested, not even a little bit.

"Actions speak louder than words, Kass, and your actions were just about screaming—"

"I think it's time we headed back. "She tightened her belt a notch and turned her back to him. At her feet lay the bag of blossoms she'd collected. It had come unseated—undoubtedly when she'd dropped it as he kissed her—and a dozen blossoms were strewn across the ground. She crouched down to stuff them back into the bag. "Then you and I are going to have a nice sensible conversation across the kitchen table about the limits of this—ow!

She hear the angry buzz, felt the vibration against her hand as something pieced deep into her finger. She fell onto her backside, yanking her hand out of the bag of blossoms and splayed it in front of her, just as the wasp flew away.

She winced as the pain shot straight up to her elbow intensifying with each throb. She shook her hand in a vain effort to diffuse it.

Then Trevor was there, crouching in front of her. "You got stung."

She gritted her teeth. "Obviously." She eyed him warily, saw the glimmer of humor on his face, but chose to ignore it. "Occupational

hazard,” she muttered, still cringing from the pain. “It happens occasionally.”

“Tsk-tsk. You should know better.”

“Stop gloating. It isn’t attractive.”

He held out and made a futile attempt to suppress his grin. “Let me see.”

“There isn’t anything you can do about it.” She snatched her hand away from him, hating herself for acting so childishly. “The pain will go away sooner or later.”

“Sooner if you let me look at it.” He reached for his pack and pulled out an ice pack he was using to keep the food cool. He waved in front of her face. “Come on, Kass.”

“That won’t help any.”

“Yes it will. Trust me.”

“I trusted you already and that led to kissing.”

“Well,” he said, shrugging those broad shoulders with a rogue’s grin, “I promise I won’t kiss the sting, okay?”

She frowned at him. She wondered how he could be so lighthearted when she was still reeling from the after effects of that kiss. She wondered why she was behaving so completely irrational. Mentally berating herself for losing her cool, she shoved her hand toward him. He took her hand in his, turned it this way and that, then gently probed the lump forming on the tip of her finger. “You’re not allergic, are you?”

“No,” she said, biting her lip at the stinging cold as he placed the ice pack against the lump. “I’ve been stung before.”

“You could still have a reaction.” His gaze shifted from her hand to her face. “You are looking a little flushed.”

“It’s the weather,” she said, flatly. “In case you can’t tell it’s hot.”

His lips quirked. “Feeling any tightness in the chest? Having difficulty breathing?”

Her breath caught in her throat. “Trevor, can I have my hand back now?”

“I need to check your pulse,” he murmured, sliding his rough hand down to her wrist and probing the delicate bones. “You feeling itchy?”

“Trevor—”

“I’m serious,” he said, the quirk turning into a slow and wicked grin. “We’ve got to check for hives.”

“You want to look for them, too?”

“You making me an offer, Kass?”

She pulled her hand away and scrambled to her feet. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself at my expense.”

“Not as much as I’d like to be. And believe me, it wouldn’t be at your expense.”

She stared at him, a hard, fierce stare, but the glance that usually made her students scramble to do her bidding only made Trevor’s wicked grin dissolve in a deep chuckle.

“Well,” he said, lumbering up to his full and imposing height, “that settles one question.”

“What question?” She flexed her stinging finger, wincing at the pain, as she went back to collecting the blossoms—more carefully this time. “What are you talking about?”

“You might talk the talk and walk the walk, Kass.” His gaze swept lazily over her figure. “But you’re no ice queen.”

A shaky chill flooded her, dulling everything from the sting throbbing on her finger to the desire throbbing in her veins. The words rang in her ears at a pitch that could shatter glass. As the coldness flowed through her body, stiffening her spine and making her neck muscles go rigid, she wondered why everyone assumed that just because she didn’t sway her hips or bat her eyelashes at any man who caught her eye, just because she was past thirty years of age and didn’t exhibit any paroxysm of terror at her single status, just because she had the ability to hold her emotions in check.—that she had no feelings at all.

Because she did—she did. Trevor’s words were positive proof, the sting of them sank deep and were still shooting poison.

She turned a gaze on him that she knew was frigid as an icicle, and just as sharp. “Did Dr. Breton put you up to that kiss,” she asked, “to have something to laugh about at the next conference?”

“Come on, Kass.” His gaze dropped, then slid up her body again. “There’s no conspiracy. I didn’t expect this anymore than you did. If I had,” he said, striding over to where his camera lay against the tree, “I wouldn’t have used the ice-queen jab.”

Her nostrils flared, but she clamped her mouth shut. She’d said enough. She’d said too much. The cold flush that had shot through her ebbed, leaving her feeling hot, dizzy and out of sorts.

“It always sends you into such a tailspin,” he continued, picking up the camera. “Whoever stuck that label on you must have been a real bastard. And blind, as well.”

“Just drop the subject.” She scrambled to her knees to shove her equipment back in her pack. “As a matter of fact, let’s just forget about this entire day.”

“Too late. The deep dark secret is out.” He placed the camera back around his neck and slipped the pack over his shoulder and shook his head. “Can’t take it back now, Kass, no matter how much you want to.”

“Watch me.”

He *was* watching her, for he set those intense gray eyes on her with sudden sharpness. “Are you okay?”

“I’m *fine*.” She pushed the last of her equipment into her pack and jerked the ties closed, hoping none of the vials would crack before she made it to the lab. “I’ll be even better when we’re back at the cabin.”

“You sound hoarse.”

She stood up and swung the pack over her shoulder. “From arguing with you. An exercise in futility.”

He took three steps toward her and placed his hand on her forehead. “You’re warm. Do you feel dizzy?”

“Don’t start with that insanity again.” She shoved his hand away and brushed by him. “It wasn’t funny the first time.”

“I’m serious.” He fell in step beside her. “You have any Benadryl in your pack?”

“No. I don’t usually get stung.”

“Yes, well, by all reports you don’t usually get kissed senseless in the middle of the woods, either.” His jaw clamped shut as she shot him a look,

then he spoke more softly. "You should prepare for these surprises, Kass. Ever heard of anaphylactic shock?"

"Listen to you." She tried to quicken her pace, but his long-legged stride always kept up with her. "I'll take Benadryl when we get back to the cabin, *Dr. Trevor*. Is that good enough for you?"

"No," he said. "You will take some when we get back to the truck. I have a first aid kit there. I should have brought it with me."

He swung his pack over his shoulder. "By the way, it *is* Dr. Richmond. Trevor Richmond, M.D., specializing in trauma and emergency medical treatment." He met her gaze as her eyes widened. "Yeah, that's right, Kass. It's for real. Apparently, neither one of us is exactly who we seem."

* * * *

Trevor placed the blade of the chain saw into the pine trunk, holding the buzzing tool steady as steel met wood, then sank deeper to spew off a shower of sawdust. He'd been working on this old trunk since morning, when dew still clung to the blades of grass. Now, from the shelter of the shed, he could see that the sun had dried the grass stiff. Insects buzzed lazily in the heat. Sweat soaked the collar of his T-shirt where bits of wood fiber clung, making his skin raw and itchy. He ignored the irritation and concentrated on sizing the trunk. A few more passes of the saw and the log would be just the right length for his purpose. Then he could really get down to work.

The saw slipped free of the trunk. A perfect circular slice of wood fell to a pillow of chaff on the shed floor. Trevor shut the chainsaw off, planted it on the worktable nearby, then raised the can of soda to his lips. The drink had long lost its tingle and its coolness, but at least it was wet as it slid down his throat. As he finished swallowing, he swiped his arm across his forehead and stepped out the door of the shed, hoping to catch a breeze.

His gaze shifted, inevitably, to the basement window. The glow of bare blubs was visible through the grime. She was at it again. Rather, she was at it, *still*. In the week since they'd returned from the park, it seemed as if she hadn't budged from the gloominess of the basement. But for the sight of that bare bulb and the sound of clanking glassware coming from

the basement, he wouldn't even know that he had a gorgeous woman for a roommate.

He heard a crackling noise. He glanced down and discovered that he'd crushed the empty can of soda in one hand. He turned, tossed the can toward the recycling bin in the shed, then ran sawdust-flecked fingers through his hair. Wasn't he a charmer? The only woman he'd seen in over a year that he'd taken a liking to—colleague of a friend, no less—and at the first opportunity he'd attacked her like an animal.

He'd scared her away so thoroughly that she hid from him like a groundhog, popping her head out of her subterranean home only when he wasn't around. The only evidence he had that she was sleeping and bathing was the unmade bed and the vague scent of coconut shampoo lingering in the hallway in the wee hours of the morning.

A real jerk, that's what he was. A genuine first class jerk. He'd made it clear the moment she walked into the cabin that he wanted no visitors, and now he'd gone out of his way to prove it. Yeah, she was gorgeous. Yes, he had the hots for her. He was acting as if he had as much control as a sixteen-year-old-boy at a peep show.

She deserved better. His jaw tightened. His lips went thin. She deserved a hell of a lot better than Trevor Richmond, failed M.D., unemployed drifter crashing at a friend's home and temperamentally unable to put together a resume. She deserved better than to have a guy like him eyeing her at every turn, pawing her the moment the opportunity arose, making her afraid to leave the basement. But he wasn't going to give her an apology. Oh, no. Maybe he shouldn't have kissed her out there in the woods, but there was no way she could deny she enjoyed it. He'd felt her response. Hell, he could still feel her response every time he closed his eyes. He could still feel it now, rushing through his veins. There was unadulterated, raw animal passion between them. If she were the kind of woman to indulge in that kind of relationship, he would be happy to oblige, but if there was one thing he'd learned about Kassady Gibson, it was that her head ruled her heart. At least, it tried to—until a jerk like him used primal lust to shake her up.

No, he had no intention of apologizing. But that didn't mean he couldn't try to make amends. At the rate she was working, she'd definitely be done with her research soon, and then he wouldn't have the opportunity.

So he stood outside the shed and glared at that grimy basement window as he had at least a dozen times already that day, running the arguments through his head again. Wondering how he could make amends at all, when at the first sight of her he was certain he'd turn into that mindless lusty creep again.

This time, he didn't turn back to the shed. He crossed the yard, swung open the door, pounded across the kitchen floor and confronted the basement door. Before he had second thoughts, he swung it open and descended the stairs.

She sat at the desk, peering at a book, tracing the words with her fingers as if she were looking for something specific. The basement also smelled of the strong scent of the blossoms she'd picked several days back.

Her finger paused as she raised her head and stared at him steadily. He had the feeling she'd been expecting him.

"So, this is where you have been hiding out," he said, gazing around the room. "Impressive."

One sleek brow arched high on her forehead. "It's not a hide out. It's a work space."

"It's definitely serving double duty right now."

"Don't flatter yourself, Dr. Richmond. I'm not hiding from you. I'm not hiding from anybody. I'm working."

"You work too much."

"I enjoy my work. I always work this hard. I'm good at it. And I'd like to get back to it."

"And rid of me."

"Yes."

He tilted his head to the side. She'd put aside the social graces she usually exhibited. He had a feeling Dr. Kassady Gibson rarely reached this point in a relationship. Whatever this point was.

“I have thought up a solution to our problem, Kass.”

“We don’t have a problem,” she retorted. “I’m working here just fine, and you’re staying out of my way. No problem.”

“Prickly today, aren’t we?”

“Busy.”

“Hmm.” He sat down on the steps and rested his elbows on his knees. “Keeping busy works for me, too.” He jerked a thumb toward the basement window. “I’ve done more work in the past week than I’ve done in the past few months.”

“Congratulations. I’m happy for you.”

“But it hasn’t done the trick,” he said, ignoring the sarcasm in her voice. “I still can’t get my mind off you.”

He heard the sudden catch of her breath as she turned her face away. “I suggest,” she said, “that you try harder.”

“I have a better solution.”

“Oh really?” She tucked a tress of hair that escaped her ponytail behind her ear, then turned her attention back to the book in front of her. “When are you leaving?”

“I’m not.”

“Pity. I could use the peace and quiet.”

“I’m asking you out on a date instead.”

She froze in place. Her fingertip whitened on the paper.

“Dinner and a movie,” he continued. “Nothing fancy. There’s nothing really fancy around here anyway.”

Kassady placed a piece of paper inside the book in front of her, then closed it. She stood, turning to face him and rested a curvaceous hip against the edge. She took a deep breath that made her breasts strain against the buttons on shirt.

He remembered what those breasts look like, glazed with residual water from her shower, in the light of the master bedroom.

“Trevor, listen to me,” she said, her voice pitched as though she were speaking to a child—or a very stupid person. “I’m sure in most circumstances you’re a really nice guy. You must be, because your conscience keeps sending you back to me to apologize.”

“I’m not apologizing. And I’m not making amends.”

Her brows rose high on her forehead. “You’re not?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then that just proves my point,” she continued. “You keep coming back to do...something. And all you end up doing, in the end, is making the situation worse.”

He resisted the urge to wince. He supposed he deserved that. He supposed he’d have to accept it. But he didn’t have to like it.

“See? You’re not denying it.”

“That I can be a jerk? No, I’m not denying it.”

She exhaled and it was as if some of the tension left her body.

“Hey, you could at least attempt to disagree with me, you know. Tell me I’m really a charming guy.”

She rubbed her forehead with the palm of her hand, glancing at him once from under her hand. “The bottom line is this, Trevor—we don’t have to be best friends. We don’t even have to like each other.”

“Exactly.”

“Now, I have to admit I’m not very good at this either. I’m used to living on my own. I haven’t had a roommate since boarding school.”

Boarding school? Trevor kept his mouth shut and filed that little insight away.

“And certainly not a male roommate,” she continued. “Not since—well, not for a while.”

“For a while?” He realized, with a sudden shock, that she had once had a male roommate. She’d once had a lover. As soon as the thought crossed his mind he fought a grin. Of course she’d had a lover. Kass was a very attractive woman. Still, his curiosity got the best of him. “Since when?”

“Since so long ago that it doesn’t matter,” she said, waving the air as if to wave the words away. “And this...this attraction between us. Just think about it for a minute.”

“Only a minute?”

“It’s biology, that’s all,” she continued, as though he hadn’t spoken. “We can’t even be in the same room without arguing. To indulge in

anything more...intimate...would be, well, pretty shortsighted and stupid.”

“I agree.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” He straightened and rolled his shoulders. “That’s exactly why I’m asking you on a date.”

She shook her head as if shaking off a fog. “I don’t get it.”

“So we can get to know each other better. Instead of seeing me as a brawny, beer-chugging woodsman, you’ll get to know the read me, uncluttered by charm and wit.”

She blinked at him. And then her lips—those soft, irresistible lips—twitched into an unwilling smile. “Charm and wit?”

“I know, it’s blinding.”

“So blinding that I haven’t seen it yet.”

“Well, you will if you go on this date with me. And it’ll dim after a few hours across a dinner table, for sure.”

“So,” she said as his meaning seemed to dawn on her, “you think that we’ll see how unsuited we are.”

“That’s the plan.”

“You do realize how ridiculous that sounds?”

“Of course.”

She crossed her arms and leaned more deeply into the desk as if thinking about research for work. “I think it’s almost weird enough to work.”

“If it doesn’t work, you’ll have at least gotten dinner and movie out of it.”

“Mmm.”

A silence fell between them, broken only by the low sound of music coming from her laptop.

“So,” he finally stated, wondering why his chest felt tight, anticipating her answer. “Are you going to go on a date with me, Kass? Or do I have to come over there and kiss you senseless first, to convince you?”

Chapter Five

It's just dinner and a movie.

At least that's what Kassady had been telling herself for the past forty-five minutes as she searched her meager wardrobe. The bulk of it covered her unmade bed. She pressed a hanger against her chest and looked down at the blouse and skirt she'd paired together, wondering if it was too formal. Maybe she should go the T-shirt and jeans route. As though she didn't care what she looked like. As though she dated contradictory, sexy, aggressive, impossible-to-figure-out men like Trevor every day.

Yes, that's what she should do, she thought as she tossed the outfit on the bed. She reached for the jeans, then caught sight of the simple black dress that became anything but once she put it on. Hmm, it was just what she needed. Really cool, really feminine. Casual enough to imply she hadn't put forth too much effort, but dressy enough to where she didn't look like a slouch.

She jumped at the sharp rap on the door.

"Ready to go when you are, Kass."

She snatched up the dress and pressed it against her body, as if he'd burst in to see her standing in nothing but matching satin bra and panties. She glanced at the clothes strewn everywhere, the shoes toppled out of the closet, the clutter of jewelry on the countertop.

"I'll be right there."

Her hair was pinned up on the top of her head in shapeless fashion. "Just a few more minutes."

What the heck am I doing?

She was making too much of this, that's what she was doing. *Look at this room.* If he could see it, he'd think she was doing all of this for *him*.

What had gotten into her? She was nervous, then that meant she cared, and she didn't.

She just wasn't prepared, she told herself. It had been so long since she'd been on a date, even a weird date like this, and she hadn't brought much to wear. When she'd packed for the three weeks, she had expected to be in front of her laptop or trekking through the woods or, at best, doing a little shopping for her uncle's upcoming birthday. Certainly not going on a date with anyone. Especially not a date with a man who almost managed to kiss her senseless—and relished in the fact. She curled her hands into the dress. She wouldn't think about that. No, she couldn't think about that, but her body was already remembering, and reacting, with all the fierceness of that bright hot day in the woods.

I kissed him back. I kissed him back not because he expected it, not because it was expected of me, but because I wanted to kiss him back, because I couldn't help myself.

And that, Kassady concluded, was such a totally shocking, unexpected, mind-bending experience that she'd spent every moment since wondering why, after having experienced no more than awkward, uneasy and only vaguely satisfying sex, she found herself electrified by one man's singularly world-rocking kiss.

She concluded that it was a fluke. A moment out of reality. An alignment of the planets, a phase of the moon, an excess of estrogen in her bloodstream, a total eclipse of the sun. Or maybe a combination of all the above. Too rare and strange ever to happen again. She had no doubt that Kass the ice queen would freeze again the next time Trevor approached her.

She shook herself. She couldn't stand here thinking about that, because if she lingered too much longer in this bedroom, he'd start wondering what was taking her so long. He'd start to wonder if she *was* dressing for him, carefully choosing her clothing right, down to the satin panties and bra. She didn't want him to think that. She didn't want to give him the wrong idea. After all, this was a date where they were supposed to end up *not* liking each other, right?

She slipped into the dress, then frantically ran around the room stuffing the clothes back into the closet in one huge muddled heap. She dragged a comb through her hair as she kicked the shoes atop the pile. She closed the closet door with one swing of her hips, then ran to the bathroom to stare at her reflection in the mirror while her mind went through a paroxysm of indecision about lipstick, eyeliner, blush and mascara.

She plunged her hand into her makeup bag. Her fingers fell upon an old square case. She pulled it out and flushed as she realized what it was. She hadn't had to use what was inside this little yellow case since Lance. She snapped the lid open and pressed the flexible rubber ring between her fingers. She wouldn't need this, of course, she told herself as she lifted the rubber cup to the light and check for pinholes. She and Trevor would hate each other before this night was through.

Several minutes later, she rolled her shoulders, tossed a sweater over her arms and opened her bedroom door. *Cool. Be cool*, she told herself as she strolled through the hallway and the living room. *So you had one really unbelievable kiss. Be satisfied with that, Kassady, because lightening never strikes twice.*

By the end of the night, he'd know the real her. The frigid icicle that had turned off so many men. That ought to send him running for a hotel room. Alone.

She found Trevor standing outside on the deck, leaning against the railing, staring off into the trees. He'd tucked a simple button-down shirt into a pair of crisp khaki's. *He fills out a pair of khaki's well.* She pushed aside the stray thought as quickly as it appeared in her mind. Then he turned around as the screen door wheezed shut behind her.

She saw the surprise in the depths of his eyes. She saw, too, the widening of his pupils, the way he straightened. Every rising goose bump on her body sensed the way his gaze slipped from the flats on her feet to the unruly mass of her barely tamed hair. In that moment, she felt indescribably delicate, fragile, one-hundred-percent vulnerable female.

"You look wonderful," he said, then just as quickly frowned. "Am I supposed to say that?"

She shrugged. Felt the scrape of material across her breasts. “I’ll let it pass for...for now.”

“I’ll try to be more of a jerk later.”

“I have no doubt that you will keep your promise.”

He grinned. She felt the twitch of her own lips. Felt a current of humor between them, a quiver of sensation that felt dangerously good. But the date wasn’t supposed to start out like this. This was all about proving how incompatible the two of them were.

Trevor was the first to turn away. “Come on.” He dug his keys out of his pocket and clambered down the deck stairs. “I’ll do the driving.”

Kassady was about to offer to do the driving—after all, her shiny new Mercedes was parked on the gravel and it certainly looked a lot safer than the rusted, beat-up hulk of a pickup truck Trevor was heading toward—but she bit her lip on the offer. The point of this ‘date’ was to learn to dislike each other. Better they be battered around in a dirty cab of that dusty old vehicle, than lulled to comfort in the air-conditioned luxury of a buttery leather interior.

But if she’d been looking for sensory deprivation, she soon discovered she was seriously misguided. The instant Trevor revved up the engine and turned the pickup truck onto the road, she found herself overwhelmed by remembering a summer in her early teens at her grandfather’s home. When Grandpa had allowed her to go to an afternoon movie with the sort of boy her parents would never have let her date. The kind of boy whose hands were rough from working on his family farm. The sort of boy whose body rippled with muscles earned through good honest work, the sort of boy who entertained no lofty academic aspirations, the kind of boy who had no qualms about introducing an innocent girl to the delights of necking in his father’s pickup truck.

A truck just like this one, she thought, bouncing down the country road toward town. The windows were wound down and the balmy evening air tossed her already wild hair about. Perhaps she should have secured it back with a clip instead of taking the quick and easy headband route.

The breeze filtered through the easy knit of her cotton sweater and rippled the sheer fabric of her dress over her knees. The cab was set high,

so much higher than her Mercedes, so despite the bouncing of the vehicle over the road, she felt as if she were floating above it, as light hearted and powerful as a teenage girl anticipating an evening of hot petting.

She hazarded a glance toward Trevor from the safety of the far end of the cab. Though the breeze had twice hefted her skirt to mid-thigh, Trevor continued to stare at the road with all the intensity of a race car driver. The roar of the engine and the squeak and rattle of the truck precluded easy conversation. But then again, conversation never seemed to be easy between them. Reason one why she and Trevor were such an ill-matched pair.

Several miles and what seemed like thousands of years down the road, he pulled the truck to a stop in front of the only eatery in town, a building that looked more like a run-down, warehouse than a restaurant. A painted sign swung from a post, the single word Diner painted on it in big red letters.

Kassady swung down from the pickup, put her hands on her lower back and stretched out the kinks. Trevor came around the truck and his gaze fell immediately to her breasts. She slid her hands to her hips and tried to ignore the widening of his pupils. "So, this is the only place to eat in town."

"Yes," he responded, "and it's the best one, too."

"That goes without saying," she said with a dry tone.

"You'll love it, city girl. You'll see. Some of the best pizza you will ever eat."

She arched a dark brow in his direction. "You just so happen to be speaking to a pizza expert, Trevor. I've eaten every brand of pizza available in the American market. I know the best of every kind—thin crust, thick crust, Sicilian, brick-oven—"

"You haven't eaten pizza until you've eaten Mama's pizza."

"Mama?"

"The owner of the diner. Everyone calls her Mama."

"Something tells me," She muttered, "that this is going to be very interesting."

"Yes, it is. So prepare yourself, Kass, for the treat of a lifetime."

The place was packed. It surprised her greatly. She knew the population of this town and was positive that all of the citizens were gathered here tonight. Country music wheezed out of tiny speakers. Cigarette smoke formed a blue haze around ceiling fans that spun lazily. Trevor led the way to the only available table, a rickety one in the far back corner of the room. A *very* small table, she discovered, once she settled down on the well-worn chair. Her knees bumped Trevor's under the table. She slid her legs around, then crossed them, to avoid further contact.

He didn't notice. Or at least, he pretended not to notice as he drummed his fingers on the table and waved a hand at a formidable looking woman lumbering through the crowd toward them. Suddenly, she gave Trevor a very wide, very friendly smile.

"There you are, Trevor. I've been wondering where you've been."

"Been a little busy, Mama."

"I see that." Her gaze settled on Kassady, and Kassady felt herself being sized up from her sandals to her tousled hair. "This ain't a cousin of yours. Never seen this pretty thing before. What are you thinking, bringing her into town?" Mama said the words with a slow, teasing smile and a wink in Kassady's direction. "You're going to disappoint every woman under sixty when they see her and you sitting here all cozy."

"I'm just a decoy," Kassady responded, straightening in her chair and wondering if they really looked 'cozy'. "Trevor and I are...friends."

"If you say so. If you say so," Mama retorted, a wicked gleam in her eyes. "I'm Mama."

"Kassady Gibson," she responded, grasping the woman's hand in her own.

"Doctor Kassady Gibson," Trevor added. "Don't let the pretty face fool you, Mama. She's smart as a whip."

"I can see that. She's here with you, isn't she?"

"She's only here for three weeks," Trevor corrected, giving Mama an eye. "She's a city girl and doesn't know a thing about pizza, so how about getting us something that'll knock her socks off."

“Sugar, there’s already something at this table that’ll knock her socks off. But if you don’t know what it is, I ain’t going to be the one to tell you.”

Kassady gave Trevor a look as Mama turned away, hands flapping, shouting the order toward the kitchen.

“Local character, huh?”

“Definitely. “He leaned back in his chair. Speaks her mind.”

“I hope her pizza is as spicy as she is.”

“Spicy, huh? I pegged you for a plain-veggie-pizza sort of girl.”

Plain. Ordinary. Boring. “You pegged me wrong.”

“Apparently.”

“I take it we don’t get to choose a crust here.”

“Nope.”

“And what, exactly, does ‘the works’ mean?”

“Whatever Mama has in the kitchen. That the way it goes around here, city girl. Plain and simple. No fancy fruit. No exotic cheese. What you see is what you get.”

“Too bad the men around here aren’t the same.”

A waitress placed two beers on the table and then zipped away before they stopped rattling. Trevor curled a hand around the frosty amber glass and lifted it to his lips. When he finished drinking, he swiped his mouth with his arm then slammed the mug back on the table.

“What the hell is that remark supposed to mean?”

Cowboy, she thought as she took a hesitant sip of the yeasty brew. *Bad table manners. Gets testy when he’s the butt of a joke.* More reasons why she and he made such an ill-matched pair.

Well, what the heck. She might as well plunge headfirst into danger. “It means that I still find it hard to believe that you are an emergency room doctor, Trevor.”

“I’m not a doctor anymore.” His knuckles whitened on the beer mug. “Quit my job several months back and I have no intention of returning.”

“Did you lose your license?”

“No.” A muscle in his cheek ticked. “Doesn’t matter. I’m not working as a doctor anymore.”

Miss Carliner was jumping up and down in head now, pearls a-flying, hands a-waving, warning her to change the subject. It was obvious by all signals that Trevor didn't want to talk about it, but a stronger force was at work here. She wanted to know what happened, why he'd given up on medicine after what must have been years of schooling. She wanted a reason to dislike him. He spoke before she could ask.

"What you see *is* what you get, Dr. Gibson. I was a doctor, yes. But now I'm unemployed, I'm crashing at a friends' house and I have no visible means of support. While you," he continued, after pausing to take another gulp of beer, "are clearly employed, on a working vacation and have a very visible means of support."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you're a rich girl." His gaze slipped down to the diamond necklace resting against her throat. "And I didn't need that fancy car parked in my driveway to figure that out."

Her back straightened as a spark of anger arrowed through her. "Oh, really?"

"Definitely. It's more than the expensive necklace. Or the classical music you listen to while you're working and the boarding school. You ooze wealth, Kass. It's been bred into your blood. It's like a cool frost you give off your skin."

She watched a drop of moisture slide down the side of the mug. She traced it with her finger. "Do you have a problem with wealth?"

"No," he responded, a little too quickly. "I don't have a problem with it because it isn't an issue. Because we're not an issue."

"Good. Because I *am* wealthy" she said, scraping the chair out a little from the table. "At least, my parents are. But that doesn't mean I didn't work hard to get where I am today." She tilted her head to the side. "The last time I checked, you couldn't buy a PHD or an M.D., for that matter."

He winced, then looked away from her, across the heads of the crowd. The speakers hissed between the twang of country songs. He twirled the mug absently in his hand, rattling it over the warped wood boards of the table. When he looked back at her, it was with a tilt of his head.

"I was just making a point, Kass."

“Were you?”

“I don’t give a care if you’re rich or poor. I know you worked hard to get where you are. I was just trying to point out how different we are.”

“And that’s the entire point behind this...” She couldn’t make herself say ‘date’.

“Yes, that is the point.”

“So, I take it,” she said, with more bite than she intended, “that you were born into poverty?”

He glared at her. “Not exactly.”

“Standing in bread lines? No shoes for your feet?”

“I was born on a ranch in Wyoming. One of six kids.”

“And you all slept naked in one bed, I suppose?”

He arched a brow. “My charm and wit are working on you already. You’re as cold as an icicle, and we haven’t even made it to the movie yet.”

She dropped her gaze from his. Okay, maybe she was laying it on pretty thick. But she resented his inference that she was born with a silver spoon in her mouth. Maybe she had been. She’d never been hungry, she’d never wanted for anything. Well, almost anything. There was more to growing up than having food, clothes and lots of educational toys.

“My dad was a veterinarian,” he continued, “but most of the time the ranchers couldn’t pay him much. So me, my brother and sisters worked like dogs every summer keeping the family ranch running. Got to medical school on a scholarship. Wouldn’t have been able to go otherwise.”

“Congratulations.” She paused as the anger dulled. She’d never had to worry about money for schooling, though she had gone to undergrad and graduate school on scholarships and fellowships. She’d never had to work a day in her life to pay for school or anything else for that matter. “That must not have been easy.”

“No, it wasn’t.” He drank the last of the beer. “And it put dirt under my fingernails, the sort that never comes out.”

Her gaze fell to his hands. They were clean, but they were work-hardened, strong hands. Nicked here and there, sprinkled with hairs on the back. They’d be rough against her skin, she found herself

thinking...remembering. As they had been that day in the forest, when he'd scraped his hand up her ribcage and cupped her breast—

"The only dirt I ever got under my fingernails was from my grandmother's garden," she found herself abruptly, in an unnaturally high pitch. "Easy enough to wash off."

A silence stretch between them. She told herself that this was another difference between them. Wealthy and not-so-wealthy. Hard-working and... Well, she wasn't about to characterize herself as a slacker. She'd worked hard to get where she was today. A different kind of work.

"You told me about your grandfather," he said, his voice lower. Rougher. "You spent your summers there."

"I wish I could have spent more time. But during the year I was off in boarding school."

"I thought boarding schools only existed in books."

"Oh, no," she responded. "From first grade up, it was boarding school for me. The best my parents could afford—"

"First grade?" His dark brows hot upward. "You were what...seven years old?"

"Actually," she murmured, "I was six."

"That's insane." He leaned forward as if urging her to deny it. "You've got to be kidding me. Your parents sent you away when you were six?"

"To one of the most exclusive boarding schools in Switzerland."

Kassady let her gaze drop to the condensation pooling under the beer. *Mother, please let me come home. I don't like it here. I don't understand people. They talk funny.*

"My parents are both surgeons at *St. John's Health Center*," she explained in a light, easy voice. "They have been developing cutting-edge surgical techniques for over thirty years now. People...of their stature...send their children to boarding school."

"I see."

"I got a hefty allowance." She shrugged a shoulder, felt the slip of the sleeve against her arm. "All my parents' friends' kids were sent to Europe, too. And my parents visited often. I think I saw them more when I was in boarding school than when I was in Maryland."

Mother, why can't I stay home with my nanny?

"I learned a lot," she continued. "Art lessons, piano lessons, ballet lessons. Never a free moment."

"Sounds like hell."

"It was."

She startled. The words slipped out before she could stop them. She stared at Trevor, who had pushed aside the glass and was leaning on the table, watching her closely.

"I got used to it," she added swiftly. Defensively. "I think it built character. I got the best education money can buy. And it made me...independent."

"Lonely."

She shot him an irritated look. "You know, just because they sent me off to boarding school doesn't make them bad parents."

"Uh-huh."

"They spent every Sunday with me when I was home. We ate dinner together at least three times a week."

"Three times a week."

"My mother's parents barely had a penny to their name. Her parent's sacrificed to send her to medical school. She sacrificed the same for me."

Trevor settled back in his chair as she laid that little piece of information on of him. "That will teach me to make snap judgments. It's just..." He frowned as he perused her face. "I just don't like the image of you as a six-year-old little girl with ponytails... Did you have ponytails?"

"Yes and buck teeth, too."

"A six-year-old little girl being shipped off to some institution for the remainder of her childhood."

"It wasn't all that bad," she murmured. "I had never known any other life. I had nothing to compare it to, and I was one of the rich ones, one of the fortunate ones."

"When I was six years old I was learning to ride a horse. I was learning how to drive cattle and lasso a calf. I'd helped my father birth more foals than I could count. And every night, without fail, the family ate dinner together."

Kassady curled her hand around her glass and traced patterns in the dew. She could imagine his youth. She'd imagined a similar life for herself a hundred thousand times when she was a little girl and still could dream of the kind of family life she saw on American TV: a mother who stayed home, a father who came home in time for dinner, friends who lived in neat little houses with front lawns and played on the grass after dinner. She'd been almost twelve years old before she realized that a lot of people really lived like that.

She crossed her legs and met his gaze. "We're very different, Trevor."

"Worlds apart."

"Couldn't be farther."

"Absolutely."

The point was moot. She met his gaze across the width of a restaurant table and held it steadily, and wondered why they were trying so hard to make it *hard*.

Truth be told, she didn't really care where he came from. She never cared about that sort of thing. She hated that he'd even brought up the fact she'd been born into a wealthy family. It shouldn't make a difference. It wasn't where you came from that mattered; it was where you were, and how you got there.

In many ways, she and this man sitting across the table from her, etching her face with his intense gray eyes, were in the same place. She had a PhD in Academic Studies. He was a doctor of emergency medicine. Her parents were doctors. She knew how much schooling, how much training went into getting an M.D. She knew it took brains and grit and hell of a lot of motivation to obtain it. What she didn't know was why—after so much time and work—he would give it all up.

Suddenly, she didn't want to know. To know—to understand—would be to draw closer to this man she could not stop thinking about. She didn't want to get closer to him. They'd shared a hot kiss, yes, but that had to have been an aberration—trick of the hot sun and fresh air. If it had continued, surely he'd have discovered what it took Lance three years to discover—that she was as frigid and unfeeling and sexually cold as an icicle.

A tray clattered on the table. She leaned back in her chair, as did Trevor, as the steam of the hot pizza filled the space between them.

“One pizza, everything on it,” the waitress said. “I’ll get you more beer as well.”

Kassady stared at the creation between them as the waitress walked away. Her stomach growled; her eyes widened. “There has to be two inches of ingredients on this.”

Trevor pulled off a slice and eyed it from different angles. “It’s a little low tonight.”

She picked up her own slice, folded it as best she could and took a healthy bite of the tip. She closed her eyes as the taste of fresh pepperoni, firm mushrooms, melted cheese and spicy sausage filled her mouth.

“Well?” he asked. “What do you think, city girl?”

Defying Miss Carliner’s teachings, she spoke around the food in her mouth. “It’s an out of body experience.”

“There’s one thing we can definitely agree on.”

* * * *

A cool soft rain greeted them when they left the movie theater later that evening. Trevor welcomed the chill. After sitting in a dark room next to Kass for two and a half hours, he needed a cold shower.

“We’d better get to the truck,” he said roughly, shrugging his jacket over his shoulders, “before the sky really opens up.”

The air in the truck was humid and heavy, the inside of the windows fogged over. He turned the key and revved up the motor, trying to ignore the subtle scent of coconut floating in the air as Kass settled in beside him.

The urge to get her talking swamped him. Chatter. Mindless chatter. Anything to get his mind off the warm female body beside him, the way her damp skirt clung to those long, long legs...

“So,” he started, “how did you like the movie?”

“It was good.”

“Good, huh?” He shook his head. “Come on, Kass. Which car crash did you like the best?”

“I wasn’t keeping count.”

“You were counting the bodies, then?”

“Nope.”

“You’re supposed to argue with me. Tell me you would have preferred another movie.” He turned out onto the highway and headed down the road just as the patter of rain intensified on the windshield, “Some sort of romantic comedy or heartfelt drama.”

“Those selections would have been fine as well. But I did enjoy this movie.”

“You’re lying.”

She made a sound of protest. “I am not!”

“Kass, there was more testosterone in that movie than in an entire class of ninth-grade boys.”

“I noticed. So what?”

“So there’s no way you could have enjoyed it.”

“Is that why you chose it?”

“I chose it,” he said with a defiant tone, “because *I* wanted to see it.”

“Very Neanderthal of you.”

“Thank you.”

“Nonetheless,” she continued, “I really liked the movie.”

“Why?”

“You really have to ask?”

“Humor me.”

“Men can be so dense,” she said. “Who starred in that movie, Trevor?”

“Hugh Jackman.”

“Bingo.” She shifted on the vinyl seat. “Do I really need to explain anything else?”

Trevor concentrated on the road while he grappled with this new insight into her mind. He’d intentionally chosen the most male-oriented movie on the marquee and bought tickets for it without even asking what her choice would be. He’d wanted to put her off. He hadn’t given a thought to the relative hunk value of the leading man.

But what disturbed him more was the fact she’d admitted she’d liked the movie because of the leading man. Which was tantamount to admitting she had a secret sexual fantasy life.

“What is it?”

He glanced at her, then realized that he'd chuckled out loud. He fixed his gaze back on the road, but not before getting a good view of bare knees. She'd hiked her skirt up to dry it. "You," he said, shaking his head. "You and Hugh Jackman."

"In my dreams."

"Precisely," he continued. "You keep surprising me, Kass."

"Why does that surprise you?" She asked, a slight edge to her voice. "I *do* have blood in my veins."

"I know that." He heard the hitch of her breath. "I just can't believe no other guy has noticed it before now."

Silence stretched between them. They were bordering dangerous territory. He felt her hesitation, a vibration in the air around them.

"Whoever the bastard was," Trevor continued, "he must have been missing a vital part of his anatomy."

"Well, she said in a rush of words, "he certainly thought I was missing a vital part of mine."

"Excuse me?"

"He left me," she said, "and told me I was the coldest bitch he'd ever known."

The words hung in the air, thick and heavy in the sudden silence. Trevor glanced at her profile, saw her chin jutting, the patrician lines of her brow, her upturned nose, her trembling lower lip. She turned her face away, granting him an obstructed view, but enough for him to see the quiver of her jaw, a strand of wet hair trailing from the corner of her mouth.

"I can't believe," she mumbled, placing her hand to her mouth, "I can't believe I told you that."

"Kass—"

"No, don't, Trevor. Don't start with the niceties. I deserved what he said to me. I hadn't been the ideal girlfriend." She hugged her elbows and flattened her back against the seat. "I mean, I was faithful. We lived together. We enjoyed each other's company—"

"You're describing all the attributes of a golden retriever, Kass."

“He wanted something more,” she continued. “Something I wasn’t capable of giving him.”

“He wasn’t the one.”

“Not that I didn’t try. I tried. Believe me I did. For three years I tried to give him what he wanted, but—excuse me? What did you say?”

“You were with the wrong man, Kass. If you have to ‘try’ that hard, then he wasn’t the right man. End of story.”

She stared at him with a mixture of astonishment and confusion. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It *is* simple.” He felt the tightening of his own jaw. “At least, that’s what I’ve seen with my family. My friends.”

Over and over again. Each one of them. Coming home from school, or from church, or from work, with a strange light in their eyes. Talking about ‘this guy’ on her lips, ‘that girl’ on his. Weeks, or occasionally months later, they’d be engaged or even wed. He’d seen it happen over and over, jealously wondering when it was going to happen to him.

You travel too much, they had said to him. *When are you going to find a nice girl and settle down? The instant she walks into my life, guys. The instant she walks into my life.*

Suddenly, he was flush with images of Kass, naked as the day she was born, walking out of the bathroom.

“Why, Trevor,” she said, her voice soft. “You’re a romantic.”

“What?” He tried to shake the image away so he could focus on what she was saying. “Me?”

“Yes. You believe in love at first sight.”

“Whoa, city girl,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t know a damn thing about it.”

“Yes, you do. You don’t strike me as the monkish sort.”

“I’m not,” he responded. “But I’ve been traveling so much these past years that I haven’t had time for more than the sort of relationship where the word *love* is never mentioned.”

“Yet you believe in love at first sight.”

“I was only expressing my observation of empirical evidence,” he said stiffly. “That’s how it worked for my siblings. My best friend.”

“And it’s how you expect it to happen for you.”

He flexed his hands over the steering wheel, saw the knuckles whiten, set his eyes on the wavering white line in the middle of the road. The rain splashed against the windshield, the wipers squeaked it away. The engine rumbled under his foot. And for a moment life contracted upon him, reduced in all its dense complexity to the simple space within this cab. To the living, breathing attractive woman sitting beside him, and the beckoning warmth of her body. The surprising tenderness of her heart.

“Yes,” he admitted. “I suppose so. Someday.”

“Someday,” she repeated. “Yes...” She stared out the window at the blur of the wet night. “I hope it happens like that for me, too. Someday.”

He heard the wistful note in her voice, the almost childlike wonder. The man she’d been involved with must have been a dolt. Kass did have a heart. A delicate one, easily bruised. Covered with a lifetime’s worth of emotional armor. Armor he wanted to tear off with raw male energy so he could take that heart in his two hands and hold it safe.

The engine roared as he pressed down on the accelerator. Not now. He wasn’t ready for this now. His life was in chaos. He had nothing to give a woman, nothing but a few nights of heat and a lot of enthusiasm. Kassady Gibson deserved much, much more.

This ‘date’ had been a mistake. The more he got to know the woman, the more ice he melted off her. The more he wanted to reach the molten heat of her...the more he wanted her. He’d spent the evening light-headed, his loins engorged, erotic visions rolling through his mind. He didn’t know how much longer he could share a house with her without sharing her bed.

Something had to give.

Chapter Six

As soon as Trevor took the key out of the ignition, Kassady stumbled out of the truck. She couldn't take another minute in the close space with that brooding hulk of a man. He exuded power, heat and sexuality in waves so powerful she couldn't breathe. She needed fresh air, she needed to clear her head of too many fleshy images.

She stepped down into a puddle, spraying her bare legs with mud. Rain pounded her head and shoulders soaking her in an instant. Hunching over, she scrambled around the truck and headed blindly for the deck.

"Here."

Trevor loomed out of the darkness and thrust his jacket over her head. Out of reflex, she clutched it against the roar of the rain and tried to ignore the fragrant warmth of it seeping around her from the brushed cotton inside. She followed him up the stairs. He snatched the key out of the turtle near the plant by the door and fumbled with the lock. He thrust the door open and they both burst inside.

Kassady slipped his coat off her head and flicked the light switch. She glanced up at the fluorescent bulb when nothing happened. She flicked it again.

"Power's out," he stated, his deep voice rumbling in the darkness. "I noticed it while we were driving. For the past mile or so, none of the houses have lights on."

"Oh."

"There are candles in the drawer by the fridge. Stay here—I'll grab them."

He moved into the darkness. She pulled off one of her sandals, smearing her fingers with mud and grit. She toed off the other one and pushed them to the side of the mat. She heard him yanking open drawers,

then fumbling amid the clanking silverware and wooden spoons. Finally, she heard the strike of a match. A golden glow flowed into the kitchen.

She gingerly walked across the cold floor and turned the faucet on. She rubbed her hand free of the grit under the cool stream of water. By the flickering light, she noticed the array of candle nubs rolling on the counter as he set them up and lit them, one by one.

“Do the lights go out often around here?”

“Every time there’s a decent storm,” he murmured. “It’s an old transducer or something.”

“No flashlights?”

“Can’t keep enough batteries around for them.”

She turned the faucet off and shook her wet hands. An awkward silence filled the room broken only by the sound of rain outside, the flare of another match, the hiss of a drop of water falling from Trevor’s dark hair into the hot wax.

He lit the last of the candle stubs and then blew out the match. A curl of smoke rose, hazing between them. He raised his lashes and looked straight at her.

“Who needs flashlights,” he said in a tone that made her skin tingle. “Candles are much more romantic.”

She froze, the skirt of her dress pasted to her legs, while the top clung to the fullness of her breasts. She could only see his eyes—those fierce gray eyes. The rest of him was an outline of a shadow against the gloom.

Standing here wet, but fully clothed, she felt as naked as that day he’d seen her damp from the shower. Kassady expected the lights to buzz on, the coffeemaker to burble, the old electric mixer to spark up and whirl. If there were a way to tap into the electricity zapping between them, there’d be no need for a new transducer in this neighborhood.

“It’s customary,” he said, his voice husky and close enough that she could feel his breath on her cheek, “for a man to get a good night kiss after a date.”

“Trevor—”

“I’ve decided we should stop pretending.” His wet khaki’s brushed her wet skirt, his chest brushed the hardening nubs of her breasts. “Pretending,” he continued huskily, “that we don’t want each other.”

She couldn’t seem to find her tongue, to make it work, to protest as she should. He was too close. His lips hovered a kiss away from hers, his large body loomed warm against her. She wanted this. The knowledge was beyond question. She wanted to lick the rain off his chest, feel the softness of hair against her tongue.

“I want you, Kass.”

His words rang hushed in the flickering light of the candles. Phantom lover, phantom words, veiled by the night. She made a sound. She didn’t mean to. It slipped through her lips, half protest, half moan. The heat rose between their bodies like steam.

“I’ve wanted you,” he continued, “since the day I walked in on you and saw you naked as the day you were born.”

She met his eyes, searched them as her throat closed up on her. His eyes blazed with naked passion. This was where she should push him away, she thought. This was when she told him she wanted nothing to do with him. Kassady Gibson never ‘put out’ on the first date. She rarely put out at all. Definitely not to a man she had nothing in common with; a man who made it quite clear his intentions were purely physical. Such lusty displays used to always turn her off. *Control yourself*, she’d think, feeling a jolt of scorn at a date grown too frisky. *Control yourself*, she’d think as her heart closed up.

Her heart wasn’t closing up now. Now, at the sight of Trevor standing before her, in the heated glow of his eyes amid the echo of the bald, honest passion of his words, she felt her heart opening, unfurling...she felt lightening strike twice.

“This doesn’t make a damn bit of sense, Kass,” he murmured, his lips rolling over her name. “All I know is that I want you naked on my bed.” He curled one work-hardened hand around her waist and thrust the other into the wet tangle of her hair. “I want to thrust deep inside you. I want to make you moan.”

A tremor rippled through her with all the might of an earthquake shattering her inhibitions, settling with molten liquid heat between her legs. He seized her close, so close she felt the breath of his words on her mouth.

“You want it, too, Kass.” He spoke in a strained whisper. “I can feel how much you want it. Feel how much *I* want it.”

He pressed his erection against her. The thin layer of material separating their skin couldn’t disguise the feel of him—the long, hard ridge, the indentation at the tip—the throbbing strain of it. Her legs slipped open, one of his thighs slipped between. He pressed up against her.

She scraped the fibers of his shirt with her fingernails. She told herself that all he wanted was to ease that pressure in his loins, she was just a convenience, nothing more. But it didn’t matter, for she felt the pressure, too. She felt the heat and the moistness, the engorged sensitivity between her thighs—now masterfully being manipulated by the subtle thrust and scrape of his thigh.

“Damn it, Kass—”

He made a sound. A deep-throated grunt of a sound, then claimed her lips in a kiss. She placed her open hands against his chest. Out of instinct, out of reflex, in an effort to hold on to something as the world slipped off its axis and spun wildly through the cosmos. Trevor was strong. Trevor was solid—and Trevor kept on kissing her though she was certain the kitchen floor had just given out beneath them. Amid the swirling muddle of her mind came one clear thought: *I want him and he wants me—we can have each other.*

His flat nipples beaded under the wet shirt, his heart throbbed under her palms. He smelled like rain; clean, crisp and wet. The edge of the counter cut into her hip. Her body swayed over the sink; rainwater dripped from her hair onto the chrome. The rain roared outside; the raindrops beat a rhythm against the windowpane. Her heart raced, stumbled and then raced anew. She slanted her mouth against his.

He shifted and pushed one of his hard thighs between her legs. Her legs slipped up over his hip and she was open to him. He moved his leg in

a way that made her cry out, then he coaxed her mouth to remain open for his kiss and claimed her tongue.

She stopped thinking. There would be enough time to wonder how a heartless, frigid professor who'd never found any sexual pleasure with a man would suddenly be moist, hot, eager and willing with this stranger. She couldn't begin to understand it now. Her brain was so fogged with desire for Trevor. So...she let herself go.

She dragged her hands up past his shoulders and wound them around his neck. She explored his tongue in her mouth, she reveled in the rumbling music rising from his chest. His lips broke away from hers, trailed wet kisses down her jaw. He plundered the delicate hollow beneath her earlobe, traced the quiver in her throat, lower, to where he'd seized her breasts with eager hands and pressed them up, to where her nipples strained against the damp material of her dress.

Her head fell back as he unzipped the back of her dress. A few heartbeats later, his mouth closed around one of the buds, heating the tender flesh with his breath through the lace and satin bra. She clutched his head in her hands, her voice constricted with passion.

"Trevor..."

He stopped abruptly. Withdrew his face away from the pillow of her breasts. Dragged himself up and cupped her head between the palms of his hands.

"Look at me, damn it."

She blinked and stared at him, her eyes heavy-lidded, through the flickering light of the candles.

His breath hissed from between his teeth and his eyes widened. "Look at you," he murmured. His hands tightened on her hair. "You're supposed to push me away, Kass. Go all cold or something."

"I don't want to."

The words came out breathy, uneven, but as sure in conviction as if she'd stated that the world was round. He shook his head, cast his gaze over her features from her forehead to her throat. "You're supposed to turn into the ice queen, Kass, not this hot sexy thing."

Something seemed to have short-circuited her brain functions, because she couldn't seem to put words together—she couldn't give a darn right now that she was leaning back over the counter with a virile stranger pressing against her, his intentions obvious and hard.

Her body felt alternately hot and cold, but mostly hot from the sparks that tingled across her breasts to the honeyed liquid heat pooling between her legs. She was no ice queen, not tonight. She knew that with a certainty that came from some previously unknown instinct. She wanted Trevor in the most basic primitive way. She didn't want to think beyond that.

"I'm beyond the point of conscience, Kass, so don't count on my being a gentleman anymore. I'm about to drag you to my bed."

"*Oh*," she responded, breathlessly. "Oh...okay."

He swore. "Push me away. Tell me how different we are."

"We should stop pretending," she responded in a voice she did not recognize as her own, "that we don't want each other."

His pupils constricted to pinpoints and his face went tight. Kassady sucked in a breath that trembled all the way to the deepest part of her lungs, and she felt the strangest surge of sensations...the strangest surge of raw female power.

"I want you, Trevor," she continued, her voice coming hoarse through her tightening throat. "I want to feel you deep inside me. *Now*."

* * * *

The instant the words left her mouth, Trevor grabbed her hand, swiveled on one foot and dragged her out of the kitchen. He strode through the darkened living room, pulling her behind him. She stumbled over the corner of the couch, bumped her shoulder in the hallway, let her fingernails scrape the wall while he pulled her along—until he pushed open his bedroom door and drew her inside.

Without the candles it was pitch dark. A flash of lightening speared rows of silver light through the blinds, illuminating a computer sitting on a desk, a pile of scattered papers and—dominating the room—a rumpled unmade bed.

He pulled her against him. Claimed her mouth in one sure, hungry kiss. Walked her backwards until the bed bumped against the back of her knees.

For a brief moment, panic fluttered in her belly. It felt, oddly, like virgin panic. For this was where it was going to happen. On this bed, with this man. It wasn't her first time sleeping with a man, but it felt like it. She trembled like a young woman. She wanted him as if she'd never had a man before, as if she'd never been touched before.

She responded to the subtle pressure of Trevor's body; she fell back upon the twisted sheets. The mattress bounced her up, then let her settle. She let her arms fall above her head. The stretch lifted her breasts. She waited for Trevor's body to fall upon hers. She couldn't see him fully in the darkness. She arched, wanting him with growing urgency.

Lightning flashed again, illuminating the ripple of the muscles of his bare shoulders as he wrestled his shirt off and tossed it away, the light faded, leaving them in darkness again. She heard the clink of a belt buckle, the whirl of a zipper, the anxious rustle of clothes being kicked off. She raised herself up on her elbows, silently begging for the lightening to flash anew.

"Take your clothes off, Kass."

She sat up, reached behind her to undo the zipper the rest of the way. She wiggled out of the damp dress tossing it to the floor with a wet thump. She reached back again, unhooked her bra, setting her breasts free of the underwire. The cool air drifted over her skin.

As her hands went to the waistband of her panties, the lightning flashed again. She was acutely aware of the light on her bare skin, illuminating the curve and sway of her breasts. She'd always been self-conscious about her body. She'd always considered herself too large-breasted, too voluptuous, hated how two oversized mammary glands could turn sensible men into drooling teenage boys. Her breast size had always seemed to be another barrier to overcome before any male colleague would take her seriously as a professional. She'd even considered having her breast size reduced but had never gotten around to it.

In this split second when the light illuminated her nakedness to him, she saw his entire silhouette stiffen. A throb of desire. In that moment, she was inordinately glad she had never gone for the surgery. Because her body excited Trevor. She had the power to excite Trevor. She let her head fall back. Her hair slipped over her shoulders. She thrust out her breasts, waiting for the light again. Eager for his hungry perusal. But what she got instead was his hot lips on her collarbone. His rough hands scraped across her ribcage, his springy hair brushed her throat as he kissed his way over the rise of her breast to the hard, aching peak. Her elbows trembled, weakened. She sank against the bed, he sank with her, and she raked her hands through his hair.

Skin met skin and she realized with a jolt that he was naked. His thigh brushed against her leg. She felt the hardness of his erection pressing urgently against her thigh. Her pulse rate shot up. She dragged her hands out of his hair, down to his nape, through the hair that curled there, then over the flexing muscles of his bare shoulders. His skin was smooth, hot and different in texture from hers—deliciously different. The muscles beneath were hard and strong. She ran the flats of her palms over him, envisioning in her mind what she could only feel.

He found her mouth in the darkness; she turned her face to meet his. His body lay heavy upon hers. She wanted him deeper. She wanted more than what his kiss could give her.

She wanted more, yes much, much more. She wanted to feel him lose control atop her. She wanted to feel the surge and thrust of his male power, turning her into something soft and womanly, deserving of desire. So this was what it meant to make love, she thought. This was that madness that possessed a woman and made her throw all caution to the wind—

And it came to her that she had more sense than this, that she should know better than to *care* about someone, she should know better than to open her heart even a crack to a man who had no intention of sticking around and then she told herself, just as swiftly, that she *didn't* care, that this was sex, just sex, and it didn't matter.

She wanted this experience to go on forever and ever, never ending, never stopping, never losing its heat. She wanted to be *whole*, in some way beyond the physical, in a way she didn't dare to try to understand right now. In this incandescent moment, only Trevor could do that—only Trevor could make her whole.

He shifted his weight, then reached down to tug gently on the waistband of her underwear.

“Off,” he growled.

“Okay.”

She lifted her bottom as much as she could with him lying on top of her. He tugged but the panties barely moved in his one handed grip.

“Get these off, Kass,” he said, urgency rippling in his voice, “or I swear, I’ll rip them off.”

“Do it.” She nipped the corner of his mouth.

“What!?”

“Rip my panties off, Trevor.”

After a short pause of what she was certain was disbelief, he tugged so hard that he lifted her bottom clear off the bed. Material ripped; the sound of it filled the room. With scrambling hands he grabbed another handful of fabric and ripped again, until he tore the underwear free of her body and sent them flying through the air. The amount of money she’d spent on them should have her screaming at the careless treatment of them.

She couldn’t have cared less. Designer underwear could be repurchased, but she would go into cardiac arrest right here, right now if Trevor didn’t make love to her. Lighting flashed anew and branded an image in her mind—the sight of Trevor, strong and naked rising up over her.

Then all was sensation, from her hair follicles to her toes. The scratch of his hair-dusted skin against her breasts, her stomach, her thighs. The thrust of his knee as he parted her legs. The rake of his fingers through her hair, the heat of kiss on her brow as he probed the tender, swollen place between her legs with the tip of his erection. The rumble in his chest as he found the moist heat to the entrance of her body and eased a fraction of himself inside.

She sucked in a breath that vibrated all the way down to her toes. Her body arched, her legs opened wider, her hips tipped as she welcomed him, wordlessly urged him deeper. She flexed her palms across his back. His strong body quivered beneath her hands. His kiss settled on her temple, his breath fell hot on her face and she realized with a rush of sensation and wonder that Trevor was trembling.

Trembling. From want of her. From his passion for her. A glow lit somewhere deep inside her—a warm, vital glow—from the knowledge that in this moment she wanted...*desired.*

Then he pushed the length of himself deeper, and all rational thought ceased. Their fit was tight, the friction exquisite as he pulled out slowly to thrust in again. On the next thrust, she lifted her hips to meet him.

They fell into the wonderful synchronicity she'd first noticed that day in the woods—they moved as fluidly and effortlessly as two ballet dancers in a well rehearsed pas de deux, though they'd never danced before, they'd never been this close before. She knew on some instinctive level, how he was about to move before he moved, and she adjusted her own motion to his. She met each thrust in perfect rhythm. She opened herself when he moved within her, closed upon him as he pulled away. She took the lobe of his ear in her mouth as he burrowed his lips deep in her hair. She softened for him as he grew impossibly hard, impossibly anxious, as he quickened his thrusts—hard, deep, fast.

She wrapped her arms around him and cried out, his hair against her mouth, his hips flush against hers, as the tightness in her cinched to a pinnacle of impossible pleasure, a tight knot pulled to infinitesimal smallness and then breaking, loosening, sending her mind reeling off in the brightness of the brightest light—as he groaned and lifted her hips to meet his in the final deepest thrusts of pleasure.

Much, much later, when the storm had ebbed to the lightest patter of rain on the windowpanes and the air had turned cool, Kassady blinked open her eyes in the darkness. Trevor still lay half-atop her, his head buried in her hair, her body still throbbed, less frequently now, but each throb reminded her of the pleasure that had shattered her mind.

She held Trevor tight. Their bodies were slick against each other, damp with perspiration. At some point, Trevor had pulled a thin, cool sheet over their joined bodies, and it clung sweetly to their legs. In his sleep, Trevor had curled his hand around her hip. Possessively. She was naked, warm, drowsy and sated in a way she could not put into words. He was heavy atop her, but she dared not wake him. She wanted to lay here a little longer. Just like this. And pretend that she could feel as warm, contented and loved as she did this very moment...forever.

Chapter Seven

Trevor woke suddenly to a sound—a distant, crushing sound he wasn't quite certain he'd heard—that faded the instant his senses settled. He blinked his eyes open. His lashes tangled with long dark hair that assailed his senses with the scent of coconuts. The bright light of morning streamed through the blinds and fell upon the shell of a woman's ear.

Kass.

In one heady, hormonal rush he forgot altogether about the sound that woke him up. The memories of the night flooded over him and buried the last remnants of sleepiness of out his veins. He reached for her, curling his hand over her ribs and turned her body to face his. Lazily, she rolled into the circle of his embrace and made a soft, sleepy-woman sound that brought new warmth to his blood.

Kass. He wanted her. Again. He still couldn't quite believe she was lying in his bed, naked under the sheets, her hip pressed against his belly. He couldn't quite believe he'd actually experienced that incredible sex last night. He couldn't quite believe that the warm body lying beside his was the same stick of dynamite he'd lit in the darkness of that storm. Nor could he believe how he felt this morning—complete without remorse and hoping, eager for more.

Maybe he was still sleeping. Maybe he was still dreaming. This couldn't be Kass, his Kass, sleepily blinking open her eyes. This couldn't be Kass whose soft lips, under his perusal, were curling into an inviting smile.

Then he heard another sound, coming from outside the window. It was the distinctive sound of a car door slamming.

A car door?

Trevor rushed out of bed and raced to the window. He shoved his hand between the slats of the blinds and peered through the opening, toward the driveway. He realized with a jolt that the sound that had woken him out of a deep, contented slumber was the crunching sound of tires against gravel. Parked behind his truck and Kass' car was a sports utility vehicle that looked vaguely familiar.

"Kass," he muttered, "get dressed."

"Hmm?"

"Get dressed—*now*."

He snapped the blinds closed and turned toward the bed. Kass arched herself up and stretched her arms above her head as she yawned. The sheet slipped down, exposing one perfectly formed, dusky nipple, puckered as if waiting for a kiss.

He seriously considered slamming his bedroom door shut and having his way with her—and to the hell with his visitor—but just then he heard footsteps pounding on the deck. The kitchen door squeaked open.

"Trevor?" called a male voice from the kitchen. "Are you here?"

Kass' mouth flew open, frozen in mid-yawn. Trevor searched for and found his underwear beneath the bed. He shoved one leg in, then the other, and groped wildly for a pair of shorts.

"Trevor," she whispered, a flush beginning to show at the base of her throat. "Who—"

"Find something to wear, and do it quick."

"Dr. Gibson? Trevor?" came the male voice again from the living room this time. "You've got to be here, your vehicles are in the driveway."

Kass made a muffled squealing noise and flailed in the bed, searching the room for something to cover herself with. Trevor managed to jerk on a pair of shorts just as Colin's shape loomed into view at the end of the hallway.

"Hide," Trevor whispered. "Quick."

"There you are," Colin said from the hallway as Trevor fumbled with his zipper. "Do you always leave the front door open?"

In one swift move, Kass rolled herself in a sheet and dropped of the other side of the bed, just as Dr. Colin Breton strolled into the room

“Look at you.” Colin gave Trevor a once over then whistled between his teeth. “You look a wreck. It’s nearly noon. Are you just getting out of bed?”

“Yes,” Trevor responded, fumbling with the button on his shorts and trying not to look in Kass’ direction. “You have an issue with that?”

“Man, you really are taking it easy,” Colin stated. “Can we trade places for a week or two? I tell you, since the baby came, all I can think of is the chance to sleep until noon.”

“You didn’t tell me you were coming.”

“That’s a nice way to greet a friend.” He looked Trevor up and down. He glanced around the room, a line appearing between his brow. “I tried to call, but the phones are out after last night’s storm... Hey, what’s that hanging off the lamp shade?”

Trevor gave up on buttoning his short, grabbed Colin by the shoulder and pushed him out of the bedroom door. “Go make some coffee, Colin. I could use some, couldn’t you?”

“Hey, what’s going on?” Colin lost his footing as Trevor propelled him blindly out of the bedroom. Colin stumbled, braced on hand against the wall, then glanced down at the torn fabric wrapped around his shoes. “What the heck is that?”

“Nothing.” Trevor grabbed for it. “Get out of here, Colin. Go commune with nature for a while.”

Realization spread like a light across Colin’s face. He gave Trevor a look so full of incredulity that Trevor would have laughed, if it had been a laughing matter.

“Coffee, Colin,” Trevor repeated in a loud, meaningful voice, giving his old friend a look he couldn’t possibly mistake. “I’ll be out in a *few minutes* and then you can explain to me why you decided to drop by *unannounced*.”

Then Trevor slammed the bedroom door on Colin’s bright, curious eyes and incredulous grin. Kass’ bed ruffled head peeked above the edge of the bed. “That’s...that’s Dr. Breton, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You didn’t tell me he was coming.”

“I didn’t know he was coming.”

“Doesn’t he have a newborn baby? And a wife just out of the hospital?”

“Last time I checked.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

“Did he...?” She bit her lip as she rose, nymph-like from the tangle of sheets—sheets she struggled to hold close to that magnificent body. “He didn’t see me, did he?”

“I don’t think so.” Trevor lifted a fistful of the remnants of her panties. “He saw this though.”

She groaned and dropped back down into the pool of sheets.

“I’d better get out there and spin some tale,” he mumbled, letting the fabric fall back to the floor. “I’ll distract him or something, so you can get to your room and get dressed.”

Trevor buttoned his shorts, snatched his shirt from the floor and shoved his arms into it, while Kass padded around like a cat on a hot tin roof, searching for what was left of her clothes. A raw red spot stained one side of her throat, just beneath her chin. Stubble burn, he thought, and wished that he could rub her raw some more.

This wasn’t how he’d envisioned the morning after. In truth, he hadn’t envisioned the morning after at all. He could hardly think past the moment they made last night. But he knew this wasn’t what he wanted. He’d wanted to make love to her again. Hold her close. Watch her face this time when he thrust himself into her. Watch her face when she cried out his name at the peak of her pleasure.

Now there was Colin to contend with. Mucking up the works during a very fragile period of a very fragile relationship.

He thrust his hands through his tangled hair. He couldn’t think about this now. He had to go out and face Colin and do some spin control. If there was one thing Kass didn’t need after last night, it was a colleague of hers grinning, leering and making dirty jokes.

He was about to leave when Kass' soft voice broke into his concentration.

"Trevor?" She was shuffling around the room in the sheet, her dress waddled up under her arm."

"Yes?"

"Have you seen my bra?"

"Yeah," he responded as his throat tight. "It's hanging off the lampshade."

* * * *

Trevor strode through the hallway, angrily inventing stories to explain why he was in bed at noon, with a woman's shredded panties on his floor and glossy satin and lace bra draped over his lamp. He could try to write it off as a wild one-night stand with some nameless woman, except that Colin had to have noticed there was no sign of Dr. Kassady Gibson anywhere in the cabin, though her car was still parked in the driveway. There was no sign of any *other* woman, either.

Then Trevor wondered why he was trying so hard to protect Kass' reputation. They were both single adults who didn't have to answer to anybody about their sex lives—least of all to an old buddy who'd busted in without any sort of warning.

The moment he entered the kitchen and saw Colin's rangy body sprawled on one of the chairs, a grin the size of Texas splitting his face, Trevor knew that there was no way in hell he could hide the truth.

A surge of conflicting emotions overcame him. He was, in part, relieved he didn't have to lie. He felt a fierce urge to yell to the mountains that he'd claimed Kass for his own. He wanted to strut around like a rooster. He wanted to restrain himself, as well. He had great respect for the woman he'd spent the night making love to, and he didn't like the idea that she'd be uncomfortable knowing a professional colleague had peeked into her private life. And overriding all those conflicting emotions was the incredible angry urge to wipe that lascivious grin off Colin's face.

"Well, well, well." Colin said, kicking the chair up on its back legs, stretching his legs. Here I am, thinking poor old Trevor, stuck up in that

godforsaken country cabin with that workaholic colleague of mine, probably ranting and raving over the loss of his privacy—”

“What the hell are you doing here, Breton?”

“—and me, in convulsions of guilt over putting you two in this situation, decide to take a ride up to see how you’re doing—”

“Don’t you have a wife and newborn?”

“—only to find one bed unmade and a pair of torn ladies underwear on the floor—”

“Enough.”

At the tone of Trevor’s voice, Colin shut up. He let the chair fall back to it four legs as his brows disappeared under the mop of jet black hair falling over his forehead.

“My, my, my...”

Trevor broke eye contact with his friend and made a beeline to the untouched coffeemaker. He yanked open the cabinet and plunked the can of coffee grounds onto the counter. “Ever hear of a telephone, Breton?”

“I tried calling,” he said, scratching the thick scruff on his chin and jaw. “The phone hasn’t been working this morning.”

“You should have called *yesterday*.”

“I tried, but I’ve got a house full of women. My mother, my wife’s mother, my wife’s sister, a baby nurse who must have been a Marine, and all of them on the phone spreading the news...”

“More excuses, Colin.”

“Trevor, I needed to get the heck out of the house for a while. Coming to see you and Dr. Gibson seemed to be the best excuse I could think of at the time.”

“It’s over an hour drive.”

“Exactly.”

Trevor glared at him, hard, until Colin looked away. For a moment, Colin looked almost sheepish.

“Give me a break, Trevor. An hour is nothing. It’s an hour when I don’t have to look at my lovely wife nursing out newborn child, knowing I’ve got to wait six whole weeks—” Colin stopped short. His face turned

ruddy in color. He eyed Trevor with pure envy. "Before I can send her bra flying over a lamp shade."

Trevor dipped the measuring cup into the fragrant grounds and heaped measure upon measure into the filter. Trevor understood too well. He didn't think he could wait another *minute* before dragging Kass back to the bedroom. But Kass wasn't his wife. Hell, she wasn't even his girlfriend. And if it weren't for Colin taking up space in this kitchen, Trevor would march back into the bedroom, confront Kass and figure out exactly *what* they were.

Blindly, Trevor slammed the filter of the coffeepot closed and yanked open the faucet to fill the pot. *What an ungrateful jackass I am.* Colin had saved his butt when Trevor had left South America. Colin had given him a place to live and all the time in the world to pull his life back together. And now Trevor stood here, wishing Colin would just disappear, when it was obvious his friend needed a friend.

"So," Colin said, watching him intently, "I guess you and the professor worked things out."

"Yes, we did." Trevor clicked the coffeemaker on and leaned a hip against the counter, giving Colin the eye. "We worked things out very, very recently."

"Ah."

"It hasn't been easy."

"Oh."

"In fact, it has been damn hard."

"I bet it has."

Trevor glared at Colin, as his friend's lips quirked. Colin struggled to control his humor and finally just cleared his throat. "So, things are still unsettled in this house?"

"Very."

"And here I am, Mr. Sunshine."

"Precisely."

"And right about now, you want me to march out that door and head back to my wife and child and my own private tort—"

"That isn't necessary, Professor Breton."

Both men glanced up in surprise. Kass stood in the doorway. She'd tossed on a bathrobe of some heavy, cream-colored silk that covered her from head-to-toe and brought out the sheen in her unbound hair. A glow lit her face—a silent flush of embarrassment—but she held her chin up.

She checked the knot on her robe, then stepped into the kitchen and thrust out her hand. "It's good to see you again, Professor."

"Best call me Colin," he drawled as he lumbered to his feet and took her hand. "Under the circumstances, that is."

"Yes...the circumstances." She gave a tight little smile, then stepped back into the doorway. Trevor realized he'd pushed himself away from the counter and was now standing, fists at the ready, as if prepared to battle his friend Colin if he made the slightest move toward her.

And all the while his gaze drifted over her, seeing in his mind's eye what the satin covered. She stood erect, her face cool and controlled, her chin just a notch below defiant, and he wondered how he could have ever thought her distant and frosty. It was all just a shield, and a brittle one at that, holding back the rumbling molten passion inside her.

"Please stay, Colin," she said, toying with the sash of her robe—the only evidence of her nervousness. "This is your cabin, after all."

"Yes, but I showed up without warning." Colin's green eyes twinkled with humor. "And I think you two could use a little privacy—"

"Nonsense."

She spoke firmly and swiftly. Both men looked at her in silence. Trevor watched the rising flush stain her neck. She couldn't seem to meet his eye.

"You made the trip here," she added. "There's no use in leaving so suddenly just because my lingerie is decorating Trevor's bedroom furniture."

Colin choked.

"Besides," she continued as Colin fumbled for a napkin to cover his coughing, "I think Trevor and I can keep our hands to ourselves for a few hours. Don't you think so, Trevor?"

She finally looked at him. A surge of electricity passed between them, intense enough to make light bulbs explode into a thousand

shattering pieces. He wanted her. He wanted to tear that satin bathrobe off her as he'd torn her panties off her last night. He wanted to feel the silky sheath of her along his shaft. He wanted to fill his mouth with the taste of her.

The he realized that she was expecting him to say something, and he couldn't for the life of him remember what he was supposed to say.

"Ah..." Colin said, clearing his throat. "Maybe it's best if I—"

"Stay for the afternoon, at least," she said firmly, looking away from Trevor. "I insist, Colin. We've got ground beef in the fridge. Trevor can use that grill outside to make us some burgers."

"Well..." Colin glanced at Trevor, looking for guidance.

"Besides," she continued, drawing his attention back to her, "while you're here, I'd like to show you some of the work I completed on my research for the journal."

Colin's eyebrows lifted. "Oh?"

"Yes," she said. "I always value the input of a fellow colleague who has vast experience with them as well. You're welcome to browse through my notes downstairs. I need to..." She pointed vaguely back to the bathrobe and the brittle shield of control quivered a little before she forced it still. "We can talk about your opinion when I'm more...presentable."

"Okay...fine."

Her gaze flickered to Trevor. A hesitant careful little look that set his blood on fire. She nodded to the coffee pot. "I hope there's enough there for me."

"Plenty."

"Good. I'll be back in twenty minutes or so."

Then she was gone, leaving behind her a lingering trace of coconut. Colin let out a slow, long whistle the moment he heard the bedroom door close. "Well, well, well, will the surprises ever end? Here I thought you were doing the wild thing with Dr. Kassady Gibson, tenured professor, working wonder, and low and behold, I find not the good professor in her designer suits and tight hair, but a gorgeous Amazon love goddess who smells good enough to eat."

"Watch your mouth, Colin."

“You’re one lucky son of a gun.”

“Shut up, Colin. You still take your coffee with milk and sugar?”

“I mean, when I got off the phone with you a little over a week ago,” he continued, nodding absently at Trevor’s question, “I thought that this was heading for disaster. You’ve been such a bear since you got back from South America, and Dr. Gibson can be one cold... Well,” he said, biting down on his words, “obviously I don’t know the lady well enough—”

“So, Colin,” Trevor said in a voice that was not in the least bit casual, “how’s Angie?”

“—until now. Man, oh, man, you could set the house on fire with just the looks passing between the two of you.”

“Tell me about this baby nurse.”

“Obviously,” Colin continued, ignoring the questions. “Dr. Gibson hasn’t turned you into any less of a bear. But I had no idea the two of you would hit it off so quickly.”

“But you hoped we would.”

“Yeah, of course. I wouldn’t have set you up otherwise.”

Trevor glared at his friend as Colin’s grin split as wide as Texas, again. Trevor had always suspected he’d been set up. Now he was certain.

“You son of a b—”

“Hey, after what I just witnessed this morning, you should be thanking me.”

“You’re worse than my mother.”

“Thank you. I like your mom and thinks she’s an awesome lady.”

“Go home, Colin,” Trevor muttered. “Go home to Angie. If Postpartum Depression sets in, it will be around this time. And I warned you about a certain surgical procedure I’d try out on you if I found out you set me up.”

“You don’t have the stomach for it, Trevor. And Angie has enough company, believe me. Neither wild horses nor the threat of your rusty scalpel will tear me away from this cabin. Not yet,” he warned. “I’ve got an invitation, remember? From the lovely Miss Gibson herself. It would be plain inhospitable of me to go driving away now. So you’d better fess

up, Trevor, because I'm not leaving until I hear the entire story about you and the lovely lady."

Trevor thrust the steaming cup of coffee toward Colin and met his eyes levelly and hard. "That will take all of ten minutes."

"So you say." Colin took a sip of the coffee. "I've got all afternoon to see for myself if that's true."

It looked, Trevor thought, as if Colin had set roots into the linoleum. Trevor sighed and resigned himself to the inevitable. He and Colin had known each other since they were children, attended the same schools for fifteen years, played on the same football team, struggled in the same trigonometry class. In just a way as this, Colin had dragged out of Trevor the entire sordid tale of what had happened in South American—a story Trevor had told to no one else.

So Trevor leaned against the counter, gripping his coffee cup and trying to form his thoughts into words. He could hear the vague sound of the water running in the master bathroom. It hurt to think. What he wanted to do was toss the coffee into the sink, tear down the hallway, and join Kass in that small slower. Run his hands over her wet flesh. Suck the nub of her nipple into his mouth. Make love to her against the tiles...

But there sat Colin, grinning, his feet planted firmly on the kitchen floor, taking his time with his cup of milky coffee. Trevor realized he didn't have words for what he was feeling. They didn't exist, not in any language he knew. His feelings for Kass were deep, muddled and visceral. He *wanted*. It was as basic as that. He wanted more than her body, but he wasn't ready to go down that path. He wasn't even ready to think about it. Everything was too raw, too fresh and too tender to expose to the bright open air.

"My God," Colin murmured as he watched Trevor struggle. "I never thought it would happen."

"What?"

"You, falling like a load of bricks."

Trevor's first instinct was to deny it. To shake his head or laugh it off, but he couldn't. He couldn't because he knew Colin might just be right. "It's isn't the right time, Colin."

“What?”

“The timing,” Trevor said, waving his coffee cup in vague circles. “It’s not right. I’m not ready for this. And neither is she.”

“Cupid doesn’t give a damn about timing.”

Trevor nearly spit a mouthful of his coffee across the kitchen floor. “Cupid?”

“Don’t laugh.” Colin got up from the chair and tossed the remnants of his coffee in the sink. “I remember the first time I saw Angie. Got shot clean through the heart. Felt it, too.” He yanked open the refrigerator door and sidled a glance at Trevor. “I felt exactly how you look right now. Like the arrow was made of lead shot and weighed about a hundred pounds.”

Again, Trevor couldn’t muster a denial. Neither could he say the *L* word. But he was honest enough with himself to realize that *something* had seized him. Something fierce, needy and uninvited.

“The good professor was right, you do have burgers in here.” Colin took the meat out and started to unwrap it. “Got propane for that grill? I’m starved.”

Trevor glanced at the clock over the sink. “Colin, it’s only eleven-thirty in the morning.”

“Hey, you single studs might be able to sleep until noon,” Colin responded, “but I was up feeding Joshua at six-thirty this morning. It’s was past lunchtime for me. You and your lady love will just have to have burgers for breakfast. Besides,” he said, a twinkle in his eyes, “what a man needs after a night like yours is some red meat.”

“Point made,” Trevor said, clanking his cup into the sink. “But I’m the one who’s making the burgers.”

“You burn them. No way to treat such fine ground beef.”

“Be quiet and get the Worcestershire sauce.”

Chapter Eight

Kassady sat in the basement, in the office chair that had seen better days, shifting this way and that the open pages of her notebook spread out under her elbows. Through the grime on the basement window she could see Dr. Breton's long knobby legs stretched out from a lawn chair. The muddled sound of his and Trevor's voices could be heard now and again, punctuated by a sharp bark of laughter. Whatever discomfort Trevor had felt when Colin interrupted them this morning had obviously passed, for the two men had spent the last hour in easy conversation in the afternoon sun.

She frowned and glanced down at the page. She wanted to get this notebook in shape to show to Colin, but she couldn't seem to concentrate. The letters blurred into one another. The murmur of the men's voices outside her window was mesmerizing, strangely drawing. Her attention kept drifting back to that window, and the occasional glimpse of Trevor through it.

Trevor.

She felt as if someone had poured warm honey over her heart. All soft and dreamy and languid. She shifted on her chair, exquisitely aware of the soreness between her thighs. If she allowed herself to think about it for more than a minute, she swore she could still feel the roughness of his tongue on her—

She straightened abruptly on the stool and inadvertently tore a page in the notebook. She wasn't going to think about *that*, she told herself. Not now, anyway. She had to get a grip on herself. She had been working in this basement for a good hour. She *did* have to work, she told herself. She glanced around the basement at the unfinished experiments on the plants.

She could reasonably stay here for the rest of the afternoon and have a good excuse for it.

While she'd completed most of the work on the article for the journal, there was still proof reading to do. She hadn't even begun to get to the real work on the plants. While it was only a hobby, it was one she took seriously.

Come on, Kassady.

She squeezed her eyes shut and groaned. She didn't like to think of herself as a coward. She knew she had no reason to be ashamed. After all, she and Trevor were adults, and what they'd shared last night was a reasonable thing for two consenting adults to do, given the circumstances and the red-hot passion between them. She'd destroyed that ice queen image for certain now; she'd seen the astonishment on Colin's face when she'd met him in the kitchen.

Yes, she reminded herself. She'd mustered up her courage to face Colin then and now she was going to muster it to the sticking point and join those two outside. Act like it didn't matter. Act as though she tumbled into bed with complete strangers on a regular basis. Act as if last night's coupling hadn't changed something in her, something she couldn't quite describe, something she was still uneasy exploring.

Still, she lingered in the desk chair, twisting, swiveling, smoothing the tear in the page and trying to calculate in her head what her next move should be. She'd have to talk to Colin about something when she went out there. She'd never been good at social occasions where people stood in tight groups trying to make each other laugh, chatting about this one's baby and that one's impending marriage, and the illicit affair going on between a teacher and a graduate student. With only Colin and Trevor out there, she'd be expected to keep up her end of the conversation. She couldn't hide behind her glass of wine, checking the clock at intervals to see when she could in good conscience leave. And all three of them would have to ignore the big elephant sitting right in front of them that everyone pretended not to see.

But she *did* have to get out there, she told herself when she realized she'd spent the last few minutes doodling on the page. She flipped the

pencil over and firmly erased the tiny hearts and stars that marred her serious text. She had to get up there, because if she didn't Trevor would suspect she was hiding. And why would she hide unless she was embarrassed, or unless last night meant a lot more to her than it should? That is...whatever it meant. To her.

She dropped the pencil into the notebook and put the flats of her hands against her temples. She was going to lose her mind. She was surprised there wasn't smoke coming out of her ears for thinking in circles so much. She had to stop being a wimp, suck it up, just get out there and get it over with.

The next thing she knew she was standing on the deck, in the shade by the edge of the house, swinging one arm of her sunglasses from her fingers and staring at the men. Staring at Trevor, standing over a smoky grill, his black hair thick and glossy, his neck strong and sturdy. Remembering how she'd drawn his face down in the middle of their lovemaking so their lips would meet, so she could taste his breath, his lips and his tongue—

Then Trevor turned around and fixed her with an unerring gaze, as if she had winged the memory to him on a gilded arrow.

"There you are." Colin waved a beer in her direction. "Trevor's just putting on a second batch of burgers. Better tell him if you like them any way but crispy, Kassady, because this cowboy has a heavy hand."

"Medium," she said, ducking her head to slip her sunglasses up the bridge of her nose. "Just on the other side of alive and kicking."

Colin let out a laugh that bordered on a whoop. I like this girl. She knows how to eat a burger."

Kassady sauntered out into the sunshine, her eyes shaded behind the sunglasses, trying to be cool and casual. Her act was all in vain, for Trevor looked fixedly down at the meat sizzling on the grill. "Keep this up," Trevor muttered, "and you are both going to die young."

"Don't you listen to him, Kassady. He's been living in too many foreign countries for too many years. It's got him spooked."

"Food poisoning," Trevor reiterated. "Number one killer of children under three in certain countries."

“I’m over three,” Colin retorted, handing Kassady an open beer. “And I sure hope Kassady here is of legal age, otherwise you’re in more trouble than I thought, Trevor.”

Kassady placed her lips over the cold glass and took a swig as a hot blush washed over her face. The brew slipped cold and tasteless down her throat.

Colin continued, “Trevor has to remember that we’re living in the U.S. of A. now, where the government has standards for beef—”

“—and suggestions about how it should be cooked,” Trevor added.

“Let the government eat their burgers their way,” Colin stated, “and I’ll eat ‘em mine.”

Kassady settled in one of the chairs, warmed by the midday sun, as the men bantered back and forth. She tried not to clench the beer too hard in her hand as she stretched out. She tried not to look too pointedly at Trevor, tan and sweaty, his polo shirt open at the collar, revealing a stretch of skin she remembered licking in the darkness last night.

Then suddenly Trevor crossed the yard and headed directly toward her. He slid a paper plate heaping with a thick sizzling burger on the table beside her chair. His shadow fell over her, and she could smell sun-warmed skin, hot grease. He reached out and tipped her sunglasses down her nose just as she raised her lashes to meet his eyes. He brushed her cheek, softly, with one finger. Their gazes met and locked.

What she saw in those intense gray eyes drew the air from her lungs. It was as if, in the meeting of their gazes, all the memories from last night passed between them, with all the same passion, intensity and heat. Leaving, the end, the exquisite tenderness of unspoken promises.

“Hey, if you guys are going to act like this, I’m heading home, you got that?”

Colin dropped down in the chair across the table, his teeth white in his wide smile, his eyes dancing as he looked back and forth between the two of them.

Trevor took a step back, swaggered those broad shoulders and flashed his friend a reluctant grin. “Green-eyed envy, Colin?”

“Damn straight,” Colin responded. “Here I am, living like a monk, and where do I find myself seeking refuge? The House of Sin.”

Kassady made a little sound, a squeak of surprise. She wasn’t used to being the source of such innuendo, and she wasn’t certain if she should feel embarrassed or affronted, or just join the banter.

“Good to see you have a human side to you, Kassady,” Colin said, fisting an enormous hunk of burger in his oversized hands. “Watching you up there at the podium of all those meetings, I was beginning to think you were all work and no play. I mean, you’re younger than me and it seems every week I see another published article with your name attached to it.”

Trevor visibly perked.

“Didn’t you know, Trevor? Kassady here is a regular publishing powerhouse. She’s responsible for the death of more trees than anyone else I know.”

“Come on, Colin,” she murmured, shifting in her chair uncomfortable with being the focus of attention. “You know the trade journals use recycled paper.”

“Doesn’t make your accomplishments any less impressive,” he remarked. “Still, I don’t know if I approve of your choice in men.”

“Oh?”

There she was again, being witty Kassady, so full of clever little remarks. She could use the excuse that her mind was still short-circuited from Trevor’s steamy look, but the truth of the matter was that she’d always been a social Hindenburg. Not even Miss Carliner could teach her basic charm.

“Old Trevor here,” Colin continued, as if oblivious to her discomfort, “has been as thorny as a rose bush since he got back from South America.”

“Hey, I am standing right here,” Trevor chimed in.

“Yes, we know,” Colin said, grinning with a mouthful of burger. “Maybe you can tame him, Kassady. He’s in dire need of some gentling.”

“Gentling?”

“Yes. You know. Centering. Calming.” He paused for effect. “Settling down.”

“So,” Trevor said in a firm and overly loud voice, “how’s that baby of yours, Colin?”

If a man’s grin could split his face, Colin’s face would be in two halves. His eyes shone over the ruddiness of his cheeks. “That baby of mine is doing just fine, Trevor old pal, as I’ve told you a dozen times now.”

“You haven’t told me,” Kassady heard herself saying. “I don’t even know what you’ve named him.”

“Joshua,” he responded. “He’s an adorable kid, but he has a temper you wouldn’t believe.” Colin stated this with the softest grin on his face, and his eyes misted over, as if he were seeing something every far away. “But when he smiles it’s like the entire world glows.”

“Listen to you,” Trevor scoffed as he flipped his burger onto a roll. “You still count his age in days. What you’re seeing is gas.”

“That’s what the pediatrician said, but I say it’s not. He smiles, right at me. He knows who his daddy is.” Colin finished the last of the burger and settled back in his chair, cradling his stomach with his hands, looking very much like a snake who had just eaten something big and whole. “Daddy is the one who feeds him at three in the morning. Daddy is the one who changes the really *special* diapers. Daddy is the one he always throws up on. I don’t think I’ve even slept since he was born.” A beautiful smile spread across Colin’s face. “But I wouldn’t give this up for anything in the world.” He winked. “You should try it sometime, Trevor. Fatherhood, that is.”

Trevor flashed him a look and then concentrated on the burger oozing grease onto his paper plate. “You’re asking for trouble, Colin.”

“I think you found enough trouble for yourself. “Colin glanced at Kassady.” You ever see a baby born, Kassady?”

“Uh...no.”

“Trevor here has. He’s delivered more babies into the world than he can count.”

Trevor kept his head down but gave Colin an unreadable look as he squirted mustard on his burger. Kassady glanced at Trevor, found herself looking at his hands. Those long-fingered hands. It was hard to imagine

him as a doctor, in a white coat, tending to patients. Coaxing a laboring woman into pushing a child into the world. It was a part of Trevor she didn't know yet.

She knew so little of Trevor really.

"Hundreds and hundreds of babies, I imagine," Colin continued. "All brought into the world by Trevor here. He knows how fragile and amazing a thing it is."

Trevor's voice held a hint of warning. "Colin..."

"I never knew how terrible a beauty it was," Colin said, ignoring Trevor and settling back in the chair, "until I was forced to watch the process myself. I'm glad I did, now. But boy was I scared then. I mean," he continued, struggling for words, "so much can go wrong. But when it goes right... Seeing that baby—our baby—come out into the world yelling with all the power in his lungs... First there was one woman with a swollen belly, suddenly there are two people. There's a baby, a whole new person, and he's all ours to tend to and care for. It's..." Colin shrugged. "It's the most amazing thing in the entire world."

A soft silence fell around them as Colin's words lingered. The midday sun beat down hard upon Kassady's skin. Idly, she thought. *I should go inside. It's really warm.* But for some reason, she was reluctant to rise from the cushion of the chair. With Colin's words, a sweet camaraderie fell among them, despite the sexual quivers shimmering between her and Trevor.

She glanced around the backyard, the smoke of the grill rising into the trees and the birds chirping amid the leaves. A bee lazily buzzed around a thatch of dandelion gone to seed. The laths of the outdoor chair slashed across her back, cushioning her still. A simple summer barbeque, she thought. This was what people did when they weren't working. They sat in their backyards and grilled up some burgers or hot dogs and soaked in the sun and enjoyed the company of family and friends. This was what her friends did all those summers while she was hiding in the dampness of her musty office filing her notebook with notes. This was how people with normal lives lived.

A pang twisted her heart. Yearning, longing. She hid her gaze behind her sunglasses but fixed it on Trevor. And felt the warmth of the loving afternoon twist around her heart and squeeze.

“You know,” Colin said abruptly, sitting up in his chair. “I shouldn’t be here right now.”

Trevor straightened as if he’d been lost in thought, too. “Colin, you just got here.”

“No,” he said, rising quickly to his feet. “I really shouldn’t be here. This was a crazy idea. I don’t know what I was thinking. I can’t believe Angie let me leave.”

“Colin,” Kassady said, “it’s only an hour drive—”

“And the sooner I get on the road, the sooner I’ll be back home.” He patted her hand absently. “I’m not being polite, Kassady, trust me. I’ve got to get back to Angie. To Joshua.”

“Oh.”

There seemed to be nothing more to say except goodbye. Kassady promised to run the notes for her submission to the next journal when she got everything settled. Colin shook Trevor’s hand and thanked him for the burger, then the two men headed around the house toward Colin’s vehicle, leaving Kassady alone in a suddenly empty, lonely, backyard.

Trevor poked his head around the side of the house a few minutes later. “I’m going in to make some phone calls,” he said. “After that, Kass, we’ve got to talk.”

A chill washed over her though the sun still beat hot on her head. *We’ve got to talk.* She’d heard that before and the words struck her hard enough to bruise. She curled her hand around the heated metal of the lounge chair and dragged it through the lush grass to a shady spot under a tree, bracing herself for the ‘last night was a mistake’ discussion.

Here we go again. Another ending, truncating a relationship that had hardly had a beginning. She’d spent a lifetime struggling with loss in one way or another. One nanny after another gone. Grandpa gone. Friendships with girls who lived in other countries across the sea, across the mountains, sustained for a few months with a barrage of letters that slowly

petered out. A lifetime of abandoned relationships, of uncomfortable ‘discussion’.

She sank down in the chair, kicked off her sandals and curled her bare toes in the cool grass. Trevor took a long time in the house. She closed her eyes and tried to doze, but memories of last night kept making her curl her toes into the ground. Best not think of that, she told herself. No use hoping for the impossible. Maybe she had only imagined that he had wanted her as much as she had wanted him.

She had to be cool, calm and not make a scene, she told herself. Then she could go back to the basement and finish her work as quickly as possible so she could leave this place. So her mid-thirties body had kicked into sexual overdrive. A natural process. Nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing to be sorry for. No reason to mourn a relationship that had never truly been born.

Then he was there, standing before her, his arms crossed, his thumbs beating a rhythm of his own devising upon the balled mass of his biceps. She blinked open her eyes and met his fierce gray gaze and felt every self-protective instinct inside her melt into a custard-like filling.

“I just got off the phone,” he said without preamble, “with my mother, my three sisters, two brothers and another old friend.”

“Oh?”

“I had to make sure they were all safe and secure in their homes or places of business.”

“Oh.”

“They have a bad habit of ‘dropping by’ unannounced. Colin wasn’t the first to do so. I think it’s a conspiracy.”

“Oh.”

Wasn’t she the soul of wit today. She struggled to find something sensible to say. Something cool, unruffled and reasonable. “They must worry about you.”

“Like hens. Every last one of them. Male and female.”

His dark hair was haloed by the blue-white brightness of the sky, making him look achingly handsome. She wondered if he knew how fortunate he was to have so many people who loved him so deeply, then

realized with a start, that he had no need for one more person to love him so deeply.

Her blood went cold. She didn't love Trevor. She must have stayed out in the sun too long. Or she was too giddy with last night's events. This thing between her and Trevor, whatever it was—and she expected it would soon be a 'was'—was certainly not an affair of the heart. She must be crazy to be turning a fling into the sound of wedding bells.

"Kass," he said, his chest expanding as if he were bracing himself for something, "you've got to answer me one question first."

"Yes?"

He hesitated. His knuckles turned white against his arms. He waited, almost expectantly, as if she knew what the question would be, when she didn't have the least clue.

"Kass," he finally continued, "what's going to prevent last night from producing a brown-eyed girl with an aptitude for academics?"

"Oh!"

"I didn't do anything to prevent it," he continued, all but growling in his discomfort. "I didn't have much else on my mind but getting you in that bed. I didn't stop to think of the consequences until this morning, when Colin started talking about his baby."

Baby.

The word sang in her head. She'd never really thought about babies, about having some of her own. She'd long come to the conclusion that married life wasn't going to be her destiny, that she'd live a more 'interesting' life, devoid of husband, children or any such human responsibility with only her career as her rudder, guiding her through the murky waters of the future.

"Kass..."

"You don't have to worry, Trevor," she said as a strange dark hand closed around her heart. "I'm not pregnant."

"If there is a ripe ovum anywhere in your body, lady, then there isn't a snowflake's chance in hell that you're not pregnant—unless you're on the pill."

"I'm not," she stated. "But I wore...a diaphragm."

“You wore a...”

She nodded, and as Trevor stared and stared, she felt a flush of color rise up her neck. By dropping that little piece of information, she realized she was telling him more than the form of birth control she used. He knew she hadn’t stopped in the middle of their coupling to slip the thing in. In effect, she’d just told him that she’d been prepared for a sexual encounter last night, long before they left the cabin for their date.

She tilted her chin and tried to summon her usual patina of frost. She shouldn’t be ashamed for behaving like a responsible adult. She shouldn’t be ashamed for anticipating a possibility that had hovered between them since the day he’d caught her naked in his bedroom. This was the twenty-first century, after all, and she was an adult female who finally—after all these years—was flexing her sexual wings. Responsibly. If she looked deep into her heart, she knew she didn’t regret last night—not at all.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

“At least one of us was thinking last night,” she said, hating the coldness of her voice. “Thinking of the consequences.”

“I pretty much couldn’t think straight the moment I touched you, Kass. That’s been the way of things since I first laid eyes on you.”

She took a deep breath, waiting for the hanging clause. The ‘but now that it’s the bright of the day, you and I have to talk. Last night was fun but...’

“I’m going to be honest with you, Kass.”

Don’t.

She didn’t want honesty. She didn’t need to know how cold she was underneath him last night, how stiff and awkward in lovemaking she’d been. She’d already heard one man tell her that, in excruciating detail. She wanted Trevor to shut up and haul her off this lawn chair, drag her into his arms, kiss her senseless as he did last night and not wonder at the why of it.

“I’m a bum, Kass.” His knuckles tightened on his biceps. “I’m unemployed. I have no plans to be employed. My car is in marginal health, I have no house or apartment of my own, my life is in total disarray.”

Her sunglasses slipped out from between her fingers and fell to her lap.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about what I’ve done, how I got to be in this place.”

Tell me. The words sang from her heart, but she didn’t say them out loud. For the sun beat hot down upon them and the world was all brightness and light, and she suspected the things he wanted to tell her needed to be told in darkness and in shadow.

“There’s no place in my life for a full-time woman,” he continued. “I can’t make commitments—of any kind.”

She sat there staring at him, thinking that something had definitely short-circuited her brain last night, because for the life of her she couldn’t think of anything to say to him. Nothing that would make sense. Because she wasn’t anyone’s ‘full-time woman’. She’d tried that once with a man and it had all blown up in her face, coasting her more in emotional grief than she could ever pay. She’d vowed never to try again. It hurt much, much too much to try.

“Now,” he continued, “if you’re looking for a couple of weeks of really great sex, well, then that’s a different story. I’m able, ready and willing to be your stud, Kass, but that’s about all I can offer.”

Really great sex. She let his words sink in deep. *I’m able, ready and willing to be your stud, Kass...* She quivered with a new sexual heat, a vibration that all but launched her off the chair. He wasn’t pushing her away. He was offering her a short-term commitment. He was offering her more really great sex.

“Uh...that’s okay.”

Trevor started. “Excuse me?”

“Hot sex,” she said, then bit her lip to keep it from tremble. “A week of really great sex. I can handle that.”

Trevor stepped forward, grabbed her by the shoulders and hauled her out of the lawn chair. “We’ll find out,” he said, his voice a rasp, “because you’re about to get more hot sex than you bargained for.”

Chapter Nine

Trevor attacked the buttons of her sleeveless shirt first. He thumbed the tiny pearls free of the holes and peeled the cotton back from her flesh. When she'd come sauntering out of the cabin dressed in this tailored shirt and matching shorts with their tiny gathered pleats and neat, even stitching, she'd looked as crisp and cool as an early autumn breeze. At the sight of her, he'd wanted nothing more than to toss Colin out of the backyard and strip the lady bare so he could reassure himself that the hot-blooded woman he slept with last night was still there, as eager and willing as before.

Holding her now in his arms was like holding on of those sparkling things kids lit for the Fourth of July. A cool, tall stick spitting sparks and heat, and he was the match that had made her come alive.

His first instinct was to sweep her legs from under her, lay her in the long, hot grass and grind his loins into hers. He squelched the urge. Though Colin had taken to the road anxious and distracted, Trevor knew that his prankster of a friend could return any minute, claiming he'd forgotten something, just to see how the tableau played out after he left. Trevor wanted no more interruptions.

So he tugged her toward the cabin. He yanked the pale blue cotton off her shoulders, wrapped it down her arms and let it fall into the grass. He glanced at the cups of a satin bra. He skimmed his fingers under the edge of one cup and her lips parted in a gasp. He kissed her silent, tugged her up the stairs to the deck, then around to the shadows to the kitchen door.

Once in the coolness of the kitchen, she wrapped her arms around his neck. He seized her by the waist and hiked her up against the closed door. He buried his face in her throat. She smelled of coconut, of the coconut soap he'd seen one day on the ledge of the bathtub when he'd gone to

retrieve some shaving cream he'd left in the room. He vowed he'd be running that slippery white bar over her bare wet skin before the day was done.

He could think of a hundred ways he'd have her in the remaining week. In the backseat of his truck. On a blanket in the yard under the moonlight. In front of the old fireplace. Spread-eagled upon him, in her bed. Pressed over the back of the couch. Right here, right now, against the kitchen door.

He flicked open the button of her shorts. The zipper split against the back of his arm as he thrust his hand down the front, under the elastic edge of her panties, through the softness of the hair at the juncture of her thighs and farther, to slip his fingers into the cleft.

Her entire body flexed. She made a noise, a soft keening sound that vibrated in her throat. He rubbed the moistness between her legs with gentle stokes. Her heat intensified against his fingers. Reverberations shuddered the curvaceous, full-breasted frame pressed so tightly against him.

His erection strained against his shorts, rock-hard. He slipped his fingers deeper between her legs, then with her welcome murmured urging, he slipped them deep, deep inside the softness of her.

He stroked and stoked. Her body quivered tighter and tighter, so close to completion he could feel her. He stroked deeper, thinking, *another minute and I'll tear off these shorts and give her more of me, send her reeling with the first stroke*. Then he realized with a jolt that she probably wasn't wearing the diaphragm anymore.

He stopped his stroking for a moment and probed her deep, deep enough to know nothing lay under his fingers but hot, moist flesh. She must have taken the diaphragm out during her shower. He wanted her—now—and for a moment he toyed with the idea of filling her with his shaft and pulling out when the time came near, but he forced himself to discard the idea. He couldn't—he wouldn't put her at risk. Kass wanted hot sex, not a lifetime commitment.

Right about now, he'd give her anything she wanted. He started to withdraw his fingers, but she clenched her muscles and pulled his head

close to her throat. He tasted the thin, salty sheen of sweat on her skin, felt the pounding of her pulse against his temple and realized how close she was to reaching climax, just with the touch of his hands.

He raised his head enough to see her face, flushed with exhilaration, her lips soft, her eyes heavy-lidded. He wanted to hear her scream out his name as she climaxed against his hand, he wanted to watch her lose control.

“Hold on to me, Kass,” he said, changing the angle of his fingers against her, shifting his hips so he could bear her weight. I want to feel you—”

Then her muscles tightened against his hand as the first powerful throb of her orgasm roared through her body. She arched her neck, pressed her head against the window of the kitchen door, thrashed back and forth to the rhythm of the contractions shuddering out from her body’s hot core.

Still he stroked, deep, even and firm, watching her, feeling her orgasm against the flat of his palm, urging it to extend, on and on, watching her face until she let her chin drop. As the contractions ebbed, she blinked open her eyes and looked at him in unabashed amazement. Soft tendrils of hair had come loose of her ponytail and framed her face, as soft-lipped and vulnerable as he’d ever seen it.

He slipped his hand out of her shorts, curled his fingers around her bare waist, settled her weight upon the ground and waited until he was certain she had found her footing.

She was tall, so he didn’t have much height on her, but barefoot and weak kneed as she was, she had to blink up at him. Absently, he curled one of those loose tendrils around his finger, eyes the sheen of her hair, then let his gaze drift back to her clouded whiskey-colored eyes.

She looked as if she was trying to say something but could seem to find her tongue. In the end, all she managed was a soft, tremulous smile and two breathy words.

“Oh...my.”

“Yeah,” he said as a grin tugged at his mouth. He pressed his forehead against hers. “This is going to be good, Kass. So very, very good.”

* * * *

Kassady wondered if there was a limit to the number of times a couple could make love in a give span of time. If there was, she and Trevor had not reached it yet. For even now, lying naked and soaking wet her bed, sated from yet another bout of lovemaking, she wanted him again.

She said, breathlessly, "How many times was that?"

Trevor groaned. "Don't know. Seven? Eight?"

"Eight, I think," she said, closing her eyes, feeling an incredible urge to arch her back like a cream-fed cat. "Not including last night."

"I count seven."

"Definitely right," she insisted, splaying her hand on her bare belly and feeling the slippery foam of leftover coconut soap on it. "The shower, the living room—"

"The hallway," he said, a certain timbre to his voice. "Don't forget the hallway."

"Yes, the hallway," she added dreamily. "Then twice on this bed, twice on the carpet in the living room, and then the kitchen."

"Kitchen doesn't count for me."

"Ah," she murmured, her lips stretching in the most lascivious of grins. "Then it's eight for me, seven for you."

"You owe me one, Kass."

"Okay." She lifted herself lazily on one elbow, rolled to her side to eye Trevor, naked and flat on his back, his skin gleaming with water and soap. She rolled her finger around one dark nipple. "How do you want it, Trevor?"

Trevor's eyes jerked open. A certain part of his resting anatomy twitched. A rakish grin spread across his face. "I can't believe you."

"Mmm?"

"You're going to kill me."

"With pleasure."

He laughed. Aloud. She realized it was the first time she had ever heard him laugh. She like the sound. Short, sincere, from the center of him. It made her warm inside to know that she'd given him pleasure.

In more ways than one.

Things had changed, of course. By her estimation, they had definitely changed for the better. She'd discovered that hot sex was a wonderful thing when a woman was sharing it with a man as skilled, masterful and sexy as Trevor Richmond. Right now, hot sex was definitely enough.

"Well," he mused, grabbing her hand from his chest and lifting it to his lips, "I can think of a few ways of doing it that we haven't tried yet."

"Just a few?"

"But," he added, "right now I'm hungry."

Just then, Kassady's stomach growled. "Mmm. So am I." She frowned and thought of the empty refrigerator then perked up. "You know, I think there's some whipped cream in a can in the kitchen..."

"You're not thinking what I think you're thinking."

"I *am* hungry," she said, letting her gaze drift meaningfully down his body. "Why not kill two birds with one stone?"

Laughter rumbled from him, a different sort of laugh, a rough and ragged sound, then nipped the inside of her wrist. "Save that thought for later, my little sex kitten. You might think I'm superhuman, but right now I'm in dire need of more sustenance than whipped cream."

"Mmm." She tried not to sound too deflated. "Guess man cannot live on love alone, huh?"

The minute the words left her lips she regretted them. The word love hung in the air between them. She met his gaze and saw the word register in his thoughts as well.

I should have said sex, she chided herself. *Man cannot live on sex alone*. They were having two weeks of hot sex, not love, he'd made that as clear as day, and she had accepted it wholeheartedly. Commitment was apparently as frightening a word to him as it was to her.

This was the perfect solution, she was certain of it. Both of them had been very careful since that conversation in the backyard to keep everything they had said light and easy between them—not that they'd had much conversation between bouts of lovemaking. Bouts of very intense lovemaking. Nonetheless, the intervals in between had been full of banter, full of sultry laughter and totally devoid of any serious conversation.

Oh, she didn't want to ruin this...this...this *thing* between them. These fragile, tender, hesitant, unsure emotions she couldn't even put a name to. She wished she could just suck the words back into her mouth, chew them and choke them down. Anything rather than to feel this dark shadow stealing between them.

"Oh, I don't know if that's true," he responded, his voice deceptively light. He slid to his side and reached up to tug her lower lip from between her teeth. He gave her a soft, easy smile. The tension that had grown taut between them eased and faded away. "I think I might be able to live on you, my delectable coconut-scented wildcat."

She breathed out a laugh grateful that he hadn't withdrawn, thankful that he'd ignored her gaffe, grateful that in her usual blundering way she hadn't destroyed whatever it was growing between them.

"But right now," he continued, rising up to rub the tip of his nose along her cheek. "I'm in the mood for pancakes."

"Pancakes?" She looked over at the digital clock on the night table. "It's seven o'clock at night, Trevor."

"We had burgers for breakfast and each other for lunch. We might as well have pancakes for dinner." He brushed her forehead with a kiss, then settled back. "I know a great pancake house in town. Open all night. Twenty-four-hour breakfasts. Sausage, bacon, scrambled eggs, thick waffles—"

"Waffles" she interrupted, imagining the fragrant squares dripping with maple syrup and blueberries. "As in Belgian waffles with dollops of whipped cream?"

"You got it, Kass."

"Oh...my."

"Hey," he murmured, grabbing her by the shoulder, "That expression is reserved for post-coital bliss with me."

A bubble of laughter rose within her, floating its way up her throat. "I don't know," she murmured, "Belgian waffles can be really, *really* good..."

He pressed her back on the bed. "I'll show you really, really good, lady. "He dipped his head to one breast. "And then we'll compare it to those waffles."

An hour and a half later, Kassady lifted a forkful of waffle dripping with syrup to her lips. The waffle melted in her mouth, and the taste of fresh maple syrup and blueberries exploded on her tongue. As she chewed, she gazed at Trevor over her fork and concluded without question that sex with Trevor Richmond was a hundred thousand times better than waffles.

He knew, too, for his mouth twitched in that sexy, knowing grin, and those gray eyes sparkled with shared knowledge. Kassady resisted the urge to glance around the nearly empty pancake house to see if the other patrons were staring at them... While Trevor made love to her with his sultry, hooded eyes.

"I can't believe you're doing this to me," he said, shifting on the bench.

"Doing what?" she asked, slipping another forkful of waffle into her mouth.

"Eating like that," he said, his gaze shifting to her lips as she chewed. "You did the same thing last night with the pizza. Drove me out of my mind."

Kassady swallowed and speared another piece of sweet waffle, swirling it deep in the maple syrup. "You're criticizing how I eat?"

He sucked in a deep breath as she lifted the fork to her lips. "The way you eat should be banned. The way you slip your lips around a fork like that. Then pull the food off so...deliberately."

She felt her lips tug upward into a smile as she *deliberately* lengthened the time it took ease the small piece of waffle off the tines of her fork.

"Then move your mouth like that," he continued, his voice choked, "looking up at me with those smoky brandy eyes of yours."

"Are you suggesting," she said as she swallowed anew, "that I'm not eating properly, Dr. Richmond?"

"It's positively obscene. Makes me want to throw you onto this table, rip off your shorts and have my way with you."

“I am,” she said, spearing another piece of waffle and closing her thighs together as a quiver of sexual desire shook them, “doing everything correctly, I believe.”

“Oh, yeah.” He shifted again, this time leaning his crossed forearms on the table. He shoved his plate of half-eaten pancakes to one side of the cluttered table. “You’re doing it right, Kass. You’ve been doing everything right today.”

“Well then,” she sighed as she lifted the fork dripping with maple syrup. She tipped it up and licked off a drop with her tongue. “Miss Carliner will be quite pleased I learned my lessons well.”

“Miss Carliner?” he mumbled, watching the trail of her tongue across the bottom of the fork. “Who’s she, a madam of a brothel?”

“Oh, no.” She slipped a bite of waffle half into her mouth. She chewed slowly, deliberately, then swallowed. “Miss Carliner was my teacher in etiquette at the finishing school.”

“Finishing school?”

“She wouldn’t approve of lovemaking in a public restaurant.” Kassady tilted her head, felt the brush of her unbound hair against her bare shoulder. “Not during working hours, anyway.”

The look Trevor gave her was worth all the gold in the U.S. Treasury. Kassady laid her fork on the side of her plate and pulled the straw out of her vanilla milkshake. Defying all the dictates of etiquette, she licked the dripping shake off the length of the straw, then sucked the rest through until it slurped.

Trevor laughed. A low, rumbling, sexy laugh, and the sound sent sexual vibrations winging through her. Their gaze met across the table and danced together, and Kassady felt wonderful. She felt...different. She felt saucy. For certainly this wasn’t cold, stuffy Dr. Kassady Gibson sitting across this booth from wide-shouldered Dr. Trevor Richmond. This wasn’t Dr. Kassady Gibson the ice queen, not this woman wearing her skin, eating waffles at ten o’clock at night and doing things with food and her lips that she planned to do later with parts of this handsome man’s most private anatomy.

She hadn't thought about work in almost twelve hours. She felt exhilarated, wild, her hair hanging loosely over her shoulders, her legs bare, her toes tracing Trevor's shin under the table, her breasts loose under the cotton shirt, this man's gaze bright and eager on her as if she were the sexiest, most desirable woman in the world.

She held the feeling tight and reveled in it. Maybe a little too desperately, for she knew it was temporary. As temporary as the bargain she'd struck with him, for one more week of hot sex.

Trevor reached across the table and ran his finger up the length of her forearm. "Did you really go to finishing school?"

"Uh-huh," she said around another bite of waffle. "For one summer. My parents wanted me to know how to set a formal dining-room table, but they didn't want that training to interfere with my more academic studies."

"Finishing school," he murmured, "brings images of pearls and white gloves."

"Oh, we wore pearls and white gloves. In fact, we were required to wear them at teatime."

"How Victorian."

"Of course, there were times when me and the girls would wear our pearls and our white gloves and our afternoon dresses...and no underwear at all."

Trevor made a quiet choking sound. Kassady let herself grin. The story was a bald-faced lie. She'd studied etiquette at finishing school as fiercely as she'd studied Mozart at her piano lessons. She would not have dared to do something so bold, so sensual. Not then, anyway. Right now, she felt as if she could do anything.

Then the glass and dishes clattered as Trevor leaned across the table and kissed her full on the lips. A hungry, hot kiss that broke every last rule of social propriety and brought upon them the surprised stares of the entire pancake-house staff.

"One more comment like that, Kass," he said roughly as he pulled himself away from her, "and I'm going to haul you across this table, propriety be damned."

“Mmm,” she murmured, licking her lips as if his kiss had been as tasty as the Belgian waffles. “Promises, Trevor. Promises, promises...”

They didn’t linger long at the restaurant. On the way home, somewhere along the side of the country road, Kassady finally found out what it was like to make love in the back of a pickup truck.

* * * *

Trevor knew it was corny, but he wanted to hold Kass’ hand. Just hold her hand as he drove back to the cabin. The night breeze flooded the cab, bringing with it the smell of another round of oncoming rain. He had just made wild love to her in the backseat of his truck, touching her as deeply as a man could touch a woman...and now they sat, content and staid, next to each other. Yet he was scared to death of the simple act of taking her hand in his own.

It seemed too intimate. Too tender. Too much like a promise that this wild relationship they’d dived headfirst into would turn into something more. Something concrete. Something forever.

So he resisted the urge and fixed his hands on the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. He kept his eyes on what little of the road he could see ahead. The county road had no street lamps. It seemed as if they were hurtling headlong into darkness, riding blind in the night, and at any minute something or someone could loom up and he wouldn’t have time to brake before the impact.

That’s pretty much how it had happened with Kass, he realized. He’d been living blind, thinking no more than one day at a time, looking no farther than the tip of his nose. When Kass came along, it was as if she’d loomed out of the darkness to knock him senseless. He’d never seen her coming.

That plain truth didn’t change anything, he told himself. He was still the man he was before she entered his life. He’d be the same man after she left. Not fit to be any woman’s anything. Certainly not a woman as accomplished, brilliant and loving as Kassady Gibson. He drove up the driveway and turned the engine off. Kass stretched like a cat beside him.

“Don’t know about you,” she said, “but I’m all done in.”

“Me, too.”

He hopped out of the truck before she could say anything about sleeping arrangements. He wasn't sure he wanted to sleep next to her warm, soft body tonight. He wasn't sure he could prevent himself from *loving* her, from holding her tight with her head under his chin and saying too much with body language that he wouldn't allow himself to say with words.

"I'm just going to go around back," she said as they climbed the stairs to the deck. "I left my sunglasses and shoes out there this afternoon. Smells like rain, so I'd better go out to get them."

He grunted his reply, fiddled for the keys and entered the house, tossing the keys on the counter. He strolled to the bathroom, flicked on the light and went to splash his face with cold water. He stared at the man in the mirror. Seeing a different man. A man who should know better.

Kass took a long time gathering her things. He peered out a window a little later and found out why. The light was on in his shed, flickering with the movement of her shadow.

When he finally screwed up the courage to go outside to fetch her, Trevor found her inside the shed, seated on a stool, cradling one of his finished pieces in her hands. At the sound of his footsteps, she looked up and the softness and wonder in her eyes stopped him in his tracks.

"I didn't mean to pry," she said softly. "I'm sorry."

Trevor's throat tightened. It was inevitable that she would have discovered this place. He hadn't intentionally made it off-limits to Kass or anyone else, but now that she was sitting smack dab in the middle of his workspace, he felt strangely...invaded. Uneasy. This was his sanctuary back here. This was where he'd found peace these past months.

"I thought that while I was in the backyard," she explained, "I might as well put away the lawn chairs and folding table. Rain coming, and all."

"Doesn't matter."

"And then I found...all this."

She cupped a little wooden bird in her hands. Trevor recognized one of the western meadowlarks. It had been one of his earlier pieces, simpler than the ones he was working on now, but carving it and polishing the wood had brought him hours of serene meditation.

Her gaze fell upon him, bright and clear. “Did you really do this, Trevor?”

“Yes.”

“All of these?”

She waved at the dozen of birds perched on the counters and ledges all around the shed; tiny brown wrens teetering on white-speckled eggs; woodpeckers frozen in mid-peck; bright yellow larks and tanagers perched for flight; warblers with open beaks caught in mid-song. A hawk stretched forward as if it eyed a mouse scurrying across the floor.

Trevor shoved his hands into the pockets of his shorts. “I’ve been doing them for years.”

“They are amazing,” she said, passing her hand over the meadowlark as if petting its feathers. “The carving, the painting...it looks as if it might stand up in my hand at any moment and fly away.”

Trevor resisted the urge to take the meadowlark out of her hands and return it to its perch. He supposed it was inevitable that they’d learn more about each other. They couldn’t spend every moment engaged in hot sex. But this was his private place, his private passion, and the woman has already sunk deep under his skin.

“This is why you take photos of the birds.” She gestured to the prints hanging from a rope stretched across the shed. “You photograph them, then carve their likeness.”

“I try.”

“You are an intriguing man, Trevor.” She placed the bird on the workbench and slipped off the stool. She fixed him with those whiskey-warm eyes. “So many hobbies. So many talents.”

He swaggered his shoulder and tried to give her a lascivious grin. “So you’ve told me.”

“No, I mean it.” She kept her gaze steady on him, ignoring the sexual innuendo. “This isn’t something you can learn. This is the sort of talent you’ve got to be born with.”

“Ah, Kass, I’d like to have you believe I’m the next famous American sculptor, but the truth is, I wasn’t born carving birds.”

“Doesn’t matter. You can only be taught so much,” she said, wandering around the bench, touching a bird now and then. “The rest is talent.”

“You’re making me blush.”

“I’m serious.” She ran a finger across the wings of a hawk. “I know what I’m talking about. I took piano lesson for eleven years. My father was a child prodigy, you know. Played at Carnegie Hall at the age of ten. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps so badly... Though I worked my fingers to the bone, I just didn’t have the talent.”

“Kass Gibson, I suspect there is nothing on the good, green earth that you could not accomplish.”

She looked at him, then gave him a shy smile that made his heart skip a beat. “Now who’s the flatterer?”

“I am. Your most ardent admirer.” He leaned a shoulder against the door frame. “I’d love to hear you play.”

He regretted the words the moment they left his mouth. There was no piano here, in the cabin. To hear her play meant extending this relationship beyond the bounds of this place.

“I can do a passable Beethoven, but people who spend their life around music would see me as an amateur in a minute. My father sensed my lack of talent very early, and accepted it. With more grace than I did, I suppose. I kept working at it, trying to please him.” She sucked in a breath and said, swiftly, “So, who introduced you to all this?”

“An old Columbian man,” Trevor said. “He had terrible rheumatoid arthritis. He must have been over eighty years old. I gave him aspirin to ease the pain. He thought I was too young to be a wise man.”

“And you met this man while working in an emergency room?”

“No.” Trevor traced the flecked paint on the doorjamb and figured in for a penny, in for a pound. “I used to work for an international organization called Doctors without Borders. I was one of a team of doctors and nurses who would bring modern medicine into remote areas. Sometimes into war zones. To treat the poor and the victims. Also to teach basic first aid. I met him while running a temporary clinic in Columbia.”

“I see.”

Her words held a world of surprise and he plunged on so he wouldn't have to explain anything else. "This guy made a living carving birds for tourists out of the fallen branches of local hardwoods. He gifted me with one of them after I treated him." Trevor remembered his own amazement at the fine quality of the work done with the crudest of tools, the most primitive of dyes. "Bird-watching had always been a hobby for me, and so I asked him to show me how he did it, and well..." Trevor struggled with words. How to describe those long afternoons with a tiny wizened man whose native name he could never pronounce. A man who spoke no English, yet taught Trevor how to walk a wooded area and seek out and let it tell him what kind of bird it wanted to be. "He was generous in his teaching."

"He saw your talent."

"My first efforts were horrendous," Trevor said shaking his head. "Unwieldy, crude."

"Yet you continue to do it."

"It is just a hobby. A way to relieve stress. That job could make anyone crazy now and then." He folded his arms across his chest and eyed the aviary within the shed. He hadn't planned to do this when he got back from South America, but one look at the old growth in the forest reminded him of those South American jungles, and soon he found himself picking up and weighing branches of hardwood in his hands. Carving them filled his long days, gave his mind some relief. "When I came here, I even had some crazy idea of trying to make a living doing this."

"That's not so crazy."

"I tried. Commissioned some with one of the stores in town." He shrugged. "The sales are keeping me in paint. But I've discovered that most people like the little birds....and if I have to keep making the same thing over and over, that'll suck the joy out of it. I'd rather keep it a private passion."

"A private passion."

She whispered the words. She'd circled the shed several times and now she came to a stop in front of him. He could not look straight in her face for she gazed upon him with such adulation. Such blind wonder. He

didn't deserve to be looked at like this. She'd stumbled upon one of his finer attributes. But there was much she didn't know, much that still lay in the shadows.

"You are a man of many secrets, Trevor," she whispered running her fingers down the buttons of his shirt. "You keep surprising me."

"Not all the secrets are pretty."

"I guessed that," she said, pressing her fingers against the forearm crossed over his heart. "Anyone looking at you can tell that there's at least one secret eating away at your heart."

He flexed his arms, kept them crossed, resisted the urge to open them up. Damn her. She was crossing the line. What was she doing? Hot sex, remember? Nothing more. No commitments. No looking beyond tomorrow or next week. No use in learning about each other's pasts. Her hand lay so warm against his forearm, as if the heat of her touch seeped through flesh and bone to his beating heart.

"What happened, Trevor?"

What happened? His blood throbbed through his body. His eyes smarted from the pressure. The light from the shed spiraled, the contracted to a pinpoint.

What happened?

All the pain he'd suppressed for all these months threatened to rip through, to flood him anew, as fresh and sharp and unrelenting as those horrid days in South America. *Damn her.* He'd managed to hold back all these months. He fooled himself into thinking that it had begun to fade. And now, with Kass' eyes soft and urgent on his face, it all rushed back to him as if it had happened yesterday.

What happened?

He'd failed, that's what. He'd failed, and a little soul had slipped away from this world because of it.

"Trevor?"

He glared at her and knew he couldn't keep it any longer or he would lose his mind.

“I’ll tell you what happened.” The words rushed from his lips as he stepped back, away from her, away from her touch, out of the shed’s light into the night.

“I killed a child, Kass. I killed a little three-year-old boy.”

Chapter Ten

Trevor turned away. He didn't want to see the horror, the disgust, the shock on Kass' face. He walked into the darkness and flattened his hands against the trunk of the tree. He pushed until the bark bit into his skin.

He stared up, beyond the boughs, seeing in the pinpoints of the stars, the sparks castoff by a failing generator just outside the tent where fifty people lay groaning in pain. He flexed his toes in the cushion of pine needles on the ground and remembered the give of mud made of blood and dirt.

He remembered stepping out of the tent where he and four other doctors worked feverishly trying to stop the bleeding of too many wounds. He'd plundered the supply boxes for bandages, gauze, clean strips of cotton—anything that would suffice. They had run out of clean syringes hours ago. They were treating the pain of machete wounds with over-the-counter painkillers. Not one pair of latex surgical gloves was to be found.

The young woman had stepped out of the murky darkness to confront him. She couldn't have been more than sixteen years old. Eyes dark as chocolate, swimming in tears. She carried a limp child in her arms. Trevor knew the woman. She'd been in the week before with her little boy, who'd been running a fever. Trevor grabbed the child, thinking he was another victim, all the while cursing the heartless bastards who had caused such bloodshed. Wondering if the raid would ever be known to the outside world to people other than him and his co-workers—if all of them weren't murdered first. *That* story might, at best, receive some ink, buried on page ten of a few larger newspapers, right beside an ad for unconscionably expensive handbags.

He'd carried the young boy into the tent while the mother trailed behind him, babbling in a language Trevor could not understand. A quick

examination revealed no signs of bleeding, no traumatic wound, no broken bones and no apparent head trauma. Only a runny nose. A fever.

All around him, men and women screamed in pain, some dying before his eyes. He had shouted for one of the nurses, told her to get some pediatric fever medication, then strode back out of the tent, leaving the child in a nurse's care. He would see to the little boy later, he'd figured. When he had time.

That's where he had failed, for he knew better than to treat a child's fever so lightly. Especially a child who'd had a fever for a week. He knew better than to make such a quick, careless examination. In the jungle, a fever could mean a dozen different diseases, almost all fatal in children under the age of five. Had he spent another minute, another two minutes, looking at the boy—if he had *looked* at him at all—he would have diagnosed the little boy immediately and he might have lived.

At least he would have had a chance.

But Trevor had been too busy. He'd brushed the little boy off as unimportant. Neglected and ignored, the mother had taken her child and wandered back to her village. A day later when she returned, hysterical, carrying her withered little boy awash in bluish bruises, it had been too late to stop the advance of the meningitis.

But he'd tried. Oh, yeah, he'd tried. He'd dragged that young mother and her dying son on a forty-mile trek over a bumpy jungle road to the nearest place that could be called a village, to a mockery of a hospital. There the three-year-old died in a rickety bed with needles stuck out of his arms and monitors strapped over his body in a huge, echoing room painted stark white and smelling of antiseptic.

He'd seen men, women and children of all ages die. It came with the job—life and death ran together in these makeshift hospitals in some of the most primitive places of the world. But he'd always done his best. He'd always *tried*...

Until that young woman with eyes like brown velvet looked up at him if he were a god, and with full trust, thrust her little boy into his arms. He'd killed that child as surely as if he'd dropped him off the side of a cliff.

“Oh, Trevor...”

Abruptly he was sucked through space and time and sent tumbling flat-footed onto the hard earth of the western United States. His breath came quick. His heart pounded. Kass’ hand lay soft in the valley between his shoulder blades.

He realized, in his haze, that he’d blurted out the entire story. He shook himself free of that gentle hand. He pushed away from the tree and wandered deeper into the darkness, farther away from Kass. What the hell had gotten into him? He’d told no one but Colin about South America. Colin, who’d taken one look at Trevor after he explained and directed him to the nearest bar stool. Even then, it had taken a number of shots before Trevor had broken down. Even then, Trevor had not told him nearly as much as he had just told Kass. He felt deflated, empty, as if he’d exhausted every detail and was left with nothing more to say.

Her voice was low. “So, that’s why you quit?”

He tightened his lips, nodded curtly, wished he could crawl into a hole, under a rock, anywhere away from her scrutiny. He was about to tell her that he hadn’t been worth a damn since the incident. He couldn’t examine a patient without second-guessing himself. Couldn’t handle emergency situations without breaking into a sweat. Couldn’t do what he’d spent his life training to do. Could never trust himself with another person’s life again.

He forced himself to turn to her in the darkness. He couldn’t see her eyes. All he could see was her hand across her mouth, and he way her fingers splayed across her stomach as if holding back her own disgust.

He deserved her revulsion. He was repulsed enough at himself. She wouldn’t want him now. Considering the circumstances, it was best that this relationship end right here. Before it really grew deep and strong. Before he found himself falling to his knees before Kassady Gibson.

For a long time they stood there in the darkness, with the wind whipping the boughs above them. Kass leaned against the trunk, her arms loose across her midriff, while he tried to find some interest in toeing a fist sized rock out of the ground. He waited for the inevitable. All the clichés he’d heard from his colleagues, from his superiors in the organization.

You're not God, Trevor. You can't save everyone. That had been his favorite, always spoken, in his mind, with a tone that suggested it would never have happened to them. *Meningitis is difficult to detect, especially in a young child, without tapping the spine for fluid.* As if he didn't know the basic diagnostics. *You were one doctor of five trying to save the lives of sixty wounded people. How many did you save, Trevor?* He didn't know. It didn't matter. He'd failed to save the life of one little boy.

Kass' voice came out of the darkness, feathery light. "My father is a surgeon, you know, Trevor."

He tightened his jaw. He didn't want to hear banalities. Platitudes were clichés for people who didn't understand, people who still needed to make sense of it all. He'd lived it and knew that there was no sense to it, no reason. So he waited for the words she needed to say, words that would burn his ears.

"He came home early one day, when I was a teenager," she continued. "He didn't do that very often. He'd been in surgery since the night before," she stated. "One of his patients was a young girl who needed a new kidney. My father got a phone call at dinner the night before with the news that a good match had been found. The surgery could go ahead immediately."

His jaw felt like lead. "So the girl died."

"Yes," she said. "She died on the table. And my father came home and sank into a chair with his head in his hands. He knew if he'd put off the surgery that the girl could have lived another two years. Maybe three."

"Your father took a calculated risk. The girl might have survived and lived seventy more years."

"Yes, but maybe the girl would have been stronger if she were older, more able to survive the surgery."

"Or too weakened by her failing kidney," Trevor said tersely. "It was a judgment call."

"Exactly," Kass responded. "And because his judgment proved incorrect, my father spent the next few years wrestling with demons." She rubbed her hands on her upper arms as if she were cold. "At the time, I'd been toying with the idea of going to medical school. But Dad's

experience put me off that idea forever. So much responsibility.” She wandered around, edging closer to him. “I knew I didn’t have the courage to accept the inevitable.”

“What?”

“That one day, I would be too exhausted to catch a critical symptom.” She shuffled to a stop in front of him. “Or I’d get too comfortable in my work and miss something in an examination. I’d misdiagnose a child. Or watch a patient die on a surgeon’s table because I’d overestimated her strength. I’m not perfect enough, Trevor. Neither are you.”

He stood there with the stars swirling above his head, staring into Kass’ eyes and telling himself that he’d heard this before. He’d been warned of failure in medical school. It was inevitable. He’d been warned of the ‘God syndrome’. He’d even been told, after he quit, that he was throwing away a brilliant career over his failure to save a child who never would have lived even if Trevor diagnosed him the first day he’d come under his eye.

Kass had said the same in such a way that the brittle shell he’d erected over his heart shattered into a thousand pieces in his chest, leaving the throbbing flesh sore, tender and vulnerable.

She understood.

He stood there as the first drops of rain splattered from the sky. The raindrops pattered on the grass, dripped in heavy droplets from the leaves. A cool wind rustled the boughs swirled around them and dampened their skin with dew. Kass’ hair, unbound, shone in the dim starlight. Her eyes gleamed with moisture.

Words escaped him. Not because he had none, but because all of a sudden, he had too many. Where moments ago he’d been deflated, now he was so full of sentiment that he couldn’t speak for all the words in his heart.

So he raked his fingers through her hair, cupped her face in the palms of his hands, tilted her chin so he could look into those eyes. He had the odd feeling he’d done this before, a thousand times and that he would do it a thousand times more in the years to come.

Damn. There was no escaping the truth anymore. He'd fallen hopelessly in love with Kassady Gibson.

* * * *

Something had changed. Kassady felt it the moment he kissed her. As sure as the bright hot day had ceded to a cool windy night, something had changed abruptly and permanently between her and Trevor. She couldn't put it into words. She knew only what she felt. Above and beyond all other sensation, she felt Trevor's pain like a vibration rippling through his body palpable and heartbreaking. She yearned to stoke all that hurt away, run her hands over his face and murmured in his ear, let him know that she felt his pain, acknowledged it, understood it and would give all her body and soul to make it fade away.

How strange for her to feel this way. What did she know of easing her own? An why now, of all times, was she so openly, so willingly giving of herself, when she knew that this relationship was doomed within two week's time?

She couldn't think straight. It was as if they were kissing for the very first time. His hands felt warm against her face—tender, gentle and wonderful. His lips felt different—firm and commanding as always, but gentle, too. Coaxing. Eager, but willing to savor.

Savor she did, following his lead blindly as her eyelids fluttered closed. She tilted her head this way, then slid it that way, catching her breath as he drew her lower lip into his mouth, then slipped his tongue across her teeth. She spread her fingers wide on his chest and felt the pound of his heart against her palms.

She had never know that she could want someone so much. They'd spent the day making love. She should be sated by now, sore, exhausted, eager for sleep. But Trevor was kissing her in such a way as to make all of the lovemaking that came before fade. She yearned for the touch of his hands, for the friction of his skin against hers, for the taste of his flesh under her lips, for the joining...as if for the very first time.

He dropped one hand from her face, slipped it under her arm and drew her close to him. The warmth of their bodies shielded them against the cold splatter of light rain. The wind whispered around them, lifted her hair

off the nape of her neck, drew them closer and shared warmth. He kissed her cheek, her temple. He pulled her tighter. She closed her eyes and nestled in the fragrant nook between his shoulder and his throat. He rubbed his lips against her hair. She breathed in the scent of his damp skin. He would kiss her again, soon, she told herself. She wondered if he was as overwhelmed as she. This was passion, yes, primitive and strong. Passion of the likes she'd never known. But there was something more, as well; something growing between them.

He made a sound like a deep-throated laugh, then murmured something against her ear. Something about her having a really bad sense of timing.

She burrowed deeper into his neck. She could think now. It hurt to think when she was feeling like this. She whispered his name. A husky plea. His body flexed at the sound. A vein in his throat throbbed against her cheek.

He spoke against her hair. "I must be out of my mind."

Me, too.

She didn't know whether she'd spoken the words aloud if he'd just read her mind, for his grip tightened her. She'd never acted like this before. Soft, willing and female. Giving her body over to a man she'd know for barely two weeks. Risking her bruised and tender heart with a stranger.

Not such a stranger anymore. For he'd trusted her with the secret that was eating him alive. He'd trusted her with his darkest, deepest pain. Trevor probably felt as vulnerable as she did.

Trevor. Vulnerable.

She slipped her arms up around his neck and tightened her grip. Holding him close and sure.

"Kass," he said sometime later, his voice husky against her ear. "We're getting wet."

"I know," she whispered. "It's raining."

"Again?"

"Uh-huh."

"Let's go inside."

Trevor slid his hand down her arm, then curled his fingers around hers. The touch was electric. He stood looking at their joined hands as if he, too, could sense the current flowing through their interlaced fingers.

He swiveled in the mud and walked toward the shed, turned off the light and closed the door. Kassady followed along, breathless and mute. The rain splattered on her head and shoulders and they crossed the yard to the deck, then finally ducked into the shelter of the kitchen.

He was still holding her hand as he tugged her through the kitchen. He drew her across the living room, down the hall to her bedroom. The bed loomed in the dim room, big, warm and inviting.

He drew her into his arms. He was just the right height, Kassady found herself thinking as she slipped easily into his embrace, tall, not so tall that their lips couldn't meet comfortably. His shoulders loomed broad enough for a woman to hang a lifetime of joy and wonder upon them...strong arms, lean waist and hips... She flattened her hands as she memorized the move of his muscles under his cotton shirt. Tension stretched between them, obvious in the tightness of his ribs, the tremor of his biceps. He slipped his hands through her hair, over her nape and farther down, lightly grazing her spine, down, down, all the way to the sensitive small of her back. He spanned his fingers across her buttocks. He lifted her slightly, showing her in the most primitive way exactly how much he wanted her.

She laughed—a throaty, sexy sound, so unlike her that her breath hitched in surprise at the end of it. Little light permeated the room, only what splashed through the door from the hallway, but his smile had a brilliance of its own. Wide, knowing and rakish. She fell into those intense gray eyes that were tinged with passion and something more. Something akin to yearning.

This time she clutched his face and took control of the kissing. She drew him down to her, suckled his lower lip, traced her tongue across the ridge of his teeth. His hands came to rest upon her arms, flexing and tightening, flexing. Tightening.

Trevor...

Her heart whispered his name, but he broke the kiss as if he'd heard her. He stepped back and waited until she opened her eyes. He slipped his

fingers between the buttons of her cotton dress and tugged her deeper into the room, toward the edge of the bed.

When she'd shimmied into the green dress earlier this evening, she'd done it with the thought of making love to Trevor. With such a soft, easy dress, she could feel the breeze slip under the hem and dance teasingly across her bare belly and legs. With such a loose, flowing dress, he could slip his hands up her thighs and find no impediment to lovemaking but a pair of lacy panties. In the backseat of his truck, she hadn't bothered to completely disrobe, and they'd made hot eager love with her skirt bunched around her waist. She'd planned it that way, she'd wanted it that way. Hot sex. Eager loving.

Now she wanted to rip the dress over her head. Trevor impeded her attempt, lifting the hem over her head slowly, exposing her flesh into the air. The dress fell to the floor unnoticed as he skimmed the tips of his fingers over the rise of her breast, then he ran the pad of his index finger over the edge of her lacy bra. His gaze followed his fingers and she saw in it an ill-disguised hunger.

She held her breath and watched him watch *her*, watched him make love to her cleavage, slip a hot finger in a line from the front clasp of her bra to the sensitive skin of her midriff. He took a step back, sat on the bed and dragged his hot hands around the cool skin of her back. He pressed his face against her belly. He flicked his tongue across her navel. She grasped his shoulders so he wouldn't sink tonelessly to the floor. Trevor stilled and tightened his grip around her hips. "You're so beautiful," he said. "All of you. *Warm, soft and beautiful.*"

A quiver shuddered through her, a swift and aching sensation. Tears pricked at the back of her eyes. He found her warm, soft and beautiful. Not awkward cold and stiff.

She sank down before him. She settled on her knees and fingered the front clasp of her bra. With one flick, it fell loose. Shaking her hair over her shoulders, she peeled the cups off her breasts, slipped the straps off her arms and tossed the lacy bra to the floor.

With rough hands he fondled the weight of her breasts. He cupped them in his palms and traced the tilt of her nipples, which tightened to

exquisite knots of sensation under his touch. She wondered if she would ever get used to the knowledge that he didn't see her as frigid, found her sexy and worthy of his love.

Making, she amending swiftly. Worthy of his lovemaking.

He leaned forward and sucked a nipple deep into his mouth. She let her head fall back until the tips of her hair brushed past the middle of her back. They'd bargained for a few weeks of hot sex, but this wasn't sex they were experiencing here, in the silence of this bedroom. They were making love. For the first time. He drew in a deep breath as he released her nipple. He tightened his grip around her waist, then dragged her up, over his body, so they were lying upon the bed. Kassady let her legs fall to either side of his hips and felt the urgency of wanting in the hardness of his erection. She dipped her head, took one of the buttons of his shirt between her teeth and tugged.

"No fair," she whispered as she let it fall. "You're still dressed."

"Undress me, Kass."

She slipped off to his side and tugged the buttons free of his shirt. She stretched the cloth off his chest as he'd done to her. She traced the whorls of hair between the hard contours of his pectoral muscles. She flicked her tongue over his dark nipple, then nipped at it gently with her teeth. She took her time with the unveiling, tormenting him as he'd tormented her.

"So," he said in a hoarse whisper as she slipped her fingers under the waistband of his shorts, "you weren't the kind of girl to tear open the presents all at once at Christmas."

"Oh, no," she said, freeing the tails of his shirt. "I did it slowly. Unknotting the ribbon," she said dreamily, "then picking the tape from the wrapping and peeling it off whole."

"I tore it all to pieces."

"You wouldn't know," she whispered, "by the way, you just undressed me."

"It's not Christmas," he reminded her with a slow, smoldering grin. "And I'm not a little boy anymore."

"I noticed," she said, freeing the shirt, to expose his taut abdomen. "For me, anticipation was everything at Christmas."

For she knew she'd be disappointed in the end.

The memory assaulted suddenly. Fiercely. Making her still. Every year, for years on end, she had only one request for Christmas. A puppy. A big, sloppy, tail-wagging dog of any breed, of any size, of any age. That's all she wanted, that was all she ever wanted. Every year, she opened her presents nicely, slowly hoping beyond hope to find a collar or an engraved bowl inside, with the attendant promise of puppy to come. But Santa never delivered. No matter how large their home, her parents always told her it was too small for a puppy.

So she'd smile and thank them for the designer clothes and the high-tech toys and all the wonderful things money could buy, aching inside for something much more basic.

The pain and disappointment of those days rushed upon her hard and swift. She realized in a sudden revelation that she'd been lonely...all her life, in spite of all the nannies she'd had growing up, all the girls she'd known in boarding school, the few friends she'd made in college and graduate school. She'd never had the courage to hope for a puppy. She feared rejection. Disappointment.

"Kass?" Trevor touched her cheek, drew her to face him. "Hey, where did you go?"

She blinked back the bite of tears at the concern in Trevor's face. It was no wonder she was labeled an ice queen. She'd never reached out. She'd never had the courage to try. "Make love to me, Trevor."

He seized her, rolled her onto her back, kissed her until she felt no more sadness, until she felt nothing but the urgent need to take him, strong and hard, deep inside her. He made short work of his clothing, slapped a hand on her hip and guided himself inside her.

They rocked on the bed, and all the while he kissed her—her eyes, her cheeks, her lips, the curve of her jaw—he kept kissing her as he moved inside her. She clung to his shoulders, arched her hips to meet his thrusts and made noises in her throat of wanting, of yearning, of anticipation. His fingers dug into her hip as he tensed, held himself back, waited for her—then she sent him the message, *don't stop, Trevor, please—please—please—don't ever stop.*

Chapter Eleven

Kassady woke slowly. A warm ray of sunlight stroked her face. She blinker her eyes open. Golden early morning light glowed beyond the translucent curtains and seeped into chase the darkness from the room. She felt strangely content to lie about naked in this warm bed, cool sheets draped across her breasts, and watch the dust swirl in the light seeping through the window. Memories of the night drifted through her mind. Her body felt heavy, loose-jointed, limber yet sore.

She absently brushed her tangled hair off her cheek. Her elbow came in contact with something hard and warm. Trevor lay beside her. He'd kicked off the covers during the night. He lay as naked as the day he was born, gilded in the golden glow of morning like some sort of ancient Roman god. Carefully, so as not to wake him, she shifted her weight onto an elbow and raised her head.

The shadow of a beard darkened his face. His hair stuck out in all directions. In rest, his lips were full. Sculpted. Sensual. Oddly boyish. She couldn't seem to breathe, looking at him like this, for at that moment Trevor Richmond was the most handsome creature she'd ever laid eyes upon.

The lazy warmth and ease she felt upon awakening gave way to the rising surge of her heart. The ballooning sentiment filled her chest, choked her and sent tears to her eyes.

Trevor.

She reached out to touch him, to stroke the bristle that fuzzed the line of his jaw, to cup his face in her hand and turn him toward her, to kiss him in slumber. Instead, her hand hovered, just above his skin. His slow, even breathing fell upon her palm. She drew her hand back. She loved Trevor with all her heart and all her soul—and it scared her to death.

How could this have happened? She hardly knew this man who could paint tiny wooden birds so lifelike they looked as if they could rise up and fly. She hardly knew this man who had spent a good part of his life in the more savage parts of the world, giving life and witnessing death. She hardly knew this sleeping face, yet she felt as if she had known him all her life.

She eased back, then swung her legs over the side of the bed and slid off. Her ivory bathrobe hung on the closet door knob. She heard his voice as she thrust her arms into the sleeves.

“Come back to bed, Kass.”

She tugged the robe across her breasts as she jerked around. Smoky gray eyes peeked out beneath heavy lids. He hadn’t moved. With an outstretched hand, he rubbed the place where she had slept.

She took a deep, shaky breath to resist her first urge—to let the robe slip off her shoulders so she could join him, naked as he, in that big bed. So she could kiss his lips, caress his hard, long body, pretend they were just enjoying each other for the great sex.

It wasn’t that easy anymore.

She reached for the only defense she had. She drew around her a cloak of frost and forced her heart to turn to ice. Then she frantically sought for an excuse, any excuse, and came up with one quick.

“Sorry, Trevor,” She said with a lame laugh. “I can’t.”

“Sure you can.”

“I need to remove this diaphragm,” she explained. “It doesn’t work forever you know.”

“Remove it,” he responded, “then come back to bed.” He rolled onto his side and cradled his head in his hand as a lazy smile slipped across his face. “There are other ways to pleasure each other, Kass.”

Her eyes widened as images flashed through her mind as the heat he’d ignited with his words threatened to melt the thin patina of frost she was determined to hold. She struggled to form words. She curled a fistful of silky material over her heart. “Trevor...”

“I want you, Kass.”

“I want you, too.”

The words came out before she could stop them, pushed by the momentum of honesty. She told herself there was nothing wrong in admitting passion for him. After all, that's what got them into bed together in the first place, but there was a whole lot of distance between passion and love. Her heart had crossed that distance with lightening speed and her mind was still playing catch-up. She had no idea if Trevor had made the journey with her.

"Did I hurt you?" He sat up on the bed his brow creased with concern. "Is that it, Kass? Things got pretty rough yesterday."

She was sore. Her entire body was sore. She'd used muscles she hadn't known she had. But all the creaking and soreness of her body wouldn't preclude another bout of lovemaking with Trevor, if she had the courage. Instead, she shrugged a shoulder and latched onto the excuse. "I could use a little breather."

In more than one way.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. "I'll run you a warm bath."

"No," she said, catching his arm as he passed her. "No," she repeated, swiftly releasing him, unnerved by the feel of his warm, smooth skin. "A shower will be fine. I just need a break."

He searched her face. A curious light came into his eyes. She felt soft, open and vulnerable under the impact of that gaze, as readable as child's picture book. She didn't want him to know how she felt. He'd made it clear he wasn't a "forever" kind of guy. She didn't want him to back off because she'd fallen too deep, too hard. She didn't want his pity. And if he did feel something for her that went beyond passion...well, she wasn't sure she wanted that either.

For 'that' meant commitment, that meant forever, that meant vows and ramblings of white fences and small babies—all the things she had never dared to dream of.

Her head spun. She was so confused. This was an emotional maelstrom she couldn't control, she didn't know how to handle. So she dealt with it the way she'd always handled difficult, muddled human relations.

“The truth is,” she said, backing away from him, “I need to go back to work, Trevor. We can’t be...” She let her gaze drift to the bed with its rumpled sheets. “I mean, a few weeks of hot sex is great, but I realized I still need to do some work on my research and I need to gather more plants for my uncle—”

“Don’t”

“Wh-what?”

“Don’t do this, Kass.” He turned to face her. She backed up further. “Don’t push me away like this.”

“I’m not.” The doorknob of the bathroom bumped against the base of her spine.

“Yeah, you are,” he interrupted. “You can stand there tall and straight with your jaw set and your shoulders thrown back, but I can see into you now, Kass. That deep-freeze act doesn’t work for me anymore. Those eyes of yours...” He touched her cheek, traced her cheekbone. “I used to think they were the color of iced tea. Cold and shocking. Then I thought whiskey, yeah, whiskey. Secretive, sexy and smoky. No, I think they’re like Long Island Iced Tea—a splash of cola and four liqueurs. Deceptively potent, utterly intoxicating.”

She tried for levity. “You must be thirsty.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “For you.”

He stepped closer, settled his hands on the closed door to the bathroom, trapping her. He smelled of sleep, of man, of rumpled sheets, of sex.

“I’m not going to let you hide in the basement, Kass,” he whispered. “Not for the rest of the time we have together, anyway.”

“I’m not hiding,” she said, hating herself for being so transparent. “I do have to work. I only have a little over a week of vacation remaining. I need to do a little proofing of my research before school starts back up and my time becomes even more limited. Not to mention I need to find some more plants to run a few additional tests on to give my uncle some preliminary information so he can determine if it’s worth moving forward.”

“Well, I refuse to allow you to lock yourself in the basement right now or you will never come out. Instead let’s go back to the forest together.” He glanced toward the window, to the morning light turned bright and warm.

“It looks like a good day. We’ll go to the park and take a hike, find a few more plants of yours. Have a picnic.”

“You want to mix business with pleasure.”

“Yes,” he said. “Though I’d be happy with just the pleasure part. But if it takes mixing business and pleasure to keep you out of that basement, then so be it.”

She hesitated. She didn’t know if she could handle this. Another whole day with Trevor, another twenty-four hours close to him. Getting to know him better. Letting him get to know her better.

He pressed his forehead against hers. His breath brushed her face; she breathed it in. She felt herself weakening.

“You promised me two weeks of hot sex, Kass.”

“Promised?” Her voice felt shaky in her throat. “I think it was more like...an agreement.”

“Whatever. You promised—agreed to—two weeks. The first week has only begun.”

Just begun, she thought. How long had they been sleeping together? Forty-eight hours? Not even. More like thirty-six. It felt as if she’d lived an entire new life in those thirty-six hours.

He lifted his head from hers looked deeply into her eyes. “Have I disappointed you?”

“What?”

“In bed.” His lips quirked. “Is there something you want me to do that I haven’t?”

“Trevor!” she sputtered. “You know...of course not!”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes!” *You’re the only man who has ever made the earth move for me.*

“Yes, yes, yes.”

“I’m just trying to figure out why you’re acting so nervous.”

“I’m not acting nervous.”

“Squirrely. Jumpy. Afraid to look me in the eye.”

She glanced up sharply into those gray eyes, so close to hers, saw in them the effort it was taking for him to keep his voice light.

“Well, Kass, I’ll tell you the truth,” he said, swallowing hard despite the lightness in his voice. I’m feeling pretty nervous too. You, little lady, are scaring me to death.”

She froze. She froze, staring into his eyes, his honest words ringing in her ears and her heart tripping in her chest. She froze while a shiver shimmied up her spine. She felt something, too—something undeniable, strong and otherworldly—something she couldn’t deny or ignore.

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her gently. “Let’s just take this thing between us...one day at a time.”

* * * *

Trevor put the mouth of his soda against his lips and lifted the can to drink as he listened to the call of a yellowthroat. He leaned back in the dappled shade of a tree and cradled his full belly.

The sound of a tanager drowned out the yellowthroat a few moments later. He glanced up into the boughs of the tree and searched for the bird through squinted eyes. No sooner than he had, he found the brilliant red head amid the greenery. Then his gaze drifted down again...down across the blanket he’d carried to this shady little glen in the hopes of coaxing Kass into another bout of lovemaking...to the sight of Kass.

Kass, who leaned over the edge of a trickling brook, then lifted a test tube filled with clear water. She dropped a few drops of a blue solution into the water, then tapped the test tube to mix it. When she was done, she held it up against a color chart and marked the results in a notebook. He had never seen someone so focused on a hobby. When the lady worked, he thought ruefully, the lady *worked*.

She had the fierce, burning concentration of sunlight through a magnifying glass. It had taken them most of the morning to find the plant Colin had referred to, and she hadn’t stopped with tubes, bags and solutions yet. She hadn’t even stopped to eat her sandwich, which lay wrapped and abandoned on top of the picnic basket.

It all made sense, of course. She lost all track of time when she was focused on something. He suspected that Kass had spent most of her lifetime hiding out in her office. She forgot about food, she forgot about everything, including all her problems. One of her problems was sitting several feet from her, eyeing her like a lion after its next meal. After last night's incredible lovemaking, everything had changed between them. Kass was having a hard time dealing with it.

So was he, he admitted, rolling his shoulders. He wasn't ready for his. The timing was all wrong. What would Kass want with a man like him? Kass, who couldn't even take an afternoon off from to spend time with her lover. He didn't resent it—he couldn't. He envied her concentration, he coveted her love of her work, he was jealous of her unbridled confidence. A woman didn't achieve the position Kass had by goofing about, drinking beer and carving knickknacks.

She stood up and wandered over to the patch of weeds that were the sought-after plant species. She spread her hand over the blossoms. With tape, she lifted the pollen from the flowers and tucked the sample into another plastic bag.

Sitting here like a bump on a log, watching her add her contribution to the world's scientific knowledge, Trevor felt worthless as dirt.

“Whew! It's hot.”

He glanced up a pair of long, toned legs. Kass swiped her brown with her forearm and tossed a small, plastic bag full of decapitated flowers upon the blanket.

“Is that sandwich for me?” she asked. “I'm starved.”

“All yours, babe,” he said. “The soda is inside the basket.”

She dug into the lunch with vigor. He watched her eat, his loins reacting instinctively. Kass ate with her lips. She puckered them around the edge of the can every time she took a sip. She even tore off bits of the sandwich and lifted them to her mouth, tugging the morsels free with the fullness of her lips. Even when she chewed, her lips were moist...kissable.

The next thing he knew he was straddling her legs with his knees, leaning over her and kissing her on that delectably full mouth. He tasted the spiciness of brown mustard on her lips.

“Trevor!” she sputtered, covering her mouth as she finished chewing a bite of her sandwich. “Trevor, we’re in the middle of a public park.”

“Mmm.” He licked the corner of her lip where a breadcrumb lingered. “I noticed.”

“Well...I don’t think...”

Her voice grew uneven as he ran his hand over her breast. Her nipple hardened into a nub; it pressed urgently against his palm. He watched her face as he found that nub and rubbed his thumb rhythmically over it. He loved when she looked like this, wide-eyed, red-cheeked, her lips starting to quirk at the corners in sensual pleasure.

Then a cold mist clouded those bright whiskey-colored eyes, and she placed her hand over his to stop the motion.

“We can’t do this, Trevor—”

“Yes, we can.”

“There are public decency laws.”

“Don’t tell me, that during the time of your field research,” he said, “that you’ve never made love in the great wide open.”

“We...no.”

“Honey, the only creatures around right now are the birds, and believe me, they won’t be shocked.”

“Anybody could come by,” she said. “This place is full of hikers.”

“We are four miles from the park entrance,” he retorted, pressing his palm warmly against the full globe of her breast, “and we haven’t seen a hiker in at least two miles.”

She blinked at him, wide eyes full of uncertainty. That was the lamest excuse she had offered since this morning, but he was beginning to figure this lady out. He wanted to make long, slow love to her with open eyes; she was scared to death of that kind of intimacy, ever since last night’s fireworks. Offer her hot sex and she was a willing participant; proffer something a little deeper, a little more frightening, and she ran for the hills. He supposed hot sex would be just fine...for now.

“Turn over, Kass.”

“What!”

“Roll over. Onto your stomach.” He laid his mouth over the pulse throbbing in her throat. “Remember yesterday...in the living room?”

The skin at the base of her neck turned red.

“We’re in the woods,” he said, huskily, remembering the sight of her naked body bent over the back of the couch. The smoothness of her caramel skin, the long indentation of her spine, the soft cushion of her buttocks. “It’s full of animals—birds, deer, maybe a bear or two, all in heat. When in Rome...”

She made a little sound in her throat, then, with a shaky laugh, obediently rolled onto her stomach. He ran his hands down the curve of her back, to the rise of her buttocks, and with a hardening erection, he followed nature’s most urgent urgings.

A half hour later, he rolled onto his back and yanked up his shorts to cover himself enough for the public decency laws. Raking his hands through his hair, he tried to catch his breath. He glanced at Kass, lying face down beside him. She peered at him over the length of her arm, and he saw the sleepy glow of sexual satisfaction crinkle the corner of her eyes.

Well, he thought, still shaking with the force and intensity of their primitive mating. At least he was good at one thing in this world. If only he could make a living at being Kassady Gibson’s personal stud, he’d take on the job in a minute.

Of course at this point he figured he’d take it on for free. He wanted this woman. For more than swift lovemaking in the summer sun. He wanted to make her look like this—soft, vulnerable, happy—all the time. He wanted to melt that frost machine inside her—make her unafraid to love. To love *him*. Even if he wasn’t worth a damn.

He traced the downy hairs on her arms and she shifted her shoulders and settled down as if to sleep. Lightness swelled in his chest, as if his heart had inflated like a balloon and now pressed against his sternum, trying to break free. This could happen if he willed it. He could make himself worthy of this woman.

He could seize this love that has come upon them so unexpectedly. He could grab it, hold it, make it work.

He watched her face as she dozed. Something started to happen inside his head. The options started to roll. Options he'd known about six months ago, but he'd never really taken the time to consider.

He didn't *have* to go back to his old international medical team, he didn't *have* to go back into the field again. He didn't even have to practice medicine. He could get a desk job with the same organization. Or, he could try to get a position teaching at a medical school somewhere. He could go into hospital management. There were insurance companies who hired doctors to write guidelines for managed healthcare. His M.D. wasn't totally worthless in the marketplace for a man too much of a coward to pick up a stethoscope again.

He'd made no effort to apply to any of those sorts of positions in the past six months...because they had all left him cold. After working for nearly ten years in back waters of the underdeveloped countries of the world, he didn't think he could spend his days staring at a word processor or attending meeting with M.B.A.s who spent their time weighing profits against quality healthcare. He still wasn't sure he could make that transition.

What he *did* know is that he wanted to be worthy of this amazing woman. He couldn't ask her to share his life, unless he had a life worth sharing. For the first time since his plane had touched down on North American soil, he felt the urge to turn on his computer and work on his resume.

All because of Kass.

He turned to face her—and caught her looking at him. The softness in her eyes struck him like a hammer. He rolled on his side and slid his hand under her unbound hair to savor the bare skin of her back.

Marry me, Kass.

God, he wanted to say those words. He wanted to nuzzle his face in that place behind her ear, fill his senses with the smell of her sun-warmed hair, tell her he wanted to spend his life in her bed. The urge was almost too strong to resist...but resist he did. Because her gaze faltered, slid away, and she closed her eyes against him. If she knew the truth, she'd turn into ice before his eyes.

One day at a time. That's what he'd promised her.

He slid his hand down the incline of her back, then over one bare buttock. "For a lady who was so concerned with the public decency laws," he said, squeezing the fullness of one lush, naked cheek, "you sure are reveling in the transgression."

He was rewarded with a flash of brown eyes and a sexy little smile as she tossed her hair over her shoulders and lifted up on her elbows, giving him full view of the wonder and weight of her breasts.

"Your fault," she murmured. "You've corrupted me."

"Good."

"I used to be such a moral, law abiding citizen," she continued, rolling to one side, giving him a full frontal view. "Now you have me committing lewd acts in public places."

"Complaining?" he said through a throat suddenly tight.

"Oh, no." Her grin widened. "I'm not complaining one little bit. It's strangely...liberating."

He followed the path of her hand as she let it slip down, across her waist, over the curve of her hip. He knew that the motion was an unconscious act on her part, hesitant, strangely innocent—like a young girl first discovering the power of her own naked body. He wondered what kinds of blind man she'd entrusted her heart to before him. What kind of man couldn't see the molten sexuality of this woman? She'd never known it before, that much was obvious. She was just discovering her own sexual prowess.

For him, the sight of her running her hand over her own body was wildly sexual and an open invitation for another romp. His loins reacted instinctively. But he didn't want just sex anymore, and he knew she wasn't ready for lovemaking. So he tapered the rising heat in the air between them, leaned toward her, reached across her body and grabbed a handful of linen clothing.

"Dress you shameless hussy," he said gruffly, pressing the wad of clothing against her belly, "before I think of another way to act like animals do."

"Promises, promises."

He managed an uneven laugh and rose to his feet. He pushed his hair back from his forehead and wandered toward the stream to splash the cold water over his skin. He shot up as she cried out in sudden pain.

“Wasp,” she said in a strained voice as she danced a little pained and clutched her upper arm. “I can’t believe I’ve been stung again.”

“You know,” he said, wandering over to her side, “for an English professor and part-time botanist, you get stung a lot.”

“I never get stung,” she retorted, glaring at him. “Except when a certain swaggering man is around, stripping me of my clothes and tossing them in patches of flowers. The wasp must have crawled in the sleeve—it stung me when I pulled the shirt on.”

She hadn’t yet buttoned her shirt, and he found himself distracted for a moment, by the sight of her breasts cantilevered out of the lacy bra.

“I wasn’t exactly aiming when I threw it, you know.”

“You have a bad habit of throwing my clothes around.”

“So this is my fault?”

“One hundred percent.”

He grinned and touched her elbow. “Then I’ll kiss the boo-boo and make it better.”

He rummaged around in the bottom of the basket for some ice but settled for a cold drink. When he returned, she’d pulled on and buttoned her shirt. She scratched at her throat as she held out her arm.

“It’s swelling,” she said, frowning at the welts rising on her skin. “Worse than the last sting.”

Trevor frowned at the hives rising all along her arm. Angry red splotches blossomed on her throat, and she scratched more vigorously.

“Did you ever pack that antihistamine?”

“What?”

“Last week. I told you to pack some Benadryl.”

“Completely slipped my mind, Dr. Richmond.”

A shiver of worry shimmied up his spine. He placed the cold can on the welts then took a good, hard look at her face. She was definitely flushed.

“You feeling hot?”

She gave him a sexy grin. “Are you going to start that again?”

“I’m serious.”

She shrugged, reaching under the collar of her shirt to scratch another welt he spotted. “A little.” She wagged her eyebrows at him. “Hot sex will do that to a girl, you know.”

“You’re having an allergic reaction,” he said, gesturing to her arm, then the blotches rising up on her thighs. “Sit down—there, in the shade. I think I’ve got something in my pack.”

“Are these hives?” She frowned down at the blotches rising all over her skin. “I haven’t had hives since I was twelve years old and ate some lobster. I had to take oatmeal baths for a week.” She walked over to the tree and cast him a look over her shoulder. “This is going to put a real damper on our remaining week-and-a-half of sex, Trevor.”

He ignored her as he dropped to his knees and started pulling stuff out of his pack. He always carried a first aid kit—old habits die hard—and he found himself gritting his jaw as he plowed lower and lower in the pack and couldn’t find it.

It was just hives he told himself. A common allergic reaction. Nothing to be concerned about. More an itchy inconvenience than anything else. He would rub a washcloth full of oatmeal over her bare skin tonight to ease the itching—and he’d find a way to turn the gritty mixture into massage oil.

Relief rushed through him as he closed his hand over the first aid box. Snapping it open, he rifled through the samples for a packet of antihistamine tablets, wishing he had his other doctor’s bag. The one with adrenaline shots, the tourniquets, the EpiPens, the IV, the saline, the cell phone.

“I’ve got some,” he said, thundering across to where she sat. “Here, take these.”

She sat cross-legged on the blanket and stopped scratching long enough to hold out her hand for the tablets. She tossed them in her mouth and washed them down with a long sip of soda.

Tendrils of her dark hair lay wet against her temple and neck. Her skin was flushed and glowing with moisture.

“Damn it, Kass.” He was getting worried. “You should have packed your own. You shouldn’t be out here without the proper medicines.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Doctor, sir.” She sat the can on the ground and swiped her forehead with the back of her forearm. “I hope those help. This itching is driving me insane.”

He didn’t tell her that she’d better pray the only reaction she experienced was hives. He didn’t tell her that it took thirty minutes for the antihistamine to get into the bloodstream, or that anaphylactic shock could be fatal within twenty.

Damn his overactive doctor’s imagination. He was no better than a first-year medical student seeing cardiac arrest in gas pains, melanomas in common freckles, anaphylactic shock in a simple was sting.

Or maybe it was just Kass, whom he loved. Kass, whom he was afraid of losing in more ways than one.

“You’re not one of those doctors,” she said, taking a breath between words, “with a great bedside manner, are you?”

He didn’t laugh. Her pulse raced under his fingers. Her breasts heaved under the shirt. As he watched, her eyes fluttered closed for a moment, and she swayed backwards.

“Kass?”

“I’m all right,” she said abruptly, straightening then shaking her head as if shaking off a fog. “I just need...I just need to...sit and rest for a while.”

The words came with effort, between deep breaths. She looked at him, but it was if she were looking for a great distance. There was no sight in those brown eyes.

“You’re feeling dizzy,” he murmured.

She touched her temple with one shaking hand as she flattened the other one on the blanket to brace herself.

“Kass, *talk* to me.” He gripped her shoulders. “Are you having trouble breathing?”

“I’m just...” She breathed out, emitting a hoarse croaking noise before she heaved another breath. “Need...to...rest.”

He released her as if she were a blazing—hot ember. He shot up before her, staring down at her dark head of hair as some dam broke and his mind flooded with thoughts that read like a medical text book. *Venom from insects and respids belonging to the order Hymenoptera contain several vasocative substances, are hemolytic and neurotoxic and highly potent sensitizing agents...*

He wasn't imagining this. She was wheezing now, clutching her chest and digging her fingers into her bosom. This couldn't really be happening. He was overacting. She'd been stung by a wasp. Only a handful of people a year get stung and had a reaction bad enough to require emergency treatment.

The allergic reaction is usually the result of previous stings, when the immunologic basis being and IgE response...

Then he remembered. Last week. She'd been stung by a wasp last week. A sensitizing exposure jacked up the chanced for an allergic reaction. He stared up at the wide-open sky, at the acres of trees around them, at the loneliness of this spot in the wilderness.

Individuals stung by such insects may exhibit the following responses. 1. A local reaction with pain, generally swelling and redness confined to the sting site. 2. Hives, itching and swelling in areas other than the sting site.

The hives glowed nuclear red now and stretched all over her body. He could even see one trailing from her forehead to underneath her hairline, another one the back of the hand she braced on the ground to keep herself from tumbling over.

3. Hoarse voice, tongue swelling.

"Trevor." She swallowed laboriously. "I don't...feel well."

4. Dizziness or sharp drop in blood pressure.

His heart pounded in his chest. The straight trunks of the pines spun around him, centering him in a vortex of a silent scream. His truck was parked near the entrance—four long miles away. They had no cell phone, no flare, nothing to make their position.

Kass struggled to stay sitting up, in vain. She sank to the ground, staring up at him with wide, disbelieving eyes as she clutched her throat.

“Kass?” His hands shook. His palms were slick with sweat. “Kass? Don’t do this to me.”

“My chest...so tight.”

“Breathe,” he urged. “The antihistamine will take a few more minutes to work. Breathe!”

Her tissues were swelling up too quickly. The Benadryl would take too much time to work. He’d seen this before, not with wasp stings, but with fire ants. He’d seen a young man in Venezuela die from anaphylactic shock within an hour of the fire ant sting—he’d been too far away from their makeshift hospital to get there before he went into cardiac arrest.

Oh, God.

This was some sort of cruel heavenly joke. He couldn’t do this. He was alone. He couldn’t help her, not him, *not him*. He’d screw it up. She’d die in his arms. Kass, his Kass. His mind raced. He didn’t know whether he should use a tourniquet over that arm to prevent the venom infested blood from reaching the heart, or if it was too late. His head was too muddled, his senses overloaded. He wasn’t worth a damn in these situations anymore. He had to get her help—professional help—and quick.

He filled his lungs with air and yelled out at the top of his voice, “*Can anyone hear me? Is anyone out there? We need help here.*”

The sound echoed, lonely amongst the trees.

“Trevor?”

A mere whisper. A plea.

“I’m going to build a signal fire,” he said, swirling away and frantically gathering sticks from around the clearing. “A ranger will see the smoke and come immediately. Hold on, Kass, hold on.”

He grabbed anything that looked like wood, shoved it in a pile away from the trees, tossed the contents of his pack on the blanket until he found matches. Lit the wood, nearly choking at the smoky blaze, praying a ranger would see the smoke curling above the treetops and come to investigate.

Then he heard a strangled sound and turned to see Kass thrashing on the blanket. He remembered symptom number five.

Unconsciousness and cardiac arrest.

Chapter Twelve

“Ms. Gibson.”

Kassady blinked her eyes against the bright white light. Her lids felt heavy, as if someone had glued them together. It took a concentrated effort of will to split them open and focus on the beeping, clicking world around her.

“Ms. Gibson?” An unfamiliar face loomed in the whiteness then receded. “She’s coming around this time, Doctor. She’s responding.”

She tried to swallow, but it felt as if someone had stuffed a bag full of cotton balls down her throat. Her tongue was swollen, thick and heavy in her mouth.

A woman’s heels clicked on the floor and someone flashed a penlight into her eyes. “Ms. Gibson, do you know where you are?”

She scraped a dry tongue over cracked lips and forced one word. “Hos...pital?”

“Yes. Memorial Community Hospital.” The doctor gave her a brief, reassuring, efficient smile. “And you are the luckiest woman on the face of the earth.”

Kassady stared at the doctor blankly and wondered what she was talking about. She was in a hospital. How could she be lucky? She struggled with memory. Why was she here? She remembered hiking in the woods with Trevor...

She worked her throat to say the name, unsuccessfully, but the doctor anticipated her question.

“Dr. Richmond left only ten minutes ago. He had something urgent he had to do, and he figured you’d be out for the night. I promised I’d call him if you came to, but he’ll be disappointed he missed you.” The doctor’s

hands flickered over her, checking a pulse, monitoring the instruments. “Do you remember what happened?”

Kassady closed her eyes, sank into memory. The brightness of a summer day, the warmth of the sun on her back as Trevor and she...Kass heard the heart machine beep more quickly.

“You were stung by a wasp,” the doctor said. “You had an extreme allergic reaction and went into anaphylactic shock.”

Kassady remembered sitting on the blanket, watching Trevor scramble around the clearing, building a fire which curled wisps of smoke high into the air. She remembered the pounding of her own heart in her ears, the squeezing sensation in her chest, the haze that had come over her eyes before her head hit the ground. She remembered holding her hand out to Trevor as her world went dark.

“Dr. Richmond gave you an antihistamine that didn’t kick in until after you went into cardiac arrest. He administered CPR, which kept you alive until a ranger came by in a Jeep to investigate a suspicious fire. They called 911 and had you transferred to an ambulance, and then here, where we finally stabilized you.”

Kassady tried to sit up, but winced at the pain shooting down her chest.

“Don’t—” The doctor steadied her with a hand on her shoulder. “Your chest took a beating from the CPR. We x-rayed you. You’re going to have bruises the size of California, but fortunately, nothing’s broken.”

Kassady settled down into the pillow. She didn’t quite understand. She’d been stung by a wasp. “CPR?” Her voice sounded like gravel. “I needed CPR?”

“Yes, you did.”

“But...” She couldn’t quite comprehend what was going on. “I just...got stung by a wasp.”

“I know, it’s highly unusual,” the doctor said as she finished fussing with the tubes and machines and clanked Kassady’s chart on the hook at the end of the bed. “It’s a very rare occurrence. Sometimes it happens suddenly. Dr. Richmond told me you were stung about a week ago?”

Kassady nodded.

“That’s it then. You had a sensitizing exposure. Your immune system reacted to that sting by making whole lot of weapons to attack the venom. When you were stung again, it launched those weapons full force—in other words, it overreacted. You fell unconscious and went into cardiac arrest.”

“Cardiac...” It dawned on her suddenly. “You mean...I almost—”

“You could have, but you didn’t.” The doctor gave her another one of those brief, reassuring smiles. “You had the illustrious Dr. Richmond to keep you with the living. That’s why you are the luckiest woman in the world. Dr. Richmond has pioneered how to do emergency procedures with the most commonly available non-medical equipment and has implemented them in the field, too. His papers are famous.” The doctor’s enthusiasm was evident in her voice, but glancing down at Kassady, she brought herself back to the matter at hand. “Of course, you just needed CPR, not glue sutures or a pig’s bladder saline bags. Still, you couldn’t have chosen a better hiking partner.”

Kassady wasn’t completely listening, for the enormity of the situation was just beginning to sink in. Her skin went cold.

“You’re doing very well,” the doctor continued, “but we’d like to keep you here for a little while for observation. And since this kind of allergic reaction could very well happen again, I’ll be sending an allergist up to talk to you about venom immunotherapy. You’ll have to be extra careful from now about stings, but the therapy is ninety-nine percent effective.”

Kassady nodded numbly.

“Try to rest. I’ll make sure Dr. Richmond knows that you have come to.” The doctor patted her on the shoulder twice before swiveling on one heel and heading toward the door. “Lucky lady, Ms. Gibson. Lucky, lucky lady.”

Kassady sank deep into the bed as the doctor left the room. She didn’t feel very lucky right now. She felt sore, achy and fuzz-headed. She felt side swiped, shocked, confused. One minute, she’d been a perfectly healthy thirty-four year-old woman, hiking in a park. Twenty minutes later she’d been in cardiac arrest. Now she was strapped down on this hospital bed with an IV in her arm and bruises the size of Texas blossoming on her

chest, slowly realizing that but for Trevor's intervention out there in the park, right now she'd be dancing on the clouds with Grandpa.

Trevor. She flexed her fingers into the stiff sheets. She wished he'd stayed—she wished he was here. She needed him, she needed someone to hold onto, someone to tell her that this was just a bad dream. She hated being immobilized like this, strapped on a gurney, unable to get up, to move, to do anything for herself. She'd had an emergency appendectomy when she was twenty-one years old and hated every moment she'd spent on her back. Even then, her parents had hovered around her for the entire time, seeing to it that her basic needs were met, entertaining her between their own rounds. But her parents were thousands of miles away now, in Santa Monica, and it wasn't her parents she longed for.

She wanted Trevor.

She wanted Trevor to take her into his arms, kiss her, hold her tight. She wanted to hold Trevor, to feel his skin under her hands, to touch him...touch life. To reassure herself that she was still living. She wanted to hold him, and cling.

She wanted it so fiercely that tears stung her eyes. Her heart ached with a strange emptiness. She'd never felt this way before—so needy, so vulnerable, so shaky, as if she needed a big fuzzy teddy bear to hug tight. She wondered how long she'd been under. The clock read 10:55 p.m. Was it the same day? Why would Trevor leave her here, all alone?"

She closed her eyes and breathed through her mouth, forcing herself to be calm. Trevor would be back, she told herself. Then she could lie, shaking, in his arms, until the world fell back into place.

She lay there for a long time, with her eyes closed, taking deep breaths and trying to get a hold of herself. Slowly, she managed to control her shaking. Slowly, disturbing, thought seeped into her consciousness. She blinked her eyes open. The clock read 12:30 a.m. She hadn't slept, not really. She'd dozed in fitful, uneasy snatches buoyed by whatever drug they were dripping into her veins through the IV. She felt spacey, disconnected. Still, she knew Trevor should be back at the cabin by now, and the phone at her bedside had not yet rung.

Those disturbing thoughts seeped out of the shadows and took solid form, and though she tried to wrestle them away, she could not destroy them. She thought about Trevor, out there in the park with her, as she succumbed more and more deeply to the allergic reaction. Trevor, alone in the quiet wilderness—alone with a woman going into cardiac arrest. Trevor, who'd lost his faith, who'd given up medicine. She remembered the panic shining in his eyes as he gazed down at her. She remembered the way his hands shook as he frantically, made a signal fire.

She realized with cold dread that she had inadvertently sent Trevor back to South America. The phone rang, jangling her nerves. She fumbled for it dropped the receiver on the nightstand, then cradled it against her ear. "Hello?"

"Kass?"

Trevor's voice sounded rugged, rough. A little anxious. She could read no more into it. "Hi, Trevor."

"God, it's good to hear your voice."

Her heart gave a little trill, but she stifled it and bit her lower lip, struggling for words to speak the uncertainties in her heart. "It's good to hear yours, too."

"I stayed as long as I could. I just missed you," he said. "Dr. Yager told me you came to just after I left. But I had to go, Kass. I didn't know how long you'd be out. And I had... I *have* some things I needed to do."

He sounded unlike himself. Incredibly uneasy. Restless, edgy. She heard him on the other end of the line, making noises, as if he was pacing, antsy, struggling to choose his words. She wasn't sure why she wanted to hear those words—she knew that nothing urgent waited for him back at the cabin. She suspected he just had to get out of the hospital, away from her and the hell she'd put him through."

"Listen, Trevor," she said, licking her parched lips. "The doctor told me it was you who saved me out there."

"No," he said, a little too swiftly. "I mean, I kept you going, but you were lucky. The ranger saw the fire, drove out to investigate, called 911. Kass—" He sighed, then rushed on. "We can't talk about this now. Not so soon. We have to talk—but you're tired and should get some sleep."

She winced back tears. She wanted to talk to him, she wanted more than that, too. She wanted a future with him. She wanted to know that five years down the road she'd be waking up by his side, making love with him, arguing with him about who was going to feed the baby.

"Dr. Yager told me she wants you there for observation at least until the day after tomorrow," he said. "I've got to go to Denver, and I might have to stay overnight, but I'll be back in time to pick you up and drive you back here. Is there anyone you want me to call?"

"No," she said, her voice small, hating that he was being so kind, so efficient, so...detached. "I'll call my parents from here."

"Okay." He made restless, hurried little noises. "Okay, then. Rest, Kass. I'll keep in touch. I'll see you the day after tomorrow."

Kass stared at the receiver after Trevor hung up as the painful realization dawned upon her. Trevor might have saved her life, but in the process, Kassady had lost him. The sharpness of the pain was like the cold steel of a garden spade, and she was a garden grub unexpectedly unearthed and exposed to the hot dry air and blinding light of day. By instinct, she curled into herself, blindly fixed the receiver into the cradle of the phone. She tightened her hands into fist and crossed her arms over her chest, then pulled her knees up to protect herself, closing her eyes against the pain.

This will pass, she told herself. It always did. She'd lost enough loved ones in her lifetime—through voluntary departure as well as death—to know the stages of grief. She'd already passed through shock. What shock was there in the knowledge that Trevor didn't love her as much as she loved him? She'd known him for less than two weeks and only a few days of it were dedicate to 'hot sex'. She'd been more the fool to become so emotionally involved, so swiftly. Stage two was denial, which she never bothered with. Why deny the inevitable? No one stayed with her very long. Anger, stage three, was a waste of energy. She simply needed to go through the fourth stage—realization. Realization that, once again, someone she loved had abandoned her. Then, and only then, could she finally attain the fifth and final stage—acceptance.

All very scientific, she told herself, tense against the pain emanating from the region of her heart. She just needed time to pass through each

phase, time to grieve and to heal. She'd see Trevor one last time, pack up her stuff at the cabin, then go back to the university. She had lots of data to organize, preliminary results to give to her uncle. She had plenty of work to do, plenty of experiments to plan and perform...

Then, suddenly, she couldn't think of work anymore. The pain overwhelmed her. One hot tear slipped out of her eye and burned a trail down her cheek, then soaked into the pillow.

I love Trevor Richmond.

A simple truth, undeniable. Spoken in her heart. She loved him, body and soul. Deep inside her, she suddenly realized that no amount of work was going to 'busy' her out of this pain.

She blinked her eyes open and stared at the white room, at the blank walls and shiny floors, at the IV bag hanging from the stainless steel pole. The sound of nurses' footsteps came from the hallway, along with the murmur of voices. For one brief, piercingly vivid moment, she imagined herself sixty years from now, lying in a hospital bed like this one, in a stark hospital room like this one, feeling her life ebb away as she lay there...all alone.

Fear seeped into the pain. She did not want to be alone anymore. She did not want to spend a lifetime alone. She wanted...

Trevor.

Trevor as her husband. Trevor's eyes in her children's faces. Trevor's babies in her home. Trevor's love in her heart.

Her body loosened. She let her arms fall to the bed. Air flowed through her mouth, filled her lungs...then flowed out again. Her chest throbbed where Trevor had performed CPR. The tears dried in her eyes.

She straightened her legs out on the bed, turned on her back, stared up at the ceiling squares punctured with hundreds of tiny holes. She began to imagine what could be like...if, for once in her life, she dared to dream.

* * * *

Trevor walked into Memorial Community Hospital, then stopped for a moment in the middle of the busy, echoing hallway just to breathe the air. Just to feel the electricity of the place, the vibrancy, just to revel in the feeling of his senses awakening, of his mind turning on again.

Three days ago, he thought he would never feel this way again. Three days ago he'd been a dead man, and now he'd come back to life. It hadn't been an easy transition, but he'd made it, and now all he wanted to do was make up for wasted time.

He took the elevator to the fourth floor and bounded down the hall to Kass' room. They'd had a brief, impersonal phone conversation that morning, arranging for her discharge, and she'd sounded normal enough. Revived, impatient to be out of there. But the phone conversation didn't prepare him for the woman he saw when he walked into her room.

She stood by the window, awash in the white light of mid-afternoon. Her skin looked pale; her hair freshly washed and hanging loose over her shoulders. It gleamed, lying soft and silky. She wore the same clothes she had on that day in the park, but the linen had long lost its crispness. When she turned to him, all wide eyed, she looked like a lost, frightened little girl.

He took a step into the room, instinctively wanting to take her into his arms, enfold her, engulf her, kiss her worries away—but he resisted. He stiffened, fixed himself in place. He had to be cool, careful, and approach her the way his father had taught him to approach an injured wild thing—with great gentleness and patience. He'd nearly scared Kass off once before with the intensity of his feelings. He'd be damned if he'd scare her off again.

Instead he thrust the bunch of wildflowers he'd gathered from the backyard that morning. "No venomous insects," he said, grinning at her over the wilting blossoms. "I promise."

She smiled then, hesitantly, and as she walked toward him, he noticed her back straightening and her spine going stiff, and his old cool-tempered Kass—the strong woman he'd come to love—was back again.

"They are lovely." She took the bouquet, buried her face in the flowers, then peeked at him over the petals. "Thank you."

He didn't know what to say. She looked so beautiful. So untouchable. He was afraid that if he said anything he'd say too much.

"Are you ready to leave?"

She nodded. "Paperwork is all taken care of. Just waiting for you to wheel me out in that thing." She pointed to a wheelchair waiting just inside the door. "Hospital policy, you know."

"Climb in, then, and let's get out of here."

He wheeled her down the hall, anxious to get her out, wondering how he was going to say all he had to say without messing the entire thing up. Dr. Yager stopped him in the hallway to talk for a few minutes. Trevor bobbed his head at her chatter and escaped as soon as he could. He left Kass at the entrance way to the hospital and brought the car around.

"My Mercedes," she said, gazing at the sleek care as he got out. "You brought my Mercedes."

"I thought you'd want a smoother ride than what you'd get in my truck."

"That was very...nice of you."

"I told you I can be a pretty nice guy, once you get to know me." He came around and opened the passenger door for her, made an exaggerated gesture of welcome. "Your chariot, my lady."

She gave him a strange look and slid inside. He settled into the soft leather driver's seat and the car purred onto the highway as his mind raced faster than this driving machine ever could. The fine make of the car made the silence of the interior as deafening as any rock concert.

"Trevor," Kass began sometime later, as they neared the cabin. She began fussing with her hands in her lap, "you seem to be in an odd mood today."

"I am." He struggled for a moment, then figured there was no easy way to do this. "I've got a job."

"What?"

"I've got a job, Kass. That's what I was doing yesterday. Looking for a job."

"Oh." She shifted in her seat. "That was...quick. And wonderful."

"Something happened that day in the park," he said, flexing his hands on the wheel. "Something changed. I don't know how to explain it."

"You saved my life."

He turned his head to look at her, and it struck him how close she was to him—he could see the depths of her eyes, the sweet softness of her lips. He glanced back to the road, saw the turnoff to the cabin and took it abruptly.

“Trevor?” She grasped the dashboard. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not going to do this in the car,” he stated. “We aren’t far from the cabin. I want to see your eyes. We have to have this talk face-to-face.”

Trevor pulled off the narrow road, turned into the entrance of the driveway leading to the cabin. He rushed out of the car before the engine even idled, came around and opened the door. He seized her hand and hustled her to the cabin quickly, but gently. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s get you settled inside the cabin.”

Trevor pulled her inside and led her toward the couch, but he couldn’t sit. He was wound up tight than a jack-in-the box ready to spring out.

“Okay, Kass. I didn’t want to dump this all on you, but I can’t hold it back any longer.”

She stared at him, shell-shocked, wide-eyes and mute.

“Something happened that day in the park,” he continued, “something I can’t explain for the life of me. You...when you went into shock...by God, Kass, I was scared.”

“I know.” She met his gaze levelly. “South America.”

“Yes. South America.” He planted his hands on his hips and looked at her and realized that she *did* know—she did understand. Of course she understood. “It was all happening again, and I couldn’t handle it. I was so sure I’d screw up.”

“You didn’t.”

“I know. I couldn’t.” He thrust his hand through his hair. “It all came back to me with crystal clarity, all that I had to do, all that must be done—the confidence came back,” he explained. “And all the doubt, all the anxiety...it just burned away.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said with a soft smile. “By the way...did I thank you yet, for saving my life?”

He swallowed the growing lump in his throat. “Did I thank you yet—for saving mine?”

Confusion clouded her eyes.

“You saved me, Kass,” he said, taking her hands. “It all came back to me—the excitement, the thrill, the *ability*. I could do it again, and more importantly, I *wanted* to do it again.”

“Oh, Trevor...”

“I’d forgotten what it was like. I didn’t remember how important the work is. I’d forgotten that I was born to do this. When I left you at the hospital, I came straight to the cabin and started working on a plan. Early yesterday morning I started making phone calls. Old friends who’d left the organization and come to work in the States. Old buddies from medical school, professors I’d kept in touch with. I was just probing, just seeing what I could find. I had an interview by lunchtime, a job by the end of the day.”

“Congratulations.” She murmured with an uneven smile. “I’m so happy for you, Trevor, I really am. Where...will you be working?”

“Denver,” he responded. “The community hospital emergency room.”

“Not the international organization?”

“No. Not anymore. It’s time for a change, and the need me at the community hospital.”

“Then you...you could live near the university.”

“Right near *you*.” He tightened his grip on her hands. She looked confused, bewildered, overwhelmed with information, but he was unwinding and nothing could stop this now. “I didn’t want to tell you all this until it was all settled.” He braced himself. “I wanted to be worthy of you, Kass.”

She sucked in her breath, a swift, sharp sound. Her eyes grew round, and she searched his gaze with her own. “Trevor...you didn’t need a job to be worthy of me.”

“I damn well did,” he said. “For my own peace of mind, if not for yours.”

“Trevor, it doesn’t matter,” she said, standing up, taking a step closer to him as he lost himself in her eyes. “It doesn’t matter at all.” She filled her lungs as if bracing for something. “I want you just the way you are, Trevor. Unpredictable. Garrulous. Even unemployed.”

He felt his heart stop at what she was saying penetrated his whirling thoughts.

“I love you, Trevor.”

She trembled. He felt the tremors though all he touched was her hands.

“It took me a while to figure it out and it’s taking every bit of courage I have to tell you this—but I love you with all my heart. I want to marry you, if you’ll have me.”

“Hey,” he said as his heart skipped several beats. “Hey,” he repeated, tugging her closer, “that’s *my* line.”

Her lips spread in a tremulous smile, a smile as big as Texas and her eyes were as warm as brandy backlit by a fire. “Have a problem with liberated women, Trevor?”

“No, no,” he said, “I’m in love with one.”

Wrapping his arms around her, he felt their bodies and hearts merge in a warm, honeyed swell. He dipped his head down and captured her smile with his lips, then kissed her until Kass drew back gasping for breath.

“Yeah, I’m in love with one,” he repeated, holding her tight. “And it looks like I’m going to marry one, too.”

Epilogue

Kassady opened the oven door to a cloud of smoke. Waving it away with a quilted mitt, she pulled out a tray. The bruschetta clanked on the edges of the pan like lumps of coal. Exhaling deeply, she walked the tray across the kitchen, pressed her toe on the pedal of a hinged garbage can and trashed her failed experiment.

Someday, she *would* learn to cook, she thought. She was determined to have some sort hobby. It might as well be a practical one. But right now, she thought as she reached for the phone, she'd just have to add an appetizer of bruschetta to the caterer's order for this evening's gathering.

Just as she finished placing the order, Trevor came up behind her and slipped his hands around her expanding waistline.

"The bruschetta experiment failed," she admitted as he nuzzled his neck. "But no fire this time."

"It wouldn't be home without the smell of burnt food."

She laughed, a laugh that dissolved into a husky chuckle. Trevor's hands were working magic on her swollen belly. Maybe it was the pregnancy, or maybe it was the thrill of a year of marriage, but Kassady couldn't seem to get enough of her sexy husband.

"Trevor," she moaned as his hands slipped lower, "my parents are due to arrive any minute now."

"They'll understand if their welcome is delayed."

"And Colin's going to be here... Do you want him walking in on us again?"

"I want you."

She turned in his arms and smiled up at her husband. He'd changed so much in the past eighteen months. He'd lost that anger, he'd lost that frustration. The shadows hadn't completely dimmed in his eyes, but they'd

faded some. His job had given him a new sense of purpose, a fierce vitality that electrified him.

Kassady found this new, confident, virile man incredibly, impossibly sexy. Now that they were married and promptly pregnant, he walked around with an air about him, as if the world were his oyster, and she his pearl.

A warm honey feeling filled her up. It had taken her a long time to adjust to this tender sensation. It had taken her a long time to learn to trust it. Now it was hard to believe she'd once been afraid of this kind of love. It was hard to believe she'd almost curled in on herself and given it all up. She couldn't imagine any other life but the one she'd been living since she'd said 'I do'. It was a life full of love, joy and hope—a life full of Trevor. Soon they'd be sharing this brilliant life with a little baby boy.

With a husky laugh, she went up on tip-toe, opened her mouth and kissed him with all the hot passion banked within her. There was a *little* time to frolic before their guests arrived.

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