



Back to Basics

ERIN  
McCARTHY

# **BACK TO BASICS**

**By**

**Erin McCarthy**

Kindle Edition

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Back to Basics is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed herein are fictitious and are not based on any real persons living or dead.

# Chapter One

THEY were not the words a bride expects to hear on her wedding day.

"Uh, Angel, Brian's not coming. Last night he ran off and married a stripper named Laila."

Angel found her brother Luke's joke in poor taste, even as her stomach did a startled flip. She took a quick glance at the wall clock in the church dressing room. Brian was only five minutes late. She wasn't worried. Annoyed? Yes. But not worried. Brian was notoriously late for everything.

She said, "That's not funny. In fact, it's pure evil to tease a woman on her wedding day." Even a semi-fake wedding. A last glance in the mirror had her wondering again if she should have worn nylons with her knee length dress.

Smoothing her blond hair back, she said in distraction, "Why are you still here, Luke? Go stand at the altar and act like a best man."

Luke's cold hand reaching out and touching her arm made her jump and peer a little more closely at him. He looked pale, his tan washed out under his sickly expression, and his blue eyes were nervous. His mouth opened, but no sound came out.

Her stomach forgot the flips, and did a raucous dive somewhere into the area of her white beaded shoes.

Oh, no. He couldn't have. He wouldn't have.

"Luke?" she croaked out.

He gave a guilty shrug. "I'm sorry. I tried to stop him... or I mean I would have stopped him if I hadn't been passed out cold in the back of my truck." That explained Luke's slow movements and pasty complexion this morning. "When I came to, Jake and Eddie told me all about it."

"What did they tell you?" She shook his arm off. Brian wouldn't do this to her. They had a deal.

She paused. This was Brian Logan they were talking about, whose self-control was slightly greater than that of a two year old. Yes, he would. "Oh, God!"

She should have known better than to trust Brian. She should have handcuffed him to her yesterday. It had crossed her mind briefly the week before, but she had thought she was overreacting. Obviously not.

"Jake and Eddie said he married the girl who was performing at his bachelor party last night. In one of those love chapels down in Gatlinburg. They talked to Brian and the girl afterwards." Luke was now turning green, swaying on his hung over feet, and she thought it served him right.

They both knew Brian was a loose screw sometimes. Luke had no right to get wasted when he should have been protecting Brian from himself. And to leave him in the care of their half-brothers Jake and Eddie was just lunacy. They couldn't even take care of their pet goldfish, Ginger<sup>7</sup>, named after her six predecessors, all dead from lack of nourishment.

Tears of frustration were now springing to her eyes and she fought them to no avail. Instantly they were racing down her face and she swiped at them, her voice breaking. "You know what this means, don't you?"

He ran his fingers through his blond, rather scraggly hair, shooting her an agonized glance. "That your heart is broken?"

"No!" she sobbed, reaching for him, needing him to comfort her. "It means I don't get the money." The thought made her sob all the harder and she flung her arms around her brother, leaning her head on the lapel of his gray suit.

Wrapping her in his arms and patting her back, he said in confusion, "The money?"

"Yes!" All her anguish and frustration rose out on a wail. It had been the perfect, most logical plan she had ever formulated, and it was all ruined. "I was supposed to get ten thousand dollars for marrying Brian!"

"What?" He stepped back so suddenly that she stumbled in her heels, and the strap of her white wedding dress slipped off her shoulder. "You were going to marry Brian for that stupid college bet money?"

She tilted her head back up to meet his gaze. Astonished, she said, "Of course. Why else would I marry Brian?" Not for his responsible behavior and witty repartee, that's for sure. Granted, she and Brian had been platonic friends for fifteen years and she cared about him, but she could never love a man who thought an organizer was a sex toy.

"Maybe because you love him, and want to spend the rest of your life with him?" He blinked his bloodshot eyes hard. "Oh, hell, Angel. It's probably better that he ran off with a stripper. You can't marry Brian for money."

She was astonished that her own brother had actually thought she was in love with Brian. Brian! Of course Luke didn't know that she and Brian had made an arrangement six weeks ago. They were the last two unmarried from a group of ten friends who had made a bet a decade ago in college. A bet that was made under the influence of cheap beer and maudlin movies, and had everyone vowing they would not fall into the trap of love and get married.

They had decided that the last person in the group left unmarried would be the winner. Until Becky Strom had gotten sentimental and suggested that the winner shouldn't be rewarded for not falling in love. The money would be awarded only when that last person finally walked down the aisle. Which was supposed to have been her and Brian.

As the last two remaining in the running, if they married each other, they could split the pool, that thanks to stock market wheeling and dealing was now worth twenty grand. Brian had agreed with her logic. Well, okay his exact words had been that he wouldn't mind being saddled with his good old pal Angel as a wife for ten thousand bucks.

They had intended to marry, take the money and run. Separately. With such perfectly opposite personalities, she knew she and Brian could not live together for even one day after collecting the cash. It was a perfect plan, with no apparent flaws.

Except for Laila. Who could plan for the contingency of cheap alcohol and the wily ways of a cunning exotic dancer?

"There's more to this than you know, Luke. Brian and I had an understanding." Somehow that didn't sound right. But it was the truth. She had worked hard to plan this

fake marriage and Brian was ruining her well-ordered life for a stripper.

She tilted her chin up and said, "I just have to have the money, that's all, and if that means marrying Brian, I will." As an afterthought, she added, "I like Brian."

Okay, that didn't sound very persuasive, especially since Luke was staring at her in open-mouthed horror.

"What do you need ten grand so bad for?"

Maybe it would have been better if she had told Luke why she needed the money earlier. But she hadn't wanted any complications, or to listen to any discussion on why marrying Brian was insane. Or Luke's opinion on why she should only marry for love. She hedged. "Just trust me, okay?"

It was a horrible habit to bite her bottom lip, but she always did when she was nervous or upset. Being both now, she winced when her teeth tore through the tender flesh. Pulling the strap back up on her satin dress, she squelched her emotion and embraced the logical side of her brain for a solution.

She was not a spontaneous person. Growing up with free-spirited parents who made all their life altering decisions based on emotion, she had grown into what her brothers termed a control freak. She preferred to think of it as being organized, efficient, and well prepared.

After all the effort she had gone to, she knew she was not ready to abandon her plan to marry Brian today. Angel still felt it was the best way to obtain her goal.

So when Plan A fails, go for B.

What if Brian hadn't actually married the bachelor party bimbo? It wasn't unheard of for her half-brothers Jake and Eddie to misinterpret information. Particularly after a night swilling tequila.

Plan B. "I'm going after him."

There was a knock on the door and they ignored it. Luke looked at her uncertainly. "You sure you want to go after him? I mean, maybe he's not worth it. And you know you could borrow that money from Dad, whatever you need it for."

Somehow she knew he would catch onto that. Yes, she very well could get the money from their father, but she would see herself homeless first. "Luke, it's not about needing the money today. I want to do this my way. I don't want anything from anyone."

His bloodshot eyes stared at her. She shifted uncomfortably. He said, "Not even love?" She tried to laugh it off. "Love's overrated." And nonexistent.

He stood there in his suit, his corsage smartly pinned to his lapel, his hands twitching at his sides helplessly as he probably pondered the three million places he'd rather be this morning than here with her. He looked so miserable, she wanted to reassure him that she had it all figured out, even if she didn't. This was a life long game they played. He worried about her, and she scoffed. She'd gotten good at trampling down her emotions.

The knock came again, more insistent. "Angel, it's Mom. What are you doing in there with Brian? Nothing I would do I hope!"

Grimacing at her mother's cheerful tone, she said, "It's my mom. She thinks Brian's in here."

She was mortified at the thought of facing all those people and announcing Brian had stood her up. Her heart might not be involved, but she had her pride. "There's a hundred people in the church waiting for a wedding. I can't go out there, I can't! Luke, you've got to help me!"

Panic blind-sided her, and she felt the room start to spin. It was an unfamiliar feeling and she closed her eyes. Holy moly, was she going to faint? Her teeth rattled as Luke's cold hands grabbed her and shook, jarring her out of the blackness that was threatening to swallow her.

"Angel! Listen to me. Here, take my keys." He fished in his pocket and pressed his car keys into her hand. "Go out the back door. Take my car and do whatever you need to do. Make sure you have your cell phone. Call me and let me know what's going on." He took a deep bracing breath. "I'll take care of things here." He squeezed her hand.

Her mother's voice came more enthusiastically through the door. "Angel Weiss! It's time to get married, honey, so if you and Brian are having a quickie, finish up and get on out here."

It set her into action. Grabbing the keys, she kissed him on the cheek and murmured, "Thanks, Luke." She scooped up her white clutch purse that contained her wallet and her cell phone and headed for the door.

She heard Luke calling, "It's me, Jessie. Luke."

Her mother's puzzled voice came booming back. "Luke, what on earth are you doing in a locked room with your sister? I always thought you two were unnaturally close."

She didn't wait to hear his answer to that absurd question. Unnaturally close was a hilarious understatement, considering that she and Luke had been born a mere three months apart to different mothers, the same father. While Angel's mother had been married to Buddy Weiss, Luke's mother obviously had not, and in fact had no idea that he was even married.

Naturally when the truth came out, Angel's mother had divorced her husband, and with a strange sense of kinship for the betrayed, had moved into an apartment with Luke's mother shortly after his birth. The new mothers had happily dressed their babies in matching boy-girl outfits. If anything was unnatural in Angel and Luke's relationship, that had to be it.

Throwing open the back door, she charged into the parking lot, blinking against the bright June sun. Feeling like a Julia Roberts movie, she ran to Luke's SUV, checking left and right for wayward wedding guests. Hauling herself into the big vehicle, she nearly ripped her skirt trying to lift her leg that high. A minute later she was headed south.

The forty minute drive from Knoxville to Gatlinburg gave her thirty-nine minutes too many to reflect on her train wrecked plans. So much for the simple church ceremony with closest family and friends, and the quiet reception planned for afterwards at the Logan's country club.

Just the thought of Brian's parents made her groan out loud. They were going to die. But before they died surely they would kill Brian. They had threatened to before, but had as of yet lacked the temerity to take that final step. Public humiliation and the loss of thousands of dollars ought to do it.

As she lumbered past motels and waffle houses, she dialed Brian's cell phone number and listened to it ring. She nearly ran a red light when a woman's sensual voice purred into the phone.

"Hello?"

"Where's Brian?" She was not in the mood to play games with Laila, the Love Goddess.

There was a pause, then a very smug laugh, that undoubtedly set men to howling. The kind of laugh that makes women grit their teeth and contemplate how many ways they can call a woman a tramp behind her back.

"He's still sleeping. Who's this?"

Gunning it as the light turned green, she darted her eyes around and tried to get her bearings. She was supposed to keep going straight. At least she thought she was. She snapped into the phone, "This is the woman he's supposed to be marrying right now. Go wake him up."

"Well, I don't think I should." Her honey filled voice poured out in sticky sweetness. "He's awfully worn out. I do that to men, you know."

"I bet you do. But while you may have been a good old time, Brian is marrying me. Put him on the phone." So she could tear his sorry hide to bits.

"Brian can't marry you." Laila delivered this announcement with glee. "He's already married to me. Last night we had one of those cute little chapel ceremonies."

"You're lying." Please, let her be lying.

"Why would I lie about that? It's the truth, sweetie. The poor thing blurted it all out last night. How you strong-armed him into getting married, but you won't even sleep with him. Cold and controlling, that's what you are. Brian needs a warm woman like me."

Slamming on the brakes before she hit the sedan in front of her, she hung up on Laila and threw the phone on the other seat. The little weasel. He'd gone and done a tell-all with a stripper. And since when had Brian ever wanted to sleep with her? This was the first she'd heard of it. Unless he counted the time he'd said, "What would happen if you and I had sex? With me being so tall and you being so short, would it work?"

If that had been a seduction attempt, it had gone over her much lower to the ground head. With rigid fingers on the steering wheel, she tried to determine where she was going. If Brian and Laila had gotten married in Gatlinburg, he had probably taken her to the cabin he had rented for the week. It was supposed to be a honeymoon cabin, for Brian and Angel Logan, to satisfy the terms of the bet and give the appearance they were truly married.

She realized she ought to have seen the rental place by now. Honeymoon Happy Cabin Rentals was a little hard to miss. She slowed down to look more carefully.

An hour later she had concluded three things.

First of all, she had no sense of the absurd. As she drove through the exhaust fume filled town of Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, she was not amused by the T-shirt shops, outlet malls, and helicopter rides. While Brian's idea of a fun week was obviously hand-pulled taffy and Dollywood, theme park of the famed blonde, hers was not.

Secondly, as a directionally challenged person, she should never have attempted this impulsive drive without step-by-step directions printed off the Internet because the GPS

had decided to abandon her in the mountains along with her sanity. She was lost.

Thirdly, if Plan A and Plan B both fail, it would be nice if you actually had a plan C.

Which she was determined to create when she realized she had left the town behind, and was driving through what she suspected was the Smoky Mountain National Park. Gatlinburg was supposed to be the next town after Pigeon Forge. She seemed to have missed it completely.

No Honeymoon Happy Cabins here. Turning into a small pull-off that boasted a scenic view and trails, she dropped her head onto the steering wheel and banged it for good measure.

"Damn, damn!" The heavy summer Saturday traffic was zipping by on the road as she contemplated what to do. Feeling slightly nauseous from the frantic drive and the hot June sun beating through the windows, she decided to get out of the car. It was a tranquil view, beckoning her, urging her to step out and relax amongst the cool shade of the trees.

Opening the door, she listened to the quiet, to the birds chirping, to the soft hum of the cars whizzing by on the road. It was rather pretty here. This was what she had envisioned when Brian had said they could go to the Smoky Mountains. Verdant trees and quiet trails.

She landed on the gravel parking lot in her heels, pushing her skirt back down in place, and started off on wobbly feet. She had chosen to wear nearly three inch heels so the disparity between her five foot two and Brian's six foot three wouldn't be so noticeable.

It made walking in the woods a little difficult. Stumbling along the path for fifty feet she dropped onto a large rock and brooded. She wasn't going to find Brian, and even if she did, what would she do with him? In all likelihood he was married.

To a warm woman.

Which meant Angel could not collect the bet money. The terms had been no money until the last person was married, and without Brian, she was out of candidates for the position of temporary groom.

A burning sensation began to prick her ankle. "Ouch." Looking down, she spotted a black insect on her bare leg and she swatted it off. "You bit me, you little maggot." The thick woods were peaceful, but fraught with ankle-biting, wild animal attacking dangers for a city girl from Chicago wearing wedding clothes. She didn't even have her bouquet to beat anything off with. She'd tossed that in the back seat when she'd fled the church.

Which reminded her of her family. Luke was probably having a time of it. With Jake and Eddie probably equally as hung over, if not worse, that left things to Luke and her father. Which meant that left things to Luke, since her father was incapable of handling responsibility. Either way, someone was going to have to cancel the reception.

On second thought, though, there was no way her family would accept a missing bride and groom as a reason to cancel a reception. Free food and free booze equaled a party in their minds, and she had the sudden vision of her brothers dancing on the tables, a drink in both hands, while her two younger sisters, Hannah and Dixie, lead the Cupid Shuffle in suggestive dresses.

It might not be a bad thing after all that she wasn't there.

Except that she was getting hot sitting here, and her ankle now sported an angry red lump where her little insect friend had chomped on her. Giving it a tentative scratch to ease the itch, she gave a cautious glance around for any raccoons or skunks that might be in her path, and stood up, breathing deeply.

The fresh air break was over. It was time to find the cabin or go back to Knoxville, neither of which sounded the least appealing.

The trees made a complete green canopy over her head, and only tiny patches of blue sky were visible overhead, making her question why she didn't spend more time outdoors. She tried to remember the last time she'd been in the woods. It came back to her immediately.

She had been ten years old. A Campfire Girl, enjoying getting back to nature. Then there had been that little incident involving Angel, her poor fire dousing skills, and a three acre forest blaze. She hadn't set foot in the woods since then.

She watched birds weaving in and out of branches and shifted her eyes towards where the truck was parked. And froze.

"Oh, no," she whispered, standing completely still with her arms in the air mid-stretch. "This can't be happening."

Standing twenty feet ahead, partly in the path, and most definitely blocking her way, was a black bear, his hand on the branch of a small tree. He saw her. He was staring at her, the leaves rustling as he adjusted on his haunches.

What was she supposed to do? Panicked, she tried to remember what she had learned earning her Campfire Girls animal safety badge, but her mind was a blank. She stood there, her heart racing so fast she was sure she'd die of cardiac arrest if the bear didn't eat her first. Afraid to move, she said quietly, "Good bear. Go away."

He dropped to all fours with a resounding thud on the forest floor. Holy moly, he was big. Terror started to rise in her already overtaxed body, and she began to fidget, whimpering. "Oh, please. Don't eat me. I just want to leave, that's all."

Were you supposed to run or just stand there? She'd watched When Wild Animals Attack, and all she could think of now was seeing a man being mauled by a bear when he was camping. His puny little human body being tossed around by the powerful beast, red bloody scratches racing along the length of his arms. She was dead. With her child-sized frame, he could pick her up with one paw and spin her around before hurling her off into the woods.

Both she and the bear heard the branches crackling and leaves rustling at the same time. They swung their heads to the left towards the murmuring voice and when a man came into view, she sobbed out with relief. He was wearing a park uniform, and he was young, strong, and looked extremely confident. He quickly sized up the situation, poised as he was between her and the bear, off to the left.

"Help!" she screamed.

When he held his hand up and nodded, she didn't wait. She took off on her heels in his direction, determined to get something else between her and Smoky the bear.

## Chapter Two

RICK Dangel had always appreciated the little things. Like peace and quiet. He glanced back on the trail to make sure he wasn't being followed, then breathed a sigh of relief. He had successfully ditched his co-worker Sheri, who had been killing him with kindness for the last three months.

The woman was tenacious. He supposed that was what made her such a good athlete and ranger, but truth be told, the woman scared him. She was attractive enough, tall, tanned, good muscle definition from all her training, but hell. There was something about a woman who could kick his ass that was unnerving.

He was on an easy trail, close to the north border of the park, strolling along in the warm afternoon, shielded from the heat of the day by the trees. He began whistling a jaunty little tune, confident that even Sheri couldn't track him down today. This was not the labor-intensive part of his job. Walking around monitoring the trails, watching for animals in danger or humans violating park rules was no hardship. Maybe once a day he ran across someone who was illegally picking foliage off the trails, or was disturbing a bird's nest.

The rest of the time on his patrols was blissfully quiet. He heard a branch snap. Freezing, he listened closely. Damn, he shouldn't have been whistling. Sheri must have heard him. For the ten thousandth time he cursed the day he had taken Sheri to lunch. It had been an impulse, motivated by nothing more than the need for a little company. He had sprung for both their meals, and suddenly she had gotten the wrong idea.

Since then, every time he turned around, she was there, touching his arm and smiling. That smile that says a woman wants to settle down behind a picket fence with you. He liked Sheri well enough but he had done the marriage thing and it hadn't been pretty.

Hearing nothing but silence and birds, he bent down and picked up an acorn. Tossing it hand to hand, he started walking again. He had to learn to curb his impulses. Or work on learning how to say no. He should just tell Sheri he wasn't interested.

Just like he should have told Nicole he didn't want to get married even though she had been pregnant, given that she'd already felt the pull of California, and he had wanted to stay put in Pigeon Forge. The marriage had turned out predictably. Nicole had left him, taking their daughter with her to California, leaving him to see Kiri only when he could scrape up enough cash to fly out there.

But he had never learned to say no to a woman. He hated when their eyes went round with hurt, and they turned away so you wouldn't see. It was his one true weakness. Women.

"Can't live with them, can't live..." he dropped the thought as he came out of the trees and discovered the origin of the earlier noise.

A black bear was down on the ground rumbling around menacingly. Surprised at the aggressive stance the bear had taken, he followed its gaze and saw a short blond wearing an even shorter white dress, frozen in terror.

She screamed at him, her voice cracking hysterically, "Help!"

He held up his hand in a gesture meant to calm her down. "Miss, it's all right. Just..."

In shock, he watched her suddenly take off towards him, her arms flying and her hair swinging in its ponytail as she screamed a violently loud shriek.

"... don't move." He finished his sentence a little too late, as the tiny blond bundle reached him and turned her ankle in her little clickety clacking shoes. What the heck was this lady doing on the trail in heels? Before his brain could offer a possible explanation for this oddity, she tripped and came sailing towards him with an ear splitting scream that made him grimace, even while his hands reached out to try and steady her.

In her hysterical state, she managed to block his arms with her own, and her hands hit his chest with enough force to make him stumble slightly backwards.

Then came the rest of her.

He grunted as she slammed into him, her white satin dress slipping across his skin. As he struggled for balance, he was acutely aware of the fact that somehow her legs had become wrapped around his thighs. Her bare legs clamping onto his sent a jolt to his lower regions and he thought blindly that this was a fine time for his body to decide to wake back up after its post-divorce hibernation.

Then he lost the struggle for balance as she tried to shimmy up him like a tree, her hands grabbing onto his head, her thighs squeezing him with no regard to his reaction. They began to fall backwards, and as they did, his brain tried to remind him there was another danger more eminent than getting an unwanted hard-on.

The bear. As he landed on his behind in the dirt, wearing the blond like plastic wrap, he caught a glimpse of the big bear sitting up, yawning, and ambling away. He felt resentful. The big guy had gotten him in this mess, than had just walked off.

If only it were that simple for him. "You need to calm down," he managed to say, trying to set her off of him.

Hysteria had obviously set in, and she shot a wild-eyed glance at him, and clung to him even tighter, her teeth chattering as she shook her head. He left his hands on her back, rubbing vigorously hoping to calm her down. He wasn't altogether certain what to do with a woman who was obviously scared spitless.

Especially one whose petite body was wrapped all around him, her chest pressed invitingly against his and her pink lips breathing in and out inches from his own. He felt another jolt down south. Another one of those and she was bound to notice. Her little round bottom was nestled between his legs, wiggling back and forth in her jerky panicked movements. Well, hell.

"Listen, doll, the bear's gone. He took a wander off. There's nothing to be afraid of." Just the sexually deprived man beneath you.

"Are you sure?" She spoke breathlessly, darting a quick glance behind her. She let out a relieved sigh, but didn't let go of him.

"I'm sure." He was about to reach down to her waist and give her a nudge off of him when he sucked in his breath. The fall and the wiggling had scooted her skirt up to the point where it was now bunched up as high as her belly button. Which left nothing but smooth thigh and white lace underwear staring back at him, clinging to the curve of her

body, the lace see through enough for him to catch a glimpse of dark blond curls peeking invitingly out at him. And she was sitting on his lap.

His mouth went dry. He was incapable of speech. His shorts were suddenly too tight. He gaped like an eager teenager.

"I was so scar..." her words trailed off as she noticed the direction of his gaze, and she gave a gasp. "Oh!" Trying to scoot back down his legs and tug at her dress at the same time, she blushed a fiery red.

A gentleman would have looked away, but Rick had no intention of missing a single minute of the show. Nor did he give her a hand in standing up. After all, he argued to himself, he was on the bottom. There was no way he could help her from his awkward legs straight out position. The end result was that she got tangled up in his legs, her heels, and the wayward dress, and stumbled again.

This fall left them even better situated in his opinion. After a grunt on impact, he sighed with pleasure as he lay on his back, the woman sprawled all across the length of him, her hand between his arm and his side, and her hip nestled against his. Her chin was on his chest and her breasts pushed softly into his stomach.

"Are you all right?" he asked her lazily, taking in the adorable pert nose she had, and her smooth complexion flushed pink. Blue eyes gazed back at him in horror, long eyelashes batting as she blinked.

"I... I..." She tried to push off the ground and sit up, without much success. He saw she was trying to avoid pushing on him, which was necessary if she wanted to get herself off the ground.

With a sigh, he wrapped his arms around her and heaved himself up, despite her squawk of protest, ending up with both of them in a sitting position. The minute he loosened his grip she tried to scramble away, still tugging on the hem of her dress, making sure everything was covered. It wasn't. Not by a long shot. He still had a good view of shapely thigh and as she crawled on her knees, a flash of lace taunted him.

"I'm sorry." She stopped crawling and sat back, clapping her knees together in an attempt at modesty. "I was just so scared. That bear was just staring at me and all I could think about was him whacking me with one of his paws." She shuddered in remembrance, and to his horror, burst into tears.

He cursed. He was a downright sucker for female tears. "Come on, now, doll, don't cry. Everything turned out all right. And if you just walk away real slow like a bear won't hurt you." Most of the time.

He shifted, thinking it was time to get off the ground. The pine needles were making his hand itch. When he lifted his hand and saw what was underneath his skin, he cursed again. One glance around confirmed the worst. "It's time for us to move, though I expect the damage has already been done."

Her tears had subsided to small shudders and sobs and she sniffled. "What are you talking about?"

"We're sitting in poison ivy. A lot of it." He groaned at the three-leaf plant, dreading the thought of days of the itchy, red rash. His hands, arm, legs, neck, everything had been nestled in the sinister plant.

"Poison ivy?" She held her arms out in horror, staring at them as if she expected spots to appear instantly. "What does that mean?"

As he stood up, he held a hand out to her to help her up. "It means in a day or so you're going to have a nice red rash all over any part of you that touched the ground." He glanced at the skirt ruefully, remembering it bunched around her waist. "Which means an awful lot of you."

Her jaw dropped and her face flushed hot. She shot him a look of prim reprimand. Instead of feeling guilty, he felt a tremor of alarm in him. He was feeling the beginnings of impulse. The beginnings of the inability to say no to this adorable little thing. But as long as she didn't ask him for anything, he was safe.

She said, "I guess a rash is better than bear bait." She took his hand gingerly, pulling herself up and smoothing her dress with her slender hands.

Curiosity got the best of him, beating out his instincts of self-preservation which were telling him to get the hell out of here. "Can I ask just why you're wearing that get up for a hike in the woods?"

She blinked at him. "I didn't intend to come hiking. I got lost driving. I pulled off the road, and then decided to walk into the woods for a few feet."

It didn't sound like the full story, but he wasn't about to push it. Neither were his feet taking him away from her, though. "Well, that clears everything right on up. Do you need directions?"

"I guess." She ground her heel into the ground, biting her bottom lip, obviously thinking. "I guess I should still go ahead. Yes, I definitely will."

"Well, since you're so sure." She was obviously in no condition to be left alone. She didn't even know where she was going. He couldn't just leave her here. And his feelings had nothing to do with the fact that she was blond and gorgeous. Not much, anyway.

He dusted off his shorts, once again reminded of their sit-down in poison ivy. "Listen, I'm going to head back to the ranger station and wash off my arms and legs. It might help make the rash less painful when it comes in. You want to head back with me and use the ladies room?"

"The rash is painful?" she asked in a quiet voice, gulping.

He looked at her white face. "You seriously haven't ever had poison ivy before?"

"No." She shook her head violently. "I'm sorry. It's all my fault. I should have stayed in the car. I should have stayed in Knoxville. No, I should have stayed in Chicago with Mookie, and none of this would have happened."

Now why did he feel compelled to reassure her? While not the worst thing that could happen, poison ivy was damned uncomfortable, yet he still felt the overwhelming urge to pull this woman into his arms and comfort her. Then kiss her. Oh, damn, he was in trouble.

"It's just a rash, it's not the end of the world." He started walking down the path, telling himself it was his duty as a ranger to be an ambassador for the national park. She was from out of town, and needed assistance. He glanced back.

She licked her lips. His groin tightened. Yeah, he was noble all right. "And who is Mookie?"

"My tabby cat. He's being boarded at the vet's."

He nodded solemnly. "Where cats should be."

She frowned.

He grinned. "Come on, let's go wash up." He glanced back to see if she was following him. She was, though reluctantly, still glancing suspiciously left and right.

"You're from Chicago? Were you thinking that bear was going to eat you?"

She looked horrified at his flippancy. "But they could! I saw that show on TV, where animals attack people and..." she trailed off, pursing her lips together.

"And what?"

"You're making fun of me." She looked annoyed.

"No, I'm not. It's just this isn't exactly your neck of the woods, so to speak." That was the understatement of the year as he watched her pick gingerly across the trail, her little shoes twisting her ankles and sinking into the dirt. When they weren't slipping off her feet.

Ditto for the dress. It was inching up with each step, and the strap had fallen off her shoulder. She seemed oblivious to this. He didn't know a whole lot about women's clothes, but he kind of had the feeling it wasn't an outfit you wear to go to the grocery.

"I guess that's true," she admitted reluctantly.

They were almost to the parking lot when she said, "Oh, I left my keys on a rock."

Gallant man that he was, he jogged back for them. It would take her ten minutes to walk back on those stilts she was wearing. He found them on a rock right where he'd popped out of the woods. He grabbed them and was heading back when he heard a familiar voice.

"Rick? Is that you?"

Damn, she'd found him. He couldn't see her yet, but he could hear Sheri's voice coming from the left. She had followed him after all. He jogged faster. He still had time. The woman was standing there prettily in the path, hugging herself with her arms. He jogged past her.

"Hurry."

"What's the matter?" She tried to run, the terror restored to her face. "Is the bear back?"

"No, it's worse." They reached the parking lot. "Which car is yours?"

She pointed to an enormous SUV. Funny, that's not what he'd pictured this little bitty thing driving. "Hop in, before she catches up with me."

"Who?" She stood there, watching him unlock her car and get in the driver's seat. "And just what do you think you're doing?"

He started the engine, desperate to get away before he was cornered. "Get in, and I'll explain." He gunned the engine for good measure, startling her into believing he might actually leave with her truck.

She hauled herself in the passenger side after two tries and looked at him as if he were certifiable. Which he was.

"Rick? Rick!" Sheri came out of the woods, stood on the edge of the parking lot and stared in puzzlement, waving her hand as he pretended not to see her and shot out into

the road. He instantly felt like a heel.

Not enough to stop though. "Whew, that was close."

"Who was that?" She had turned around and was staring back at Sheri still on the side of road.

"Sheri, my worst nightmare." He headed down the road to the ranger station, sure he felt itching already on the backs of his knees. "She works with me and she has this crazy idea that she's in love with me." That was an exaggeration, but he might as well try and impress the little blonde.

"That does sound crazy," she murmured.

"Hey!" He darted a glance in her direction, wondering if that was an insult, but she merely looked distracted. She had pulled her purse up off the floor and was riffling through it.

"It's crazy because we've never even gone out on a date. Yet she's always hanging around, smiling at me." Rick shuddered. If Sheri didn't let up soon, he was going to have to come right out and reject her. Which he hated to do, since he didn't like disappointing anyone.

So far, it had been easiest to just avoid her.

"I think it's kind of sweet. She must really like you." She spoke wistfully as she pulled out her cell phone, checked the face and sighed. "No calls. Where are we going? I'm not sure I should trust you. You're not stealing my car, are you?"

"Of course not. The ranger station to wash up, remember?" He took a turn and glanced over at her again. "So, what's your name, Miss Chicago?"

She winced. "Angel."

Angel. It fit. She was like a small blond angel that you would put on top of the Christmas tree, delicate as glass. He nearly laughed out loud at himself. The top of the tree? Hell's bells, he was losing his mind. "Angel, huh? Is that short for something?"

"No." She pulled out a compact from her purse and clicked open the mirror, swiping under her eyes with her finger. "If it was, I would not be called Angel, trust me. No, my mother's just... whimsical." She said it like it was a dirty word.

"It's pretty."

"So are daffodils, but I don't want to be named after one." She powdered her nose. "So, you're Rick?"

He nodded.

"Ranger Rick. Very cute." She smiled into her mirror.

He'd taken enough razzing on that one from the guys. He didn't like it coming from her. He lowered his voice. "The name? Or the man?"

## Chapter Three

SHE swallowed hard. Fiddling with the sponge, she couldn't think of a single thing to say. This man unnerved her. And not just because he'd seen her underwear, though that was reason enough. But because when she had been in his arms, she had felt protected and... well, cherished.

Which she absolutely hated. Men were always trying to take care of her because she was petite, and it drove her to distraction. She didn't need anyone to take care of her. Her "tune in, turn on, drop out" mother had been more of a friend than a mother. Her father had been too busy finding and marrying a succession of six wives to worry overly about the children he had.

She had taken care of herself emotionally since childhood and she bit her lip in disgust that she had actually liked the feeling of protection now. She reminded herself she was vulnerable. Raw from the day's events. She needed to get away from him before she embarrassed herself even further. How she could top screaming her head off, leaping into his arms and tumbling him into poison ivy she couldn't imagine. Not to mention the underwear incident. She might possibly be emotionally scarred for life from that.

Ignoring his preposterous and suggestive question she didn't look at him. "Oh, are we here?" She saw a small building made out of cedar siding.

She saw his grin out of the corner of her eye, but he didn't comment on her blatant change of subject. "Yeah. This is just an outpost, so to speak. The research lab is a much bigger facility."

"I'll just let you out, then I'll be on my way." To Honeymoon Happy Cabins, if she could ever find them.

"Aren't you at least going to wash your arms and legs off? You'll be sorry," he predicted solemnly, but he stepped down out of the truck after parking it.

"That's okay. I really need to go." She slipped her compact into her purse and headed around to the driver's side.

Maybe she should just head back to Knoxville. She hated living by the seat of her pants, making split second decisions. Everything worked much better when she carefully planned things out. Okay, with the exception of her wedding. Normally her life ran neat and tidy, along the carefully drawn lines she prepared for herself.

"Your purse is ringing," he told her just as she heard it too. Praying it was Brian, so she could verbally wring his neck, she took the phone out of her purse and said, "Hello?"

"Angel? It's Luke." His worried voice came roaring into her ear. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Luke." Very aware of Rick's steady brown eyes boring into her, she turned slightly towards the car and lowered her voice. "I can't find the rental place though."

"Stop and get directions." He was still yelling and she realized there was a multitude of background noise that sounded suspiciously like laughter and loud music.

"I am. Where are you, or do I have to ask?" She wished Rick would walk away, but he stood swaying on his boots, not even feigning polite ignorance of her conversation. He

was completely unnerving.

"At the reception. Jake and Eddie are singing karaoke style on the head table, and your mom's reading palms. Let's see, uh, my mom is giving her boyfriend a lap dance and the girls are taking turns giving toasts to you and Brian as if you were here."

That sounded about right for a Weiss family gathering. "Where's Dad?"

"He left with the woman who runs the catering business about ten minutes ago."

"At one o'clock in the afternoon?" she exclaimed in horror. She couldn't believe that his hot blood ran through her veins. She had never been the least bit swept away by feelings of lust, let alone at one o'clock in the afternoon.

Turning, her eyes met Rick's and she blushed. Well, maybe despite the fright, there had been a moment when she had been laying across his body, and he'd assured her there was no danger, that she had felt a certain stirring of something. He was extremely good looking and she wasn't a robot, despite what certain ex-boyfriends might claim. With that short dark hair sticking up slightly in the front, chocolate brown eyes and a crooked grin, he was bound to inspire some sort of reaction.

Perhaps it was appreciation more than anything. Her heart had been racing from fear, and he had held her so strongly, so confidently... she lost her train of thoughts here entirely, as his eyes darkened and his grin turning sensually smoldering.

"Dad's a swinger. What can I say?" She could see Luke shrugging it off in her mind's eye. No one else in her family ever seemed bothered by their father's antics. It was isolating to feel like she was the only one who thought it was high time Buddy Weiss grew up and stopped thinking below the belt. She knew teenagers who had more control over their hormones than he did.

"Can I call you later?" she said uncomfortably. "But call me back if you hear from Brian, okay?"

"Okay. Be careful."

"Thanks for holding down the fort, Luke. I love you," she said impulsively, realizing she didn't tell him that very often. Despite the fact that at times she swore she was adopted, she did love all of her family. Especially Luke, since they had grown up together.

His voice came back soft and sheepish, and she pictured him shuffling in embarrassment. "I love you too, Ang."

Turning the phone off she nearly jumped at the cold look that greeted her from Rick. Gone was the erotic visual caress of a minute ago. Gone was the grin. He had even stepped back a foot.

"Well, do you need directions or not?" His voice was abrupt and impatient.

"Yes." She spoke slowly, unsure of his rapid mood change, and darn it, for some strange reason, disappointed. "I'm looking for the rental office for Honeymoon Happy Cabins. Have you heard of it?"

"Sure," he shrugged coolly. "If you have a pen and paper I'll write down directions for you. Sometimes GPS doesn't work well in these mountains, but you came a little too far south."

"Thanks." She dug in her purse and handed him a pen, gulping when their fingers touched and she felt a jolt through her skin.

"Are you meeting Luke there?" He didn't look up as he jotted down directions for her, resting the paper on the hood of the truck.

She blinked in surprise, wondering if he'd noticed the way she'd been staring at his muscular calves. They really shouldn't let these men walk around in shorts, showing all those gorgeous, tanned, strong leg muscles. And who would have ever thought beige shorts and a matching ranger shirt could be sexy? She supposed it could when it was straining across a broad chest.

She answered his question absently. "Why would I be meeting my brother at a honeymoon cabin?"

The pen stopped moving. "Your brother?"

"Yes." Before he could respond a car pulled into the spot next to them. Rick cursed. She recognized Sheri, the woman scorned, as the driver. She wanted to hop into the car and bolt, sure this was about to be awkward, but Rick had the directions still in his hand. Besides, she didn't know how to bolt. She stood there in indecision, until it was too late to do anything.

"Rick!" Sheri barely turned the car off before she leapt out of it. She was tall, a good eight inches taller than Angel, who suddenly felt like a smurf next to her. Sheri was also gorgeous, with thick auburn hair pulled back in a serviceable ponytail and her wide green eyes and full lips needing little makeup. She looked like she spent hours in the gym, yet she had no bulk, just powerful muscles.

Now Angel felt like a weak smurf. Fiddling with her phone she tried to smile as Sheri glanced at her in surprise.

"Oh, hi!" Sheri turned to Rick. "I saw you on the Abrams Trail, but I guess you didn't see me. Have you had lunch yet?"

Rick shook his head reluctantly, obviously stalling. "No." Before Sheri could speak, he suddenly said, "But I have plans with Angel. Sheri, I don't think you've met my girlfriend Angel, have you?"

Angel blinked. Sheri gaped in astonishment. Rick, the swine, grinned. "Sheri, this is Angel. Angel, this is Sheri, my co-worker."

"Nice to meet you," she murmured automatically, wondering whether she should blow his cover or not. Something kept her from opening her mouth. Probably the fact that he had saved her from an enormous bear intent on having her for lunch.

Sheri only managed a tight nod, her expression crestfallen.

"Hey, uh," Rick leaned towards Sheri confidentially. "I saw you back there on the trail, but me and Angel here, we were, well... taking advantage of a beautiful day to get back to nature if you know what I mean."

Sheri's eyes widened.

Angel gasped and dropped her cell phone on the ground. She sputtered in shock, "How could you say that?"

Rick retrieved her phone and gave her a pleading glance, tossing her phone back and forth in his hands. "Sorry, doll, I don't mean to embarrass you, but Sheri's a friend. She won't tell. And we probably look strange, dirt all over our clothes, our hair all messed up." He winked. "She'll think we had a run in with a bear."

She felt her hair quickly and realized it had slipped loose of its knot. A quick glance down at her dress showed the skirt liberally covered with dust. She narrowed her eyes at him.

Sheri shook her head. "You don't have to explain, and I won't say anything. What you do on your break is your business." She cleared her throat and shot Rick a look filled with disappointment. "Well, see you later, I'm going to lunch."

"Bye, Sheri." She found herself feeling sorry for her then caught herself. Exactly why was she feeling sorry for a woman who could be on the cover of a magazine? Especially a woman who had height and breasts, two things Angel had desired since puberty. As Sheri walked away, she snatched the paper out of Rick's hands and scanned the directions in irritation.

She climbed into the driver's side, eager to get out of there. "That was mean," she couldn't help but toss at him, though she knew she should just keep quiet.

"What? I was trying not to embarrass her." He looked remarkably sincere. "She won't take a hint, and I don't want to just say, look lady, I'm not interested. Now that seems mean." He stepped onto the runner and leaned in, his warm gaze rushing over her. "Scoot over."

"Why?" She inwardly cursed the breathy way she sounded. She was having a little trouble understanding her reaction to him. It must be like Florence Nightingale syndrome. Ranger Rick syndrome, because he had saved her from a wild beast. It was enough to make her gag. She thought more highly of herself, and to think that she was susceptible to strong muscles and a confident grin was very lowering.

"I'm driving you to Honeymoon Happy Rentals. You look like you could use an escort."

Well, that was insulting. He seemed determined to find her helpless. Of course, leaping into his arms had probably served to cement that opinion. She grimaced. "I'm fine, thank you. And don't you have to work? Aren't you on the clock?"

"You heard Sheri. I'm on break. Plus it'll only take ten minutes to get you there and come back."

"How are you going to get back?" She'd stumped him, she noted gleefully.

He paused then shrugged. "I don't know. I'll think of something."

"That's a stupid answer." She tried to lean back away from him, but he didn't take the hint. In fact, his hand was shoving her thigh, trying to force her over. "I'd be an idiot to let a strange man get in my car."

"Well, let me at least call you a cab instead."

Angel lost patience. "Look, I don't exactly know what I'm going to encounter when I get there, okay? If you must know, I'm looking for my fiancé and I'd rather not have an audience of any kind."

That had the desired affect. He froze then gasped, "What?"

"Yes. My fiance." She decided that since she would never see him again, it didn't matter in the least if he knew the sordid details of her pathetic life. "We were supposed to get married this morning." She gestured to her dress. "I showed up. Brian didn't. My brothers tell me that last night Brian got drunk and married a stripper instead. I came here to find him, assuming he's gone to the cabin we rented for our honeymoon."

He fell off the runner onto the ground and stared at her. The silence stretched so long she started to fidget. He didn't have to look at her so intently. Like she was an alien species from the planet Loser.

Finally he raised an eyebrow. "What kind of guy marries a stripper the night before his wedding?"

That was an easy enough question to answer. "Brian Logan does." She turned the key in the ignition. "Look, thanks for your help in the woods, I'm not usually such an idiot, but I haven't had any experience with wild animals."

"No problem," he said slowly and stepped back so she could close her door.

"Well, bye, Rick." She tried to smile, but didn't have much luck. Her mind was already racing ahead to the cabin and what she would say to Brian if he were there.

Rick merely waved, his face puzzled, and she pulled out into the road, feeling something suspiciously like regret. She squashed it. She had no time for regret. She had to find Brian or she was going to have to rethink her whole strategy.

It was really more like a plan. The Grand Plan that she had been putting into place since she was nineteen and had learned that she couldn't have children. Due to the vagaries of Mother Nature and endometriosis, her lifetime dream of having a house full of children was gone. In the eleven years since that day she had come to accept this, and the intense pain and regret she'd felt in those early years had eased.

Now she was focused on her plan. Watching her parents strained relationship, and her father's string of wives, had been enough to convince her she would never marry. Which was precisely why she'd agreed to bet a hundred bucks against her college pals that she'd be the last to marry. Instead, her idea had been to take care of things herself. Get an education, a career, save her money, buy a house, adopt a child. Simple.

Having accomplished one through three she was now ready for four and five, but while she loved being a kindergarten teacher, it has its drawbacks. Namely low cash flow. She just didn't have the money to buy a house and pay adoption fees, and she had long vowed that she wouldn't adopt a child until she was financially ready. To her, that meant being able to afford a house.

Enter Brian and the marriage made in Pigeon Forge. Ten thousand dollars would see her through, and she could finally have it all. Her own life tailored just for her, and a child to call her own.

There was nothing else to want for. Certainly not love. She knew how that ended. Broken promises and broken glasses hurled at each other's heads.

So really, it had to be hunger that was suddenly causing a gnawing ache in her chest. But strangely enough, unless her stomach had shifted north, she was feeling a pang in an area she chose not to acknowledge.

Ten minutes later she followed the rental office's directions down the road past several identical cabins before reaching number four. Each cabin had a number as well as a cute country name on a painted wood sign next to the door. She passed Granny's Place, L'il Darlin', and Hearts-a-Thumpin'.

As she pulled up to number four she read out loud, "Big Bear Butt?" She groaned, never doubting for a minute that Brian had especially requested this one based on its

name.

If Brian were here, she'd whack him with the wooden sign. Wearily walking across the deck in her aching feet, she realized she was going to have to go grab a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. She couldn't wear this dress a minute longer than she had to. Turning the key, she pushed open the door.

And gasped. "Oh, my..." Right in front of her, larger than life, hanging over the fireplace was a... well, a big bear butt. Stuffed and mounted, and facing her in all its backside glory. "Is that real?" she asked the room at large. No, it couldn't be. There was no way. It was a joke, part of the decor. But it was so furry. She shuddered.

"Yuck." Looking around, she realized there were dead stuffed things, or fake dead stuffed things, she didn't know which, intermixed everywhere in the rustic furnishings. There was a squirrel resting on the breakfast bar on his haunches. A beaver was holding the remote control for the television on the coffee table. Various birds were mounted on the wall in the main room. A rabbit family was nestled at her feet by the front door.

Stepping around the bunnies, she wandered into the bedroom in horror, and encountered a glassy eyed deer standing sentry at the sliding glass door leading to the deck. She backed into the bathroom, unnerved by the sightless animal. It felt like he was watching her. Just what she needed. A peeping tom stuffed deer. She turned around in the bathroom. And screamed.

And screamed again, her heart leaping into her throat. She'd stumbled into Norman Bates' attic. There in the bathroom was a gaudy heart shaped pink bathtub, and standing proudly next to it was a bear. Holding a clean white towel draped over his arm like a waiter.

"Holy moly!" She stumbled back and put her hand on her chest. That was the freakiest thing she'd ever seen. She could see now that in his other hand, excuse me, paw, he was holding tiny plastic bottles. Leaning forward cautiously, trying not to touch him, she saw it was bubble bath and shampoo. "Oh, my God! Brian Logan, you are so dead!"

## Chapter Four

RICK couldn't get Angel off his mind. He was lying on his couch watching the six o'clock news and mulling over the events of the day. He had stood there dumbly while she had explained why she was in Gatlinburg, and had continued to stand there for a good two minutes after her truck was no longer visible.

How could a sexy, cute little dynamo like that want to marry the kind of putz who would leave her standing at the altar? For a stripper, no less. Man, that was rough. That was dog-down dirty to do to a woman. Yet she had sat there, reasonably calm, and stated that she was looking for him. And he suspected that when she found him, she would pull him out of his marital mess and take him back.

Damn, that burned him up. He felt the beginnings of a soft-hearted impulse here. He was thinking about interfering in something that was none of his business. It wasn't a good idea. In fact, it was a very bad idea.

With a sigh, he shifted on the couch. He had changed into just a pair of denim shorts, and it was still hotter than all get out in his apartment. He kept meaning to look for a new place, but he never got around to it. Just like he never got around to buying furniture.

He was living over the garage at his parent's house. It was small, it was dark, and lacked air conditioning, but it had a glorious view from the half a dozen windows. His parents lived on two acres butting up to the park, and the property was densely covered with trees. The mist hung over the mountains to the south, visible clearly beyond the lush green trees. He loved the mountains, and couldn't imagine ever living anywhere but here.

However, an apartment with room to fit more than one person at a time might be preferable. Going to the small refrigerator, he grabbed himself a beer and twisted the top off the bottle. He had moved here right after his divorce and at the time he hadn't cared where he lived, as long as it wasn't the condo he'd shared with Nicole. Then when she had up and moved to California two months later, it didn't seem to matter if he had a bigger place.

Nicole had refused to let Kirsten fly back to Tennessee for visits. Even though he had assured her he would fly out and get her and take her back on the return trip, Nicole had been adamant that Kiri was too young to be traveling cross-country for a week long visit. He could see her point when he was feeling rational, but when it came to missing his daughter, most of the time he wasn't rational.

So for the past three years he had bowed to her wishes and had flown out there a couple of times a year when he could scrape together the money for airfare and for a hotel. Staying with Nicole was out of the question since she'd remarried a dentist eighteen months ago. The added expense of a hotel on his modest ranger's salary made even going twice a year a challenge, and the balance on his credit card was downright scary.

In place of seeing his daughter, he called her twice a week and forked out each month

for a major cell phone bill and tried not to let it bother him that he was missing everything in her life.

Taking a big pull on his beer, he looked at the phone sitting on his kitchen table. When Angel had driven off, he had still been holding her phone. He knew he needed to get it back to her, but the thought of going to Honeymoon Happy Cabins and finding her there with that schmuck she'd called Brian wasn't his idea of a good time.

Unbidden, the image of her on his lap with her dress pushed up around her waist rose in his mind. Her smooth thighs and that scrap of lace covering her. He felt a tug on his groin that was now beginning to be familiar in relation to her. She had been so adorably scared. And hot. Scrambling across the ground, tugging on her skirt, unknowingly flashing him.

He slapped his beer down on the table, and shifted in his pants a little. This was not good. Getting involved with a woman like that was trouble. She obviously had a whole bucket full of problems, none of which were his concern, and hadn't he learned anything from Nicole?

He'd learned from Nicole to listen to his gut. His gut feeling had been that he and Nicole had drifted too far apart to make a marriage work, and they had only lasted two years. Now his gut was giving him the same warning to stay away from Angel. Unfortunately other parts of him were talking louder right now.

His phone rang and he dived for it gratefully. He didn't like being distracted by things he couldn't have. Like more time with his daughter, and a roll in the sack with Angel.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Daddy!"

He grinned, settling down into the kitchen chair. "Hi, sugar. How are you?"

"Fine. Mommy let me call you because I lost a tooth today!"

The familiar mix of excitement and sadness at having missed yet another milestone, sat down on him. "You did? How did that happen? Three year olds don't lose teeth!"

Kiri giggled. "I'm not three, Daddy. I'm five. And a half," she added.

"You are?" He faked surprise. "Whew. I guess that explains why you're starting kindergarten in a couple of months. I was wondering why they were letting a three year old in."

"You're crazy."

"Crazy for you, sugar." Picking at the label on his beer bottle, he stretched his legs out. "So how did this tooth come out?"

"In an apple. Mommy thought it was gross, but Elliot said it's only nat'rel. He let me keep it, and said I could leave a note for the tooth fairy instead of the tooth. He says since he's a dentist he can make special deals with the tooth fairy."

Well, wasn't that just as nice as all get out? Elliot, wonder step-daddy, who got to be with Kiri when he should be there with her. "So you got a big space there now, huh?"

"Yep. On the bottom."

"I guess we'll have to change your nickname then. We could call you Spacey Stacey." She giggled and his heart clenched. "Or Gappy Gabby. How about Toothy Lucy?"

"No! How about I call you Silly Daddy?" There was rustling and Kiri's breathing

scratched into the phone. She spoke again. "Mommy wants to talk to you."

Great. He wanted to talk to Nicole about as much as he wanted to fall into a pit of snakes. "Okay. I love you, Kiri."

"Love you too, Daddy."

The phone sounded like it was dropped then Nicole's polite voice came on. "Hello, Rick."

Nicole was always perfectly appropriate. Even after three years, he still hadn't quite figured out how a man was supposed to talk to the woman who had once been his wife.

"Hello, Nicole."

"When do you think you're coming out again? Kirsten misses you, and you haven't been here since January."

Why did he feel like everything out of her mouth was a criticism? His face went hot with the familiar burn of anger that he was made out to be the bad father who wouldn't see his child. It wasn't his fault Kirsten missed him, since he wasn't the one who'd moved two thousand miles away.

"I'll be there as soon as I can. Airfare, it ain't cheap you know." He always turned up his Tennessee twang when he talked to her, knowing it annoyed the hell out of her.

"You can skip the child support this month if that will help," she said carefully.

The lid blew on his tightly contained anger. He knew she didn't mean to be insulting, but hell. He could pay to take care of his own kid. In a clipped voice, he said, "Look, who's fault is it Kiri's all the way across the country? Not mine, sweetheart. Your doing."

She made a sound of impatience, which was rare for normally controlled Nicole. "Let's not go into all that again. What's done is done, and you have to accept that. I wanted to be near my family. And I don't care about the money, Rick, if it means you can come out here more often to see Kiri."

He clenched his hand around his beer bottle. She might not, but he cared. "The check will be there like it usually is." He didn't wait for a response. "Bye, Nicole. I'll let you know when I'm coming out."

He hung up before he said something he would truly regret. He watched the phone a minute to see if she would call back, but it remained silent, thank goodness. Sitting next to Angel's cell phone on his table. He fingered the cell phone then muttered, "Well, hell."

Twenty minutes later he was in his pick-up pulling up in front of number four cabin, a pizza box on the seat next to him. The rental office desk clerk had been an easy going young guy who liked to talk. Getting Angel's cabin number had been no problem. Her black SUV was parked in front and according to the clerk she was alone. No Brian. He didn't know how Angel would be feeling about that though, and while he didn't want to come across as a creeper, he did want to give her the phone back. If she happened to invite him in though, he wasn't going to say no.

Clearing his throat, he adjusted his denim shorts. He ran his fingers through his brown hair as he stood in front of the door then shook his head in disgust that she had reduced him to acting like a girl. He'd left the pizza in the car. He knocked hard and tossed her phone back and forth between his hands.

A surprised voice came through the door. "Who is it?"

"It's Rick." He paused then added, "I brought your cell phone. From this afternoon. It's Ranger Rick." He winced at how stupid that sounded, but he heard her laugh softly. It was the first laugh he'd heard from her. It was soft and low, throaty.

The door came swinging open and she stood there pursing her lips like she was trying not to smile. She had ditched the dress and was wearing little navy blue stretchy shorts, a University of Tennessee T-shirt, and gray Converse on her feet. She looked like a high school cheerleader. "Hi," she said.

"Hi. You a Volunteer?" He pointed to her shirt.

She looked down in confusion. "No. I just went into town and bought something to wear. I didn't bring any luggage with me, and my feet were killing me."

"No wonder." He grinned. "Fending off wild beasts in heels could get a little tricky."

She shrugged, letting the corners of her mouth slide up. "I don't know how Charlie's Angels did it." She took her phone from him then hesitated. "Do you... do you want to come in for a minute?"

"No Brian?" He studied her expression carefully. For all he knew Brian was normally a possessive and jealous man who would rip his nuts off if he found him with his fiancée.

"No Brian." Shaking her head, she said, "Don't worry. If he hasn't shown up or called by now, I don't think he's going to. I've been completely stood up."

Not that he was any expert judge of character, but she didn't look that broken up. She looked tired, a little embarrassed, but not heart broken. Still, it would take a real jerk to take advantage of her in this vulnerable state.

He stepped through the door.

"Watch out for the..." she tried to warn him, right as he stepped on something solid, that gave with a soft slippery feeling beneath his gym shoe. Jumping off to the left, he looked down and started when he saw a rabbit lying on the floor on its side. Oh, that was just great. He'd come here for a flimsy reason and had killed her pet. That's the way to charm the ladies.

"Damn! I just stepped on your rabbit. I'm sorry. Is he okay?" He bent down and touched it gently. It was stone cold. Jerking his hand back he let out a startled yell. "That thing's dead!"

Angel's hand was over her mouth as she silently laughed. "It's stuffed. It's part of the decor."

Giving it another poke, he could tell that it was stuffed, with glass eyes to boot. Glancing around the room as his heart rate restored itself to normal, he came face to face with a big furry bear's ass hanging on the wall. "What the hell?"

She was now laughing openly as he took in the squirrel on the counter, the birds in mid-flight, and good Lord, was that a beaver on the coffee table? "What's that beaver doing?" He stepped forward and saw Bucky was holding the remote. "What is this, the gamekeeper's lodge? This is sick."

Angel had tears of hysterical laughter streaming down her face. She gasped, "I know! Isn't it awful? Who would think this was a good idea?"

He chuckled. Poor thing. Bears were getting her coming and going. "A person with a mighty strange sense of humor."

"Or just really bad taste." She wiped her cheeks and added, "You should see what's in the bedroom."

"I'd love to." Just the thought of the bedroom sent a jolt right through him and he cursed himself for coming here, no matter how good her laughter sounded.

This was not a good idea. But damn, she was a sexy little thing. She was delicate, yet no nonsense all at the same time. She also had a fiance she loved. He could not take advantage of a vulnerable woman. That was worse than standing a woman up at the altar.

Her laughter cut off abruptly and her blue eyes widened.

He stuck his free hand in his pocket to hide his massive erection from her view. "I'm sorry about your phone. When you dropped it I picked it up and forgot to give it back. I hope you didn't miss any important calls."

"Oh, good point." She scrolled through her face and made a face. "Nothing from Brian, though I'm not surprised." She held the screen out so he could see it.

Rick ignored his brain shooting a warning at him. He purposely let his fingers collide with hers when he reached for the phone to steady it to read the screen. In fact, he would go so far as to say he stroked her hand. She pulled back, clearing her throat nervously, before he even got a glance at it. He told himself he should be truly and heartily ashamed of himself for flirting with her, but he wasn't.

Instead, he enjoyed the cheap thrill as she shivered.

He fixed his features into a sheepish look. "I also wanted to apologize about what I said to Sheri. It was rude of me to put you on the spot like that about being my girlfriend." He did feel bad about that. That whopper lie had just zinged out of his mouth from nowhere.

"You're right." She stared at him, chin up, slightly defiant. "It was rude. But since you probably prevented me from being served as lunch for a family of bear cubs, I suppose I can forgive you." She gave him a reprimanding look that reminded him of a teacher. "But if you're not interested in Sheri, just tell her. Otherwise, you might be leading her on and not knowing you are."

Now he did grin, feeling a little sheepish. "I'll do that, Miss Angel." He couldn't stop himself from taking a step forward. "You know, you remind me of a grade school teacher. Just the same tone was used when I was caught tying Mary Beth Grody's shoelaces together."

She frowned. "I am a teacher. I teach Kindergarten."

It struck him as oddly funny. He could just see her in a long skirt reading a book to five year olds. It explained her odd combination of compassion and authority. "No kidding? You can tell me what to expect then. My daughter starts kindergarten this year."

He spoke of Kiri without thinking, and watched her expression go from guarded to shocked. "You have a daughter?"

While he didn't know why it mattered, considering she had a fiance, he still felt compelled to hint that having a daughter didn't mean he had a wife. "Yes. Kiri's five, and thinks she's got the world by the tail. She just called me tonight to tell me she lost her first tooth in an apple."

Wiping her hands slowly back and forth on her knit shorts, she said softly, "It's a good age. She doesn't live with you?"

She was trying desperately to sound casual, but he was on to her, and the thought made his pulse jump. He paused before answering, knowing he didn't want to leave Angel here tonight, knowing he was on the verge of doing something downright stupid. But he couldn't leave until he'd at least had the chance to pull her into his arms and taste her sweet pink lips. "No, she lives in California with my ex-wife."

"That must be hard for you." Her lips dropped open, and her eyes suddenly moistened with sympathy.

The look on her face made him think she might actually understand just how hard it was for him. Most women took it as a matter of course that it wouldn't bother him that his kid was thousands of miles away. It was rare for anyone to admit that a father could want more than phone calls and ten days a year with his daughter.

He nodded, his throat tight. "It's hell."

"Oh, Rick."

A kick in the gut would have had less effect. Her hand lifted slightly as if to touch him, and her teeth were biting and twisting her bottom lip.

"So, Miss Angel." He swallowed and smiled slowly, hoping to distract her from what looked more like pity than what he wanted to see on her face. "Have you eaten?"

Surprise, then indecision flitted across her face. "No."

"I just picked up a pizza. It's sitting in the car." He gestured towards the door. Now here came the stupid part. "How about I bring it in here and we share it?"

She squeezed the phone so hard in her hand he thought it might bend. "I don't know... I don't think I should."

"This isn't a come-on." Liar. Huge liar. "I know that you're engaged. And that you're probably going to marry him." Unless he could convince her to forget Brian, the bimbo loving bonehead. "But why not? It beats sitting here alone in the nature preserve."

Giving a nervous laugh, she said, "That's true. I don't know how I'm going to sleep tonight with all the eyes staring at me."

Resisting the urge to touch her, he said, "Move the beaver off the coffee table. I'll get the pizza."

## Chapter Five

CAVING. That's what she was doing. Watching Rick's retreating back, she didn't even know anymore why she should resist. The man was a warrior. That's the ridiculous notion that kept popping into her head. While she didn't need rescuing the majority of the time, whenever there was real and eminent danger like a bear looking for something more substantial than berries, she had the oddest idea that Rick would be there.

Which only went to prove that she was sleep deprived and undernourished. She was fantasizing about warriors, maidens, and fathers who loved their children. All mythical.

Maybe her mother had dropped a hallucinogenic herb in her juice this morning. There was certainly no other explanation for her, Angel Weiss, the master planner, wanting to throw the date book and rule book out the window. Inviting a stranger like Rick into her life was only inviting disaster, and she needed to focus on finding Brian, not sinking into chocolate brown eyes.

She couldn't bring herself to care where Brian was right now. She wondered if Rick even knew the wistful sound in his voice, and the pain in his eyes when he spoke about his daughter. It had sliced through all her reserves and stabbed at the very heart of her being. A father who missed his child.

Not a father who found his children slightly amusing and a means to placate a discontent wife, but a father who really loved his child.

Lost. That's what she was. Drowned in her own needs and the soft sensual voice of a man who was the most interesting mix of strength and gentleness she'd ever seen.

She was working up the courage to touch the stuffed beaver when Rick popped his head in through the open door. "Hey, on second thought, why don't we use this picnic table you've got? It's a nice night."

"Sure." Anything that kept her from interacting with her fuzzy roommates.

The table was on the side of the cabin, on a sunny patch of grass. It looked worn out and creaky. She sat down carefully and looked expectantly at Rick. Now what did they do?

He was putting a pizza slice on a napkin for her. Handing it across the table he said, "So why is a girl from Chicago getting married in Gatlinburg?"

That cut to the chase. "Brian's parents live in Knoxville. We were supposed to get married there." She picked at her cheese idly and wondered that all her anger at Brian seemed to have deflated.

He didn't pursue it. Instead he said, "I brought beer too." He held up a six-pack.

Just what she needed. To get drunk and start blubbering all over him. Or worse. Sleep with him. The idea shocked her. She wasn't supposed to have raging feelings of lust. Yet it sure felt like raging lust to her right now. And that was without beer.

"No thanks." She watched him fold his pizza slice in half and bite it vigorously. He winked at her. She felt compelled to try and carry a conversation. "So are you from Pigeon Foot originally?"

He stared at her then laughed loudly, covering his pizza filled mouth with his fist. He spoke carefully around his mouthful. "It's Pigeon Forge. Not Pigeon Foot."

"Oh." She was mortified, but then found herself laughing alongside him. "Whoops."

It felt good to laugh. It felt good to just be sitting here, not thinking, not caring about anything. That was something she didn't do very often. She waved a fly away from her face. It was warm, but not uncomfortably so. The trees kept the temperature cooler.

"I'm guessing you've never been in these here parts?" His twang had gotten noticeably more pronounced.

"No. But if I need a T-shirt or the World's Greatest Fudge, I'll know where to come in the future." She bit her pizza with a smile.

He grinned right back. "You don't have T-shirts in Chicago?"

"Not ones that say GRITS on the front. What does that mean anyway?" She had seen it in two different stores but hadn't bought it for fear of some hidden meaning. She didn't want it to mean that she was a believer in alien abductions or that she was promoting a heavy metal band.

"It stands for Girls Raised In The South."

Good thing she'd asked. If she had been walking around in that, who knows what might have happened? People would ask her for directions or expect her to know Gone With The Wind by heart. Carrie Underwood lyrics and who knew what else.

"That's not me."

"City girl, too, I imagine," he said. He started on slice number two.

She was still picking her way through her first slice. Wiping sauce off of the corner of her mouth, she said, "Sort of. My dad lived in the suburbs, and sometimes I lived with him. Sometimes I lived with my mom in run-down apartments in the city." Her mom would squawk if she heard Angel say that, but it was the truth. "Mom was an artist, trying this, trying that. Which meant no money for rent most of the time."

"That's rough." He looked sympathetic.

She shrugged. She hadn't meant it to sound like she was asking for pity. That was her mother, and she loved her. She was resigned to her quirkiness, as she was to her father's habit of collecting wives. "On the flip side, my dad's loaded." She'd never been able to understand how a man who couldn't remember his kid's birthdays could create complicated computer software.

"Is Luke your only brother?"

She'd forgotten he knew about Luke. She smiled at Rick, studying his tanned face, memorizing the long lines of his cheekbone, and the strong jaw. He was a manly man. A lumberjack. "No. I have two other brothers, and two sisters. I'm the oldest. Me, then Luke, Jake, Eddie, Hannah and Dixie."

"No way." He looked baffled. "I'm an only child."

That she really couldn't imagine. She loved her brothers and sisters with a passion. Family meant everything to her. But she was curious. After all, once she adopted a baby, that baby was going to grow into an only child. "Did you like it?"

"Sure." He picked up slice number three, and beer number two. "Everything was mine, all my parents attention came to me. They took me places they probably never would

have if there had been a whole crowd of kids, like Cape Canaveral, New York City, and France. But sometimes it was lonely."

He didn't look lonely anymore. He looked content. He looked delicious. A bead of beer was hanging on his bottom lip and she wanted to reach out and lick it, slowly sucking on him, pulling the amber liquid into her mouth and tasting. She wanted him.

It wasn't part of the plan.

She finished her own pizza and tried to focus on her brother's dirty socks. That ought to kill any feelings of lust hovering around her like mosquitoes. "On the flip side, six kids is a noisy, obnoxious mess sometimes. Of course, we didn't always live together."

He looked confused, but was polite enough not to ask. Pleased he didn't pry, she elaborated, "We don't all have the same mother." In fact, all six of them had a different mother, but that was a little too shocking for picnic table conversation.

She had a sudden thought. "Were you making that up about the poison ivy? Are we really going to get a rash?"

He closed the pizza box and stared solemnly at her. "Hell, yeah, I was serious. The leaves secrete an oil onto our skin that causes the rash. It gets under our fingernails too and we spread it to parts of us that didn't even touch it." He started to grin. "Can't you feel it yet? The itch? Starting slow, burning under your skin, a dry crackling feeling that makes you want to scream..."

"Thanks for the visual. I get the idea." She wiggled in her seat. It was the grass tickling her ankles. Not a violent rash starting.

"Why is this place called the Smoky Mountains?" This had occupied at least three minutes of her thoughts this afternoon, and she had been unable to ascertain the reason.

"Stand up." He moved the pizza box. "Get on top of the table."

"What?"

He climbed up onto the table and reached for her hand. Looking dubiously at him, she finally took his hand and climbed up next to him. He didn't let go of her, the rat. Instead, his big warm hand lifted to the sky, with hers still in his grip. Both their hands pointed to the mountains rising above the tree line.

"See there? Right where the mountains and the trees meet?"

It was the first time she had actually stopped and looked at the mountains. They rose majestically, great hunter green jagged peaks, and surrounding them in undulating waves was a cloudy mist that shifted. Lighter than clouds, they were like the plumes of cigarette smoke, curling and rising.

"It's beautiful."

He brought their hands down, and tucked them along his side. The movement pulled her closer to him until her arm was brushing his, and her nose was breathing in the clean scent of his after-shave. "The Indians called these mountains Sha-co-na-qe, which means place of blue smoke."

It was peaceful, just standing on the table staring at the sky. She sighed.

A mosquito sucked on her arm, breaking the mood. She swatted it.

"The bugs are really coming out." Rick was waving his own hand. "Let's go in." He hopped down off the side of the table and held his hand out for her.

She avoided it. Enough cozying up for the night. She stepped down to the opposite end and prepared to jump off it.

Rick said, "Angel, not that side, there's a..."

Seeing no danger, she leapt, landing on a sandy, mushy mound.

"... fire ant hill," Rick finished.

"What?" In confusion, she watched stupefied as hundreds of ants poured out of their destroyed home and ran over the sneakers on her feet, and up her legs. Then she felt the pricks and stings. "Aaahhh!" Leaping frantically, she tried to swat them off, tears pooling in her eyes from the onslaught of pain.

Rick scooped her up in an instant and set her down on the table away from the ant hill. While she whacked at the fifty or so ants left clinging to her legs, he leaned across the table. She didn't know where he thought he was going. She said desperately, "Help me, Rick."

Cursing, she turned to him and gasped as an icy cold stream of beer hit each leg. Jerking reflexively, she let out a cry of dismay.

"Stop moving." He shifted the cans he held in the air until the streams were hitting her again, dribbling down her legs and falling into the dirt, taking the ants with them.

The cold, sticky beer dripped off her toes and ankles, and the stinging subsided to a dull ache. Rick set the cans down and ran his hands across her wet ankles and feet, yanking her shoes off. "No strays," he reported. "You're all set."

She blinked. "You poured beer on me."

He shrugged. "You okay?"

"No." Throwing her head side to side, she felt hysteria rising again, like she had when she'd realized she was safe from the bear. She wiggled her toes, wondering at the beauty of her wedding pedicure with beer and ant bodies rolling over it. Looking into his calm, concerned brown eyes, she started to giggle.

He grinned.

Through her giggles she said again stupidly, "I can't believe you did that."

"It worked, didn't it?" He bent over and picked up her shoes and handed them to her as they dripped beer onto his shorts.

"Yes." She laughed harder, until tears were streaming down her face.

She wasn't even sure why she was laughing, but he laughed with her as he pulled his shirt out of his shorts. Leaning over her, he made an effort to dry her feet with his shirt, fumbling to get the fabric around her. Her laughter died off as his warm hands took her cold legs and rubbed back and forth with the taut cotton shirt. Her feet tickled where he touched them, and her toes were pressing against his hard chest.

"You'll have some welts." He pulled his shirt back and studied her feet and legs, running his hands over her caressingly.

Her hand flew up to her neck. She tried to speak, but had lost her breath. From the laughing, of course, not from the sensual way the top of his head looked bent over her.

"I'm okay," she whispered.

Looking up, his eyes locked with hers. He leaned forward.

Was he going to kiss her? Her mind wrapped itself around this amazing concept as he

rapidly closed the distance between them. She barely had time to open her mouth in surprise and drop her hand before his lips were on her.

Holy moly. His mouth was firm, warm, softly demanding a response from her, and she was incapable of protesting. In fact, she threw her hands up to his shoulders and leaned against him. His strong arms surrounded her and he sighed into her mouth, coaxing her lips to fall open.

She complied, reveling in the feel of his hot breath pushing past her lips. When his tongue met hers, she felt such an intense burst of desire in her that she nearly fell off the edge of the picnic table.

So this was lust.

He held her, wedged firmly between her thighs. She snaked her legs and bare feet around his waist, wanting to feel his strength, wanting to feel the arousal she had created in him. With a gasp, she broke contact and let her head drop back.

He took the opportunity to brush his mouth across her bottom lip, across her chin, and down the length of her neck. Shivering, she wondered if she were capable of having a spontaneous fling.

When his tongue slid expertly across hers again, she knew the answer. Yes, yes, and yes. She was on the verge of telling him to take her inside before she died, when he lifted his mouth and head, breaking contact.

What was he doing? Before she could stop herself, a moan of protest escaped her. She stared at him disbelieving as he breathed in and out raggedly. His hands were squeezing her upper arms tightly and he spoke inches from her mouth.

He said, "Are you in love with Brian?"

That was not what she had expected to hear. She dropped her arms from around his neck. The last thing in the world she wanted to think about was Brian. Without any thought but getting his lips back on hers, she shook her head with a truthful no.

His slow southern voice held puzzlement, but also a hint of steel in it. "Then why are you marrying him?"

That was a question she couldn't answer. "Because I am."

He didn't like her answer. Taking one last deep breath, he ran his hand through his short dark hair and stepped away from her. As he headed for the driveway he said, "Bye, Miss Angel. Stay out of the woods."

"Where are you going?" She sat there, trembling, sure that all the blood in her body was boiling from desire. She understood for the first time why her father had such a hard time controlling himself. She was on fire. And Rick was leaving.

He stopped and turned, giving her a smoldering, but determined look. "I'll be back when you can give me a better answer to that question. Until then, don't leave the concrete, doll."

She was left speechless, sticky and uncomfortably aroused. "Jerk," she muttered with little conviction as he drove away, obviously not bothered by the fact that they had just about set the picnic table on fire with that kiss.

She reached down and scratched her knee vigorously. She was starting to feel an ominous prickling in various areas that had nothing to do with desire, and everything to

do with rolling in poison ivy.

"I'm in trouble." She went into the cabin with the pizza box and sat on the stool by the breakfast bar in confusion. Something was happening to her, and she didn't like it. If Rick had suggested they come inside and make love, she would have headed for the door in a dead run.

Staring at the squirrel on the counter next to her, she wondered if she should just go home to Chicago. Or if she should stay and have an affair. A weekend fling in the mountains. A wildly spontaneous fling with a handsome park stud. It made her shiver. In excitement or fear, she wasn't sure which.

Meeting the glassy brown-eyed gaze of the once perky squirrel, she said, "What would you do?"

With a frustrated groan, she pushed the stool back. "Now I'm talking to dead animals! What is the matter with me?"

She gave her left arm a violent scratch.

## Chapter Six

RICK woke up with a groan, and rolled over, hitting his head. Groggily opening his eyes, he wondered just where in the heck he was. Burgundy plaid assaulted his eyes.

Great. He'd slept on the couch. The TV was still on, and the morning news was playing. The little clock popped up in the corner of the screen, and he squinted. 6:33. Damn.

Stretching, he nearly fell off the couch and held onto the cushion for dear life. His neck and left side were killing him, and his head felt like he'd inserted cotton up through his nostrils. And there was a burning, itchy feeling all over him.

Blinking, he cautiously held up an arm, seeing his worst fear realized inches in front of him. Covered. His arm was covered in a red angry rash. He popped his leg up and saw more of the same. He'd slept in his clothes, but one tug on his shirt produced the same results. His stomach was on fire.

He'd meet Angel, and look what had happened to him. He was Rash Man, and had spent the night on the couch pretending she hadn't felt like the sweetest thing he'd ever met snuggling up in his arms.

Kissing her had been plain old stupid. Yeah, he'd gotten the last word in, but he'd also gotten a restless night filled with hot dreams featuring one tiny pair of white lace underwear and Angel. With nothing but a naughty smile on her face.

A low animal groan sounded in the room. It took a minute to recognize it as his own voice.

He stumbled out of bed, and off to the shower, knowing the only way to combat the itch was to be tortured by a steaming hot shower. While it made you want to crawl right out of your skin when you were under the stream, after a few minutes the agonizing itch eased. Sort of.

By noon he was convinced that he was going to have to scrape every inch of his skin off. After struggling through his three hours inspecting ash trees for disease, he was back at the ranger station asking his boss, Mick, if he could take an extra ten minutes at lunch and go home and take another shower.

Mick tried to hide his grin as he nodded his assent. "I can't believe you've got poison ivy. What the heck were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking at all." He left it at that, but shuddered from desire, not disgust, at the memory of Angel lying on top of him, pressed intimately against his thigh with hers.

Then on the picnic table, she had been a perfect fit against him, her petite body clinging to his as she had kissed him back eagerly. He could have spent the night with her, he suspected.

But it would have been unfair to take advantage of her like that, and he was grateful he'd had the control to walk away.

Sort of.

Sitting in the lounge area that served as lunchroom and the post area for their day's

assignment, he leaned forward and tried not to let his body touch anything, including his clothes. Which was damn near impossible.

Mick, a big guy in his early forties, grunted in disbelief and scratched his head. "That sounds like something maybe I don't want to know about."

"You got that right, Mick."

Oh, hell. That was Sheri's voice coming from the doorway. Rick remembered just what he had implied to Sheri he and Angel had been doing the day before. She was most definitely assuming he'd gotten poison ivy rolling around doing the dirty in the woods. If only it were true. He had the feeling that might have been worth today's discomfort. It was a shame he had a conscience.

Sheri shot him a look of pure female disgust as she lounged against the doorframe in her crisp tan ranger's uniform, her hair in its mandatory ponytail, and her tan legs ending in thick hiking socks and boots.

He said nothing, only concentrated on breathing without itching. At least his face and chest were clear, but that was about the only parts of him that were. He hadn't been quick enough in washing up. If you didn't catch it in the first ten minutes or so, the oil seeped into your skin and it was too late.

Angel must be miserable. He at least had been covered by his shorts and part of his shirt, except where it had come untucked at the waist. Angel, on the other hand, had been bare except for those panties that were haunting him, and the top of her dress. He was thinking she probably had a mighty uncomfortable itch in certain unenviable areas.

"You're pitiful looking." Sheri finally commented, studying him carefully.

Mick barked in laughter. Rick grimaced. "Thanks, Sheri. I appreciate the compliment." At least he seemed to have gotten Sheri right over her little crush on him. He guessed she didn't go for guys who had quickies in the woods on their lunch hour, so distracted they didn't notice or care they were rolling around in a poisonous plant.

Sighing, she frowned. Finally she pushed herself off the door and said impatiently, "Oh, fine. I'll help you. I can't stand to see you like this."

"What can you do? I'm not letting you daub calamine lotion all over me. A man's got to have his pride, and pink dots aren't my idea of manly." He tentatively scratched his elbow, his gaze on the floor.

She snorted. "I'm not going to daub anything on you." Yeah, she was definitely over the little crush thing. "But I have a herbal remedy that works wonders on easing the itch. Stop by my apartment after work and I'll give you some." She gave him a long, knowing look. "Enough for both of you."

He suddenly felt like a teenager caught feeling up his date by her father. The irony was, of course, that he hadn't gotten to feel anything up. All he'd gotten was that earth-shattering kiss leaning over the picnic table. And an itch that had nothing to do with poison ivy.

Angel was to the point of wondering if climbing into the refrigerator would calm the maddening itch that covered her from her shoulders to her toes. It was the only thing she

hadn't tried yet.

After six showers- three cold, three warm- she'd concluded there was no way to wash off the itch. Lotion didn't work either, which she'd slathered over every inch of her body. The cortisone cream she had gone to town and bought had worked marginally well, but she'd used the whole tube the first time around.

The calamine lotion had never even had time to dry before she had scratched it right off.

Since seven am she had been watching TV, shifting around on the couch to find a more comfortable position. Other than the foray into town for useless creams and some food, she had been stuck here. It had been her intention to leave this morning and head back to Knoxville, but there was no way she could drive in this state. One itch attack and she'd drive Luke's truck off the side of the mountain.

Lying in her T-shirt and a pair of panties, no bra, she reached for her cell phone.

Luke answered on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"It's me."

"Hey, what's up? You find Brian yet?"

"No." Her call to his cell phone this morning had been answered by Laila again, and she had just hung the phone up to avoid vicious name calling. That wasn't even considering what Laila might say. "Has he called anyone?"

"No. Not that I know of."

Not that she gave a darn where Brian was at this point. The whole miserable experience of the last two days was his fault. As well as the fact that she had gotten only two hours of sleep last night.

Well, technically that had been Rick and his mouth watering kiss's fault, but still. She wouldn't even have been in the woods if it weren't for Brian's antics, so therefore everything that followed was indirectly his fault.

"I was planning on coming back to Knoxville today, but I have a little problem. Luke, I got poison ivy." This whole thing wasn't coming even close to following her plans. It had seemed simple yesterday morning. Drive down, grab Brian, be done with it. Now she was covered in a rash, and was itching in more ways than one.

"So?" Luke's puzzled voice irritated her.

"Haven't you ever had poison ivy? It itches. Everywhere. I can't drive. I can't even sit still." So much for her hope he would know some sort of remedy. Or at least offer sympathy.

"No, I never had it. I didn't go to camp like you did. Once your mom told my mom about your little disaster at camp, my mom wouldn't let me go."

Little disaster. That was understating the fateful camping trip that had resulted in the coordinator suggesting to her mother that she drop out of Campfire Girls. All because of a little forest fire. She should have learned her lesson then and stayed away from the woods.

"Thanks for reminding me. So you don't know what I'm supposed to do to make this itch go away?"

"No. But call your mom. She knows about that alternative medicine and stuff like that."

Just what she needed. Her mom plying her with ginseng. Or cucumber wraps or something. No thanks. "Calling her would mean I would have to talk about Brian. I'd rather itch."

"You've got to talk about it sooner or later." His voice was cautious. "I don't think Brian's going to be able to get himself out of this one. Jake and Eddie are sure he got married."

Her patience with the whole thing effectively snapped in two. "Jake and Eddie are also sure that Gisele Bundchen is a femmebot."

He snorted with laughter, then caught himself. "I'm just saying maybe you need to rethink things with Brian." He paused, then said, "If you really need that money, I'll sell the truck and give it to you."

Her heart flipped over and she gripped the phone so tightly all the blood left her fingers. She was so grateful to have Luke as a brother. They had been the oldest in their crazy family, and there was a bond between them that she didn't always share with her other siblings. "Thanks, Luke. I appreciate that, but don't worry. I'll work it out."

If she had to, she'd abandon the idea of buying a house and stay in her apartment. But she wasn't ready to give up yet. There had to be some way around this. The bet awarded the money to the last person of the betting pool to get married. She and Brian were the last two. If Brian was married, she could still win by getting married.

Did they have mail order grooms? The image of Rick rose in her mind. She squashed it. Whatever it was he wanted from her, a fake marriage was not it.

Luke sounded impatient with her reticence. "As long as you know what you're doing. But I'll help you out if I can."

His voice was so worried, she was about to tell him the whole situation when there was a knock on the door. "Oh, there's someone at the door. Let me call you back."

Debating what to do about her state of undress, she grabbed her discarded shorts off of the coffee table and pulled them on, but left the bra sitting there. Her shoulders were way too covered in the red rash to even think about putting a bra strap on them. Besides, in her case, a bra was more optimistic than necessary.

As she went to pull the door open, she wondered at the sudden leap of anticipation in her. And it wasn't for Brian. She was hoping it would be Rick, despite the brush off he'd given her the night before.

It was Rick, standing there with a pained expression on his face. His arms and legs matched her own, red raw skin with a spider web patterned rash. She felt the urge to laugh. "Hi." She tried not to be hopeful.

"Hi." A finger crept out and scratched his forearm.

Biting her lip, she squashed a grin that was threatening to burst out. "I'm so sorry, Rick. This is all my fault."

"I suppose," he drawled slowly in that good ole boy voice of his, "that it's really the bear's fault. For walking through the woods. I mean, imagine the nerve of that guy."

She couldn't help it. The smile broke out. He was standing there very carefully, holding a plastic bag in his hand, and he still managed to look like a calendar pinup. Twelve months of the Hottest Mountain Men. Meet Mr. June. She wasn't sure if it was the short

dark hair, his height, the wicked tan he had going on from all the time in the sun, or the coffee colored eyes.

Maybe it was everything put together, touched up with those strong legs, and rippling arm muscles. She didn't care why he was here. She was just glad he was.

"Do you want to come in?"

"Sure." He held up the bag. "Sheri's taken pity on us. She gave me this tree leaf stuff that's supposed to make the itch go away. I don't know if it works, but figured it's worth a shot." He gave her a lingering once over. "You look like you might be a little uncomfortable."

"I'm dying. Does that clarify things?" She stepped back and let him in. "I don't care what it is. I'll try anything."

Opening the bag, he inspected a plastic bottle filled with a liquid that looked like baby oil. "Tea tree leaf oil extract," he read off of the bottle. "Apply to dry, cracked, irritated skin for instant relief." He glanced up at her. "Angel, is your skin irritated?"

"My skin's gone way past irritated. It's at madder than hell right now."

"Stick out your arm." He squeezed some into his hand and started towards her.

Before she could debate the wisdom of letting him rub oil into her arm, he was there, pulling her hand so her arm was out straight. With his other hand, he glopped on the oil and massaged it into her skin from wrist to upper arm, stopping where her T-shirt sleeve was.

Amazingly, she felt a cooling of the itch. Her skin was settling, soothing, and while still upset had gone from totally ticked off to only mildly miffed. "It's working! It feels a little better!"

Taking the bottle from him, she squeezed a healthy blob into her right hand and took Rick's arm in her left. Oh, my, he was strong. She could feel his tendons and muscles bulging beneath the surface of his skin, throbbing.

Swallowing hard, she didn't look at him as she rubbed the oil into his arm quickly. She slapped the bottle down on the counter and sighed in relief. That hadn't been so bad. She had touched him without dissolving into a puddle at his feet or begging for him to kiss her again.

"How does that feel?" She spoke neutrally.

He held his arms out as if to compare the two. "It is better." He picked up the bottle. "Your turn again."

This time he slathered all the way up her other arm, skimming under her shirt sleeve and over the rounded curve of her shoulder. She drew in a sharp breath and thought that she should demand he stop. He was wandering into dangerous territory here, caressing her collarbone, trailing one finger along the top of the curve and one on the bottom.

She started to protest when he pulled his hand out, but stifled herself quickly. She didn't know if she was protesting him touching her, or suddenly stopping.

He was only reloading.

With oil on both hands now, he went in through the neck of her T-shirt, each hand taking a shoulder, then her neck, sliding along sensually in the warmth of the oil and her quickly overheated skin. Did he know what he was doing? Did he have any idea?

A quick glance showed him concentrating fully, his lips parted, a slight hitch in his breath. He was watching her, studying her face, and following the contours of her body beneath his fingers. Oh, yeah. He knew what he was doing.

Especially when he pulled his hands back out and dropped to his knee on the floor. She gasped, and said quickly, "What are you doing?"

He gazed up at her, his forearm resting on his thigh while he poured more oil. He spoke casually, teasing. "Putting some on your legs. Is it helping?"

She felt she should deny it. Or snatch the bottle away. But the sad truth was that even if it didn't do a darn thing to help the itching, she wasn't going to regret letting Rick slather it all over her. "Yes, it's great stuff."

"I think so too." His wide warm hands spread across her ankles, and worked up, massaging the oil into her skin.

He skimmed her knees lightly and was inching further and further up her thighs, and she let out a strangled gasp that startled her when she heard it. She was suddenly monumentally embarrassed, and a glance down made it worse. It was completely unlike her to be standing here, with a virtual stranger, letting him rub her legs with oil, while his face was dangerously close to there. It was so intimate, and her body was responding in turn in a way that she hadn't known she was capable of.

She screwed her eyes shut tight, uncertain, and swayed back a little, hitting the countertop with her back. Rick never even paused, and his very warm, very capable hands were now brushing across her upper thighs beneath her shorts, where they had somehow slipped when she wasn't looking. She murmured, "What are you doing?"

He was so close to her his breath blew across her thigh when he spoke. "You've got to be itchy under these shorts. I saw how far your dress was pushed up, Angel."

Just what she needed. A reminder that he had seen her in her underwear, legs up like a Thanksgiving turkey. "I'm fine, really... you don't need to." Her eyes stayed closed and her voice was nothing more than a desperate whisper.

He laughed, low and triumphant.

She was trying to muster the energy to protest harder as his fingers stroked, gliding across her warm skin, wet and slick from the oil. Her mouth was open, little gasps emerging that she tried to stifle, and she tried to force the word "stop" out. Without rushing, suddenly his questing thumbs had slipped underneath her panties on each thigh, continuing rubbing as if the barrier had never been there.

"Rick!" she moaned, swaying back towards him, knowing she had no strength to stop him. He moved slowly around each thigh, until his hands were completely under her panties, massaging the oil into her behind, his wide palms splayed across her.

"I don't have a rash there," she thought to say stupidly. It was the most amazing thing, how good this felt. She felt shocked, yes, and decidedly naughty, but mostly she just felt warm and alive, aching with need and feeling very desirable.

No man had ever made her feel this with just a simple touch.

"Here then?" He moved back around and to her inner thigh, spreading each hand possessively over her.

When his thumbs skimmed over her panties at the apex of her thighs, she jerked out

of her lethargy. Letting out a startled cry, she found the strength to open her eyes. And wanted to close them again.

He was coming up the length of her, his mouth a mere inch from her skin as his hands stroked upward, passing over her hip bone, passing over her waist, up and under her shirt. He was standing now, his lips meeting hers with a gentle kiss, his hand moving confidently to the underside of her breast.

A moan ripped out of his mouth. "You're not wearing a bra."

"I know." She felt the sudden shift, his teasing tantalizing control slipping as he encountered more than he had expected to.

This change in mood brought a heady power as she observed his half closed eyes, his ragged breath, and felt him pressing into her abdomen with the proof of his desire.

She enjoyed another kiss he pressed upon her with total abandon, then impulsively turned and grabbed the bottle of the counter. "Your turn now."

Before she squeezed the oil out though, she went to work on the buttons of his tan ranger shirt. She didn't know or care if he was itching under there, she merely wanted the excuse to get a good look at him. If she was going to act crazy, she might as well get the most for her time. The strangled moan he gave as her fingers worked made her grin in satisfaction.

"Angel."

"Yes?" Mission accomplished, she stood and stared, swallowing hard. He was a rock. That silly park uniform had been hiding the most incredible chest she'd ever seen. He was hard, yet smooth, tan and broad.

"What are you doing?"

Ignoring the little voice shouting in her head that this was wild and dangerous, she smiled slowly. Why shouldn't she touch him? He wanted her to. And she really, really wanted to. "I'm putting the tea oil on you."

With the oil thoroughly saturating her fingers, she touched him, letting her curious fingers trail across him, enjoying the heat of his skin beneath her. He didn't have the rash on his chest, just a slight redness by his waist, but she didn't let that stop her. She touched everywhere, skimming his nipples, caressing the well-defined muscles of his torso, standing on tip-toe to reach his shoulders.

The unbuttoned shirt was still on him, and she pushed it down his red arms. The shirt got trapped at his wrists and with finger and thumb she pulled it off, tossing it onto the floor unceremoniously.

He grabbed her and pulled her to him, and their mouths collided violently. She threw her arms around his neck, suddenly desperate with the need to taste him, knowing that this moment of impulse wouldn't last long. She was going to enjoy it before her conscience could have time to give her a swift kick.

Their lips met more easily now, over and over again, she felt the soft invasion of his tongue. Never had she felt this, such a powerful rising of longing in her, a deep anxious ache in her body that begged to be eased. Every touch, every taste, made her want more, until she was pressing against him urgently.

She whimpered in distress when he pulled back. Then shivered as he gave her a fierce

stare. Roughly, he reached out and grabbed the bottom of her shirt. He paused for a mere second, and she rocked forward giving permission. With a growl of triumph, he pulled it over her head, tossing it somewhere in the direction of his.

She shuddered in anticipation as his eyes raked over her bare breasts and for once in her life she didn't feel the need to apologize for their inadequate size. In fact, she found herself tilting her head back and arching to give him a better view. He wanted her, she could plainly see, and the thought sent her heart pounding and her blood pumping faster.

She wanted him too.

Then he pulled her back into his embrace, and she gasped as their skin made warm contact, her breasts pressed intimately against his chest. Her nipples slid across the oily smoothness, and tingled in pleasure. She sank against him.

When he reached for her shorts, she suddenly knew where this was heading. This was not playing around with a few kisses. This wasn't going to end anywhere but with them in the bedroom. She wanted him to make love to her. Desperately.

It was the word desperate that shocked her right out of her desire more effectively than a bucket of cold water could have. This wasn't like her. Desperate meant out of control, and that was a state she was never in. She didn't get naked on a moment's notice with a man she'd just met and rub oil into his chest.

Panicked and uncertain, she stepped quickly back out of his arms, forcing his hand to let go of her waistband. She held her hands out to ward against his reaching for her again. "Rick, no! We can't do this. I want you to leave."

## Chapter Seven

SHE couldn't have just said that. Rick's brain was foggy, probably because all the blood in his body had rushed south, and he shook his head a little to clear it. Surely she couldn't have just asked him to leave, not when she had just finished touching him like she'd never seen a man's bare chest before.

He tried to breathe, tried not to moan, tried to ignore the painful throb in his shorts. It was a little difficult to do since she was standing there in those cotton shorts that barely covered her ass, riding low at the waist, and not a damn thing else. Her hands held out did nothing to shield his view of her perfectly rounded creamy breasts, which perfectly matched her petite body, and her full pink nipples.

It would be best to just ignore her ridiculous little outburst, he decided. She couldn't possibly claim she didn't want him. She had practically purred beneath his hands. He took a step forward to pull her to him.

She retreated a step. He took another forward. She backed up two, eyes gone wild with panic.

He stopped stalking her. Walking was too painful anyway. And not from the rash. He tried to sound calm. "What's the matter?"

"We can't do this. We both know where this is heading."

His groin tightened anxiously. "I know what I'm hoping."

She scanned the floor, spotted her shirt then bit her lip uncertainly. He could see that the shirt was right next to him. With no feelings of guilt whatsoever, he stepped on it. Let her bend over and grab that now.

Narrowing her eyes, she crossed her arms over her chest, hiding her nipples from him, but not the swell of her breasts. "This isn't a good idea."

"It seems like a damned good idea to me." The best idea he'd had in a long while, in fact.

Suddenly, to his horror, she sniffled, snatching a throw pillow off of the couch and covering herself with it. Her eyes filled with tears. "I want to, but I just can't."

Damn it, not tears. Swearing, he took his foot off her shirt and scooped it up, suddenly feeling like a huge pervert. "Don't cry, doll. You know I'd never force you to do anything."

Taking her the shirt, he resisted the urge to draw her into his arms and comfort her. Instead, he just meekly handed her the shirt and retreated.

And felt like he was dying a thousand deaths when she pulled the shirt on over her head. Especially when the pillow fell away to the floor. With her arms in the air, her breasts were lifted up in the most remarkably sexy way. He cleared his throat.

"I think you should leave." She hugged herself, shirt in place, her smooth blond hair falling over one eye.

He was going to then suddenly thought better of it. This was the second time she had responded to him like a woman desperate for some attention, yet she was supposed to be engaged. Something was seriously wrong here. Any woman about to be married

shouldn't be trembling when he barely brushed against her. Twice now she'd responded to him eagerly, then pulled the plug.

A man deserved a little explanation, especially when he had a hard-on the size of a mountain, and no relief in sight. He wasn't going to walk away until she gave him that explanation.

Besides, his legs were still itchy. She owed him a rub down. He said clearly, "No."

She blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean no. I'm not leaving until you give me some answers, Angel." Leaving his shirt on the floor he strolled over to the couch. "Starting with what's the real story between you and Brian since you admitted last night you don't love him."

Staring at him, she stood speechless for a good thirty seconds, watching him settle himself onto the hunter green couch. Finally, she said, "You've got a lot of nerve!"

He smiled in what he hoped was a charming manner. "Come here and sit on down right next to me." He patted the cushion.

"No!"

"Why not? I promise I won't touch you."

Disappointment flared in her eyes, or maybe that was just wishful thinking on his part. "Or if you like, I'll touch you all you want."

That was definitely a nasty glare she was giving him. Good thing he was thick skinned.

He crossed his leg and leaned back, throwing his arm up on the back of the couch. "Listen, I'm a nice guy. I'll give you a choice. Either tell me about Brian, or put that tea leaf stuff on my legs. I'm still itchy." He tried not to laugh at the look of horror on her face. "Those are your choices, doll. I'm not leaving until you do one or the other."

She glanced at his legs then stomped over to the chair across from the couch. "Being a bully doesn't seem like your style."

"These are hard times. I need to know more about you, and you're not telling." He had to know so he could get her off his mind. So he could enjoy a decent night's sleep tonight.

She glared. "I don't know anything about you either."

He held out his hand. "Ask away, doll. My life's an open book."

"First of all, stop calling me doll. I'm very self-conscious of my height."

He raised his eyebrows. She sat there, glaring at him, her chest rising up and down in indignation. That wasn't exactly what he had expected her to say. "It's meant as a compliment. I mean that you're beautiful."

A pleased expression passed over her face before she hid it. "Well, I still don't like it."

"Fine. I'll call you Angel." He paused. "Are you opting for the oil or for spilling your guts to me about Brian?" He was sure she would be afraid to touch him, afraid to go where they had been before, and would talk instead. While he wanted her hands on every inch of him, he wanted information first. Then he wanted her to get naked.

"Fine. There's not much to tell." She slapped her bare feet on the coffee table. Her toenails were painted a pale pink color. "I've known Brian since high school. We went to the same college, and one night in our group of friends we were talking about marriage, and all swearing that we would never make that mistake. It turned into a bet, and we all plunked down a hundred bucks, saying that whoever was the last one unmarried would

get the money when they did finally get married."

He was trying to follow along, and the first thing that struck him was the high stakes. He wouldn't have had that kind of money, but then she had said her dad was loaded. He said casually, "You had a hundred bucks in college to bet with? I couldn't have bet more than a quarter."

She grimaced. "It wasn't our money, but money from our parents. We told them it was an investment pool, which it was. My dad was always generous with money, if not his time."

He suspected there was more to that than she was telling. Her voice took on an edge whenever she talked about her father, but he didn't say anything.

"Anyway, I bet because I knew I couldn't lose. I knew there was no way I was getting married."

Her voice was so determined, he had to ask. "Why not, Angel? What's wrong with getting married? Even most eighteen year olds figure they'll give it a try sooner or later."

She looked him straight in the eye. "My father has been married six times. My brothers and sisters and I all have different mothers. That will cure anyone of romantic dreams."

He whistled low. That explained a lot. Including the loveless marriage she had intended to have with Brian. She was afraid to believe in love and forever after. "I guess that could turn you off, yeah. So why get married now?"

He almost didn't expect her to answer. He was almost afraid of the answer if she did. No matter what had happened with Nicole, he had loved her in the beginning, and he still believed in love, and in marriage.

She didn't hesitate in her answer. "You know how I said we all put out a hundred bucks?"

He nodded.

"Well, there were ten of us, and our friend Alan Frank took it and invested it." She smiled a little. "He saw it as a grand opportunity to learn how to wheel and deal with money that wasn't his, and it didn't really matter if he lost it. He took some huge risks with it. He's a stockbroker in New York, now, by the way. Anyway, that money is now worth twenty thousand dollars."

His hand fell off the back of the couch and he leaned forward. "Whoa. Twenty grand?" That made it a lot more than a crazy college bet now.

"Yeah. And Brian and I are the only two people from the original ten in the betting pool who aren't married."

Understanding dawned in his brain. "So, you said the last person to get married gets the money. If you and Brian get married, you split the cash. Right?"

She nodded. "Yes. So now you know I'm a gold digger who will get married for the financial equivalent of a car."

His first instinct was to recoil. Getting married for money, even to someone who is a good friend, was foreign to him. But after that initial reaction passed, he realized he had no idea what he would do if that option were offered to him right now. He could see Kiri more often. Hell, he could move out of his tiny apartment, and talk to Nicole about having Kiri spend her summers with him.

Yes, he could see the lure. But what did Angel need that money for? There had to be a reason. She wasn't a greedy person. If she was, she'd be sponging off her father, or would have chosen a different profession. Teachers aren't paid anymore than park rangers.

"I would have given everyone their hundred bucks back, by the way. And they were all invited to the money." But her cheeks were flushed, like she knew that wasn't entirely above board, given the marriage wasn't legit.

"What do you need the money for?" he asked quietly, firmly.

She froze. Then her head shook.

There was something there, but he knew she wasn't ready to tell him. He knew when to retreat. He asked instead the question that had been plaguing him, and overwhelming him with fits of jealousy. "Have you slept with Brian?"

"What?" Her face scrunched up and she grabbed the arm of her chair.

He said it again.

She sputtered, she flushed, she shifted uncomfortably, tucking her feet under her legs. "That's none of your business."

He let himself smile, a smile of pure male triumph. "I didn't think so."

"I didn't say I did or didn't!" She sat up indignantly.

Shrugging, he told her, "Doesn't matter. Your face is telling me." He felt immense satisfaction. He didn't like the idea of her giving herself in martyr sex to some guy who obviously didn't appreciate her.

Noticing that she was on the verge of throwing a pillow at him, he quickly said, "So tell me about your family. You're the oldest, then Luke, then who? I can't remember what you told me."

Suspiciously, she said, "Then Jake, Eddie, Hannah and Dixie." Standing up, she went over to the breakfast bar. She picked up the oil, and waved the bottle back and forth at him. "You're still scratching your legs."

"Am I?" He hadn't realized it, but his hand was on his leg scratching. His throat went dry. She was going to oil him down again. If she wanted to keep going this time, he saw no reason to stop. She didn't love Brian, she hadn't slept with him. She was his for the taking. His mouth watered. "So what are you going to do about it?"

She moved slowly towards him, her narrow little hips swaying, her nipples pushing through the fabric of her shirt. Her long blond hair cascaded around her face and he had no trouble picturing it spread across a pillow, that same look on her face.

He nearly groaned when she kneeled down next to him. Her moods obviously swung hard and fast, but he wasn't about to complain. The oil hit his leg in a cool spurt as she squeezed the bottle over first his right, then his left leg. His body was taut with expectation, and he didn't think there could be anything sexier than looking down at the top of her blond head as she bent over him.

Except that she wasn't. She was already rising, saying with a lift of her eyebrow, "You'd better rub that in before it drips on the carpet."

He stared at her, stunned, his body whining miserably at this blatant tease as she smiled cockily. With a vicious swipe at each leg he rubbed the stuff into his skin and

wiped his hands on his shorts. "You think you're pretty cute, don't you?"

She crossed her arms smugly. "I hope you're not complaining. You got more than the bargain called for. I told you about Brian and you still got the oil on your legs."

He stood up quickly and grinned to himself when she stumbled backwards in alarm to avoid contact with him. The little angel had a devilish side to her, but she wasn't as in control as she'd like to believe. "Well, you have a fine night, now, Miss Angel, and I'll see you in the morning."

He waited for her to realize what he'd said. It took her a minute then she blurted out, "In the morning? To do what?"

With one finger he reached out and dragged it slowly across her bottom lip. "Oh, I don't know. A little of this. A little of that. I'm sure we can think of all kinds of fun things to do. I was thinking we'd start with breakfast. I have a thing for waffles."

He nearly expected her to slap him. Or at the least stalk off in a huff. Instead, she nodded. "Okay. See you in the morning." And she wandered off dazed, in the direction of the bedroom and absently closed the door behind her.

Well, well. Seems she was up for playing with fire after all. He couldn't wait until tomorrow.

Luke Weiss had the devil of a hangover. Which wasn't new for him. What was new was that he was awake before noon. Owning a bar back in Chicago meant he kept late hours and even later mornings. Yet a glance at the clock showed it was only eight AM. Monday morning.

He sat up in the bed in his hotel room. Angel should have found Brian or come back to Knoxville by now. It was worrying him, and seriously cutting into his sleep time. He didn't need this headache. A guy needed his sleep, and his favorite sister running around alone chasing down her runaway fiance was enough to ruin his eight hours two nights running.

It was time to do something about it. When he thought about the look on Angel's face when he had told her the news in the church, his first thought was to hunt down Brian and beat the hell out of him. It was a brother's right.

But on greater reflection, he decided the best thing for Angel would be to not find Brian. If she couldn't find him, she couldn't marry him, and Luke didn't want Angel to marry Brian. He never had, but when he had thought she was in love with him he'd been willing to overlook Brian's obvious misgivings for her sake.

Now that he knew the truth, he was going to do his best to keep her from making the biggest mistake of her life. Standing up, he searched around in the jumble of clothes thrown around his hotel room. Finding a wrinkled pair of jeans and a T-shirt that stated "Deal With It", he got dressed without showering.

He didn't need to smell pretty for his brothers, and he had the sneaking suspicion they would smell worse than he did anyway. His hand pulled through his blond hair sufficed for grooming. He had a slouchy, unkempt image, that prevented him from combing his hair too often. Normally, he did go for clean, though, but time was running out here.

The sooner he got to Brian the better.

It took ten minutes of pounding for Jake to respond. He finally called sleepily, "If that's you, Dixie, I'm going to stick your face in the toilet."

"It's me, Luke." He shifted impatiently. "Open the door, Jake."

The door opened after much mumbling and a thump, followed by a vicious curse. Jake stood there in his underwear, eyes bleary and blond hair on end. "Somebody better be dead," he stated.

Luke brushed past him, and saw Eddie moaning in bed, wiping the drool off the corner of his mouth. The room reeked like old pizza. "You two are disgusting."

"You woke me up to tell me that?" Jake stumbled back to the other queen sized bed and was tumbling forward.

Luke said sharply, "I'm here about Angel."

They all felt protective about Angel, even the girls. She was the most vulnerable of them, despite her being the oldest. Or maybe because of it. She'd seen the worst of everything the old man had done.

Mentioning Angel had the desired effect. Jake settled for sitting on the bed, resting his head on the wall behind the headboard. Even Eddie managed to open his eyes and ask, "What about her? She all right?"

"Yes. No thanks to us." He paced back and forth, carefully avoiding the piles of clothes littered all over the room. How did they live like this? He conveniently forgot the state of his own room. "We shouldn't have let her head off on her own. I mean, come on, here. Angel can't cross the street without planning it first. Being thrown into strange situations unnerves her. It's likely she'll do something stupid."

"You're right." Jake moaned guiltily. "Man, we suck as brothers. What should we do?"

"We need to head down there and find Brian for her. If that's what she wants, we should do it." What he really meant was find Brian and keep him away from Angel, but that was his secret for now. Jake and Eddie actually liked Brian and might not appreciate Luke's meddling.

Eddie sat up and scratched his chest. "We never thought he'd marry that stripper chick, man, I swear, or we'd of stopped him. Just thought he was getting it out of his system one last time, that's all. I couldn't believe it when he said he'd actually married her."

Jake started to search through the pile of clothes next to his bed and pulled out a shirt. "We're with you. When are we leaving?"

"As soon as you shower." And took one himself.

A knock came at the door and they heard Dixie's cheerful voice call out, "Rise and shine, boys! Another beautiful day awaits us!"

Eddie yelled, "Go away."

Luke said to them, "Make yourself decent. I'm letting her in. She needs to know we're leaving so she can run interference with the family."

Dixie was standing in the hallway, wearing a hot pink bikini and a piece of something or other fabric wrapped around her waist. Her blue tinted sunglasses were pushed up on her head. "Well, hi, Luke. What are you doing up so early?"

He lifted the corner of his mouth. "Same thing you are. Embracing the beauty of the day."

She laughed. "That's a load. But since you're up, you'll work." Reaching out, she took his arm and tried to tug him out of the room.

"Whoa. What are you doing?"

"There's a guy down at the pool who keeps giving me the eye but won't make a move. If I bring you down for awhile it'll make him jealous, spur him into action." She kept tugging.

He thought the logic was flawed. Not to mention that he didn't find the idea of pretending to be Dixie's date appealing. "I'm not going to sit there and be your cabana boy. You're my sister, that's totally disgusting." He managed to extract his arm. "I used to change your diaper."

She laughed a tinkling lighthearted laugh that grated on his ears. "That is such a lie. Angel changed my diaper, not you."

"I was still in the room," he told her darkly.

"Oh, fine." She laughed again and pushed past him. "Eddie will go with me. Won't you, Eddie? You know you're my very favorite brother." She said this as if to mortally wound him and Jake.

"Sorry. We're heading out of here." Eddie got out of bed, the sheet wrapped around him, and walked toward the bathroom.

"What?" She cried, looking from face to face in dismay. "You're going home? But we've just gotten here!" Her lip dissolved into a tremendous pout.

"We're going to find Brian," Jake said. "He hasn't turned up yet."

"Oh, that sounds boring." She put her hands on her bare hips. "But it's boring here too, so count me in. We can go in my car."

"No." He spoke emphatically. Dixie was the only one of them who had no problem accepting gifts from their father and she was currently driving a brand new perky green Volkswagon Beetle. There was no way in hell he was going anywhere in that thing. "It's a chick car. Besides, my legs don't even fit in it."

"I'm sure your ego doesn't either." She smiled prettily at him.

"Why don't you just stay here?" he complained.

"And miss you pounding Brian into the pavement? No way!" She spun around and walked to the door, her hair swinging back and forth. "I'm going to wake up Hannah. We'll be back in ten minutes."

He cursed under his breath. This was getting out of hand. The last thing in the world Angel would want was the whole Weiss clan swooping down on Gatlinburg in Eddie's Monte Carlo. On the other hand, between the five of them, they ought to be able to keep Brian away from Angel.

There was no way he was letting that joker marry his sister. He'd put up with Dixie's nonstop chatter to accomplish that.

## Chapter Eight

ANGEL needed to get the heck out of Dodge. Or Gatlinburg. Or Pigeon Foot. Wherever she was, she needed to leave. She had only slept four hours in two days, was covered in an itchy rash, and was no closer to finding Brian than she had been when she'd roared into town on Saturday.

Plus she was losing her mind and her body felt as though she'd stepped on a live electrical wire.

Standing in the shower Monday morning she cautiously reached out and snatched the bottle of shampoo from the dead bear. She sighed in relief when nothing happened. She was just waiting for the time when he growled at her.

There was no logical explanation for her behavior last night. Letting Rick oil her up, strip her shirt off, kiss her senseless. It was horrible, shocking. And the way she had let herself be talked around in the end to seeing him again.

Scratching her scalp viciously, she rubbed the shampoo in. "God, I sounded like such a twit! Okay. See you tomorrow," she mimicked her own stupid response and rinsed her hair.

Worst of all, she was beginning to look like a tease. She said no, she said yes, no, yes. A tease, or suffering from multiple-personality disorder. That could explain the sappy acquiescence when he'd boldly stated he would see her today.

She snatched a towel from the bear and stepped out of the shower, drying off vigorously. She had no food to eat. No clothes to wear. She was being forced to use toothpaste that wasn't her brand. It was a total nightmare and as soon as she'd grabbed breakfast she was high-tailing it out off there before Rick was knocking on her door.

A knock came on her door.

"Oh, no!" That had to be Rick, and she was naked and still damp. Her body hummed in response, her nipples budding. "Just a minute," she yelled at the top of her lungs in the direction of the front door, praying she had locked the door. If he came in here right now, there was no guessing what she'd do.

Grumbling, she pulled on the same shorts she'd been wearing for a day and a half and took the time to put a bra on, despite the lingering itch on her shoulders. She could not face him without a bra on, knowing her breasts would betray her by firming in response to his gaze.

She was starting to think she was going through some sort of early menopause or weird hormonal cycle. She'd read somewhere that women sexually peak in their early thirties, so maybe that explained her sudden hormonal surge and desperate feelings of desire. Her body was peaking, with no one to peak with.

A quick run through her wet hair with her fingers and she opened the door to see Rick standing there in olive green cargo shorts, a white T-shirt and hiking boots. It was an improvement over the ranger uniform. So much so that her body gave her another vicious little reminder of what she was missing.

"You ready?" he said.

She was immediately suspicious. "For what?"

"To see the sights of the Smoky Mountains, doll, that's what." When she bristled, he quickly amended with a grin, "Sorry. I mean, Miss Angel."

That wasn't any better. It made her feel like a Sunday school teacher. "I was planning on going back to Knoxville," she said with a shrug, trying to sound nonchalant.

He smiled, and she felt a shiver course through her. He glanced up and down the length of her body, and it wouldn't have mattered if she had been wearing a steel bra, he still managed to make her feel naked. Vulnerable. Desirable.

"Without experiencing our mountain hospitality? I don't think so."

Struggling to remain determined, she crossed her arms across her chest. "Don't you have to work?"

"Monday and Tuesday are my days off." He smiled again. "Come on. Please. You'll never know what you're missing."

He was trying to charm her. And it was working. She opened her mouth, closed it. Oh, why did he have to sound so... interested in her? If only he would look at her with mild amusement like Brian did, then she could ignore him and go back to her tidy life.

Her tidy and boring life.

His rough hand encased hers, and his thumb rubbed back and forth, while his eyes dropped down to her lips then up again. "Just a little fun, Angel, that's all. You don't look like you have a whole lot of fun."

"Just a little fun," she whispered back, taking a deep breath, mesmerized by his smile. There was nothing wrong with a little fun. There was no harm in spending time with Rick.

Except spending time with Rick would make it harder and harder to say no. Easier and easier to listen to that little voice inside her telling her that one night with Rick would be worth sticking around for.

Suddenly she wondered if that little voice might be right. "Okay."

His satisfied grin sent a hot rush through her abdomen. He tugged on her hand to pull her forward as she wondered at the fact that she was being spontaneous. For the first time in her thirty years of life. Her mother would be so proud.

Angel wasn't sure how spontaneous landed her in the world's largest cowboy boot store, but that exactly where she was ten minutes later.

Looking dubiously around the outside, she said, "What are we doing? I'm not helping you pick out new boots to go boot scootin' in. I have to draw the line somewhere."

He laughed and opened the door to the store, allowing her to enter first. "It's not for me. It's for you."

She raised an eyebrow at him over her shoulder and winced when the sound of honky tonk country music assaulted her as she crossed the threshold. "I have never needed the use of cowboy boots and don't expect I will in the future. And you don't look like the cowboy type anyway."

"They sell hiking boots here too. You can't go hiking in the woods in those rubber sandals."

She glanced down at her flip flops. "Who said I was going hiking?"

"Me."

He took charge, gauging her foot size accurately, and heading to the hiking boots on the rack. He picked three styles and had her slipping them on in no time flat, having bought a pair of socks for her to wear.

"These socks are too thick," she complained, more because she felt like she should, than because they were actually bothering her. She was squirming with embarrassment.

Trying clothes or shoes on together was reserved for married couples, like grocery shopping.

She had still damp hair, no make-up on, and was wearing the same grungy clothes he'd seen her in twice before, but somehow the act of him lacing her boots up was more intimate and sensual than a kiss.

She had to look away from the top of his dark head bent studiously over her.

A saleswoman approached them cheerfully, her feet happily ensconced in black knee length cowboy boots. She was wearing a denim shirt with red fringe. Angel supposed it was mood setting to please the tourists. The woman said, "Can I get you another size there, hon?"

Angel pursed her lips and tried to interpret. The woman spoke so fast, her accent so heavy that she couldn't understand a single thing she'd said. She needed an interpreter. Rick shot a grin at her, and said to the saleswoman, "We're fine, sugar. We'll holler if we need you."

The saleswoman smiled and cracked her gum. She whacked Angel on the arm and said, "Well, ain't he just the cutest thing? Hold on to him, honey."

As the woman walked away, Angel brushed off Rick's hands that were possessively stroking her ankle. She stood up and walked a quick step. "Did you pay her to say that?"

"No. She just knows a good thing when she sees it."

"Whatever." She rolled her eyes and bounced up and down, impatient with flirtatious saleswomen and country music. She didn't care if Garth Brooks had made country cool, it was still too loud in this store. "These are fantastic. Awesome. Let's go. All this leather is making me itch again. Or maybe it's the music that has that effect."

"Well, Miss Chicago, if you're all set, we'll pay for these, then go get ourselves a real southern breakfast. Grits will get you going on a beautiful day like today." He stuck her sandals in the boot box and stood up.

Somehow grits didn't sound like anything she wanted to be eating. "Are you trying to make me leave town?"

He could watch her for hours. He was doing just that, watching her, as she picked around her grits and nibbled on a little piece of toast. Her hair had dried and was falling softly around her face, little wisps curling here and there from the humidity. He liked that she was confident enough in herself to go out with wet hair. He had known plenty of women who wore full make-up to go jogging in. But Angel seemed comfortable with herself.

She was talking about being a teacher. She was telling him cute little anecdotes about

her students, and in every word he could hear how much she enjoyed her job and how important those kids were to her.

He had the strangest feeling that she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever met, that rare combination of outward and inner beauty. Any woman who cares about a messy pack of five years olds was special. One who also had the power to make his blood boil from one saucy look was downright dangerous.

Angel professed to be the planner, but today it was he who had the plan. He was going to get her to relax, let down her guard, enjoy herself, and then they were going to enjoy each other all night long in that little cabin of hers.

He had no guilt that she had been about to marry another man. By her own admission, she didn't love him, and she had practically admitted they hadn't even slept together. No wonder she melted under Rick's touch. She was desperate for some attention, and he intended to give her some. And then give her some more.

She hadn't said anything negative about her job so far. He asked curiously, "Isn't there ever a kid who just totally gets on your nerves?" He picked up the last crumb of his biscuit with his finger and licked it off.

Surprised, she said, "No, I don't think so. It's more the parents who get on my nerves." She laughed as she played with the rim of her orange juice glass, glancing around the diner casually. "You know the ones who are completely neurotic and have to be involved in everything, or the ones who never ever remember anything. When you have a kid at the Halloween party who is the only one without a costume you want to throttle some parents."

"I bet you've got a spare princess and a pirate costume in your supply closet, don't you?" Somehow he couldn't picture her letting any child go without if she could help it.

She blushed. "Actually it's a princess and a power ranger."

He laughed. "I hope Kiri gets a teacher like you." Suddenly he found himself pulling out his phone and pulling up a picture of his daughter. Kiri was wearing a red jumper and her dark curls were in two pigtails. She was grinning broadly at the camera.

As Angel smiled at the picture, he fought the urge to snatch it back. Geez, what an idiot he was being. He hadn't showed around pictures of his daughter since she'd been an infant.

She just smiled at him though, handing it back carefully. "She's adorable. She looks just like you."

He knew by the sudden frozen look on her face that she hadn't meant the one comment to have to do with the other, but he couldn't help teasing her. "Thank you. I am pretty adorable, aren't I?"

She rolled her eyes, and he laughed. "You finished?"

The grits got one last shove with her fork. She frowned at them. "Yes."

He saw her scratch her still red forearm. "How's the rash today?"

"Better. Sheri deserves a reward for giving us that oil. It worked wonders."

Did it ever. He hitched his breath in as he remembered exactly what they had been doing with the oil. His hands jumped at his side, eager to be on her warm skin again.

She blushed when she caught his gaze. "That's not what I meant."

He grinned, but didn't say anything.

They walked down the street side by side, slowly and comfortably. "It's kind of nice here," she commented a minute later as she stopped to glance in the window of a candy shop. The taffy pulling machine spun around and around, stretching the pink glob.

He glanced around at the town that was so familiar to him. Commercial, yes, but quaint nonetheless, many stores designed in a Tudor style to bring to mind chalets at the bottom of the mountains. The river chugged slowly through town, and the hum of traffic droned steadily in the background as the sun beat down mightily on the June afternoon.

Living anywhere else seemed impossible. This was home, and he wished again that Kiri could grow up here, where she belonged.

"Those are strong words from a big city girl."

She shot him a rueful look. "It's not that I don't like small towns and the great outdoors. They just don't like me. Bears and ants." She shuddered. "There's no telling what will happen if you take me hiking."

She had to be exaggerating. She was just lacking in outdoor experience. "I'll risk it. But first we're going on the lift." It would ease her into the idea of hiking, which he had every intention of doing today.

This might be his only chance to spend time with Angel, and he didn't want to share her with the tourist crowd all day. A secluded trail was more what he had in mind. Secluded, seduction, they were practically the same word.

"What's the lift?" Her feet slowed in her hiking boots.

"It's a cable car that goes down the side of the mountain like the ones in Switzerland. It's a great view." Besides, it was a surefire way to scare the daylights out of her, and force her to lean back into his arms. And his sixth grade teacher had said he had no imagination.

The car was crowded, and didn't allow for much maneuvering. When Angel swayed in alarm away from the window, she ended up leaning back against him. Oh, yeah. He was good. Possibly demented, but good. He'd never pictured himself scaring women just for the chance to hold them.

"Lord, Rick, are these cables safe? It's creaking!"

Trying not to grin, he reassured her by putting his arms around her and pulling her firmly against his chest. Shady? Maybe. But he was short on time here, and he strongly suspected he'd never sleep another full night for the rest of his life if he didn't get to share at least one night with Angel.

"They're safe. They make this trip a hundred times a day."

"But we could be the one time that it plunges to the ground." Her eyes were squeezed shut. "That's not part of my life plan- dying in a plunging mountain car."

"I can't imagine that's part of anyone's plan." He leaned down and placed a greedy kiss on the top of her head. She smelled like berries, the kind that grow wild in the back yard, at the edge of the woods.

She trembled in his arms. Shifting away from the woman next to him and her huge handbag pressing into his leg, he said quietly, "Open your eyes. You're missing the view."

She turned and looked out the window, then gasped. "It's beautiful."

They both watched the mid-morning mist hanging over the rounded mountains, the sides cascading out of the clouds and down into the fantastically green valley.

"This is even better than the view from the picnic table. I can see for miles."

The look on her face was so wondrous, that Rick was suddenly sorry he had brought her here. This was supposed to be a day for enjoying a beautiful woman's company, and hopefully ending it in her bed. There was no justification for finding his gut had jumped up into his throat.

She was here today, gone tomorrow, and that was exactly the way he wanted it. Just a little fun. Nothing more. He wasn't looking for a relationship, and she was still entangled in one, no matter the oddities of her engagement to Brian.

Or was he looking for a relationship? Suddenly he wasn't sure anymore. The only thing he was sure of was that Angel was beautiful, and that he wanted her more than he had ever wanted any woman.

He whispered in her ear, "The only thing more beautiful than the view is you."

He loved watching the blush rise up her cheeks. "Rick..."

"What?" He dropped another kiss on the soft skin of her ear.

"Don't do this to me." Angel's gaze stayed focused on the window, but she leaned back against him again, removing all force from her words.

"Do what?" Rick ran his fingers lightly down her arms and reveled in the feeling of her back and behind resting against him like they belonged there.

"You know."

Of course he knew. But he wasn't about to make this easy for her. Everyone else on the cable car ceased to exist. Their tourist chatter receded and there was no one but him and Angel. His lips strayed into her hair again before he said in a low voice, "Why don't you spell it out for me."

Her breath hitched. After gulping, she said in a quiet voice, "This isn't the place to discuss it."

Discuss was the last thing in the world he wanted to be doing.

They had glided to a stop and the doors swung open. As they stepped off, he pulled her aside to a path that lead through botanical gardens. "Walk with me. This looks private."

When they were a few feet away, surrounded by red geraniums and boxwoods, he said, "We're alone now. Tell me what I'm doing to you."

Placing two full feet between them, Angel looked up at him, her expression agonized. "That. That's what you're doing to me. Looking at me like I'm the most beautiful woman that you've ever seen."

He didn't see what was wrong with that. "You are."

She gave a strangled laugh. "I know what you want, and while it appalls me to realize I do, I want it too. I don't know why I do, but I do. So don't spend your whole day and hard earned money trying to butter me up, or whatever you want to call it." Angel put her hands on her hips and thrust her chin up at him.

He'd be the first to admit, women baffled him sometimes. But Lord, he had no idea what Angel was talking about. He said eloquently, "Huh?"

"I'm saying if you want to sleep with me, just take me back now and let's get it over with. There's no point in you spending all day trying to seduce me when about thirty minutes back at the cabin is all you'll need." She gestured impatiently back the way they had come. "Let's go, and get on with it already." She studied the path. "Or I suppose behind a bush would work."

He couldn't move. He was shocked to the very tips of his toes squashed in his hiking boots. Behind a bush? She was something else. Treating making love like a task to be checked off on her list. Okay, hormones acting up today. Find a man and be done with it.

This was not what he'd had in mind at all.

So, never mind that sex had been his primary focus from the minute he had met her. It was different now, he was getting to know her as a person, and damn it, men had feelings too. They didn't dust them off and put them on display very often, but they were there. Being used to scratch her itch did not sit well with this good old boy.

"Hold on there, Missy."

She stopped in the act of brushing past him with dogged determination. "What?" She kept her eyes on a colorful burst of wildflowers lining the path instead of him, and he reached out to take her arm.

Stiffening, she tried to shrug him off, but he gripped tighter, slowly turning her back to face him. "Look, this isn't what I had in mind. I don't want to head back to the cabin and get it over with, for God's sake. If and when we make love," he spoke with a raspy desire the very idea triggered, "it's going to be because we come together willingly and because there's no way we can stop it anymore."

He shook her arm a little for emphasis. "Not because you're hoping to get me out of your system. You got that?"

"But it's bugging me," she whispered frantically, staring up at him. "I've never felt like this. I feel out of balance, out of control. I don't like it."

"You think heading back to the cabin's going to fix that?" If anything he had the feeling once they tumbled into bed, it could be days before they got back out again. Once he had her, he was going to want her again. And again.

He wiped sweat off his forehead. Damn, it was hot today. Must be near ninety degrees on this humid path.

"I don't know," she wailed, and looked up at him, panicked. "I just want it to go away."

"You really know how to stroke a man's ego, there, Angel." He was only half joking. He'd never had a woman think of him as a problem before.

"Don't you feel it though, Rick? Like a big tornado is swirling up inside you whenever we're together? I've never felt this kind of... attraction for a man, and it's scaring the heck out of me." She hugged herself with her arm that he had let drop. "It's like all of a sudden all of my father's DNA is rising up in me in a great lusty wave. I've never even really liked sex! And now I feel like I'm going to explode soon."

She was so earnest, breathing so hard, looking wildly hysterical, that he chuckled softly. "Now you know what it feels like to be a fifteen year old boy."

"It's horrible!"

Again, not exactly the response he was going for. But if he shifted through her words,

there was extreme flattery there. She had never liked sex, she said, yet she felt a tornado swirling inside her when she was with him? Damn, that was worth a male strut or two.

But the most mind boggling thing of all, was that he felt the same way. And now, watching her struggle to understand her feelings, he felt a surge of tenderness towards her.

How old was Angel? Late twenties, thirty maybe. She was engaged, or at least had been, and yet she could stand there and say she'd never experienced those wonderful feelings of physical satisfaction that most people take for granted.

He wanted to take her into that world, and show her how much fun it could be. He wanted to cherish her the way no man ever had.

"Angel, when the time is right, I'm going to watch you explode in my arms." He brushed his lips across her jaw line and whispered, "Didn't anyone ever tell you making love's a good thing?"

She shuddered. "There can be too much of a good thing."

He knew she was probably thinking of her father and his multiple wives, even as she tilted her head to give him better access to her. He decided right then and there to take his time with Angel. His own need could wait.

He nuzzled in her neck and lifted her at her warm and smooth waist until she was raised on her toes. He just wanted to growl at how good she felt in his arms. "Well, then, I guess it's up to me to show you how wrong you are."

## Chapter Nine

ANGEL had meant it when she had suggested they just head back to Big Bear Butt and jump into bed. She had also been fairly sure that Rick was agreeable to the idea, especially when he had hauled her into his arms and trailed kisses along her jaw and neck.

It seemed like the perfect solution. It was like craving ice cream. You want it more badly every day until you get it, then you realize that all you really wanted was one bite. One bite of Rick and she would be cured, she was sure, and she could head back to Chicago and leave Brian to his stripper.

Yet instead of heading back to the cabin, Rick had driven her to the other side of the park and they were now hiking along a trail to some cave or other natural wonder that he swore she was going to want to see.

She was sure she didn't care.

She refused to be swayed by the majesty of the forest. Forests were for enjoying from a distance, not entering. Shameful memories still rankled her whenever she was confronted by large clumps of trees.

"You know," she said to his broad back, "I got kicked out of my youth scout group." It had been so humiliating she had actually gone and lived with her dad for six months to avoid seeing the other girls in the group afterwards.

He was walking along at a fast clip, eyes darting left and right, looking at what she had no clue. He slowed down a little and grinned back at her. "Do I even want to know why?"

"You'll be shocked. Horrified. I'm the human they probably teach you about in ranger training." She pushed a branch out of her way impatiently and ducked when it swung back at her. A blister was forming on her heel, and she shifted in her new boots.

"Oh, really? You know, I'm an eco-ranger. I spend most of my time assessing wildlife and foliage. Like trying to protect the fir trees from woolly adelgids. I can't imagine what a squirt of a kid like you could have done."

Squirt had to be the worst thing anyone had ever managed to call her. That beat pee-wee hands down. "I forgot to dump dirt on our campfire and within hours a forest fire was raging."

He stopped moving and turned around, his brown eyes wide. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." She blushed. Why had she brought this up? She didn't generally go around sharing her past humiliations, or pointing out her flaws. "It was an accident. I just forgot, and I had nightmares for months about fire and trees burning, but the leaders had no sympathy. They told my mother I was a hazard and asked her not to sign me up anymore."

She was startled when he let out a laugh.

He said, "That's meaner than all get out. As the adults they should have been checking up on your tasks before they left. It was their fault really."

"That's how I felt." He didn't look like he was joking, but you never know. She said suspiciously, "You're not teasing me, are you? This was a very traumatic childhood experience for me."

"I can tell. It's kept you out of the woods for the last twenty years or so, hasn't it?" His boots crunched twigs and leaves as he started walking again. "Don't worry, I won't turn you over for trial and execution if you're nice to me."

She followed with dignity. "I'm nice to everyone."

He shot her one of those dark glances that was destroying her peace of mind. "I want you to be extra nice to me."

A certain idea came to mind, that to be perfectly honest, she didn't have much experience with, but she could try. It certainly would qualify as being extra nice. She had the satisfying feeling that she could make Rick do some exploding of his own. She gave him a saucy grin.

"What?" He turned off the path and waited for her.

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"About your pyro days?"

"No." She purposely lowered her eyes to the zipper of his shorts. "Something else."

He caught her meaning, and reached for her with a growl, but she darted out of the way with a laugh and ran lightly in the direction he had been heading. She stopped suddenly, delighted. "Oh, my God, wow. This is beautiful."

There was a waterfall cascading gracefully several hundred yards in front of them, hitting the rocks below with a soft roar. Rushing along to get a better view, she tripped over a root and went crumpling to the ground. Stunned, she flung out her wrists to catch herself and let out a yelp when she hit, scratching her hands and knees. Just what she needed. Now that her rash was subsiding, she was replacing it with scratches.

"Well, that was graceful." She was starting to feel like she had time warped back to eighth grade. Between raging hormones and klutziness, this day was remarkably similar to her entire school year as a fourteen year old.

"Are you okay?" He held his hand out to help her, his face a tender mask of concern.

It didn't make her feel any better. "Just feeling like an idiot."

Standing up, she headed again for the water, this time carefully checking her footing. At the edge of the stream, she stood and admired the rush of the small waterfall, its white waters sailing over slippery rocks and past verdant greenery. It sounded so soothing that she felt a rare moment of relaxation. She wasn't an unhappy person, but she was never a relaxed person either. Her mind usually moved quickly and nervously, planning and thinking.

Standing here she just felt at peace.

Rick came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders, rubbing back and forth. She wanted to purr, but contented herself with rocking back into his hold.

He whispered, "What do you need the money for, Angel?"

Though his question made her jerk forward in surprise, she forced herself to relax back. It suddenly mattered to her what he thought of her. She didn't want him to think of her as a greedy person. And the look on his face when he talked about his daughter

assured her she could trust him, that he would understand why it was so important to her.

"I need the money to adopt a baby." She took a deep breath and kept her gaze focused on the misty falling water. His hands stilled on her shoulders. "I can't have children, Rick."

A sigh rushed past her ear. "God, I'm sorry. That's sucks. And I didn't mean to push. It was none of my business."

"I wanted to tell you. I have endometriosis, and the doctor said I won't be able to conceive." And for the first time that she could remember, saying those words out loud didn't make her feel inadequate.

His hands started rubbing again, and she closed her eyes. She could let him touch her all day. It was a dangerous feeling.

"If I had the money, I'd give it to you. I think you'll make a wonderful mother."

His voice sounded so wistful, she turned around swiftly and looked up at him. His eyes tore into her, holding her gaze steadily. And in that moment, it felt like all their needs, wants and desires were reflected in one another. He understood her.

The true her.

She whispered, "What are you thinking?"

He hesitated, his hands brushing her hair back off of her face. He said, "I was just thinking I wouldn't mind you being the mother of my child."

She gasped. Holy, moly. No one had ever said something so touching in her whole life. She felt the most powerful feeling surging up inside her and she swallowed hard. Stepping back, intent on kissing the daylights out of him for being so sweet, her boot slipped in the mud.

Which sent her pitching backward. Her arms went up in the air, and her feet slipped further and further down the bank. She was falling into the river and was stupidly doing nothing to prevent it.

Rick's hand reached out and grabbed her shirt right in the middle, and his other hand grabbed the waistband of her stretchy shorts. Neither was an effective means of saving her, but in relief she grabbed his arms and hauled herself back forward. Heart beating rapidly, she stared at him while he grinned.

"I can't take my eye off you for five seconds."

Oh, that was nice. Brushing his hand off her waist, she stomped off, annoyed at how idiotic she was making herself look, and exasperated that she had broken the closeness that had been between them.

Determined to turn the subject away from her outdoor shortcomings, she said, "Rick?"

"Yeah?" He followed her, amusement still on his face, she noticed when she glanced back.

She blurted out, "Why are you divorced?" Maybe it was none of her business, but she was curious enough to ask. She couldn't imagine being married to Rick and wanting it to end.

He grimaced, before running his hand through his dark hair. "Why? That's not really an easy question. But I guess it's because this is what I do, you know? I'm a park ranger,

this is my home. Nicole hated living here, she missed her family and her urban life back in San Francisco. I wanted to compromise, I thought I could get a job out in Northern California, but by then Nicole's heart just wasn't in the marriage anymore." He shrugged. "I guess mine wasn't either."

But his heart was clearly with his daughter.

"I'm sorry, Rick."

And her heart was starting to feel like it had been inflated with a tire pump. Unwilling to examine why, she changed the subject. "Are we going back the way we came?"

He paused then said, "There's a cave right up ahead. Turn left at that big maple up there and you'll see the entrance. Don't be surprised if there's people up there. It's a pretty popular tourist site."

There was a family with three kids, and an older couple moving around the exterior of the cave, talking and laughing when they approached. Angel wasn't in the mood to be friendly, so despite trepidation, plunged right into the murky depths of the cave.

"Angel," Rick called quickly after her, "there's something I need to tell you first."

"What?" she said, sure that a dark cave was better than facing Rick and the unfamiliar feelings he inspired. As she stepped forward a few feet she amazed at how quickly the sun was blotted out. Her voice bounced around the cave, echoing back and forth, and she listened, amused. Echoes had always fascinated her.

A faint rustling sound answered her voice and she wondered what it was.

A breeze swept past her bare arm and she decided to wait for Rick before going further. She was out of her element here. "Rick? Where are you?"

The echo reverberated through the cave. A sudden cold fear swept over her as the rustling grew louder. That sounded... alive. "Rick!"

"Shh." He whispered frantically from a foot or two behind her. "Listen I have to tell you that there's..."

His words were drowned out as the sudden flapping of hundreds of tiny wings enveloped her and she came to the understanding that she was surrounded by bats. Their wings beat against her arms, legs, her face and her hair as they struggled to distance themselves from the voice that had disturbed their sleep.

Irrational hysteria rose in her, and she took great gulping breaths, screaming and beating at the bats, covering her face with her arms. They surrounded her, were touching her everywhere with cold scratchy wings and feet. Her skin was crawling and she shook left and right to get away from them.

But they were still there and she shuddered in unexplainable horror. When one accidentally crashed into her open screaming mouth, she felt the fuzzy warmth of bat body on her tongue. That did it. She sank to the floor, her mind blissfully shutting down and eyes fluttering closed into total darkness.

When she came to a few seconds later, clawing her way out of the dizziness, she found herself peering through the darkness at Rick's concerned face hovering over her. "Are they gone?" she croaked.

"Yes."

She became aware that she was lying on his lap, her head settled down between his

thighs and her arms on his knees as he squatted down on the ground. Well, this might be worth fainting for. She closed her eyes again and breathed in the light scent of his after-shave.

"Are you okay?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes." If the bats were gone, she was okay. She lifted her gaze up to him and tried to focus on his ruggedly handsome face and his warm brown eyes. What a cutie he was. Especially since his face was so concerned.

Too bad she wasn't going to be sticking around town for awhile. Too bad she couldn't just marry Rick herself instead of Brian.

She sat up quickly, the blood rushing through her face. Where the heck had that thought come from?

"If you can, we should move." Rick cleared his throat. "I don't want to scare you, but where there are bats, there's usually bat snakes. They like them for food, you know..."

Snakes? She shoved his hands off of her and stood up, ignoring the way the cave spun. "Get me out of here!"

"They're not poisonous," he hastened to reassure her.

As if she cared. The mouth of the cave greeted her like a candle in the dark. Stumbling out into daylight, she bent over and caught her breath. "I think I want to go back to the cabin. I don't feel well at all."

"Sure." He said sheepishly, "I meant to warn you. I didn't think you'd charge in here so fast, you know. But bats won't hurt you. Totally harmless."

There was nothing she felt like saying in response to that. Nor did she want to think about the crazy marriage idea that had popped into her head when she had been semi-conscious. She said, "I'm hungry. Can we get lunch on the way back?"

He laughed a little. "Grits are supposed to stick. Keep you full until supper time."

"Well, I confess I didn't eat my fair share, and now I'm starving. What time is it, anyway?" She hadn't been wearing a watch with her wedding dress, so her watch had gotten left back in Knoxville in her hotel room and she was too rattled to pull her phone out.

She thought to wonder what had happened to all her stuff. She hoped Luke had the sense to get her luggage. She had been scheduled to check out of the hotel on Sunday, and today was Monday. She sighed in disgust at yet another problem. She was starting to think this was what she got for planning to marry for money.

"It's two-thirty." Rick glanced at his watch. "What do you want to eat?"

Him. With a cherry on top. Angel nearly clapped her hands over her mouth to make sure she didn't speak out loud. She was losing her mind. The stress of this failed wedding and her desperation to adopt a child were making her sanity crumble. There was no other explanation.

Unless once she had allowed herself to be spontaneous, she was incapable of stopping. What if she had unleashed the secret Weiss family wild woman inside of her? That was a frightening thought.

She said numbly, "Whatever. Something from a deli, if it's possible. I don't do fried foods."

"We can do that." He swept his gaze over her. "Can you hike all the way back to the truck?"

His stance showed quite clearly that he doubted this. He looked ready to sweep her up in his arms. Nice as this might have been, she was insulted. First he called her squirt then watched her nearly fall into a river and faint when confronted with a cave full of bats.

Okay, so maybe he had a point.

She squared her shoulders. "I'm fine, thank you very much."

An hour later they had hiked back, gotten lunch and were pulling up to her cabin. Big Bear Butt. Her home away from home.

She hopped out and waved to him, expecting him to pull away. He was already stepping out of his side. Why couldn't he just go away and let her confront her hormones alone? She was sure if she just ignored them, they'd go away. Besides, she was beginning to like him for more than his muscular chest and chocolate eyes.

He was a nice guy.

Which was just mean of him.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye as she headed towards the cabin, waiting for him to touch her so she could rebuff him. If he caught her off guard she had less resolve.

Unfortunately, watching Rick meant she wasn't watching where she was walking. She tripped over a rock by the steps.

Whacking the deck railing, she gave a grunt then steadied herself. Whew. That wasn't so bad, aside from humiliating. She hadn't caused the deck to collapse or anything.

Then she heard the buzzing. She knew immediately that whacking the banisters had disturbed a beehive, sending forth an army of protective bee soldiers.

"Rick!" She turned around, slamming straight into him.

"Calm down." He tried to stop her from running. "Walk slowly back to the truck."

Walk? Was he nuts? There were twenty bees swirling around them now and she decided getting into the house was safer. She had no interest in being a pincushion for angry worker bees. Running up the stairs with a karate yell, she rammed her key into the lock and threw the door open. She went in, nearly slamming the door in Rick's face.

He caught the door with his arm, and quickly followed her. "Whoa, Angel. They're just a little hive of honeybees."

"Hah!" She shuddered, glancing at the door to make sure no pesky little black and yellow stripped invaders had followed. "They hurt!" She hugged herself and shuddered. "I hate the woods. This is a total nightmare."

He was on the verge of laughing she could tell, and she was about to launch a throw pillow at him from the sofa when she felt something crawling in her shirt. She froze and prayed it was her imagination. Little insect legs moved on her again, and she felt dangerously close to a faint for the second time. Sweat started streaming down her sides under her shirt.

"Rick," she whispered desperately.

"What?" He dropped his arms, which had been held up in pillow protection and looked at her curiously.

"There's... there's a bee up my shirt." Crawling up her abdomen towards her breasts. "Oh, Rick. Get it out!"

She pulled her shirt forward and arched her back trying to urge it to move, but it still kept stealthily crawling up her.

She felt panic rising up and the room swirled around as she fought to keep from passing out.

Rick strode forward saying, "Let go of the shirt."

Obediently, she stood stunned as he quickly ripped her shirt up and off in one fluid motion. And stared at her breasts in her ivory lace bra. Or was he staring at the bee? She wasn't sure until she felt him lean over and blow on her breasts. She grabbed his arms as his hot breath danced across her. The man had damned lousy timing. She was most definitely not in the mood.

However, his breath had encouraged the bee to take flight, and she stepped back in relief. With his bare hands Rick grabbed the little troublemaker right out of the air and shook his fisted hand rapidly back and forth.

"What are you doing?" She shuddered, her skin still crawling. She scratched her stomach vigorously to erase the feeling.

"It stuns them so they can't sting." He kept shaking his hand while he pushed the door open with his hip and tossed the bee out, quickly slamming the door again.

She concentrated on restoring her breathing to normal, and put a hand on her chest to feel her pounding heart. It was then she realized she was standing in her bra. It was then that he turned and met her gaze. Oh, yeah, he realized it too.

Panic quickly shifted to desire. The man had grabbed a bee right out of the air with his bare hand. How could she resist that? Her hand fluttered back down to her side, letting him have his look unobstructed.

He licked his lips.

Fire quickly pooled in her abdomen. She stood there dumbly, waiting for him. She couldn't do this. Could she?

"Angel." He was steadily moving towards her now, one slow and sensual step at a time. His voice was raspy, determined.

"Yes?" Her instinct was to turn tail and run, but her body stayed exactly where it was. It knew what it wanted, even if her brain was resisting.

"It's time now."

"I had a feeling you were going to say that." She bit her bottom lip. "Would you be upset if I said I've changed my mind? I don't think this is a good idea after all."

"You're lying."

He was almost on top of her now, and damn it if he didn't see right through her. She was lying. Lying like a rug, that's her. Her brain was no longer functioning enough to make any further protest, especially when he reached her and leaned forward, brushing her teeth back off her lip with his finger and nipping it himself.

"Let me do that for you." He bit gently, tugging her bottom lip out.

She closed her eyes and tried to remember why she was supposed to resist. Why was she fighting herself just because meeting Rick hadn't been planned?

He whispered, as if he could read her thoughts, "It's okay, Angel. I like you, you like me... there's nothing wrong with that."

"You like me?" she whispered back.

"Oh, yeah. You're an amazing woman. Caring, generous..." his hands went through her hair. "Beautiful."

His eyes were glazed with desire. For her. That was so arousing she forgot any reservations she might have had. She was certain she'd never had a man look at her like this. Like he could eat her alive right now.

Plan C. Have hot sex with a gorgeous mountain man.

Her arms reached up and wrapped around his neck and she gave him the kiss that she had planned to give him by the riverbank before she'd slipped into the mud. She put everything she had into that kiss, stretching up on her tiptoes to reach him, and passing her lips over his with an eager sigh over and over.

The groan that slipped past his lips was enough encouragement to send her back for more, as his warm hands fell onto her bare arms and pulled her closer to him. The lace of her bra was pressed up against the cotton of his shirt and she shivered. Her body felt alive, every inch of her aching and straining to be closer to him, a part of him.

His warm fingers snaked around her back and undid the clasp on her bra, and she gave a nervous hitch of breath as he pulled each side forward until the straps fell off her shoulders. The material was caught between them, but with a smoldering look, he stepped back and watched the bra fall down onto her wrists. Then she couldn't contain a moan as he leaned forward and kissed the top of her breastbone, sliding his tongue gently down between her breasts.

Angel had always wondered what the appeal was in this type of foreplay. It had never done a thing for her in the past. But now she held onto Rick's rock hard arms in understanding as his tongue teasingly flicked up and danced across her nipple, back and forth. More. She wanted more.

"Rick!" She couldn't find any words beyond that, but he seemed to know what she wanted. He took her breast into his mouth and she gasped. This was unreal. This was nothing she'd ever experienced before.

When he came up for air, she realized he was wearing altogether too many clothes and with unsure, but eager fingers, she pulled his T-shirt out of his waistband.

Rick had to close his eyes against the sight of her, topless, running her small smooth hands across his waist, tugging his shirt out eagerly. He was shocked at how aroused he was, how desperately he needed her, how badly he wanted her to come apart under his touch.

With his shirt undone, her hands came up under the fabric, running across his chest until he couldn't take it anymore. Lifting his arms, he ripped the shirt off and tossed it on the floor, then pulled her back into his arms. He groaned as her bare breasts crushed into his warm skin, and he dipped his head to kiss her again.

Brushing her tousled blond hair back off her face, he reveled in the look of utter abandon on her face. There was no way he could resist taking the waistband of her shorts and pushing them down past her thighs, where they dropped softly to her ankles.

Expecting the white lace scrap of panties that had been tormenting his dreams, he swept his gaze down eagerly.

And blinked. Angel wasn't wearing the lace panties.

Instead he was staring at navy blue and hot pink tiger striped cotton bikinis, that proclaimed across the top HOT STUFF. He heard her gasp, but was unable to lift his eyes from the sight before him, stunned, and hell, even more aroused if that was possible.

"Oh, no. I forgot I was wearing these." She made as if to bend over and pull her shorts up.

Which was the last thing on God's green earth he wanted. Quickly, he grabbed her arms to stop her from moving. While unexpected from the rather conservative Angel, it didn't mean he wanted the panties covered back up. In fact, he intended to ball them up and throw them over his shoulder in about five seconds. "Don't. They're sexy. It just surprised me, that's all."

She blushed. "I bought them yesterday at a T-shirt shop. I couldn't wear the same underwear for three days in a row, you know, and this was all they had."

That made sense. Angel was not the tiger striped type. He grinned. "Come here, Hot Stuff." He pulled her back into his arms, even when she resisted.

"It's not funny."

She was adorable when she pouted, and he kissed her projecting bottom lip. He pressed himself against the panties. "Do I feel like I'm laughing?"

With a gasp, she glanced down. "No. I guess not."

He put a hand on each of her smooth hips, and slid his fingers under the waistband of the panties. His throbbing ache became painful when he cupped her firm behind. Then he slide the panties down, wanting her in front of him without a stitch on.

There was no hesitation on her part. She stepped out of the panties and back, running her fingers through her hair. Smooth golden skin taunted him, and he couldn't resist taking her nipple into his mouth again, his finger sliding between her legs.

Her breath hitched and she moved eagerly beneath him. Despite the desperate desire he was feeling, he moved his finger slowly back and forth, denying her the faster rhythm she was trying to force him into. Finally after several long and anxious moments, he picked up speed, removing his mouth from her breast and concentrating on forcing her to let go.

She did, with a shout that was deeply gratifying, and brought a cocky smile to his face. As her grip on his arms relaxed, she suddenly looked at him in shock.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, stunned. "I didn't mean to, it just happened."

Trembling in his arms, she shivered. He gathered her closer, running his hands across her bare back. "Don't be sorry." He sure in the hell wasn't. He added wickedly, "It was my fault. I made you do it."

She laughed a little. "That's true. But what about you?"

If she thought they were finished she had another thing coming. He wasn't done by a long shot. "Don't worry about me. I'm just getting started."

## Chapter Ten

RICK wasn't kidding. Angel hadn't thought it could get any better. She had already experienced more pleasure in ten minutes with him than she had in ten months of a previous relationship. And he said he was just getting started.

It began all over again, with soft kisses, then demanding kisses, then kisses trailing down her neck and her breasts. Then he was tugging on her nipples with his teeth, his tongue flicking back and forth and she was aching in every inch of her body.

Aching enough for her to know that this time she needed him inside her to satisfy, and with this thought in mind, she undid the button on his shorts, and quickly unzipped them. Having felt him pressing against her before, she knew he was more than adequate, but when she slipped her hands down into his shorts and took him into her grasp, she couldn't help but swallow hard. The man was big. And hard as a rock.

Unlike her now panicked brain, her body began to hum with anticipation. She listened to her body, and told her brain to take a hike. She sent his shorts to the floor and groaned when he laid her down on the scratchy sofa.

And then left her. She watched, stunned as he walked in all his naked glory across the room and picked up his shorts off the floor, rifling through the pocket.

After admiring his tanned and muscular body for a minute, she thought to ask, "What are you doing?"

"Looking for something." He pulled out his wallet.

She rolled onto her side, resting her head on her arm and sent him a saucy look, suddenly sure what he was doing. "Looking for what?"

He glanced at her then groaned. "Oh, hell, Angel, do you have to do that? I can't find the condoms I put in my wallet and you're not helping."

"What?" she said innocently, knowing full well her pose resembled that of a pin-up model. She took mercy on him. "You don't need one, you know."

He dropped the wallet and started searching through his shorts desperately, his hands dipping into the same pockets over and over again as if he expected different results. "Of course I do. You know how babies are made, Angel." He sat back and dropped his head into his hand. "Damn. I'm going to have to go to the store."

"Rick."

He looked at her, exasperated. "What?"

"I can't get pregnant, remember?" It was the only time she could ever remember being pleased by that fact. She was going to get to experience making love with Rick sans latex. The thought made her want to growl and haul him over to her all at the same time.

Her statement sunk in, and his frustrated look softened into understanding. "Well, hell."

"Uh, huh." She nodded solemnly. "Get over here."

He stood up, his breath coming in and out heavily, chest heaving, his tanned and strong body taut with expectation. "I hate to admit it, but I haven't had sex in two years,"

he told her. "So I'm clean. And very, very horny."

Good to know. "I have you beat. Three years. I'm not one for hook ups." Then she realized that was exactly what she was doing. "Usually."

"Sounds like we're on the same page then." He came towards her and with each step she felt her body ache more until she thought she might have to yank on him to get him down to the couch faster. Resting one knee on the couch, and one foot on the floor he lowered himself over her, where she had rolled onto her back. He gave her one last searing kiss that had her dropping her legs apart for him then he locked his gaze with hers and without any more discussion, he entered her.

She gasped, reaching up as he sank slowly into her, his teeth gritted as he fought for control. She didn't want him to be in control, she wanted him wild like she was, and she sunk her nails into his back, pushing him down on her.

He swore. He opened his eyes and murmured, "Angel," in a voice that mirrored her own desperation. Then he let himself go. He pushed down into her hard then began a quick rhythm that sent them both exploding in seconds.

Gasping for breath, she ran her fingers across his arms as he lay against her, fighting for his own air. Marveling that there was absolutely nothing running through her usually overactive mind, she sighed with contentment. It had been a long time since she had just enjoyed herself.

And enjoying herself she was. The feel of his hot skin beneath her fingertips was soothing, intimate. She had told Rick the truth when she had said sex wasn't always enjoyable for her. It had never been a need and certainly not a priority for her. And when she had slept with her one and only serious boyfriend, it had ranged from downright bad to merely mildly entertaining.

This had been nothing like that. Here, with Rick, she had felt every part of her body in tune with his, every inch of her aching and straining, desperate to give as well as take.

Her fingers continued to trace a pattern on his arm, and suddenly Rick shivered.

When she looked up at him in question, he grinned at her. "That tickles."

She was grinning back with what was probably an idiotic sappy smile spread from ear to ear. "Sorry."

Pulling his weight back off of her, he nodded over his shoulder. "Show me what's in the bedroom."

Though her body leapt in expectation, she tried to play it cool. "Oh, just a dresser, a TV, a dead stuffed deer, and, oh, yeah, a bed."

"Forget the deer. Show me how the bed works."

She couldn't believe any man could be ready again so soon, but the evidence was resting against her. Maybe being thirty didn't guarantee you knew everything there was to know, and this was a happy discovery. Maybe all the time Rick spent in the fresh air built stamina. Time in the woods might also explain her own sudden and uncharacteristic boldness and spontaneity. Like what came out of her mouth next.

"How does a bed work? First you lie down on your back. And then I lay on top of you and... we see what happens." She had planned to be more descriptive of what came after she lay on top, but she chickened out.

It didn't seem to matter. He let out a strangled sound before smiling in masculine satisfaction. He turned up his twang just a little and she shivered. "Well, doll, that sounds like a mighty fine idea. You just lead the way."

Luke was regretting the whole stupid trip. No, correct that. He was regretting that he had thought for one second it would be a good idea to have his siblings with him.

His head was pounding by the time they pulled out of the Honeymoon Happy Cabin's rental office.

"That desk clerk was cute." Dixie piped up from the back seat, squeezed between Hannah and Jake.

"He had buck teeth, and he said "thar" instead of "there"." Hannah scoffed at her sister, leaning into the door of the car on her arm.

"He did not have buck teeth."

"Did to."

"Did not."

Luke felt his temples throbbing. "He did so! Now shut up already."

Dixie bristled. "Someone's crabby today."

Yes, he was crabby. In fact, he was madder than hell. It had taken two hours for them to leave the hotel in Knoxville while everyone showered and Dixie and Hannah packed three suitcases full of female garbage to bring with them.

Then Jake and Eddie had whined about being hungry, so they had spent another hour and a half eating lunch. By the time they had arrived in Gatlinburg, it had been four o'clock and they had gotten lost twice before finding the cabin rental office.

Now, finally, they knew that Angel was still checked in after much flirting on the part of Dixie to gather the desired information from the buck-toothed clerk. They were headed to number four, otherwise known as Big Bear Butt, Luke saw as they pulled into the driveway.

Geez, Brian was an idiot.

He really hoped he was not too late to stop a wedding.

Eddie slammed on the brakes, grinding the souped up Monte Carlo to a halt, and Luke put his hands on the dashboard to brace himself.

"This place isn't very impressive." Hannah sneered at the cabin and added, "There is no way I'd spend my honeymoon here."

"Who cares where you go?" Eddie pulled his keys out of the ignition and shrugged his shoulder. "A honeymoon is all about being naked anyway."

"Spoken like a man." Hannah said with true contempt.

"I am a man."

Jake opened his door and said, "It doesn't matter to me what or where a honeymoon is, because I'm never taking one. I'm never getting married. No way, no how."

"Women everywhere sigh in relief." Hannah opened her own door.

Yes, Luke thought to himself. He definitely deserved the idiot award for not coming alone. He left the car and started towards the steps. "Hey, whose truck is that? Is that

Brian's?"

He pointed to the red pick-up truck next to his SUV, and frowned. He was almost sure Brian didn't have a truck.

Eddie looked puzzled. "I don't think so. I thought he had a little car. Black."

They went up the steps and gathered on the deck. Luke was about to knock when he heard a creaking sound. "What was that? Did you hear that?"

"What?" Dixie leaned closer, gripping his arm, her fake fingernails digging into his skin.

He shook her off. "That." He heard it again. This time it sounded like someone moaning. In pleasure. Oh, no. He asked sharply, "What is that sound?"

This time two voices rose together, faint, but obviously right smack in the middle of doing the deed. He felt his stomach churn a little.

Dixie looked at him in amazement. "If you don't know what that is, then your life is pretty sad, Luke."

Jake and Eddie were snickering a little, and Hannah looked gleeful. He just felt a little sick. Angel and Brian. Knocking boots. And he was hearing it right now.

He was too late.

And he was totally disgusted.

Rick was hearing voices. He was dozing in and out of sleep, Angel tucked in his arms, recovering from what had to be the most astonishing hour and a half of his life. He was blissfully satiated, the feel of Angel on top of him still fresh in his mind as his eyes drifted closed.

Yet there were voices. Coming from somewhere other than the bedroom. He moaned and tried harder to fall asleep, listening to Angel's even breathing. The voices persisted.

A high-pitched female voice said quite distinctly, "You can't knock on the door!"

A muffled masculine voice replied.

His eyes popped open. That sounded like someone was on the porch. The sudden urgent pounding on the front door confirmed it.

"Go away," he whispered, turning on his side to come face to face with the stuffed deer standing next to the dresser. As the empty eyes stared at him, Rick wished his apartment was bigger, so he could take Angel back to his place and make love to her without an animal audience.

The knock came again, harder. He shifted out from under Angel's arm. Somehow he had the feeling they weren't going to leave on their own, so he had better get rid of whoever it was. As he left the warmth of the bed he couldn't resist dropping a soft kiss on Angel's blond head. Damn, she smelled good. Felt good. Tasted good.

He pulled on his hunter green boxers and looked around for his shorts. They were missing, so he merely shrugged as the knock came again on the door more violently this time. This had better be good. He stumbled through the front room, discovering his shorts as he tripped on them. He didn't bother to put them on. A glance around showed every stitch of their clothes scattered about. The image made him grin again.

With an annoyed yank, he brought the door open. Faces stared back at him in

astonishment. A lot of faces. First and foremost was a blond man with shaggy hair, a black T-shirt, and a very prominent tattoo on his arm. Next to him, mouth dropped completely open, was a little blond wearing a hot pink tank top and denim shorts that didn't leave a whole lot to the imagination.

Behind them were two men and another woman, all blond, all staring at him as if he had grown a second head. Or, he thought ruefully, as if he were standing there in his underwear. Which he was.

"Can I help you?"

The blond in the tank top raked her eyes over him, and clapped her mouth shut.

The man next to her said, "Uh, I'm sorry. I think we've got the wrong cabin or something."

That just figured. He heard movement behind him and turned to see Angel standing in the doorway of the bedroom wearing nothing but a sheet, her hair tousled and her expression screaming to the world that they had just spent the last hour tumbling around in bed. He tried to block the doorway with his body so the crowd on the deck didn't see her.

"Rick, what's going on?" she asked, her voice heavy with sleep.

About to slam the door on his unwanted guests, he froze when the man in front yelled in shocked disbelief, "Angel?"

What the...? Rick swung his head back to the man in astonishment, only to wince when Angel screamed in his ear nearly as loud as she had the day he'd met her in the woods.

"Luke!" Angel clapped her hand over her mouth and tightened the grip on her sheet.

Oh, hell. He suddenly had the sinking feeling that he was facing Angel's five siblings. And down in front was the brother who was so protective of her. He winced and backed up a step. It didn't take a real vivid imagination to see that this didn't look so good.

Luke pushed past him and strode into the room. He came to a stop when he was confronted with the sight of Angel's bra lying on the floor between him and his sister. Rick suddenly sympathized with the man. This probably wasn't Luke's idea of a good old time anymore than it was his. He began to seriously wish he at least had pants on.

"What the hell is going on here, Angel? Who is this guy?" Luke shot a backward look of contempt at him.

He shifted awkwardly and moved closer to the two women, deciding they could do him less harm. Plus they were in the opposite direction of the other brothers who had entered the room and were shooting him accusing glares.

The girl in the tank top was still leering at him. She murmured, "You are a definite improvement over Brian."

Angel was fumbling with her sheet and looking six shades of red. She didn't seem to be capable of speech.

Luke said, "Where's Brian?"

Her chin came up. "I never found him."

Luke stared at her for a minute then raked his hand through his hair and shouted, "Angel, damn it, say something! Who is this guy? And why are you wearing nothing but a sheet?"

Rick thought it was pretty darn obvious, given he was in his underwear, but he knew when to keep his mouth shut. The taller blond wearing a blue sundress and sandals twirled her sunglasses and leaned in to him.

She said with bored amusement, "I give it three seconds and she'll be fighting back tears, insisting she's fine. One, two, three..."

Angel looked ready to cry, her eyes squeezing shut for a second as silent sobs shuddered through her. They reopened, and she stated, "I can handle it, Luke. It's not any of your business."

The blond next to him said, "Now Luke will drop his arms, start stammering, then apologize profusely."

Luke swore and dropped his arms. "Oh, hell, Angel. Don't cry. I'm sorry. You're right, it's none of my business." He reached forward and patted her arm. "I was just worried about you that's all."

Rick looked at the girl next to him in amazement. "How did you know?"

She smiled smugly then shrugged. "Years of observation."

He was amused despite the fact that his life might be in jeopardy. He asked, "And who might you be?"

"I'm Hannah, the bored and sarcastic sister."

He raised an eyebrow then looked at the girl in the tank top. "And you are?"

"I'm Dixie." She smiled, tossing her hair back. "The younger and prettier sister."

Hannah gave a snort. "You'd like to think so."

Rick relaxed a little. He looked at the brothers. So far no one had attacked him yet. That was a good sign. He could see the family resemblance between them. They were all blond, with a rich complexion that glowed with health, and boasted strong jaw lines. The Weiss brothers were tall, and the sisters were average height, with the exception of Angel, who was a little on the short side.

Angel, who was still fighting to prevent tears, waved off Luke's attempts to comfort her. It was painful to watch her like that. Rick was a sucker when she cried, no doubt about it, as much of a sucker as Luke, from the looks of it.

Rick closed the distance between them, regardless of his personal safety, and reached out for Angel. She slipped into his arms without hesitation, earning him a hideous glare from her brother. With a back and forth motion she wiped her tears on his bare chest, and he felt a rush of tenderness at this act of trust on her part.

She had turned to him for comfort, not her brother. She was sniffing against him now, her hands letting go of her sheet long enough to wrap around him.

He suddenly felt like he'd been kicked in the gut. This feeling sticking inside him felt suspiciously like love. But that was crazy. He couldn't possibly be in love with someone he'd just met two days ago. But it could be the forerunner of love. Or lust.

Then Angel sighed against his chest, relaxing into his arms, and he knew that it didn't matter how long he'd known her. It wasn't just lust. He was falling hard for her.

Which made him the biggest idiot east of the Mississippi river.

Angel was going back to Chicago in a day or two. Leaving him there with a bad case of bummed out. There was nothing worse than seeing the potential of something, someone,

and not being able to explore. He was going to spend a good long while wondering what could have happened between them.

Shaken to the core, he wondered just what the heck he was supposed to do now. He went with instinct. Clearing his throat, he said, "I take it you're Luke, Angel's brother." He stuck his hand out in an offer to shake, hoping Luke didn't bite it off. "I'm Rick Dangel."

Luke hesitated then took his hand and gave it a vicious shake, squeezing his fingers in warning. Rick took the silent threat to heart and wondered if Angel knew how lucky she was to have family who cared so much about her. He felt maybe that was what he'd always missed in not having any brothers or sisters.

That's what he wanted in a relationship. He wanted to take care of a woman, and have her take care of him in return. That had been missing in his marriage to Nicole. They had both been selfish, unwilling to bend to the other.

This time around, he wanted a wife who would place his needs on equal footing with hers, and he would do likewise. And the thought of compromising didn't stick in his craw at all. Not when the wife he was picturing was Angel. Not that he was picturing marriage at all. Because he wasn't.

Luke let go of his hand and nodded behind him. "That's Jake and Eddie, Angel's other brothers. And Hannah and Dixie."

"We've met," Dixie piped in.

"What?" Angel pulled back and looked in astonishment at her sister. "What does that mean?" Without waiting for an answer she rounded on him and glared up at him with a tear stained face. "Do you know my sister?"

He nearly grinned, suddenly feeling better. She looked good wearing green. "She means we met a minute ago, doll. That's all. Nothing to worry your pretty little self over."

She bristled. "I wasn't worried."

"You should be." Dixie said emphatically. "You're letting your boyfriend prance around in his underwear looking sooo fine. That's asking for trouble."

He was starting to enjoy himself. This wasn't so bad after all. He looked good, did he? He had to admit he spent some time in the gym. Dixie had the same good taste as her sister.

Or not. Angel replied coldly, "He's not my boyfriend."

Ouch, that hurt. He had just admitted to himself that he could fall in love with her and then she came out with that. When she disentangled herself from his arms he let her go, unwilling to beg in front of her family.

She gave Luke a gentle look that annoyed the hell out of him.

"Look, you guys, I really appreciate you checking up on me. Do you have a place to stay?"

Luke nodded. "We're renting one of those chalets, and plan on staying a couple of days."

"Okay. I'll call your cell in the morning and we'll make some plans. I'll drive back with you guys when you're ready to go. Day after tomorrow?"

He nodded. "Okay. Be sure to call me first thing in the morning." He waited until she nodded then he turned towards the door. "Let's go."

"We're leaving?" Dixie wailed. "Angel didn't even explain anything."

"Be quiet, Dixie. Let's go." Luke gave her a stern look and she followed, grumbling.

Hannah leaned forward and whispered to Angel, "Does this mean you don't want Brian?"

Rick held his breath. Angel nodded, and he sighed in relief.

Then Hannah said, "Can I have him then?"

Angel made a strangled noise then nodded. "Sure, Hannah. He's all yours. If you can find him."

A few seconds later the whole crowd was out the door and he was left staring at Angel. Who was staring at him. He scratched his chest and tried to be nonchalant. "So, nice family."

She stared at him in amazement. "Listen, Rick, I don't know what to say."

That made two of them.

She bit her bottom lip, and clutched her sheet tighter. "This..." She waved her hand around, "was incredible, but it was just a one time thing. You know that and I know that." She looked desperate for him to agree with her.

He thought about arguing. He thought about telling her that he wanted to explore dating with her. But his gut told him to ease back, give her time. Especially since he didn't really have any idea what exactly it was that he wanted out of this thing, serious like or not.

Except he knew that he wanted her. Again. Now. He reached out with one hand and hooked his finger between the sheet and her bare skin at her breastbone. One quick jerk and she came stumbling towards him.

"I know that I have to have you." He took her mouth, urging her lips apart, and plunging his tongue into her mouth. She was warm, and tasted like toothpaste. He wondered when she had brushed her teeth before he lost all rational thought. He sank into her mouth, letting his eyes slide closed.

She kissed him back in abandon, rushing her arms across his chest and slipping a hand into his boxers. That did it. He lost any patience he might have had a minute ago. He gave a few tugs and unwrapped her from the sheet.

He drank her in, her small, but nicely rounded body shivering beneath his view, her nipples budding in anticipation. He trailed a finger across her lips, down her arm and along the underside of her breast. "Damn, you're beautiful."

He leaned forward and took her nipple into his mouth and sucked the hard tip, reveling in the strangled moan that ripped from her. He had the thought that he could listen to that all night, before he felt her nimble little hands pushing his boxers off of him and down to the floor.

There was no thought then but getting inside her. Gripping her arms, he hauled her backwards two feet to the couch. He sat down and stroked her thighs as she stood before him, eyes glazed with desire. "Have a seat," he urged her, hoping she wouldn't go shy on him now.

She didn't. She smiled, a naughty grin dancing across her face, and moved her legs onto either side of his thighs. Then with a graceful motion she slid down the length of

him, while he watched in awe. Well, hell.

## Chapter Eleven

ANGEL had never been so relaxed in her entire life. If she relaxed any further, her body would melt like Jell-O in the sun. They were soaking in the big heart shaped pink tub, filled with bubbles from Smoky the bear's plastic bottle.

After getting busy on the couch, they had ordered a pizza then had found their way back to the bedroom. Now they were both blissfully exhausted and soaking together in the hot water. She leaned back against Rick and wondered at how perfect everything seemed with him. It was so easy to do this. So easy to just let hours go by, in comfortable companionship.

Then there was the way he made her feel physically. She had a whole new appreciation for her body and its needs. Never could she have imagined she could feel so good, so complete. In fact, if she wasn't careful, she was going to find herself confused and thinking that she was actually falling in love with him or something crazy like that.

The thought made her jerk forward in the water. Where had that thought come from?

"Something wrong?" Rick said, his voice heavy as if he were on the verge of sleep.

"No, not at all." She was just fighting the feeling that she had fallen into desperate and unrequited love with him. The very emotion she had sworn didn't exist.

But Rick had become more than the hunky park ranger. He was a thoughtful, intelligent, and honest man who had slipped in under her wall of defenses and into her heart.

Which meant, when the relationship ended, in about twelve hours, she was going to hurt.

With a sigh, she glanced to her right and stared into the glassy eyes of the bear. He was staring right back, up on his hind feet, paws extended to her, holding the towel. He still gave her the creeps. Always watching. "Actually, the bear is bugging me. I think he's staring at me."

Rick laughed, and she shivered at the feeling of his warm chest rocking against her smooth back. "He must think you're hot, like I do."

She shifted a little on his lap, and felt his renewed interest. The man was incredible. No question about that. The bear continued to stare, judging her, looking into her soul. She was starting to realize that no matter how much fun she was having, she was incapable of just having a fling and walking away. It was against her nature, against everything she'd come to believe in after watching her parents. She attached. So sue her.

But what were her alternatives? Rick wasn't offering her anything beyond a fling and they lived a thousand miles away from each other. She didn't think she wanted to give up even a few precious hours with him, so she was going to have to harden her heart and take what she could get. Relax. Have fun with a hot man.

Sticking her tongue out at the bear in disgust, she said, "He's getting on my nerves." Know-it-all bear. Who was he to say she couldn't just enjoy herself?

She had already abandoned all sense in hot pursuit of her runaway fiancé and had

slept with Rick. Surely she could continue to enjoy a simple fling for another day or two before she had to return to reality.

The water sloshed over her back as Rick sat up and reached an arm over the side. She watched him scoop up her panties that she had brought into the bathroom to put on after the bath. She did have to get dressed sooner or later.

With a casual toss, her hot pink and navy tiger striped panties landed on the bear's face. He said, "That better?"

"That's bizarre." She studied it for a second, the panties spread across the fur, and started laughing. "But hilarious."

"Bet you've never had a bear down your pants before. Though I'm kind of a bear in bed." He winked.

"Rick!" Gad, the man was ridiculous.

Without the bear creating a distraction, she took a deep breath and turned around to face him, sliding across his thighs with her own and settling back on his lap. He went hard with desire, and his chocolate eyes smoldered.

"I still need a few minutes, doll. You've gone and worn me out."

And vice versa. She felt a warmth pooling in her abdomen and spreading down lower. But she needed to concentrate on the task at hand. She commanded her body to sit and heel. "We need to talk." And she didn't mean about the fact that he persisted in calling her "doll".

"About what?" He didn't look the least bit interested in talking. He looked equal parts sleepy and sexy.

"I'm going home tomorrow or the day after." There, she said it.

Her heart beat wildly waiting for his response. Was she actually hoping he would suggest they continue their relationship beyond tomorrow? She nearly groaned out loud. Her heart was not listening to her head.

"Yeah, I was thinking about that." He yawned.

Her stupid traitorous heart plummeted. "Me, too."

"You want the money from the bet, right?"

The bet had been the furthest thing from her mind. She jerked back, and grabbed his shoulders for balance, startled at his inscrutable statement. "Yeah?"

"Brian's married, so that makes you the last one left, right? The only one who can win."

He still looked so casual and half asleep that she wondered if he knew what he was talking about. Why had he brought this whole business up? "Yes."

"Well, I have an idea. You want a baby. I want to see my daughter more often." He gave the first sign of being alert, his focused eyes meeting hers. "We have a good time together, we're very... compatible."

His hands on her waist pressed her forward a little and she was amazed at how relaxed she still felt with him. She had never sat naked in a tub with a man before and held an entire conversation. She tried to concentrate on what he was saying and not his hands.

"It's a win-win situation. I think we should get married, Angel, and collect the bet

money.”

Married to Rick? Holy, moly. Could she do that? She had never planned to marry at all then had decided to marry Brian knowing full well her heart was not affected. She wasn't sure if she had the strength to take the plunge and marry a man that had her insides doing a tango.

Before she could speak, he continued. “I mean it wouldn't be a permanent thing. Just so we could get the money. Sort of like business.” He grinned and glanced down at her breasts. “But with a whole lot of pleasure in the meantime.”

“Oh, right, of course. Good idea.” Tears suddenly stung her eyes and she breathed in and out quickly so she wouldn't humiliate herself. She had known that was what he meant, but to hear him say it out loud... well, it hurt. He wanted a fun relationship, no strings attached, and the added bonus of ten grand.

She supposed she didn't blame him. After all, who wouldn't want those things? But she wanted him to want more.

She told herself it didn't matter. What she wanted was foolish and based on nothing but lust and an unusually intense attraction. Not something that you base a marriage on. Hadn't she always sworn that was how her father had wound up married six times, and that she would never repeat his mistakes?

Rick was right. Getting married was the logical solution to both of their problems and the real Angel, the Angel who thought things through thoroughly would see this without question.

Besides, she had wanted to get married for those very same reasons to Brian. Hadn't she told herself that love was for fools, and destined to end in divorce and a wrecked heart?

She swallowed and shifted off of him, determined to handle this with a clear head. A clear head was amazingly difficult when she was on his lap naked.

“Are you sure that's what you want to do?” She spoke in as close to normal a voice as she could manage, given the fact that her stomach was churning. “I mean, it might be an inconvenience to get back out of a marriage once we're in it.”

“It's worth it.” He pushed her hair back off of her face, and the light touch of his fingers made her tremble.

“I miss my daughter, Angel. I need her in my life more than she is now.”

She understood that. It was the very reason she wanted to adopt a baby. She would be a good mother. Rick was a good father. And the rest was unimportant. She would make it unimportant.

“Would we tell people we're married?”

He shook his head. “No, just who we need to in order to get the cash. Otherwise it would be awkward when we went our separate ways.”

That was a valid point. Yet somehow the thought of a secret marriage was unappealing. If she was going to be Rick's wife, she wanted the world to know.

Where had that ridiculous thought come from?

She bit her lip, hard.

That had been her heart talking, not her head, and her heart wasn't allowed to make

decisions on this.

Would she feel guilty about being dishonest with her old college friends? Would she feel guilty about standing in front of a judge and taking vows with Rick?

No. Because a tiny little part of her leapt at the chance to be with Rick, in whatever capacity. It was shocking to her how much she wanted a part of him, however small, but when she ignored that, she realized he was offering her the perfect solution.

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. "Okay. It makes complete sense. Let's do it."

But if it made so much sense, why did she feel such an intense burning ache in her chest?

Angel stood straight up in the tub.

"Where are you going?" Rick reached for her.

"The water's too hot." She had to get out, away. "I feel sick."

Rick woke up on Tuesday, still in Angel's bed, every muscle in his legs screaming. Maybe he wasn't in as good of shape as he had thought. He stretched and grinned. Or maybe just having sex six times in twenty-four hours was something his legs weren't used to.

It was an exercise regimen he wouldn't mind taking up on a regular basis.

He was restless, enough so to get out of bed and hop in the shower, leaving Angel sleeping. He was getting married. Again. It made him a touch on the nervous side. Okay, a lot on the nervous side.

But then this wasn't an ordinary marriage. This was a business arrangement. Plain and simple.

Then why had he nearly passed out waiting for her response? Truth of it was, if he was inclined to be honest with himself, which he wasn't sure he was, he was hoping that after awhile together, he could talk Angel around to sticking with him. He could see being married to her for a good long while.

Giving it a shot. For real.

It was a risk, and he had sworn he wouldn't take this risk again, but something just told him he had to. He had see if there was any chance for something real between him and Angel or he'd spend forever wondering what if.

He stood under the hot spray and scrubbed at his hair with her shampoo. It smelled like tropical fruit. Ugh. Girly shampoo.

If he was having odd doubts about this whole thing, he was determined to ignore them. So what if he had married Nicole because she had been pregnant and he had felt responsible for her? That had nothing to do with now.

He could fall in love with Angel, no question about it. She just didn't know it. Technically he was listening to his gut. His gut was telling him to marry for love, and he was. The potential of love, anyway. He was just disguising it in a business arrangement package. Because he was too chicken shit to tell her his feelings.

Nothing wrong with that.

Much.

Through the spray, he almost didn't hear the knock on the door, faint and distant. Turning off the water, he listened and heard it again. It was the front door.

Stepping out, he pulled his boxers and shorts on, with the idea that it might be Angel's family again. He wasn't getting caught with his pants down a second time. Especially with that feisty little Dixie running around. She looked like a man-eater.

"Coming," he called, and saw Angel sitting up, covered in a sheet, with a serious case of bed head. Damn, she was cute, even with her hair flattened on one side, and the other sticking straight out.

"You have my permission to kill them if it's my siblings."

"No bloodshed before I've had coffee." He crossed the living room and opened the door.

A tall man standing on the deck gave him a surprised look. "Oh, hey, man. I must have the wrong place." He leaned back to look at the nameplate hanging next to the front door.

Rick felt a sick sense of déjà vu. This sounded exactly like the conversation he'd had the day before with Luke. Except that Angel didn't have any more brothers. Which meant that this might be...

"Brian!" Angel yelled in astonishment from the room behind him.

Oh, damn.

Brian skirted around him into the room with the arrogant confidence of a man who's never had a thing go wrong for him in his life. Rick's temperature shot up ten degrees.

Brian said with a big grin, "Hey, Ang! What's going on? Who's this guy?"

Brian jerked a thumb at him, but looked neither upset nor truly interested. In fact, he leaned over and picked Angel up, who Rick was glad to see had pulled on his T-shirt. Definite improvement over the sheet for company.

Yet he didn't appreciate Brian lifting her right up off the floor and twirling her around, his hands resting on her perky little behind. The behind that until recently had been in his hands. His blood pressure jumped a notch along with his temperature.

Angel swatted Brian on the arm, a healthy whack, the sound reverberating through the cabin. "Where have you been?"

Brian managed to look sheepish, but nothing more. On closer inspection, Rick could see Brian was unshaven, and wearing wrinkled jeans and a shirt that looked like he had dragged it across the floor six or seven times.

"It's like this, Ang. That Laila is something else. I have never in my whole life experienced anything like her." He shook his head in amazement. "I mean, I haven't even been out of bed for like two days."

Angel turned a dangerous purple color. "Try almost four days, Brian. We were supposed to get married on Saturday. This is Tuesday. How could you do that to me? You didn't even call!"

He held his hands out in surrender and smiled charmingly. "I'm sorry, Ang. I really am. I didn't mean to, but I was drunk and you know what I'm like when I've been drinking. That's why I don't do it that often."

She snorted and Rick fought the urge to punch Brian's good-looking lights out. What a

total idiot. He couldn't believe that Angel had even considered marrying this waste of space.

She said, "You're an idiot, Brian." Amen to that.

Brian grinned. "I know. That's why I have you. To keep things straight for me."

After a long stare at him, she suddenly sighed, her shoulders dropping two inches. Brian seemed to realize his lecture was over.

Rick still thought the guy deserved thirty lashes, or at least a good kick in the nuts, but Angel looked ready to let him off the hook.

Taking advantage of her sigh, Brian said quickly, "So how about it? You ready to get married? We can head out right now before I get myself in any more trouble."

Angel gasped, and Rick felt his heart constrict. Oh, no. That meant that...

"You're not married to Laila?" she gasped.

Brian had the gall to look surprised. "Married to Laila? Why would I do that?" He gave a wistful faraway sigh. "Though she was an amazing individual. If you could only imagine." He shook his head. "Anyway, no I didn't marry her. I'm supposed to marry you. Why would I marry her?"

While this logic seemed to make sense to the man in front of him, Rick wanted to knock his head into the wall. He said in a tight voice, "Then why didn't you call Angel? She's been down here looking for you."

Angel turned to him for the first time, as if she'd forgotten he was there. "Uh, Rick, do you think you could give me a minute alone with Brian?"

It was a pleading look, one that made his heart sink. With Brian the Bozo back on the scene, Angel had a choice to make. Him or Brian. And the way she was shifting around nervously, imploring him to go, it didn't look so hot for him.

"I'll go in the bedroom," he said after a pause.

"Why don't you go home for a little while and I'll call you?"

The firm tone of her voice left him little choice. Stunned, he nodded. "Sure." He searched out his shoes, and car keys, looked around for his shirt, then remembered Angel was wearing it.

In Brian's arms. The slimeball had gathered her up again and was squeezing her hard, and whispering in her ear who knew what. He guessed some half-baked apology and charming lies.

So there it was. He was out. Brian was in. The best night of his life had just ended in an abrupt dismissal from the woman he had decided he was almost, practically in love with.

Because if Angel married him now, she couldn't collect the bet money. And that was the only reason she had wanted to marry him.

Rick didn't have the patience to ask for his shirt back. She could keep it. He needed to get out of there, and away from the disgusting sight of the woman he really dug in another man's arms.

He left shirtless, and she didn't even seem to notice.

Angel watched Rick head out the front door bare-chested and fought the urge to call after him. She needed to deal with Brian before she dealt with Rick. Two pairs of male eyes staring at her expectantly were more than she could handle.

Especially now that Brian had decided to gather her up in a bear hug and squeeze the daylight out of her. And whispering the biggest load of you-know-what she'd ever heard in her life.

"I'm sorry, pal. Do you forgive me? You know how I am, I can't help myself. I'll make it up to you, I promise."

Oh, she couldn't stand it when he called her pal. "Have you called your parents?" She tried to disengage herself from him, but he clung tightly.

"My parents? Why would I call my parents?"

She prayed for patience. "They spent good money on a rehearsal dinner for a wedding that you failed to show up for. I think they might be curious as to what happened to you. They might even care if you're alive or dead, though that's questionable at this point."

He released her and shrugged. "I'll let you call them. You can always calm them down faster than I can."

With the usual flicker of annoyance she felt in Brian's company, she crossed her arms in Rick's warm T-shirt. She felt a sudden sickening sense of panic at the stiff way he had walked out.

She had just sent the wrong man out the door.

There was no way she was going to marry Brian. She knew that. She could no longer marry for money, not after what she had shared with Rick.

She should have told Brian to take a hike and kept Rick here. Now he was gone, without a backward glance, and she had only herself to blame. Now that he was gone, she saw the truth.

She was falling in love with Rick, spontaneous and insane or not.

There was no way to deny it anymore.

Rick brought out the best of her personality and softened the hard edges, and she was happy when she was with him.

The alien feeling of unrestrained joy was rising in her and she fought the urge to rush out after him and tell him she was falling in love with him.

First she needed to deal with the man in front of her. She took a deep breath. "Brian, I care about you. Despite your character flaws you are a kind person. But I am not your mother. I am not your social worker, I am not your receptionist. It is not my job to pick up the pieces every time you screw up. It is not my job to take care of you. It's time for you to acknowledge the fact that you are thirty years old and need to grow up."

His forehead wrinkled as he stared at her, scratching at his newly developed beard. Whatever Laila had provided him with, it hadn't been a razor. "What are you saying, Ang? That you don't want to marry me?"

Why did she bother? She said, "Yes, that's what I'm saying."

"Well, you could have said something sooner. I mean, this was your idea, and I've gone to a lot of trouble here, booking this cabin and everything." He glanced around. "Hey, this place is pretty sweet."

Obviously she shouldn't have worried about hurting Brian's feelings. He didn't exactly look broken up.

He spotted the beaver on the table. "Whoa! Check it out." Picking it up, he turned it all around and laughed. "This is too cool. He even looks like he's smiling."

Turning the beaver in her direction, he made it dance back and forth. "This place is awesome. I knew it would be. How can you go wrong with a place called Big Bear Butt?"

She wasn't even going to touch that question.

## Chapter Twelve

IT took a full hour to get rid of Brian. He was in love with the cabin. He couldn't understand why he couldn't stay with her there. His feelings were mortally wounded. He didn't have any cash to stay anywhere else.

She finally sent him to stay in the chalet with her brothers and sisters. Jake and Eddie liked him well enough, and Hannah obviously had a thing for him, so it would work out in the end. Brian always landed on his feet. Or his head.

In the meantime, she needed to have a well thought out plan. Her not thinking was what had sent Rick out the door in the first place. Now she needed to approach this logically, with a clear plan in place.

She wanted Rick back.

Which could be a problem. Since Brian hadn't married the stripper after all, if Angel and Rick married now, there would be no bet money to collect. That was seriously working against her.

That had been the whole reason Rick had suggested marriage, so he could have the money to see Kiri more frequently.

How was she supposed to convince him to be with her without the money?

"Seduction," she whispered to the squirrel on the breakfast bar. "I know he's attracted to me. I'll just plan to seduce him until he's so satisfied he'll agree to anything." Like a long-distance relationship.

It didn't sound foolproof. In fact, the plan had lake-sized holes in it, but she didn't know what else to do. And if it didn't work out, at least she would still have one more night with Rick.

She would take what she could get.

How to seduce him was a problem. She didn't know where he lived. Besides, he had said he lived over his parent's garage. That could get awkward.

It probably wouldn't help his career to show up at the ranger station naked either. She decided she needed to lure him here, and she needed to be wearing something better than sweat shorts in desperate need of a spin cycle.

She dialed Hannah's cell phone.

"Hannah, it's Angel. I need your help." She didn't bother to be polite and say hello. Always the most stylish sister fashion wise, Hannah was bound to have something she could borrow, even if she was taller.

With a sister response time of seventeen minutes, Hannah and Dixie were standing in the front room of the cabin. Dixie said excitedly, "Before we do anything you have got to tell us where you found that hot guy! He was yummy, honey."

Already digging through Hannah's suitcase she had brought, Angel said, "I found him in the woods. He saved me from a bear."

Dixie cooed. "Ooohh. The damsel in distress technique."

Angel tossed a bikini aside and held up a white tank top for inspection. "What about

this?"

Hannah gave it a critical eye. "I need to know your motivation here before I make a judgment. What exactly is your goal?"

"Sex!" she blurted. She quickly amended, "Rick and I decided to get married so we could split that bet money. Then this morning Brian showed up and said he didn't marry the stripper after all. So, with no money to be won, Rick left, which wasn't what I wanted. I want to give us a chance to see where this could go on our own without the stupid bet."

Angel wasn't sure she was ready to say she wanted to marry Rick. That was a major step, and she still had a deep fear that marriage was a mistake she would regret. She had no idea what Rick felt for her, if anything, but she knew he desired her. That was enough for her for right now. A building block for a relationship, one they could take day by day.

Hannah stared at her. "So Brian's not married?"

That was all her sister had managed to hear in her very lengthy and heart wrenching explanation? "He says he isn't. I would check the records at city hall if I were you, though. Brian's liable to become a bigamist without even knowing it, sure he remembers what happened."

A ferocious look of stealth crossed Hannah's face. Angel imagined this was what she looked like herself right now. She had been right to fear love all these years. It forced her into unnatural activities like seducing men and turning to her sisters for clothing advice.

"Okay then," Hannah nodded decisively. "Motivation is potential relationship via sex. Tank top it is. You can't wear a bra with it, because it has built-in cups, so it's virtually guaranteed to land you in bed with your ranger by the end of the day without coming across as slutty."

She swallowed. "No bra? Isn't that a little suggestive?" She preferred more modest clothing herself. Like a turtleneck.

Dixie laughed. "You are so sad. Be glad we're not making you wear something out of my closet."

That was indeed a scary vision. She pictured herself in shorts so low they showed pieces of her anatomy even her ex-boyfriend hadn't seen. Coupled with a halter that was really just pasties on a string. She would rather let him see her naked.

Wait a minute. He had seen her naked. She felt a warmth spreading throughout her body, and her nipples rose to the occasion. She wanted him to see her naked in bed again. That was the whole point. She would go au naturel. "Fine. No bra. A built in one is sufficient for my B cup anyway."

Dixie threw her hand in the air. "Whew! You go girl. Angel's cutting loose!" She laughed then added, "Hey, and maybe Rick has a friend for me. Hannah wouldn't let me go out with the cabin rental desk clerk."

"He had buck teeth." Hannah said, as if no further explanation was needed.

"He did not." Dixie turned around and Angel saw that there was no back to the tank top she was wearing.

She said a silent prayer of thanks that Hannah had more conservative taste.

"He did." Hannah dug through the bag and shot Dixie a look of disgust. "Luke said he

did too."

Dixie pouted. "Luke thinks he knows everything. Dixie this, Dixie that, Dixie shut up. He thinks because he's old, he can tell me what to do." She gave a startled glance at Angel. "Oh, no offense Angel."

Yes, she was feeling rather old next to Dixie. "None taken, Dix. Luke's just trying to protect you." She took a deep breath and accepted the shorts Hannah was holding out for her. They were olive colored, very short, very low riding, with a button fly. Her voice cracked. "I'll just go change in the bedroom."

Hannah nodded and turned to the kitchenette. "You got any food in this place?"

Five minutes later she was staring at herself in the mirror in the bathroom. She couldn't go through with this. The shorts were showing her hipbones and her nipples were perkily standing at attention through the tank top. She looked, well, sexy. She stood a little straighter. Sexy wasn't a bad thing.

She gave an experimental toss of her head. After all, she had slept with the man, had agreed to marry him. Surely she could stand there in a slightly revealing outfit and send him come hither glances. That shouldn't be so hard.

And she looked good. She gave a smile of satisfaction. Not exactly known for his prior restraint, Rick would be on her in three seconds. Which was three seconds longer than she wanted to wait.

She stroked his T-shirt she had taken off and gave it a little exploratory sniff to see if it smelled like him. It did. Musky and cedar. She tossed it on the bed, no intention of ever giving it back to him.

Stepping out into the living room, she heard the girls continuing their argument about the overbite of the desk clerk. Dixie had a one-track mind, that currently ran only on men. She was definitely their father's daughter.

"Uh-hhhm." She cleared her throat and put her hands on her hips. "Okay, don't make fun of me."

Hannah studied her. "That'll work. Put some makeup on though, your tan's not deep enough."

Dixie jumped up and ran over. "Oh, wait a sec." She dug through her purse and pulled out a tube.

Angel nervously watched her bare down on her. "What is that?"

"It's like body glitter. It gives you a soft glow." Dixie squeezed a huge blob on her hand and slapped it on Angel's chest and shoulders above the tank top. "Rub it in."

It was cold and slimy. She rubbed and said, "Okay, thanks, guys, but it's time for me to call Rick now before I lose my nerve. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Hannah frowned. "Hey, if Brian didn't marry Laila, where is he?"

Speaking of one-track mind. Angel was a little stunned. She had no idea Hannah had been harboring a crush on Brian. And no idea why. Brian, worthy of a crush? Go figure. "I told him that he could probably stay with you guys. I bet you just missed him."

Hannah started violently throwing the rejected outfits back into her suitcase. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?" She ran a finger through her hair. "How do I look? Geez, where's your hair brush?"

"In the bathroom. And you look great, like you always do." Hannah was wearing a soft short skirt and a sleeveless black shirt. She looked like she could be doing anything from going to work in an office, to strolling along the beach, to spending an afternoon at the mall. She had clothes confidence and it showed. That particular gene had only been passed to certain Weiss offspring, Angel not included.

"Uh, Hannah, can I ask a question? Do you actually like Brian?"

Hannah turned a slight pink color, the first time Angel had ever witnessed her actually blushing. Her curiosity deepened.

Hannah said, "Yes."

"Why?" she blurted out incredulously.

Hannah flicked open her compact mirror and powdered her nose. "Because he needs someone to take care of him."

That was the truth, and then some.

"I like to be in control. I want to straighten him out a little. Besides, he's gorgeous. And adorably charming."

He was? She couldn't picture it, but chalk that up to the differences in personal attraction. "Oh. I wish you said something to me sooner. I never would have suggested a sham marriage with him if I had known. But good luck. I hope it works out for you." She could certainly understand wanting to be in control.

That had always been a personal requirement for her, to be in control at all times. It was a philosophy that she was now ready to chuck out the window.

She all but shoved them out of the door and stared at her phone for five minutes. What was she supposed to say? She rehearsed for a minute, dialed Rick's number then promptly hung up.

"I can't do this." She wasn't spontaneous, she was who she was. A cautious, conservative planner, who didn't do anything without her planner app. Who was going to wind up alone and childless.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she took a deep breath then hit the send button to call him again. With a little luck maybe he wouldn't be home.

He answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Rick, it's Angel." Which he knew, of course. Duh. She leaned on the breakfast bar for support, hoping she could get through this conversation.

"Hi, Angel." His voice sounded funny. Formal. Polite.

Her nerve was failing her. She bit her lip until blood squeezed out. She could do this. In a rush she said, "Can you come over? We really need to talk."

The pause that followed made her heart sink down to her toes. She was too late.

"Now?"

"Yes." She held her breath.

"Okay. Give me ten minutes."

He hung up and she stared at the phone, a chill sweeping through her. Rick didn't sound right.

But at least he was coming. She paced the cabin, practicing poses on the couch and in front of the door. When she lifted her arm on the door in a sultry move and nearly flashed

the stuffed rabbit family when her tank top rode up, she groaned. "I can't do this!"

Neither could she put on makeup when her nerves were as taut as guitar strings. After nearly putting her eye out with the eyeliner, she decided to forgo the smoky eye look and stick with a light lipstick to cover up the hole she'd ripped in her lip earlier with her teeth.

The doorbell rang as she was dropping her blush brush in the sink and adjusting the straps on the tight tank top.

"He wants you. Just remember that," she coaxed herself as she walked to the front door.

She took a deep breath, smiled, and opened the door.

Only to have the smile fall off her face. "Brian! What are you doing here?"

He shook his head and gave her a lazy look of reprimand. "I think you gave me bad directions. I couldn't find Luke's cabin." Brian stepped over the threshold and into the cabin. "I'll just stay with you for now."

"No!" He couldn't do this to her. Rick would be here any minute.

"Why not?" Brian was already heading into her kitchen, opening up the refrigerator. "You don't have any food in here."

Desperate, she stayed in the doorway and said, "I have someone coming over."

"Not that guy who was here earlier, right?" He spoke with his head in the freezer. "I was meaning to say something to you about that, Angel. You shouldn't let total strangers come into your house like that. It's dangerous."

Though his concern was charming, she didn't have time for this. She started towards him, distracted by his methodical search through all her cabinets. "There's no food in there! And I need you to leave."

He turned around and narrowed his eyes in scrutiny. "Why are you dressed like that?"

"Like what?" She crossed her arms over her chest defensively.

"You're not wearing a bra," he accused.

Just because she had been about to marry him didn't make her bra or lack thereof any of his business. "Brian," she said in warning.

His mouth dropped. He asked in astonishment, "Are you flirting with me?"

"No!" The very thought was enough to leave her speechless.

Shaking his head, Brian leaned his tall and lanky form against the counter and said, "Well, what do you expect a man to think when you go walking around in front of him without a bra on?"

Before she could answer, or attempt to bodily throw him out, a cold voice came from the doorway. "He's got a point there, Angel."

Rick. No. She turned and saw him standing there, rigid, his face a cool mask. He was wearing faded jeans and a white T-shirt and she felt the prick of tears in her eyes. Her seduction attempt was over before she even had the chance to try.

Brian was oblivious to the tension. "See? He understands, Ang. You can't just walk around letting it all hang out without expecting some kind of response."

She wondered what would happen if she started screaming hysterically. Or started railing on Brian's chest with her fists. She'd never know, because she wasn't going to do that. Not even the new relaxed, more spontaneous Angel was capable of making a scene

like that.

“Brian, I didn’t even know you were coming over! Now could you please leave so I can talk to Rick? Privately,” she added.

“Sure, no problem. I can take a hint.” Brian straightened up. “I’ll just go take a shower. Do you still have that shampoo that smells like kiwi? I like that stuff.”

Brian headed off to the bedroom, unaware that he had just about ruined her life. For the second time. Swallowing hard, her heart pounding, she turned around to face Rick.

## Chapter Thirteen

RICK couldn't believe what he had just heard. Brian knew what kind of shampoo Angel used. Only a man who had been in her shower would know that. Despite everything she had said, she really had slept with Brian.

His gut clenched. "You said you didn't sleep with him." He couldn't keep the anger out of his voice.

"I didn't!" She brushed her hair back and said, "I've known Brian for a long time, Rick. He's been like another brother to me. Once he stayed at my apartment for two weeks when his girlfriend kicked him out."

He wanted to believe her. Badly. But she had been about to marry Brian. Hell, for all he knew, she still was. "You were going to marry him."

"Was," she said firmly. "Not anymore. I'm not marrying Brian now or ever."

That was a relief. It truly was. But not marrying Brian didn't mean she'd want to marry him.

"Why not?"

Her voice was stilted. "I can't marry him for the money. It's not enough. Especially not now."

Relief flooded him. He was about to step forward and pull her into his arms when he caught himself. During his morning away from Angel, he had been having a serious talk with himself. He had gotten involved with Angel impulsively, had allowed himself to be swept along first by attraction, then by his growing feelings for her.

In the end, he had concluded that he couldn't see Angel anymore, no matter how much he wanted to. He couldn't just have an affair with her, not when his heart was all tied up in slipknots. It was all or nothing for him.

He said softly, "I'm glad you're not marrying that guy. He's not your type."

She whispered, "Are you my type?"

He closed his eyes in agony against the question in her words and on her face. It didn't even sound like her, and he started sweating. Why did she sound so sensual? And since when did she wear short shorts like that, showing off her flat stomach? He had to stay strong and get out of here before he did something stupid. Like kiss her.

"I know we're... compatible."

Wrong answer. He wanted to whack himself on the forehead. He was supposed to be distancing himself from her, not coming on to her.

The sound of the water in the bathroom shower gave him the strength to say what he needed to. "But that's not enough, is it?" It was the truth, he told himself, ignoring his sissy heart that was squealing at him that there was a whole lot more to this relationship than lust.

All seduction fell out of her voice. Her arms came across her chest. She spoke tentatively. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that we had a good time, Angel, but that Brian saved us from making a

mistake. We can't marry for the money either. Neither of us are casual kind of people like that."

There was a big pause, and her arms hugged her chest tighter. "You're right. I'm not a casual person. And there isn't any money anymore since Brian's not married."

Which meant she wouldn't want to marry him. What he had to offer wasn't enough, and he couldn't settle for a fling. His heart was too far gone to walk away from that unscathed.

In fact, it was already too late. He'd been putting up picket fences in his mind, and Angel was always standing behind them.

He tried to voice those feelings in a stilted way. "When I get married again, I want lots of kids, and a house with a couple acres for them to run rough shod over. I want a wife who wants to be there for the long haul." And he wanted it with Angel.

But she didn't want that. She had told him right up front her feelings about marriage. She obviously hadn't changed her mind either, given that she wasn't saying anything, just shaking her head back and forth.

He could almost see the wall building up between them brick by brick.

"I see." Each word she spoke was frostier than the last.

"So." What the hell did he say now? He nearly chewed his lip off in an effort to keep his big mouth from blurting out that he loved her. He needed to end this quick before he said something stupid. "Thanks for a great time, Angel." Like that.

She gave a strangled laugh, then squeezed her eyes shut tightly for a second. "No, thank you. It was... unique."

They were reduced to thanking each other for the most mind-blowing and intimate two days of his life.

She was struggling not to cry.

He was struggling not to take her in his arms and tell her how he really felt. But it was better this way. Brian showing up had saved him the pain and heartbreak of being married to a woman he loved, who didn't love him in return.

He said stiffly, "I'm going to California on Friday. My daughter broke her arm."

"Oh! Is she all right?" She sniffled as she dashed her soft golden hair back off of her face.

"She's fine. I just want to see for myself that she's okay, and spend some time with her." He swallowed hard. "I'd better go then, I'm working today since I asked for the weekend off to go see Kiri."

His hand came up to touch her cheek, but he forced himself to drop it before he made contact. He backed up.

"Goodbye, Rick."

"Bye, Angel." He went out through the open door, pulled it shut behind him, and closed his eyes.

He pictured Angel the way she had looked that morning standing there, blond hair rumpled, sleepy eyes, dressed in his shirt that went almost to her knees, with his scent still on her from their lovemaking. That was the image he wanted to carry with him for the rest of his life.

She was sitting on the couch bawling her eyes out, petting the dead beaver, with Rick's shirt over her face, when her cell phone rang. Maybe it was him.

And maybe this beaver was going to start talking to her. Rick had made his feelings perfectly clear- he had none.

It was probably her sisters or Luke.

Wiping her tears on the shirt, she gave it a big pathetic sniffle to see if she could still smell traces of him in the fabric. His musty woodsy smell met her eager nostrils and she gave a muffled gasp. Why did she insist on torturing herself?

She stood up in Hannah's sexy shorts. So much for seduction. He hadn't even noticed what she was wearing.

This was what she got for all her careful months of planning. A broken heart, a stuffed beaver, and Brian in her shower loudly singing the lyrics to a soft drink commercial.

She answered the phone still clinging to the shirt, with tears streaming down her face. "Hello?"

"It's Hannah. We're just checking in. Is your ranger there?"

"No." She sighed. "It's over, Hannah. Everything that could go wrong did."

"Oh, Angel." Hannah whispered something to Dixie. "We're coming over. We'll bring ice cream."

"You don't have to..." it was too late. Hannah had hung up. While it was very sweet of them to care, she would really rather be alone. Except that she wasn't alone at all.

Brian was standing in the kitchen in his jeans and no shirt, his hair wet from the shower. He was staring forlornly into the empty refrigerator again. "Angel, I'm starving. I'm wasting away."

Since all of her pity was directed at herself, she had none to spare for Brian. "Then go to the store."

He turned with a smile then stopped. "Have you been crying?"

"No," she lied.

"Yes, you have. What did that guy do to you?" He looked indignant.

Nothing, except make her fall in love with him. "I'm fine."

Then suddenly she was being engulfed in Brian's arms as he attempted to comfort her. Confused, she pushed her face away from his bare chest. She didn't want to be in any man's arms but Rick's.

"I'm sorry, Angel."

"For what?" she asked suspiciously. Brian sounded almost sincere.

"For screwing our wedding up."

Better late than never, she supposed. She sighed, knowing he really meant it. Brian was a good guy, just a little screwy sometimes. Okay, a lot screwy. "It's okay, Brian."

"Good." He pulled back and winked at her. "Then would you mind if I go and see if I can convince Laila to marry me? I'm in love with her, Ang."

What? Brian had found love and happiness in the arms of the stripper? There was no justice in the world.

“Go for it.” What else was she supposed to say? She had no business doling out advice or warnings. She dredged up a smile. “I hope you’ll be very happy.”

She did feel a twinge for her sister Hannah, but couldn’t help but think that in the long run Hannah could do better than Brian for a boyfriend.

“Oh, I will definitely be happy.” Brian’s face took on a faraway look of worship.

She had lost everything. The bet, the money, Brian, the chance to adopt a baby. And Rick. She had lost Rick. Not that she’d ever really had him. But she had lost everything.

Plan D. Eat her body weight in chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream.

## Chapter Fourteen

LUKE was trying to sleep on the lounge chair in the warm sun, but was finding it futile. When Eddie wasn't jumping into the pool and splashing him with icy cold water, Dixie was talking to him.

Or at him was more like it.

He had finally resorted to putting a towel over his head, hoping to muffle her high-pitched voice.

"Luke!" His towel was rudely ripped off of him.

He blinked up at Dixie, marveling that he could love her and hate her at the same time. "Do you have a death wish?"

"I need the keys to Eddie's car. Hannah just got off the phone with Angel and she's upset. We're going over to see her."

Hell. "Why is she upset?"

He sat up and started fishing around in the pile of towels and shirts for the car keys.

"That ranger guy dumped her, and she's in love with him."

"How can she be in love with someone she just met?" He didn't believe in that romantic love at first sight business one bit. And he didn't think Angel was acting very rational lately anyway. He'd about had a heart attack when he had seen her standing in a sheet with a half-naked guy. Angel just didn't do stuff like that.

Dixie put her hands on her hips, her hot pink bikini nearly blinding him as it contrasted with her bronze skin. "Some day you'll fall head over heels and you'll understand."

"I don't think so, little sister." He gave her the keys, and scoffed at the notion that some woman could ever get him to act like a total idiot in the name of love.

"But listen, we need you to do something."

Here it was. Where they asked him to do something that would embarrass him or cost him money, and which he would sorely regret. "What?"

"We need you to go to the ranger station and call us on your cell phone when you see Rick enter the building."

They were scaring him. "Why?"

"We're going to get Angel and Rick back together." She rolled her eyes. "Pay attention."

Hannah came up behind her, already pulling a pair of shorts on over her bathing suit. "Look, I called the station and they said that Rick is out in the field, and will be returning about noon. I signed Angel, Dixie, and me up for an educational class for tourists inside the station. So when Rick comes in, you let us know, and I can find some dumb excuse to get Angel into the parking lot. You can't let Angel see you, though, or she'll know something's up."

He lay back down and closed his eyes. Once they left he could finally have his nap. "You're crazy. First of all, that's not going to work, second of all, why should I help? We don't know anything about this guy at all."

Someone tugged on his hand hard. He opened his eyes to come face to face with Dixie's chest as she tried to pull him out of his seat. "Aahh. Dixie. Back up." He was entirely too close to his baby sister's bikini top. There were certain things a guy just doesn't want to see, his sister's breasts being on the top of the list.

"This is your sister's happiness at stake here. You either love Angel or you don't." She stared him down.

They manipulated him so easily, it wasn't even funny. They all knew he loved them too much to ever truly deny them anything they asked. "Oh, hell. Fine. I'll do it."

Angel tried to smile when Dixie swooped down on her, all hugs and tender little clucking sounds. "Honey, I'm so sorry. What happened?"

She did not want to relive her conversation with Rick, but it looked unavoidable. "I don't know, Dixie. When Rick got here, Brian was here, and it just started us off on the wrong foot."

"Is Brian here now?" Hannah's eyes darted towards the bedroom of the cabin.

"No. He went for food."

Hannah refocused on her. "So, really, what happened with you and Rick? Yesterday he looked like he was half in love with you."

Massive stab through her heart. She fought the urge to whimper pitifully. "He said he wants a wife, kids, a big house."

Hannah raised an eyebrow and started unpacking the ice cream pints they had brought with them. Handing her a spoon, she said, "Well, isn't that what you want?"

"Yes." She had always wanted the house and the baby.

"So what's the problem?" Hannah looked at her like she was lacking in sufficient brain cells.

"He didn't say he wanted those things with me!" she wailed. "Besides, I probably can't have kids." She wasn't sure why she even made it seem doubtful when it was a fact, but it had been her horrible secret for a long time and even forcing those words out was difficult.

But Hannah just rolled her eyes. "No one can do anything without me, I swear. Did you tell him how you feel? That you're in love with him, want to have the house, the dog, the 2.2 kids with him, and all the rest of that happy garbage? Hello, adoption and/or surrogacy if you can't have kids. You'll be a great other no matter what."

Her sister made it sound like it was easy. Just throw your heart at him and see if he takes it or stomps on it. "Well, no. And who said I was in love with him?"

"Oh, give me a break. I'm not even responding to that. You're head over heels, honey. Call him."

"No!" The thought made her squirm worse than her poison ivy rash had.

Dixie, speaking around a mouthful of ice cream, said, "You need to stop expecting every guy to be like Dad."

"What?" She looked at Dixie in horror. "What does Dad have to do with anything?"

Dixie swallowed. "I know you all think I'm brainless, but even I can see that you're

afraid to get involved with anyone because of Dad. You're afraid if you love a guy, he'll leave you like Dad did."

Hannah murmured, "Holy cow. Out of the mouths of babes."

Dixie stuck her tongue out at Hannah. "I'm not that young. I'm twenty-one."

Angel felt like a bowling ball had landed square in the middle of her stomach. Could Dixie be right? Was she holding back her feelings for Rick because she was afraid he would hurt her?

Yes.

Which wasn't the least bit fair to him.

"I still can't call him, though," she whispered. Her understanding of her feelings didn't change the fact that his interest had always been in the money, not her.

She added, "He said we were compatible. That's not exactly a declaration of love."

Hannah handed her the chocolate chip container. "Then come with us. We're going home."

"You're leaving right now?" She was horrified to realize that she didn't want to leave yet. Leaving would mean there truly was no hope.

"No, tomorrow. Today we're taking a class at the ranger station."

Dixie grinned as she switched the mint chocolate chip for the butter pecan, and pried the lid off. "It's a class on native foliage. Very educational."

"Then why are you going?" Angel asked in disbelief.

"I'm hoping to meet cute guys."

That made more sense than Dixie suddenly taking an interest in botany. "Well, I'm not going to the ranger station. What if I see Rick?" She dropped her spoon into the ice cream and dug out a huge mound.

Hannah scoffed. "You're not going to see him." She tossed her long hair back so it wouldn't fall in her ice cream. "That park is thousands of acres big. He's not going to be in the very spot you are."

"Come on, Angel." Dixie coaxed. "Otherwise you're just going to sit here and feel sorry for yourself."

She didn't see what was wrong with that.

Except she knew they wouldn't leave until they had harassed her into going. She figured she might as well save them a few steps. "Fine, I'll go with you. But don't embarrass me."

Dixie gave her a wide-eyed innocent stare. "How would I do that?"

By refusing to wear a shirt, for starters. Dixie insisted that since it was a wildlife class, the dress would be casual. Somehow Angel didn't think a bikini top was what was meant by casual dress.

"Let me go wash my face." It was itchy from all her tears streaking down her cheeks.

Stepping into the cabin, she wondered if there would be any ice cream left when she came back out. Maybe she should have taken a pint with her.

Her cell phone was ringing as she crossed the living room. Plucking it off the counter, she answered it, assuming it was Luke. But it was her Dad. Just what she needed. "Hello?"

"Ang? It's Dad."

Her father's booming voice made her grimace. "Hi, Dad."

"I'm just calling you to see how you are, sweetheart. Luke told me you were okay, but I wanted to hear it for myself."

"I'm fine." About as fine as she could get considering she had found love and lost it again in less time than it takes most people to commute to work.

"Do you need money or anything? I can always send you some, or give you my credit card number." His voice sounded no different than usual, upbeat and a little bit forced.

Angel had spent her whole life hating that her father offered her money every time she turned around. She had always thought of it as bribe money, but now she leaned on the counter and listened to him, wondering if she had always misinterpreted.

Maybe this was the only way her father knew how to relate to her. Maybe he did care about her, and wanted to help her out, and money was the only way he knew how to do that.

She found herself saying impulsively, "Dad? Did you know I can't have any children? I'm... infertile." Of course he didn't know. She'd never told anyone but Luke and Rick.

"What? Oh, baby, I'm so sorry. You kids mean everything to me. I can't imagine my life without you." He cleared his throat and she heard the emotion in his voice. "Can you adopt a baby, Angel? Or go to a specialist or something? I'll pay for it."

A part of her heart let go of the bitterness she'd been harboring against her father all these years. She felt an enormous relief, and closed her eyes for a second. "I want to adopt. Dad, can I borrow the money for it?"

"It's yours. Just let me know how much and when you need it." Now the relief was clearly in her father's voice.

A minute later Angel hung up the phone, her pain a little lighter. She might not have Rick, but she was going to have a baby, and she had just embarked on a whole new, more mature approach, to her relationship with her father.

She had forgiven her father, but she knew deep down, the fear of turning out like her father, or having a man abandon her, had kept her from trusting anyone.

Not once in her life had she ever told a man she loved him. And she never had thought she could love a man until now.

But that lack of trust had prevented her from telling Rick her true feelings, and had let him walk out of her life.

After washing her face and combing her hair, she put the remnants of the ice cream in the freezer and prepared herself to be interested in learning about sugar maple trees. After five minutes of listening to Dixie chatter about the new straw handbag she had gotten on sale, they arrived at the ranger station.

Angel frowned when they pulled into the parking lot. The first car parked on the left looked a lot like Luke's SUV.

It was. Luke, Jake, and Eddie were peeling themselves out of it. Sitting up straighter, she said, "Why are the boys here?"

Dixie's curse made her suspicious. "Dixie, what's going on here?"

Her little sister turned around to gaze at her in the back seat with an innocent stare.

"Nothing, why? Maybe they decided to join us for the class."

She nearly laughed. "For the stimulating information on forest plants or for the cute guys? I don't think so."

When Hannah parked the car, Dixie ran over to their brothers in a mad dash that confirmed the worst. Something was going on here. She considered staying in the back seat for the next hour or two, and did sit there for a minute, watching her siblings for evidence of some sort of conspiracy. Of what she had no idea.

Now Dixie was riding piggyback style on Eddie's back across the parking lot. Hannah was looking around at the tree-canopied ranger station and shaking her head, picking across the gravel parking lot gingerly in her chunky sandals.

Jake came over to her and said through the window, "Climb on my back, Angel. We'll race E and D."

She studied him to see if he was serious. He was looking at her, eagerly. Sometimes it was hard to see that Jake was twenty-eight years old. "Okay." Now why had she just agreed to that?

Climbing out of the car, she looked around to make sure no one was around except for them.

"All right. We'll dust them. You're smaller than Dixie."

In the chest anyway. Carefully she grabbed Jake's bent back and tried to shimmy up gracefully. He took her legs with his hands and threw her up further, standing up as she scrambled to catch her balance. She wasn't used to moving around in Hannah's short shorts. He bounced her up and down a few times for practice, and she couldn't help but laugh. This was so juvenile, but sort of fun.

It was a distraction at the very least. As Jake and Eddie determined on a race course she stared into the deep forest hugging the ranger station. It reminded her of Rick and his valiant efforts to save her from the encroaching beasts the deceptively peaceful woods contained.

She'd never have the heart to step into a clump of trees again.

Luke gave the signal to start racing and Angel clung to Jake's shoulders as he ran as fast as he could across the length of the parking lot and back. Eddie and Dixie were a few steps behind, but Eddie played dirty by grabbing Jake's arm. Angel was laughing as she was bounced up and down and once nearly flew off Jake's back when she and Dixie collided mid-jostle in the air.

Looking ahead, she saw the tree that had been designated as the finish line between two rows of cars. Oh, great. There was a man and a woman down there. Just what she wanted to be seen doing.

As they came closer, she started and nearly fell off of Jake. "Holy crap."

It was Rick, in his ranger uniform. He was talking to Sheri. She squeezed her fingers into Jake's shoulders, and stared intently. What was he doing here?

Jake cursed. "Quit pinching me." He stumbled across the finish line with a final burst of speed, breathing hard and laughing as Eddie and Dixie came right behind. "Told you, Eddie. We whooped you good."

Eddie slowed down and let go of Dixie's legs, who fell to the ground and nearly lost her

balance before recovering. "Watch it, you oaf."

Rick turned at the noise and met her stare with a look of shock. That was about how she felt. Kicked between the eyes. Her arms clung to Jake, still resting on his back, and she was unable to look away from Rick. She thought she should say something, but she couldn't think of a thing to say.

Dixie said, "Hey, isn't that...?"

"Who?" Eddie looked over.

"The guy with Angel yesterday, you know." Dixie flashed a knowing grin.

"Oh, yeah." Eddie leaned forward for a better look. Since there were only five feet away from him, every word they spoke was within hearing distance of Rick, who gripped his car door and glanced around as if looking for an escape route. Eddie said, "Hey, man, what's up? I didn't recognize you with your clothes on."

She was going to die of mortification. She made a whimpering sound and whispered in Jake's ear, "Put me down."

## Chapter Fifteen

RICK grimly nodded a greeting to Angel's brother. He had the worst miserable timing in the world. Of all times to pull into the damn parking lot, he picked now, when the woman he loved was hurtling across it on her brother's back, looking like she was having a grand old time. He felt like he'd been pulverized, and she was looking like she didn't have a care in the world.

Even between worrying over Kiri's broken arm, and making his travel plans, he hadn't been able to get Angel out of his mind. He couldn't stand the way they had said goodbye. He had actually been thinking of stopping by her place to see her after work. But now what the hell was he supposed to say to her in the parking lot?

Sheri cleared her throat next to him. Angel's brother, which one he didn't even pretend to remember, let go of her legs suddenly and she slid down his back to the ground, hovering behind him. Somebody needed to say something.

Dixie filled the silence. "So what's the matter with you? Angel went and put on body glitter for you and she says you blew her off. I want to know why you would do that to my sister. You thought she was good enough for you yesterday."

After this extraordinary speech, Dixie put her hands on her hips and stared at him in indignation. He felt like he had walked into the middle of a conversation. Darting a glance over at Angel, he saw she was beet red and was gasping for air.

Body glitter? The thought was enough to send his thoughts spiraling in directions they shouldn't be taking in a parking lot.

They had left too much unsaid that afternoon. He needed to talk to her.

He ignored Dixie's question. He willed her to look at him. "Angel, can I talk to you? Alone."

Her brother moved in front of Angel blocking her. He leaned back and said, "You want to talk to this guy?"

Great, now he was going to have to blast his way through a wall of brothers to get to her. They were all staring at him like he was a prison escapee bent on kidnapping their sister.

But Angel stepped out from behind her protective muscle and said, "Yes, I want to talk to him."

Turning to Sheri he said, "Will you wait a minute for me?"

Sheri nodded, but she wasn't looking at him. Surprised, Rick saw that she and Angel's brother Luke, the one whose name he did remember, seemed to be locked in eye contact.

He thought about warning Sheri to run the other way and not get involved, but he knew no matter what the outcome, he was never going to regret the memories of Angel he had.

Angel was waiting for him to say something. Now he had to figure out what the hell to say. He gestured to the edge of parking lot, where the gravel ended in a copse of trees.

"Over here?"

"Sure." She spoke breathlessly, not really looking at him. He watched her as she came towards him, and his mouth went dry.

She was still wearing those shorts that barely covered her behind, and only went up to her hipbones. Between that and her shirt was nothing but smooth golden skin. He had the urge to slide his tongue across her stomach and dip it into her belly button.

Quickly he turned his back to her brothers. Somehow he didn't think they would appreciate his dirty thoughts about their sister.

Angel looked up at him. "How's your daughter doing?"

He felt panic fade to tenderness at the concern on Angel's face. "She's fine. Bragging about her cast." Smiling, he ran a finger across her bottom lip. "I'm sorry. I was a jerk at the cabin. I shouldn't have accused you of sleeping with Brian."

Her mouth fell open, and she shook her head. "We were just both confused, I think."

That was only partly the truth. He owed her the whole truth. "I was scared. That you'd want to marry Brian, even after everything. You just sent me home when he showed up."

She paled. "I didn't mean for you to get the wrong impression. I just wanted to find a way to deal with Brian without you distracting me. I needed to break things off with him on my own."

He supposed he had known that all along, but it still hadn't felt good to be sent off to wait in the corner. "Why did you ask me to come over today?"

He hoped the answer would be what he wanted to hear.

Waving a fly away from her in irritation, she said, "I wanted to see you, that's all. Explain that I wasn't going to marry Brian."

His chest constricted and all the pieces he had been trying to place fell in with a click. Crazy or not, he wanted to give this a go with Angel. Maybe it wouldn't work, but if she felt half for him what he felt for her, it would. He couldn't judge their relationship by his failure with Nicole.

He had never asked her how she really felt about him. He had never admitted his feelings for her. Here was his chance. It was now or never. He took her hands in each of his and squeezed. "Angel, remember how I told you that I wanted a wife for the long haul and a bunch of kids, and a big house?"

Her eyes went wide, and she bit her bottom lip, trembling. "Yes."

"What I didn't tell you was that I could see doing those things with you."

"You could?" She jerked her head as the fly buzzed right by her nose.

"Yes. I could. I do. I know it's crazy. I know we live in two different cities and we don't really know each other all that well, but sometimes you just know that you have to give it a shot. You make me happy. I want a chance to see where this can go." He restrained himself from leaning forward and kissing her, desperately needing to hear some kind of answer first.

"Rick..." She yanked her hand out of his and said, "URRGH!" She whacked at the determined fly but missed.

His future hanging in the balance, he reached out and grabbed the fly out of the air and squeezed it between his pointer finger and his thumb. It made a crunching sound.

Wiping the guts on his shorts he looked up, heart pounding. Would she just say something already?

Eyes wide, she looked up at him, and shook her head violently. "You don't really mean that."

Somehow that wasn't what he had pictured her saying.

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't." Tears rose in her eyes. "Rick, I... let's just leave it the way we did this afternoon. It was a fun weekend."

A fun weekend. The words hit him like a slap in the face. She was standing there and telling him that he was nothing to her. He felt about as good as that dead bug smeared across his pants probably did right now.

Well, he had his answer. He managed to force out, his voice tight, "Yeah, it was fun. While it lasted."

Taking a step back, he faced the staring crowd, eager to get the hell out of here now that he knew the score. It was not in his favor. "Well, see you around then, Angel."

She clamped her lips together and watched in amazement as he walked away. What the hell was she doing? Instead of grabbing the opportunity to be with the man she was falling in love with, she had argued with him. She had actually convinced him to walk away.

It didn't matter why the man wanted to date her. He did, and that was the important part and she couldn't let fear dominate her action.

Angel tried to think of a plan. Nothing came to mind at all. And he was walking away. Her brothers and sisters were gawking at her.

Heart racing, she felt a sudden panic rising up in her. She could not let him walk away. She loved him. He was halfway across the parking lot now.

Then it hit her.

There didn't have to be a plan.

They could give this a shot, see where it went. Be happy together.

Not worrying about next week or next year. They didn't need all the answers today. Turn a fun weekend into a fun few weeks or months or years.

If she stopped him, that is.

A strangled gurgle left her mouth as she met Luke's gaze and silently begged for help. He jerked his head in Rick's direction and raised his eyebrows.

"Go after him, Angel." He sounded exasperated with her.

He was right, and she knew it. With a frantic skid across the gravel, she took off in her flip flops across the parking lot, running faster than she had since high school gym class.

As she got closer, she yelled, "Rick! Wait!" Her chest was screaming for air, and her thighs were burning, but she pushed harder, screaming again, "Rick! Don't go!"

He stopped walking and turned right as she reached him. She went flying into his chest, unable to stop. The wind rushed out of her as she collided with him, and he threw his arms out to steady them. She said quickly, as he tried to stabilize her, "I can't have kids."

"What?" he muffled into her hair as he kept her from falling. "I know, you already told

me that."

She fell against his chest, reveling in the feel of being in his arms again. Okay, maybe this wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind given that he was holding her clumsy self up, but just to be near him again made her happy.

"You want more kids. I can't give you that." She took a deep breath and stared up into his chocolate brown eyes, still clinging to his chest. "That's why I was trying to push you away. But I wanted you to know the truth. I think you're an amazing man and I would love to spend more time with you."

He blinked. "Hey. Not being able to have children does not mean that you aren't desirable. I'm glad you were honest with me, but that's not an issue for me. If we got to that place, we'd make decisions about our options together. You and me. But I understand why you pushed me away. I did the same thing in a way. I didn't want to marry you once the bet was over because I care too much about you and I couldn't stand it being a fake. I want to give this thing, between you and me, a genuine shot."

"But you said we were...compatible." That lukewarm word was burned into her memory.

He groaned. "Well, we are. I said that because I thought you weren't interested in me. As anything more than a good time." His brown eyes raked over her face tenderly as he said, "Give it a chance, Angel. What do we have to lose?"

Just her heart, but she was halfway to losing that already. She nodded. "I have all summer off from teaching. Maybe you know a place I could stay a week or two at a time when I might happen to be in the area."

He lifted his head and gave her a soft kiss. "Oh, I most certainly have a place for you to stay and it's called Rick's Bed. You'll get the best service anywhere going."

That wasn't a doubt in her mind. She decided she had to do this spontaneous thing more often. "I was a little worried you were going to suggest a tent and I was insane enough to actually consider agreeing to go camping with you."

Laughing, he said, "You don't need to go that far. The woods might not survive you, doll. It's been a dry summer and fire spreads fast."

Then he kissed her again, and she forgot everything but the happiness she felt with him. When he broke away, he grinned at her.

"Angel?"

"Yes, Rick?" She stroked his cheek, and dropped little kisses on either side of his mouth.

"I have an itch that needs scratching."

Of course he did. Angel fought a grin. "Poison ivy again?"

"Could be. Maybe you should check. And tell your family to take a hike, will you?"

She glanced over to see that no one was even trying to be discreet. They were standing there, hanging on every word. Hey, that was the Weiss way. No privacy. Dixie gave her the thumbs up sign.

She laughed and smiled at her mountain man.

Last and final plan. Plan E. Check out of Bear Butt and get naked with Rick. "I can do that. I'll send them back to Chicago this afternoon."

"Good. Because Ranger Rick and his Campfire Girl have a fire that needs to be started."

Angel rolled her eyes, feeling giddy with Rick, her spontaneity, the possibilities, a whole glorious summer stretching ahead of her.. "That's as awful as that beaver on the coffee table. But I think that fire is pressing against my thigh already. And I said 'beaver.' See, I can be corny, too."

"Good. Nothing wrong with a laugh or too at my name and your lack of survival skills. Though I never joke about beaver. That's serious business."

Oh, God, she couldn't help it. She laughed. "What survival skills? By the way, I am not wearing a scout uniform for you in bed."

"Doesn't mean you can't earn a badge or two." His hand was traveling down her back, speeding towards her backside.

It was time to get out of the parking lot. Angel stared at his lips, thinking of the delicious things he could do with his mouth. "I always was a late bloomer."

The look he gave her was so hot and so tender, Angel sucked in a breath.

"It was worth the wait," he told her. "Now that's get back to nature."

That was the best plan yet.

The End