



3 *in* 1

Millionaire: Needed
for One Month

Maureen Child
Christie Ridgway
Susan Crosby



By Request

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Susan Crosby
Christie Ridgway
Millionaire: Needed for One
Month: Thirty Day Affair

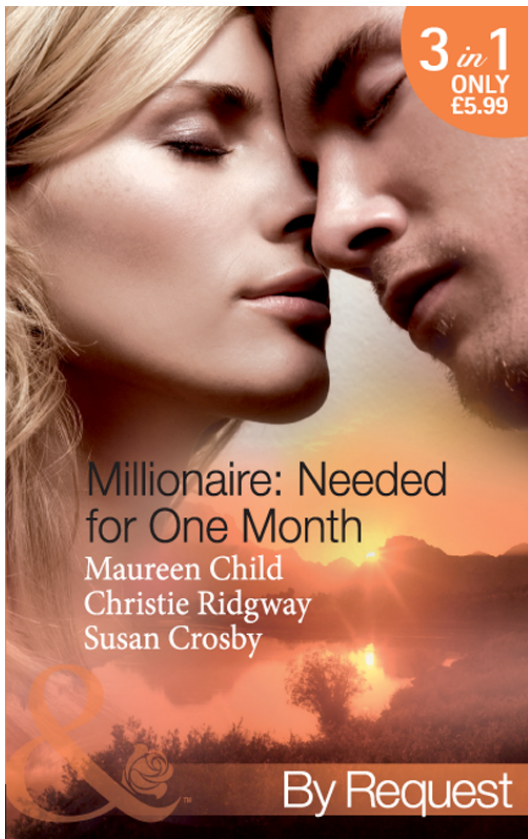
Аннотация

Thirty Day Affair When grumpy, rich and gorgeous Nathan Barrister arrives at the Lake Tahoe lodge, his one-month commitment feels like solitary confinement — until a snowstorm traps him with lovely Keira Sanders. Then an affair seems like just the thing to pass the time...if Keira agrees to his no-ties arrangement. His Forbidden Fiancée In the years since his identical twin had stolen the family company, Luke had devoted himself to two things: success and revenge. Suddenly, his brother's fiancée, Lauren Conover, appeared and offered Luke the opportunity to achieve both. Lauren believed Luke was his twin. But in Luke's plan for payback, he hadn't counted on wanting to keep Lauren for himself... Bound by the BabyButtoned-up banker Devlin Campbell prided himself on his control. That one passionate night in Atlantic City had been an aberration, but one with lasting consequences: his mystery woman was pregnant. Now that he'd found her, Dev approached Nicole with a decent proposal. Would their

ardent beginning allow these virtual strangers to forge a bond that was more than skin deep?

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Six millionaires each have to spend one month at a friend's Lake Tahoe lodge. Here's what happened to the first three ...

Millionaire: Needed for One Month

Three powerful romances from three favourite Mills & Boon authors

**Millionaire:
Needed for One
Month
Thirty Day Affair
His Forbidden Fiancée
Bound By The Baby
Maureen Child
Christie Ridgway
Susan Crosby**



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Thirty Day Affair

Maureen Child

MAUREEN CHILD is a California native who loves to travel. Every chance they get, she and her husband are taking off on another research trip. The author of more than sixty books, Maureen loves a happy ending and still swears that she has the best job in the world. She lives in Southern California with her husband, two children, and a golden retriever with delusions of grandeur. You can contact Maureen via her website: www.maureenchild.com.

To Christie Ridgway, Susan Crosby, Liz Bevarly, Anna DePalo and Susan Mallery

One

“Hunter,” Nathan Barrister muttered as he stared at the mammoth wood-and-stone mansion on the shores of Lake Tahoe, “if you were here right now, I’d kill you for this.”

Of course, Hunter Palmer wasn’t there and Nathan couldn’t kill the man who had once been his first—and best—friend, because he was already dead.

The ice around Nathan’s heart thickened a little at the thought, but he used his long years of practice to ignore that tightening twinge. Regrets were a waste of time.

“As big a waste as the next month is going to be.” He climbed out of his rental car and stepped into a mound of slush he hadn’t even noticed.

With a disgusted sigh, he kicked the dirty snow off the polished toe of his shoe and told himself he should have listened to the clerk at the rental agency. She had tried to tell him that renting a four-wheel-drive car would make more sense than the sports car he preferred.

But who the hell expected snow in March for God’s sake?

A wry grin curved his mouth briefly. *He* should have expected it. He’d grown up back east and should have remembered that snow could hit anytime, anywhere. Especially this high up in the mountains. But he’d spent so much time trying to forget his past, was it really surprising that even the *weather* had the ability to

sneak up on him?

The air was cold and clean, and the sky was so blue it made his eyes ache. A sharp wind whipped through the surrounding pine trees, rustling the needles and sending patches of snow falling to the ground with muffled *plops*.

Nathan shivered and shrugged deeper into his brown leather jacket. He didn't want to be here at all, let alone for a solid month. He never stayed *anywhere* for more than a few days at a stretch. And being here made him think about things he hadn't allowed himself to remember in years.

Reluctantly, he headed for the front of the house, leaving his bags in the car for the moment. The crunch of his shoes on the ground was the only sound, as if the world were holding its breath. Great. Fifteen minutes here and his brain was already going off on tangents.

He shouldn't be here. He should still be in Tahiti at his family's hotel, going over the books, settling disputes, looking into expansion. And next month, he'd be in Barbados for a week and then Jamaica. Nathan moved fast, never giving himself a chance to settle. Never risking more than a few days in any one place.

Until now.

And if there had been any way at all of getting out of this, Nathan would have taken it. God knows, he'd tried to find a loophole in his friend's will. Something that would have allowed him to keep both his own sense of duty in place and his sanity

intact. But even the Barrister family lawyers had assured him that the will was sealed nice and tight. Hunter Palmer had made sure that his friends would have no choice but to honor his wishes.

“You're enjoying this, aren't you?” Nathan whispered to his long-dead friend. And when the wind rattled the pine trees, damned if it didn't sound like laughter.

“Fine. I'm here. And I'll try to make the whole month,” he muttered. Once he'd completed Hunter's last request, he hoped to hell his old friend would stop haunting his nightmares.

A long white envelope with his name scrawled across it was stuck to the heavy wood front door. Nathan took the short flight of snow-dusted wooden steps, stopped on the porch and tore the taped envelope free. Opening it, he found a key dangling from an ornate keychain and a single sheet of paper.

Hi, I'm your housekeeper, Meri. I'm very busy, so I'm not here at the moment, and chances are you won't be seeing me during your stay. But here's the key to the house. The kitchen is stocked and the town of Hunter's Landing is only twenty minutes away if you need anything else. I hope you and the others to follow enjoy your time here.

Without thinking, he crumpled the short note in his right hand and squeezed it hard.

The others.

In a flash of memory, Nathan went back ten years. Back to a time when he and his friends had called themselves the Seven Samurai. Foolish. But then, they'd been seniors at Harvard.

They'd done four hard years together and come out the other side closer than brothers. They'd had their lives laying out in front of them like golden roads to success. He remembered the raucous evening with just a few too many beers when they'd vowed to build a house together and reunite in ten years. They'd each spend a month there and then gather in the seventh month to toast their inevitable achievements.

Yes, it was all supposed to work out that way. And then ...

Nathan shook his head and let the past slide away. Jamming the key into the lock, he opened the door, stepped inside and stopped just inside the foyer. From there, he could see into a great room, with gleaming wood walls, a huge stone fireplace with a fire already ablaze in the hearth and lots of plush, comfortable-looking furniture.

As jail cells went, it was better than most, he supposed. He thought of the housekeeper and the nearby town and hoped to hell he wouldn't be bothered by a lot of people. Bad enough he was stuck here. He didn't need company on top of it.

He wasn't here to make friends. He was here to honor a friend he'd lost long ago.

An hour later, Keira Sanders grabbed the oversized basket off the passenger seat, leaped down from the driver's seat of her truck and slammed the door. Her boots slid around on the slushy ground but she dug in her heels and steadied herself. All she needed was to meet the first of Hunter Palmer's houseguests with dirty snow on her butt.

“Great first impression that would make,” she murmured as she looked the house over.

It shone like a jewel in the gathering night. Light spilled from the tall windows to fall on the ground in golden spears. Smoke lifted from the stone chimney and twisted in the icy wind coming off the lake. Snow hugged the slanted roof and clung to the pines and aspens crowding the front yard. Winter tended to stick around this high up on the mountain, and she wouldn't have had it any other way.

There was something about the cold and the quiet hush of snow that had always felt ... magical to Keira. In fact, at the moment, she'd like to be back in her cozy place in Hunter's Landing, sitting beside her own fire, with a glass of white wine and a good book.

Instead, she was here to greet the first of six men who would be spending thirty days each in the lakeside mansion. Nerves jumped in the pit of her stomach but Keira fought them down. This was too important—to the town of Hunter's Landing and to her, personally.

Just two weeks ago, she'd received a very legal letter from the estate of a man named Hunter Palmer. In the letter, the late Mr. Palmer's attorney had explained the unusual bequest.

Over the next six months, six different men would be arriving in the town of Hunter's Landing, to spend thirty days in this gorgeous mansion. If each of the men stayed for the entire month, at the end of the six-month period twenty million dollars would

be donated to charity—a large chunk of which would belong to Hunter's Landing—and the house itself would be donated to the town as a vacation home for recovering cancer patients.

Keira took another deep breath to settle the last of her nerves. As the mayor of Hunter's Landing, it was her job to make sure each of the six men held to the stipulations of Hunter Palmer's will. She couldn't afford for her small town to miss out on a windfall that would allow them to have a spanking-new clinic and a new jail and courthouse and ...

Her head was spinning as she smiled to herself. She tightened her grip on the basket and checked to make sure the lid was latched down. Tugging at the lapels of her black jacket, she straightened her shoulders, plastered a smile on her face and prepared to meet the first of the men who could mean so much to Hunter's Landing.

She was good with people. Always had been. And now, with so much riding on the next six months, she was more determined than ever that everything go right. Not only would she ensure that each of the six men would stay his entire thirty days at the lakeside lodge, she was going to make sure they knew how much this all meant to her hometown.

With that thought firmly in mind, she gulped a deep breath of frosty air and headed for the front door. Her boots crunched in the snow but, when she hit a patch of ice, her feet slid wildly. “Oh, no.”

Eyes wide, she held tightly to the basket and swung her arms

in a desperate attempt to regain her balance. But her feet couldn't find purchase and as she tipped and swayed, she knew she was going to lose both her balance and her dignity.

“Ow!” she shouted when she hit the ground, landing so hard on her butt that her teeth rattled. The basket tipped to one side and she groaned, hoping that the contents were tightly sealed. “Well, isn't this perfect.”

The front door flew open and light spilled over her. She blinked up at the man silhouetted in the doorway. Oh, man. This so wasn't how she'd planned to meet Nathan Barrister.

“Who're you?” he demanded, making no move to come down the steps to help her up.

“I'm fine, thanks for your concern,” she said, wincing as icy, wet cold seeped through the seat of her jeans. So much for first impressions. Maybe she should crawl back to her truck and start all over.

“If you're thinking of suing, you should know I don't own this property,” he said.

“Wow.” For a moment, Keira forgot all about getting up—forgot all about the fact that this man and five others just like him could mean a windfall for Hunter's Landing—and just sat there, staring at him in amazement. “You're really a jerk, aren't you?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Did I say that out loud?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry.” And she was. Sort of. For heaven's sake, none of this

was going as planned.

“Are you injured?”

“Only my pride,” she admitted, though her behind hurt like hell and the melting ice beneath her wasn't helping the situation any. Still, might as well make the best of the situation. She raised one hand and waved it. “A little help here?”

He muttered something she didn't catch and, considering his attitude so far, she considered that a good thing. But he came down the steps carefully, grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet in one quick motion.

His fingers on hers felt warm and strong and ... good. Okay, she hadn't expected that. He dropped her hand as if he'd been burned, and she wondered if he'd felt that small zap of something hot and interesting when they touched.

She brushed off the seat of her pants while she looked up at him. For some reason she'd expected him to be an older man. But he wasn't. Tall and lean, he had broad shoulders, a narrow waist and long legs. Considering how easily he'd plucked her off the ice, he was strong, too. Not that she was heavy or anything, but she certainly wasn't one of those stick-figure types of women that were so popular these days.

Ordinarily, a man like him was more than enough to make her heart go pitty-pat. However, the scowl on his truly gorgeous face was enough to make even Keira rethink her attraction. His black hair was stylishly cut to just above his collar. His blue eyes were narrowed on her suspiciously, and his hard jaw was clenched.

And his full mouth was tightened into a grim slash across his face, letting her know without a doubt just how welcome she wasn't.

“Wow. Are you really in a bad mood or is it just me?”

He blew out a breath. “Whoever you are,” he said, his voice a low rumble that seemed to dip all the way inside her to start up a slow fire, “I didn't invite you here. And I'm not interested in meeting my neighbors.”

“Good,” Keira said, grinning at his obvious irritation, “because you don't have any. The nearest house on the lake is a couple miles north.”

He frowned at her. “Then who are you?”

“Keira Sanders,” she said, holding out one hand and leaving it there until rudimentary good manners forced him to take it in his.

Again, there was the nice little buzz of connection when his skin met hers. Did he feel it? If so, he wasn't real pleased about it. Keira, on the other hand, was enjoying the sensation. It had been a really long time since she'd felt the slightest attraction for anyone. Purposely. “Been there, done that” sort of summed up her feelings about romance.

But she had to admit, it was really nice to feel that sizzle.

Still shaking his hand, she smiled up into his scowl. Gorgeous, but crabby. Well, she'd dealt with irritable people before, and there was just no way she was going to let his bad attitude affect Hunter's Landing's chances at getting money that would be a godsend to the small town. “I'm the mayor of Hunter's Landing and I'm here to welcome you.”

“That's not necessary,” he said and dropped her hand.

“It's our pleasure,” she said, hanging on to her good cheer by her fingernails as she turned to pluck the basket out of the snow. “And,” she continued as she walked past him, headed toward the front door, “I've brought you a welcome basket, courtesy of the Hunter's Landing Chamber of Commerce.”

“If you don't mind,” he countered, following after her quickly.

“Not at all,” Keira said, walking into the house and stopping just inside the foyer. “I confess, I've been dying to see the inside of this place ever since they started building it last year.”

It took a moment or two, but she heard him come in behind her and close the door with an exasperated sigh. He was not just crabby, but very crabby, apparently.

But that was okay. She'd win him over. She had to. She had to make sure that he and the five others who would come after him here would complete the terms of the will that would so benefit her hometown.

“Ms. Sanders ...”

“Call me Keira,” she said and turned to give him a quick glance and smile.

“Fine. Keira.” He shoved both hands into the pockets of his slacks and rocked back on his heels.

He *really* didn't want her there.

“Don't worry,” she said, stepping through the arched doorway into the great room, “I won't stay long. I only wanted to welcome you, let you know that you're not alone here.”

"I prefer alone," he said flatly and she stopped halfway across the room and turned to look at him, still standing in the foyer.

"Now, why is that?" she wondered aloud.

His features tightened even further, until he looked as though he'd been carved from stone. Not really a people person, Keira decided, then shrugged.

"Anyway," she said loudly, setting the basket down atop a hand-carved coffee table that probably cost more than her monthly house payment. "I've got a few goodies here to make your stay more comfortable."

"I'm sure I'll be fine."

She ignored him and started rooting through the basket, pulling items out, one after the other, with a brief description of each. "Here's a certificate good for free coffee and freshly made doughnuts every morning at the diner. And a jar of homemade jam—Margie Fontenot, the late mayor's widow, makes the best jam in the state. A bottle of wine from Stan's Liquor Stop, fresh bread from the bakery, a bag of ground Jamaican coffee beans—" she stopped to sniff the bag and sighed at the aroma, then continued "—there's a jar filled with the best marinara you've ever tasted, from Clearwater's restaurant—you really should get over there for dinner while you're here. The outside dining area overlooks the lake and there's no better place to catch a gorgeous sunset—"

"Ms. Sanders ..."

"Keira," she reminded him.

“Keira, then. If you don't mind—”

“And,” she went on as if he hadn't spoken, “there are a few more goodies in here, but I'll let you discover them on your own.”

“Thank you.”

“Now,” she said, turning to face him from across the room, “is there anything else I can do to help make your stay more interesting?”

“Leave?” he asked.

Keira shook her head at him, as if she were sorely disappointed. Wandering the great room, she ran her fingers along the deeply carved mantel over the fireplace and, just for a second or two, enjoyed the heat pouring from the hearth. Her gaze swept the rest of the room and lingered on the view of the lake out of the floor-to-ceiling windows. The moon was just beginning its climb across the sky, and the water shimmered with a breath of light as if waiting for the show to start.

She gave herself a moment or two to calm the flash of irritation inside her. Wouldn't do to insult the man whose very presence could mean so much to her town. But at the same time, she wondered why he was being so nasty. By the time she'd centered herself and turned her gaze back to him, *still* standing in the foyer as if he could force her to leave by simply not welcoming her in, she was wondering something else.

Why did he intrigue her so much when his rudeness should have put her off immediately?

And how was she going to make this man connect with

Hunter's Landing and make a commitment to see this through when he so obviously wanted nothing to do with her or the town?

Two

Nathan had had enough.

He'd been at the lakeside mansion for a little over an hour and already he had an uninvited guest.

Plus, Keira Sanders seemed to be oblivious to insults and clearly didn't care that she was very obviously not wanted.

His gaze swept her up and down more thoroughly than he had when he'd first found her sitting in the snow. Her jeans were faded and hugged her long legs like a second skin. Her long-sleeved black sweater came down to her thighs and, ridiculously enough, made her figure look more exposed than hidden. Maybe it was the way the soft-looking fabric clung to her curves, but whatever the reason, Nathan could appreciate the view even while wishing she were anywhere but there.

Her shoulder-length, reddish-blond hair hung loose in waves that seemed to dance around her animated face whenever she moved—which was often. He'd never seen a more mobile woman. It was as if she couldn't bear standing still. She was wandering the great room, her fingers touching, stroking, everything as she passed and he couldn't help wondering what those fingers would feel like touching *him*.

Yet as soon as that thought hit his clearly fevered brain, he knew he had to get her the hell out of the house. He wasn't interested in a monthlong fling. That was more commitment than

he'd given to any woman he'd known in the last ten years.

Best to just get her out of the house now. And if that meant being even ruder than he had been already, fine.

“Thank you for coming,” he said, waiting until she gave up examining the bookshelves to look at him again, “but if you don't mind, I'd like you to leave.”

There. A man couldn't be any more plainspoken than that.

“Wow,” she said softly, her green eyes sparkling in reflected light from the fire, “nobody ever taught you how to treat your guests?”

He swallowed hard and pushed away the thought of just how horrified his grandmother would have been at his blatant rudeness. “You're not a guest,” he said tightly, reminding her as well as himself. “You're an intruder.”

She actually laughed at him. “But I'm an intruder who brought you gifts!”

Nathan finally left the foyer, since it seemed clear that standing beside the door wasn't going to be enough to convince her to step through it. He'd never met anyone else quite like her. She seemed impervious to rudeness, just rolling right along with a cheerful attitude that must, he thought, really annoy the hell out of people who knew her well.

“Look,” Nathan said, walking across the polished floor toward her. “I've tried to be polite.”

She blinked at him and her smile widened. “Really? *That* was trying?”

Frowning, he ignored the jab and said, "I appreciate the gifts. Thank you for taking the time to come out here. But I would really prefer to be *alone*."

"Oh, I'm sure you want to settle in," she said, waving one hand at him, blithely ignoring his attempt to get rid of her. "And I won't stay much longer, I swear."

Hope to cling to.

"I only wanted to let you know that Hunter's Landing is ready to help you and the other men who will be staying here in any way we can." She wandered to the big-screen TV, picked up the remote and studied it for a second or two.

If she turned the damn thing on, she might never leave. Nathan walked to her side, took the remote and set it down on a nearby table. She shrugged, walked to the windows overlooking the lake and stood staring through the glass as if mesmerized.

He watched her and couldn't help feeling a little mesmerized himself. The fall of her hair on her shoulders. The curve of her behind. The defiant tilt to her chin. She turned to look at him and her wide, shining eyes fixed on him with a slam of power he didn't want to think about.

"You'll only be here a month," she said quietly, "and maybe you don't realize just how important your stay and the others' are to Hunter's Landing."

Nathan sighed and resigned himself to at least a few more minutes of conversation. It seemed plain that Keira Sanders wasn't going to leave until she was good and ready. "I know about

what your town stands to inherit from the estate.”

“But you can't know what it means to us,” she insisted, half turning to lean one shoulder against the cold glass. “With that influx of cash, we can build a new courthouse, expand our clinic ...” Her voice trailed off and she smiled as if already seeing the changes that would happen to her town.

“And speaking of the clinic,” she said quickly, straightening up and walking toward him. “I want to invite you to the town potluck dinner tomorrow night. We're raising money to get the expansion started and—” “But you'll have the inheritance—” “Can't count on that until it's reality, can we?” she pointed out, neatly cutting him off before he could finish his sentence. “Anyway, our clinic is good, but it's not nearly big enough. Of course, there's a terrific hospital in Lake Tahoe, but that's a long drive, especially in the winter snow. We need to be able to take care of our own citizens right here and, with the potluck dinner, all the money collected will go directly into the fund for ...”

She was talking so fast Nathan's ears were buzzing. He had no interest in going to her community fundraiser and he suspected that she didn't really want him there, either. What she wanted was a donation. Wasn't that what everyone wanted from him in the end?

With the Barrister family fortune behind him, Nathan had long ago accepted that he was seen first as a bankbook and second as a man. Which suited him fine. He didn't want friends. Didn't want a lover or a wife. What he wanted was to be left

alone.

And he suddenly knew just the way to hurry Keira Sanders out the door: Give her what she wanted. What she'd really come for. While she continued to talk in nearly a stream of consciousness while hardly pausing for breath, he stalked across the room to where he'd dropped his briefcase on one of the overstuffed, burgundy leather chairs. Quickly, he opened it, grabbed his black leather checkbook and flicked his ballpoint pen.

Shaking his head, he wrote a check made out to Hunter's Landing, and then tore it from the pad and walked back to where Keira was still smiling and outlining the plans she had for her little town.

“So you see, it would be a great chance for you to meet everyone in town. Nice for you to see the place you'll be living for the next month and maybe it will help you see how important it is to us that you and your friends complete the stipulations of Mr. Palmer's will.” She finally took a breath. “If it's okay with you, I'll pick you up tomorrow about six and drive you to the potluck myself. I can take you on a tour of the lake if you'd like too and—”

“Please,” Nathan said, interrupting her when it became obvious it would be the only way to keep her quiet. He held out the check and waited until she'd taken it, a question in her beautiful eyes. “Accept this contribution to your clinic fund.”

“Oh,” she said, “that's very generous of you but—” She stopped, glanced down at the check and Nathan actually *saw* all

the blood drain from her face. She went absolutely white and her hand holding the check trembled. “I ... I ... you ...”

Her mouth opened and closed, she gulped noisily and wheezed in a breath. “Oh. My. God.”

“Are you all right?” Nathan reached for her, grabbed her upper arm and felt the tremors that were racing through her body.

She raised her gaze to his, waved the check in a tight fist and swallowed hard a time or two before trying to speak. Apparently, he'd finally found the way to make her speechless.

“Are you *serious* about this?”

“The check?”

“The *amount*,” she said harshly, then added, “I've got to sit down.”

And she did.

Right there on the floor.

She pulled her arm free of his grasp and folded up on herself. Leaning her head back against the closest chair, she looked up at him in stunned amazement. “I can't believe you—”

“It's just a donation,” he said.

“*Of five hundred thousand dollars*,” she pointed out.

“If you don't want it ...”

“Oh, no!” She folded the check and stretched out her right leg so she could stuff it into her jeans pocket. Then she patted it carefully and gave him a grin. “We want it. And we thank you. I mean, the whole *town* is going to want to thank you. This is just wonderful. Completely generous. I don't know what to say,

really—”

“And yet you keep trying,” Nathan said, feeling oddly embarrassed the longer she went on about a simple donation.

“Wow. My head's still spinning. In a good way,” she insisted, then raised one hand toward him. “A little help here?”

Nathan sighed, reached for her hand and, in one quick move, pulled her to her feet. She flew off the floor and slammed into his chest with a *whoosh* of air pushed from her lungs. His hands dropped to her waist to steady her and, for a quick moment, he considered kissing her.

Which surprised the hell out of him.

Keira Sanders wasn't the kind of woman who usually attracted him. For one, she was too damn talkative. He liked a woman who appreciated a good silence. And she was short. He liked tall women. And he preferred brunettes. And blue eyes.

Yet, as she looked at him, her green eyes seemed to pull at him, drawing him in, tugging him closer than he wanted to be.

With her breasts smashed up against his broad chest, Keira felt a rush of something hot and needy and completely unexpected. The man was as closed-off as a deadend road, and yet there was something about him that made her want to reach up, wrap her arms around his neck and pull his head down for a long, lingering kiss.

And it *wasn't* the huge check that was sitting in her pocket like a red-hot coal.

“You're a very surprising man,” she finally said when she was

pretty sure she could speak without her voice breaking.

His hands dropped from her waist and he stepped back so quickly that her shaky balance made her wobble unsteadily before she found stability again.

“It's just a check.”

“It's more than that,” she assured him. God, she couldn't wait to show his donation to the town council. Eva Callahan would probably keel over in a dead faint. “You have no idea what this means to our town.”

“You're welcome,” he said tightly. “Now, if you don't mind, I have some work I have to get to.”

“No you don't,” she said, smiling.

“I'm sorry?”

“You don't have any work,” Keira said, tipping her head to one side to study him, as if getting a different perspective might help understand why such a deliberately solitary man could give away so much money without even pausing to think about it. “You just want me to go.”

“Yes.” His frown deepened. “I believe I already mentioned that.”

“So you did.” She patted the check in her pocket, swung her hair back from her face and gave him a smile. “And I'm going to oblige you.”

A flicker of something like acceptance shot across his eyes, and Keira wondered about that for a second or two. But then his features evened out into a mask of granite that no amount of

staring at would ever decipher.

“Okay then,” she said, starting for the front door, only half surprised when he made no move to follow her. He'd seemed so anxious to get rid of her, she'd just assumed that he'd show her out once he had the chance. But when she turned to glance back at him, he was standing where she'd left him.

Alone, in front of the vast windows overlooking the lake. Behind him, the water silvered under the rising moon and the star-swept sky seemed to stretch on forever. Something inside her wanted to go back to him. To somehow make him less *solitary*.

But she knew he wouldn't welcome it.

For whatever reason, Nathan Barrister had become a man so used to solitude he didn't want or expect anything to change.

Well, Keira wasn't going to allow him to get away with an anonymous donation. She was going to make sure the town got the chance to thank him properly for what he had done for them with a click of a pen.

Whether he liked it or not, Keira was going to drag Nathan into the heart of Hunter's Landing.

By the next evening, Keira was running on adrenaline. She'd hardly been able to sleep the night before; memories of Nathan Barrister and the feel of his hands on her had kept her tossing and turning through some pretty detailed fantasies that kept playing through her mind.

Ridiculous, really. She knew the man would be here for only a month. She knew he wasn't interested—he'd made *that* plain

enough every time he looked at her. But, for some reason, her body hadn't gotten the message.

She felt hot and itchy and ... way more needy than she'd like to admit.

Apparently it had been way too long since she'd had a man in her life. But then, the last man she'd been interested in had made such a mess of her world that she'd pretty much sworn off the Y chromosome.

Then grumpy, rich and gorgeous Nathan Barrister, rolled into her life and made her start rethinking a few things. Not a good idea.

She spun her straw through her glass of iced tea and watched idly as ice cubes rattled against the sides of the glass. It felt good to sit down. She'd been running all day, first calling an emergency meeting of the town council so she could tell them about Nathan's donation. And, she smiled as she remembered, Eva Callahan had behaved as expected, slumping into a chair and waving a stack of papers at her face to stave off a faint.

Once the meeting was over she'd had to take care of a few other things, like depositing that check, talking to the contractor about the renovations to the clinic, settling a parking dispute between Harry's Hardware and Frannie's Fabrics and finally, coming here to the Lakeside Diner.

Being mayor of a small town was exhausting, and it was really hardly more than an honorary office. Her duties consisted mainly of presiding over town council meetings once a month, playing

referee to adults old enough to solve their own problems and trying to raise money for civic projects. And yet, she seemed to always be busy. She didn't have a clue how the mayors of big cities managed to have a life at all.

But then, Keira thought, isn't that the way she wanted it? Keeping busy gave her too little time to think about how her life had turned out so differently from what she'd expected. She picked a French fry off her plate and popped it into her mouth. Chewing, she glanced around the crowded diner and took a deep breath. Here, no matter what else was going on in her life, Keira could find comfort.

The Lakeside Diner was a tiny coffee shop and more or less a touchstone in Keira's life, the one constant she'd always been able to count on. Her parents had owned and operated the diner before her and she herself had started working here, clearing tables, when she was twelve.

Then, when her parents died, Keira had taken over, because there was her younger sister, Kelly, to provide for. Now, she had a manager to take care of the day-to-day running of the diner, but when she needed a place to sit and recharge, she always came here.

The red Naugahyde booths were familiar, as was the gleaming wood counter and the glass covered cake and pie dishes, the records in the jukebox her father had loved hadn't been changed in twenty years. Memories crowded thick in this diner. She closed her eyes and could almost see her dad behind the stove,

grinning out at her mom running the cash register.

This diner—like Hunter's Landing—was *home*.

“Hey, Keira. Can I see it?”

She opened her eyes, startled as an older woman slid onto the bench seat opposite her. Sallye Carberry grinned, and held out one hand dotted with silver rings.

“See what?” Keira asked.

“The check, of course,” Sallye prompted. “Everyone in town is talking about it. Margie Fontenot told me that she'd never seen anything quite so pretty as all those zeros. I just wanted an up close peek at it.”

“Sorry, Sallye,” Keira said, taking a sip of her tea. “Already deposited it.”

“Well, darn.” The older woman slumped back against the seat and huffed out a disappointed breath that waded the curl of bangs on her forehead. “That's a bummer.”

Keira laughed.

Sallye waved one beringed hand. “That's okay, I'll settle for meeting the man himself. I hear he's a real looker. He *is* coming to the potluck so we can all get a look at him—I mean thank him—*isn't he?*”

There was the question.

She knew damn well Nathan wouldn't want anything to do with the town or their potluck dinner. She knew he didn't want their thanks and was pretty sure he wouldn't want to see her again any time soon. So anyone with a grain of sense would keep her

distance, right?

The last thing she should do was go back to the lakeside mansion to see a man who wanted nothing to do with her.

And yet ...

Keira checked her silver wristwatch, saw she had a couple of hours until six and took one last sip of her tea. Sliding from the booth, she looked down at her late mother's best friend and nodded. "He'll be there," she said firmly.

Three

Nathan felt like a prisoner.

And damn it, he shouldn't.

He *preferred* being alone.

But this kind of alone was too damned quiet.

He stepped out onto the deck overlooking Lake Tahoe and let the cold wind buffet him. His hair lifted in the icy breeze, and he narrowed his eyes as he stared out over a snowy landscape. Silence pounded at him. Even the soft sigh of the lake water slapping against the deck pilings seemed overly loud in the eerie stillness.

The problem was, Nathan thought, he wasn't used to this kind of alone. Other people considered him a recluse but, even in his insular world, there was more ... interaction.

He traveled constantly, moving from one of his family's hotels to the next. And on those trips he dealt with room service personnel, hotel managers, maids, waiters, the occasional guest. No matter how he tried to avoid contact with people, there were always some who he was forced to speak to.

Until now.

The plain truth was he hated being completely alone even more than he hated being in a crowd.

His fists tightened on the varnished wood railing until he wouldn't have been surprised to see the imprint of his fingers

digging into the wood. He was used to people jumping when he spoke. To his employees practically doing backflips to accommodate his wishes. He liked dropping in on his favorite casino in Monte Carlo and spending the night with whatever blonde, brunette or redhead was the most convenient. He liked the sounds of champagne bottles popping and crystal clinking, and the muted sound of sophisticated laughter. He was accustomed to picking up a phone and ordering a meal. To calling his pilot to get his jet ready to leave at a moment's notice.

Yet now he knew he couldn't go anywhere.

And that was the real irritant chewing at him. Nathan hadn't stayed in any one place for more than three or four days since he was a kid. Which was exactly how he wanted it. Knowing that he was *trapped* on top of this damned mountain for a damned *month* was enough to make him want to call his pilot now.

Why he didn't was a mystery to him.

"Hunter, you really owe me big time," he said and didn't know whether to look toward heaven or hell as he uttered the words.

Hunter Palmer had been a good guy, but reaching out from beyond the grave to put Nathan through this should have earned him a seat in hell.

"Why did I come here in the first place?" he whispered, asking himself the question and knowing he didn't have an answer.

Old loyalties was not a good enough reason.

It has been ten years since Hunter had died. Ten years since Nathan had even thought of those days, of the friend he'd lost

too young. Of the five others who had been such a huge part of his life. He'd moved on. Built his world just the way he wanted it and didn't give a damn what anyone else had to say about it. That pledge the Samurai had made to one another? It seemed to come from another lifetime.

He thought briefly of the framed photos of the Seven Samurai, as they'd called themselves back then, hanging here in the upstairs hall. Every time he passed them, he deliberately looked away. Studying the past was for archaeologists. Not barristers. He didn't owe Hunter or any of the others anything. College friendships were routinely left behind as life continued on. So why in hell was he here?

A bird skimmed the water's surface, its wings stretched wide, its shadow moving on the lake as if it had a life of its own. "And even the damn bird is freer than I am."

Pushing away from the rail, he turned his back on the expansive view of nature's beauty and walked back into what he was already considering his cell.

He glanced at the television, then rejected the idea of turning it on. There were plenty of books to read, and even a state-of-the-art office loft upstairs but he couldn't imagine sitting still long enough to truly accomplish anything, at the moment, all he could do was prowl. He could take a walk, but he might just keep on walking, right down the mountain to the airport where his private Gulfstream waited for him.

"I'm never gonna make the whole damn month," he muttered,

shoving one hand through his hair and turning toward the table where his laptop sat open.

He took a seat, hit a few keys and checked his e-mail as soon as the Internet connection came through. Two new letters were there, one each from the managers of the London and Tokyo Barrister hotels.

Once he'd dealt with their questions about his schedule, Nathan was at a loss again. There was only so much work he could do long-distance. After all, if he wasn't there in person, he couldn't scowl at his employees.

When the doorbell rang, he jumped to his feet. This is what he'd come to, then. Grateful for an interruption. For someone—anyone—to interrupt the silence that continued to claw at him. He closed the laptop and stalked across the great room to the front door.

When he opened the door, he said, “I should have guessed it would be you.”

Keira grinned, slipped past him into the house and then turned to look at him. “You're going to need a coat.”

Nathan closed the door and didn't admit even to himself that he was glad to see her. As annoying as she was, she was, at least, another voice in this damned quiet.

“I'm warm enough, thanks.”

“No, I mean, the potluck is outside so you'll really need a coat.” She turned again and walked into the great room as if she belonged there. Her voice echoed in the high-ceilinged room and

her footsteps sounded like a heartbeat. “We could have held the dinner at the courthouse, but it's a little cramped and the band said it would be easier to set up outside.”

“The band?”

“Uh-huh,” she said, looking around as if she hadn't just seen the place the day before, “it's a local group. Super Leo. They play mostly rock but they'll take requests, too, and they're good guys. They all grew up here.”

“Fascinating,” Nathan said, moving to the edge of the foyer, leaning one shoulder against the wall and crossing one foot over the other as he watched her move. Damn, the woman looked good.

It was the solitude getting to him. The only explanation why he was interested in a short, mouthy redhead when ordinarily, he never would have looked at her twice. The fact that he'd only been “enjoying” this solitude for a day didn't really matter.

“The town council approved new lights for this year, so the square will be bright as day with plenty of room for dancing. When I left they were already setting the food out on the tables and the band was tuning up, so we really should get going if you don't want to miss anything.”

“Miss anything?” Nathan shook his head. “I told you yesterday that I had no interest in going to your town party or whatever.”

“Well, I didn't think you *meant* it.”

“Why not?”

“Who wouldn't want to go to a party?”

“Me.” Now, if the party were in St. Tropez, or Gstaad, he'd be right there. But a small-town party in the middle of Nowhere, U.S.A.? No, thanks.

She stared at him as if he'd just grown another head. Then she shrugged and went on as if he hadn't said a word.

“The town council was incredibly grateful for your donation.”

“You told them?” An uncomfortable itch settled between his shoulder blades. He didn't mind donating money. It was simply a part of who he was. But he preferred anonymity. He didn't want gratitude. He just wanted to be left alone.

But even as he thought this, he realized that he'd been complaining about the solitude just a minute before.

“Of course I told them,” she said, picking up a throw pillow from the couch and fluffing it before she dropped it back into place. “Who am I, Santa? Dropping money into the town coffers without an explanation? I don't think so. They all want to meet you, to thank you for your generosity.”

“Not necessary.”

“Oh, but it really is,” she said and reached down to straighten a stack of magazines strewn across the coffee table. “If you don't come to the potluck so everyone can meet you ...”

“Yeah?”

She shrugged. “Then I guess everyone will just have to come to *you*.”

Nathan sighed. She was blackmailing him into attending her damned town function. And doing a pretty good job of it, too. If

he didn't go, he had no doubt that she'd lead droves of citizens up the mountain to intrude on the lodge. He'd be hip-deep in people before he knew it.

“Extortion?”

“Let's call it judicial negotiations.”

“And if I go to the party, you'll leave me alone.”

She held up one hand like a Girl Scout salute and said, “I so solemnly swear.”

“I don't believe you.”

“Gee, attractive, crabby *and* smart.”

A smile twitched at his mouth, but he fought it into submission. No point in encouraging her any.

“Fine. I'll go.”

“Wow,” she said, patting her hand over her heart, “I'm all excited.”

Her green eyes were shining and a smile curved her tantalizing mouth. The gray sweater she wore beneath a black leather jacket outlined the swell of her breasts, and her faded jeans and battered boots made her look too tempting to a man who was going to be trapped on a damn mountaintop for a month.

So Nathan got a grip on his hormonal overdrive and turned to the hall closet. He opened it, snatched out his brown leather jacket and pulled it on over his dark green cashmere sweater.

A few minutes ago, he'd been complaining that he was too alone. Now, he was going to a block party, of all things.

Be careful what you wish for.

Keira sneaked glances at him as she drove down the mountain. His profile was enough to make her heart stutter and when he turned his head to look at her, she almost drove into a tree.

“Whoops.” She over-straightened and her snow tires slipped a little on an icy patch of road.

“Was this a ploy to get me on the road long enough to kill me?”

“Everything's fine,” she said, tightening her grip on the wheel. “But would you like to take a look around before we head into town?”

“No, thanks.” He checked the gold watch on his left wrist. “I can only spare an hour or two.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Ah. Good reason.” Keira smiled and followed the curve of the road. There was a steep drop-off beyond the white barrier and Nathan glanced down into the abyss.

“Look,” he said, “I'm only coming to this party to avoid the alternative.”

“Don't worry, you'll be glad you came.”

“Why do you care if I attend this party or not?”

“Why?” She risked another glance at him as soon as the road straightened, then turned her gaze ahead again. “You and the others who'll stay at the lodge after you are doing something tremendous for our town. Why wouldn't we want to thank you for that?”

He shifted uncomfortably on the truck seat. “I can't speak for

the others, but I'm not doing this for you or your town.”

“Then why?”

His mouth flattened into a grim line. “It's not important.”

“But it's important enough for you to come here. To stay for a month?”

Still scowling, he said, “I'm here. As to the month ... I don't know.”

A small spear of panic jolted through Keira at the thought that he might leave. If he did, then, according to the terms of the will she'd read, the town of Hunter's Landing would get nothing and the lakeside mansion would be sold.

She couldn't let that happen.

She *had* to convince Nathan Barrister to stay for the whole month. And maybe the best way to do that was to show him the town he and his friends were going to help. To let him see firsthand what a difference a month of his time could make to all of them.

But if he really wanted to go, how could she make him stay?

“But you agreed to the month.”

“I did,” he said, and she sensed, more than saw, him shrug his broad shoulders. “But I don't know that it's feasible. I have businesses to watch over. Places I'm supposed to be.”

Already he was making mental excuses. Giving himself an out. Looking for a way to escape the terms of the will. The panic Keira's heart felt a moment ago jumped into hyperactive life and did a quick two step in the pit of her stomach. Did he believe

that by making that incredibly generous donation he didn't have to complete the terms of the will?

“You wouldn't really leave soon, would you?”

He shifted in his seat and the leather creaked as he moved. “If you're looking for guarantees, I can't give them to you.”

“But you agreed to the terms.”

“Yes.”

“So your word's not worth much?”

He frowned at her. “Is insulting me your grand plan to get me to cooperate? If so, it's a bad idea.”

“Probably.” She sighed and took the final turn down the mountain road. Just a half mile ahead was Hunter's Landing, where her friends and neighbors were celebrating and planning the changes that would be coming at the end of six months.

She wondered how happy they'd all be to meet Nathan Barrister if they knew just how close he was to ruining those plans.

Pulling the car off to the side of the road, Keira threw the gearshift into park, yanked up the emergency brake and turned in her seat to look at him head-on.

“Problem?” he asked.

“You could say so,” she said. In the darkening light, his pale blue eyes shone like chips of ice—and were just as welcoming. “This might not mean much to you,” she said, “but your staying here for the entire month can mean a huge difference to the people here.”

“I didn't say I was leaving,” he pointed out.

“You didn't say you were staying, either,” she countered.

“I am for right now,” he said.

“That's supposed to make me feel better? Right now?”

“It's all I can give you.”

Keira wanted to grab him and shake him, but she knew that wouldn't do any good. He was so closed-off, so shut down from anything other than his own feelings, she'd need a hammer to pound home her point. Tempting, but probably not logical.

“You've been here only one day. Give it a chance. Give *us* a chance.”

He looked at her in the waning light and, just for a second, Keira thought those eyes of his warmed a little. But she was probably mistaken since an instant later, they were cool and distant again.

“If you do,” she added, “who knows, you might just like it here.”

One dark eyebrow rose. “I'm not expecting to like it.”

“Well,” she said, smiling as she turned to shift the car into gear again and head into town, “surprises happen every day.”

“Whether I stay or go is really none of your business.” His tone clearly stated that was the end of the discussion.

Well, Keira wasn't sure who he was used to dealing with, but she wasn't about to back down under that king-to-peasant attitude.

“That's where you're wrong, Nathan.” She paused and threw

him a smile designed to either put him at ease or worry him half to death. “You don't mind if I call you Nathan, right? Well, Nathan, it *is* my business to see that you stay here. As mayor, I can't let you walk away from something that will mean so much to us.”

He studied her for a long minute. She felt his gaze on her and forced herself to keep her own gaze focused on the road ahead of her. As they got closer to town, she heard the still-distant sounds of the band playing and steeled herself for whatever he was going to say next.

“Just so you know, Keira, if I decide to go, there's no way you'll be able to stop me.”

She took the last turn in the road and saw Hunter's Landing spilling out ahead of her. Party lights were strung across the street, tiny blazes of white in the gathering darkness. People crowded the whole area, and a few couples had already started dancing.

Her heart swelled with love for the place and the people she'd grown up with. Determination filled her as she turned to glance at the man beside her. She smiled and said, “Nathan, never issue a challenge like that to me. You'll lose every time.”

They were swept into the party the moment she parked the truck, and Keira watched with some amusement as Nathan was dragged unwillingly into the center of things. The man was so stiff, so aloof, he stood out from the crowd like an ostrich in a chicken coop.

With the band's music pouring over them in a continuous wave of sound, Keira stood to one side and watched Nathan's features tighten as a few of the older men gathered around him to give Nathan some advice on fly-fishing.

The devil inside her told Keira to leave him to it. To let him be surrounded by the townspeople she'd so wanted him to meet. But a rational voice in the back of her mind drowned out that little devil by pointing out that if he *hated* it here, he'd have little reason to stay for the month to insure the town's bequest.

So she walked up to the group of men, smiled and said, "Sorry, guys, but I'm going to steal Nathan away for a dance."

"Aw, now, Keira, we're just telling him about the best spots in the Truckee River for fishing," one of them argued.

"And it was fascinating," Nathan said, dropping one arm around Keira's shoulders and dragging her in close to his side, as if afraid she'd change her mind and leave him there for more fishing advice. "But if you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I did promise the lady a dance."

Keira hid her smile and told herself that the warmth of Nathan's arm around her had more to do with body heat than sexual pull. Although she wasn't easily convinced, since parts of her that hadn't been hot in a very long time were suddenly smoking with sizzle and warmth.

When they moved away from the crowd toward the dance floor, Nathan bent his head and muttered, "I don't know whether to thank you for rescuing me or throttle you for bringing me here

in the first place.”

His voice was nearly lost under the slam of sound, so Keira leaned in closer to make sure he heard her response. “But you looked like you were having so much fun.”

“I don't fish,” he muttered.

“Maybe not,” she pointed out, “but thanks to Sam Dover and the others, you could now if you wanted to.”

He stopped and, since his arm was still wrapped around her shoulder, she did a quick stop too and slammed into his side.

“You're enjoying this, aren't you?”

“Would it be wrong to say yes?”

He frowned down at her. “I don't think I've ever met anyone like you before.”

“Nathan! A compliment?”

“I'm not sure that's how I meant it.”

She grinned. “That's how I'm taking it.”

“Big surprise.”

Keira wasn't fooled. There was a twitch at the corner of his way-too-kissable mouth that told her he was fighting the urge to smile. In the last day or so, she'd noticed he fought down smiling a lot. And she wondered why.

“So,” she asked, “are you really going to dance with me?”

He sighed. “If I don't, are you going to sic the fishermen on me again?”

She lifted her arms into the dance-with-me position and said, “Nothing wrong with a good threat.”

Four

The music slowed down into as close as a rock band could get to a romantic ballad, and Nathan reached for Keira. The instant his arm went around her waist, he felt a charge of something that jolted him from the soles of his feet straight up through the top of his head.

She smiled at him and he knew she'd felt it, too.

Her right hand felt small in his and the featherlight weight of her left hand seemed to be branding his shoulder. The air was icy and the street was crowded with people, yet he felt as if he and Keira were alone in the tropics, heat pouring through them with enough intensity to kindle a white-hot flame.

“What're you thinking?” she asked as he steered her around the makeshift dance floor in the middle of town.

“I don't think I'll tell you,” he said and deliberately raised his gaze from the sparkling beauty of her green eyes. “I have a feeling you'd find a way to use it against me.”

“Oh, you're a sharp businessman, aren't you?” she asked, and suppressed laughter colored her voice.

He risked a glance down at her and found that the power in her gaze hadn't lessened a bit. “You've already blackmailed me *once*,” he reminded her.

“For a good cause,” she pointed out.

“I really don't think that's an excuse the legal system would

smile on.”

“Hey, I'm the mayor. Would I do anything illegal?” She smiled at him again, and damned if Nathan's body didn't do a quick lunge. His arm tightened around her waist, tucking her in even closer, and when she moved in the dance, she did things to him he didn't want to think about.

So he didn't. To distract himself, he let his gaze sweep the town, and it didn't escape him that he could see the whole thing in a matter of seconds. The buildings were old, but well cared for. Fresh paint shone in the lights and sidewalks were swept clean. Flower boxes jutted out from window fronts and he presumed that if spring should ever come to the mountains, those boxes would be full of bright flowers.

A couple hundred people crowded the blocked-off streets, and he saw everyone from old couples sitting quietly holding hands to teenaged lovers gazing at each other so intently, he half expected to see tiny cartoon hearts circling their heads.

Keira fit right in here. She was greeted by hugs, kisses, teasing laughter and shouts, and Nathan wondered briefly what it must be like to so thoroughly belong somewhere. He hadn't known that feeling since he was a kid. And he had, over the years, done everything he could to *keep* from belonging anywhere in particular. Yet he could see that Keira thrived on the very kind of life he'd avoided.

Overhead, the moon peeked through a wisp of clouds and shone down onto the town, bathing it in a silvery glow that

made it look almost magical. Which was a ridiculous thought, since Hunter's Landing was clearly no more than a tiny town in between a couple of bigger ones.

If Hunter Palmer hadn't chosen this town—no doubt for the pleasure of building a mansion in a town that shared his name—Nathan would never have known of the place's existence. He wasn't a man to go wandering down unbeaten paths.

He preferred big cities. The anonymity of hotel rooms with an ever-changing sea of faces surrounding him. He had no interest in bonding with a town and people he'd never see again once he got off this mountain.

And yet ...

Keira held his hand a little tighter as if she could read his thoughts and was subtly trying to hold him here, to this place.

She felt good in his arms, her curvy little body pressed up close to his, and Nathan could admit, at least to himself, that he wanted her. He hadn't had any intention of making a connection of any sort with the people of this town, but she just wouldn't go the hell away. And was it his fault if his body reacted to hers?

This reaction was chemical, pure and simple.

He'd been so long without a woman sharing his bed that he was reacting to the first female to get close.

Not that she was close.

But the thought of her in his bed was enough to set a flash fire racing through his bloodstream.

“Oh,” she said, tipping her head back to stare up at him, “now

I *really* have to know what you're thinking. Your face just got all stiff and your eyes went slitty.”

“*Slitty?*”

“It's a word,” she argued.

“Barely.”

“You're changing the subject.”

“Apparently not successfully,” he said, not surprised at all that she wasn't willing to back down.

“Once you get to know me,” she countered, “you'll know that I don't give up all that easily.”

“Trust me,” Nathan said, “that much I've already learned.”

“Wow!” Her face lit up and her eyes sparkled in the overhead lights. “We're really making progress here, aren't we?”

“Progress?”

“You bet. I know that you get all stiff when you don't want to talk about something, and you know that I'm a little stubborn ...”

“A little?”

“... we're practically friends already.”

“Friends?”

“Nothing wrong with that, is there?” she asked and came to a stop as the song ended and a new one, one with a raw, savage beat, started up. “You have so many friends you can't use another one?”

No, he didn't have friends. Purposely. That need had been satisfied then discarded ten years ago. Now his life was streamlined. Just the way he wanted it.

Nathan let her go gratefully, though he couldn't help but notice just how empty his arms felt without her in them. A warning flag if he'd ever seen one. Keeping a few feet of space between them seemed like the smart move, here. And he'd always been smart enough to protect himself.

“We're not friends, Keira. Friends don't use extortion to get their way.”

“Really?” she asked, tipping her head to one side so that her hair fell in a reddish-blond wave to the side of her head, “isn't that what your friend Hunter Palmer did?”

He felt himself stiffen again and couldn't seem to stop it. “Excuse me?”

“Well,” she said, linking her arm through his and leading him farther away from the pulsing beat of the song and the jostling crowd on the dance floor, “you clearly don't want to be here, but you're going to stay the month because your old friend asked you to in his will. So, isn't that extortion?”

He supposed it was and hadn't he been thinking pretty much along the same lines earlier today? “You can be extremely annoying.”

“I've heard that before.”

“Again, not surprising.”

“Come on, Nathan,” she said, tugging at his arm, “I think it's time I fed you. Maybe your attitude will improve once you've tasted Clearwater's lasagna.”

He didn't want to spend more time with her. She had a way

of getting into his head that he wasn't entirely comfortable with. So he stopped dead, and Keira jolted back into him.

“Hey, a little warning before a sudden stop might be a good thing.”

“Sorry. But I think I've seen enough,” he said. “I came to the potluck and now, if you don't mind, I'd like to go back to the house.”

“You haven't eaten yet,” she said.

“Not hungry.”

“Liar.”

He shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and gave her a look that had been known to send hotel managers scurrying for cover. “Are you going to take me back or not?”

“You bet. As soon as we eat.”

“Damn it, Keira—”

“You have to eat, Nathan. You might as well do it here.”

When he didn't budge, she prodded. “You're not scared of us, are you?”

“Us?”

“The town.” She spread her arms wide as if encompassing everyone there in a hug. “Hunter's Landing. You a little worried that if you stick around for a while, you just might get to like us?”

“Don't you get it?” he asked, suddenly feeling that, if he wasn't rude, she'd never listen to him. “I'm not here to make friends. I'm here because I have to be. I owe it—” He stopped himself before he gave her more information than he wanted to. “I'm not

interested in liking or disliking your town. I just want to put in my time and get back to my life.”

“Wow.” She blinked up at him. “You did it again.”

Nathan sighed and asked the question he knew he shouldn't. “What?”

“Turned on the rude,” she said. “It's pretty impressive, really, just how easy it is for you to get all crabby and nasty.”

“You don't listen to me otherwise.”

“Oh,” she said, smiling again like nothing was wrong, “I listen, I just don't pay attention. There's a difference. And whether you want to admit it or not Nathan Barrister, you're hungry. You may not want to be here, but since you *are* here, you might as well eat. Right?”

How was a man supposed to argue with that kind of twisted logic? She grabbed his arm and tugged him toward a long line of tables piled high with what looked like every kind of food imaginable.

Nathan felt like a petulant child and he didn't like it. No point in being stubborn about this, though. There was no way out. He couldn't *walk* back up the mountain. And he wasn't going to ask someone else to drive him up. So he'd wait. He'd eat. And once he got back up the mountain, he'd call his damn pilot and tell him to fire up the engines.

No way was he going to stay for the whole month. A couple of days in Keira Sanders's company was enough to convince him to leave while he still could.

For the next hour, Keira watched him with some amusement.

Nathan probably wouldn't be happy to hear it, but she found it pretty entertaining watching him try to dodge the town's gratitude. Every time someone stepped up to say thank you, Nathan turned into a stone statue. He would nod politely, close down his features and then turn away, only to be met by yet another grateful citizen.

What was it about this man that was so intriguing? She couldn't quite figure it out. But seeing him squirm uncomfortably around her friends and neighbors was just captivating enough that she wanted to know him better. To slip under the walls he'd erected around himself. To get past the arrogant stance and condescending tone to the man who lived within.

Or was she just fooling herself?

Maybe there was no inner Nathan to meet. Maybe he was just who he appeared to be. Rich, aloof, disinterested. But she didn't believe that. She'd seen the quick flash of humor in his eyes before he deliberately stamped it out, and she was willing to put in the time to see if she could reach past his barriers.

Why?

She hadn't figured that out yet.

Oh, sure. She was working double-time to make sure he didn't leave town before his month was up. But this was more personal than insuring a bequest to the town she loved. This was getting to be ... interesting.

When her cell phone rang, Keira glanced at the screen, noted

the number and got up to walk farther away from Nathan and the crowd to answer it. She threw him a finger-wave as she moved off and smiled to herself at the panic that zipped across his face.

Couldn't really blame him for the panic as Sallye and Margie, the town's two most talkative women, took up position on either side of him. Keira left him to his own devices as she stepped into the doorway of the flower shop and flipped her phone open.

“Hi, Kelly!”

“Hey, big sister, how's it going?” Kelly Sanders sounded like she was down the street instead of calling from her home in London.

Keira didn't even want to think about what kind of charges were going to be adding up on her cell phone. But she was so glad to talk to her younger sister, she wasn't going to worry about it.

“Everything's good,” Keira shouted to be heard over the band who, even now, was cranking up the decibels to ear shattering level.

“What's going on?” Kelly demanded, then, after a heartbeat, whined, “It's a block party, isn't it? Everyone's having a good time and I'm not there.”

“Yeah, but you're in Europe. Really good times, remember?”

“True,” she said wistfully. “Usually I love it here, but I hate knowing life is going on at home without me.”

Well, that was typical Kelly. She had always wanted to be in the center of things. Even when she was a little girl, Kelly wasn't satisfied with being in the background. Their mother used to say

that Kelly had been born in a hurry and had just never stopped running.

Keira really missed her. They were each other's only family now, and this last year, when Kelly had been living in England, Keira had had a hard time of it.

"I'll tell everyone you said hi," she said and glanced down the street, making sure Nathan hadn't bolted for freedom. Nope, he was still there, sandwiched between the two very nice, very chatty older ladies. Keira grinned, leaned against the shingled wall of the flower shop and said, "So what's going on?"

"Oh, Tony's taking me to Paris for the weekend and I wanted to let you know I wouldn't be home for our Saturday night phone call."

Tony—also known as Stewart Anthony Brookhurst, was CEO of some huge conglomerate based in England and, for the last six months, the main topic of all of Kelly's conversations.

"Paris, very nice," Keira said and tried to keep the sigh of envy from slipping from her soul.

She'd had plenty of plans of her own years ago. She'd wanted to finish college, travel, see the world. But in the blink of an eye, her plans—her world—had changed. Not that she regretted being there for Kelly, for putting her own life plans on hold to see to it that her little sister went to college. She didn't resent the fact that while she had stayed here, in the town she loved, Kelly had gone off on the adventures that Keira had once dreamed of.

And, if she did feel occasional spikes of envy jabbing at her,

she'd managed so far to hide them from the sister she loved.

"I know," Kelly said with a laugh. "Who would have thought that I'd be saying stuff like that? *Paris for the weekend*. But you know, K, I really love it here. I mean, I miss home and everybody, you especially, but I love living in London. I even like the rain!"

"I know." She heard that love in Kelly's voice every time they spoke. This was supposed to have been a one-year stint—a year that was almost over—in London, for the international bank that had hired Kelly right out of college. But Keira had been preparing herself for months now, to be ready for the day when Kelly announced that she would be *staying* in Europe.

Kelly loved everything about England and now that she was seriously dating a man who had been born and raised there, the chances of her ever moving back to Hunter's Landing were slimmer than ever.

"So what's going on at home, besides the party I'm not at," she asked.

Keira shook off the gloomy thoughts that had settled over her like some sort of shroud and forced a smile into her voice. "We've got our first guest in the lake lodge."

"Oh my God! You're kidding! What's he like? Did you see the inside of the place? Is it fabulous?"

Keira laughed. God, she missed her little sister. "Not kidding, he seems nice, saw the house, it's amazing."

"C'mon," Kelly whined. "There's gotta be more than that. You've been telling me about that house for a year now. So what's

it like?”

“It's so gorgeous, you wouldn't believe it. Awesome views of the lake—built of glass and wood and stone, and there's a fireplace big enough to stand up in.”

“Oh, wow.”

“I'll say.”

“And the guy?”

“What about him?”

“*He seems nice?*” Kelly laughed. “Please. Give me more than that.”

More? What could she say? That he was arrogant and irritating and altogether too attractive? That she was spending too much time thinking about *him* when she should have been worrying about keeping him in the lodge long enough to fulfill the requirements of the will?

“What's his name, at least,” Kelly demanded.

“Nathan.” There. That was safe information. “Nathan Barrister.”

“*Whoa*. Barrister? Like in the Barrister Hotel Barristers?”

“I don't know,” Keira said with a shrug her sister couldn't see. “I ... maybe.”

“Nathan Barrister was in London a couple of months ago. Had a meeting at my bank. Tell me what yours looks like and I'll tell you if it's him.”

“Tall. Dark. Pale blue eyes.”

“Snotty twist to his mouth?” Kelly asked.

“Not exactly snotty,” Keira argued.

“Woo hoo,” Kelly crowed. “It *is* him. And you *like* him.”

“Dial it down, Kel,” Keira said, knowing it was way too late to put the lid back down on that particular box. Kelly was already enjoying herself.

“I don't believe this. Nathan Barrister in Hunter's Landing? That's too funny.”

“Why's it funny?” She stiffened at the amusement in her sister's voice and felt like she should be defending the man for some reason.

“Well, he's just such a *stick*. The man has no sense of humor and one look out of those eyes and you practically freeze over. And I saw my boss's face after his meeting with Barrister. You remember I told you that my boss is mean enough to give the boogeyman nightmares?”

“Yeah ...”

“When Barrister left his office, my boss was *pale* and shaking.”

“Oh.”

“Seriously, K,” Kelly said, her voice dropping. It was a strain to hear her over the crash of the band and the swell of laughter and conversation rising up over Main Street. “If you're thinking about falling for this guy, don't do it.”

“Oh, please.” Keira sighed, shook her hair back from her face and said, “He's here as part of that will I told you about. If he stays for the month, if the rest of them each stay for a month, the

town is going to get a heck of a lot of money that we really need. And that's all there is to it. I just said he was attractive, I didn't say I was going after him.”

“You didn't say he was attractive!” Kelly's voice shrieked so high that Keira jerked the phone away from her ear.

“I didn't?”

“No. K, don't do this. Don't let yourself care about this guy. Remember what happened with—”

“Don't go there, okay?” Keira interrupted her quickly, not willing to take a forced march down memory lane. “And let's remember here just which one of us is the *older* sister.”

“I know,” Kelly said, “it's just that you're so—”

“So *what* exactly?”

“I don't know. Never mind. Just be careful, okay?”

“I'm always careful, Kelly. Trust me. Nothing's going to happen.” Even if she wanted something to happen, Nathan had already made it perfectly clear that *he* didn't, so what could happen?

Keira peeked around the edge of the flower shop wall to stare down the street at Nathan again—big mistake. He was watching for her. Even from a distance, his gaze slammed into hers with a punch that was nearly physical. Keira sucked in a gulp of air and reached out blindly with her right hand to slap it against the wall in an effort to balance herself. It didn't help much.

A flicker of heat kicked into life in the pit of her stomach and rolled through her like a storm-pitched wave crashing onto shore.

She felt her world rock and had to fight to right it again.

“K?” Kelly's voice was in her ear. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she lied, swallowing hard past the knot of need that was lodged firmly in her throat. She couldn't look away from Nathan's eyes. “I'm fine. Don't worry about anything.”

“But—”

“Look. Send me a postcard from Paris, okay?”

“Sure, but—”

“Bye, honey, be safe.” Keira flipped the phone closed and straightened up just as Nathan headed toward her.

Five

Nathan had had enough.

His ears were ringing and the good manners his grandmother had drummed into him were strained now to the snapping point. He'd excused himself from the two older women who had seemed determined to trap him on Main Street forever, and now he was going to get Keira to take him back to the lodge.

He should have driven himself.

Then he wouldn't be waiting around for anyone. He wasn't a man who liked being dependent on someone else for anything. His insides tightened as people milled past him, laughing, talking, dancing. He wasn't a part of them and never would be. Didn't *want* to be. And the more time he spent with all of them, the more clear that feeling became.

He didn't know why the hell he hadn't left the mountains already. He didn't *have* to honor a promise made in college to a man long-dead. Hell, he could donate the twenty million himself and get out of this mess now.

And with that thought firmly in his mind, his steps quickened toward Keira. Her gaze locked with his and he told himself to pay no attention to the brilliant green of her eyes or the worried twist of her mouth. He refused to notice how the light dazzled the ends of her reddish-blond hair, making it almost glow in a soft halo around her head. And damned if he would remember

just how good she felt when her body was pressed against his during their dance.

As he came closer, she shoved her cell phone into the front pocket of her jeans and inhaled deeply enough that her breasts rose and then fell with the rush of her sigh.

If his body tightened suddenly, desperately, he ignored it.

“Hi,” she said and, somehow, her voice carried over the other sounds on the street. “Enjoying yourself?”

He frowned at her. “Yeah, it's been great. I've eaten, I've danced and I've listened to enough thank-yous to last me a lifetime, so if you don't mind, I'd like a ride back to the lodge.”

“Sure.”

“That easy?” He felt one eyebrow quirk. He hadn't expected her to give in without trying to talk him into staying longer.

“Why not?” she asked and looked away from him, shifting her gaze to sweep across the town square. She sighed again and this time her voice was so soft, he almost missed it. “I just wanted you to see Hunter's Landing. To meet some of the people, so you'd know who you and your friends are helping.”

“Thank you.” He heard the sarcasm in his own voice but didn't bother to try to take the sting out of it.

“I can take you by the clinic for a quick look on the way back. Then you can see exactly what we're planning.”

“Not necessary.”

Nathan blew out a frustrated breath. Everything in him was clamoring to be gone from this place. To pick up the threads of

his life and get back to living the way he knew best. He didn't do well with other people. Didn't care to. And yet now ...

Screw it.

“How about that ride?”

Frowning, she said, “You're just determined not to enjoy yourself, aren't you?”

“Was that a requirement?”

She muttered, “Kelly was right. You really are scary, aren't you?”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Reluctantly, she shrugged and said, “Let's go.”

He followed her to her truck and when she stumbled over a crack in the road, Nathan lunged forward to grab her before she could fall. Spinning her around, he pulled her in close and she laughed up at him. The woman was so changeable, he could hardly keep up.

“Thanks, didn't see that.”

“Weren't looking, you mean.”

Her hands were on his upper arms and even through the thick leather of his coat, he felt the heat in her touch and wanted more. Wanted to feel her hands on his bare skin, run his own hands over every curve of her body. Hear her sigh as he buried himself inside her.

The images in his mind were suddenly so clear, so overpowering, he could hardly draw a breath past the hot fist tightening around his lungs.

He willed himself to speak. "It's a wonder you're not covered in bruises the way you stumble around."

"What makes you think I'm not?" she asked, still smiling.

He pulled in another deep breath of cold, mountain air and hoped it would help chill the fire in his blood. "What the hell are you doing to me?" he demanded.

"Depends, Nathan," she said, her smile fading as her brilliant green eyes darkened with a need he recognized. "What do you *want* me to do to you?"

"I'm not interested in a short affair," he said tightly, despite the fact that his body clamored for just that.

"Well, who asked you?" She pulled free of his grasp, straightened up and shook her hair back from her face. "Jeez, save a girl from a fall and then accuse *her* of trying to seduce *you*. Nice. Very nice."

He pushed one hand through his hair and wondered why in the hell he tried talking to her anyway. "Can we just get in the damn truck?"

She dug her keys out of her pocket and bounced them on her palm. "You know, you were the one looking at me like you wanted to gobble me up."

He blew out another breath and glared at her. "Call it temporary insanity."

"Wow, one compliment after another," she said and turned for the truck. "You're really on a roll here, Barrister."

He stood just where he was and watched her open the driver's

side door and step up into the cab. “You're an infuriating woman, did you know that?”

She glanced back at him over her shoulder. “Believe it or not, that's been said before.”

“My sympathies to the poor bastard, whoever he was.”

Her face froze up and her eyes shuttered as effectively as if she'd slapped on a pair of dark glasses. “He doesn't need your sympathy, Nathan. And neither do I. So, you getting in the truck or are you going to walk back up the mountain?”

Over the next week or so, every time Keira drove up the mountain, she was half afraid she'd find Nathan gone. After a *really* quiet ride back from the block party, she had dropped him off at the lodge and had hardly waited for his feet to hit the dirt before she gunned the engine and went home. It still embarrassed her to think about driving off in a huff like that.

She never should have let him get to her—couldn't understand why she had. But that little dig about giving his sympathies to whichever man had last been in her life had come a little too quickly after Kelly had brought up the same damn thing.

It wasn't that Keira was sensitive about her past; she just didn't like being reminded of what an idiot she'd been once upon a time.

But that was the past and this was now. And all that mattered *now* was making sure Nathan didn't leave before his month was up. She was pretty sure he was tired of having her show up on his doorstep every day, but she kept visiting him anyway, because she could practically *see* his need to leave vibrating in the air all

around him.

And she wouldn't let that happen.

Parking the truck in the drive, she hopped out, slammed the door and headed for the front door. Dark clouds hung heavy over the mountains and the air felt thick with the promise of more snow. As much as she loved winter in the mountains, she was really ready for spring. Unfortunately, it looked as if nature didn't feel the same way.

She shivered, dug her hands into her jacket pockets and quickened her step, only to stop when she heard Nathan's voice shout, "Back here."

Surprised to find him outside and away from the laptop that he clung to like his last link with civilization, Keira headed down the drive. She saw him at the lake's edge and she wasn't ashamed to admit, at least to herself, that the man was really sigh-worthy.

He wore that dark green cashmere sweater again over jeans that looked worn and comfortable. His brown leather jacket gave him a piratical air, and the wind tossed his hair across his forehead, making him look more free than she could remember seeing him before. Her heart jumped a little and her mouth went dry.

She could be in some serious trouble here. Especially if he started looking at her the way he had the night of the party.

"What're you doing?" she called as her boots crunched on the gravel drive.

He gave her a quick look, then shifted his gaze back to the

steel gray surface of the lake. “Just looking. Needed some air.”

“Really?” she teased as she walked up to stop beside him. “I thought you were very happy breathing canned air and looking at nature through the beauty of clean glass windows.”

He snorted. “Let's just say I'm feeling a little cabin fever.”

There it was again. She could see how ready he was to chuck the whole month and escape from what he no doubt considered captivity. So what she had to do was take his mind off it.

“I can cure that.”

“How?”

“Take a walk with me.” She threaded her arm through the crook of his and smiled up at him.

“It's freezing out here,” he reminded her.

“If we keep moving, we won't feel it.” She tugged at his arm. “Come on. When's the last time you took a walk along a lake as beautiful as this one?”

His gaze swept out over the wide expanse of water and the pine-tree-studded shoreline before turning back to her. “Never.”

“Way too long,” she assured him and started walking. His long legs outdistanced hers, and Keira caught herself half running to keep up before she pulled back on his arm and said, “It's not a race, you know. You don't actually get a prize for reaching the other side.”

He stopped, smirked a little, then shrugged. “Point taken. But I'm not used to just strolling.”

“It's okay,” Keira said, enjoying the flash of warmth in his

too-cool blue eyes. "You can learn."

They walked in companionable silence for a few minutes before she said, "The bears will be waking up soon."

"Bears?"

"Oh, yeah. Black ones and brown ones. Mamas and babies. They'll be trolling through backyards and tipping over trash cans looking for food or trouble."

"Bears." He shook his head. "Can't imagine living somewhere I could expect to bump into a bear."

"Funny, huh?" she asked, tipping her face up to the darkening clouds, "I can't imagine living anywhere else."

"You were raised here?"

"Yep. Born in Lake Tahoe, raised here. We didn't have a clinic back then. Now our new moms don't have to take that trek over the mountain for medical help." She grinned and patted his arm with her free hand. "And thanks to you, our clinic's going to be even better than it already is."

"You've thanked me enough."

"Not really," she said, "but I'll let it go."

"Thank you."

"For now."

He snorted.

"What about you?" she asked in the silence, "Where are you from?"

"Everywhere," he said, turning his gaze on the wind-whipped water of the lake again.

“That's not an answer, just so you know.”

“I was born in Massachusetts. Grew up on the east coast.”

Amazing how the man could give information and still make it seem like so little. But Keira wasn't a woman to be dissuaded easily. She dug a little deeper.

“Your family still there?”

“No family,” he said shortly, and his gorgeous blue eyes squinted into the wind racing past them.

“I'm sorry.”

“No reason to be. You couldn't know.”

“Well, I am, anyway,” she said and squeezed his arm companionably. “My folks died when I was in college,” she said, thinking that maybe if she gave a little, he'd be willing to give a little, too. “They went skiing. Got caught in an avalanche.”

His gaze shifted to hers. “Now I'm sorry.”

She looked up at him and smiled. “Thank you. It was really hard. I still miss them so much.”

“I was ten,” he said. “Car accident.”

A few words, but said so tightly, Keira could feel the old pain still welling inside him. At least she'd been grown when she lost her parents. She couldn't even imagine how lonely and terrifying it would have been to be a child and lose the safety of your own little world.

“God, Nathan, that's terrible.”

“A long time ago,” he reminded her. “Had my grandmother. Dad's mom. She took me in.”

“That couldn't have been easy for her,” Keira said, then stumbled on a piece of wood jutting up into the rocky trail.

Nathan caught her by tightening his grip on her arm and keeping her steady. “It wasn't much of a hardship. She sent me to boarding school, and I was only home for a month every summer.”

“She what?”

He blinked at her, clearly surprised by her reaction. What kind of people farmed out ten-year-old kids to boarding schools? What kind of grandparent couldn't see that the child left in her care was in pain and needed more than the impersonal attention of someone *paid* to watch over him?

“It was a very good school,” he said.

“Oh, I'm sure.” A spurt of anger shot through Keira on behalf of a child who no longer existed. “No brothers or sisters?”

“Nope. You?”

God, he had been all alone with a grandmother too busy to give him what he must have craved. A sense of belonging. A sense of safety. Keira couldn't even imagine what that must have been like for him, and a part of her warmed up to his frosty nature a little more. After all, if he'd been so cut off as a child, how could she possibly expect the man to be open to possibilities?

He was watching her, waiting for her to answer his question, and so she gave him a smile that didn't let him in on the fact that she was really feeling sorry for the boy he'd once been.

“I have a sister. Kelly. She's younger than me and was still in

high school when our folks were killed. So, I came home from school, watched over her and started running the family diner.”

He frowned. “The coffee shop in town?”

“You noticed it? Yep. The Lakeside was my dad's baby. It's small, but it's been good to us. Made it possible for me to get Kelly into college—well, the diner and a few good loans.”

“What about you?” he asked. “You didn't go back to school?”

“No,” she said, still irritated with his grandmother for some bizarre reason. “I meant to, I really did. But then Kelly was in college, and no way could we afford for both of us to go. And when she graduated, I'd already hired a manager for the diner and was running for mayor, so ...” She shrugged.

“Your sister should have taken her turn in town to give you a chance to go to school.”

Keira shook her head. “No, she got a tremendous job offer right out of school and there was no way she could not take it.”

He was silent, but the quiet held a lot of disapproval.

“You could go back to college now,” he pointed out.

“Oh, yeah,” Keira said, laughing shortly. “Just what I want to do. Go to school with a bunch of kids. Sounds like a great time.”

“What's your sister doing now?”

“She's living in London,” Keira said, defensive of a little sister who didn't need defending. “She loves England,” she added with a wistful sigh. “She sends me pictures that make me want to pack my bags and go there for myself.”

“Why don't you?”

"I can't just leave because I *want* to. I have responsibilities to this town."

He sighed, frowned and turned slitted eyes on her. "Is that a not so subtle hint?"

"I wasn't going for subtle," she admitted, smiling up at him despite the glower in his eyes. "Just for a reminder about the responsibilities *you* and the others have to Hunter's Landing."

"I'd never heard of your town until a month ago," he reminded her, "and a month from now, I will have forgotten it."

"Well, don't we feel special," she mused.

"It's nothing personal," he said. "It's just ..."

"None of that really matters, does it? You agreed to the terms of the will and—" The toe of her boot caught under a root and she would have gone sprawling if Nathan hadn't steadied her again.

"You're dangerous," he snapped. "Why don't you pay more attention to where you're walking?"

"Hey, I have you here to catch me."

"Don't count on that."

"I am, though," Keira said, blocking his way by stepping in front of him before she stopped dead. "We're all counting on you. You and your friends."

The wind sliced in off the lake and cut at them like a knife straight out of a freezer. Keira's hair swept across her eyes and she plucked it free so she could look at Nathan.

He didn't look happy, but what was new about that? His gaze was locked with hers and his mouth was tightened into a grim

slash that told her exactly what he was thinking.

“I know you don't want to hear it,” Keira said and reached out to put both hands on his forearms. And even through the icy brown leather jacket, she felt the strength of him, tightly leashed. “But it's true. I can't even tell you how important it is to all of us that you stay for the month.”

“Keira—”

“I know, I know,” she said, lifting both hands in a mock surrender. “You don't want to hear about this anymore.”

“The night of the town party,” he admitted quietly, “I had every intention of calling my pilot and flying out of here.”

“But you didn't,” she said lightly, despite the quick tightening around her insides.

“That doesn't mean I won't,” he pointed out. “I don't want you—or anyone—counting on me. For anything.”

“That's a hard way to live,” she said.

“It's my way.”

“It doesn't have to be,” Keira said, her voice a whisper that was nearly lost in the swirl of the wind. Why was she doing this? Why did she care how Nathan Barrister lived his life?

He laughed shortly, and the sound was so surprising that Keira blinked at him.

“I *like* my life just the way it is,” he said. “I'm not interested in changing it.”

“Just like you're not interested in a one-month affair.”

His jaw clenched.

Oops.

She didn't know why she'd said that. But now that it was back out in the open between them, she wasn't sure how to *un*-say it, either.

“Keira ...”

A puff of white danced on the wind and flew between them as if trying to end their conversation.

“Was that ...?” he asked.

“Snow,” she said.

And in that split second, several more flakes of snow whipped around them, carried on the wind that snapped and rattled at the pine trees. The temperature dropped what felt like twenty degrees and the lowering clouds looked black and threatening.

“Of course it's snow. For God's sake, does spring *ever* get here?” He inhaled sharply, deeply, and looked at her as if there was something more he wanted to say.

The look in his eyes was nearly electric. Despite the snowflakes just beginning to flurry around them, she felt heat arcing between them.

Her heartbeat was jittering in her chest, her blood was pumping hot and thick in her veins, and she had the most overpowering urge to reach up and smooth his hair back from his forehead.

Instead, she curled her fingers into her palms and took a deep breath. “It's coming down harder. We should start back.”

Six

By the time they reached the lodge, snow had dusted their hair and shoulders and was thick enough in the air that every breath tasted like ice.

When Keira would have turned down the driveway to head for her truck, Nathan caught her elbow and tugged her up the back steps to the house by the lake.

“Nathan ...”

He stopped on the top step, looked down into her soft green eyes and said, “You might as well wait out the storm here.”

She hunched deeper into her jacket, swung her snow-dusted hair out of her eyes and said, “It might not stop for a few hours.”

Glad to hear it, he almost said and was glad he'd managed to clamp his jaw shut. But the truth was, he didn't want to go back into that too-damned-quiet lodge. It was bad enough to be trapped there in the silence when the sun was shining. He had a feeling that being alone with the falling snow and lowering clouds would make him feel as though he were buried alive in a dark cave. Not something he really wanted to experience.

“And it might stop in a few minutes,” he pointed out, but, as if to prove that prediction false, the wind kicked up and the snow flew in frenzied flurries.

“If I was home right now,” Keira said, “I'd make myself some hot chocolate.”

“I can probably handle that,” he said. “Or, there's some excellent brandy.”

She climbed up a step, coming that much closer to him, and the depths in her green eyes called to him, reached for him. “Brandy would be good, too. Got anything to eat?”

He held out one hand and waited for her to take it. When she did, his fingers folded tightly around hers. “There's plenty of stuff in the fridge.”

She took the last step that brought her beside him and gave him a smile that warmed him through, despite the icy wind and the snow sneaking beneath the collar of his jacket. “Then why are we still standing in the storm?”

They walked across the covered deck, stepped into the mudroom and pulled off their jackets and boots. Then, together, they went into the kitchen. The room was cavernous, with built in niches for the stainless steel appliances and a mile of granite counter. The walls were painted to give them an antiqued finish, and the colors were warm cream and brown, making the kitchen seem cozy even in the midst of a storm.

“Let's get that brandy first, worry about food later,” Nathan said, and led the way from the kitchen to the great room.

“Good plan,” she said and shivered a little as she followed him down the hall.

A fire was blazing in the hearth and Keira moved straight toward it as Nathan walked to the wet bar. He poured them each a drink, then walked to join her by the fire. Handing her one

of the crystal snifters, he watched the amber liquid swirl in the bottom of his glass for a long moment before he took a sip.

He swallowed and felt the alcohol fueled fire rush through him as he shifted his gaze to Keira. Firelight played on her skin and danced in her eyes. The ends of her hair shone with a nearly incandescent light and when she lifted her glass to her lips, everything inside him tightened.

After taking a sip, she blew out a breath, smiled and looked up at him. “Wow. Well, that warms you up fast, doesn't it?”

Nathan ground his teeth together and then took a sip of his own brandy. The heat it produced was nothing like the *other* kind of heat swamping him. Just looking at Keira made him burn.

For more than a week now, he had tried not to think about her, to put this insane attraction out of his mind. But he hadn't been able to manage it. When he closed his eyes, he saw her. When he dreamed, he touched her. When he thought he would go out of his mind from the silence in this place, she arrived and he nearly went out of his mind for different reasons entirely.

She sat down on the stone hearth, the fire at her back, and looked up at him as she cradled the brandy snifter between her palms. “So, Nathan, are you the Barrister Hotel guy?”

One eyebrow rose and he took another sip of his brandy, welcoming the steady fire. “Hotel guy? Yeah. I suppose I am. How'd you know?”

She smiled. “Just a guess. Hunter's Landing isn't exactly on the moon. We get newspapers and magazines here, too. Which

one of your hotels is your favorite?”

He shrugged carelessly. “I don't really have a favorite, they're all top-of-the-line establishments, each of them with their own unique pluses and minuses.”

“Boy, feel the enthusiasm.”

“I'm sorry?”

“Well, come on, Nathan, you own four-star hotels—”

“Five-star,” he amended automatically.

“Right. In beautiful, exotic places all over the world. You talk about them as if they're nothing special. As if they're no different from any other exclusive hotels. Is that really what you think?”

Nathan frowned, sat down beside her and instantly appreciated the heat of the fire warming his back. “It's the family business, Keira. They're valuable properties with impeccable reputations that I work hard to maintain.”

“Uh-huh,” she said and nudged his upper arm with her shoulder. “And do you ever drop in on one in say ... Paris, or Dublin ... just for fun?”

“No,” he said and wondered why he cared that she looked disappointed at his statement. “I have a rigorous schedule I adhere to. The managers of the hotels know when I'm coming, know to have everything ready for my inspection and—”

She sighed.

“What?”

“Do they salute? Click their heels together when you walk into a room?”

He scowled at her. "I'm not a general or something."

"Could have fooled me," she muttered, and took another sip of brandy. "Seriously, do you scare all the people who work for you? I bet you do."

"Certainly not," Nathan said and wondered why he suddenly sounded so damn pompous, even to himself.

"You know," she said, lifting her brandy glass to peer at the room through the amber liquid, "if you changed up your *schedule* once in a while, you might actually catch people unaware. Find out what life in your hotels is really like."

He stared at her, but she wasn't looking at him. Her words, though, were running through his brain as if they'd been etched in neon. Funny, but he'd never thought to do something like that. He was a man who lived his life as efficiently as possible. And to do that, he required a schedule. But ...

"You mean, I should show up when they're not expecting me?"

"Why not?" she mused. "They're *your* hotels, aren't they?"

"Yes, but a schedule is necessary to maintain some kind of order."

"And if the kids know that daddy's coming home, they're on their best behavior."

Frowning, Nathan kept staring at her until she finally turned and looked at him, her eyes wide.

"What?" she asked.

"I can't believe I never thought of that."

"Me, neither," she said, smiling. "For heaven's sake, Nathan,

do you *ever* do something that you don't have scheduled? Do you ever take a little time out for yourself? You're wound so tight, it gives *me* a headache.”

He sighed and shrugged. “In my world, there's no time for relaxing.”

“You should make time.” She turned on the hearth, laid one hand on his forearm and asked, “For instance, when you're at one of your fabulous, oh-so-exclusive hotels, do you ever take a swim? Get a massage? Sightsee?”

“No. I'm not there for pleasure—”

“Why not?”

“Because ...”

“People all over the world want to go to your hotels to experience something amazing. I've seen some of them on TV. And in magazines. God, the one in London, I would actually kill to stay in.”

He smiled, picturing the stately stone entrance of the London Barrister with its sweeping marble floors and Old World chandeliers in the lobby.

“It is beautiful,” he mused, surprised that he hadn't really appreciated the place until seeing it through Keira's enthusiasm.

“It's amazing,” she said with a sigh. “Some rock star held an interview in the penthouse suite and the news covered it—there was an incredible view of London.”

“The view from the owner's suite is even more impressive,” he told her, picturing it vividly now in his mind. “You can see

Big Ben in the distance and the Millennium Wheel.”

“The huge Ferris wheel!” she cried and grabbed his arm hard. “Have you ridden it?” She paused, and said, “Of course you haven't. Honestly, Nathan, don't you ever have any *fun*?”

A little insulted, he said, “Sure I do.”

“Prove it. Name one thing you've done just for fun in the last month,” she challenged.

“I sat on a stone hearth letting a beautiful woman insult me.”

She tipped her head to one side, gave him a smile that made his heart jitter in his chest and repeated, “*Beautiful?*”

“Figures that's the part you heard.”

Her smile brightened into a grin. “Well, *duh*.”

He really enjoyed the flash of humor in her eyes. And for the first time in way too long, he realized there wasn't a steel band wrapped around his middle. There was no pressure pounding through him. No hurry to get work done. To check his e-mail. To leave the lodge.

Because suddenly and completely, there was simply nowhere else on earth he'd rather be.

The quiet between them stretched on for another minute or two, the only sound in the room, the snap and hiss of the fire behind them. Shadows stretched across the room and, outside, dots of white swirled in ever changing patterns driven by the wind.

“I envy you,” she said quietly. “All the places you've seen.”

“You like traveling?”

“Never really traveled much, but yeah, I think I would.” She folded her legs up beneath her on the stone, her white socks standing out brilliantly against her dark denim jeans. “I had big plans,” she admitted. “When I was a teenager, I went to bookstores and bought street maps of foreign cities. If you had dropped me into the middle of Paris, I could have found my way around blindfolded, I studied those maps so often. London, Dublin, Barcelona, Rome, oh ... *Venice*.” Her voice took on a dreamy quality that tugged at something deep inside him. “I wanted to drink wine while riding in a gondola. And see the windmills in Holland, and the Swiss Alps ...”

“But ...”

“But,” she said, giving him a dazzling smile and lifting her glass for another sip of brandy, “life happened. I had to take care of Kelly, and then I got busy with the town and ...”

“You stopped reading your maps?”

“Oh, no,” she said, “I’ve still got them all and I still pore over them and plan trips and, one of these days, I’ll get away.” She looked down into her glass and asked, “What about you? When the month is up, where do you go next?”

“Barbados for a couple of weeks, then Madrid.”

She sighed. “It sounds wonderful.”

“Barbados or Madrid?”

“Both. But Barbados first. A tropical island.” She sighed again.

“A beautiful one,” he agreed.

She leaned her head against his shoulder and said, "Show me."

"Can't. Don't have any pictures of it."

"No," she said softly, "Draw me a picture with words. Show it to me through your memories of the place."

Nathan frowned down at the top of her head and tried to give her what she wanted. He thought about the Barbados Barrister for a long moment, bringing it up in his mind, then slowly said, "It's our newest hotel. Only been open a few months. It sits right on the beach, stretches out almost a block. It has five stories for guest rooms and the sixth floor is the owner's suite." His voice warmed as his memories thickened and the ease of sharing them became more comfortable. "The views stretch on forever. The ocean is so blue you're not sure if you're looking at the sea or the sky."

"Keep going," she said.

He smiled. "There are palm trees and sand so white it hurts to look at it. Green-and-white striped umbrellas surround an infinity pool, and waiters dressed in green shirts and white pants carry trays of drinks to the people lounging poolside."

"More," she said, nestling in closer.

The feel of her leaning into him, the heat of the fire behind them and the quiet of the house all made for a feeling of intimacy that Nathan hadn't allowed himself to feel in years.

"Inside the hotel," he continued, "the wood is pale, almost gold. The windows are always open, and the sea wind sweeps through the lobby where pots of flowers and trailing vines make

it seem almost like a jungle.” He rested his head on top of hers. “There are deck chairs on a wide, white porch that stretches the length of the first floor, and people sit out there, sometimes all day, just to watch the ocean. And the restaurant has an outside deck where you can dine and watch the sunset.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

“Actually,” he said, not a little surprised himself, “it really is.”

She raised her head and smiled up at him. “I’m going to buy a map of Barbados,” she said, “and I’m putting that hotel on my list.”

He smoothed her hair back from her face, his fingertips lingering on the softness of her skin. She closed her eyes at his touch and shivered a little as his fingers slid down to her jaw.

“I’ll put your name on the VIP list,” he whispered, threading his fingers through her silky hair again just to enjoy the sensation.

“Nathan?”

“Keira ...”

“The storm’s still blowing,” she said softly, her gaze locked with his. “What will we do while we wait it out?”

“We could eat,” he offered.

“True,” she said. “Or you could tell me about another of your hotels.”

“Or play chess.”

“Watch a movie.”

“Read.”

She nodded and reached up to catch his hand with hers and

hold it against her cheek. “All good ideas. But, I have a better idea.”

Nathan bit back a groan as she leaned in close to him. His body was hard and tight and every breath now was a victory. If he didn't have her in the next few minutes, he was going to explode. “Yeah?” he asked. “What's that?”

“I think you know,” she said and took one more sip of brandy before setting her glass down on the hearth.

Nathan tipped his head back and tossed the last of his brandy down his throat before setting his glass down beside hers.

“Possibly,” he said, though a voice in his brain was telling him to stop now before it was too late. But damn it, he wanted her. Keira's image had been haunting him for days—she'd gotten to him more than any other woman he'd ever known. He wasn't used to waiting for something he wanted. Usually, he simply *took* what most women were more than willing to offer. Keira was different. “Why don't you tell me, and I'll let you know if we're on the same page.”

“Why don't I show you?” she whispered, and then pressed her mouth to his.

Air.

He probably needed air, because the edges of his vision were blurring and his brain felt as if it had been short-circuited. But breathing didn't seem as important as kissing her—harder, deeper—did.

Nathan groaned, pulled her in tightly to him and opened her

mouth with a sweep of his tongue. She sighed into him as he tasted her, tangling their tongues together in a wild, frantic dance of need and promise.

He felt her hands tighten on his shoulders, her fingers digging into the soft fabric of his sweater to brand his skin with match-head dots of flame. Electricity hummed between them and Nathan surrendered to the sensations coursing through him.

He needed her.

Now.

He pulled her into his arms and settled her on his lap. His hands swept up and down her back, defining her curves through the soft knit of her sweater. She sighed heavily, pressed herself more firmly to him and rubbed her body against his.

Nathan's mouth moved over hers like a dying man seeking the only sustenance left in the world. He shared his breath with her and she gave it back to him. Their tongues and lips melded, savored, enjoyed. Nathan slipped both hands beneath the hem of her sweater and his palms slid across her back, his fingertips smoothing over her satiny skin.

She tore her mouth free, let her head fall back and sighed at his touch. "Nathan ..."

He lowered his head, kissing her jaw, her neck, following the line of her throat with his lips and teeth and tongue. She shivered in his grasp and fed the need pulsing inside him.

Lifting his head, Nathan looked down at her as his hands, sliding beneath her sweater, swept around her body to find the

front clasp on her bra. Deftly, he undid the tiny plastic clip, then pushed her bra free and cupped her breasts in his palms. His thumbs caressed her hardened nipples as his fingers kneaded her soft flesh.

Her hands clutched at his shoulders as he held her tightly to his lap, letting her feel the hard length of him.

Need roared and crashed through Nathan until he could hardly draw breath. He couldn't remember *ever* wanting like this before. He couldn't remember another woman in his life who had pushed him to the razor's edge of rationality. All he could think of was Keira.

All he wanted was Keira.

He didn't care what it might mean.

What it might cost him.

Didn't want to examine every feeling, every ache.

He only wanted to lose himself in her. For this one moment in time, he wanted nothing more than the feel of her beneath his hands and the sensation of burying his body within the hot, tight channel of hers.

"I've got to have you," he whispered, hearing the raw throb in his own voice.

"Me, too," she said, opening her eyes and pulling herself upright, leaning into him. "Oh, Nathan, me, too. Now, okay?"

"Right now." He pulled his hands free of her body, not even thinking about how empty he felt without the warmth of her pouring into him. Then he stood up, set her on her feet and led her

across the great room toward the foyer and the majestic staircase that led to the second floor and the master bedroom. With their boots off, their sock feet made almost no noise at all in their rush for the stairs.

She stumbled behind him, kicked an end table and letting go of his hand, hopped ungainly for a minute, whimpering. “Ow, ow ...”

Nathan turned, swept her up into his arms and said thickly, “Okay, I’m carrying you from here. I’m not taking any chances with a tumble down the stairs.”

“Right, right,” she said and leaned in to nibble at his throat as his long legs took the steep stairs two at a time.

He hissed in a breath, took a sharp turn at the head of the stairs and headed for the only bedroom in the place that had been furnished.

Keira looked around quickly as Nathan carried her into the master bedroom. The log walls were pale and the honey-colored floorboards gleamed from a thick coat of polish. A stone hearth, much like the one in the great room, boasted a fire that warmed the room and made it feel, for all its size, cozy. A bank of windows overlooked the lake and the forest and showcased the snow falling steadily.

But Keira didn't really care about the storm or the decor. All she was interested in now was the feel of Nathan's arms around her as he walked toward the huge, dark sleigh bed tucked against the far wall. Her heartbeat thundered in her chest as Nathan set

her on her feet, grabbed a corner of the old-fashioned quilt and tossed it to the foot of the bed.

Then he grabbed her again and Keira stopped thinking in favor of *feeling*.

His mouth claimed hers again and her brain sizzled. Every nerve ending she possessed hummed with an awareness she'd never experienced before. His lips and tongue tasted her, tormented her, and she gave as good as she got.

Holding on to his shoulders, she pushed her body against his and rubbed her aching nipples across his chest. She needed him. And that thought was enough to make her splintered brain try to work for a second or two. She knew she should stop. Think about what she was doing.

But a heartbeat later, when Nathan pulled her sweater up and over her head, and bent to take one hardened nipple into his mouth, Keira silently told the cautionary voice in her mind to shut up.

Seven

Keira groaned gently as his mouth closed over first one nipple, then the next. His lips, tongue and teeth teased her already aching flesh until her whole body felt as though it were on full alert. She felt his touch in every cell. Her blood pumped thick and hot through her veins and when she closed her eyes and tipped her head back, she could have sworn she actually saw fireworks bursting in electric flashes of heat and color.

She held his head to her, half afraid that he might stop what he was doing. Her fingers speared through his thick, soft, black hair and when he sighed against her flesh, she felt the heat of his breath brush her skin in an ethereal caress.

He dropped his hands to the waistband of her jeans and, in just moments, he had the button and zipper undone and was sliding them, along with her pale ivory panties, down the length of her legs. She helped as much as she could, stepping out of her jeans and lifting first one foot, then the other, so he could pull her socks off.

The air in the room felt cool against her skin, despite the fire in the hearth. She listened to the snap and hiss of the flames on logs and let the sound fill her mind until all that remained was the music of the fire and Nathan's breath against her body.

She smiled up at him and tugged at the hem of his sweater, fingers curling into the soft fabric. "Someone here is

overdressed.”

“Not for long,” he promised and quickly got rid of his own clothing before laying her back on the cool, soft sheets.

He looked down at her for a long minute, and Keira arched her back from the bed and stretched both hands back and over her head, enjoying the power of his gaze on her. She saw the passion in his eyes and responded, moving sinuously over the bed, sweeping her own hands down her body, pausing at her breasts, stroking her own nipples as she watched his eyes darken and his jaw clench. Finally, when she lifted both hands toward him in open invitation, Nathan groaned and leaned over her.

“No bruises,” he said quietly as he studied her.

She smiled and stroked his cheek with her fingertips. “It’s been a good week for me. You were always around to rescue me from a fall.”

“You’re making me nuts. You know that, right?”

She reached up and cupped his face between her palms. Drawing his head down to hers, she kissed him once, twice and again. “Of course I know. The question is, what’re you going to do about it?”

“Return the favor,” he assured her.

He kissed her, hard and long and deep, until her body was quivering and her breath was hissing from her lungs. And when she tried to hold onto him, to pull him closer, Nathan slipped from her grasp and Keira could only watch as he moved along her body, sliding his flesh across hers, kissing every inch of her

skin as he moved down the length of her.

She trembled, her breath caught and she bit into her bottom lip as she moved, twisting into him, arching into his movements, trying to keep their bodies connected, their flesh burning into each other's.

But Nathan had other ideas; he continued his slow, torturous assault on her nerve endings by stroking his tongue across her abdomen and nibbling at her skin until she was whispering his name in a broken hush. He smiled against her body, and kept moving, lower and lower still until finally he had backed off the mattress.

And kneeling beside the bed, he grabbed her legs and pulled her close, until her legs hung free and she was balanced precariously on the edge of the bed. He lifted her legs, laying them across his shoulders and Keira watched him as he smiled knowingly.

“Your turn,” he whispered and scooped his hands under her behind before lifting her to meet his questing mouth.

Keira sucked in a gulp of air and held it, afraid to let it out because if she did, she might not be able to draw another, and she was pretty sure she was going to need to breathe.

His mouth claimed her, and Keira pushed herself up onto her elbows to watch him take her more intimately than anyone ever had before. Her eyes widened and locked on him, as aroused by the sight of him taking her as she was by the incredible sensations coursing through her.

Keira had never known anything like it. His tongue swept a caress across her inner folds and dipped within her body to tempt her with even more.

She was really grateful for that lungful of air, because now she had forgotten how to breathe. Her world centered on this one man and what he was doing to her body.

Again and again, he stroked and nibbled and caressed. His tongue touched a tiny bud of sensitized flesh and—"Nathan!"

She felt him smiling, and then lost herself in the wonder of what he was able to do to her. He suckled and teased and stroked until the ball of need in the pit of her stomach bubbled into a fiery cauldron that tipped and spilled an unbelievable heat throughout her body. Keira rocked her hips, reached down to cup the back of his head to hold him to her and couldn't seem to look away.

Her heels dug into his back as he slipped one finger, then two inside her body and quickened the intensity of her experience in a heartbeat. There was so much, too much. Her mind couldn't capture it all, so she quit trying and surrendered to the incredible wash of anticipation building within.

"Nathan, if you stop," she whispered through dry lips, "I'll have to kill you."

He chuckled and then closed his mouth over that one most sensitive spot. Keira cried out his name as her body shuddered with the force of the climax ripping through her. She held onto him as the only stable point in the universe and as the tremors rocking her slowly faded, like far-reaching ripples in a pond,

Nathan moved, easing her legs from his shoulders, shifting her further back onto the bed and then covering her body with his own.

“I can't ... I mean ...” She blew out a breath and laughed shortly. “I think I may be paralyzed.”

“Not yet you're not,” he murmured, dipping his head to taste one of her pale-pink nipples.

Instantly, need rebuilt at the feel of his body pressing her down into the so-soft mattress. She stroked his skin, running her hands up and down his back, kissing the underside of his jaw, his neck.

“That was ...” she said.

“Only the beginning,” he said and kissed her, his tongue plunging into her mouth, tangling with hers, stealing what breath she had left, then giving her his own to replace it.

Keira's body lit up again with fresh need and she lifted both legs to wrap them around his waist. “I want you inside me, Nathan.”

“Just where I want to be, Keira,” he whispered and lifted his head so he could watch her face as he entered her.

She tipped her head back on the bed, but kept her gaze locked with his. He pushed himself home with one long, deep stroke, and Keira gasped as she rocked her hips, taking even more of him within.

Outside, the storm raged, and inside, a different kind of storm swept the two of them into a world of mindless passion. Where all that mattered was the next touch, the next kiss, the next stroke

of heat to heat. Their bodies moved in an ancient dance with a rhythm that seemed as old as time and as new as her next breath.

His body moved with hers, invaded hers, claimed hers, and Keira gave him all she had to give. Her hands smoothed over his back and around to stroke down his chest, her thumbnails flicking at his flat, brown nipples until he was gritting his teeth to hold back a shout.

She liked knowing that he was as lost to sensation as she was. That his body was screaming for release as loudly as her own. That she could shatter Nathan's rigid sense of control.

Arching into him again and again, she urged him deeper, faster, harder. Her fingers clawed at his back while the pressure within tightened ferociously, demanding release.

“Now, Nathan,” she groaned, moving with him at a fever pitch that couldn't be sustained without the two of them bursting into flames, “please *now*.”

He pushed himself up on his hands, stared down at her face and whispered, “You first, Keira. You first and I'll follow.”

He slid one hand down the length of her body, across her flat abdomen, down to where their bodies were joined. His fingers dipped into the joining and stroked her damp heat as he continued to move inside her.

“Nathan!” Keira shrieked his name, clutched at his shoulders and bucked beneath him as an overwhelming wave of pleasure swept through her on what felt like an endless tide of mind-shattering explosions rattling just beneath her skin.

“Now,” he groaned and plunged deep inside her, his body shaking as he fell into the same tidal wave that had captured Keira and let it carry them both away.

An hour ... or, for all Keira knew, a *week* later, she forced her eyelids open and stared up at the ceiling. Fire-cast shadows leaped and danced across the beams in hypnotic pulses.

“You okay?” Nathan murmured from close to her ear.

“Not sure yet,” she admitted, turning her head on the pillow to smile at him. Reaching out, she smoothed his hair back from his forehead with her fingertips. “Hey, I can move my hand, so ... good sign!”

Pushing himself up on one elbow, he stared down at her for a long minute or two, his eyes unreadable. A curl of unease opened inside Keira as she studied him, searching for a shadow of the passionate man he'd been so short a time ago. But the Nathan watching her now was more like the closed-off man she'd met his first day at the lodge.

“What?” she finally asked, unable to stand the silence any longer.

“I was just thinking.”

“About?” she coaxed.

He looked as if he were about to say something, then thought better of it. Shaking his head, he said only, “Nothing. Never mind.”

He rolled off the bed and walked naked across the room to a door that he opened to reveal a gigantic closet. It was practically

empty from what Keira could see, since he'd brought only enough clothes for a month. But he stepped inside and when he came back out, he was wearing a thick black robe and carrying a dark green one that he tossed onto the foot of the bed. "I brought my own robe, but this green one was hanging in the closet when I got here."

"Thanks," she said, reaching for it and shoving both arms into the sleeves before slipping off the bed and tying the belt of the robe at her waist.

His features were tight, closed off as if he were carefully preventing whatever he was thinking from showing on his face. Which only served to really irritate Keira. A few minutes ago, they'd shared something truly amazing. They'd been as close as two people could get. Yet now ... he was looking at her as if she were a stranger.

A really unwelcome stranger.

"Nathan, what's going on?"

"Not a thing," he said and started for the bedroom door and the stairs beyond. "But I promised you food, didn't I? I'll check out the kitchen. See what I can find."

Very nice, Keira thought. He'd shut her out so politely, so neatly, she had to wonder if maybe his hideous grandmother, who'd shipped him off to boarding school with hardly a wave goodbye, had taught him how to do that? How to push people away without even breaking a sweat.

Well, she wasn't going anywhere. Not until the storm stopped.

And to be honest, even if the storm stopped right this minute, she wouldn't have been going anywhere. Not until she found out what the hell had happened to send Nathan from orgasmic to crabby in no time at all.

She followed him down the stairs, keeping one hand on the banister to make sure she didn't fall down the damn stairs and break her neck before she got some answers. She made a sharp right at the bottom of the stairs just in time to see his black robe disappear into the distant kitchen.

Well, if he thought she was that easy to get rid of, he really didn't know her well at all. Walking quickly, her bare feet hardly making a sound on the area rugs tossed across the gleaming wood floors, Keira got to the swinging door to the kitchen, slapped her palm against it and sent it crashing open.

He was at the fridge and raised his head to look at her when she stepped into the room. Then he dismissed her coolly, reached into the freezer and pulled out a long, flat aluminum tray.

“The housekeeper fills the freezer for me once a week. I think this is ...” He read the label. “Fettuccine Alfredo with grilled garlic chicken. It's from the Clearwater, the restaurant you seem so fond of.”

“Their fettuccine is great,” Keira said, walking toward the granite counter and one of the stools pulled up beneath it. She sat down and tucked her bare feet up to get them off the cold floor.

“Glad you approve,” he said, and turned to quickly take off the lid, turn on the oven and pop the tray inside. “Shouldn't take

too long,” he said, and walked to the wine cooler along the wall. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Sure,” Keira said, trying to figure out a way to get past the wall he'd erected around himself so quickly and so completely. “Nathan, is everything all right?”

“Why wouldn't it be?”

“You're just acting a little ... weird.”

One black eyebrow rose as he set a bottle of white wine on the countertop. He opened a drawer, took out a corkscrew and then tore off the foil top from the bottle. Keira shivered a little and he said, “Cold?”

“A bit.”

There was another fireplace in the kitchen, but this one was cold and dark. Beyond the windows leading to the covered deck, the world was a whirl of white. Light faded from the sky, the heavy clouds dropped even lower, and the flurries of snow were thick enough that it looked as though someone had hung a sheet from the edge of the patio cover.

“There's extra firewood on the deck. I'll get some.”

“Okay, fine,” Keira said as Nathan walked to the back door, “but first, tell me what you were going to say upstairs. When you were looking at me so funny. When you said, ‘oh, it's nothing, never mind.’ “

“Keira,” he said with a sigh, “just let it go.”

“Oh no,” she assured him, shaking her head at the sheer folly of the man. “That's never gonna happen. So it'll be quicker and

easier on both of us if you'll just spit it out.”

“It's nothing.”

“Then *say* it,” she insisted.

One hand on the doorknob, he stared at her for a long moment, as if trying to decide whether to speak or not. At last, though, he nodded and said, “Fine. I was thinking about the sex. And I wondered just how far you were willing to go to get me to stay here for the whole month.”

Keira felt the slap of his words like a physical blow. Stung, humiliated and furious, she glared at him with enough heat that, if there were any justice at all, he would have been a pillar of fire. “Are you serious?”

“You asked what I was going to say,” he said and watched her through narrowed eyes.

“I didn't know you were going to say *that!*”

“Don't sound so offended.” Nathan looked at her for a long minute. “It's not like I'm surprised.”

“Is that right?”

“For God's sake, Keira, you think this is the first time a woman's used her body to get me to do something for her? We're both adults. You wanted something from me and you used sex to get it.”

Fury whipped through Keira. “You ... you ...”

He shrugged and headed for the back door. “It was good for both of us. We each got what we wanted. No point now in trying to make it something it wasn't.”

He opened the back door to a gust of icy wind and said, "Look, let's just forget it, all right?"

"Sure," she whispered as she watched him hurry barefoot across the icy deck toward the neatly stacked pile of firewood. As he gathered up a few logs and some kindling, the wind whipping the edges of his robe around his calves, Keira jumped off her stool, crossed the floor and quietly closed and locked the back door.

Instantly he straightened up, whirled around and shocked, stared at her through the glass. He crossed to the door and gave the knob a turn and a shake. "Keira, open the damn door."

"I don't think so," she said, folding her arms over her chest and tapping one bare foot against the cold wood floor.

She'd never been so mad in her whole life. *Or* so humiliated. For God's sake, she'd let him do things to her no one had ever done before, only because she'd felt a connection to him somehow. Some minuscule, apparently clearly one-sided, *feeling*. How could he ever think that she would have slept with him just to make him stay?

Did she really give off such a slutty vibe?

And what the hell kind of people was he so used to dealing with that would make him assume she was so coldblooded?

He shivered, clutched the firewood tighter to his chest and gave her a glare she was sure sent his employees scuttling for cover.

Keira, however, remained unmoved.

“Damn it, Keira, it's snowing out here!”

“You're under the porch roof.”

“It's freezing.”

“Start a fire.”

“*On the deck?*”

“Frankly, I don't care if you freeze solid to the spot. I'll put up a small but tasteful plaque, something like Here Stands An American Moron.”

“This is *not* funny!” he shouted, and hunched deeper into his way-too-thin-for-snow robe.

“No kidding!” Keira walked closer to the glass so she could burn her stare into his eyes. “I cannot believe you. You actually think I'd *prostitute* myself to get you to stay here?”

“I didn't say *that*,” he reasoned.

“Oh, yes you did, you pompous, self important, miserable son of a bitch.”

“Look, I was *wrong*, okay?”

“You're just saying that so I'll open the door,” she snapped.

“Damn straight.”

“Well, forget it! You deserve to freeze, but you probably won't. You're so damn cold already, I don't see how you could possibly get any colder!”

“Can you let me the hell in the house and *then* yell at me?”

“Why should I let you in?” she demanded, so furious she was seeing red at the edges of her vision. Amazing. You really *did* see red if you were angry enough.

“Because ... because ...”

“See? Even *you* can't think of a reason!” Keira shouted.

“Hah!” Nathan raised one hand in the air, dropped some kindling on his foot and hopped in place. “Because if I die out here, I won't be able to stay the damn month and your town won't get the money you want so badly.”

“Funny,” she said, thoughtfully tapping one finger against her chin, “but I don't remember it saying anywhere in the will that you had to be *alive* and here for a month. It'd probably be okay if we just prop you up out there on the deck.”

“You are the most infuriating woman I have ever met.”

“You've got a heck of a lot of nerve, Nathan Barrister. You call me a *ho*, and I'm the one who's infuriating?”

He flicked a glance behind him when the wind shifted and a flurry of snow rushed at him from the lake. Turning his gaze back to hers, he said tightly, “Keira, open this damn door and let me inside.”

“And if I don't?”

“Then I'll break the glass with one of these logs and we'll *both* be freezing our asses off.”

Hmm. Good point. Well, she hadn't really planned on letting him become an ice sculpture on the deck. Though the idea was all too tempting at the moment.

“Fine.” She reached out, unlocked the door and then stomped across the room so she was as far from Nathan as she could get and still be able to give him dirty looks.

He rushed into the room, dropped the firewood into the hearth, then pounded his bare feet against the floor and slapped his hands at his arms, trying to get his blood moving.

“Cold?” she asked sweetly.

“Funny,” he snapped, snarling at her.

“As cold as that tiny little marble in your chest? You know, the one you call your *heart*?”

Still shivering, he turned his back on her, started a fire in the hearth and huddled next to the flames as they sputtered, caught and licked at the dry wood. Finally, he turned a look on her. “My heart's got nothing to do with any of this.”

“Since it probably gets very little use, I'm willing to bet you're right,” Keira hissed.

“You tried to freeze me to death!” His voice ricocheted off the high beamed ceiling and Keira didn't even flinch.

“Don't be such a baby.”

“A *baby*?” Astonishment flashed across his features and she waved one hand at him dismissively.

“You're lucky I let you back in.”

There was a long moment of silence before he finally said, “Yeah. You're just crazy enough to have left me out there, so I guess I am lucky. And frostbitten.”

“That was a nasty thing to think about me,” she said, ignoring his complaint, “and even nastier to say.”

“You wouldn't leave it alone. You had to know what I was thinking,” he pointed out, raising his hands high in amazement.

“What is it about women, anyway? They poke and prod at a man to tell them what he's thinking and when he does, they lock him outside in a damn snowstorm!”

“Is it our fault that what you're really thinking is so ridiculously insulting that we aren't prepared?” Keira slapped the granite counter. “We want to know what you're thinking, because, silly us, we actually think your minds *aren't* twisted little black holes.”

“No, you expect us to be like you,” Nathan said tightly, still scowling, still stamping his feet on the floor trying to get his circulation moving again. “All warm and fuzzy, wanting kids and a dog and a white picket fence and—”

“Are you *delusional*?” Keira interrupted his rant. “Who said anything about a picket fence?”

“You don't have to say it,” he challenged, stabbing one finger in the air, pointed at her. “It's who you are. You're Ms. Roots herself. Well, I don't have roots. Don't want any and if I found some I'd rip 'em out of the ground.”

Keira stomped across the room until she was right in front of him. His blue eyes were wild and hot, and the set of his jaw told her he was every bit as furious as she was. Well, good. No point in being mad all by yourself. And besides, he'd probably *never* lost his temper. Not the ever-polite, always distant Nathan Barrister. So, she'd let him rant and rave. Maybe it'd do him some good. God knows it was doing wonders for *her*.

“Your perfect little town has nothing I want or need. As soon as possible, I'll be on my jet, heading for the opposite end of the

world.”

“Good. Nobody's asking you to settle down in Hunter's Landing, *Mr. Wonderful*.” Keira stabbed her finger at him, poking him several times dead center of the chest until he grabbed her finger in self defense. She shook him off a second later. “*I'm* certainly not laying out traps for you—”

“Oh, no?” Nathan countered quickly, apparently enjoying interrupting her for a change. “No traps, huh? Did it happen to escape your notice that we didn't use any protection?”

Keira blanched for a second. Damn it, it *had* escaped her attention. Then his words hit home. *A trap?* “First I'm a slut and now I'm trying to trap you and your golden sperm? Aren't I the busy little bee?”

“You're deliberately avoiding the point,” he said. “We didn't use anything and—”

“Well, jeez,” she said, interrupting him neatly for the umpteenth time, “color me *human*. You know, I don't actually travel with condoms in my jeans on the off chance that some spoiled, snotty rich guy will want to have sex with me and then insult me!”

He grabbed two fists full of his own hair and yanked. Hard. Then, his voice rumbled through the kitchen at a level just below howling. “For God's sake, I just told you I could have made you pregnant and you take *that* as an insult, too?”

“I'm not pregnant,” she snapped. “Just so you know, I'm on the Pill, so no worries there, Mr. Barrister. Your personal fortune

is safe from this particular gold digger.” “I never said you were a—” “But as long as we're on the subject,” she continued, her voice rolling right over his, “how about you?” He grimaced. “I'm not on the Pill.”

“Not the best time to develop a sense of humor, just so you know.”

He raised his hands in mock surrender. “Fine. Fine. I'm healthy. No worries there. You?”

“Contrary to certain people's opinion, I am *not* a slut and, therefore, I, too, am very healthy.” She crossed her fingers over her heart. “Of course, I'll be happy to get you a letter from my doctor to alleviate any further concern ...”

“Damn it, Keira, I'm not calling you a slut for doing whatever you have to do to get what you want. That's how the world works. The real world, that is, not your own personal little Xanadu here.”

“Believe it or not,” she shouted, “I did *not* have sex with you to keep you here for the month!”

“You keep telling yourself that,” he said tightly.

“Jeez,” Keira muttered, shaking her head. “Are you really so far out of touch with humanity? Does *everything* in your world carry a price tag?”

“There are price tags everywhere in the world. Wake up and maybe you'll notice them.”

“You lead an ugly life,” she whispered.

“At least I live with my eyes open,” he countered. “I know that people are mostly out for themselves and willing to do just about

anything to take care of number one.”

“So I slept with you to get what I want?”

“Wouldn't be the first time it's happened.”

Keira flinched at the coldness in his eyes. He really did believe that anyone getting close to him was out for his money. His lifestyle. How sad. How unbearably empty his world must be. And the saddest part was, he didn't even realize it.

“And so, because you've surrounded yourself with sycophants and users, you naturally assumed that I was one, too.”

He gritted his teeth and a muscle in his jaw twitched. “And you're telling me you're not.”

“Yeah,” she said, “I am. And what's more, you know it. Somewhere in that cavernous emptiness you call a heart, you know it. And you insulted me on purpose.”

He glared at her. “You are the most—” He caught himself, dragged in a gulp of air and then fired his gaze into hers. “Okay, yeah. I did.”

“Finally!” Keira shouted and scooted a little closer to the kitchen fire, nudging Nathan out of her way. “The question is *why?*”

“Why?”

“Why did you want to insult me, Nathan?” She tipped her head to one side, stared up at him and asked, “If you wanted me to leave, all you had to do was say so.”

“I didn't want you to leave,” he admitted, though it was clear he wasn't happy about the confession.

“Then why?”

“I honestly don't know,” he said and pulled her up close against him. When she tried to push herself free, he simply tightened his hold on her middle, pinning her body to his until Keira could feel his need building again.

Was he so unused to people wanting to be with him just to be with him? Was his world so insulated that the only people he ever saw were the ones who worked for him or wanted something from him?

Slightly mollified, Keira stared up into his eyes and saw questions still lingering in those pale blue depths. The man did things to her she had never expected. He had a way of touching her heart at the oddest moments and she was more than a little confused about that.

She could continue the fight, which, let's face it, she was enjoying. She could give him answers to his questions. She could even make him wonder about lots of other things.

Or, she could do what she most wanted to do.

Tugging the lapels of his thick, cashmere robe aside, Keira stroked his bare chest with the flat of her palms and watched his eyes narrow into slits and his jaw clench as he hissed in a long, slow breath.

Deliberately, she teased him, spreading his robe open, baring his body to her touch. She slid her hands over his still cold skin and felt heat bubble beneath the surface at her touch. Then she tugged the belt of the robe free and swept one hand down to

capture his hard length in a soft, firm grip.

“You know, Nathan,” she said, smoothing her fingers up and down his erection with slow caresses, “the simple truth is, I've wanted you almost from the moment I first saw you. That's why I stayed. That's why I want you again now.”

He groaned as she slipped her free hand down to cup him. “Works for me.”

Eight

The rich scent of Alfredo sauce was beginning to fill the kitchen, but Keira was hungry for something other than food. Strange, but even fighting with Nathan was stimulating.

Her body was quickening as his hands moved to tug her robe open and pull it down off her shoulders to let it pool on the floor at her feet. The air in the kitchen was still icy from the wind that had whooshed inside when the door was opened. Yet she didn't really mind it. Instead, that sensation added to the others already coursing through her body, mingling together, causing a ripple effect of near turmoil in her system.

His hands swept up and down her body, his long, talented fingers exploring every curve as she ran her own hands over him. His broad, muscular chest was clearly defined, sculpted and tanned, making him look as though he were carved from the same kind of honey-toned wood that graced the lodge.

But he was warm and ready, and his body was already pressing into hers, letting her know that he felt the same blood pounding need she did.

“Why do I want you so much?” he whispered, his fingers stroking, sliding down her body to caress the heat between her thighs.

Keira sighed and swayed unsteadily on her feet as a rush of something delicious began to build within. “Why do you ask so

many questions?" she answered.

He smiled, and her heart flipped in her chest. A weird sensation, but a shockingly good one.

"You're the one with all the questions," he murmured, dipping his head to kiss the curve of her neck, to nibble at the base of her throat.

Her hands moved to his shoulders and she clung to him desperately as he continued to smooth his fingers over her damp heat. Instinctively, he found that one most-sensitive bud and concentrated his attentions on it, thumb and forefinger gliding, stroking until Keira's blood felt as if it were boiling just beneath her skin.

"No questions," she said, licking dry lips and trying to catch her breath. "Not now, anyway."

He slid one hand up to hold the back of her neck while his other hand continued to gently torture her with anticipation. His blue eyes caught hers and Keira wished she knew what he was thinking now. Now, when passion simmered in pale eyes gone dark with desire.

She wanted to give him what he was giving her, so she slid one hand down his body until she could encircle his length with her fingers again. He swallowed a great gulp of air before lowering his head to take her mouth with his. His tongue plunged into her mouth, claiming her fiercely, desperately, as if he couldn't wait another moment to taste her.

And Keira matched his need with her own. She shifted

position, sliding her hands around his waist to splay them against his back. She felt his heart pounding and knew her own was in sync that wild rhythm.

His fingers dipped into her center, first one, then two, diving in and out of her heat, touching her deeply, but not deep enough. Not as deeply as she wanted him. Needed him.

When he tore his mouth from hers, he stared down at her and whispered, "We'll never make it back up to the bedroom."

"Not a chance," she agreed, already so hungry for him, her arms and legs were trembling.

"Here then," he said and, moving quickly, he picked her up, carried her to the counter and plopped her down onto it.

"Yikes!" The cold granite bit into her heated skin and sent a chill slicing right through her.

He grinned wickedly. "Cold?"

She narrowed her eyes on him. "You enjoyed that. Payback for locking you outside?"

"Just a little," he admitted, then leaned in and bit her bottom lip gently, swiping his tongue along the crease in her mouth. "But I'm willing to warm you up again, too."

She reached for him, sliding her arms around his neck, pulling him in closer. "A generous man," she said with a sigh as his mouth came down on hers.

As he kissed her, he parted her thighs, moved in close and entered her body on a rush of sensation that poured through the two of them, linking them in a way that neither had experienced

or expected.

Keira arched into him, moving her hips on the hard granite in a desperate attempt to get closer, to take him more fully within. She closed her eyes and saw swirls of vibrant color as her body leaped into life. Her being soared, and something deep within her unexpectedly awoke. Her eyes opened again as that thought sang through her mind. She watched him and felt new feelings stir within. New emotions. New and incredibly fragile threads of connection.

Nathan's hands dropped to her hips and he held her still, trapped within his steely grip as he plunged in and out of her depths in a ferocious rhythm designed to drive them both quickly over the edge.

The world dropped away and it was just the two of them. Nothing beyond existed anymore. Passion swelled and trapped them in a silky web of desire. Keira held on to him, and lost herself in his strength, surrendering to the twist of anticipation curling inside her.

Her body tightened, her mouth mated with his and she hooked her legs around Nathan's waist, pulling him in harder, deeper. She felt his body's invasion of hers all the way to her soul and knew she would never get enough of him. Knew that this man was touching more than her body. He'd already laid claim to a piece of her heart.

Whether she wanted it or not, she cared for him. More than she wanted to think about. More than she dared to admit.

She pulled free of his kiss so she could watch his eyes as he claimed her. His beautiful blue gaze locked with hers, as though he understood her silent plea and felt the same way.

Her body quickened, anticipation exploded and a climax stronger than anything she'd ever known before shattered inside her, splintering itself into brilliant colors that tore through her heart and spilled into her bones.

Nathan kept his gaze fixed on hers and when she cried out his name, he gave himself up to the release clamoring inside him and followed her over the ragged edge of control, into oblivion.

By morning, Nathan was rethinking the whole situation.

The night before, he'd thought it a great idea having Keira stay with him. They'd come together often during the night and each time had been more incredible than the first. He felt as though each time he touched her, he felt something more, something different. And he'd reveled in their time together, knowing that in the morning, she would be going home.

At least, that's what he had thought.

He gritted his teeth and stared out the bank of windows in the kitchen. Outside the lodge, the world was a wash of white. Snow piled on the sides of the deck and blew in under the overhang to coat the wood planks with a layer of snow at least a foot deep. And that was under the porch roof. It was much deeper everywhere else, and it was still falling.

He'd never seen anything like it.

“It's mid-March and it looks like Siberia in December out

there,” he muttered.

Keira came up behind him, threaded her arms around his waist and rested her cheek against his back. “Welcome to the high Sierras.”

“I tried the phone,” he said. “No dial tone.”

“Uh-oh.”

“What’s that mean?” He turned his head to look at her.

“It means,” she said, “that with the phone lines down this early in the storm, it’s a big one.”

Nathan glowered at her. “Which translates into ...?”

She shrugged. “If the roads aren’t completely blocked already, they soon will be.”

“Surely you have crews to take care of that.”

“Of course we do,” Keira said, smiling up at him. “But they can’t roll till the heavy snows are over, and even when they do ...”

He didn’t like the look on her face. The look that said *he’s not going to like this*.

“What?”

“They take care of the town first and then the main stretches of highway. Those are priorities for obvious reasons.”

“And ...?”

“And,” she said with another shrug, “the roads up here probably won’t be cleared for a few days.”

“A few days?”

“Maybe sooner,” she said, he suspected simply to placate him. “But the private roads and the roads leading to them are pretty

much a lower priority. Unless there's an emergency or something. If the road crews get a call like that, they'll come right away.”

“*The phones are out.*” He paused, then said, “Wait. I've got my satellite phone.”

“But no one else around here has one.”

“Right.” Nathan shook his head.

She pulled her arms from around his waist, shoved her hands into the pockets of her robe and said, “Look, we do the best we can. And people generally privately contract to get their roads cleared, so that takes care of a lot of problems.”

“And does the lodge have a private contract?”

“I don't know.”

“Perfect.” Nathan blew out a breath. This month was turning into a real trial. “How long is this going to keep up?” He shook his head as he shifted his gaze across the lake, watching snow slide in sideways, riding a wind that was rattling the windows.

“Well,” she said, giving him a brilliant smile, “if it keeps up, at least it won't be coming down anymore.”

He glanced at her. “Oh, very humorous.”

She moved to stand in front of him, leaning both palms against an icy window to get as good a view as she could of the blustering storm outside. “I always laughed when my dad said it.” She glanced at him over her shoulder. “Of course, I was ten.”

Nathan wasn't amused. Nor was he charmed. He'd wanted her here last night—and he'd enjoyed every minute of his time with her. But that didn't mean he wanted her at the lodge for freaking

ever. Scowling, he saw the wind spit snow at the windows and knew that she wouldn't be going anywhere. At least not today.

As if she was reading his mind, Keira turned around, leaned back against the floor-to-ceiling windows and tipped her head to one side, staring up at him. "So, what'll we do while we're stuck inside?"

He knew that gleam in her eye. Hell, he'd seen it most of the night. He was willing to bet they hadn't had more than a couple of hours' sleep. Yet even thinking about being inside her, touching her, holding her, tasting her, made him hard and eager again.

Which was clearly unacceptable.

He wasn't a kid to be led around by his groin. And damned if he'd let himself get any more tangled up with Keira than he already was. Just because she was here, with him, didn't mean she had to be *with* him.

"Uh-oh," she said, tugging the edges of her robe more firmly together over her chest. "It suddenly got very cold in here."

He nodded. "I'll turn up the thermostat."

"That's not what I meant."

"What're you talking about?" he asked as he walked to the coffee pot on the kitchen counter.

God.

The counter.

How was he ever supposed to walk through this kitchen again without remembering her sitting naked on that counter? Without thinking about how she'd taken him so deep inside her he'd

thought he might never find his way out again?

Crap.

Now he had a headache.

Rubbing his temple, he asked, "Coffee?"

"Sure. I'll have a cup of coffee, black, with answers."

"Huh?" He half turned to look at her as she walked slowly across the kitchen. Did her hips always sway like that, he wondered, or was she doing it purposely now?

"I said I'd like some answers."

"To what?" He was stalling. He knew it. He poured two cups of coffee, handed her one, then stalled again by taking a long sip of his own.

"To why your eyes suddenly looked even colder than this stormy day outside."

"Keira," he said tightly, "you're making too much of nothing."

"So you're *happy* I'm here," she coaxed, taking a drink of her coffee and moving in closer to him.

"Delirious," he assured her.

"Liar."

"Why do you do that? Accuse me of lying at every opportunity?"

"A better question is why am I always right?"

He set his coffee cup down, tugged at the belt of his robe and said, "You're not right. Women always say that to win an argument, but it's never true."

"Of course it is," Keira said, sipping her coffee. "Women are

right because we *see* everything and we *remember* everything.”

“Sure.”

“Just like I can see that you're trying to start a fight so you won't have to answer my question.”

He sighed. This woman got to him like no one else ever had. And he was forced to admit that part of the reason why was because she never took any of his crap. She always called him on everything.

“Fine,” he said tightly and met her gaze with a hard look designed to put some distance between them. “I was thinking that it would be more comfortable if you could have gone home this morning. Happy?”

“Delirious,” she said, throwing his own word back at him. Then she turned around and pulled a chair out from under the kitchen table. Curling one leg under herself, she plopped down, propped her elbow on the table and took another sip of coffee before saying, “Was that so hard?”

Nathan just blinked at her. Any other woman would have been insulted, giving him all kinds of frosty attitude right now. Figured Keira would react differently. She had to everything else.

“You're not mad.”

“Nope, sorry to disappoint.” She took long drink of her coffee, then set the cup onto the table. “Nathan, I know you don't really want me here, and that's okay. I mean, I hadn't planned on staying forever, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“But it's really storming out there, so I'm stuck here and you're stuck with me. We might as well make the best of it, don't you think?”

A constant surprise. Keira Sanders never failed to bewilder him with her reactions to things. He couldn't depend on what she'd do next, because she never responded to *anything* the way he expected her to. How was a man supposed to find his emotional footing if a woman kept changing on him?

“I suppose that's logical.”

“Excellent,” she said. “I've got a few ideas on what we could do today.” She hopped off her chair, stumbled over her own foot and slammed into his chest. She grabbed him in self-preservation and spilled his coffee down the front of his robe. Grinning up at him, she said, “Maybe we should do some laundry first.”

Cold fettuccine Alfredo for breakfast, a load of wash done and in the dryer, and the snow was still blowing outside.

Keira wandered through the lodge, peeking into closets and exploring rooms that were still standing empty waiting for the decorator. From every room, the view was outstanding and displayed the growing storm to its advantage.

She chewed at her bottom lip and wondered how the town was doing, then reminded herself that the people of Hunter's Landing dealt with snowstorms every year. The only difference with this storm was that she wasn't there. She couldn't see for herself that everyone was fine, hunkered down to wait out the snow.

She couldn't even *call* anyone to check on them. The phone

lines were still down. Remembering the look on Nathan's face when he'd tried the phone again an hour ago made her smile.

Leaving one of the bedrooms, she wandered back into the upper hall, passed the master bedroom and paused for a moment, remembering everything she and Nathan had done together the night before. Her heart filled, her body ached with tired satisfaction and the small smile on her face faded slowly. She knew that today, he was regretting their time together.

He probably wasn't used to facing his nighttime bed partner the next day. Well, this was pretty new for Keira, too. But at least she was trying to make the best of it. Unlike Nathan, who'd buried himself in busywork on his laptop. The man had avoided talking to her for hours now and the quiet—except for his fingers hitting the keyboard—was starting to really bother her.

The wind howled around the corners of the house, sounding as though it was looking for a way in. Shivering, Keira headed for the stairs. She held onto the banister, and started down, her bare feet making no sound at all on the dark carpet runner that covered the wood planks.

Walking into the great room, she headed for the fire crackling in the hearth, turned her back to it and stared at Nathan, just a few feet away. He hadn't even looked up when she entered the room.

“Ignoring me doesn't make me invisible,” she said abruptly.

“Huh? What?” He raised his head, turned to look at her and asked, “What did you say?”

“I said, are you going to be sitting in front of that computer all day?”

“I have work to do.”

“That you can't send anywhere because the phone lines are down.”

“It's not e-mail, it's work,” he said.

“Fine.” She blew out a breath, walked toward him, then squatted beside him until they were eye to eye. “My point is, does *everything* have to be done *today*?”

“Keira ...”

She hopped up, plopped onto the couch beside him and leaned in, staring at the computer screen. “Okay, okay. So you have to work. Tell me about it. Talk to me.”

He sighed in resignation, and Keira hid a smile. “I'm working up a new schedule for *impromptu* visits to my hotels.”

She looked at him, stupefied for a second, then burst out laughing.

“What's so funny?”

She waved one hand, shook her head and fought for breath. Laughter spilled from her throat, bubbled into the room and crashed down around them as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and gave him a fast hug. “Nathan, you're really something,” she said when she finally got control of her giggles.

“I'm so happy I can entertain you.”

“Don't you get it?” she asked, grinning. “You're making a *schedule* for *impromptu* visits. The whole point of *impromptu* is

no schedule.”

Nathan scowled at her, then at the computer screen. He felt like an idiot. But in his own defense, he'd only been making busy work anyway. Anything to keep his mind off the fact that Keira was here and way too accessible.

He had no intention of getting in any deeper with her. And the best way to keep from doing that was to keep his hands to himself. Yet ... everytime he heard her breathe, or caught a whiff of her scent, all he wanted to do was carry her back upstairs and bury himself inside her.

He wanted to experience again that incredible warmth that he'd only found with her. But it wouldn't be right. He wanted to enjoy her, enjoy their time together and still be able to walk away. Because he *would* be leaving. Nothing would stop him.

She reached out and closed the computer, then clambered onto his lap. Threading her arms around his neck, she looked into his eyes and asked, “What do you do when you're not working?”

He didn't have an answer. Strange, but he'd never really thought about it. “I'm always working.”

“Well, let's see what we can do about that.”

Nine

An hour later, Nathan rolled out of bed, his body replete, his mind racing. He glanced at Keira languidly stretching on the mattress and had to fight down an urge to lay back down and gather her up close. And because that thought was uppermost in his brain, he took a step or two away from the bed just for good measure.

“Now,” she said, sweeping her hair up to lay across the pillow like a red-gold banner, “wasn't that more fun than planning schedules?”

He grabbed his robe from the end of the bed, slipped it on, then stood up to look down at her. “If we spend the next few days like this,” he said with a smile he couldn't quite prevent curving his mouth, “by the time the storm ends, we'll be dead.”

“I can think of worse ways to go.”

So could he. That was one of his problems. Always before, Nathan's relationships with women had been uncomplicated and straightforward. Before he took a woman to bed, he made sure she felt as he did about affairs—that they should be undemanding, easily slipped in and out of, with no hard feelings, no promises made, so no promises broken.

Ordinarily, he never would have become involved with a woman like Keira. She had “complications” written all over her. And yet, at this moment, he couldn't really bring himself to regret

what he'd found with her.

Regrets would come later. Once he was gone and safely wrapped up in his normal world. Once he was far enough away from her eyes that they didn't haunt him every damn minute.

“You're an unusual woman.”

She sat up, completely comfortable with her own nudity, and swung her hair back from her face. “Thanks.”

“You're welcome,” he said, his gaze dipping to the swell of her breasts, then back to her fathomless green eyes. She was tempting. More tempting than anyone he'd ever known before. He was walking through unfamiliar territory here and he felt as though he were trying to negotiate his way through quicksand.

What he needed was a little space. A little time to himself to gather his defenses and shore up the inner walls she seemed so determine to shatter.

Decision made, he said, “I'm going downstairs to get some work done.”

She looked at him for a long second or two, shook her head, then flopped back onto the bed, dragged the quilt up to cover herself and muttered, “Of course you are.”

A few hours later, Nathan was hunched determinedly over his computer, doing an excellent job of pretending Keira wasn't in the room.

Tossing the book she'd been trying to read for the last half hour onto the sofa cushion beside her, she frowned at the back of his head and said pointedly, “What're you doing?”

“Working.”

“*Again*, you mean. Well, I can see that, Mr. Chatty. Working on what? Still trying to find a way to schedule spontaneity?”

“No.” He shook his head, turned back to the computer and typed something else.

“Then what?”

“You're not going to give me any peace at all, are you?”

“Probably not,” she said.

“Fine.” He leaned back into the couch, winced and retrieved the book she'd dropped out from behind his back and set it on the coffee table. When he was settled again, he glanced at her and said, “I'm making some notes on how to confront the manager of the Gstaad Barrister.”

“Switzerland,” she said with a sigh. Then she asked, “Confront? About what?”

“I gave him specific instructions last time on how I wanted him to deal with the housekeeping staff, and they haven't been implemented.”

“Why not?”

He looked at her. “How the hell do I know?”

She curled her legs up under her, propped her elbow on the back of the sofa and leaned in. “What's wrong with the way *he's* handling things, then?”

Nathan sighed. “He's very ... relaxed in his position. He allows the employees too much leeway in their work.”

“Does it all get done?”

“Yes, but—”

“So maybe,” Keira said, “he knows his people better than you do?”

“Maybe, but—”

She smiled. “So if you weren't stomping around bellowing orders like a bully, maybe you'd get more cooperation out of him?”

“I do *not* bellow,” Nathan said and sat up straight.

“But you *do* bully.”

He blew out a disgusted breath. “You don't understand. There's a right way and a wrong way to run a business, Keira.”

“Oh, I understand,” she said, reaching out to pat his shoulder, then letting her fingertips linger there just a moment or two. “Believe me, as mayor, I have to deal with people all the time. And it's just not logical to assume you can use the same strategy when dealing with different types of people.”

“It's always worked before,” he pointed out, scowling at her.

Keira scooted closer, leaned down and looked him dead in the eye. This she knew about. He might own all of the gorgeous hotels in the world, but Nathan Barrister was *not* a people person.

“But the thing is, Nathan, you don't know if it might work better doing things differently.”

“The company's policy has been in effect since my grandfather started the first hotel.”

“Jeez,” she said softly. “No wonder it's out-of-date.”

“I didn't say it was out-of-date.”

“Nope. I did.” Turning around, she sat back beside Nathan, tucked her hand through the crook of his arm and cuddled in. “Like, for instance, when Donna—she owns the pottery shop on the outskirts of town—wanted to increase her number of parking spaces in front of her shop, I went to bat for her with the town council. After all, her shop is out of the way, it wouldn't infringe on anyone else's parking. Why not?”

“Okay ...”

“But, when the Clearwater wanted the same deal, I had to tell them no. Because they're in the middle of town, lakeside, and we just couldn't afford to lose tourist parking slots to make more room for their customers. Different situations, different rules.”

“Ah,” he said, smiling at her, “but the situations in my hotels are all the same. Each one is a Barrister. So the rules should apply evenly.”

She nudged his shoulder and laughed shortly. “The hotels are all in different places. Different traditions, different employees.”

“But—”

“Would you decorate your Barbados hotel the same way you decorated the one in say, D.C.?”

“No ...”

“So, same thing applies.” Leaning her head against his shoulder, she added, “Cut your managers a little slack, Nathan. Trust them to know their people and their hotels. Lighten up a little and you might be surprised by the results you get.”

He frowned thoughtfully and shifted his gaze to the screen

of his laptop, where his carefully written-up notes were marked with bullet points. “You couldn't have made your point an hour ago? Before I started working on this stupid list?”

Keira laughed and Nathan took a heartbeat of time to simply enjoy the sound as it swirled around him. She was cuddled in close and he liked the feel of her pressed against him. He liked knowing she was sitting beside him reading quietly—or that she was in the kitchen making grilled cheese sandwiches—or tripping over a rug on her way down the hall.

He just liked knowing she was here. Outside, the storm was still blowing and Nathan was willing to admit, at least to himself, that if he had been here, trapped by himself, he would have been half crazy by now.

But having her here made for a different sort of crazy. Keira was becoming too much a part of his world. He hated knowing that he was beginning to count on hearing her move through the house. That he was looking forward to their next argument. That he wanted her even more now than he had the first time they were together.

Somehow, she was worming her way right into the heart of him. And Nathan wasn't sure how to keep her at a distance anymore. Or even if he wanted to. Which worried him more than a little.

He hadn't thought about anything but business for years. Now, his life was on hold and he was in a situation where the rules had all changed on him. He was in a place where there was

too little work to do and too few distractions to keep him from having too much time to think. To wonder. To ask himself a few fundamental questions. Like what his life might have been like if he'd taken a different path.

He supposed most men wondered those things from time to time, but he never had. He'd never had any doubts about his life or how he lived it.

Until now.

Until Keira.

“What're you thinking?” she asked.

“No way,” he said. “I'm not playing that game again. I'm in no mood to get frostbite, thanks.”

Keira laughed, gave him a punch on the arm and said, “Fine, coward. Can I use your satellite phone?”

He turned and looked at her, curiosity taking small, annoying bites of him. “Who're you going to call? The lines are all down, remember?”

“My sister,” Keira said. “I know, it's really long distance, you know, to London and all. But I won't stay on long and I'll pay for the call.”

Something inside him eased back and he really didn't want to explore what that might mean. Instead, he rummaged through the briefcase beside him on the floor, came up with the phone and handed it over. “Talk as long as you want. My treat.”

“Wow. You'll do *anything* to get me to leave you alone, huh?”

The answer to that question should have been yes. Since he

wasn't sure anymore if it was or not, he said nothing, just turned back to his computer and began to delete his well-thought-out letter.

Keira punched in her sister's number as she walked into the kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee. While she waited for Kelly to pick up, she took a sip and leaned back against the kitchen counter.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Kel,” Keira said, pushing away from the counter and walking toward the bank of windows. Her gaze fixed on the storm still blowing like crazy out there, she listened to Kelly's excited yelp and settled in for a good talk.

“Where have you *been*?” Kelly demanded. “I've been trying to get you forever but the phone at home's out of order and, by the way, how are you calling me and whose phone is it? I didn't recognize the number.”

Keira laughed, took another sip of hot coffee and said, “Big storm blew in yesterday. Phone lines are down.”

“Then how—”

“It's a satellite phone,” Keira said quickly. “Nathan let me borrow it.”

“*Nathan*, is it?” Kelly whistled a little, then asked, “what's he doing at the house?”

“He's not at the house, *Mom*—I'm at his place.”

“You mean the lodge?”

“That's the one.” Keira grinned and watched her reflection

smile back at her.

“So this storm. How bad is it?”

“Phone lines down, remember?”

“Which means the roads are blocked, which means you're stranded in that big lodge with Nathan Barrister?”

Keira laughed. “All that college wasn't a waste after all. You're really quick.”

“Very funny. How did this happen? Oh, K. You slept with him, didn't you?”

“Kelly ...” Keira glanced back over her shoulder, as if Nathan could hear her sister's voice.

“You did. I can *so* hear it in your tone. It's that, *this is none of your business, butt out, Kelly*, tone. I know it well.”

“And yet,” Keira said through gritted teeth, “you always seem to ignore it.”

“I'm sorry. No, wait. I'm not. Honest to God, Keira, are you nuts? This is Nathan Barrister, for God's sake. He is soooooo not your type.”

A quick jolt of anger shot through Keira but she managed to squelch it before she could shout. “What exactly *is* my type then, Kel? You tell me.”

“Someone remotely normal? As in, not some damn recluse? Someone who isn't one of the richest men on the planet? Someone who isn't *renowned* for strings of one night stands?”

Well, Keira thought bitterly, she'd had to ask. “You're really making me sorry I called,” she muttered and took another drink

of coffee, appreciating the scalding heat as it sang down her throat.

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