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VICTORIA'S CONQUEST

Laurie Paige



ALL-AMERICAN SWEETHEARTS

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"*I didn't realize what I was doing—I hope you'll forgive me.*"

Jason frowned. What was she talking about? "Forgive you?"

For kissing you. It was like you said—the aftermath of a very dramatic afternoon, the tension and the closeness

The light dawned. "You... you think *you kissed me?*"

"Yes, I started it—"

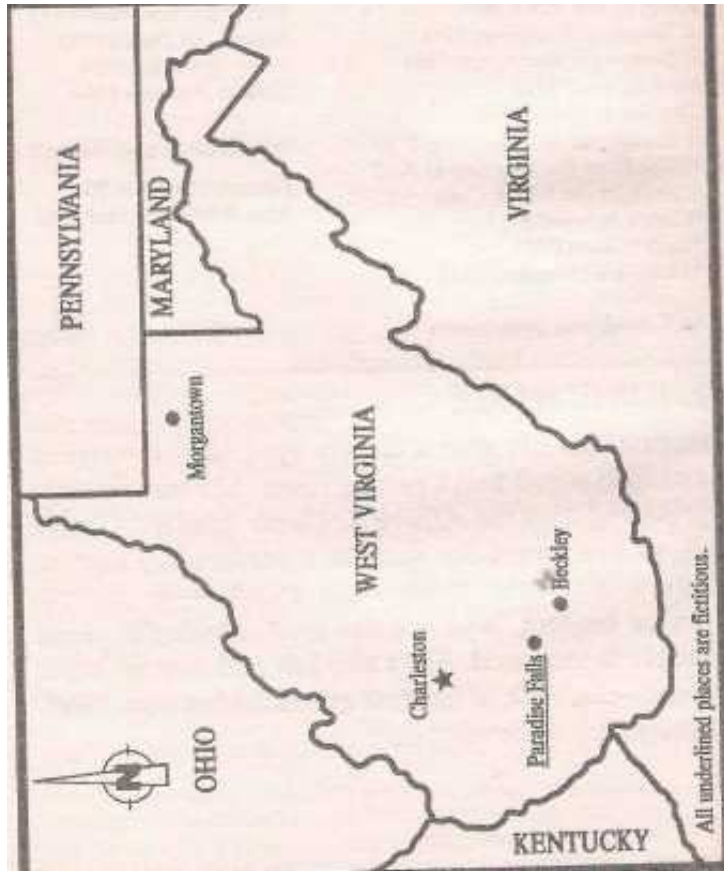
"You didn't kiss me, I didn't give you a chance. I started the kiss. I stopped it.

When your lips went all soft under mine, I knew I had to back off."

All she remembered was was the kiss—hot, tempestuous and much too brief. Spontaneous combustion might be closer to the truth.

"Oh."

"Yeah," he agreed cynically. "Oh."



Chapter One

"I'm terribly sorry. This meeting was totally unex-pected,"the secretary explained, excusing her boss's his next appointment waiting.

Victoria Broaderick glanced at the clock—almost forty-hour of one. Her appointment had been at one. She smiled politely. "That's all right. I don't mind waiting."

Since she'd come specifically to meet with Jason she had nothing else to do. Because she was a realative so to speak, being the widow of Jason's second cousin, he probably felt he didn't have to pay her the courtesy of timeliness.

"He usually very prompt," Susan, the secretary, defense of her boss. "Would you like an-other cup of coffee?"

She seemed anxious to please. Victoria agreed and took her cup over to the desk. The younger woman was very pregnant, and Victoria didn't want to cause her any extra work.

Twice already she had heard Susan gasp when she bent over the bottom drawer of a file. The way the secretary had laid a hand on her extended abdomen made Victoria wince. She knew what it was to be pregnant. She knew how labor contractions felt—how fast they could come, how soon it could be over.

Susan poured the coffee. Victoria returned to her seat. She turned her gaze out the window.

The June day was one to bring the poets running with pencils in hand. A breeze rippled the line of birches alon: the creek, setting their leaves a-tremble.

The ring of the telephone jarred her thoughts. While the secretary wrote down a message for Jason, she thought over her reasons for being there for the hundredth time.

Raleigh, North Carolina, was a huge metropolis compared to her hometown, Paradise Falls, West Virginia. As mayor of the small town—population 4928—she had a responsibility to carry out her campaign pledge to bulid a secure future for the area.

She was determined to do just that. In fact, it was the sole reason for her trip.

Jason's systems engineering company had recently won a new contract from the Navy. She wanted him to locate the assembly plant in Paradise Falls

She wondered if any of her arguments for the move would appeal to a tough businessman like Jason. He was from the area so he already knew it was a lovely place to live.

With the mountains cupping the town on three sides, it was protected from the worst winter winds. Spring and fall were a riot of color, as dogwoods bloomed or maples turned crimson. At present the summer season was just starting. The weather was perfect for picnics by the river and for hiking, she would remind him.

And it was a good place to raise children, she added to her mental list, when Susan again drew a quick breath.

Eight minutes since the last one. Victoria held her breath as she waited for the secretary to resume breathing.

"Are you all right?" she finally asked, a stupid question since no one ever asked it until it was obvious that the other person wasn't doing well at all.

Susan opened her mouth and drew in a gulp of air. She nodded. Laying a hand over her rounded stomach, she smiled. "Junior is being rambunctious today."

Relieved, Victoria smiled in understanding. She knew how hard a baby could kick. She'd been almost six months pregnant when the accident had occurred. An icy road. A driver who hadn't been able to make the curve. John cursing and cutting the wheel hard. Then a confusion of sound and blur of motion while they went off the cliff, turning over and over....

Susan paused and grimaced. Victoria checked her watch. Six minutes. This was making her nervous. She drew four deep breaths, then continued her mental review when the secretary resumed work.

The town had a skilled work force, she would tell Jason....if she ever saw him. Hand-made crafts for the tourist trade over at the new resort were popular items. But, she admitted, they were too seasonal for most people to depend on them for a living.

She glanced at her watch at another gasp. Five minutes.

Not that the town was destitute. Far from it. The Clairmont Textile Mill was rebounding quickly from the recession in the apparel market. Adam Clairmont had recently expanded the company to include a new line of clothing—breathable rain gear that was all the rage with backpackers and outdoor types.

As a businessman, Jason would understand that diversity was important. When one industry was in a slump, the other would take up the slack. At least, that was the theory.

Four minutes. A nervous tremor ran over her.

What the heck was keeping him so long?

She continued the review of her arguments. They needed another source of revenue more reliable than the tourist industry and with less competition from foreign markets than textiles. It would have to be a "clean" industry, no smokestacks or noxious fumes. Thus her decision that something on the order of an electronic assembly operation would be perfect. That was the reason she was-

waiting to see Jason Broderick. As CEO of one of the fastest growing privately owned corporations in America, he could help her reach her goal and fulfill her promise to her constituents.

Although Jason hadn't lived in Paradise Falls in years and she'd met him perhaps a dozen times in all, she considered kinship enough of a tie to justify her calling upon him with her problem. In West Virginia family was important.

She settled back in her chair and crossed her legs, pausing in her mental meandering to admire her new pumps of embroidered linen. They were blue like her summer suit and nearly the color of her eyes. Her silk blouse was smoky pink and crisscrossed over her breasts in a draped, pleated V. She knew she looked nice in the outfit. She'd spent a whole day searching for it.

"Dignified, as the mayor should be, but smart. Voila, I give you the modern woman." Her friend, Cara, had approved while they scoured the town during the shopping expedition.

One thing she had learned in politics: appearance was important. Sometimes it was everything.

She thought people voted more for an image than for any reason. She knew she was seen as the All American sweetheart—spunky, bright, hard working and kind.

People gave her more credit than she deserved for putting her life back together after the tragedy. What else could one do?

She opened a casual clothing boutique and made a success of it. Last year she'd run for mayor and won. Life goes on.

Occasionally she felt she was playing a series of roles, and real Victoria Broderick had gotten lost between. The buzzer sounded on the telephone. The secretary leaned forward with a grimace and picked it up. "Yes. All right. Yes. I know where it is. I'll bring it to you right away."

She hung up, gave Victoria a worried glance and bent over her files again. With a grunt, she pulled a file folder out and stood, her hand going to her bulging waistline. When she opened the door, "Victoria got a glimpse of uniforms and suits.

The Navy brass must be meeting with Jason on the new contract. Victoria nervously clasped her hands together. She wished she could join them. The secretary returned to the outer office and gave her an apologetic smile.

"Meeting still going strong, huh?" Victoria asked in a friendly tone to let Susan know she understood. "Some of our town council meetings last half the night." Victoria had used her official letterhead stationery to request the appointment. With a busy magnate like Jason Broderick, she'd suspected prestige of office might count more than kinship. She was prepared to use both in her efforts.

"Jason is probably ready to slit some throats. I'm sure he didn't expect the conference to go on and on like this. The Navy people insisted on talking to him after they finished with the manager and scientist in charge of the project," Susan explained. She sat down in her chair with an audible catch of breath and closed her eyes for a second.

"Are you okay?" Victoria asked again, a frown puckering her brow as the secretary held on to the edge of the desk.

"It's just false labor." Susan sighed as the pain passed. She relaxed slowly. "It's a month too early."

Victoria glanced at the young woman's rounded abdomen and thought it looked more like a month too late. A prickle of foreboding swept over the back of her neck. "Perhaps you should lie down for a few minutes."

The office was furnished comfortably with a short sofa and two matching chairs in heather shades of mauve and green, a color scheme she might have chosen herself. A copper sculpture on a wall and copper accents in lamps and vases added a splash of brightness.

"No, I'm sure it's nothing—" Susan stopped as another grimace crossed her face. Victoria placed the coffee cup on a low table and tossed her purse into the chair when she stood. Her nurturing instincts surfaced. She went to Susan's side and held her hand until she relaxed again. "Come on. You need to get your feet up." She took a file folder out of Susan's hands, placed it on the desk and helped the younger woman lie down on the sofa. With a hand at her wrist, Victoria checked Susan's pulse. Steady and strong. She noted the time. Three minutes.

"I feel silly." Susan declared, swinging her feet to the floor. "Really, I'm fine. It was only a twinge."

Victoria remained doubtful. "Looked like more than twinge to me," she protested. Susan stood and started toward the desk. About half-way across the room, she stopped dead still, her body taking on a strained posture. Victoria rushed to her side and grasped her arm. "Su-san?"

Oh, God," Susan groaned. She bent slightly and pressed her hands on her thighs as her body was racked with a strong spasm.

"One Minute" Victoria stated, glancing at her watch. I think you're in labor." Can't be," Susan gasped. "Too early." "As if that makes a difference. Mine came—" "She stopped. Her baby had come during the accident, hours before they'd been found trapped in the twisted steel, She had delivered it alone—a little boy with dark, downy hair on his tiny, perfect head. "You've had a baby?" Susan asked as the cramp eased.

Pain flicked through Victoria at the brief, poignant memory. She forced a confident smile to her face. "Sure have. The secret is to go with the flow."

"Right. I've had classes." A ripple of surprise crossed Susan's face. She stared at the floor. "I'm... I'm..."

Victoria looked down and saw water puddling on the carpet. "I think," she said, "we've run out of time. Come on, get back on the sofa before the baby falls out on its head."

The feeble joke brought a fleeting senile to Susan's face. "Oh, help. It's starting again."

"Easy now." Victoria held Susan for the minute it sn for the contraction to lessen, then guided her back to the sofa. "Lie on your side with your knees drawn up. That seemed to help me."

"Get Jason," Susan requested through pale lips. S hewas apprehensive now that she realized the real thing was happening.

"Good idea. I'll be right back. Don't move."

Brilliant advice, Victoria mocked herself as she headed for the conference room. She opened the door witbo knocking and stuck her head in so the men wouldn't see Susan. Eght pairs of eyes stared at her with varying levels of inquiry. One pair, as blue as her own, she recog-nized right away.

"Jason... Mr. Broderick... uh, could I see you for a minute, please? It's urgent."

"Gentlemen, if you will excuse me," he said without further ado. She was relieved he didn't rail at her for in- terrupting.

He came around the long table, ushered Victoria away from the door and closed it securely behind him. "What is it?"

At that moment Susan groaned again. "Jason, get Ted," she pleaded in a ragged whisper.

His gaze, outlined by a lush curtain of black lashe flicked to the sofa. He took in the situation.

He looked back at Victoria. For a split second, his face altered. An emotion, deep and unfathomable, etched lines between his eyes. It passed as swiftly as it had ap-peared.

Victoria paused, surprised. She thought she'd seen pain in his eyes, but she must have been mistaken. He was all brisk, jovial efficiency now. After taking off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves, he bent to Susan and laid a soothing hand on her brow.

"Darned right we'll get him. He'll want to be in on the big event. First we'll call an ambulance, then we'll call his company and tell him to meet us at the hospital." He sounded so cheerful and capable, Victoria was put to ease. He was evidently a man of quick discernment and action that was what was needed at the present.

"Too late, I think," Susan wailed. "Oh, Jason, I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" he questioned, kneeling beside her and giving her a roguish smile... 'For what? It's not often a man gets to welcome his godchild into the world at the first breath.'

Victoria found herself smiling at his teasing. His glance flicked to her. "Get that ambulance," he said.

"Right."

She dashed to the desk and picked up the phone. Seeing the intercom button light up, she impatiently punched another one for an outside line and dialed the emergency number. A man's voice answered. She explained what was happening. He promised to send help right away.

"It's on its way," she told Jason.

"Good. Now call her husband. What's the number, honey?" he asked Susan.

She gasped it out.

Victoria dialed. She noticed her hand was trembling. She asked for Ted and was told he was in the lab. "Tell him Susan is in labor and to meet her at the hospital." She heard a groan from the sofa. "Tell him to hurry," she added.

The woman on the other end of the line promised she'd get the news to him immediately. Victoria relayed the message.

"Great," Jason said, giving her a glance of approval.

Warmth stole over her. She hovered behind him, wondering what more she could do to ease the situation. Susan appeared a little frightened; her eyes held a pleading look.

"There, now, it's going to be fine." Jason brushed Susan's bangs off her forehead in a caring, gentle manner.

Victoria was fascinated. He was very different from her first impression when she'd opened the door and interrupted the meeting. Then she had observed annoyance in his probing glance, but now he was all calm tenderness—reassuring and in control, exactly what Susan needed.

She watched his hands as he stroked Susan's cheek and arm. His fingers were long and lean. His skin was tanned. She knew he liked to play tennis. On the occasions he visited his folks in Paradise Falls, he spent a lot of time at the country club, picking up tennis and golf games.

"Get those men out," he directed, his manner changing as he spoke to Victoria.

"Take them out the other door and—" he paused to think "—escort them to the cafeteria and give them lunch on the house. They can meet with the VP of operations if they still want to talk after that. Get back up here on the double when you get them taken care of."

"Right," she said.

She went into the executive conference room. The seven men were still sitting around the table, discussing a series of graphs. They hushed when she appeared.

"Gentlemen," she said, "Mr. Broderick has a... -uh.. .family emergency." That was certainly the truth.

He suggests you break for lunch and perhaps he can catch you later in the main conference room. Will you come with me?"

She ushered them into the hall, lining them up behind her like ducks in a row.

"Isn't it a lovely day?" she commented as they rode the elevator to the lobby.

They agreed it was indeed.

Fortunately she remembered seeing a sign pointing to the cafeteria on the first floor when she had arrived that afternoon. She led them to it. She passed Jason's instructions to the cashier and returned to the third-floor executive office.

"Get that pillow and blanket out of the closet in my office. And towels from the bathroom," Jason ordered the second she reappeared. "Not that way, the other door."

Victoria changed directions and darted to the door he pointed out with a tilt of his head. He was holding both Susan's hands as she moaned through a contraction. In less than a minute Victoria returned with the items.

Jason slipped the pillow behind Susan's head and the blanket beneath her. He searched out the fastenings on her skirt,

"Jason," she said, a flush of red rising over her cheeks.

"Relax, I'm an expert at undressing women." His grin was bold, but his touch was gentle.

With rapid skill, he removed the damp skirt and underclothes while Susan closed her eyes tightly as if deny-

ing she was there and that this could be happening to her. With impressive strength, he lifted and positioned her, then he draped the towel over her drawn-up knees. She was in the birthing position.

Victoria's breath came as rapidly as Susan's as the contractions pulled and eased, pulled and eased.

Jason spoke continuously, his voice soft but wonderfully resonant, like the full-throated bay of a hunting dog heard from a distance through the woods. A memory stirred. His voice was so familiar...as if she'd heard him speak like this...

The timbre beguiled Victoria. It was a lover's tone, rippling deeply with unspoken thoughts, a longing of the soul.

She studied her cousin-in-law with renewed interest.

He'd always held himself aloof from the family fun, smiling and watching mostly

from the sidelines. She'd thought he was cold—a distant, cynically amused man. She saw she'd been wrong. Very, very wrong. A tremor glided over her. She wrapped her arms across her chest, fascinated by him.

"Hold tight," he murmured once when Susan cried out.

He would be an extraordinary lover. Victoria was shocked when the thought sprang full-blown into her mind. It unnerved her, jarred her composure... and filled her with a longing so acute, so potent, she, too, gasped. He gave her a brief, intense glance.

"Jason... I'm sorry... for all this," Susan panted.

"Don't be. This is what marriage is all about—loving and making babies. Sharing. It's life with a capital L."

His smile was the most beautiful Victoria had ever seen. Tears filled her eyes at his tenderly spoken assur-

ance. She blinked and moved closer, not wanting to miss

He looked up when she sat on the edge of the chair beside the sofa. Their eyes met.

Victoria couldn't look away. She felt that she was being pulled into an unknown universe through his gaze. He was asking her to come with him... to take his hand and come with him...

""What?" she asked, coming back to reality and realizing he'd spoken to her.

"Hand me that washcloth," he requested.

She put it in his outstretched hand. He swabbed Susy's brow and gave her an encouraging grin. When the next contraction began, he put his hand down and let her hold on to it again.

A knot formed in Victoria's throat. When Susan made a choked sound, she picked up the cloth, folded it and held it out. Susan grasped it between her teeth, using it to bite against as the labor deepened. Victoria sensed the end was nearing.

"Where is that ambulance?" Jason muttered with a fierce frown.

"The man said it should be here in ten minutes," she replied.

"How long has it been?"

She looked at her watch. "Six minutes."

Jason grimaced. He removed his hand from Susan's and laid it on her rounded abdomen. He rubbed in soothing circles. "Relax, now. Deep breaths. Rest up for the big one."

Susan managed a smile around the cloth. She took it out of her mouth and sighed.

"This really is work."

"They don't call it labor for nothing, right?"

"I wish Ted was here." Susan got a little teary.

"Hey, is that an insult to my bedside manner? Aren't I rubbing your tummy? Ted

told me that's what he did when you had a restless night."

With bantering good humor and infinite patience, he coaxed Susan through each minute, one after another.

Victoria felt sweat gathering on her forehead and between her breasts as time stretched into an eternity. She saw Jason steal a quick glance at his watch, then peer out the window. Ten minutes had come and gone. The ambulance was late. "Maybe you'd better not push," he advised at one point.

"Have to," Susan said, her tone querulous.

"Well, then, that's all right."

Seeing the beads of perspiration on his face, Victoria grabbed a towel from the table behind her and mopped his brow. He turned his keen gaze on her. She smiled, offering encouragement and support. Her mouth trembled when he stared at her lips.

"She's had a baby," Susan said abruptly, nodding toward Victoria. "She said she had."

She saw Jason's throat move as if he'd swallowed something hard, then he said, "I know. I know about Victoria's baby."

"How old—" Susan broke off with a gasp.

Victoria hoped Susan would forget her train of thought before the contraction ended. This wasn't a good time to discuss what had happened that snowy day seven years ago. Recalling her own ordeal, her heart went out to the young woman who was trying so hard to be brave as Jason encouraged her to "hold on just a little longer."

She studied Jason, her feelings for him tender and suddenly clear. He was a man who'd be easy to love, if a woman could reach the compassionate center he hid behind his devil-may-care grin. That woman would be lucky beyond Measure. Susan uttered a keening sound. She caught a breath and held it. Her face turned red with effort. "Pant." Victoria ordered. "Don't hold your breath. You needed the oxygen. Pant." She panted to show Susan the rhythm.

"Take her hands," Jason broke in. "Get behind her and hold her hands. I'm going to need mine free." His gaze locked briefly with Victoria's.

A thrill rushed through her. She realized she'd never felt so alive, so in tune with nature, with life, with another person. She was one with Jason and Susan... with this moment of birth... this miracle of life! Together they labored through the contraction until it eased. Victoria brushed sweat off her brow with the back of one hand when Susan released her and relaxed once more. Jason did the same.

"Get two more towels," he requested. Victoria ran to his executive bathroom and returned in record time, her breathing as hard as Susan's. She gave him the towels. He laid one across his knees, one across Susan after pushing her maternity blouse

out of the way.

"You're doing fine, love," he assured Susan. "Yell if you feel like it. Easy now. We don't have to rush. There, it's easing up a bit. Rest and get your breath..."

His gentleness caused tears to come into Victoria's eyes. Then Susan gripped her hands as the next contraction started.

Jason leaned forward, intent and focused, ready to help the mother and child. Victoria couldn't take her eyes off him. If she'd had him seven years ago, might her baby have stood a chance?

Not likely, she acknowledged. But this man would have been a comfort. He was... wonderful was the only word.

There was a passionate intensity about him, as if this birth was the most important thing in the world, as if the sum total of all life depended on the success of this one event.

Strange emotions arose in her, filling her throat with a need to cry out her feelings as she once had at the climax of passion.

Then she experienced the oddest sensation. It was as if she'd been enclosed in an enchanting warmth and swept into a magic realm. She breathed the very elixir of eternity.

This man, she thought, confused by the longing that poured over her. This man brought life.

She watched his hands—such gentle hands—move over Susan again, calming her with his touch on her abdomen, and wanted to lay her hands over his and move with his movements.

She felt pain in her fingers as Susan squeezed harder. Joy washed over her. She was connected to this lusty eruption of new life. She was part of it. ..part of the miracle.

"All right," Jason exclaimed, sounding like a Little League coach in a tight game. "Show us what you can do, sweetheart."

"Hit one for the gipper?" Susan managed to tease.

Jason laughed, a vibrant chuckle that sent shivers bouncing along Victoria's spine. He had a laugh almost identical to that of the other Broderick men she had known, warm and husky and pleasing to the senses. With Jason there was more, though—undercurrents that hinted of mysterious depths. Like the birch trees along

The river. murmuring and chuckling in the breeze, keeping its secrets____

She looked out the window, feeling bereft and saddened all of a sudden. This moment belonged to Susan, not her. She no longer shared life in the fullest sense. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, she chided.

A commotion at the door brought her head around. Three paramedics entered,

carrying a medical kit and stretcher

"Thank God," Jason muttered. So, he hadn't been quite as sanguine as he'd led her to believe. He wiped his forehead against his sleeve after he moved aside and let the medic take his place.

"Well, what have we here?" the man said on a jovial awe. He gave Susan a reassuring grin. "We won't make it to the hospital, but I think we can get you into the ambulance where we have a better birthing bed than this one"

The other two men positioned the gurney. They lifted Susan onto it, strapped her in and headed out.

"Jason," she called, casting a panicky glance back. "I'm right behind you."

"Come... with me?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." He gave Susan a cocky grin that dipped right down into Victoria's heart. At that moment she realized she'd fallen a little in love with him during the past fifteen minutes. She knew the feeling was due to the emotion of the moment, but it didn't seem any less real.

Jason Broderick wasn't the man she'd thought he was. There was more to him—so much more!—than the sarcastic, raffish person he portrayed when he visited Paradise Falls. She wanted to know him better. There were depths to this man....

He paused at the door, a frown nicking a line over the bridge of his nose as he looked back at her.

"Don't worry about me." She gave him a wobbly smile. "Take care of Susan. My business can wait."

He tipped his hand in a half salute, his eyes dark with some emotion she couldn't read, and headed off at a run to catch the men carrying Susan. From the window Victoria watched him climb into the ambulance and reach out to comfort Susan.

The receptionist came into the office. "Shall I set you up with another appointment?" she asked. "I don't know how long Jason will be gone."

Victoria grimaced as she considered her wasted trip. "I don't have anything else to do. I need to talk to Jason when he comes back, so I think I'll wait, if you don't mind."

The receptionist looked unsure, but Victoria was experienced in dealing with people. She took a seat and smiled confidently. The woman hesitated, then shrugged and left to resume her duties at the front desk.

Victoria selected a magazine and thumbed through it. After five minutes, she closed it and laid it aside.

She reviewed the recent exciting episode. She still couldn't quite comprehend the

difference in Jason. To day she'd seen a side to him that he'd never shown his family, at least not while she'd been around. Of course it wasn't every day that a person was in on the beginnings of a new life.

Tears clouded her vision. She was still wound up from the excitement, she realized as she patted her eyes with tissue.

And from watching Jason, her late husband's enigmatic cousin, who had been John's best friend when they were boys and best man at John and Victoria's wedding.

Their friendship had drifted into an occasional meeting after the marriage.

She propped her chin on her fist and considered their mutual past. She had sensed John's hurt at Jason's standoffish attitude, although he'd never actually complained about it. He hadn't understood why Jason wouldn't visit with them or go on their frequent fishing and camping expeditions.

She personally thought it was because Jason, a bachelor had been bored with their married bliss.

He probably had, but bachelor or not, he'd certainly been wonderful during this birthing crisis. She envisioned his hands, stroking and soothing—slightly callused on the palms, she'd noted at one instant—but so gentle.. .so very gentle. It still amazed her that she'd never seen him like that, never even realized the potential in him for that kind of emotional depth.

A pulse came to life deep inside her. Heat seemed to radiate outward from the same mysterious point, warming her all over. She stirred restlessly and frowned at the tension that filled her.

The sound of Jason's voice came back to her, low and husky, demanding and coaxing. She pressed her fingertips to her temples as confusion washed over her. He'd never spoken to her like that, so why did she seem to remember that he had? She sighed, deflated now that the emergency was over. She needed to relax and rehearse her strategy for persuading Jason to come to Paradise Falls. When he did, she and her two best friends were going to give him a sales pitch he couldn't resist.

However, her mind wasn't on the task.

With painful honesty she acknowledged the subject foremost in her thoughts.

Jason. His incredible tenderness. His surprising warmth. The engaging way he'd teased and soothed and offered firm, steady support. She closed her eyes and pressed a hand to the burning ache that filled her chest.

She recalled his hands, his movements controlled and assuring. Did he touch a woman like that when they made love... ?

Her breath suddenly uneven, she tried to turn her thoughts in a different direction.

It was no use. She couldn't forget that appealing degree of intensity she'd witnessed in him. It had been almost passionate.. .not sexual... but passionate nevertheless.

So strange, the feelings that had stirred in her. Like a part of her had been awakened from a long sleep. It had been over seven years since she'd known fulfillment.

Shocked, she realized she wanted it now... this moment ... the touching... the caresses....

She opened her eyes and shot out of the chair. Agitated, she paced the room. Drawing upon her thirty-one years of experience, she forced herself to look at the situation realistically.

The emergency had been emotional and unsettling. It had engendered a camaraderie based on high feelings, the way soldiers in a foxhole became fast friends. Yes, that was it.

Satisfied with this reasoning, she returned to the chair. The phone rang just as she sat down. It rang and rang. She went to the secretary's desk. Looking at the buttons, she realized it must be Jason's private line. Perhaps he was calling with a message-She grabbed it up and spoke rather breathlessly. "Hello?" She couldn't remember the name of the company. "Jason Broderick's office." There, that sounded sufficiently official.

"Let me speak to Jason," an imperious female de-manded.

Victoria's spine stiffened. She disliked people who treated others without courtesy. "He isn't available. May I take a message?" She forced a pleasant note into her voice

"Where is he?"

"He had to leave the office unexpectedly."

There was a dead silence on the line.

"He's supposed to pick me up at eight. Tell him to make it eight-thirty. My modeling assignment is going to run over."

"Your name, please," Victoria said with great efficiency. She pulled a telephone message pad to the center of the desk.

"He knows who I am," the woman snapped.

"But I don't," Victoria replied sweetly.

She tried to write the time down on the pad and found the pen didn't work. She looked in a center drawer for another and spied an engagement book. She opened it to the current day and studied the list of Jason's appointments.

"What time do you expect Jason back?"

"Well, actually, I don't know. There was an emer—"

"Just give him my message. Did you get the time correct?"

Victoria looked at the name written in the engagement book and noted the

restaurant listed beside it. Her own name was the only afternoon appointment. She gave a disgruntled sigh.

Fate had cheated her out of her chance. Not only was she going to miss her interview with Jason, but she was going to spend a lonely evening at the hotel. Time, energy and money wasted, and not one whit closer to her goal, darn it. "Well?" the woman demanded.

"Are you Delores?" Victoria asked, a wicked idea popping into her head. Did she dare act upon it?

"Yes."

"Oh, good. Jason said.. uh...I was to tell you he's... uh... not going to be available for the rest of the day."

"What?"

The angry shriek hurt Victoria's ear. "He sends his deepest regrets, but there was a... a family emergency."

Guilt jostled with self-righteousness as she told this bald lie. Look at the facts, she thought, defending herself to her conscience. Her reasons for seeing Jason were much more important than one woman's dinner date. Other people's lives depended on her.

Besides, Delores would have many opportunities in the future to dine with Jason... and the model was probably on a diet, anyway, she added as a sop to her scruples.

An irritated huff came over the phone. It took little imagination for Victoria to picture the beautiful but plastic woman who was to have been Jason's date.

"What kind of family emergency?"

It was obvious the model didn't think anything took precedence over an evening with her. Victoria tried to think of some vital reason for Jason's missing the date. Nothing came to mind.

When all else fails, tell the truth, she advised with wry humor. "Actually a relative from out of town has arrived-"

"Tell Jason to send him to a show or something. There's no reason to break our date. He can say he has a business dinner."

Victoria frowned. Jason couldn't possibly have a serious relationship with this female Narcissus. "Well," she began carefully, "I think it must be important.

Jason seemed rather intent when he left the office." That much was true.

Sounds of muffled rage sizzled over the wire. Victoria's conscience scowled at her for the continued deception

"Was it a female?" Delores asked in a furious snarl.

"It was, wasn't it?"

"Actually, yes," she said hurriedly before she broke down and confessed all. "I'm

sure he feels he has to entertain her. She's from his hometown. Family obligations and all, you understand."

"What does this cousin look like?" Before Victoria could answer, the model supplied her own description. "Some frowsy bleached blonde, no doubt, with big blue eyes and no brain."

Victoria frowned at this description of herself. While she did have blond hair, it was natural. Her eyes were blue, but she didn't think that impeded her intelligence. She felt a bit less guilty for her subterfuge.

"Well, her hair did seem kind of sun-bleached. She looked like an outdoorsy sort of person—"

"I know what you mean," the model said. "I hate that type, but men seem to like them."

"Oh. Do they?" His discussion was getting interesting.

"It's all an act."

"What is?" Victoria asked, worried that she'd somehow given herself away.

"That type of woman. The cutesy blonde. She probably pretends to like all that athletic stuff while acting helpless as a lamb at the same time. I hate fakey people like that."

Victoria thought this sounded like the pot calling the kettle black, but she made her tone sympathetic. "She's only going to be in town for the evening, so Jason'll be available tomorrow."

"Tell him not to expect me to wait around for him. I've had an offer for a weekend party, starting after the session this evening. I've decided to take it."

"I'll tell him," Victoria assured her, conscientiously writing the message down word for word. She read it back to make sure she'd gotten it right. "Anything else?"

"No." The model banged the receiver down in her ear.

Victoria winced and returned her phone to the hook. A movement from the door caused her to look in that direction.

Jason stood there, his smile cool, distant, sardonic, his thoughts and feelings hidden. This was the Jason she recognized.

Chapter Two

Victoria realized Jason looked tired. He was also incredibly appealing. His tie was loose, his shirt was open at the neck and the sleeves were rolled back on his forearms. His hair was rumpled. She wanted to run her fingers through the coal-black strands and smooth them.

"So what are we going to do this weekend?" he inquired with deceptive ease. He gave her an appraising once-over. Without waiting for her response, he offered several suggestions. "Dinner. We'll go to my place afterward. A nightcap, perhaps. Then..."

He shrugged as if to say the possibilities were endless. His eyes narrowed as he let his gaze roam over her once more, lingering at the point where the material of her blouse crisscrossed. A tingling sensation dashed through her breasts, like little currents of electricity running wild over them.

"I..." She tried to think of some excuse for her conniving performance. Nothing convincing came to mind.

"Tell me... is this a kissing cousin relationship, dare I hope?" He lifted his eyebrows in a sardonic taunt. "It must be since we're obviously close. ..family ties and all."

So, he'd heard everything. "Jason—" She cleared her throat. Her mouth was dry. She realized she was very nervous. She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry for breaking your engagement, but my plane leaves at eight in the morning. I really need to talk to you before I go. It's important."

Jason kept his expression carefully neutral even as a flick of anger whipped at his self-control. He wondered why fate had chosen to send her to him. His one weakness ...

"Weakness, hell. Honey-blond hair, big blue eyes and a lush, womanly figure were hard for any man to resist. When she'd opened the door to his conference room and peered around it at him, he'd felt a surge of passion so strong, he'd nearly exploded.

He smiled, mockingly amused at his own predicament. He wasn't as cool as he pretended. In fact, he was burning up. At this moment, he'd give ten years off his life to make love to her.

That was something she would never know. He knew first-hand how susceptible that left a man to a woman's wiles.

Anyway, the desire was a natural reaction, left over from the drama of the birth. Most men, after an emergency or a smashing triumph, wanted sex—hot, wild and mindless. He was no different.

Shifting his casual pose in the doorway, he was aware of the heaviness in his lower body. He ignored it.

"It's always important," he replied to her statement, "especially when people want to ask a favor."

A tinge of red crept into her cheeks. Anger or embarrassment? He couldn't decide. What difference did it

"I do want a favor," she announced candidly.

She looked at him with a level stare, neither begging nor using her feminine charm to coax him into a better frame of mind.

He felt a reluctant tingle of admiration for her. Whatever she wanted from him, she wasn't shy or coy about it. "So what is this great thing I can do for you?"

Victoria frowned at his cynical tone. At present he wasn't in a very receptive mood...

Well, of course not. He'd come from a long meeting to an emergency—she knew how that could drain a person emotionally—and here she was, canceling his date and arranging his evening for her own purposes.

"I want to talk to you about Paradise Falls. If I could have a couple of hours this evening, I'll explain why I'm here."

She tried to stay calm, as a public official should. But too much was at stake.

Besides, he made her nervous. She kept imagining things, like how his mouth would feel touching hers...

"From the conversation, I understand I'm free for the entire weekend," he reminded her, his voice becoming very deep and husky, sort of... sexy. "So.. won't you join me?"

The soft tone didn't disguise the subtle menace she detected in every word. Nor the danger that lurked within those mocking blue eyes with their to-die-for lashes of pure black. An answering thrill of excitement danced over her nerves. He was issuing a challenge. Was she going to accept it?

She had a job to do for her community, she reminded herself sternly. This wasn't a lover's tryst. The weekend would provide an opportunity to talk to him in depth about Paradise Falls and its problems.

She needed a whole weekend to do that? Just the two of them?

Some part of her was thoroughly shocked. But another part, well, it was an intriguing idea. Besides, she was a grown woman. She hardly needed a chaperon. She frowned. The fact that she was intrigued unnerved her more than a little. The events of the afternoon had already sent her composure into a topsy-turvy mode... making her think she was in love with him... making her want the touch of his strong but gentle hands on her. She shivered delicately.

"My charm must be slipping if it's that hard for you to decide." He gave a cynical laugh,

"This is serious."

"I assure you, I'm always serious about my companion for the weekend," he mocked her scolding tone. He waited a moment, then said, "Think about it." He shrugged as if to say her decision made no difference to him.

"How long do I have?" She was startled to hear herself ask the question. Was she really contemplating an entire weekend with him? She was.

"Until—" he glanced at his watch "—until six."

That meant she had almost an hour. She bit her lip in indecision. A weekend. But it was for the community good.

Be truthful.

She would like to explore the depths she'd sensed in him earlier. Perhaps she would find the things in him that John had liked so much, although she'd never seen them herself. Until today.

She'd had a glimpse of the inner man during his care of Susan. Why did he keep part of himself hidden behind a mocking wall of amusement? The tender, caring side was enormously appealing.

"I'll do it." She lifted her chin and returned his look as if he'd questioned her courage.

"The entire weekend? You'll reschedule your flight?" He gave her a curious glance, half-disbelieving.

"I can book another one for Monday morning."

He watched her for an eternity—until her nerves were stretched as thin as a silk thread—before he nodded, then ran a hand through his hair.

"God, I'm beat," he said. "Delivering babies is hard work, not as hard as having them, but damned tiring all the same."

He lifted his arms over his head in a spine-cracking creak. His torso was outlined by the white Oxford cloth of his shirt. He was all muscle and sinew, the type of man who could eat without a thought to gaining weight.

A startling thought came to her. If she walked over to him, laid her head on his chest and wrapped her arms around him, he would hold her, kiss her, make love to her...

She forced the vision away. "How is Susan?" she finally remembered to ask. "Mother, daughter and father are doing fine." "A girl," she said, once more swept into the miracle of birth. "Ted made it to the hospital?"

"About thirty minutes ago. He was in some obscure lab working on one of his crazy experiments. They had trouble finding him. I stayed with Susan until he arrived."

Victoria smiled, feeling tender toward Jason as remembered their earlier efforts to help. She glanced at his hands. How very gentle he'd been. Tears came into her eyes.

His gaze locked with hers. For a second she thought she saw something—a deep yearning, perhaps—a azure depths.

"You were wonderful today," she said. Her smile wobbled, then disappeared. Why was she being sentimental about it all? Babies were born every day.

His expression changed. A barrier silently slipped between them. It was as if a cold fog had crept a room. He'd closed himself off, the way he did in visited Paradise Falls. Why?

She found she wanted to know the answer to the question that was Jason Broderick. After watching him she knew she'd never be satisfied to take him at face again. There was much more to him than that.

"I have some calls to make," he said abruptly stalked across the room toward his office.

The quiet in the building and the increasing noises from the street alerted her to the time. He had left.

"I should go to my hotel and get ready for tonight. I'll call a cab."

He paused at his door. "Don't bother. I'll drop; as soon as I'm finished here." He continued into the office, leaving the door open.

Victoria called and changed her flight to Monday waited for him to finish. She heard him talking on the phone.

His words were muffled, but his manner seemed restrained. After a few minutes of serious talk, he chuckled. His words were suddenly very clear. "I won't be in town. No, not Delores." He laughed. "You don't know her. What? Oh, to the cabin, I think. She's...umm, you know, the outdoor type."

Victoria's spine stiffened. A cabin. Did he think he was counting on taking her to some remote cabin for the weekend? She hadn't agreed to that, not by any twist of the imagination.

It was twenty minutes before he was through with his call. He came out, unlocked his office and nodded to her. "Ready?"

"Jason," she began stubbornly. "About this weekend what, exactly, are your plans?"

Rest and relaxation," he promptly replied.

I heard you mention a cabin. I don't want to make you give up your weekend—" You're not. You can come with me." No." She realized she'd spoken too adamantly. "I don't want to ruin things for you. I realize now that I was unforgivably rude in changing your plans to suit my needs. I'm terribly sorry. If you called Delores, I'm sure'd reconsider..."

She trailed off as he shook his head. "I don't want her. I want...you. You said it was important. Since this is the first time you've ever come to me, I believe you." I want... you. Had she really heard a slight hesitation in that statement, as if he really meant her personally? What would he expect of her? Gazing into his eyes, she found no answer. His expression was remote, yet alert, as if he noted her every thought.

She hesitated. Perhaps she was letting her emotions get the best of her common sense. "All right," she agreed.

She smiled. "If you promise not to toss me off the nearest cliff for ruining your love life."

It was as if a wall slammed down between them. She shouldn't have mentioned his love life. She'd been too personal. He stared at her without speaking. The moment stretched out. A throbbing began deep inside her.

"I promise," he finally said, his voice devoid of emotion.

A chill spread over her. She wished he would laugh with her as he had with the person on the phone. Frowning over her own unpredictable reactions, she picked up her purse and preceded him out the door. He locked it and took her arm to escort her from the building. A sense of turmoil enveloped her. It was like knowing a storm was coming and knowing she couldn't get out of its way. She wasn't even sure she wanted to.

"Victoria studied the black linen sheath. She hung it over the door and perused the suit she'd worn earlier. Her friend Cara had insisted she bring the black dress, but maybe the suit would be better. With her lace blouse, it was elegant enough for dining out, yet it would lend a businesslike tone to the evening. After all, this wasn't a date.

She put on her stockings while she thought it over. She finished her makeup and combed her hair, clipping it back behind one ear with a rhinestone comb. Finally she stood in front of the dress and suit again. Vanity won. She chose the sheath. After stepping into it and zipping the back, she slipped into her heels and surveyed the results in the full-length mirror. Her cheeks were too red. She fluffed some powder across them to dull the flush of excitement. Really, this wasn't a date.

The knock at the door caused her heart to pound with uneven beat. She pressed a hand to her chest.

This was not a date.

The knock sounded again, a bit louder. Jason evidently was not a patient man. She opened the door.

He looked her over in a leisurely manner, then grinned in silent appreciation as she stepped back to let him enter. He closed the door behind him and leaned against it, his hands thrust into his pockets. "Very nice," he said.

"The city gals won't stand a chance when the guys see you"

"Thank you. I think." She managed a carefree laugh. "Does that mean I look okay for a country mouse?" More than okay." His voice dropped to a husky level. She searched his face and realized she was looking for person she'd seen during the emergency. All signs of lender, caring man were gone, wiped as clean as a soldier's weapon after the crime. She wanted that man for escort, not the Jason who stayed aloof, watching the ride from a distance, his view cynical, rarer was an answer, she realized. Once upon a time he may have fallen deeply in love, at love hadn't worked out for some reason, so he'd withdrawn. Now he kept people at a distance, refusing to take another chance.

What a terrible waste of a wonderful man if that was true, she thought, the aching, elemental sadness she'd perienced earlier that day sweeping through her. She wanted to take him into her arms and comfort him. If she did, he would probably think she was issuing an open invitation for a seduction. After all, they were alone a hotel room with a queen-size bed not more than ten feet behind her.

Concealing her instinctive sympathy, she looked him over with the same insouciant perusal he'd used on her. "You look nice, too."

He was dressed in a black suit with a blue shirt. His tie blended the two colors and added a dash of red. The overall effect complemented his blue eyes and black hair. He looked very worldly, very cosmopolitan and very masculine, with the polish that only experience could give a person.

I'm an expert at undressing women.

Victoria believed him. The model she'd talked to on the phone was probably a good example of the type he preferred. For some reason she felt disappointed in him.

"Ready for our big night on the town?" he inquired.

She frowned at his tone. It was falsely jocular. "How kind," she said brightly.

"The long-suffering bachelor resigns himself to showing the uninvited relative a good time."

His eyes narrowed, giving his face a dangerous cast. "I'm trying to be agreeable. You're the one who set this weekend up to suit your own purposes, remember?"

"I shouldn't have bothered you," she said, troubled by her reactions to him, which seemed to roam the entire range of human emotions. She tried to laugh it off.

"Who am I, a small-town mayor, to intrude upon a busy tycoon like you?"

"Having second thoughts about staying with me?" he inquired. His tone implied he'd expected it. She hated it.

Stiffening her backbone, she assumed a cool nonchalance to match his. "Not at all. It's just that I have this inconvenient conscience that gives me a hard time when I tell falsehoods. I don't like feeling guilty."

To her surprise, he laughed. She was enchanted. Jason laughing or Jason being gentle was far different from Jason being sarcastic.

"Your conscience can rest easy. Since I heard most of your conversation with Delores, I could have stopped you at any time if I'd wanted to see her this evening," he said,

giving a casual shrug. "Shall we go?"

He took her shawl from her, when she retrieved it and her purse from the bed. His touch was a gossamer stroke against her arms when he draped the silky material around her shoulders. He escorted her from the room and down the elevator.

The restaurant was on the same block as the hotel.

They walked the short distance and were taken to their table at once.

"Impressive," she murmured, regaining her equilibrium. "I come here often."

"And leave large tips?"

The corners of his mouth flicked up in his usual cyni-cal grin. "Guilty as charged," he confessed. "You've heard the story—money is like manure..." She couldn't help but smile, too. "Yes. Spread around, it does a lot of good. Allowed to pile up, it stinks," she completed the maxim. "Which is why I'm here." Although his expression remained pleasant, she knew the curtain had closed on his feelings by the way his eyes narrowed slightly. He became wary. She supposed it was inevitable. Magazines loved to print stories about entrepreneurs like him. They extolled his acumen in starting his own business from scratch.

She'd read how he'd poured every cent into the company, and had eaten hundreds of peanut butter

Sandwiches to save money. He'd made it on his own.

Other people had read those stories, too, and knew he was rich. He was probably asked for money all the time.

For a second, something in her rebelled at being another of those people who asked for favors. She sighed.

As mayor, she had a duty to her constituents.

"So tell me about it," he invited. The waiter appeared at their table. "After we order," he amended.

After consulting with the waiter and with her, he made their selections quickly. She liked that. Dithering drove her insane.

Perhaps she was too impulsive, but she'd rather decide and go on, even if the decision turned out to be wrong, rather than spend ages worrying over it. Jason, she suspected, was like her in that respect. Studying the handsome, but hard, planes of his face, she felt a return of that warm, tingling hunger that radiated from deep inside her.

There was no denying the fact—she wanted him.

It was such a surprise, this intense hunger. She'd have to be careful around him. She was confusing desire with love, an emotional experience with the emotion itself. That would never do.

Yes, there had been a sense of oneness with him as they'd shared the moment of crisis. And yes, it had been wonderful. Her emotions had run high, and she'd felt totally alive for the first time in years. But fifteen minutes didn't make a lifetime.

"Now," he said, turning his attention back to her after the waiter left- "What's so important that it would take the mayor away from her duties to the home folk?"

"I'm not exactly on a pleasure jaunt," she said defensively.

The sardonic amusement disappeared. "Don't worry," he told her in his cool, distant way. "I never thought that for a minute."

She'd hurt him. It was a surprising revelation. "I mean, it is a pleasure to see you, but that has nothing to do with why I'm here." She was digging her grave deeper with each word. She regrouped. "I want to talk to you in Paradise Falls."

Umm-hmm," he said with no inflection. Oh, hell," she said.

That got his attention. "Is that any way for the mayor to talk?" he mocked. "Whatever would people say?" She studied him. "As it you cared," she concluded. You've always gone your own way. A loner, John said. "He gestured with his hand, its swept taking in the space around them and beyond. "That's right. I like to forge own path. That's best done alone, don't you think?" She couldn't bear his sarcasm. She wanted the inner person. "You can miss out on the good things in life like that," she said slowly. "Like you said to Susan... loving and... and..."

"Making babies 'was the term., I believe."

"Yes, and sharing all of life." Just for the tiniest fraction of time, she thought of making babies with him. A terrible yearning came over her. Once she'd held a baby to her breast and tried to breathe life into its tiny body.... No, she couldn't think of that, not now. She stared at his hand as he ran one finger up and down the moisture on his water goblet. Control. She had to keep control.

But the longing grew, and all she could remember was Jason, coaxing and tender, helping to bring a new life into the world. She wanted that... with him!

"You were so gentle," she said, unable to hold the words in. She put a hand over her eyes to hide the tears.

Dear God, she was coming apart right there in front of him. She breathed deeply, striving for calm.

"What did you expect?" he demanded. "That I'd yell at her like I did when you?" He stopped abruptly.

She lowered her hand and stared at him. He looked as if he'd been turned into the proverbial pillar of salt.

The scene came to her, as real as if it were happening this very minute. She'd been cold, so cold. Then she'd felt nothing. Sleep had stolen over her. She'd dreamed of a meadow bathed in sunlight. Instinctively she'd known if she but crossed the short distance to it, she'd find warmth. She'd taken one step, then another—she was almost there! —but something called her back.

A voice, angry and urgent, had broken into her dream, calling her name, forcing her to stop. Someone slapped her! The meadow had disappeared, and she'd been cold again... cold and frightened.

"What's wrong?" Jason asked, his tone low and tense, breaking into the memory... dream... whatever it was.

"Nothing," she said, "just a.. I just remembered a dream."

Jason had never shouted at her. He'd never touched her, much less slapped her. Certainly he'd never held her in his arms and wept over her... warm, wet tears on her cold skin. She touched her cheek, almost expecting to feel the moisture. It had been so real.

She shook off the nightmare. "When I what?" she asked, going back to his unfinished statement. "When did you yell at me?"

"When you missed that easy net shot the time we were tennis partners," he reminded her.

"Oh. That was a long time ago."

"Yes," he agreed. "A long time."

His thoughts seemed to turn inward after that. She wondered what he was thinking of. Their first course arrived, dispelling the moody silence. She decided it was time to start her campaign.

"About Paradise Falls," she began.

Jason listened to Victoria talk, her voice like a sweet melody as she spoke of the growth potential and low labor costs of the small town tucked into the West Virginia hills. She was so earnest, so appealing, it did things to him. Like make him want to snatch her up and— Forget it!

"So, will you come talk to the town council?" Victoria said at the end of her long list of arguments.

"Maybe," he said. When she opened her mouth to argue, he held up one hand.

'Let it rest. You still have two days to go.'

She grinned happily. "I'll have you convinced by then."

Heat flowed into his body. He wanted to kiss her. He'd never known the taste of her, but he'd imagined what it would be like.

"You'll try," he said, groping for a lighter tone.

"I'll succeed."

They had finished their main course, refused dessert and lingered over coffee while she extolled the wonders of the town. It was time to leave. He glanced around the dimly lighted room. The tables were filled with couples, laughing and talking, or just gazing at each other with love in their eyes.

He glanced back at Victoria. She was watching the dancers on the narrow strip of hardwood flooring. He somehow knew she wanted to join them. "Let's dance," he heard himself say.

"Victoria was startled by his suggestion. She had been longing to do that very thing. She felt very young and girlish all of a sudden. When he guided her to the floor with a hand on her back, her skin burned all the way from her neck to her feet.

They danced circumspectly, with an inch between them, unlike the couples on either side of them who were so entwined there was no visible space separating them. But she was aware of his hand at her waist. A tremor rushed over her. His hand tightened.

The top of her head came about even with his mouth. She noted he gazed over her head as if at some distant universe he longed to explore. She wanted to be there with him.

He glanced down at her. Their eyes locked. For a heartbeat, she saw the hunger, hot and passionate, in him. She suddenly felt as if she were drowning. She caught herself in time to prevent her body from gliding into his. Her lips trembled as she imagined the feel of his mouth on hers. She wanted him to touch her. Dear God, she wanted him to make love to her.

"This is all so crazy," she murmured

"Yes," he said as if he understood exactly what she meant.

She wasn't sure she knew. How could he?

"When do we leave for the cabin?" she asked, breaking the visual contact. If she thought on practical matters, perhaps she could control her more tempestuous thoughts.

"Early. Can you be ready by seven?"

She nodded.

"I'll pick you up at the hotel. We'll have breakfast there, then get on the road before the freeway becomes crowded."

"Where is this cabin?"

"On a lake about two hours from here. It's hilly. There are woods all around so you can't see the other cabins." It sounded like a perfect retreat, the type of place she'd loved to go for a vacation. She'd always liked the quiet and the sense of being alone with the person she loved.

She stole a glance at Jason again. Love? No, not really. They'd shared a moment out of time, one that would always be special to her—the drama of birth, the revelation of this other side of him—but it was no more than that.

Jason was an interesting enigma, there was something about him that stirred her imagination, but that was all. His hand tightened at her waist as if he knew of her unspoken thinking. They looked into each other's eyes, their lips as close as a trembling breath. For a second she imagined she saw a need that matched her own, then it is gone. He smiled, and his expression turned sarcastic.

She'd do well to be wary of him, she reminded herself. He was a man guaranteed to break the heart of a woman so foolish as to fall in love with him.

Chapter Three

The music drifted into a slow song of lost love. Victoria felt an ache in the vicinity of her heart. Why did love have to be so sad? It wasn't always like that, she recalled. Her marriage had been filled with a deep, quiet sense of happiness. Being with Jason didn't make her feel quiet at all. He made her nervous, put her on edge, wrought a tempestuous longing in her that reached right into her soul-She stopped the wild thinking. Really, there was no need to dramatize the day's events nor her reactions to him.

When the music ended, she sighed with relief. He hadn't spoken during the sad love song, and his face had gone blank. As if he'd wiped clean every thought and emotion, she mused while he paid their bill.

Once on the street and heading for her hotel, she fell behind as he set a furious pace. Upon realizing he'd left her, he stopped and spun around. "Sorry," he muttered when she came alongside him.

He took her hand and looped it over his arm, thus holding himself to her stride. "I'm not sleepy, are you?" he asked. They were ascending the steps in front of the hotel. A porter opened door for them.

No," she said. Was she up to a nightcap in the dimlounge? It might be better, considering her state of awareness of him, for her to put some distance between them.

"It's only ten. We could be at the cabin by midnight."

"Tonight?" she stuttered.

They stepped into the elevator. The doors silently closed. He pushed the button for her floor. "Have you

thing you have to do tonight or in the morning?"

No."

Well?"

She sensed the controlled impatience in him. He'd made up his mind, now he wanted to be off. The tension in him was almost palpable. A return of her earlier sympathy had her agreeing to the change in plans.

"Shall I pack and check out tonight?" she asked, digging the key out of her purse and handing it to him.

Yes." He opened her door and stood back to let her enter.

The first thing she noticed was the bed. The covers were neatly turned down to reveal pastel sheets. Her lacy nightgown was spread over the sheets, the waist pleated into intricate folds. A rose and two candy mints lay on one pillow.

The scene was deeply, romantically intimate.

Need rose in her. She longed for warmth and the closeness of lovers. From a long way off, she heard the door close behind her. She let her purse drop into a chair.

Slowly, she turned.

Jason stood in front of the closed door, his hands thrust into his pockets. His eyes, as dark as midnight in the glow of the soft lamplight, roamed over her. She saw the leap of raw hunger in him.

A sound, almost a moan, tore out of her throat.

He stared at her without moving. Ten seconds... twenty...

The silence became unbearable.

She didn't know who moved first. All at once, his hands were on her, gripping her shoulders. His mouth descended, closed over hers. It was a kiss that burned all the way to her soul.

After that first startled second, she found her response came naturally. When his tongue stroked her, she opened her lips to let him in. Deep inside, she felt a softening as heat flared. Needs long suppressed bloomed into life. She swayed toward him.

He bit out an oath and abruptly went to the window where he stood with his back to her. "How soon—" He paused, then started again. "How soon can you be ready to go?"

His voice was harsh, almost hoarse sounding. Its timbre caused a chill to rush along her arms. Like him, she had to clear her throat in order to speak.

"Ten minutes?"

"All right. Wear something comfortable."

She nodded, even though he couldn't see. Glancing at the window, she realized he could. He was watching her through the reflections in the glass. Another shiver shook her.

Choosing the outfit she'd worn on the flight to North Carolina, she fled into the bathroom to change. When she returned, she quickly placed her suit, black dress and blouses in the suit bag, zipped it closed, then stuffed her overnight bag with her toiletries, nightgown and shoes.

"Ready," she said.

He looked at his watch. "Eight minutes," he commented. "Pretty good for a female."

He'd apparently recovered his poise. She wished she could say the same. He picked up the two pieces of luggage and led the way out. In the lobby he went for the car while she checked out.

"Was the room not to your liking?" the desk clerk inquired. He was young and seemed anxious about her leaving.

"It was lovely. Housekeeping did an excellent job. My plans changed unexpectedly." She hesitated, not sure if she'd be back Sunday night or not.

"Perhaps I'd better reserve a room—"

"We're booked from tomorrow to the end of next week," the young man apologized. "There'll be a convention in town."

"That's all right. I'm sure I'll find something." When she walked out the front door, Jason was there in his luxury-model car. He'd taken off his jacket and tie and rolled his sleeves up. She climbed in. When she had the seat belt fastened, Jason lifted his foot from the brake and started forward.

They left the bright lights of town. The night enclosed them

Jason realized he hadn't said a word the entire trip. He would have to play the polite host all weekend, so he'd better start now. He stopped at a restaurant.

"What would you like—coffee, cola?"

"Nothing, thank you," she replied just as politely.

"Other than wishing you didn't have to deal with me?" He slammed the door and went inside before she could answer. When he returned, he was aware of her curious stare. He started the car and drove off. If she could see into his mind...

Images of them at the cabin came to him with the regularity of the telephone poles whizzing by the windows. He kept seeing her in that silky piece of pink lace. It was so thin and pale, it'd be like she wore nothing at all.

His body throbbed painfully.

He took a drink of coffee and licked his lips, remembering the taste of her when he'd kissed her. She'd been startled, then almost at once, her mouth had softened and started to open. He'd backed off and gotten away from her.

If he'd taken her mouth completely, he wouldn't have been able to stop. He shuddered, just thinking of it...of all the things he'd like to do to her.

Did she know how near the brink he'd been while they were dancing? She would have if he'd pulled her close like the other couples around them. If she'd pressed against him, there would have been no doubt in her mind where his thoughts had traveled.

Damn, a person would think a thirty-three-year-old man could handle something as simple as lust. Only...he'd wanted her too long to be sane about it. She'd always been his one craziness, the one desire he'd never been able to eradicate or control.

"It's a lovely night for a drive, isn't it?"

Her voice—soft, melodious, just a tad concerned—broke into his raging thoughts. He risked a glance her way and found her watching him, her eyes luminous in the light from the dash. A giant fist clenched inside his gut, making the ache worse.

"Yes," he mumbled, not remembering the question.

He stared at the blank ribbon of highway, boldly outlined by the moon. The night seemed dangerous and unpredictable, the air like quicksilver. He shouldn't have suggested she come to his cabin. It was a damned stupid thing to have done.

"I don't have to go," she murmured. "You obviously don't want me..." Her voice trailed to a stop, a slight question at the end.

"What makes you think that?" He tried to maintain his amused aloofness, but failed. Nothing had been funny so far that day.

"Your eager manner?" she suggested dryly.

"Sorry," he said, "I'll try to be more congenial."

Victoria felt a flicker of anger. "Don't strain yourself," she advised in a tone of mendacious concern.

He gave a snort of laughter that wasn't in the least amused. "You don't know," he muttered. "You just don't know."

"Know what?" she exclaimed in annoyance. "Was it the kiss? I'm sorry about that. I... it shouldn't have happened."

She must have been the one to step forward. Yes, she was sure she had. That was why he was so wary of her.

He stared at her for a split second before turning his dark, moody gaze back to the highway. "Damn," he said.

"Look, just take me back—"

"We're over halfway there."

"If you didn't want me, you shouldn't have suggested it," she snapped right back at him.

His grip on the steering wheel tightened. "But that's the problem," he drawled with deceptive calm. "I do want you. I want you right this minute."

She gasped at his boldness.

He gave her a coolly amused glance. "Is that so surprising? After all, you're a beautiful woman. I'm an appreciative male. What could be more natural?"

His shrug was all nonchalant self-control. She wished she had a little of it. Right now she felt as if she'd ran through a mine field... and set off every batch of explosives.

"It was the kiss, wasn't it?" She was embarrassed. He probably thought she was a mac-hungry widow.

"Right." He sipped from his coffee cup, his mouth suddenly hard and thin-lipped. He seemed angry.

She pressed her lips together nervously. He couldn't possibly know about her restlessness during the afternoon, nor the thoughts she'd entertained of them.

"Relax, Victoria," he said. "Nothing untoward is going to happen. We'll simply discuss the business prospects of Paradise Falls while we fish and relax."

"Of course."

She'd been wrong about the anger. He was laughing at her. She had to explain.

"About the kiss—" She ignored his throaty sound of irritation. "It was because of this afternoon. I mean, after seeing you with Susan. You were so gentle." She had to stop and clear her throat when her voice became reedy.

"The emotion of the moment?" he suggested.

"Yes," she said, glad that he understood. "It was wonderful, watching you, listening to you. I felt a part of life again. It was as if I were waking up after a long sleep—"

"Like seven years?"

She met his probing gaze. "Yes."

Jason felt the renewal of desire in his blood. Her softly spoken agreement, a sibilant murmur on the cool night air stroked him like a caress. He imagined the sound coming to him from a shared pillow...

Yes, Jason. Oh, yes. Yes! Yes!

His body became uncomfortably hard. He had to stop testing of her like that. No way was he going to get mixed up with her. She'd been the wife of his best friend, reminded himself grimly. "All afternoon, I thought about how... how it would feel to have you touch me like that." He strangled a curse and tried to keep from coming unglued. She wasn't being provocative, he reminded himself. Her tone was too apologetic. She was trying to explain something about the kiss to him... about why she'd started to respond.

"So, when we were in the room, I... it just happened. I didn't realize what I was doing. I hope you'll forgive me."

He frowned. What the hell was she talking about? "Forgive you?" he repeated, looking for some clue.

"For kissing you. It was like you said—the aftermath of a very dramatic afternoon, the tension and closeness and all."

The light dawned. "You...you think you kissed me?" he ground out, not sure he believed his own deduction.

"Yes. I started it—" She stopped at his bark of laughter and turned a wary gaze on him.

"Honey, you haven't a clue," he managed to say, holding in the laughter that was aimed at himself.

Victoria crossed her arms over her chest. Really, he was the most maddening creature she'd ever met. She was trying to be open and honorable about the whole thing and her ridiculous feelings, and he was laughing at her!

"I'm trying to be honest about this," she informed him. "This afternoon, I...well, I imagined..." She took

a deep breath. "I fell in love with you—a little bit—watching you."

He gave her one of his cold, remote smiles. "Did you?"* He finished the coffee.

"Are you afraid I'll take advantage of your feelings while we're at the cabin? Is that what's bothering you?"

"Of course not! I was trying to explain what happened in my room, why I kissed you—"

"You didn't kiss me. I didn't give you a chance. I started the kiss. I stopped it. When your lips went all soft under mine, I knew I had to back off."

"Oh." Victoria tried to relive the moment in her mind in order to see who had moved first. It was hopeless. All she remembered was the kiss—hot, tempestuous and much too brief.

She decided they had moved at the same time, a spontaneous action. Spontaneous combustion might be closer to the truth.

"If I'd once tasted you, I'd have kept going.. .until I tasted you all over."

"Oh."

"Yeah," he agreed cynically. "Oh."

The rest of the trip was made in silence. A few minutes after midnight, they pulled off the winding, two-lane state road onto a narrow, tree-lined drive covered with pine needles rather than pavement. They reached the house a couple of minutes later.

"Wait here," Jason ordered.

He climbed out, opened the front door and flipped on the inside and outside lights. The yard changed from dark, menacing shadows into a fairyland.

Baby spotlights in blue and red were hidden among the shrubs and trees, shining up through the foliage in in-triguing patterns. She saw that rocks and pine needles had been arranged to form ground covers so that no grass was necessary. Very efficient.

The cabin was a simple rustic log structure with a porch all the way around as far as she could see. She got out of the car and waited for his next directive.

From this viewpoint, she could see the lake, the moon shining on its still surface and reflecting pools of molten pewter. The wind was playful. It ruffled her hair and glided through the cotton of her blouse and slacks. She rucked her purse under her arm and hugged herself for warmth.

He returned and turned off the headlights, then locked the car doors and retrieved her bags from the trunk. "After you," he said, indicating she was to precede him inside.

She entered the house, filled with curiosity to see what his

home-away-from-home revealed about Ms personality. She blinked in surprise.

"Why, it's charming," she exclaimed, taking in the comfortable chairs gathered in front of the hearth, the ceiling-high bookcase overflowing with novels and "how-to" books, and the curtains of some nubby material in honey beige. The dining area was at one end of the living room. There was a pass-through to the kitchen in the wall.

"What did you expect—the all-American bachelor pad?"

"No, I assumed you saved that for your city digs. I was afraid you went for the really primitive out here."

"Your bedroom is this way." He walked past her into a short hallway, where there were three doors and a staircase that led to an overhead loft. One doorway gave access to the kitchen. Jason opened the door to the left.

He carried her luggage in and put the small case on a cedar chest at the foot of a queen-size bed. The suit bag he hung in the closet.

"The bathroom is behind the other door off the hall. There's only one. We'll have to share."

"That's okay. I don't mind."

"I wasn't apologizing."

"Fine. I still don't mind."

He gave her a hard glance before going to a chest of drawers and digging a pair of jeans and a T-shirt out of the jumble of clothing she saw in a drawer.

"Is this your room?" she asked. "I can sleep somewhere else. Really, I'd rather."

"This is the only bedroom with a door. You'll need the privacy." His tone dared her to argue.

She saw that he was tired. It had been a long day. "We should have stopped somewhere for supplies., A bowl of cereal or glass of cocoa would be nice. Milk helps a person relax."

He walked to the door and stood there with one hand on the knob, the other clasping his clothing. "There's food in the kitchen if you're hungry." He walked out and closed the door behind him.

Victoria sat on the corner of the bed and ran a hand through her hair. She rubbed her neck and realized she was pretty tired herself. Grabbing her case, she opened it and pulled out the nightgown, then the robe tucked into the bottom under her dean underwear. She changed, put toothpaste on her brush and started to the bathroom. A knock nearly startled her into dropping the brush on the shiny oak floor.

"Yes?" she called.

"I made some cocoa. If you want some."

She laid the toothbrush on her case and looked at her outfit. The robe was heavy enough, perfectly respectable, in fact. It had long sleeves and a modest neckline.

She decided to join Jason for the snack. The time, she saw, was one o'clock.

Twelve hours past the time she was supposed to have seen him in his office.

Opening the door, she peered directly across the short hall into the kitchen. Jason was in there. He placed two steaming mugs on the counter that divided the kitchen and dining area.

He turned and gave her a laconic glance. "Come on out, Goldilocks. There's only one bear and he won't bite."

His changing moods were totally unpredictable—one minute angry, the next seemingly amused by the whole attraction thing between -them.

Attraction? Yes. She wasn't feeling these crazy yearnings all by herself. He was vulnerable, too. For some reason that realization made her feel more secure.

"You guarantee that?" she asked, returning his gaze.

Placing his hands on his hips, he took a few seconds to study her mood. "Is that a challenge?" he finally asked.

"Maybe." She shrugged, then gave him a deliberate smile.

His chest expanded in a deep breath. He let it out slowly. She watched, fascinated. The curl of dark hair at the open neck of his shirt tempted her to unfasten another button and slide her hand inside____

"Very funny," he said. "Have a seat. I'll be with you in a moment." He searched the pantry until he found a tin canister. He placed it and a couple of napkins on the pass-through.

"Victoria took a seat at the polished maple table. Jason placed the mugs and the tin of cookies on the table. He laid a napkin and spoon next to her place, then took the opposite chair.

She selected one cookie and nibbled on it. He wolfed down four, finished his cocoa and poured himself another cup after topping off hers. A man with an appetite, she surmised.

"Do you ever have trouble with your weight?" she asked. "No."

She gave him an envious glance. "Lucky you."

He set down the cup and looked her over. "Do you?"

"Heavens, yes. Especially since I took office. I go to so many Rotary luncheons and Chamber of Commerce functions that I sometimes dream I'm swimming uphill through a flood of mashed potatoes and gravy. I wake up Jason laughed at her wry confession. The sound enchanted her. With the night surrounding them, it seemed intimate and sensual, pleasing to all her senses, not just her hearing. The warmth crept out of its secret place deep inside her and stole along her nerves. The delicately sizzling tension of sexual awareness glided into her consciousness.

He became silent. The amusement left his face, and he stared into his cup, his thoughts on some distant place only he could see.

She, too, became introspective. Her friends back in Paradise Falls would probably be disappointed if they could see her now, sitting here silent as a bump on a log.

They'd coached her for a week about what she was to say to Jason to convince him to return to his hometown for the centennial celebration of the town's official incorporation. Once she got him there, they figured they could convince him to move a plant into the vicinity in case she didn't.

And here she was, alone with him—he was a captive audience, so to speak—and she couldn't think of a word to say.

From the corner of his eye, Jason saw Victoria lift her cup and drink the cocoa. He almost groaned. He knew exactly what she would taste like. Since that ill-advised kiss in her room—a bad blunder, that bit of business—he now knew exactly how she felt when her lips became soft and welcoming.

That was the surprise, he realized. That she'd wanted him, too. Raw, wild feelings ran through him at the thought. He fought them until he was once again in control. The knowledge of her desire gnawed painfully at his resolution not to become involved with her. She'd loved his cousin, and he would never take second place to any man, not even John. Especially not John. His mood darkened.

He realized she'd spoken to him. "What?" he asked.

"If you're finished, I'll wash up."

"Don't bother."

"I don't mind—"

"Forget it," he snapped. He saw the flicker of surprise, then hurt, pass over her face. He regretted his outburst, but couldn't bring himself to apologize. "Go on to bed," he said in a gentler tone. "You're my guest. I'll take care of this."

Victoria thanked him for the treat and took herself off to her assigned room, feeling she'd been put in her place. She was a guest, not part of his inner circle.

There was to be no easy camaraderie between them.

Why didn't he like her?

She realized he never had. Maybe he didn't like adults. On a few occasions at family gatherings, she'd seen Jason warm and friendly with children, but rarely with others, not even John.

But he'd been wonderful with Susan.

Sighing, she took her toothbrush into the bathroom and prepared for bed. A few minutes later, tucked into the comfortable bed under a light blanket, she turned out the lamp and tried to settle down to sleep.

After giving up on counting sheep, she let her thoughts drift back to her enigmatic host. After their shared experience, she would no longer be able to look at him in the same light as she once had.

One thing he couldn't deny, in spite of disliking her, he'd wanted her as much as she'd wanted him.

A noise like a squeaky floorboard directed her attention outside. A shadow crossed her window. A momentary fear brought her heart to her throat. Then she realized the person was leaving the house.

Slipping from bed, she pulled her robe around her to guard against the chill night air. At the window she pushed the curtain aside and watched Jason walk soundlessly down the steps and along a path. He wore dark trunks, and his body gleamed like marble in the bright moonlight.

He looked like a young, powerful god come to life.

Through the clearing in the woods, she observed his rapid stride to the lake. She saw the white froth of his splash as he dove off the end of a pier.

She sank her teeth into her bottom lip as passion rose in waves like the ripples of water that flowed from his movement across the lake. For one insane moment she thought of going out and joining him.

A frolic in the moonlight ...as if they were lovers—

She couldn't, of course. Casual, mindless sex wasn't in her makeup. That's all it would be for him.

What would it mean to her?

There was no way she could judge that in her present frame of mind. All she knew at the moment was the indescribable ache of longing. She wanted to be young and carefree and wildly in love.

The need grew in her, painful in its intensity.

Seven years ago she'd lost a vital part of herself in a tragedy she couldn't reverse.
But now...now she felt that lie waited for her. It was as close as...
She stared out the window at the lake.
As close as a walk in the moonlight.

Chapter Four

Victoria woke slowly the next morning. She snuggled under the covers, reluctant to face the day. To face Jason, she admitted.

Turning her gaze toward the window and the early-morning sunlight, her thoughts flew back in time to the dark hours after midnight. She'd stood by the window for twenty minutes, watching the small white splashes that indicated where Jason swam.

He'd finally climbed out of the water and come back to the house. She'd stayed there, her pulse hammering, when he took the two steps onto the porch. He'd paused, then looked toward her window. She'd known the precise moment he'd spotted her.

He'd become totally still. like a stag scenting danger.

A frisson had dashed up and down her body. She'd wanted to run away and never see him again. She'd wanted to go to him and lose herself in the passion she knew she'd find with him.

But she hadn't. There was the bright light of day to be raced the next morning, and she knew she couldn't eas-ily sleep with a man, then continue as if nothing had happened.

Life seemed unbearably complicated all of a sudden.

She wondered what she would have done if he'd come to her. Instead he'd turned away, entered the house and gone to the bathroom. She'd heard the shower come on. Later, when the house had grown quiet, she'd known he'd gone to his bed in the loft. She'd fallen asleep after that.

Grimacing, she rose and went to the bathroom. Freshened, she returned and dressed again in the blue slacks and blue-striped shirt she'd worn on the trip. After making her bed, she ventured into the kitchen. It was seven o'clock. She figured she'd had about five hours of sleep.

There was no coffee made. Was Jason still asleep?

She listened for sounds from the loft. Nothing. It was almost eerie, not being sure whether she was alone in the house.

Searching through the cupboards, she found the coffee canister and put on a pot to brew in the coffeemaker. She found cereal on a shelf and a basket of fruit on the counter. In the refrigerator was a supply of milk, a loaf of bread, eggs, and fresh vegetables.

Hmm, curiouser and curiouser.

After helping herself to cereal and toast, she took her coffee mug and went outside to survey her surroundings.

The clearing opened onto a shallow cove on the bedroom side of the cabin. A pier led into deeper water, then turned a ninety-degree angle and jutted into the main body of water.

Walking out onto the wooden planks, she discovered the cove was part of a good-sized lake. It wasn't so large that she couldn't see the opposite side, but it was large enough to cruise around in a power boat.

Plunking herself down on a huge round pier post, she sipped her coffee and visually explored her surroundings.

Along the shoreline, she caught glimpses of civilization. There were several boat docks, all with rowboats or canoes. Motorboats must not be allowed. The residents apparently wanted their peace and quiet. She approved the idea.

She spied cabins tucked in among the trees. A lone fisherman cast his line from a breakwater of boulders extending into the lake from the next cabin to the left of the pier. She watched him catch a fish. When he pulled it out of the water, he held it up so she could see it before putting it in a small cooler. She waved.

"Hello. Ate you visiting with Jason?" a female voice called to her.

Victoria swung around in surprise. A woman in shorts and a pink top tied under her breasts walked along the path around the cove, then stepped onto the pier. She was taller than Victoria's five-four, with a willowy grace Victoria associated with professional dancers. She was very attractive.

As she came closer, Victoria realized the woman was probably a year or two older than her own thirty-one years. She carried a basket, which was covered with a cloth napkin.

"Yes, I am," Victoria remembered to reply.

"I'm your neighbor, Millicent Bryant. That's my husband, Douglas, out there fishing. Call us Milli and Doug."

Again Victoria was surprised. The fisherman, with his gray hair, seemed much older than his thirties. Perhaps the woman was a well-preserved forty.

"I brought some fresh-baked rolls for Jason. Where is that scoundrel?"

"Still in bed," Victoria said without thinking.

She saw the neighbor's eyes widen slightly in surprise, then a big grin spread over her face. Heat suffused Victoria's cheeks when she realized what she'd said, or rather, what it implied about her relationship with Jason.

"Did you find everything you needed?" Milli asked. "I try to stock up on the most obvious staples when Jason calls to say he's coming down for the weekend."

"Yes, everything was fine." Victoria could feel herself drawing back from Milli's friendly inquisitiveness.

"Are you from Raleigh?"

"No." Victoria smiled to soften the curt reply. She may as well explain the situation before Jason beat her to it. "Actually, I'm from out of state. Jason is a cousin—"

"Oh, a relative." Milli looked disappointed.

"Sort of. I'm a cousin by marriage."

She saw the woman glance at her left hand. She'd put her wedding band away years ago along with the anger and sadness.

"I was married to Jason's cousin," she clarified.

"But you're not now?"

"I'm a widow."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"That's okay. It was long ago. I flew over from West Virginia to talk to Jason about a business deal."

"Business." Milli dismissed that idea with a deprecating wave of her hand. "Jason needs to lighten up. This is the first weekend he's been up here since he heard about that Navy contract."

Victoria glanced around, almost expecting to find Jason nearby, smiling in his cool, remote way while he listened to their conversation. The porch and yard were empty. Was he sleeping?

"They won the bid. I guess he decided to relax."

"Good. Here." Milli thrust the basket into Victoria's hands. "Look, tell Jason we have a refrigerator full of fish. I'd consider it a favor if you two would come over and help us eat them tonight. Around seven?"

"I'll tell him," Victoria promised.

She and Milli discussed the weather for a few minutes, then the other woman returned to her house. After another half hour, Victoria headed for the porch. The sun was getting hot.

Going in the kitchen door, she looked around. No signs of life. She put the basket on the counter, poured another cup of coffee and turned the pot off. Going into the living room, she peered upward. The loft had a half wall, preventing her from seeing into the area. Was he up there sleeping?

Surely he wouldn't have left without telling her. She tiptoed to the window. No, the car was still in front of the house.

She supposed he could have gone for a long walk. Or perhaps he was out fishing and she hadn't spotted him.

Her questions were answered by a low moaning sound from above, then the creak of bedsprings. Then all was quiet again. So, he was still asleep.

Remembering how tired he'd looked when he'd let his guard down the day before, she felt sympathetic. Selecting a book, she went out on the porch and read the rest of the morning.

Shortly after noon she went inside to fix a sandwich for lunch.. Getting out bread, mayonnaise and a package of Min, she carried her stuff to the counter. She tried to open the wrapping on the meat with her teeth to no avail. After muttering several expressive comments on package wrap in general, she rooted through the drawers un-til she found a knife.

She shoved the drawer closed with a swing of her hips and started back to her work area, her thoughts on Jason. The knife slipped out of her grasp and skimmed across the hardwood floor with two distinct thuds then a darter until it came up against the cabinet with another loud bang.

Immediately thereafter, she heard feet hit the floor over her head. In another second, Jason appeared, a ferocious scowl on his face as he stormed into the kitchen wearing briefs that fit him very precisely. He stopped abruptly upon seeing her.

An image of long legs, lean hips, a broad, hairy chest plus several other masculine details burned its way into her memory.

She turned her back. "Sorry," she said. "I was hungry and decided to make a sandwich. I didn't mean to wake you. Would you like something? To eat," she hurriedly added.

She realized her sentence order wasn't very logical.

"Or perhaps you'd rather have breakfast," she nattered on, her face on fire as she envisioned several scenarios, none of which involved food. She picked up the knife from the floor. "I could fry some eggs."

"Forget it," he growled.

She heard his footsteps retreat. Heaving a deep breath, she got on with her lunch. Her hands were trembling. Seeing him with so little clothing on did things to her that she didn't like. And his body...magnificent and very male... She felt hot and fluttery inside just thinking of how masculine he'd looked.

Jason cursed himself for the fool he was as he went upstairs to dress. Waking to some racket he couldn't identify, he'd gone to check it out without thinking.

As soon as he'd reached the kitchen door, he remembered his houseguest. By then it had been a second too late. He glanced down at his body in disgust.

There was no doubt she'd realized what had run through his mind upon seeing her. He was hard and aching for relief from the flaming desire that plagued him like a sore tooth. What imp from hell had gotten a hold on him and prodded him to invite her to the cabin for the weekend?

The real question was—how was he going to keep his hands to himself for another forty-eight hours?

He pulled on the jeans and T-shirt he'd laid out last night, then headed for the bathroom. He only nicked himself twice while shaving. After his ablutions, he combed his hair and started for the kitchen again, wishing he'd developed laryngitis the previous day or quietly lost his mind.

He laughed silently. That was the problem. He had lost his mind...head, rather. That was the only excuse for his lapse. He'd never had a woman at the cabin. It was his private place.

Well, he was stuck with her for the duration.

The kitchen was empty. A quick check out the windows informed him Victoria was sitting on the back porch, eating her lunch and reading a book.

He drank a glass of orange juice, poured a mug of coffee, then investigated a basket of cinnamon rolls on the pass-through. Milli had been over. He cooked an egg and ate it with a couple of slices of toast, then polished it off with a roll.

After washing the dishes, he had no excuse for lingering inside. He got two fishing poles and his tackle box out of the closet and went outside.

"I'm going to fish for a while," he announced to the woods. "I have a spare pole if you want to use it."

From the corner of his eye, he saw her lay the book against her breasts. The swelling in his lower regions started again.

"Your neighbor, Milli, invited us to a fish dinner at her house at seven. I told her I'd tell you. She brought some rolls over, too. I put them in the kitchen."

"I found them. If you see her before I do, tell her dinner would be fine." He wouldn't have to be alone with Victoria for the evening. That was a relief.

Victoria stayed in the chair. She couldn't tell if he wanted her to join him or not. Well, actually she was pretty sure he didn't, but did he expect her to? She would finish her book first.

The afternoon waned into early evening.

Victoria went out to the pier. She could see Jason working the shallows around some reeds a quarter way around the lake. She picked up the pole lying on the dock, saw it had a fishing lure attached and decided to try her luck. She cast from the end of the pier into the deeper water near the rocks.

To her surprise, the cast was straight and true. She'd not fished in ages. After five or six tries, she got a bite-Excited, she pulled and reeled, pulled and reeled, until she had the fish close in. A bass. A big one. He came out of the water fighting. When he ran, she let him, then started pulling him in again, careful to keep the tension on the line.

"Steady on," Jason called. "Let him run. Now bring him back. Easy, easy." He leapt to the pier and came to her.

"It's a big one," she panted, pulling the pole up to bring the fish in, then reeling like mad as she lowered it again.

"I know. I saw him when he jumped." He stooped at the edge of the planking and readied a net to catch the thrashing bass when she brought it close enough.

It took over ten minutes for her to work the large fish in close enough for Jason to scoop him up. When he had him securely in the net, she slumped to the pier, her legs dangling over the side. "Wow, that was work."

"Good job," he complimented. He started to take the hook out.

"I'll do that."

"I'll take care of it for you."

"No," she said. "My father taught me to handle my own catch. Give it here, please."

Jason took one look at the set of her mouth and handed over the large-mouthed bass. He sat back on his haunches and watched her remove the hook, then, using the filleting knife, expertly clean the fish.

Admiration grew in him. She was a small woman, delicate looking, yet she could hold her own. Businesswoman. Mayor. Fishing buddy. Lover.

The ideas flowed one into the other without stopping.

"Hey, good catch." Doug Bryant came down to the shore on the other side of the little cove. "I believe that's the lunker Jason has been trying to catch for three years."

Victoria grinned back when he gave her a big wink. She glanced at Jason. He was smiling, too. Her heart felt suddenly lighter. "May I add my part to dinner tonight?" she asked Doug.

"Sure thing. The way Jason eats, we'll need the ex-tra."

"I can believe that," she agreed.

"Hey," Jason protested, standing. "I'm sensitive about my eating habits, in case you two don't know it."

And that isn't my fish. He's bigger and meaner than that tame thing. Why, it was so eager to get caught, it nearly jumped into her lap."

"It did not!"

"She couldn't have brought it in without my help," he added to Doug.

"I could, too!"

Victoria couldn't hold her indignant pose when he looked down at her and laughed.

Doug waved and started back to his house. "See you in about an hour."

Right. Come on," Jason said to her. "We'd better clean up if we're going to make dinner on time." He held out a hand.

She took it and let him pull her to her feet. Tingles ran from her hand and lodged in her chest. As soon as she was on her feet, she let go and walked quickly ahead when he indicated she was to go first. Once off the pier, he walked beside her across the clearing to the house.

His shoulder touched hers. They both drew apart, but before their eyes had met and looked away.

"You can have the shower first," he said. He took the SDets and headed into the kitchen without glancing back.

The attraction between them was as strong as gravity, she thought, becoming pensive. In her room she grabbed her robe and toiletries and headed for the bathroom. With the warm water running over her body, she contemplated the sparks that seemed to ignite whenever she saw Jason touched.

She hadn't been to bed with a man since her husband died. The few times she'd thought about it—she had met several attractive men over the years—something had held her back.

Thinking on it, she realized she was too fastidious to share herself intimately with just anyone. There had to be more to it than sexual relief or even companionship. So why the need to share herself with Jason?

She wasn't sure he liked her as a person. She'd often thought him a cold individual. So why?

She knew he wanted her, but so had others. She didn't think she was responding only to passion. She also knew Jason wasn't all that cold and remote. Not after seeing him yesterday.

Finishing her shower, she turned off the water and dried off, her mind still puzzling over their reactions to each other. She was beginning to suspect that Jason used his insouciant attitude to hide his vulnerable side.

She put on her robe and went to her room. "You can have the bath now," she called. Jason was sitting on the porch, his long legs stretched down the steps. Looking at him, she felt a softening toward him, not of desire, but of tenderness. Yes, he'd been hurt. That was the only explanation. Again she was seized by a strange need to comfort him. She shook her head and

Victoria looked over her limited wardrobe. The black dress definitely wasn't appropriate for a fish dinner with a neighbor. Her blue slacks were beginning to look wilted. She decided on the suit skirt and the pink silk blouse that crisscrossed in the front. There, that was the best she could do.

She combed her hair, which was still slightly damp, and put on a creamy pink lipstick. Her nose and cheeks were pink from her time in the sun, so she didn't add any other makeup.

She slipped on the flat, comfortable shoes she'd brought in case she got to do any sight-seeing.

Jason was waiting in the living room. Her heart thumped like mad when she saw him. He was wearing dark slacks and a red polo shirt. Contrasted with his black hair and vivid blue eyes, he reminded her of an adventurer.

"If you had your ear pierced, you'd look like a pirate" she told him, forcing herself to assume the ease of friendship they'd shared while catching the fish.

Look closer," he invited, his laconic smile to the fore. She boldly walked over to him and inspected his earlobes. Sure enough, his left one had been pierced.

"Product of my younger, more rebellious days," he admitted when she looked suitably impressed.

"You should be wearing a gold hoop." She smiled up at him. As she took a deep breath, the scent of his cologne teased her senses. She felt dizzy.

"Maybe I will one day. For you," Things seemed to be getting heavy. She quickly the subject. "I can see you as a stormy teen-ager."

"Can you?" He raised one dark eyebrow, his mood unused and definitely devilish tonight.

His tone had dropped to a lower octave. It strummed an answering chord to life in her. Resonance, she believed it was called. She and Jason caused vibrations in each other when they were close. It was an exhilarating phenomenon.

And dangerous.

"Ready?" he asked.

She nodded, suddenly worried about what the evening would bring. Heavens, but she was becoming as darkly moody as Jason could be at times.

They walked around the worn path to the Bryant home. Milli and Doug were in the kitchen. They called out greetings when Jason and Victoria stepped onto the porch and told them to come on in.

Victoria saw the layout of the house was the same as at Jason's cabin, with the dining area forming one end of the living room and a pass-through to the kitchen. There were two padded bar stools at the pass-through counter.

"Have a seat." Doug indicated the stools.

"Here's my special kickapoo joy juice," Milli announced. "It's wine and fruit juice, if you drink wine?"

Victoria nodded that she did. She sat on one of the stools. Jason took the other. Their knees brushed as they turned toward the kitchen.

Sparks seemed to leap at the slight contact. She took a big sip of the punch through a red-striped straw to cover her sudden case of the flutters. This was getting out of hand, she decided with a frown. She was—"acting like a... like a... a woman who was alive and well and very much interested in a virile male she didn't quite understand, but who intrigued her nonetheless.

Doug set the table with colorful, inexpensive dishes while Milli battered and fried Victoria's fish, then added it to a platter already heaped with golden-brown fillets.

"We don't have fried food often," Milli explained, "but once in a while I just have to have some home cooking. You know what I mean?"

"Yes," Victoria said. "I usually have soup or salad for my evening meal, but occasionally I rebel and go to the Paradise diner for a huge hamburger with cheese and onions and mushrooms. Oh, and the cook does the best French fries. They're cut thin like yours, with the skin left on. I just love them."

Jason stirred beside her. She glanced at him and caught his gaze on her. Although his smile was harmless, there was something mysterious in his eyes—something wild and dangerous and barely controlled. It called with un-berable insistence to something equally primitive in her that she'd never even known existed.

Since she'd stood close and teased him about wearing an earring, the tension had hummed between them, as tangible as the electricity in a high-powered line. She felt suffocated by it, by their longing for each other.

What a fantasy! Jason might want her, but it wasn't anything as emotional as longing. At least she didn't think so. It was just desire and proximity.

"Dinner is served," Doug informed them. He put the platter of fish in the center of the table.

Jason took Victoria's arm and helped her down from the stool. Without releasing her, he guided her to a chair and seated her. He waited until their hostess was seated before taking the chair next to Victoria,

The food was delicious, their host and hostess were charming. Just as Victoria began to feel completely at ease, Jason asked Doug a question about his company. She discovered the down-to-earth fisherman was president of Home

Industries, one of the most prestigious home improvement and decoration companies in the United States.

Oh, dear, and here she'd been so chummy, telling silly little anecdotes about her fishing and camping experiences so that she'd had them all laughing, including Jason.

"Victoria isn't quite the rustic she pretends to be,"

Jason drawled. He pulled a curl that lay over her shoulder, then continued to hold it, brushing it back and forth with one finger. "This country cousin is actually an accomplished politician. She's mayor of Paradise Falls."

"We should have been calling you Your Honor," Milli exclaimed.

"Oh, just bowing three times when I enter the room is enough," Victoria said modestly. That drew another laugh.

They talked until eleven, then Jason said it was time to go. "I want to get a head start on the fish tomorrow," he explained.

After they said good night and were walking along the path, she decided to do a little probing into his psyche. "You're different here, more friendly and outgoing. In Paradise Falls, you seem to withdraw. Why?"

She stopped and waited for him to come alongside her when she reached the clearing. He stopped, too, his face in the shadows of the pines along the path.

"Maybe it's the company." His voice was cool, like the night wind off the lake.

The movement of his shoulders indicated a nonchalant shrug.

Her question had caused him to recede to his safe, remote distance. That was it, she realized. Safe—that was the key. He kept his relationships at a guarded distance

He liked the Bryants, he was obviously friends with his secretary and her husband, but they didn't threaten the secret part of himself he tried to keep hidden from the world.

She'd been right. Sometime in the past, he'd been deeply hurt. She was as sure of it as sailors were of the pole star that guided their voyages.

Folding her arms across her midriff, she crossed the clearing and sat on the porch. Jason joined her, taking a seat on the other side of the steps and leaning his back against the support post.

"You were once in love," she said softly. Sometimes the night shadows could inspire confidences.

He said nothing.

"You were hurt, so you keep people away by being cynical and cool and distant with them." The silence grew between them. She decided to wait him out. Finally he laughed. It was brief and without humor.

"There," he said, "you have my life all figured out."

"Talk to me, Jason."

"What's to say?"

"Tell me how to handle the attraction between us. Tell me where it came from, what it means, where it will lead."

He stood and paced down the steps. At the bottom he spun and glared at her, his face highlighted by the moonlight.

Nearly naked, he'd looked like a god last night, sleek and muscular and powerful. She fought the vision but it haunted her.

"Are you attracted?"

"Yes. Aren't you?" she challenged.

"Hell, yes. I told you that much when we talked about the kiss that almost got out of hand."

"What are we going to do about it?"

He muttered a curse. "Nothing."

She'd always been honest about her feelings, to her-self at all times, to others most of the time. She wanted to be the same with Jason. She wanted to understand her feelings and his.

"Why don't you like me?" she asked.

Jason swore violently to himself. She was surely the most exasperating female he'd ever known. Instead of being hurt by this realization, she sounded concerned ... for him! Her worry touched a place deep inside that he didn't want disturbed. He answered with the flippancy her probing deserved.

"What makes you think I don't? After that kiss and what I told you about it—"

"That was passion," she broke in. "Or just plain, everyday lust. I don't think you have to like a person to desire them."

She seemed a bit unsure of the last statement. For her, passion and feelings would be mixed, impossible to separate.

A flare of emotion surged inside him. It would be easy to take advantage of her. She was vulnerable after the crisis yesterday. Her emotions were tender and confused.

He could take her, he realized. Right this moment he could sweep her into his arms and carry her inside to his bed and make sweet, mindless love to her all night long until they were both sated with pleasure.

He was tempted.

But then there would be tomorrow's regrets, he reminded himself savagely. He couldn't face her disappointment when she woke up and realized he wasn't John, but a man who superficially favored him. He'd seen that disillusionment in her eyes once. He now wanted to see it again.

"What do you want from me?" He spoke harsher than he meant to, but was gentler than the rage inside him demanded. "I can't turn back the clock. I can't erase the kiss. I can't deny the fact that I want you. Like seems pretty tame word for the fires you ignite in me."

"Jason," she murmured, breathing his name.

Her voice came to him with the softness of a caress. He sensed the quick urgency in her, the need that matched his. She wanted him. He wanted her. He had only to reach out____

Victoria leapt to her feet and stood there at the edge of the steps, poised for flight, either to him or from him, she wasn't sure which. "Maybe like isn't the correct word. Do... do you know any others?*"

"Pretty words. Is that what you want, Victoria?"

"Yes. Everything."

He seemed to know what she meant. He sucked in a hard breath, then turned from her, facing the lake.

"Everything?" he questioned. "I can give you the night. That's all,"

The lonely cry of a loon underscored the melancholy that engulfed her.

"Will that be enough?" he probed relentlessly.

"Will it be enough for you?"

He slowly pivoted and faced her. "We can always find out." He held out his hand to her.

Chapter Five

Victoria held herself still, refusing to give in to her first impulse and take his hand. Did she know what she was doing? More importantly, did she understand why?

Pity for Jason's past hurts wasn't cause enough to accept what he offered—one night and nothing more. For both their sakes, she had to be sure of exactly what she wanted from him before she took that step. The future depended on it.

"Thinking of tomorrow?" he asked, a smile touching the corners of his mouth.

She was no longer surprised at his perception. "Yes."

"Go to bed, Victoria. And lock your door." He walked past her up the steps. "It's going to be a long night."

Troubled, she turned when he held the door open and waited for her. She went inside and to her room, closing the door securely after her. She heard the outside door close, then his footsteps on the porch, going away from the house. Later, when she was ready for bed, she went instead to the window and gazed at the moonstruck night.

Jason was outside. He sat on one of the pier posts, his legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles. His hands were in his pockets. He looked... so alone.

Again she was overwhelmed by her need to go to him and hold him in her arms, to give him what comfort she could. She cared for him, she realized. She cared deeply about this man who held himself aloof from involvement, yet who, she sensed, was as full of yearning as she.

Was she... could she be falling in love with Jason?

The next morning Victoria knew Jason was up before her. She heard him in the kitchen when she went into the bathroom.

The aroma of coffee and bacon piqued her appetite. She hurried and dressed, grimacing at the navy-blue slacks and striped blouse as she put them on. She folded a blue scarf and tied it around her head to hold her hair back.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully, crossing the hall into the kitchen.

He was breaking eggs into a pan. "Hello." He glanced once in her direction and went on with his task. "How do you like your eggs?"

"Over medium."

He nodded.

She helped herself to orange juice and coffee. Seeing the toast had popped up, she buttered it and put it on a plate. In a couple of minutes, they sat down to eat. He didn't bother with polite conversation. Jason the inscrutable was back.

Victoria ate her meal and tried not to be aware of Jason. She didn't want to worry about him, or feel anything for him. "Life is much easier when you don't feel things too deeply, isn't it?" she asked on a philosophical note when they finished eating.

"Still wrestling with your conscience over last night?" he asked, apparently amused by her predicament.

"Nothing happened last night,"* she reminded him. "What's on the agenda today?"

"I'm going fishing."

No invitation to her.

"I'll join you."

One thing her mother had always told her—don't fall in love with a stubborn man. He'll make you consider murder many times. Victoria was beginning to understand her mother's impatience with her father.

Jason gave her a hard glance. "I'll leave you some tackle on the pier."

She could be stubborn, too. After all, she'd gotten half her genes from her father.

"That's okay. I'll tag along with you."

She tried to dazzle him with her smile. He ignored her and finished his coffee.

Without further ado, he picked up all the dishes and took them to the kitchen. He washed them and left them to drain. She didn't volunteer to help.

When he went outside without a word, she filled her mug, pulled on a baseball cap she spied on a hook behind the door, and ambled out, too. She found Jason preparing to cast a line into the middle of the cove.

"I think I'll try my luck on this side of the pier," she called out. He made a noise that could have meant anything, but which she took as assent. She picked up the pole she'd used the day before and cast to the right.

Within thirty minutes, the peace of the place invaded her soul. She was able to look with amusement on the situation between her and Jason. The gods must have been chuckling while she flew so innocently to her fate. To awaken her to the one man who didn't want any emotional entanglements was no laughing matter.

So what was she going to do?

"Tomorrow I'll be gone," she said aloud.

Jason spoke directly behind her. She realized he'd moved onto the pier and was working the reeds on the other side. "Tonight," he corrected. "We'll be on our way right*after lunch."

"I don't have a room for tonight. The hotel was booked with some convention."

"Damn. Why didn't you tell me sooner? Instead of checking out, you could have kept your room. They can't make you leave."

His irritation dampened her contentment. "I can probably find something—"

"You can stay at my place in town. It has three bedrooms. With locks on the doors," he tacked on as if this was a selling point with a prospective buyer.

"Afraid I won't be able to control my wild impulses?" she asked. "I'll try not to force myself on you."

She was sorry for her flippancy when she met his eyes. He looked angry and frustrated.

"Keep pushing," he advised,

"I'm sorry." She laid a hand on his arm, silently asking his forgiveness. Their problem was no minor thing. They were adults. They had to temper need with the knowledge experience had given them. She knew loneliness. She knew anguish. Jason did, too.

He stared at her hand, then sighed. A half grin tilted the edges of his mouth. "So am I. I'm in a rotten mood and taking it out on you. I apologize."

"Thanks. Look, I've got a bite."

The tension eased after that. They spent the morning in companionable fun, giving each other advice and nibbling it in when a fish got away.

Doug and Milli came out to the shore. "You two want to have lunch with us?" Milli yelled.

A chorus of voices answered her. Victoria noticed that other people were enjoying the lake, sitting on porches or in the grass or on boat docks. After much laughter and casual planning, it was decided everyone would bring a bag lunch, meet on Jason's pier and eat there.

A half hour later, Victoria realized she was having a great time. She met the neighbors on the north side of Jason's place and those to the south of Doug and Milli. They were all a little older than Jason and herself. Their kids were either married or off on their own pursuits, she learned.

She caught Jason looking at her more than once as if concerned that she was having fun. He was being the congenial host.

On an impulse she wrinkled her nose at him, then blew him a kiss. He grinned at her, then turned back to his conversation with the man to his right.

When it was time to go back to the city, she rose reluctantly. It was nice to be part of a friendly group. With Jason beside her as they crossed the clearing, she realized it was nicer to be part of a couple. If they were married, they could make love before they returned to the city.

It was a thought that plagued her the entire trip to town

His home was in a wooded neighborhood of modest houses, not an ultramodern bachelor pad at all. He led the way inside when they arrived, his mood unreadable.

"This is nice," she said, admiring the period reproductions that added interest to his contemporary furnishings. An ornate gold-framed mirror resided over an old-fashioned drop-leaf table. A dried flower arrangement decorated the table.

"Your room is this way."

He started down the hall with her suit bag and case. She followed, peering around with undisguised curiosity. It was a nice house... comfortable... perfect for a family.

The guest bedroom he gave her was decorated in blue with lots of white accents and touches of mauve. The adjoining bath was white with blue and mauve bath towels of all sizes used as practical yet decorative displays.

"How lovely," she exclaimed. "I love the colors."

He glanced around the room. "Ifs okay, I guess." He set her case on the bathroom counter and placed the suit bag in the closet. "Did you bring some sturdy shoes? I thought we might hike along the bluff this afternoon. There's a good view."

She shook her head. "But you go on. I think I'll read."

He'd obviously had all of her company he could take for the weekend. She would try to stay out of his way, Gve him some space, as the current philosophy went.

"All right. I thought we'd go over to Durham about six have dinner. There's an old tobacco warehouse that's turned into a shopping and dining complex. Is that okay with you?"

"Fine."

He checked on the soap and other necessities in the bathroom. She felt the brightness seep out of her. They'd... correction, she'd had such a good time at the impromptu picnic with the other couples, she'd assumed he'd felt the same.

Wrong.

She used the bathroom, then went downstairs. The silence bothered her. Restless, she explored the house. It was U-shaped with a formal living room, dining room and kitchen on one side. The master bedroom was behind the kitchen. She glanced quickly in the open door and retreated.

The other side of the house contained two bedrooms and a large family room. The family room and kitchen adjoined in a breakfast nook facing the backyard.

From this point she watched Jason exit through a gate at the far end of the long, narrow yard and strike off through the woods- She glanced at her watch. She had two hours before it would be time for thejr gala evening at the tobacco warehouse.

Finished with her wandering through Jason's house-she realized she was looking for more clues into his personality—she returned to her room, took a leisurely bath, washed and dried her hair, then lay down for a nap with an afghan over her. She woke in confusion some time later. A banging on the door caused her to frown. The door swung open. Jason leaned inside, keeping his feet firmly planted in the hall.

"You didn't answer my call," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. I must have fallen asleep."

She saw his eyes burn a path down her neck and realized the afghan was bunched at her waist and she wore only her underwear. She pulled the cover to her neck.

A smile flicked across his mouth. "Too late," he said softly. He shook his head.

"Just when I think I have

myself under control, I see you in a new light. It's hard on my ego to realize I'm as vulnerable to the perfect female form as an adolescent hanging out on a street corner." He closed the door. "It's time to get dressed," he reminded her from the hallway.

Victoria let the afghan drop. She paused on the way to the closet and studied her figure. Perfect? Hardly. She thought her breasts were too heavy and her hips too rounded. But then, so did ninety percent of the women in America.

Tonight she chose her blue skirt again, but with the white lace blouse over it, belted at the waist. That was the most she could do to vary her three outfits.

The drive to Durham was accomplished to the beat of a popular rock station in the area. Victoria gave Jason a wry glance. She figured the purpose of the music was to prevent his having to talk to her. It worked.

The warehouse was larger than she'd expected. So was the crowd. She and Jason window shopped for an hour before their dinner reservation. She hooked her hand over his arm so they wouldn't become separated. Whenever they were jostled, he tightened his arm instinctively to hold her securely to him.

Tiny flames ignited within her. She felt safe with him, she realized. Safe from others, not from him, nor from herself. The yearning that had awakened while watching him during the emergency had grown stronger over the weekend. His home and cabin, his ease with his neighbors, his caring attitude toward his secretary and his gentleness toward children, all these indicated to her a man who should have had his own family long ago.

At seven, they went to eat.

The restaurant, with its subdued lighting and soft music, lulled her senses. She resumed her review of Jason as a potential lover, knowing she was drifting into a fantasy. Strangely, it didn't seem to matter so much at the moment.

"I should be convincing you to return to Paradise Falls," she told him at one point.

"Will the city council be angry if you don't?"

"No. They don't know the purpose of my trip. I didn't want to get their hopes up in case I couldn't persuade you to attend the centennial celebration." In case she failed, she admitted to herself. "I wanted to speak to you alone."

"And wear my defenses down?" He gave her a cynical grin. His restless gaze roamed her face and flitted across her mouth before he looked away. "You've done that."

"I have?" She laughed in delight. "Then you'll attend?"

"I didn't say that. Only that my defenses were down."

Their eyes met. For a second she saw darkness in him, as if she looked into his soul. Then she saw the desire.

She understood that she would have to be the one to set the mood, and the limits, between them. It was up to her how far they would go. Jason wanted her, and he was no longer fighting it!

The knowledge both frightened and enthralled her. She'd never felt this responsible for another person, she realized. She could give him what they both wanted, or she could withhold it.

The rest of the dinner passed with little conversation. On the drive back to his home, he seemed to have closed himself off. Victoria resisted an impulse to touch his arm and remind him she was there. She knew he was aware of her.

It was not quite eleven when they arrived. Once in the house, Jason asked her if she wanted anything before she went to bed.

You.

She didn't say it, but she thought he detected the unchecked response before she said no. "I think I'll call it a night. My flight leaves at nine. That's a terrible time to get to the airport, isn't it? Perhaps I should reserve a limousine."

"I'll take you," he said tonelessly.

"Thanks." She hesitated. "Well, goodnight."

"Good night." He stayed in the entrance hall while she went to the room she'd been assigned.

The evening was ending on a flat note. After experiencing the invisible sparks between them, she found it difficult to relax.

Once in her room, she prepared for bed, but couldn't go to sleep when she was in it. She rose and paced the carpet, aware of the heavy beat of her heart and the snptiness inside her.

There was an answering void in Jason. He, too, knew the pain of losing a loved one. She didn't know the de-tails, but the loss was etched in the bleakness she some-nines observed in his eyes. The ache in her heart grew... for both of them. She couldn't go to him. There was no future in sharing one night of passion. The emptiness would return with the cold light of day. So would the distance he maintained between them.

She returned to bed, but her eyes refused to close. Finally, in desperation, she pulled on her robe and went to the family room for a magarine. Jason was there. He sat in a leather reclining chair, seemingly at ease. The television was on, but he wasn't watching it. His gaze was focused on some far point deep in his own psyche. She sensed unhappiness in him, fierce and relentless. She couldn't bear it. But... if she went to him, she knew what would happen.

She stood, rooted to the spot, while a battle waged inside her. She knew she should return to her room at once, and yet she couldn't. Just as she resolved to leave, he moved, rubbing his hand across his eyes as if a pain resided behind them.

She looked at his hands and remembered that he'd been ready to help bring a new life into the world. Suddenly a memory, or a fragment of a dream, came to her— Jason holding a tiny baby to his chgst, his strong arms cradling it, his tears falling____

She thrust aside the old nightmare. Reality was now, and she knew the tears were still falling in his heart. The source of his grief was unknown, but it was there in every line of his body.

Her doubts dissolved. She wanted this night with him. She wanted all the passion they could share. It was important. She knew it instinctively, without knowing all the reasons why, the way a robin knows it's time to fly before the winter gale strikes.

Jason needed her, and she needed him!

She walked into the room. He looked around at her step, but he didn't speak. She came to him, stopped, then took one more step until she stood beside him. She leaned against him, her thigh touching his. With a steady hand, she stroked through his hair, smoothing the shiny black waves while her heart ached for the hurt in his past.

He stood, gliding upward against her. She laid her hands on his chest. For the longest time, they stood there.

She began to be afraid that he'd reject her, then, with arruiciating slowness, he put his arms around her. She sighed and rested her head on his chest between her hands.

They stood there for several minutes, absorbing each other's warmth, letting the need build. Her heart matched the tempo set by his, hard and erratic, increas-ing with each beat.

Finally he turned her with a hand on her shoulder. They passed the light-oak breakfast table and entered his bedroom. He paused just inside the door. She waited.

He watched her without speaking for the longest time,then, "Are you sure?" His voice was husky, with no " cynical overtones.

She wasn't sure of anything—his feelings, hers, the future. "No, but it doesn't matter." "If you stay..." He left the warning incomplete.

She tilted her head to look at him. There'd be no going back for either of them, she finished his statement, wondering if her heart was going to be broken. "I know," she said.

Jason stood still another second, then he took the one fflep necessary to lift her into his arms. Common sense had deserted him. So had his willpower. He'd wanted her too long.

Tomorrow she'd be gone.

It was the price he'd pay, but he'd have the memory to pi with the longing and the gnawing hunger. He would know her taste, her texture, the essence of her. For a few hours she'd be his.

He carried her to his bed, threw the covers back and fhced her in it, a treasure not to be taken quickly, but savored. He was trembling with need, but he didn't give in to it.

When she smiled up at him, his resolve nearly slipped. Her eyes were luminous. They seemed to light a path to some secret place inside him, a place he'd kept locked away for years.

He'd stayed away from her, first because she'd belonged to his cousin, later because he'd refused to be a stand-in for another man, but now she'd come to him. Tonight would be theirs.

And tomorrow?

She was just a woman, he argued, trying to vanquish his misgivings—one that he'd wanted for years, it was true, but still, a creature of flesh and blood like any other. They would give each other mutual pleasure, and that would be it. She'd leave and he'd get on with his life, having at last satisfied a curiosity and a hunger he'd thought never to appease.

Having sorted this out, he began to unfasten his shirt. Still watching her, he peeled it off and kicked aside his shoes. Then he sat down and stroked her arm from shoulder to wrist. It was the first move toward fulfilling a dream. A sense of urgency came over him. Dreams rarely lasted the night.

Victoria realized the moment when Jason again put a distance between them. It was the instant before he touched her. Did he think to close her out during this most intimate of acts between a man and a woman?

Rising, she pressed against him and slid her arms around his neck. The warmth and strength of his masculine body almost shocked her, it had been so long since she'd known that pleasure.

She sought his mouth and found it. For a split second he remained still, then with a groan he pulled her close.

The kiss was harsh. She wanted gentleness. It was cool, exploratory. She wanted mindlessness, intensity.

She turned her mouth from his. "Jason, please."

"Please?" he repeated hoarsely, slipping his hand between them and caressing her lips with the tips of his fingers. A smile tipped the corners of his mouth. "I want to please you. Tell me what you want—"

"You," she whispered, desperate to reach him. "You."

She ran her hands over his chest as if she hoped to find the secret door into his heart. But there was only the sleek, warm feel of him under her palms, nourishing her desire.

He caught her hands and pressed them to him. "You have me. I've wanted you too long to resist this taste of paradise."

Shaking back her hair, she studied the darkness in his eyes. "You hated admitting that." The rightness of coming to him began to dim. She'd been wrong. Aching with unfulfilled need, she pulled away.

"I hate admitting to a weakness I can't control. You're that weakness. God help me, but I can't let you go now."

He kissed her then, with all the passion, all the intensity she could ever have dreamed. A fever swept through her. She was on fire, a forest burning out of control. And loving it.

"Yes, yes," she whispered when he left her mouth.

She cradled his head against her as he kissed and nuzzled her breasts through the silky material of her gown and robe. Her body arched upward, wanting more of his touch, no longer under her command. It didn't matter. She would trust him with her life.

"Like that, do you?" he teased, looking at his handiwork with a pleased smile. There was no darkness in him now. She saw only the blazing light of passion. Jason touched her shoulder, slipped his hand along her tingling skin to her neck and let the edge of one finger glide along her throat to her chin, then back. He found the tie on her robe and pulled it until the bow released. He pushed the robe off her shoulders, letting his hands flow over her.

Her skin reminded him of rose petals, except flowers were cool, having no internal fire. She was warm and smooth and delicate, the tips of her breasts a contrast to the softness he found elsewhere on her. She smelled of soap and powder and some exotic perfume.

He took her mouth again and felt her lips tremble. He was shaking all over as the need grew. "I have protection," he told her, thinking of this one last thing before it was too late.

Then he kissed her and kissed her and kissed her. She let him sample and taste her as much as he wished, giving her mouth to him without hesitation. He thought his heart would explode as he caressed her all over. When he slid her gown upward along her legs, she moved her hips so he could push it out of the way.

He stroked her thighs for long, mindless minutes before becoming more intimate. Victoria shivered, then clutched him tightly. She could keep no secrets from him. She was ready, and he knew it.

The world diminished until it contained only the space that enclosed the two of them. She writhed against him, covered him with her kisses. Her lashes became too heavy

"Oh, love, she whispered, her need too great to hide even if she'd wanted to. "Oh, love, come to me. Come to me now."

He jerked back from her, his expression fierce and angry

Then he was gone, rolling away from her and off the bed. For a second he stood there, breathing hard. When he left, she was so stunned she couldn't move. Jason grabbed his shirt, pulled it on and went out onto the private patio adjoining the master suite. He leaned against the Japanese maple and stared over the roofline at the night sky. It was full of stars, all twinkling as if the world was the same now as it had been an hour ago. He knew better.

Fool, he mocked himself. What had he expected? That she'd say his name in the throes of passion?

Oh, love. The very words she'd used seven years ago. He remembered every detail of the night...

The call had come in over the remote radio unit of the pickup truck where he and an old high school chum, now a deputy sheriff, were arguing over Paradise Falls's chances of winning the state football trophy. His friend had lifted a hand for silence and listened intently.

"There's an emergency," Bill said, cranking up the engine. "Someone just reported car tracks over the cliff near "Vista Point. You want to ride along?" "Sure." He had nothing better to do, except go home and listen to his mother complain because he didn't visit more often. Nothing he'd ever done pleased her. He'd stopped trying long ago.

The deputy put on the light and siren, and they headed out of town. At Vista Point, they pulled off the road. Apparently they were the first officials at the scene.

"Here's an extra flashlight," Bill said, getting one out of the glove box. They walked back along the shoulder of the road, then followed the car tracks down the shallow bluff. "Damn,"

Jason muttered to himself, seeing the twisted wreckage below them.

"Yeah," Bill agreed. "Lucky if anyone's alive in there. There's an inch of snow over the tracks. That means it must have happened three or four hours ago. Probably been to Beckley to do some Christmas shopping."

They made their way down the snowy bank. Through the rear window, they could see two people in the front seat. Bill went to the driver's side while Jason worked his way to the passenger.

"Oh, God," Bill said softly. "Jason, don't look—"

But it was too late. He'd already seen who was in the car. Through the broken side window, he gazed at Victoria.

Pain tore out of his soul and clawed at his throat. She was deathly still, and pale, except for the red streak of blood that had dried on her neck where the glass had cut her.

"Victoria," he murmured hoarsely, almost afraid to wake her, more afraid that he couldn't. "Victoria, wake up, sweetheart."

He wrenched the door open. One glance at the driver's side told him his cousin was beyond any help he could give him. He laid his hand on Victoria's throat.

"I'll go up and call for help. We'll need wreckers and pulleys to get them out of here. Is she..." Bill hesitated.

"I don't know," Jason said. "I can't find a pulse."

Bill uttered a fierce expletive and headed up the slope.

"Come on, honey," Jason whispered, patting her cheeks. He touched her hands which were clutched on the lapels of her coat, holding it closed over her rounded body. She was icy cold.

He spoke to her, coaxing her to wake as time passed and she didn't stir. Despair gripped him when he realized she was probably gone. Fury washed over him in its wake. Fate couldn't do this to him! He wouldn't let it!

He shook her. Her head rolled around like a rag doll's. "Victoria! Damn you, wake up! You can't die!"

Nothing.

He shook her again. He tried to find a pulse. There was none. "No," he said, fierce and low. Life had never been fair. He'd stopped expecting that long ago, but to take her...

"You won't die," he muttered. "I won't let you." He would defy death itself before he'd give her up.

In desperation, he slapped her. Her eyes snapped opened.

"Victoria," he said, clutching her to him in relief. Tears appeared on her cheeks. His, he realized.

An indescribable joy swept over her face. "Oh, love," she whimpered, her voice barely audible. "Oh, love, I thought you were dead." She stopped, confused. Then she realized it wasn't her husband who held her but merely a cousin who resembled him____

Jason drove his fist against the maple tree. He'd never forgotten the look of disappointment that had followed that realization. It would haunt him as long as he lived.

So would the knowledge that it should have been him in the car. He should have died, not John.

His cousin had urged him to come with them, but he'd refused. Being around "Victoria, knowing she was carrying another man's child, had become too much. Even though the man was his cousin and Jason loved him like a brother, he hadn't been able to stand their happiness.

If he could have relived that night, if he had been driving the car, he would have died, instead of the man she'd loved.

He started from his memories as arms closed around him. Then Victoria, soft and warm, lifted his arm, dipped under it, and snuggled against him as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Umm, cold," she complained. She kissed his throat.

He couldn't believe she'd come to him after the way he'd left her. "Go to bed," he ordered. He sounded harsher than he meant to. Damn. He could never seem to strike an equilibrium with this woman. He fought the need and the pain that rose to choke him.

She leaned against his arm and peered up at him. "You've gone all cold and distant again. Why? Why did you leave?"

"Why do women always feel that a few kisses give them the right to probe into a man's mental processes?" he shot right back. He stared at the night scene, then, drawn by forces he couldn't control, he looked at her.

Her face was upturned so she could study him. Her skin glowed in the moonlight like some magical substance. He knew how soft it was... all over. He knew how warm and pliable she was. She'd let him caress her in every way he wanted.

like a bolt of lightning, the hunger struck, making him clench his hands against his thighs to keep from reaching for her, from taking her there in the moonlight.

Dammit. He'd kissed her and tasted her. That would have to be enough. The curiosity, the need that had haunted him for years, would never be satisfied. It wouldn't even if they made love, he realized grimly. He'd never get enough of her.

Anger warred with desire. He wanted to walk away from her and be done with the turmoil she'd aroused in him from the time he first saw her, the week before she was to wed his cousin.

His cousin. She'd loved his cousin, who was handsome and charming and everything that any woman could want. John, good-natured and kind, had been the golden boy. Jason, rebellious and smart-mouthed, had been the black sheep. He forced himself away from Victoria and the temptation to disregard wisdom. When she came to her senses, she would know he'd acted for the best.

Victoria tried to shake off the despondency. What had she expected from Jason? That he would fall madly in love and reveal his deepest feelings to her?

"For us, it's a way of connecting," she finally answered his question. "Women are big on things like that, you know."

Their lovemaking had been hot and wild and wonderful. They'd touched depths in each other...maybe nothing as profound as souls, but something more than a meeting of the flesh. Their kisses and caresses had reached inside and opened all the floodgates of feeling she'd ever experienced. She'd thought it had been the same for him.

He would never admit it, she realized. Jason had been hurt. He retreated from intense emotional involvement.

Who could blame him?

It was frightening to be that entangled with someone. It left a person vulnerable... the way she'd felt after the tragedy in her own life... the way she felt now.

Well, it was obvious there could be nothing further between them. The disappointment she felt was as intense as the passion had been a few minutes ago. She summoned a smile. "How lovely this is," she murmured, perusing the intimate setting.

"Yes." He looked at her again, then away.

She liked room to mull things over when feelings pressed too closely upon her heart. She'd give him the same courtesy. "I once read that architects call this a tee-hee garden. It seems apt, doesn't it?"

"For the fun and games that go on in them?" he said, remote and cynical again. "Umm-hmm."

She and Jason were back to square one. She found she wanted more from him. And for him. He deserved more from life than one-night stands. There had to be something more tangible to living than a moment's passion, sweet though it might be.

"Go to bed, Victoria," Jason said, breaking into her thoughts, his tone harder, darker.

He'd erected his defenses and closed himself completely off. The moment when they might have touched each other's souls had passed. She turned regretfully toward the door, then paused, unwilling to give up her vision of them.

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Looking at his profile, she was moved by the* cold, clear beauty of his face and the isolation of his soul. He had awakened her to the possibilities of Me by his gentleness during the crisis. She wished she could do the same for him.

"Good night, Jason," she said softly.

She stepped toward him and kissed his throat. The tendons tightened beneath her lips.

She went inside and down the hall to the guest room. There, she climbed into bed. For the first time in many years, she was reminded of how lonely a place a bed could be.

Chapter Six

Victoria let the screen door slam behind her after she entered her home in Paradise Falls. The first thing she wanted to do was ask Sally Winetski Houston, her best friend and former campaign manager, about Jason. Sally knew everyone in town. Best of all, she knew everything there was to know about everyone in town.

Sally could tell her all about Jason's early life. After seeing the man he really was, Victoria wanted to understand the forces that had shaped him into the solitary individual he appeared to be.

She also wondered about the woman he'd loved. Perhaps Sally would know the details of that. The affair must have been very passionate, the breakup very bitter, for him to remember it with such consuming anger.

Victoria realized she intensely disliked the woman who'd done that to Jason. To ruin a man like him... He obviously had a huge capacity for love and tenderness that was untapped.

Not that she had a chance to be his love, but she wished he could have the happiness he deserved.

Tears came into her eyes. She acknowledged she'd been rather callous toward Jason from the moment she'd met him. During her marriage, she'd been too blissfully involved with establishing her responsibilities as a wife to pay much attention to John's cousin.

Actually, she admitted with total honesty, she'd been glad Jason had stayed away. Like most new brides, she'd been jealous of her husband's attachment to anyone else, even his best friend.

Later she'd been so busy playing the brave widow she'd never given a thought to him. She recalled it had been Jason who'd eased the way during the terrible days after the accident, soliciting her wishes, then quietly making the arrangements. She hadn't spared a thought for his grief.

For that, she was ashamed.

Having seen the depths in him, she knew he'd held his own sorrow in check, asking nothing from anyone while he took care of the rest of the family.

She touched her cheek as a faint memory came to her—tears falling on her while a dark-haired, blue-eyed man wept over her. She shook her head, not understanding the fragment of old nightmare that had haunted her of late.

Pausing in the living room, she dropped her luggage and picked up the phone. After dialing Sally's real estate office, she peered at the familiar room, her mind back in Raleigh.

That morning, when Jason had driven her to the airport, they'd been stilted with each other. He'd not said more than two words during the trip. When it had been time to board the plane, she'd asked if he was coming to Paradise Falls for the celebration.

"That probably wouldn't be wise," he'd said.

At his repressive tone, she'd dropped the subject, thanked him for his time and got on the plane.

When the receptionist answered the phone, Victoria asked if Sally was in. "Yes. Hold on and I'll get her," the girl said.

Sally came on the line. "Glad Your Honor made it back. How'd it go?"

"Not good," Victoria admitted. "Got time for lunch?"

"Umm, yes. Asher Inn in about an hour?"

Victoria agreed and hung up. She dashed up the stairs with her suit bag and case. Putting the dress and suit out to go to the cleaners, she tossed the rest of the stuff in the hamper. She changed into a tan linen skirt and a pink blouse.

Finished, she sat down on the window seat and gazed out at the town in its small scoop of land amid the mountains. The valley was three miles wide and eight miles long. On the opposite side of it, she could see the Clairmont Mansion, which was now an exclusive bed-and-breakfast resort. In the middle of town, she spotted the courthouse and felt a justifiable pride at the renovation being done at her instigation.

That had been one of her campaign pledges—to save the old courthouse from the ravages of age, if possible.

Finding the money had been the problem. The solution had been a value-added tax on each rented bedroom in town and on food at the restaurants. Her next task was to discover why the new highway

out of Paradise Falls. Sometimes bad weather could shut in the whole town.

She rubbed a smudge from the windowpane with the heel of her hand. A sense of homecoming swept over her: She felt as if she'd been gone on a journey that had proven dangerous. Thank goodness she had returned safely.

Safety, security—here she had those. Was that the reason she clung to the old house so fiercely?

John had brought her there as a bride of twenty-two. The place had been in the Broderick family for a hundred years.

Letting her gaze roam the hills, Victoria admitted she loved the town. She'd been born there. At fourteen, she'd been sent off to boarding school in New York to prepare for college. Her parents had moved to New York shortly thereafter. It had taken her a long time to get over a sense of abandonment. Their apartment overlooking Central Park had never been her home. This house was.

Rising, she shook off the memories, checked her watch and went downstairs. She grabbed her purse and headed out the door. It was time to meet Sally for lunch. She drove to the Asher Inn.

Sally was waiting for her. They went inside.

At the table, Sally looked her over. "Well, you made it back in one piece."

"Did you think I wouldn't?" She managed a laugh.

"With Jason, one never knows. He can get quite fierce when he wants to." Sally frowned thoughtfully. "I thought you'd be back yesterday." Heat rose in Victoria's face. She hoped Sally didn't notice. Her friend had an uncanny knack for understanding human nature and its foibles, also for ferreting out secrets one would rather keep to oneself.

"I changed my plans."

"So you spent the weekend with Jason," Sally concluded.

Victoria grimaced, then sighed. "How do you figure out things so fast?"

"I have a suspicious mind. Well? Are you going to tell me about it? Or shouldn't I ask?" Her gaze was shrewd.

The waitress came to take their order. Her eyes were as blue as Jason's, Victoria realized. Her own eyes were Hue, although not as dark. If she and Jason were to have children, their eyes would be blue.

The thought jarred her. An ache started deep inside. For the tiniest second, she wished she and Jason had completed what they had started. She would love to have a baby.... She gasped as she realized exactly what she was dunking.

After the woman left, Sally leaned forward in her chair. "I asked you about Jason," she said. "How is my dear cousin?"

"Cousin?"

"On my mother's side. Her aunt married Jason's mother's uncle or something like that. In my family, that constitutes kinship. So, how is he?"

"Fine, I think." Victoria took a breath and plunged in. "We went up to his cabin. It's on a lake. Did you know he had one?"

"No. Slow down and tell me about it."

"Well, it's very nice." Victoria described the cabin, the lake and finally Jason's neighbors. "We had a wonderful time, fishing and visiting with people.

Yesterday, before we left, we had a big picnic on his dock with several copies. It was fun."

iiGood." A gleam appeared in Sally's eyes.

Victoria felt the ridiculous heat seep into her face.

"Jason needs to relax," Sally said. "I always thought he worked too hard, even when we were young. Our families used to visit a lot back then. Jason was always so serious under that mischievous banter, so determined to succeed."

Knowing it was hopeless, Victoria gave up her casual pose. "Tell me about him," she requested.

The two women gazed at each other for a long moment, then Sally nodded. "Let me think. There was some old gossip about his family. Oh, I remember." Her mood became pensive. "Jason's mother was in love with John's father at one time," she began.

"I didn't know that."

"It isn't the sort of thing you talk about at family reunions, but I heard my mom and aunt discussing it once. Naturally, I was nosy and asked questions."

"What happened?"

"Jonathan and Claude were first cousins and alike as two peas, naturally, since their fathers were identical twins. You've seen pictures of the grandfathers, haven't you?"

Victoria nodded. "They were very handsome."

"Those two cousins grew up here in Paradise Falls. Mother said she had a crush on both of them when they were young. All the Broderick men have that thick black hair and those incredibly blue eyes," Sally pointed out.

Victoria pictured Jason, his hair tousled by her fingers, his eyes filled with unconcealed hunger.

Sally pushed a wispy curl wafting over her forehead out of the way and continued. "Anyway, Jonathan and Claude grew up and went off to war. Jonathan brought a bride home with him."

"John's mother," Victoria interrupted. "I know the story of how they met at a USO dance."

Victoria's mother-in-law had remarried a year after Jonathan's death and now lived in Texas with her husband. Victoria and John had visited them a couple of times during their twenty-eight months of marriage.

"Yes, but there was a girl he'd dated before he left. She'd waited for him. When he came back with a wife in tow, she married his cousin a month later."

"Oh, no," Victoria said, seeing the beginnings of a tragedy.

Sally nodded. "Some people have wondered if Myra ever got over her love for Jonathan. She had a son five months after John was born. My aunt asked my mother if she thought Myra had named Jason for Jonathan."

"What did your mother say?" "She said Claude's middle name was Jansen and that Myra was probably thinking of that when she named Jason."

Victoria was relieved for Jason's sake. "Did Claude know about his wife's feelings for Jonathan?"

"I don't know." Sally paused in thought, then shrugged. "If he did, it apparently didn't bother him. They've been married for over thirty years."

"Yes, it seems to be a good marriage." Victoria stirred uneasily under Sally's narrow-eyed scrutiny. She had already given away more than she was ready to confess.

"When are you going to tell me what really happened between you two at that cabin hideaway?" Sally demanded.

"Nothing happened."

Sally looked as if she thought of disputing that statement, but she evidently reconsidered. "When our families used to visit, Jason would take the time to entertain me," she said. "Did I tell you he taught me how to climb trees? I liked him best—" She pressed her lips together.

"Better than John?" Victoria asked, surprised.

"I thought they were both great." Sally picked up her fork and began eating the salad the waitress placed before them.

"But?" Victoria prodded.

"Well, John used to read to me, but Jason was the one who took the time to show me a bird's nest or the best apple tree,"

Victoria envisioned a younger Jason showing a visiting relative his favorite spots. It didn't surprise her that he was kind to Sally. "Ah, now I understand," she said.

"You and Jason were the rambunctious ones. He showed me his pierced ear."

Sally laughed. "I remember that. What an uproar that caused at his house! I'm sure Myra nearly had apoplexy. Claude finally put his foot down and told her to leave Jason alone."

Remembering Jason's father from the few times they'd met, Victoria said, "That must have been a shock."

"I'm sure it was." Sally smiled nostalgically. "Jason wasn't a mean person. Who wouldn't be rebellious if your mother was always comparing you to your cousin, who, according to her, could do no wrong? John was just naturally good-natured. He never seemed to resent orders and, as far as I know, never caused his parents an anxious moment."

"Yes. He was always thoughtful..." Tears filled Victoria's eyes. Was she sad for John, Jason or herself? she wondered, "John loved Jason. He missed his company. After we were married, Jason never came around."

Sally studied Victoria for a long minute. "Jason was wise. Bachelors and married couples don't mix. Surely you're astute enough to realize why."

Victoria remembered the urgency of the desire between her and Jason. The way he'd touched her., it was as if he'd dreamed of doing so for a very long time.

"Yes, of course," she murmured.

"I'd like to see him find the happiness he deserves. It would take a special woman."

"I know. I learned a lot about Jason this weekend," Victoria admitted. "He has so much potential. He should have married and had children. Oh, Sally, I didn't tell you about the emergency."

"Emergency? An accident—"

"No, nothing like that." Victoria smiled. "You should have seen Jason. You'd have been amazed."

"What happened?"

"His secretary went into premature labor." She described the event in detail. "He was wonderful—so supportive and gentle with her." Emotion clogged her throat, and she couldn't go on.

"I always knew he'd be that way," Sally said in an approving voice. "There's a core of goodness in Jason. Some woman will find it and make him see it, too. She'll be a lucky woman, the one who catches his heart and teaches him to trust." "Trust?"

"Yes, trust. Jason must have been hurt at some time in the past. I don't know that story. But he seems cautious about the loving and marriage business, doesn't he?"

"Jason did love someone once," Victoria blurted out. "He admitted it. He said it didn't work out."

"It must have been when he went off to college." Sally shook her head and sighed. "That explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Why, his standoffish attitude, of course." She gave Victoria a smile and stood. "It's time I was getting to baking that cake for the Historical[^] Society. Sure you won't come to the meeting tonight?"

"No, thanks." Victoria stood. Emotions ran wildly through her, so mixed up and tumultuous she couldn't sort them. One thing she knew—she hated it that Jason had been hurt. She wished she'd been kinder to him.

The rest of June passed in a busy routine of meetings and luncheons as usual. The weather was sunny. With no rain in sight, Victoria watered the garden with the hose and talked to Miss Josie, her neighbor, who was doing the same and worrying about her winter supplies if the vegetables didn't grow.

"You might have to buy them," she teased the retired teacher who thought store bought vegetables had no vitamins.

July puffed in on a breath of hot air—ninety-two degrees. Victoria dreaded the town council meeting. Tempers ran shorter than dynamite fuses during the dog days of summer. The night of the meeting she entered the council chamber and spoke to the other council members wearily. She'd been putting in fourteen-hour days.

She called the meeting to order promptly at seven. The door at the back of the chamber opened. A man came in and took a seat on the back row.

Victoria blinked twice before she could convince herself it really was Jason. She drew four quick breaths as Miss Josie had taught her to do before making a campaign speech. In a husky tone, she asked for the first item on the agenda.

A resident stepped to the microphone and stated her same and address. She was president of the PTA. "This is the third year I've been before the council with this re-request. We have the land for a park near the elementary school. The land was bought and paid for by the parents and children of the community, you might recall, through sake sales and car washes."

They listened to her plea for the playground equipment which had been promised if the land could be acquired. The woman finished and looked at the council with a determined gleam that said she wasn't leaving un-til she got a commitment.

"Thank you," Victoria said, smiling at the woman. "I think Mr. Wagner has a report on that."

Mr. Wagner, retired accountant for Clairmont Tex-tiles and, at present, council member, explained that due to emergency repairs to other property, no funds were available to complete the park. However, it was still in the general plans. The audience booed this announcement.

Victoria rapped the gavel against the table. When quiet was restored, she referred the item to the finance com-mittee for a funding study. This brought another round of protests from the parents in the audience.

She banged the gavel until quiet prevailed. "The purpose of this meeting is to conduct the city's business. If there are any more outbursts, the bailiff will clear the soom." She called for the next item of business.

As the meeting went into its third hour, tempers frayed »ore easily. Most of the audience had gone home, except for the few diehards who attended every meeting. Jason was still there.

Slouched in the chair, he sometimes seemed to be doz-ing. Then he would look up with a quick movement of his head, and she'd know he was alert to everything going on.

She assumed he was waiting for her, but maybe that was vanity on her part.

Perhaps he was just curious to see how she operated as mayor. There'd been a lot of that the first months after she'd taken office.

Glancing at the agenda, she saw they were ready to discuss the last item. "Do we have a report on the Paradise Lake road?"

The attorney appointed to investigate the reason the new road hadn't been built for the past three years stated there'd been no decision in the state road planning department. "It's still being studied," he concluded.

"They been studying it long enough to score a hun-nert percent if we gave 'em a test," one of the regular observers in the audience remarked. That brought a cynical laugh from the rest.

Victoria turned a stern glance on the retired farmer who'd made the comment.

"The audience will please refrain from speaking unless recognized by the chair," she reminded him.

Glancing toward the back, she saw Jason was grinning.

After thirty minutes, they gave up the futile discussion and asked for a delegation to press the state legislature for passage of the town-sponsored bill.

"I think you should go and speak to them, Victoria," Mr. Wagner said. "In fact, I'll make it official. I move that we send Mayor Victoria Broderick as delegate for the Paradise Falls road plan to the state capital as soon as the legislature reconvenes."

"Second," the farmer called out.

Victoria glared at him. Several in the audience tittered. Jason hid a grin behind his hand.

Another council member seconded the motion. It passed.

"Just what am I commissioned to do?" she demanded.

"Find out why the new road hasn't been approved like they promised us three years ago. See if you can get it on the new highway bill," another council member suggested. Victoria thought it would be a waste of time and money. "Any new business?"

A lean form unfolded itself from the back of the room. Jason ambled up to the microphone. He stated his name and address. "I'm a former resident of Paradise Falls." He grinned. "Some of you were probably glad to see me leave." The council and audience laughed appreciatively.

Jason grew serious. "A small town is a great place to grow up. It gives a sense of values and of belonging that's often missing in city life. Of course, you can't get away

with a blasted thing..."

Victoria realized Jason was a very good public speaker. He knew how to get a crowd on his side with wit and humor.

"If the council is interested, I have a friend, an architect, who designed a build-it-yourself playground for a school near my place. I think I can get the plans at no cost. I'll donate the materials if you think the residents would be willing to build it."

"Oh," Mary Beth exclaimed. "I saw a program about that on television. The architect designs the equipment, then supervises the community in putting it together. It saves thousands of dollars in labor costs." "Right," Jason said.

A hum of conversation filled the chamber as everyone commented on this. Victoria banged the gavel and gave a questioning glance at the PTA president, who had stayed for the rest of the meeting.

Mary Beth beamed. "We'll back it," she said firmly.

"But," Mr. Wagner worried, "who would supervise the project? Do you think your friend would come here, Jason?"

Victoria observed Jason as he thought it over. "If he can't, then I will," he volunteered. "I helped with the other one."

"Well, durn, let's do it," the farmer called out.

There was a consensus.

"May I please have a motion to accept Mr. Brod-erick's offer?" Victoria asked. The motion was made and seconded.

"Any further discussion?"

"We should have a liaison with the council," Mr. Wagner mused. "To coordinate everything. Isn't Jason kin to you, 'Victoria?'"

Victoria saw where this line of thinking was heading. "Mary Beth is president of the PTA. She and Jason should work together on it."

"Yes, and you can help them with the red tape, if we have any left from our other projects," Mr. Wagner declared.

There was a verbal agreement from the council.

"If there's no further business, this meeting is adjourned," Victoria declared before she was handed another task. "Buck passers," she muttered loud enough for the other members to hear.

Mr. Wagner smiled and went to speak to Jason. So did the rest of the crowd. The farmer thumped him on the back as if he were a returning hero. Victoria gathered her papers, stuffed them in her briefcase and headed out the side door to her office. There she filed everything neatly away.

Leaning back in her chair, she tried to still the emotions that thrummed in her. No matter how hard she tried she knew there was no way she could have pre-herself for this meeting with Jason. Not in a million years.

The kisses they'd shared had blended into every dream she'd had for the past few weeks. How could she face him as if nothing had happened after the passionate way she'd responded?

It seemed harder now than it had the morning she'd boarded the plane to return home. She still didn't know exactly how she felt about him. Another thought came to her. Maybe he didn't know how he felt, either,

Maybe that's why he'd come home for the centennial celebration to be held in conjunction with the Fourth of July festivities. Maybe he'd fallen a little bit in love with her...

Her heart pounded so hard she could feel every beat thorough her body. She was overreacting. Before she met him, she had to herself in hand. She was the mayor, for heaven's sake. She handled crises every day. She could handle this, too. A shadow appeared on the ripple glass of her door. She the broad shoulders, the thick wavy hair, by the hall light. She saw him lift a hand. He knocked softly on the wooden frame next to the glass.

She rose and crossed the room. What, she wondered, did a woman say to an almost lover? Hello? How are you?

Fancy seeing you again? Nothing seemed appropriate.

She opened the door.

Dark blue eyes scanned her quickly, as if checking against a vision only he could see. Then he stood id and waited without saying a word. Jason, the inscrutable. Whatever she'd expected of this first meeting, it wasn't this, she realized. She'd hoped for the softer Jason.... the one she'd fallen a little in love with. Instead, he was the hard, remote man he portrayed when he came home. She saw the shields all in place, blocking his thoughts and emotions. Did he think she was going to make some claim on him because of their night together? She would set his mind to rest on that score, she decided, hard herself against him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Chapter Seven

Is that any way to greet a benefactor?" he drawled.

"Victoria managed a laugh. "It was rather abrupt. Your appearance surprised me, that's all. I saw your folks after church yesterday. They didn't say they were expect-ing you."

"I'm a big boy now. I don't ask permission for my comings and goings," he said, his smile sardonic.

She didn't respond to his taunt. If he was expecting a fight or recriminations about not contacting her after their one night together, he was in for a surprise. "Your gift to the town was generous. I keep expecting strings to be attached."

"You've turned into the cynical politician," he observed. He moved his shoulders as if impatient with her doubts. "No strings. With the new contract, the company's doing well, so I thought I'd give something back to the community where I started. I can take a tax deduction and be a hero at the same time."

"Hmm, would you pass that philosophy along to other former residents? That would solve all our financial woes."

"Sure." He paused. "How about a cup of coffee?"

She hesitated just a fraction too long.

"Worried about what people would say if the mayor was seen with the town renegade?" His smile became hard edged.

"No. It's my own reactions that bother me," she confessed, as forthright as he. "I have a terrible weakness for rogues."

The air sizzled with a sudden escalation of tension. She saw his chest expand as he drew a quick, deep breath. Somehow she knew instinctively that this was the correct way to deal with a wary individual like him.

She would treat him with respect, with gentleness and with as much honesty as she could, regarding her feelings for him. At times during the week, she hadn't been sure if she would want to hit him or kiss him when she saw him again. He had that kind of effect on her.

"I might be tempted to take advantage of that weakness." He grinned, but his gaze was dark and solemn.

"I'd be tempted to let you." She locked her desk and hitched her purse strap over her shoulder. "Shall we go?"

"Is the diner okay? I'd like to avoid a crowd."

The only other place in town was the Asher Inn. The city council and several others would be there by now, arguing over everything that had been discussed during the meeting.

"Fine," she said.

They stepped into the hall. He waited while she secured the bolt, then took her arm to escort her from the building.

She led the way across town in her car. He followed in a rental vehicle with four-wheel drive. He hadn't forgotten the roads were narrow, winding and steep in the area.

At the diner they chose a booth and ordered coffee. When the waitress left, Victoria leaned forward. She wanted to ask if he was considering her proposal to move a facility here, but she refrained. First he needed to see the changes in the town and be convinced it would be feasible. She would give him some time to look things over. Meanwhile, she had a plan.

"You need a beard," she told him. "Otherwise you might be arrested and put in the stocks for indecent exposure."

"You've passed a law that all men must have beards?"

"Starting Wednesday everyone is supposed to dress in pioneer clothing or the finery of a hundred years ago."

"I suppose I'd better find some overalls and a straw hat."

"Right," she agreed. "We have some fun things planned every day through Sunday, five days of celebration for the Fourth and our town centennial."

"I remember you mentioned the festivities."

Their eyes met and exchanged other memories. Victoria tried to block them out, but it was useless. She could almost feel the way he'd moved his hands over her, caressing and exploring, giving her the most exquisite pleasure...

"Don't," he said harshly. Her mouth had gone dry. "What?"

"Your eyes give you away," he accused. The waitress brought their cups.

"Cream?" They said no in unison. The woman put the check down and left.

"About the celebration," Victoria continued, returning to her topic. "We have lots of contests planned, old-fashioned fun and games"

He made a low sound, almost a moan.

She stopped abruptly, a relentless blush creeping up her face, then forced herself to go on. "All the industries that have been here will be represented in our parade on Sunday. Logging was first. Then a grist mill that failed. That was before Nathaniel Qairmont came here after the Civil War and set up the textile mill using the old grist mill site."

Jason laid a hand over hers. He disliked the fact that he made her uncomfortable.

"You don't have to be nervous with me, Victoria. I'm not going to embarrass you before the town."

"But I might embarrass both of us," she suggested wryly.

He tried to figure her out. He'd thought, given time and distance, she would regret their passionate hour together. Instead, he could sense the tension in her. She still wanted him.

More surprising, she seemed to want to be friends with him. Her eyes, when she looked at him, were warm and... inviting. But she wasn't making any demands. It was contrary to everything he'd learned to expect from women.

So maybe he would stay for the celebration and... The thought trailed off as he watched her take a drink, then lick her lips.

Her mouth was beautiful. It went soft in a kiss. She'd let him taste her as much as he'd wanted, her tongue playful and ardent against his. Heat poured over him like a flood tide. He'd better think of something else.

"What happened at my place won't be repeated. It was an impulse of the moment. We're mature enough to handle it. I wanted to see you before we were thrown together in a roomful of relatives, to let you know I don't expect to conduct a full-blown affair in a small town like Paradise Falls."

"Why don't you let me decide where I want to conduct an affair?" she asked, eyeing him with something like distaste.

"Maybe I'm not saying this very tactfully," he began again. He was making a hash of it. "I meant, I realize I don't have any claims on you, or you on me, because of a few kisses."

"Thank you very much." She bit the words out.

Damn, the situation was getting worse. "Look, I'm trying to reassure you—"

"I don't need your assurances. I'm a big girl. I can handle my emotions and my libido without any help from you. And I've never been under the delusion that I have any claims on you, nor you on me."

He studied her expression. She looked mad enough to punch him one if he didn't watch it. "Well, how do you want me to act?" he demanded. "Like we're in the mid' die of a flaming affair?"

"Yes."

Victoria almost laughed at the shock that ran over his face. She'd gotten through to him at last,

"You don't let anything pass, do you?" he finally said.

"No."

"So what do you want to happen between us?" "I want to understand why we can't have a normal life like other people. I'm single. You're single. Even the residents of Paradise Falls, backward as they may be to you city types, know about dating. Why can't we see each other if we please?"

He'd evidently thought that one out. His answer was swift and sure. "Because I won't get involved with you. You called it the first time—I'm a loner."

"But," she said softly, "you shouldn't be."

He gave her a cold appraisal designed to put distance between them. "It's the way I want my life."

She thought of the passion between them. She recalled how glad she'd been to see him when he walked into the city council meeting. Like a light had come on inside her.

There was a reason for that. She wasn't sure she was ready to acknowledge it yet. Perhaps the next few days would tell.

She realized she was tired. "I've got to go. Why don't you come over and have dinner with me tomorrow night? Perhaps Sally and her husband can join us. She confessed to a soft spot for renegades, too," Victoria added.

"Some women are soft in the head. Renegades can never be tamed." Jason smiled grimly. There, he'd given her ample warning. If anything further happened between them, she knew the score.

"Tell your parents to come, too. I haven't seen them in ages."

"I'm not staying with my parents." He stood when she did and picked up the check. He tossed enough money on the table to handle the cost of the coffee and the tip.

"You're not?"

"No. I find it's easier to come and go as I please by staying at an inn. I checked into the Clairmont. Adam and I went to school together. We used to sleep over at each other's houses when we were boys. I thought I'd enjoy seeing the old mansion."

"I didn't know that. My parents sent me to a girls' academy for high school, so I lost track of the local people until I came back with John."

He saw her to her car, said good-night and watched her until she drove out of sight. It was an idle thought, but he wondered, if he'd asked, would she have let him stay at her place?

It was just a thought.

The door to the old Broderick family home stood open to the July heat. The sun had dipped behind the western ridge, and the air was beginning to cool. Jason knocked on the wood frame of the screened door.

Victoria appeared in the hall. "Come on in. We're having an emergency in the kitchen." She disappeared.

He opened the door and quickly walked to the back of the house where the kitchen was. Sally and Victoria were standing at the table, watching as icing dripped off a cake.

"I think it must be the heat, Sally," Victoria said.

"This recipe has never failed before." Sally turned to Jason. "What do you think?" He leaned down for a closer look. Swiping a finger through the frosting, he tasted it. "Delicious," he declared. "It's probably the humidity. Also, the cake is still warm. Coupled with the heat, it's melting the icing, I suspect."

Sally conceded defeat to Victoria. "I guess you were right. It was too soon to ice the cake." She turned with a smile to Jason. "I wanted it to be ready for our town benefactor."

Jason groaned. "I've been hearing about that all day. If I'd known what a stir it would cause, I'd have reconsidered. The Lion's Club, the Rotary Club and the Chamber of Commerce want me to speak at their next meetings."

"Welcome to the mashed potato circuit, to quote one of our country's presidents," Victoria said dryly. "By the way, Sally will be eating with us. Her husband's out of town."

Sally laughed and held out her arms. "Come on, cousin, where's my kiss? When we were kids, he told me I could be a kissing cousin," she explained to Victoria.

"My only kissing cousin," he corrected firmly, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

"My mother always tried to make me kiss her two old maiden aunts."

"I remember them," Sally sympathized. "They smelled like moth balls and snuff." Jason felt the warmth of Sally's affection. She'd always liked him, he realized. At times he thought she'd preferred him to John when their parents visited. He'd liked her, too.

"Listen," he said, "cake with chocolate sauce is my favorite dessert. Why don't we spoon the frosting off when we eat it?"

"Good idea. What do you think, Victoria? It's your party."

"Fine by me."

Jason risked a direct look at her. He almost groaned aloud. She wore a pink sundress with tiny straps that just barely held it up. The cleavage was modest, but that made no difference. He knew what she looked like, how graceful and firm and womanly she was.

From the moment he'd walked in the front door, one idea had chased around and around in his brain. A husband had the right to make love to his wife. Later, after dinner and the house was quiet, a man could take his wife to their room. He could strip her out of her pretty pink dress, her silken underwear and stockings. Then he could make love to her until they were sated with all the pleasures of the senses. He silently laughed at his own musings. Any man who "let himself get so carried away with a woman deserved whatever Fate handed out to him. He would not be that kind of fool.

Victoria tried not to be entranced with Jason during the evening. It was difficult. He praised the food until she blushed. He extolled the virtues of mashed potatoes and gravy until both women burst into laughter.

When the meal was over, he wouldn't let Sally clean up. "I can help. It's the least I can do. You take your glass of tea and relax on the front porch. That way you can keep an eye on the neighborhood,"

"Are you implying I'm nosy?" she demanded.

"Let's just say the world is a better place with you here to keep it straight," he replied. When Sally departed with a fresh glass of iced tea, he started gathering the dishes. "I'll stack and rinse while you put the leftovers away."

"All right."

They worked in companionable silence.

"You know," Victoria pondered aloud, "you're really quite charming when you want to be. That cool distance you keep between yourself and others is a sham." He gazed at her mouth, her throat, then swept on her in an inventory that left no part of her feeling. "You're right. Around you, I'm not cool at all, and distance is the last thing I want between us."

"Jason!"

"I thought you wanted the truth between us."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Thus speaks the cynic. You use the truth like other men would use a sword—to keep your foes at bay." Pausing, she considered, then added softly, "I'm not your enemy, Jason."

"You're my nemesis. I've often wondered what awful thing I did in a past life to deserve you in this one." He smiled, but the strain was obvious.

In spite of his amused tone, his words were serious. They indicated deeper feelings. She pressed her lips together, holding in the demand to know what he really felt toward her.

They were interrupted by voices on the front porch. "Your parents, I think," she said. "I invited them to stop by when they couldn't come for dinner."

"Good. I talked to them briefly when I arrived in town. My father and I are planning a fishing trip up to the falls."

"Oh, I haven't been up there in ages. I don't suppose you'd let a female tag along?" She waved a hand, negating the request. "No, it's a male bonding thing. Forget I asked."

They went out to greet his mother and father.

Victoria observed Jason's parents with an interest that was new. Myra and Claude were in their mid to late fifties. She had dark brown hair and hazel eyes. He had thick, wavy hair, which was beginning to turn gray, and eyes that were as blue as the ocean at its deepest point.

"Isn't this weather terrible?" Myra commented. "The garden is full of weeds. I don't dare water it until Claude gets them chopped out."

Victoria noticed the way Jason's mouth tightened at the mention of his father. She wanted to tell him it was okay, that his mother was making a social comment, not a complaint.

"What happened to the man you hired to do that?" Sally asked.

"Oh, he said he hurt his back." Myra frowned slightly; if she didn't believe that excuse, "Maybe you worked him too hard," Jason suggested his usual sardonic humor. "I remember the list of I had to finish before I was allowed to join my friends at the swimming hole on summer days." "You used to rise at dawn and be done with them before those other lazy rascals got out of bed," Myra said in a scolding tone. She turned to Victoria with a smile. "Then he'd pester me until I'd give in and let him out."

The other mothers would call and complain about being roused out of bed." Victoria caught the hint of pride in Myra's manner, but she didn't think Jason did. He remained polite but re-moved from the scene... distancing himself from emo-involvement, she thought.

"Myra always said Jason could do more work as a boy any two men she'd ever seen," Claude put in. There no doubt of his pride in Jason. It beamed from his as he looked at his son, "That's why he succeeded he started his own company." Ah, Victoria mused, the peacemaker. The husband the task of explaining his wife to his son. From Sally had said about the pierced ear episode, he also the son's side against his wife on occasion. Victoria wondered if there were depths to the fathe that. he kept from others just as his son did. Could a man live with a woman for over thirty years and not reveal the secrets of his heart? Of course he could. She wouldn't want that kind of marriage. A husband and wife should be best friends as well as lovers. Drawn by forces she couldn't ignore, she looked at Ja-son. He rested casually with one hip propped on the porch railing his back against the support column. His glance met hers, as cool and distant as he'd ever tr if they'd never shared a brief hour of intimacy so wonderful she'd almost wept. Pain hit her, right below the breast bone, like ar ible dart. She wanted to rise from her chair and pe=s mask from his face until he let her into his Pressing a hand to her chest, she remained still until impulse passed.

"A neighbor told me some interesting news morning,' Myra said to Sally. "Did Jason tell you his gift to the town?"

There was a hint of censure in the statement mother would have liked to have been in on the rather than having it second-hand from a friend.

"I think it was an impulse of kindness," Victoria stated, giving Jason a teasing smile. "When he saw mob ganging up on the council, he came to our rescue with his offer. He even volunteered to direct us build-ing the playground equipment." She went on to explain the donation in detail, adding her own ideas which didn't have hard facts.

While the other three adults discussed the ground, Jason leaned close to her

"Laying it on a bit thick, weren't you?"

She grinned up at him. "You're going to be a hero, whether you want to be or not. Your picture will be splashed all over the front page of the weekly paper on Thursday. Several columns will be devoted to your im-pressive sports career at Paradise Falls High School as well as your later success in life."

"John was the quarterback. He made the team a win-ner."

"You were his best receiver. You made the touch-downs," she retorted. She knew all about every touch-downs.

"I had other players for the hard situations," John had once told her. "Jason took care of the impossible ones."

John had been special, she thought. He had been the most lovingly generous person she'd ever known. Jason was special, too. He'd accomplished tasks others would deemed too hard. And Sally. People like her ke the world on an even keel.

Victoria glanced from Sally to Jason. They were very much alike—both of them hardworking people and kind to others without being soft. Tenderness toward them crept over her.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Claude spoke to Jason. "Your mother is going to be busy directing the donations for the cake walk tomorrow. You want to get an early start on the fish?"

"About four?" Jason asked.

"Sounds right to me," his father agreed. "I'll come by the Clairmont place. We can cut through the back trail to te falls."

"You will be back for the box supper auction, won't you?" Myra asked. She frowned at the men.

"Sure we will," Claude answered. He patted his wife's shoulder. "I wouldn't miss the chance to get some of that fancy apple-brandy cake I saw you making last week."

Victoria realized the woman was afraid no one would bid on her supper box. Her husband had realized it, too, assured her that he would. Jason's father was a man of perception. Remembering her dealings with Jason, she thought Jason was, too. "Would you listen to those crickets," Sally com-mented

Twilight had descended while they talked. A few fire-flies winked from the grass while the insects and peeper frogs sang to them from the trees.

Jason reached over suddenly and fondled a strand of her hair. Victoria cast him a startled glance. He held his hand to her, showing her the firefly. It had landed in her hair.

He lifted his hand into the air. When the bug didn't move, he blew across his palm, launching the firefly into the night. It turned on its hght and glided across the lawn. Another firefly joined it, and they flew away together

Jason glanced at Victoria. They smiled at each other.: For a brief second she saw into his thoughts. Heat rose to her skin from deep inside. She felt both mellow and tense.

"Victoria, should we serve our guests that cake, or just give them some ice cream?"

Victoria grinned at Sally and stood. "Both. The will taste wonderful even if the icing is drippy."

"I'll help," Jason volunteered when his mother s to rise. He followed Victoria into the house.

They worked silently around each other. She cut cake and put it on plates, then he dipped up the ice cream. He carried the first three out to the porch while she wiped the crumbs from the counter and washed the cake knife and ice cream scoop. He returned just as she picked up their plates.

"Forks or spoons?" he asked.

"I prefer a fork."

"Forks it is." He got them out of the drawer.

They returned to the porch.

Victoria was aware of Jason in an aching, breathless sort of way. He sat on the top step, his shoulder only inches from her knee when she resumed her seat in the chair. She drifted into a fantasy in which she and her husband were entertaining guests. Later they would go to their room....

She was glad it was dark enough that no one noticed the tremor that nearly caused her to drop her fork. While the other three talked, she and Jason ate in silence, commenting only when directly spoken to. When they finished the dessert, Claude rose and took Myra's and Sally's plates.

"Come on, son," he said. "Let's show these ladies we can earn our keep. We'll clean up the dishes."

Jason took Victoria's plate, and the men disappeared into the house. Sally spoke to Myra. "I saw my mother earlier this afternoon. She was wondering when Jason was going to marry and give you and Claude some grandchildren."

Myra sighed. "He doesn't listen to me."

Sally laughed. "He has a mind of his own," she said, openly approving of Jason's independent nature. "I remember when he and John graduated from high school. Their grandfathers would have been so proud to see how their grandchildren turned out, with John becoming a lawyer and Jason having his own company."

"John stayed near his family." Myra sighed softly, as if resigned. "Jason was always one for going off on his own."

"It was brave of Jason to start his own business," Victoria put in. "With his inheritance, he could have lived the life of a playboy, or he could have taken over one of the family holdings."

"He was never interested," Myra stated. "I tried to get him to go to law school and become a partner—"

"Jason would have hated that. He needs the challenge of doing things." Victoria realized she was becoming too defensive. She forced herself to relax. "Even John bored with the endless fine nuances of the law. He said he'd like to solve a case by shooting the man being done with it."

"I've often felt the same," Claude commented as he and Jason returned to the porch. "The law wasn't my first love—"

"What was?" his wife broke in, surprised.

"You," he declared, causing Victoria and Sally to laugh. To Victoria's delight, Myra laughed, too.

"But after me, what did you love most?" she demanded.

"I thought I'd like to be an archeologist."

"Ah, that explains all those boxes of arrowheads," Jason stood at the edge of the porch. He didn't resume his seat.

Victoria anticipated his next words.

"I think I'll go up to the big house," he said, using the local expression for the Clairmont mansion, "and hit the sack. Four o'clock is going to come mighty early."

"All that soft city living has ruined you," Claude teased.

"Your old room is available—"

"Now, Myra, give the boy some space. No man over twenty-one likes to be under his mother's eye. Jason might have a sweetheart he doesn't want to talk about yet." Sally laughed. "A person can't have a headache in the town without fifty people knowing about it within the hour."

"Amen to that," Jason said wryly.

Victoria looked up in time to see him glance at her then away. A frisson ran over her as she wondered if Jason thought of her as a sweetheart.

Jason gave his mother a kiss on the cheek, then did the same to Sally. That left only Victoria unkissed. His heart sped up as he turned to her. Quickly he bent down. He saw the flash of her eyes as they widened in surprise. Without letting himself think of the night he'd kissed her until they were both senseless with the pleasure of it, he gave her a peck on the cheek.

"Well, good night," he said to nobody in particular. "I'll see you at four," he said to his father and hurried to the rental car parked at the curb.

He cursed himself all the way to the Clairmont mansion. The more involved he became with either the town or the family, the more involved he would become with Victoria. That was the last thing he needed.

Hanging around her like a dog hoping for a pat on the head wasn't going to be his fate. A man would be a fool to fall in love with a woman who loved another.

I fell a little bit in love with you...

That had been the emotion of the moment speaking, not real feelings. And later, at the cabin?

Sex. That was simple enough to figure out. It had been a long time for her. The emergency had left her vulnerable.

He clenched his hands on the steering wheel as memories tumbled into his mind. Finding her in the wrecked car... her joy upon seeing him...

Oh, love.

She'd said the same thing when they'd nearly made love at the cabin.

Oh, love.

But she hadn't meant it for him either time. She'd thought he was John when he'd found her at the wreck. When he'd kissed her, she'd probably pretended he was.

Pushing the thoughts into the dark corners of his he parked and went into the mansion. The cool air -welcome relief from the heat. He noticed the light : the library.

His old school chum, Adam Clairmont, came to door. "Jason, come join me if you have a moment"

Jason crossed the hall and entered the library where and Adam and John had played checkers and taken playing chess against Mr. Clairmont. Adam's father promised ten dollars to the first one good enough to him.

Jason smiled in remembrance. He'd won that bet.

"Have a seat. Would you like a drink?"

"No, thanks." He sat on the comfortable sofa. The fireplace was filled with ferns. He imagined a fire with snow falling outside the windows and he and toria lying on the velvet couch. "What's happening?" asked with an effort.

"I wanted to find out how long you were going to in town. I have some friends I'd like you to meet."

"Only to the end of this week."

"Good," Adam said, obviously considering that ficient. "Do you remember Sally Winetski? She was behind us in school."*

"I know Sally."

"Her husband is Riley Houston." Adam grinned. "We have a business proposition for you."

"What kind?"

"You ever considered being partners in a resort sort of working ranch?"

Jason leaned forward, interested in spite of himself . " I have a feeling I'm being a fool for asking, but what's a sort of working ranch?"

"Riley has bought the land in the valley down the ridge fion here. He wants to start a ranch where city kids can have a chaace to spend the summer, working for their keep and learning something besides gang fighting. We thought we'd combine the house and the ranch into a re-sort for hiking and cross-country skiing. We're both stretched rather thin right now, so..."

"I think I begin to see the light," Jason murmured. "You need an infusion of cash." Just what he needed— to get involved with another charity project in the area. He wasn't sure why he'd volunteered for the play-ground. Seeing Victoria, working with her on the pro-ject...well, hell, he'd already made a fool of himself once by kissing her until he was senseless, why not twice?

"So what's the deal?"

Adam explained in greater detail. "There'd be four of us" he concluded.

"Four?"

"Oh, Sally Winet... Sally Houston. She's in business Riley. He says she's the brains behind their outfit."

"Yeah, Sally's smart."

"She and my wife are good friends with the woman mayor we have. Victoria Broderick is kin to you, isn't she?"

"A cousin by marriage. She was married to John." Adam remembered the tragedy. "Sorry."

"It was a long time ago." Jason stood. "My dad and I going fishing in the morning. You want to come? We can talk about this idea you and your cohorts have dreamed up."

'Maybe I will. One problem we're having is getting the new road cut through from the resort over on Paradise Lake. It's the most frustrating case of bureaucratic bun-I've ever seen."

"That was mentioned in the council meeting last night." Jason's eyes narrowed as he studied his friend. "Do you suspect anything?"

Adam nodded. "Riley and I think some money has exchanged hands somewhere to block the road. We can't figure out why. Everyone would gain from the road being built. Who would want to stop it?"

Jason had a thought. "Victoria was appointed a committee of one to go to Charleston to check it out. Maybe someone should do some sleuthing behind the scene while she plays the 'front man' with the state government."

"Great idea," Adam exclaimed. "When are you two going?"

"Wait a minute." Jason threw up his hands as if to ward off an evil fate. "I didn't volunteer that I'd do it"

"Yeah, but..." Adam grinned. "I don't think our -wives would let me or Riley go with her."

"I don't have the time."

"You volunteered to supervise construction of the playground equipment, didn't you?"

Jason refused to be drawn into another commitment. They talked another hour before saying good-night.

After Jason went to bed, he found he couldn't turn his mind off this new problem. He realized he wanted to know who was blocking the new road and why.

Victoria had mentioned the problem over the weekend she'd spend with him....

He sighed and tried to ignore the clamoring of his body at the thought of her. It was just as well that he'd stopped. Having her once wouldn't have been enough, Having her a hundred times probably wouldn't, either.

Damn.

The evening at her home returned to haunt him... the sweet look of her in her pink sundress... the scent of her shampoo and cologne ... her fluttery awareness of the attraction between them. Yeah, it was still there. For both of them.

Another thought came to him.

His mother had wanted him to attend law school with his cousin. He'd refused. Instead, he'd taken a degree in physics and engineering, worked for three years—until he'd come into his inheritance from his grandparents— then started his own company at the encouragement of his boss, who'd given him his first contract.

If he'd gone to law school like John, if he'd been on the student council with John and Victoria, he'd have met her then.

One thing he'd always wondered—if he'd met her first, would she have fallen in love with him?

It was just a thought.

Chapter Eight

Victoria wrapped Cajun chicken cakes—baked meatballs of chicken and bread crumbs rolled in a mixture of spices—and put them in the gift bag. She added home-made rolls, marinated green beans and pasta salad. Saving the best for last, she put in two large slices of Miss Josie's chocolate cream cake.

"I like your idea better," Miss Josie commented, comparing a shoe box that she'd decorated in pale lavender paper and tied with a white lace bow to Victoria's gift bag of sunny yellow with white kittens chasing a snarl of rainbow-colored strings.

"Victoria smiled. "Your box looks lovely."

"Lavender is an old maid's color." Miss Josie sighed

"And I'm an old maid."

Victoria's smile faded. Miss Josie's fiancé had been captured and died as a prisoner in the Second World War.

"Didn't you ever meet anyone else you could love?"

"No" Miss Josie paused while wiping up the kitchen counter. "Well maybe one man, but he loved another and never got over her."

"Who?" Victoria asked in surprise.

"Now that would be telling." Miss Josie bustled out of the kitchen. "I'll get my purse. It's almost time for the auction."

Victoria smiled again at her neighbour changed the subject. Love she thought. People were elated, confused or hurt by the ridiculous emotion. She'd gone over her own feelings last night after Jason and his parents had left. She had herself under control now. She wasn't in love with him. Her feelings had been as he'd said – a product of the moment, derived from tension and crisis.

Thinking of the fishing trip, she wondered if he'd be at the festivities tonight. His father had promised to be back in time.

"Ready?" Miss Josie returned, picked up her box and looked at Victoria expectantly.

"Yes." She walked to the door. "I hope I'm not called upon for a speech. I didn't prepare anything."

"Just take four deep breathes," Miss Josie advised. "Then tell everyone how pleased you are with the turn-out for the supper."

"Yes, ma'am," Victoria replied with a grin.

The two women left. They walked the quarter mile to the town square where the chief of police would auction the box suppers. The money was going to the library for new books. They meet other residents going in the same direction, all carrying boxes of home-cooked food. The picnic supper was a popular event on the Fourth of July. Later in the evening the Historical Society would enact signing of the Declaration of Independence courthouse steps. After that, the fireworks display begin.

The first person "Victoria saw when she arrived Jason. Her pulse sped up at once when he looked way. His gaze dropped to the gift bag she carried, hoped he wouldn't bid on it. Not that a person had to eat with the one who bought the supper like in the old but it was just that... well, it was customary; She nibbled on her lower lip nervously, not sure she was feeling. It was one thing to decide on he em- tions in the dark of midnight and something entirely dif-ferent when confronted with Jason and his cool smile.

"Hello," Miss Josie called, waving to friends right and left.

Victoria trailed after the older woman to the long tables set up to hold the box suppers. They were just in time. Chief Doan stepped up to the microphone, and; auction began.

Victoria saw her friends, Cara and Sally, with husbands. Sally waved her over.

"Go join the young folks," Miss Josie encouraged, think I'll sit with Myra and Claude and the rest of fogies."

Victoria laughed and went over to her friends' glad to escape Jason's company. To her consternation she'd no more than sat down when he left his group joined them.

"Miss Josie said you expected me to be your escort," he said, one dark eyebrow raised suspiciously.

Victoria started to deny the statement but the better of it. Like Miss Josie, she'd seen Jason as a out-sider to the group. He lived away while the rest of mingled almost daily in the small town. She'd observed that he'd sat silently while his kin had exchanged local gossip.

"Unless you have a date," she challenged in a light tone. "I certainly wouldn't want to interfere." His eyes met hers. She smiled, sharing the private knowledge that she had interfered in his social life once before. A quickly hidden emotion darted over his face, to fast for her to read. She knew he remembered their weekend as vividly as she. "Here, have a chair," Adam said, pulling a spare one over from a nearby table. He introduced Jason to his wife Cara, and to Riley Houston, Sally's husband.

"Listen to the chief," Victoria advised Jason when he was settled next to her. "He always puts a secret message to his auction prattle. Whoever figures it out wins usually a gift certificate from a local merchant."The y listened to the melodious drone of the auction. Adam and Riley bid against each other for their wives' suppers running the price up to an impressive figure. "Fifty dollars," Jason murmured. "An expensive picnic."

"You don't have to bid," Victoria said quickly. "The dinner hamburgers from a stand."

“ Oh I think I'd prefer a surprise.”

Her brightly colored gift bag finally came up for bid. It was the only one of its kind. The chief sniffed at it. “ Something smells mighty good. Might be chocolate cake.” He gave the crowd a mischievous grin. “ But then again, it might not. Do I hear five dollars for this delicious supper? Well, well, five, I got five who's gonna give me six, I got six...”

“ Victoria grew warm as Jason and two other men continued to bid for her supper. The price reached fifty, sixty, then seventy.

“ That's too much,” she muttered when Jason bid seventy-five.

“ It's for a good cause.” He bid again.

By now, most of the crowd had caught on that pretty gift bag belonged to the mayor and that Jason determined to win it. So was one other man in the audience, a young pediatrician who had made his interest clear during the past few months. When the doctor bid eighty, Jason called out, “ One hundred.”

A murmur of appreciation rose from the crowd, flush crept into Victoria's cheeks when her friends grinned at her.

“ One hundred,” the chief sang out. “ Do I hear ten—my Aunt Kate—a hundred ten—can roller skate—I got hundred... a hundred and fifty.” He stopped his rapid singsong. “ A hundred and fifty dollars. Going once. Going twice. Sold.” He banged the gavel.

The crowd burst into applause.

Jason rose and gave a slight bow. He smiled at young doctor, who saluted him in a good-natured manner.

“ Wow,” Sally said when the men left to collect the food.

A neighbor from a nearby table yelled, “ What'd have in that bag, Your Honor—a slice of government pie?”

Victoria was glad for the distraction. She didn't to answer the questions she could see in her friends' eyes. “ A contract for road improvement,” she answered, recalling a recent scandal in the county road department in which the supervisor had awarded the contract to his own corporation. That bought a laugh.

Adam, Riley and Jason returned with the food plus tall cups of ice tea to go with it.

“ I hope Sally didn't fix turkey sandwiches with pickles,” Riley said, giving his wife a threatening glance. “ That's all we've had for the past couple of weeks.” “ I'm thinking of switching to watermelon,” she said.

“ I've had a craving for that since I woke up this morning.”

The couple exchanged an amused, tender glance.

“ Sally?” Cara questioned.

Sally grinned. “ Yes,” she confessed. “ I'm going to look like I swallowed a watermelon in another month or two.”

The others chuckled at this description.

“ You'll look beautiful,” Victoria exclaimed, thrilled for her friend. “ Sally pregnant. The first baby in our group.”

“But not for long,” Cara confessed, a flush spreading into her cheeks. “At least, Adam and I don’t think so.”

She gave Sally a friendly shove on the arm. “ I can’t be-lieve you beat me.”

Riley raised one dark eyebrow. “Did you know we were in a rac?” he asked Adam.

Adam shooked his head. “ Cara never tells me anything,” he complained with a woeful-husband expression .

Victoria joined in the laughter.

“Maybe we can have them together,” Sally suggested.

“ Would the doc give us a break- two for the price of one, do you think?”

“He should,” Cara agreed. “ The way he was bidding on Victoria’s supper, he must have money to burn.

Victoria felt the heat rise in her face again a reminder of the bidding. As the conversation returned the coming births, a poignancy crept over her. She ized she wanted to be like her friends—happy secure, in love and expecting a child. She clenched her fist in her lap, fighting emotion.

A hand touched hers under cover of the table, glanced over at Jason. Was that compassion in his eyes?

An odd sensation flooded over her. She felt little frightened and full of longing. Yes, she want child, one conceived in love and passion. A child with this man. With Jason.

She turned from his intent gaze and stared at the fading colors of twilight. A star hung low on the horizon. A. wish formed in her mind, but she didn't give words to it.

The sweet ache of melancholy stole over her. She turned her hand and clasped Jason's in brief gratitude. For a second he returned the pressure, then he withdrew from her.

"I hope you like chicken," she said, opening the bag and setting out the meal. She gave him a plastic fork and napkin.

"It's one of my favorite foods."

They ate and listened to the reenactment of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The best performer turned out to be Mr. Wagner, who got a round of applause for his role as Benjamin Franklin.

' "Say, doesn't Mr. Wagner have a friend who works in the state highway department?" Sally asked, a speculative gleam in her eye.

“I don't know." Victoria frowned at the implication.

Jason cursed silently as the worry of running the government descended on Victoria. He saw the way she twisted her paper napkin until it came apart in her hands.

"When are you going to Charleston to find out about the road?" Adam asked.
"Probably not until September. We want to get the playground built next month. Before school starts, we hope."

Jason was aware of her questioning glance. "A set of plans are in the mail," he assured her. "As soon as I get them. I'll order the material. All you have to do is set up the date."

"I'll check with Mary Beth," Victoria promised.

"Unless you'd rather do it yourself."

Jason allowed himself a slow grin.

"No, I've found you adept at arranging my schedule."

"Do I detect a gibe in that statement?" Sally inquired of Victoria

Jason wished he'd kept his mouth shut as he intercepted a grin from Adam. He waited to see how Victoria would answer

Admiration for her warmed him as she shrugged nonchalantly. "I canceled his dinner date with some model out of his office."

You didn't!" Sally obviously relished the thought. Victoria nodded affirmatively.

"I knew you and Cara would kill me if I came back without accomplishing my goal. Due to, uh, unforeseen circumstances, Jason couldn't keep our appointment. I decided not to be out-done. When the model called, I happened to be the only one in the office. I told her it was off." "I caught her on the phone," Jason added, "making up a story about a visiting relative I had to entertain."

So he had take me to dinner and listen while I extolled the virtues of Paradise Falls," Victoria finished the tale with a deprecatory wave of her hand.

"And?" Sally demanded, looking at Jason.

He knew she wanted to know if he'd decided to plant there, but he hadn't planned on stating the facts to an audience. He wanted to talk to Victoria alone, her the idea just wasn't feasible. "I'm still checking it," he said, looking at her. He saw her eyes and knew she guessed the truth. She covered the disappointment with a light laugh. "I was sure our labor force of fifty knitting grandmothers impress you."

"The mill's doing well," Adam spoke up. "I don't see a slowdown anytime soon."

"There's a New York designer interested in our rainproof material," Cara put in.

"Wouldn't something if she did a bunch of outfits in it?"

"You should look closer to home for industry," Jason suggested to Victoria.

"What raw materials do have here? Nature is one. Adam and Riley have a good idea for a hiking and cross-country skiing operation along with a ranch."

"Tourism," Victoria scoffed. It's so unpredicable."

"So is life," he reminded her, hating it that she'd been hurt. From the moment he'd met her, he'd wanted to protect her from all disappointments. Why? It was a question he hadn't been able to answer in all the years he'd known her. It was just there—like air, like shine, like life.

Victoria knew she had to find another way to help the town. "So it is, but still, there must be something else," she muttered, determined to find it. "First we need that road. I'll get up a petition and take it to Charleston right away. I'll find out why it's been stalled in the planning office for so long."

Jason's father came over and told them he was taking Myra. He would drop Miss Josie at her house. "Perhaps I'd better go, too," Victoria decided.

"I'll take you later," Jason volunteered

"Stay for the fireworks," Sally urged.

"I can see them from my porch." Victoria stood.

Miss Josie must not be feeling well."

Jason stood, too. "I'll drive you both," he said.

"They said good-night to the other couples, joined the older woman and left after a few minutes of conversation -with Jason's parents.

"Are you all right?" Victoria asked on the way to the car

"A mite tired," Miss Josie admitted. "You didn't need to leave on account of me."

"I'm rather tired, too."

Let me help you two old ladies in," Jason said with a grin.

He put Miss Josie in the front and Victoria in the back.

At her house Miss Josie made them wait while she fetched two more pieces of cake. "You might be hungry the fireworks," she explained, handing the wrapped slices to Victoria.

"Thank you. Good night," Victoria called. Jason drove the few feet to her house and parked in the drive. Victoria tried to perform her duties as hostess. "Would you like the cake now?"

"No. I'm not hungry for food."

He waited for her to precede him onto the wide front porch. The first Roman candle burst into fiery trails across the sky. The fireworks had started.

Victoria sat in the swing. Jason chose his former place on the porch, his shoulder against the post. She looked at his back, the outline of his head and shoulders, and experienced a terrible yearning, so painful it almost made her cry out. She wanted... she didn't know what she wanted. Life seemed too harsh all at once. When was she ever going to find happiness?

Tears forced their way to the surface. She wiped them away as a particularly beautiful burst of red, white and blue pinwheel sparklers flew outward from a central explosion.

Jason sat with his back to her during the entire display. It lasted almost an hour, fifty-three minutes of silence, to be exact.

"Well, that was impressive," he said at last.

"Who paid for the entertainment?"

Her throat was too tight to speak. She opened mouth and tried to draw a calm breath. "The town, she managed.

He swung around and stared at her through the dark

"What's wrong?" he asked after a tense second.

"Nothing." She gave a shaky laugh. "I always get emotional at holidays and celebrations. By the way, you forgot to let your whiskers grow for the pioneer day celebration."

He rose and came to the swing. Pushing his hands into his rear pockets, he studied her in the dim glow of the street light. "I don't have time to grow a beard."

"That's right. You have to get back to your life in city. Do our local traditions bore you?"

"Dammit, Victoria," he began. He stopped, sighed.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I'm being a grouch.

You're not going to locate a company up here, are you?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "The transportation costs alone are prohibitive."

"I knew that. I just didn't want to admit it." Taking a seat beside her, he pushed the swing into motion. "Does knowing about your friends' babies make you sad?" She swallowed as tears rose again. "I don't think so."

She sniffed, searched out a tissue in her pocket and blew her nose. "It's just... Sometimes I expect too much of life, I suppose."

"Like a home, a husband and a child?" You're as perceptive as your father," she murmured, getting herself under control.

"It's natural to want what you once had."

Jason grimaced. It probably wasn't wise to remind her of what she'd lost. He himself was reminded of what he'd never had—the companionship of a delightful woman who loved only him.

He was intensely aware of the light fragrance of her brought to him on the mountain breeze. Although he didn't touch her, he could sense her body close to him. Memories of her satin skin taunted him with a need that grew stronger each minute. He wanted to lose himself in her warmth—she welcomed him so sweetly—and take them both to—

"What?" he asked, realizing she'd spoken to him. It's natural for humans to want closeness with other

humans," she repeated softly. "Do you want that?" His throat was suddenly so tight it could hardly speak. Yes."

"Now"

"Yes."

Flames exploded in him, as brilliant as the fireworks they'd watched. He tamped them down. She was missing her husband and the child she'd lost. It comforted her, not passion.

He closed his eyes briefly. To this woman, this one of all the millions in the world, he wanted to give what he had.

He put his arm around her shoulders carefully, whether it was her or himself that might break, most came apart when she settled against him with a sigh. The scent of her shampoo floated up to him. He hesitated, then laid his cheek against her hair.

The night closed around them, deeply intimate.

Gradually the ache inside Victoria subsided, slipped away. She no longer had to fight the wild yearning that had bothered her earlier. For this moment she was content.

When she felt Jason plant a fleeting kiss on top of her head, she couldn't resist. She lifted her face to him.

"Victoria," he said.

A protest, she thought. She parted her lips, ready for his.

"I can't hold you and not want you," he told her voice so low she could barely hear it over the whir of the crickets.

"I want you, too," she said simply.

He ground out a curse, then his mouth descended touch was tentative, as if she might disappear like a soap bubble. She lifted a hand and caressed his jaw.

With a moan, she snuggled closer, clutching his shoulders and turning so that she could wrap her arms around him.

He lifted her and sat her across his lap. She pressed against his lips when he kissed her.

His warmth through her cotton blouse and caressed her breasts. Yes, this was what she'd wanted.

When he lifted his head, they were both breathing deeply.

"It's no good, is it?" he asked. If it's wonderful," she contradicted.

But what's the point? No matter how modern you think you are, you're still the mayor. Every move you make is scrutinized by the whole town."

"So?"

He eased her back into her place. "So I don't want to give you any trouble with gossip."

"You won't—"

"Ha"

Jason stood and paced the porch. Coming to a halt in front of her, he studied her; trying to figure her out. She had to be waiting for him to see their situation in the same light she did. Which was through the rosy haze of desire.

"Jason?" she said softly, her voice a song in his blood, like melody carried on the breeze from some far and wonderful place. He longed to go there with her. He thrust his hands into his back pockets to keep from reaching for her again. With very little provocation, he'd carried her into the deep shadows at the far end of the porch and make love to her right there. "What?"

"I think I've fallen in love with you."

All the clichés regarding the human body happened to him—his knees went weak, his stomach dropped and his lungs stopped working. Common sense returned.

"It's warmed-over emotion, not the real thing," he informed as coolly as he could with his imagination on fire.

She sat up straight "What?"

"Because of what happened at the office. We shared a tense moment with Susan and the baby—"

Her trill of laughter cut him off. She shook her head.

He had to clear his throat in order to speak.

"Later at the house, there was passion. I admit it was wonderful."

"Yes," she said in a dreamy voice. "It was, wasn't it?"

"Right, so now you feel gratitude for that. It woke you up to being a real woman again."

He was having with his breathing. Pictures formed in his mind as he remembered how it had felt to kiss her and caress her to his heart's content.

"And what do you feel?"

He detected a deceptive innocence in the question. He thought it over from several angles but could see no obvious trap. "I feel the same."

"You're a wonderful lover," she told him.

"So tender and considerate, too, especially when you realized it been a long time for me."

Victoria smiled slightly when he made a rough sound and paced the porch again. She wanted to break thorough that cool control he kept locked around his heart.

He gave a snort of laughter when he stopped in front of her again. "I nearly came apart in your hands. Your response was so natural, so spontaneous, it drove me to the brink more than once."

She stood and laid her hands on his shoulders.

"A man and a woman sharing life's most precious gift is a natural thing."

"You're confusing passion with love," he told her.

"Then you do know the difference?"

"Of course." Jason recognized the trap the moment the words were said. He'd let her lead him like a babe until she reached the point she wanted to make.

He pulled her hands off him and stalked away, needing distance so he could argue logically with her. "Not in this case. You're thinking of John." There was a moment of silence, then, "What?"

"You're confusing me with John. He was your first lover right?" When she didn't answer, he repeated, "Am I right?"

"Yes, but—"

It was my fault. I knew you were vulnerable after the crisis at the office. The birth brought back memories."

"No," Victoria corrected. "It let me see another side you." She went to him when he stubbornly remained from her, his back stiff and unyielding. She laid a hand on his arm, needing the connection between them felt him emotionally withdraw from her. "Why, Jason?"

"Why what?"

"Why keep that part of yourself hidden? "You were wonderful with Susan and later with me when we nearly made love. You have a rich store of tenderness and compassion—"

You're letting your imagination run away with you."

"I don't think so." She rested both hands on his chest

"Is it so hard to believe I might love you for yourself?"

"For myself?" He laughed briefly, then clasped her wrists, removing her hands. "When we were in bed, Victoria, you called me by the pet name you always used for John."

A denial sprang to her lips. She tried to remember, but murmured words blended into the bliss of sharing her with him.

"What name?" she finally asked.

"Love". You always called him love."

The tension drained out of her. "Jason, I call every-one I love by that—my parents, my cousins, my best friends. It's an endearment I use when I'm feeling especially affectionate toward someone." She paused, then said in a soft voice, "I'd never confuse you with anyone else."

The silence grew between them as he looked into her eyes. She willed him to see the truth in her. He released her and turned away. "It doesn't matter," he said. "If for a few minutes, you were happy, who am I to complain? I reaped the benefits."

"Thus speaks the cynical Jason," she said, "but I know the other Jason, and a few kisses aren't him any more than they are for me."

"Forget him," he advised.

"I don't think I can. He's the one I fell in love with."

"Then you're a fool." He bounded down the steps.

"I don't think so," she called the instant before he reached the rental car.

He left without a backward glance.

Chapter Nine

Victoria checked off the last item on her list. The new fall stock was in. Now all she needed to do was arrange it on the racks in attractive displays. Thank goodness the windows were done.

She stuck the bills in the accounts payable file and went out to view her handiwork. The scene in the big window at front of the store depicted a family on a fall outing — father in a plaid wool jacket and jeans, mom in a gold turtleneck with a gold-and-red-striped sweater over it and dark brown cords, two boys in hooded sweatshirts and stone-washed jeans with bronze studs on the pockets.

She wondered if it had been a subconscious gesture on her part to use a black-haired, blue-eyed father with a blond-haired mother. Gazing at the mannequins and artificial leaves in bright fall colors, she pictured Jason and with two sons. Heat gathered in her.

Turning from the revealing display, she stroked s nervously down her heather-toned pantsuit.. It was almost six. Time for the dedication ceremony for the playground. She had to give the official speech thanking Jason and the volunteers who'd put the thing together. They'd done it in one day.

Jason, Adam and Riley had divided the work into three sections and the helpers into three groups yesterday. The work had evolved into a competition to see who could get done first. As mayor, she'd declared a three tie when they'd finished twelve hours later. The three men had stayed to tidy up the loose ends.

She ignored the hurt she'd felt when Sally had gested the three couples go for pizza and Jason gracefully declined, saying he had another commitment. He'd left without a word to her.

Sighing, she got her purse, locked the door behind her and went out to her car. The town was deserted. Everyone, it appeared, had gone to the park. When she arrived, she found she had been correct .The park was full and so were all the parking spaces. She drove to her house and walked back.

"Victoria, it's about time," Sally called. "We we were going to have to send Jason to drag you from your desk."

Victoria managed a cool smile when she met Jason's glance. She hadn't been alone with him since he'd left her standing on the porch after the fireworks, seven weeks ago. He'd had Susan send a letter to her with the plans for the play equipment. All she'd had to do was alert Mary Beth, the PTA president, who'd done the organization for the event.,

During the construction, she'd worked on Riley's team. Under his direction, she and Sally and two other women had put together the sections that were now a crawl-through tube for tots. She turned and surveyed the playground.

"What do you think?" a deep masculine voice asked. "It's incredible. I can't believe we did this in one day."

"A long day," Jason reminded her." "Riley and I went over everything again to make sure all the joints are secure."

The breeze brought the scent of his cologne to her. She wanted to bury her face against his neck the way she'd done the night they'd nearly made love. She looked at her watch. "It's time," she said. "Come with me. You'll have to say a few words."

Jason grimaced, but followed along beside her. He helped her climb the steps to the first level of the "tree house" to make her speech. He stood on the bottom step and watched her.

Her speech was simple, but it was saved from sounding hackneyed by the sincerity in her expression. She liked people, he realized. She believed in what she said about a community reflecting the attitudes of its citizens. She told them how proud she was to be part of a town like Paradise Falls, "a town that cares.." She related other incidents to them that indicated their caring, responsible attitude.

Jason could almost see the chests swelling with civic pride and a sense of duty well done by the time she finished telling the crowd how wonderful they were as a group and as individuals. She singled out Adam and Riley, then Mary Beth and finally himself to lavish with praise.

"Now I'd Like to turn the podium over to Mary Beth."

Victoria stepped aside and Jason helped the other woman up the steps.

"Jason," the PTA president said, "would you please join me?" She had a covered object in her hand.

Resigned to his fate, he went up the steps and between her and Victoria while he was presented with a plaque. She also told him the park had been named in his honor, which surprised him. He shot a glance at Victoria. She should have headed this off, or at least warned him. She smiled coolly.

He made the appropriate remarks, similar to those said when he'd made the offer to the city council thanked them for the award and the honor. He stepped down from the platform amid cheers and applause.

'Now,' Victoria said when the noise died down, "the volunteer fire department has chicken and hot dogs on the grill. The PTA has all the fixin's, so let's eat.: That led to another cheer and a rush to the tables

Victoria was detained from joining the line by two local merchants who wanted to know if she'd heard thing about the road yet, "No, but I have a petition over two thousand names. The state legislature ignore us this time. I'll take our case to them in Monday;"

Before she could get away, someone else had a question. "Has anything been done about the child-care center that was brought up a few months back?"

Forty minutes later she was still answering querier her constituents. From the corner of her eye, she saw Jason make his way through the group surrounding her.

"Your supper's getting cold," he announced. He smiled at the crowd. "If you'll excuse us."

Amid some good-natured teasing, he took her elbow and guided her to a picnic table where her friends waited.

"I didn't think you were going to get a chance to eat," Cara told her when she sat down.

"Who fixed my plate?" Victoria asked, looking at the paper plate stacked high with chicken and vegetables.

"I did," Jason answered.

"Thank you." She gave him a radiant smile. She was suddenly happy. Stealing a glance at Jason she knew she shouldn't be. Nothing had changed between them. Yesterday he'd been all crisp efficiency. Friday night, at dinner at his parents' home, he'd been his usual standoffish self, amusec and remote, without a flicker of emotion showing when he'd looked at her.

She and Cara and Sally discussed their plans concerning the enw road while they ate. When her naplin fluttered from her lap, Jason bent and retrieved it before it could blow away. Their figures touched when he handded it back.

"Thanks. Again." Her voice was husky, and he gave her a sharp glance as if warning her to keep her emotions under control.

She couldn't . His nearness created havoc with her sense. She wanted to lean her should against his. More than that, she wanted to feel his hands gliding over her, arousing her to the passion that simmered between them in spite of his remote manner.

"With Victoria in Charleston, working on that end,

Cara and I are going to comb the county records and find out who owns every parcel of land between the town ad the resort over on the lake." Sally explained to Jason.

"If anyone's buying up the land and holding it, they'll let me know . It might give us something to go on." Vicotira declared.

"You're going alone to Charleston?" Jason asked. He frowned at the other two men. Adam grinned.

"Of course," Victoria said, giving him an irritated look.

"When?" he demanded.

"Monday."

"I'll drive you there."

Victoria and her two friends were clearly astounded. Adam chuckled. So did Riley. Jason's ears became warm. He felt like a schoolboy caught passing a love note in class.

"I'm on vacation for a week," he hastily explained. "My father and I were going to do some fishing, but he's involved in a court case. So I have some free time He felt even more like a fool when Victoria kissed on the cheek and exclaimed, "How wonderful!" as if he'd given her the sun, moon and stars, all tied dainty bow.

His eyes met Sally's. She gave him a solemn stare. "I'm glad you're not ignoring this chance—" she paused

"—to continue your civic duty to your hometown."

That drew a laugh.

Victoria stilled the clamoring in her heart. I'd planned on leaving early Monday morning."

"I'll pick you up at seven."

She didn't argue.

The storm swooped over the mountain peak and into the tiny valley on Sunday afternoon. It kept up a steady drone into the night. Monday was dismal. The traffic in town was a snarl of frustrated parents dropping the kids off at school and harried business people trying to get to work. The streets were slick, and tempers were short.

Victoria sneaked a glance at Jason after they crept past a minor accident that had Main Street backed up Beckley Road tumoff. Finally they made it out of town and onto the twisting road that led to the interstate highway.

When they were on the scenic four-lane highway and rolling along at sixty-five miles per hour, she asked, "Why did you volunteer to come with me?" "I thought you might need help. If someone is holding up construction of the road, they might not want nosing around and trying to find out who and why"

She scoffed at this cloak-and-dagger idea. He didn't argue with her. She remained silent as the rain poured down in torrents. Jason required all his attention for the road, which was hardly visible through the blowing sheets of water

Once he cursed as a plastic bag loomed out of nowhere like an alien invasion. It hit the windshield and whipped past them out of sight. The trip, normally a bit more than an hour, extended to two. By the time they arrived at the capital, she was in no mood for her appointment with their district representative to present the petition from the citizens and the various business owners in the area as well as those from Paradise Lake.

There is a coffee shop across the street from your congressman's office. We can meet there later. I don't

How long I'll be. I'm going to do a little checking on my own. I went to school with a guy who's an engineer with road department."

"All right," she said. "I'll probably be invited to lunch, so it might be a while before I'm free."

"I'll keep checking the coffee shop. We'll meet up sooner or later.. Sooner, I hope." He peered at the sky after he stopped under the portico of the office building.

"I'd like to be home before dark. The road to Paradise Falls is treacherous enough without navigating it in a blinding rain."

"You shouldn't be wasting your vacation helping me with the town problems," she said, giving him a worried appraisal. "You're supposed to relax on a vacation."

"Let me worry about that," he snapped.

Before she could say anything, he apologized, then smiled. Her heart melted. "I'll see you later." She climbed out and ran inside before more than a dozen drops of rain blew over her.

As she predicted, the district congressman insisted join him for lunch after she presented her petition and explained the situation with the town. He was sympathetic, but wouldn't make any promises. She smiled fully as she recognized the political ploy. It was one she'd used often.

At two o'clock she went to the coffee shop. There, she waited for Jason. He didn't arrive until almost five.

He slid into the other side of the booth and gave her a solemn look, which she couldn't interpret. Gazing his eyes, she sensed controlled excitement in nervous tingle went through her. She had a feeling she wasn't going to like his news.

"Any luck?" she asked when he continued to study her.

He nodded. "Bingo," he said. "My old friend: gave me a clue. Together we traced it down."

"So what is it?" She twisted her napkin in her hand. "Maybe the question is—who is it? Someone has blocked the construction of the road, haven't they?"

He nodded. "We think so. Frank Wagner has buying land along the proposed roadway for three years. One more parcel and he'd have had it all. The widow who owned it sold her acreage to Sally and Riley for that ranch they want to start."

"Mr. Wagner," Victoria repeated. "Are you saying Mr. Wagner is the one blocking the new road?"

I met an old buddy of his, the brother of the woman Wagner was to have married—"

"She was hit by lightning shortly before they married." Victoria remembered an old bit of gossip Sally had once told her

"The man works in the highway department. I met him this morning.. He asked about Wagner when he realized I was from Paradise Falls. That got me to thinking"

Mr. Wagner is on the city council," Victoria interrupted. "He's very much in favor of the road. You're mistaken, Jason."

"I don't think so. I called Sally, She did some check-ing and verified the information I just gave you."

She realized Jason had withdrawn behind his sardonic mask. "He's spoken for the road often," she told him.

"Oh, he's for it. On his terms. He probably thinks to make a killing from the state

when the project is finally released from the planning committee... which his old friend happens to head." Victoria rubbed her forehead. "I can't believe this." Jason looked out the window. "Let's eat, then head back before the storm breaks again."

They ordered soup and sandwiches and were on the road by six o'clock. Unfortunately the next wave of the storm didn't wait for them to make it home. It unleashed its fury as soon as they were on the highway. By the time they reached Beckley, night had fallen. The storm continued as if driven by fury at the humans who had to be out in it.

Victoria clenched her hands more than once on the trip up the winding mountain road. It was during a snow-storm she and John had been forced off this very same road almost eight years ago. Right before Christmas, she remembered. They'd been shopping in Beckley and had stayed for a late dinner before returning home. She stared at the blinding rain, then looked at Jason. Fear rose to her throat.

"Jason, be careful."

He didn't spare her a glance, but she saw his jaw clench before he said huskily, "I will. Don't be frightened"

"It's just... I don't want anything to happen to you." She tried to explain, although she wasn't quite sure what she wanted to say. "I don't want to lose you before I've had a chance to know you. Before we have a chance to know each other."

"After that night at my place, I think we know each other quite well," he remarked.

"But not completely."

He cursed, but whatever else he might have said was forgotten as he turned a blind curve on the steepest part of the mountain. He slowed the car and stared ahead. "Where the hell is the road?"

All at once, Victoria realized the pelting on the roof of the car wasn't only rain. "Rocks," she said. "It's rock slide. Jason, look out!"

It was too late.

The slide gathered momentum. An avalanche of mud, gravel and boulders crashed down on them. The car skidded sideways. A boulder glanced off the top, denting it. Jason threw the four-wheel drive into reverse, but fate was determined the mortals wouldn't escape. The slide followed their efforts to retreat.

Then they were swept off the road and over the edge. Victoria relived the nightmare of turning over in a vehicle careering down a mountainside. She and Jason were going to die.

She'd never convinced him of her love, she realized just before the world disappeared in an explosion of light. Then all was dark.

The voice came to her from a distance. She'd heard it before.

She remembered the time clearly—she'd been cold and alone and afraid, but the voice had called her back. Back from where? Oh, yes, the meadow with the wonderfully soft light falling on it. The meadow where John and the baby played—

“Victoria, are you all right? Dammit, answer me!” She opened her eyes, but there was only darkness.

“Jason?”

“Thank God,” he said. “Where are you hurt?”

“My head, I think.” She touched the throbbing lump on the side of her head. “I bumped it on something.” “What about the rest of you?” he asked. His tone was calm now. She felt his hand touch her shoulder. She moved her arms and legs, then her back and neck.

“All present and accounted for. How about you?”

“I’m fine.”

“It’s so dark,” she said.

She heard the click as he unfastened his seat belt, then felt him lean past her. He retrieved a flashlight from the glove box and flicked it on.

“My God,” he said.

She saw their predicament at once. They had rolled over and come upright against a pine sapling, hardly bigger around than the calf of her leg. Beyond it was a straight drop of fifty feet. “We’re near Vista Point,” she said.

“Yes”

“Near where John and I went off the cliff.”

“Yes.” He turned the light out. He slipped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him. “Don’t be afraid,” he murmured. “I’ll get you out.”

“You got me out of the car the other time,” she said. Her thought processes were taking place in slow motion, but she knew the nightmare that had haunted her had been real. “It was you. You found me. You called back. I was walking toward a meadow,”

“I thought you were gone,” he said in a hoarse voice, “but you came back.”

“When you slapped me.”

“Yes,” he admitted.

The memory came back to her. “You saved me Jason. I didn’t realize it at the time, but.. you saved my life.” She released her seat belt and reached for him, needing his warm living touch.

“But I couldn’t save your husband or your baby.”

She remembered he’d removed her cold numbed hands, opened her coat and found the child clutched to her bosom. He’d lifted it from her. His tears had fallen on her face.

“It’s all right,” she said, twisting around in order to hold him close, to comfort him. “You did everything you could. No one could ask for more.”

"You thought I was John, then you realized I wasn't. But I wanted to be. I wanted to give him back to you. I would have if it had been possible," he said, agony in his voice.

"Oh, my darling," she whispered, aware of his pain. She whispered soothing, comforting words to him. Another insight came to her, but this wasn't the time to discuss it. She would save it for later, when they were rescued.

The wind rocked the car, and she was reminded of their precarious balance. The rescue might not come in time. She held Jason tighter. "I love you," she said. "Jason, I love you."

He moved away from her. "Another crisis," he said in a mocking tone. "You might feel differently in the morning."

"No." She sighed and prepared to wait out the dark and the storm. Dawn was a long way off. Who knew what tomorrow would bring?

Chapter Ten

With the dawn came the realization that they likely to be rescued for hours yet. Victoria was on the cliff side of the precariously balanced vehicle. "See if' get the door open now that you can see better," she suggested.

He'd tried to open the door earlier, but it was stuck. He tried it again. The car rocked back and forth. The tree holding it in place bent a little more toward the edge.

Victoria had an idea. "Try the window,"

He turned on the ignition key and tried the button. To their surprise, the window opened almost all the way.

"We can climb out," she said, relieved at being able take action after the long dark night.

She bit her lip anxiously as Jason eased into crouch on the seat. The car swayed. Several rocks skittered the side of the fifty-foot drop. Jason waited a few seconds, then tried again.

"He edged his body through the opening. Victoria held her breath she felt the vehicle shudder. The rocks

Shifted again. When she felt the car slip, she knew it was going to go over the side.

"Jump! Jason, jump!"

He froze. The car steadied. The pine tree held. Very slowly, he eased down into the seat. When he was seated raged at him, "Why didn't you jump? You could have gotten out. Why didn't you go on?" He gave her a look just as furious. "The front tire is right on the edge. If I'd jumped, the car would have gone over. "You'd have been killed!"

"But you would be safe! At least one of us would have made it." Was he so dense that he couldn't see the logic of that. It made perfect sense to her. She simply couldn't bear for him to be hurt, and that was the unadorned truth.

Grabbing her wildly gesturing hand, he leaned close until his face was inches from hers. "What the hell would the world be to me if you were gone?" he snarled at her. The silence crackled between them.

"Jason?" she questioned softly when she could stand it no longer

,—

He released her, laid his arm over the steering wheel and his forehead against it.

"Jason?" she said again. She placed her left hand on his shoulder and felt the tension in him. "I didn't mean to say that," he muttered.

Happiness burst into being inside her. He loved her. She though so last night, but now she was positive. "Oh Love," she whispered.

He whipped his head around and glared at her. A shout from above prevented any discussion of their feelings. The chief of police had arrived.

In a few minutes tow trucks were on the scene. The drivers hooked pulleys to the front and back of the rental car to hold it steady, then they forced the door on driver's side. Jason and Victoria climbed out after ten hours of entrapment.

"Ah, the world," she said, standing on Vista Point and watching the officials do their job. She smiled radiantly at Jason, who stood near her, a scowl on his face while he explained the accident to the chief.

One lane of the road was completely blocked, the other was covered with rubble. The edge of the road had crumbled. An earlier slide on that side must have under-cut its support, causing it to give way beneath of their car.

It had been a close call, but now... now she felt safe and secure... and wildly in love. She wanted to be alone with Jason.

It was more than an hour before they finally climbed into the patrol car and were taken to town. The chief dropped Victoria at her house first.

After thanking him, she turned to Jason. A rush of tenderness invaded her.

"Would you like to come in and have breakfast before we face the world?" They had so much to discuss, so many plans to make. She felt dizzy thinking of it.

"No, thanks," he said. "I'll go over and assure -parents that we're okay. The news is sure to have hit grapevine by now." He gave her one encompassing glance before climbing into the front seat where she'd sat on the ride home. The chief drove off.

Victoria went into the house. For a second she stood in the hallway and listened to the emptiness echo in her heart. Then she went upstairs to shower and get some sleep;

She heard from Jason's mother later that day. Jason had gotten his tent and backpack from the garage loft and gone off on his own for a few days.

"He said he needed some quiet to let his nerves settle after the accident," Myra explained. "He did look rather pale."

"I see," Victoria said. Her voice sounded hollow.

The meeting went against Victoria's belief in government in the sunshine—meaning all business conducted by the council was also the business of every citizen. In this case she'd called a private meeting. After everyone commented on the accident of the previous day and how lucky she was to escape with her life, she took her place at the head of the table—the signal that the meeting was about to convene.

"The council is now in executive session," she said when the others were settled. The five council members were gathered in the private conference room next to her office. The recording secretary and the city attorney were the only other people present. She hesitated, wishing she didn't have to do this.

The other officials of the town government looked at her expectantly. Glancing at Mr. Wagner, she noted he didn't seem in the least suspicious that he'd been found out.

Humans. They were the oddest creatures on earth. She looked at her notes.

"We appear to have a problem," she said after swallowing her disappointment with her fellow beings. "I have conclusive evidence that a resident of the town is responsible for the road delay."

Mr. Wagner looked as surprised as the other council members. Her confidence wavered. Maybe she and Jason and Sally were wrong. She studied the dates of purchase and deed recordings from the county records. No, there was no room for doubt.

"Well, Victoria, don't keep us in suspense. Who culprit?" one of the council, a surveyor by trader demanded.

"First I'd like to present the evidence." She handed copies of the paper listing the property transaction the past three years.

There were several minutes of silence while the three studied the report. Mr. Wagner glanced at it.. and smiled.

The knot in Victoria's stomach grew to grapefruit size. She clenched her hands in her lap to stop their shaking. She hated confrontations. But she had a job to do.

"Why, Frank, you've bought several thousaath acres along the old logging trail west of town," the surveyor said when he finished reading the page.

Mr. Wagner nodded. He seemed quite pleased.

"It has come to my attention," Victoria continued, "that you have a good friend in the highway department."

He nodded, his eyes gleaming.

She thought she was going to cry. He so... innocent! Perhaps he was becoming senile, he didn't remember what he'd done. Maybe someone else was gulling him into this, and he wasn't even aware of it.

With an effort she pulled herself together. She duty to the town. She couldn't shirk it.

"The evidence indicates that the land purchase occurred after the deletion of the Paradise Lake road from the construction plan three years ago. Since then, the project has been tied up in the planning department-"

She swallowed hard. "That department is headed by the brother of your former fiancée."

Insight dawned on the faces of the other council members. They stared at Mr. Wagner, who smiled and nodded.

Victoir apressed a hand to her aching head. "I think, say anything else, you should have an attorney to advise you," she said, pity in her eyes as she looked at the old man who'd figured prominently in the town for fifty years.

"I didn't stop the road from going through," Mr. Wagner said. "In fact the idea to buy the land didn't occur until after I called to find out why the road had been delayed."

"Why was it delayed?" the surveyor broke in

:Construction problems. The engineers discovered that a huge clay deposit ran directly through the road bed, which had previously been thought to be solid rock. They've been studying the land for a way around it." "We know about the study. It's been going on forever," the other man on the council spoke up.

"What was your part in this? Did you think you could buy the land and hold out for a higher price when the problem was solved?" Victoria asked, bringing the conversation back on topic.

Mr. Wagner laughed. He shook his head. "I'm going to donate it to the state for the road."

She started at him in disbelief. "That land must have cost a million dollars" "More than that," he declared in a satisfied tone. "I bought enough to have a park on each side of it. I going to donate the extra to the county and the town. There's one section missing. Sally Winetski bet me to it i

She and her husband want to do that ranch thing have city kids work on it," he grumbled.

In the silence that followed this pronouncement, the attorney chuckled. In a wry voice, he asked, "Did you ever think of telling anyone what you were doing?" he asked.

"I told my attorney. It's all in my will in case I died before I could get it finished. After all, I am seventy-five," Mr. Wagner stated righteously.

All that worry and work for nothing! Victoria in -an exasperated breath. "Mr. Wagner, why didn't you tell the rest of us what was going on? Do you realize the citizens of this town have worried over that road for years?"

"I wanted to surprise you. Planned on having it to present to the town at the centennial doings but couldn't get that last tract of land."

"A surprise," she repeated, not sure whether to laugh or scream. Not that either would do a speck of good.

"It's my legacy," he explained defensively. "My fiancée was hit by lightning—before your time, it was—so I never had children to carry on my name. I have no family at all. I wanted something to go on after me. I thought...well, you might name the park after me.. my legacy to the future, you see."

She did. For the briefest second, she remembered holding a tiny baby in her arms—her own hope for the future.

Compassion brought the sting of tears to her eyes. "A splendid idea," she said huskily. "Why don't we meet with Sally and her husband tomorrow and see if we can work out something about the land you need?" she suggested. She studied a map of the area. "Actually, only need a small triangle along the creek to complete your plans, it seems to me."

"That's right."

"Well, that wraps it up, I think. I don't have any further questions. Shall we adjourn?"

She looked at the city attorney. He nodded. She looked at the other three council members. They nodded.

"This meeting is adjourned" she said.

The small conference room became as noisy as the playground right after school was out. Everyone had a host of questions to ask her and Mr. Wagner. By the time the room was clear, it was time to go to the store to help with the evening rush. She heard nothing of Jason for the remainder of the week. She went through the routine of ordering clothes, checking invoices and attending to her mayoral duties, but every nerve in her body hummed with impatience while she waited for his return.

First, she wanted to tell him about Mr. Wagner—that they'd been right about what he was doing but wrong about his motives.

The second item on her agenda involved them. She loved him. If he rejected her, if he refused to admit his love for her, then she would have to write him off and go on from there.

It would be a confrontation unlike any she'd ever faced, she realized, one that would affect her entire future.

"Hey, boss, I'm off," Terri said, sticking her head into the office. "The stock is straightened, the front door is locked, the burglar alarm set. Anything else?"

Victoria looked up from the catalog of fall clothes and smiled. "No, you may leave. Is tonight the night?"

The businesswomen's club was sponsoring a series of Saturday-night dances for the young people in town. The captain of the basketball team had invited Terri to go with him. The teenager had rhapsodized about it for three days.

"You bet! The outfit you helped me pick ought to knock his eyes out. I hope." With a cheerful giggle, she was off.

Oh, to be that young again.

Smiling and shaking her head, Victoria locked her desk. The week had been so busy, she'd hardly had time to eat, much less think about her dating life, or lack of one.

After leaving the empty store, she stood on the walk for a few seconds and looked at the happy scene in the window. Perhaps it was time to change things didn't work out between her and Jason, she'd to find a new dream.

First she had to find him. Apparently he had turned from his trek into the mountains. She'd spoken to his mother only that morning and asked about him. Her thought came to a screeching halt. Jason!

He was looking at her. When he realized she'd recognized him in his father's car, he nodded without. The light changed and he drove off.

Victoria stood as if rooted to the pavement. He was back. And it was obvious he meant to have nothing to do with her!

She drove home in a turmoil of conflicting thoughts. She was torn between never speaking to him again, pretending a cool indifference to him in the future or going to him and browbeating him into admitting he couldn't live without her.

By the time she reached her house, she was exhausted. Taking the cowardly way out, she telephoned his parents' home and asked to speak to him. His mother said, in a disapproving voice, that he was staying at the big house.

"You'd think he wasn't welcome in his own home, the way he acts," she complained.

Victoria was totally sympathetic to Myra. "Yes, one can't accuse Jason of clinging to his family,"

They chatted about the weather and the new storm that was blowing in before hanging up. Victoria heated a frozen dinner and settled before the TV to watch a KQED special on wild turkeys. It was an informative show. She didn't hear more than three words.

Since seeing Jason on the street and realizing he was avoiding her, the anger had seethed in her. It bubbled to the foreground of her mind as she sat alone in her house and listened to the soft patter of rain strike the windows.

The more she thought about it, the angrier she became.

Trying for calm, she carried her tray to the kitchen, threw out the remains of her dinner and put the dishes in the dishwasher. She returned to the living room. The silence of the house, the moan of the wind, the chatter of the rain on the tin roof were getting on her nerves.

Standing at the window, she stared at the lights of the town below her. Across the narrow valley, halfway up the far peak, the Clairmont Mansion stood sentinel on its own turret of land. She could hardly see the brick structure through the rain.

Was Jason up there alone?

She knew Cara and Adam had gone to visit Cara's mother and stepfather, and, since the mansion had only recently been opened as an inn, there were few guests.

A chill swept over her. She rubbed her arms to ward off the cold seeping through the window pane. She thought of Jason, alone on his side of the mountain. And was, alone on her side.

The decision leapt into her mind. Without time for reflection, she grabbed her purse and, way to her car, dug out the keys. In less than a minute she was off.

The drive up the winding road to the slippery from the rain. At one point the washed across the road in a miniature slide. Shej the wheel finnly and pressed on up the mountain.

What would the world be to me without you,

She had another question to go with that one. At the mansion she parked at the side of the circular drive and dashed to the front door. The chill mountain seemed to whip through her thin summer blouse when she paused on the steps. The birch the edge of the lawn whispered and laughed as mocked her hopes.

Fear gnawed at her. If Jason rejected her...

Clamping down on the useless conjecture, she opened the door and slipped inside. The house was eerily silent. A light fell across the hallway carpet from the open library door, there was no sound from within. Perhaps she should go to the kitchen and find Mrs. Groves. The housekeeper could tell her which room Jason using.

Her heart went into double-time as she walked the hall. The thick carpet runner muffled her footsteps. She paused at the open door of the library and inside.

Jason was there!

A low fire burned in the grate, but he wasn't sitting on the long, tavern sofa in front of it. Instead, he stood at one of the tall, narrow windows that gave a view of the hills beyond this one. He looked as cold and formidable as medieval fortress. Another shiver went through her.

The urge to flee and not force this issue tensed every muscle in her body. She'd never known herself to be such a coward.

Although she didn't move or make a sound, something must have alerted Jason. All at once his head s whipped around, and he stared at her without a flicker of emotion on his face.

"Hello, Jason," she said. She walked boldly into the is if her heart wasn't shaking like a birch leaf in a gale. "Victoria," he said, acknowledging her presence. He held brandy snifter in one hand, the other was in the pocket of his jeans. He looked fit and incredibly handsome

Like a breathing statue, she thought. His was a hard, remote comeliness, made only to look at but not to

Touch. He isn't like that, she protested. He's a man. Inside him beats a living heart. A closed-off, lonely heart, but a heart.

"May I come in?"

He looked surprised at the formal request. "Sure. Make yourself at home," With a wave of the brandy glass he indicated the cozy arrangement of sofa and easy chairs.

She came into the room. Another chill washed over

The storm has dropped the temperature to about fifty degrees," he said. "Would you like a brandy to warm you up?"

"No, thanks. The fire is fine." She chose to sit on broad hearth where she could warm her hands and him at the same time. The clock ticked the seconds away. "Are you the only guest in the house?" she finally,

"Yes." His smile was laced with a thin thread of sardonic humor. "The housekeeper is in the back somewhere. If you came to see her."

A tremor pulsed through her. "No. I wanted to talk to you." She stopped, unsure how to begin. It seemed harder somehow, now that she was here. "Jason, help me."

His eyebrows rose in surprise at her plea. He gave a short laugh. "How? I can't even help myself." He took a long drink of brandy and gazed out the window. She wasn't sure what he meant, but she thought it had to do with her, with them. "Last week, when we trapped in the car," she said in a rush.

He gave her a quick, harsh glance, then looked away. She waited but he said nothing.

Anger rose in her. "You're not going to make this easy, are you?"

"I've never found scenes easy.

She leapt to her feet. "I am not going to make a scene. I want to know what you meant when you said... you indicated the world wouldn't mean anything to you without me in it."

He became perfectly still. Then he shruggged. "I thought it was pretty obvious." "You love me," she said softly, relieved that he hadn't denied the feeling between them.

He laughed, an ironic sound that bruised her "Love? The word is too simple. You're a fact of my life?,like the beating of my heart, like the song in my soul when I see you, like the hunger that never lets up. I've wanted you from the moment I laid eyes on you. You belonged to my best friend, but I wanted you. Funny, huh?"

"No."

The sardonic smile left his face. "No," he agreed.

"I've been free for seven years, Jason. Why didn't you ever come to me during all that time?"

"You never knew I was alive, dear cousin-in-law. Until you needed a favor."

"I'm sorry for that. I was callous toward you," she admitted. "But you were remote with me. Until I went to you for that favor."

"Yeah, that was a mistake—"

"It wasn't." She went to him and laid her hand on his arm. "It opened my eyes. Oh, Jason, without that incident in your office... Would you have ever let me see the real man?"

He interrupted her. "You saw what you wanted to see. You think I'm like your husband. I'm not. I admired John. Hell, I loved him. But I'm not him."

"I know." She sighed and laid her hand against his shoulder. He stiffened under her touch. "I love you."

"For right now," he acknowledged. "But what happens when you wake up and see the truth?"

He drank the rest of the brandy, set the glass on the windowsill, then took her by the shoulders. "What happens when you realize you've made a terrible mistake? Don't forget. I've seen the disappointment in your eyes when you realized I wasn't the man you thought I was, the man you loved. If I'd been with you that night—" She laid her fingers over his mouth. "You couldn't have changed a thing. That fate wasn't yours to decide. You aren't God, Jason, only a man. The man I love."

He spun away, thrusting his hands into his pockets, his back to her.

"That was a long time ago, Jason. Let it go. I have."

She took a deep breath, like the night she'd gone to him and they'd nearly made love, she knew they right for each other, but she wouldn't beg. "I love you. I think you love me. If you reject our love, I'll walk out and bother you again. So tell me, Jason, what am I to?"

"Dammit," he muttered, sounding like a man end of his rope. "Can't we drop this?"

"Yes," she said. The sadness engulfed her night enclosed the valley. She forced a smile. "I'll go peacefully."

Everything in her told her this was wrong! Jason belonged together. But he wouldn't let that. She drew four deep breaths and fought the tears, then she walked to the door. There she paused unable to believe it was over before it ever be didn't speak or look at her.

"Goodbye, Jason. I wish you happiness." She ran down the hall toward the front door.

A hand closed over hers when she reached for the brass knob.

"Victoria," Jason said. He locked his arms and pulled her against him, her back to his chest. He pressed his face into her hair. They stood there while the grandfather clock ticked off a full minute, then another.

"Let me go," she whispered on a ragged plea.

"I can't," he muttered, pressing closer. "God help me but I can't."

She braced her hands against the solid oak fighting the longing that made her want to yield to his wild caresses along her body. "Please," she whimpered. The tears seeped along her face.

"Stay." His voice was hoarse, as if the words hurt.

"No" she denied the request. "I want more than a night's passion. One night isn't enough—" I know." He sounded so anguished, it caused fresh tears to form in her eyes.

"If I stay, then... then we marry and do all the things - married people do—quarrel, make love... have children."

She stated her position so there could be no doubt in his mind what she expected. To take less would be to demean their love.

His arms went rigid. He let her go. She turned to face him. The look on his face made her cry out. She pressed a hand to her mouth.

"You'd go through that again?" he asked in a barely voice. "Marriage... childbirth..."

She nodded. "I want a future, Jason. With you." The tension stretched between them like high-powered electric lines. She saw the doubts, the despair in his eyes. When we went fishing, my father said something,"

He began

"What?" she asked, hoping for a clue to his thoughts. He advised me to take the reality. He said that sometimes people see what they lost as some kind of shining example of perfect happiness, but that it's never real. He said to take the moment and don't worry about the past."

"And?"

Jason reached out a hand to her, then let it drop. "I'll take the reality. I've wanted you too much and too long not to take whatever you're offering.

"Love" she said without hesitation. "I'm offering you my love. I want yours in exchange. He shrugged and gave her a half smile. "You have it."

When she leaned into him, he closed his arms her and held her so gently she felt as fragile as a bubble

"Say it," she demanded. Her heart began to sing.

He gripped her tighter. "I love you/" he murmured.

She laughed and squeezed him as hard as possible." I love you, too. Oh, Jason, I love you madly. Don't realize that?"

He studied her rapturous face, "I always wondered how it would feel to be loved by you. Back when I first met you."

She heard the longing behind the lightly spoken words. She saw the darkness that lingered in his eyes.

"You're not the first man I ever loved—I can't give that to you—but you are first in my heart, Jason she explained softly. "You have been from that day in office. You always will be."

He swallowed hard. She waited anxiously, praying that he would see the truth. Then she saw the darkness begin to break up, to fade. A light gleamed in his eyes, fathoms deep. "You'd better tell me again," he said softly.

"I love you."

He caught her to him in a fierce hungry embrace settled against his heart, where she belonged, with relieved sigh.

"Kiss me, Jason. I've been so desperate for you."

When she tilted her face up, he took full advantage of the offer of her mouth. The kiss went on forever, they had to draw apart to breathe.

Lifting her, he walked back to the library. There, stopped by the sofa. He urged her to lie down, then slipped off her slippers. After adding another log to fire, he kicked off his shoes and joined her, his masculine body partially over hers.

"I'll take the reality," he murmured, nuzzling her throat. "After once knowing the feel of you against me, the dream is no longer enough. It doesn't fill the emptiness inside me."

"But I do?" She ran her hand over his shoulders and back, needing the physical reality of him as he needed her.

"Yes. If you ever leave..." He raised his head and looked at her.

"I won't," she vowed. She touched his face tenderly. It would take time, but she'd overcome his doubts. She'd show him how good life could be. Love would win...but it would take time.

She caressed his brow, his nose, his chin. "I hate the woman who hurt you."

He gave her an odd look, a trace of his old sardonic self returning to his smile.

"No one hurt me," he said, attacking her neck with ferocious kisses.

"Your first love did," she explained, sighing in ecstasy when he stroked a long path along her side, then cupped her breast. "I hate her for hurting you."

He caught her hand and kissed the palm, then placed it over his heart. "You can't hate her," he said gruffly. "It was you. It was always you."

"I know," she said. "I figured that out a while ago. I still hate it that you were hurt. Why did you love me? I never gave you a reason—"

He touched her lips. "From the first, there was only you. I don't know why. It just was." His eyes went dark again.

"Oh, love," she whispered, filled with remorse.

Jason stopped her with a kiss. The hunger grew in him, and this time he couldn't fight it. Whatever she felt, it didn't matter. He would marry her. He'd be the reality of life for her just as she would be the center of existence for him.

Sometimes, when life got tough, perhaps she would think of her first love and she'd wonder, for an instant how things might have been. But when she needed reassurance, when she needed loving, he'd be there for her. He'd accept that.

Pressing his face against her throat, *he* held her tightly.

"Jason?"

"Yes, darling." The endearment sounded right.

"Were you going to leave town without seeing me?"

He lifted his head, looked into her eyes and saw it was important to her. Slowly he shook his head. "I tried. An hour ago, I got as far as Vista Point, and it was like an invisible wall holding me back. I couldn't go on. I turned around."

"Good," she said, satisfaction in the word.

It seemed time for a lighter note. "There were a couple of things I was trying to work out." He groaned when she slid her hands under his shirt and caressed his bare flesh.

"Such as?"

He slipped his hand between them and caressed her, thinking of how sexy she looked when she was pregnant.

"I was working out this big problem," he murmurs. "Like—how many children should we have?" It was't exactly the truth, but he realized it was what she needed to hear.

With a brilliant smile, she demanded, "How many c-o

"A half dozen sounds nice." He laughed as her e flew open. He kissed them closed. "I'll settle for ever many you want to give me." He paused, then added,

"Shall we live here until your term is finished? Let's keep this house for vacations... and for our retirement home."

She pressed her face against him. "Sounds perfect/'

It came to him then that she was truly his and that the future belonged to them. It made him feel hum-ble... and blessed.

A half dozen kids? Well, two or three, anyway.

It was a thought. A happy thought.
