

MILLS & BOON®

Stormbound with a Tycoon

Shawna Delacorte



Vintage Desire

Shawna Delacorte

Stormbound With A Tycoon

«HarperCollins»

Delacorte S.

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Wealthy, jaded playboy Dylan Russell had sought an isolated cabin in the woods to escape his fast-paced life and reconsider his future. He wanted solitude...but awoke to a woman in his bed! Nothing had prepared Dylan for the sight of his best friend's sister...or the sensual spark that embracing her ignited. After a canceled project, publicist Jessica McGuire looked forward to days of relaxation. She never expected to encounter the man who had stirred feelings deep in her soul years ago. Stranded with her in a storm, Dylan beckoned her closer with his bedroom eyes. But would Jessica have to be content with only a few nights of passion when she yearned for his love for a lifetime?

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Jessica McGuire Didn't Know How Long She Had Been Sleeping

when something nudged her awake. She managed to open one eye enough to see the morning light of a stormy dawn and know that it was still raining. Then a strong arm curled around her waist, jolting her into full wakefulness.

A body snuggled up against hers—a naked body that was unmistakably male.

A strange, naked, male body.

In her bed.

“Ms. Delacorte provides plenty of sparks to please romance fans.”

—Romantic Times Magazine

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the world of Silhouette Desire, where you can indulge yourself every month with romances that can only be described as passionate, powerful and provocative!

The incomparable Diana Palmer heads the Desire lineup for March. The Winter Soldier is a continuation of the author's popular cross-line miniseries, SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE. We're sure you'll enjoy this tale of a jaded hero who offers protection in the form of a marriage of convenience to a beautiful woman in jeopardy.

Bestselling author Leanne Banks offers you March's MAN OF THE MONTH, a tempting Millionaire Husband, book two of her seductive miniseries MILLION DOLLAR MEN. The exciting Desire continuity series TEXAS CATTLEMAN'S CLUB: LONE STAR JEWELS continues with Lone Star Knight by Cindy Gerard, in which a lady of royal lineage finds love with a rugged Texas cattle baron.

The M.D. Courts His Nurse as Meagan McKinney's miniseries MATCHED IN MONTANA returns to Desire. And a single-dad rancher falls for the sexy horsetrainer he unexpectedly hires in Kathie DeNosky's The Rough and Ready Rancher. To cap off the month, Shawna Delacorte writes a torrid tale of being Stormbound with a Tycoon.

So make some special time for yourself this month, and read all six of these tantalizing Silhouette Desires!

Enjoy!



Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

Stormbound with a Tycoon

Shawna Delacorte



www.millsandboon.co.uk

SHAWNA DELACORTE

has delayed her move to Washington State, staying in the Midwest in order to spend some additional time with family. She still travels as often as time permits, and is looking forward to visiting several new places during the upcoming year while continuing to devote herself to writing full-time. Shawna would appreciate hearing from her readers. She can be reached at 6505 E. Central, Box #300, Wichita, KS 67206-1924.

For Thom—Jeopardy isn't the same anymore.

We all miss you.

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One

Jessica McGuire did not know how long she had been sleeping when something nudged her awake. She managed to open one eye enough to see the morning light of a stormy dawn and know that it was still raining. Then a strong arm curled around her waist, jolting her into full wakefulness. A body snuggled up against hers—a naked body that was unmistakably male.

She froze. A quick rush of fear shot through her. Her heartbeat lodged in her throat. Then an adrenaline surge spurred her into action. She scrambled out of bed and grabbed her oversize T-shirt, hurriedly pulling it on as she started toward the bedroom door. A glance back toward her bed produced a sigh of relief and brought her to a halt. Even though most of his face was hidden from sight, it was obvious that the stranger in her bed was asleep.

Jessica furrowed her brow in confusion, pursed her lips and cautiously walked over to the side of the bed. She stared at the stranger, trying to get a clear look at his face. Something about him seemed very familiar. She knew him...yet she didn't. Either way, he did not seem to be an immediate threat to her safety.

She tried the light switch. The power was still out, just as it had been last night when she arrived. Power outages were a common occurrence in that part of the Olympic Peninsula whenever a storm swept in from the Pacific Ocean, so the lack of electricity had not been of any concern to her. Besides, she had been just too tired to care as she made her way through the living room of the darkened cabin and climbed the stairs to her bedroom. She had undressed, dropped her clothes on the floor, and collapsed into bed, falling asleep the second her head hit the pillow.

This morning, however, was a different story. She shot a wary glance at the sleeping man in her bed, then turned to pick up the rest of her clothes from the floor. She fully intended to wake this stranger and evict him from her cabin...as soon as she was dressed.

Jessica picked up the last item of clothing and turned to go downstairs to the bathroom as quietly as she could. A gasp caught in her throat as the shock spread through her. The stranger sleeping in her bed was now awake and staring at her. She swallowed hard at the realization that this handsome, sexy man was the naked body that had been snuggled next to her.

The blankets had slipped down to his hips, revealing a strong, athletic build. His dark, tousled hair was matted down on one side where his head had rested against the pillow. Even with the dim, early-morning light she could not miss the mischievous twinkle in his green eyes as he blatantly looked her up and down.

The commotion had forced him awake. He had been in the middle of a tantalizing dream about a warm feminine body nestled next to his with his hand gliding across silky smooth skin. It had all seemed so real and he was not happy about the interruption. He slowly opened his eyes. The sight that greeted him matched his dream in all respects. His gaze started at the floor and climbed up a pair of sleek bare legs to the point where they extended from the bottom of an oversize shirt.

He shifted his attention to the way the shirt clung to her hips and caressed the curves of her breasts. He turned on his side, propped himself up on his elbow and took in the entire woman. She stood about five-six. The disarray of her short blond hair gave her a sexy, wildly uninhibited look. The strong family resemblance told him she was Jessica McGuire...his best friend's sister. She had certainly changed since he last saw her many years ago. This was definitely not that awkward teenager.

He made no effort to hide his appreciation of what he was seeing. The thick remnants of sleep gave his voice a husky quality. "Well...well...well...little Jessica McGuire. You've certainly grown up since I last saw you."

"Dylan?" Her mouth fell open as the full shock of his identity hit her. "Dylan Russell? Is that really you?"

“In the flesh.” He peeked beneath the blanket that still covered the lower portion of his body, then shot her a decidedly wicked grin. “And I do mean literally in the flesh.”

The heat of embarrassment spread across Jessica’s face. She prided herself on being a self-sufficient, responsible woman who worked hard and maintained a stable life. Waking up to find a naked man in her bed certainly was not part of that life. She attempted to cover her thinly clad body by holding the rest of her clothes in front of her. She wasn’t sure, but she thought she detected a chuckle coming from his direction. A jab of irritation poked at her followed by disgust. He certainly didn’t seem to have any concerns about his state of undress or the fact that he’d woken up to find a woman in bed with him. It was almost as if he was enjoying her discomfort.

She tried to bring some composure to the moment, but could not quell her annoyance or keep it out of her voice. “You seem to find this situation amusing.”

He laughed—the type of sexy laugh that could immediately heat any woman’s desires while melting her resolve. “Don’t you?”

“No, I don’t find it amusing...or charming or cute. How did you get here? There wasn’t any car outside when I arrived. How did you get in the cabin? The door was locked.”

“All questions easily answered.” He sat up and ran his fingers through his hair. “You apparently didn’t try to put your car in the garage, otherwise you would have seen my car.”

“No, I parked as close to the front door as possible so I wouldn’t have to run through the rain between the garage and the cabin. But that doesn’t explain how you got inside.”

“I have a key.”

“A key?” As mature, adult and blasé as she tried to be, she couldn’t hide her surprise or confusion. “Where did you get a key?”

“Justin gave it to me when he said I could use the cabin for a couple of weeks.”

Her tenuous control over the situation began slipping away...assuming she had ever possessed any control over what was happening. Bewilderment replaced confidence as she became less sure of her ground. “Justin offered you the use of our cabin? He didn’t say anything to me about it.”

An uncomfortable shiver washed across her skin. Dylan seemed to be studying her. He cocked his head and raised an eyebrow. “Maybe that’s because he thought you were going to be in New York for three weeks.”

“Oh...right.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “New York.” He was correct. New York was exactly where she was supposed to be, not at a mountain cabin on the other side of the country. In fact, it was where she had been until the previous morning when she caught a flight back to Seattle after her work project had been postponed.

She pulled her composure together and reasserted her control. “I suggest we put this conversation on hold for a little while. I need to get dressed and you need to get out of my bed...uh, my bedroom...since it’s obvious that you can’t continue to stay here.”

He eyed her curiously, making no effort to retrieve any clothes. In fact, he snuggled more comfortably into the bed and pulled the blankets up across his chest. “And why not?”

“Why not?” Had she heard him correctly? Was he actually questioning her decision? “I thought that would have been obvious. Because I’m not in New York and you’re in my bed—that’s why not.”

“I took the first bedroom I came to.”

“This one is mine. The other one is Justin’s.”

He adopted a businesslike attitude. “You’re right. We do need to put this conversation on hold for a while—” he flashed her a teasing grin “—at least until I’ve had some coffee.” He started to lean across the bed and grab his jeans from the arm of the chair, then paused as he glanced in her direction. “Would you mind turning your back so I can put on my pants...or do you prefer to just stand there clutching your clothes in front of you?”

“It’s my bedroom...you’re the one who should...I mean...” She saw the expression dart across his face, the one that said he was about to pull back the covers and get out of bed. “I didn’t mean—”

The heat of embarrassment burned across her cheeks. She whirled around and hurried out the door, her clothes clutched tightly against her body. The amused chuckle followed her down the stairs and into the bathroom. She closed out the sound by shutting the bathroom door.

Jessica pulled back the shower curtain, sat on the edge of the bathtub and closed her eyes. She did not know whether to be angry at his intrusion or amused by his audacity. Her annoyance surfaced. He had certainly gone out of his way to embarrass her. And this wasn't the first time, either. Her thoughts drifted back to the time when she was sixteen years old.

Justin had brought Dylan home with him during a school break. Unlike the previous year when the awkward fifteen-year-old Jessica had developed a huge crush on Dylan and had tried all weekend without success to get his attention, the sixteen-year-old Jessica had basked in his attentiveness. Dylan had played cards with her, talked to her and then asked her if she wanted to go out to lunch. He had even bought her a stuffed bear to add to her collection. Obviously, he liked her very much, hopefully as much as she liked him.

She had dressed in her most sophisticated outfit, put on extra makeup and did her hair up on top of her head, all to show him she was mature enough to date a twenty-year-old college man. But when it came time for lunch, she had been devastated to find that it was not the date she'd thought it would be. It was a group lunch of nearly a dozen people and she was the only one who had dressed up. The worst part was that Dylan had brought a date with him.

She had been humiliated and embarrassed. She had never forgotten the incident, even though, in retrospect, she realized he had done nothing to lead her on and was only being polite in trying to include her with the group. She had heard what she'd wanted to hear rather than what Dylan had actually said or meant, but it had still been an emotionally traumatic incident that she had never forgotten.

But that was ancient history. She was now a mature, intelligent woman of thirty-one, not the type to be easily swayed by a handsome man with thick, dark hair, emerald-green eyes, a dazzling smile...and danger written all over him.

She pursed her lips and wrinkled her brow into a slight scowl. From what her brother had told her of Dylan Russell's lifestyle, finding a woman in his bed was certainly not an unusual occurrence. Her scowl turned to contemplation. What was Dylan Russell doing there? He was not the type of man who would hide away in an isolated mountain cabin and certainly not without the benefit of feminine companionship. Everything she had ever heard about him said he was a charming rogue, a personable scoundrel who drifted from one quick-buck deal to another and one bed to another, without any roots, commitments or responsibilities.

Her contemplation turned to confusion. He was a globe-trotting playboy who would surely feel more comfortable in a luxury resort with a hot tub and room service. So what was he doing by himself in her cabin? Then another thought struck her. Could he be expecting someone to meet him there? A woman? The quick jab of anger caught her by surprise. She immediately shoved it away. His personal life was none of her business.

Even though she had always found her brother's stories about Dylan to be fascinating, she knew no good would come from pursuing an interest in that sort of man regardless of how sexy and exciting she found him. And Dylan Russell certainly ranked at the top of any list of sexy and exciting men. She knew from experience that his type was all outward flash without any real substance underneath. She had been married to a handsome man with a roving eye and little concern about whose bed he frequented. She had no desire to travel down that path again. She dismissed the errant thoughts. Right now she needed to get dressed.

Jessica was not the only one contemplating the events of the past few minutes.

Dylan stared out the bedroom door toward the steps leading down to the living room. His teasing banter with Jessica had turned out to be far more interesting than he would have imagined. In fact, Jessica was far more interesting than he would have imagined. Justin painted his sister as an

organized, no-nonsense type of person who knew what she wanted out of life and had her feet firmly planted on the ground—certainly not the type of woman he was accustomed to dating. What Justin failed to mention was that his sister was also drop-dead gorgeous with a body that would not quit.

Exactly where had Jessica McGuire been three months ago when he needed someone just like her? When everything turned sour and his life started falling apart? He shook his head and reminded himself that she was his best friend's sister. He was not sure exactly what that meant, but the cautionary thought popped into his head. He could not consider this beautiful, intelligent woman who knew who she was and where she was going in life as another potential bed-mate.

Dylan took a deep breath, then slowly expelled it. He tried to clear his mind of the wayward thoughts, but he could not clear away the memory of her body snuggled next to his and his hand sliding across her silky skin. Nor could he erase the sight of her standing next to the bed, her mussed hair and scantily clad body giving her a look of sexy, uninhibited abandon. A tightness pulled across his chest. He took another deep breath in hopes of breaking the restrictive feeling, then threw back the covers, climbed out of bed, dressed and headed toward the stairs.

Dylan stopped short at the bottom step. He could see Jessica through the kitchen door. A scowl marred her otherwise beautiful face. She seemed to be staring at something. He entered the kitchen, walked up behind her and peered over her shoulder in an attempt to see what had captured her attention and caused her to frown like that.

"Is something wrong?"

The sound of his voice startled her. She jerked around and found her face almost touching his. For a long moment she looked up into the intensity of his green eyes, or more accurately, he seemed to be pulling her into the depth of those eyes as he searched her face for some sort of explanation.

"Uh—" she took a couple of steps away from his uncomfortable nearness "—wrong?"

"You were scowling at the stove. Is there something wrong?"

She took yet another step farther away from his disconcerting presence, coming to a halt when she bumped into the kitchen counter. Her voice held the same uncertainty that coursed through her veins. "Wrong?" She knew she sounded like an idiot, parroting the same word over and over. She gathered her composure and projected as much confidence as she could muster, but she couldn't quell the disturbing sensations playing havoc in her stomach.

"There isn't any gas...the stove burner won't light, there's no hot water and the floor furnace in the living room won't light. There must be something wrong with the propane tank."

"I didn't use any hot water and didn't even try to turn on the furnace or the stove when I arrived last night. I went right to bed. I was going to read for a while, but then the storm knocked the electricity out."

"The tank shouldn't have been turned off. It was just filled a week ago and was supposed to have been left on." She glanced toward the window, then looked up at the ceiling and the sound of the rain pounding against the roof.

An exasperated sigh accompanied her words.

"Damn...there doesn't seem to be any way to avoid going out into the rain to see what's wrong."

"Where is the propane tank?"

"It's behind the garage."

Dylan glanced out the window. "It's raining pretty hard. I'll go out and check it. You stay inside where it's dry."

"Forget it." She snapped out the words. "I'm capable of taking care of it myself."

"Whoa..." A slight edge of irritation crept into his voice. "I didn't say you weren't capable. I merely offered to help."

Jessica grabbed a jacket from the coatrack by the front door. "You weren't offering to help, you were telling me what to do." She shoved her arms into the sleeves, turned up the collar, then opened the front door.

She paused long enough to shoot a contemptuous look in his direction. “I don’t need your help.” Then she stepped out onto the porch prepared to brave the elements.

She bit at her lower lip in a moment of contemplation. Perhaps she had been a little harsh with her comments. He really hadn’t said anything wrong. She clenched her jaw in determination. Dylan Russell had totally unnerved her and she didn’t like it. She hunched her shoulders against the chilly air and ran out into the rain.

Dylan stared after her, his annoyance overriding her show of irritation. She had literally dismissed him as if he had made some sort of disparaging comment rather than a sincere offer of help. He was not accustomed to being treated in that manner, especially by a beautiful woman. He allowed a brief instant of reflection. Of course, he wasn’t accustomed to dealing with independent, self-sufficient women who would even know what a propane tank was let alone what to do with one.

He followed her out into the rain, catching up with her just as she rounded the corner of the garage. He stood by as she bent down and checked the gauge on the tank, then made sure the connection was tight. She glanced up at him, raising her hand to shield her eyes from the rain. “The valve’s closed. The tank has been shut off.”

She opened the valve to start the flow of propane to the cabin, then she straightened up and took a couple of steps forward until he blocked her way. They stood very close together, almost as close as when they had been in the kitchen.

The tightness spread across his chest again as he stared at her. The rain matted her hair against her head. Rivulets of water ran down her face and formed her long, dark eyelashes into spiky clumps. He started to reach out and touch her, but managed to resist the urge. He wanted to wipe the water from her cheek and kiss away the droplets from her all-too-tempting lips. It was the kind of delicious-looking mouth that would drive any man to distraction. He forced down the desire and reluctantly stepped aside.

She remained rooted to the spot, unable to move. Every fiber of her being screamed out for the physical contact that was almost there but not quite. She swallowed down the lump lodged in her throat and tried to still her racing pulse. She finally managed, with difficulty, to break away from the invisible hook pulling her into the realm of his masculinity. She broke into a run, quickly covering the ground back to the cabin.

He followed closely behind. When they reached the covered porch she removed her rain-soaked jacket and shook off the excess water, then pulled off her muddy boots and left them on the porch before going inside. Dylan followed suit by kicking off his shoes, too. Once inside she hung her jacket on the coatrack to dry.

He pulled his wet sweatshirt off over his head, revealing a wet T-shirt. She tried not to stare at the way it clung to the well-defined planes of his hard body, but her attempts were useless. Her breathing quickened and, much to her dismay, her pulse started to race again. Somehow she had to put a stop to the physical effect he had on her.

He hooked the sweatshirt over the doorknob, then ran his fingers through his wet hair before turning toward her. “I guess that answers the question about the heat and hot water. Where do you keep the matches?” He glanced around the large open expanse of the cabin’s living room and dining room, then toward the kitchen door. “In the kitchen?”

She forced a calm to the inner turmoil running rampant through her body, at least enough to hopefully fool him with a neutral outer manner. “The propane company must have turned the tank off when they filled it last week, then forgot to turn it back on.”

She retrieved the matches from the fireplace mantel. “It’s lucky for you I showed up when I did to fix things.” Her thoughts had slipped out without her meaning to say them aloud.

He bristled at her words. “Turning on a propane tank and putting a match to some pilot lights is not beyond my capabilities.”

The heat of embarrassment spread across her cheeks. What was wrong with her? She didn't seem to be able to stop herself from taking a cheap shot at him. "I didn't mean to imply—"

A sharp edge of sarcasm surrounded his words. "Since you obviously have everything well under control, I'll leave the work to you to finish. I'll take this opportunity to get out of these wet clothes. If you'll excuse me—" He turned and walked away from her.

Jessica watched as he climbed the steps. This man that she remembered as being larger than life had suddenly been reduced in stature to that of the ordinary guy next door wearing wet clothes and dripping water on the floor. Well, perhaps ordinary was not the correct word. There was nothing ordinary about Dylan Russell, nor about the surprisingly unsettled effect he had on her. As if to reinforce her thoughts and feelings, a little tremor darted through her body letting her know she was not as in control as she hoped.

Dylan stripped off his wet clothes. He was not sure exactly what to think about the unexpected turn of events that had filled the morning. He didn't have any experience with women who were anything more than a stunning decoration on his arm and a very enthusiastic partner in his bed.

But that was no longer the case for him. It had been quite a while since he was last intimately involved with any type of woman. It certainly had not been for lack of opportunity. The thrill of the chase no longer excited him, especially when the quarry offered no challenge. Jessica certainly did not fit into that mold. He was not sure exactly what mold she did fit into, but he strongly suspected it was not any type familiar to him.

He took a pair of warm socks, a sweater and jeans from the dresser where he'd placed his clothes the night before when he unpacked. As he dressed, his thoughts continued to center around Jessica. He found her beautiful, intelligent, intriguing...and very disconcerting.

He recalled her comment about it being lucky for him that she was there to fix things at the cabin. He did not like her implication that he was incapable of having taken care of those simple tasks. Was that the image he projected? The opinion people held of him? Someone who basically drifted along without purpose or plan? Someone who wasn't capable of handling the simple little tasks of day-to-day life? He clenched his jaw into a tight line. He did not like it, but knew it was what they believed.

It was a realization he had come to three months ago when a business deal had gone bad, throwing him into a downward spiral of depression. It wasn't the business deal itself and certainly not the loss of profits that had so strongly affected him. It was much more than that. It was the reason he had asked Justin for the use of the cabin. He had choices to consider and decisions to make. He had to do something about straightening out his life.

He glanced toward the stairs leading down to the living room. And just how was he going to be able to accomplish anything with the unexpected distraction of the very desirable Jessica McGuire?

Coffee...he needed some hot coffee to take away the damp chill. He started toward the stairs, then turned back. There was no reason to intrude on her privacy by continuing to use her bedroom. Nothing would be gained by purposely antagonizing her. He quickly moved his belongings to the other bedroom.

As soon as he finished, he hurried downstairs. He had brought a few groceries with him, but not enough to accommodate two people for more than a couple of days. When the rain let up, one of them would have to go to the little market on the main road. The reality of his thoughts stopped him cold in his tracks. Somewhere along the line he had apparently decided that the two of them would share the cabin, or, more specifically, that he did not intend to leave.

Even while moving his clothes to the other bedroom the thought had not crystallized in that manner. He squelched the mischievous grin that tried to take hold. Just how was the in charge Jessica going to handle that idea? His amusement was short-lived. As soon as he reached the living room he saw the unhappy look on her face.

"If you're through with my bedroom, I'd like to change into some dry clothes."

“Certainly.” He stepped aside, still not sure where her testy attitude had come from or why. He decided to let her discover for herself that he had moved his things out of her bedroom.

She started up the stairs, paused, then turned back toward him just long enough to level a disagreeable look in his direction. It appeared as if she were about to say something, then changed her mind and continued up the stairs.

He was not sure exactly what the look conveyed, but it made him uncomfortable. It was more than her merely being unhappy with his presence. There was something else in her look, and he couldn’t quite place it. They had met on a couple of occasions many years ago, but that did not change the fact that as adults they were virtually strangers to each other. He knew it was an awkward situation and he wasn’t at all sure exactly how to resolve it so that they each had what they wanted...or in his case, what he needed.

And what he desperately needed was this escape to solitude. He did not want to deal with the ongoing bustling activity of a resort, the impersonal nature of a hotel or the closed-in feeling of being confined to a room as the only way to avoid crowds and activity. Justin’s cabin had been the perfect solution to his needs—isolation without feeling closed in.

The A-frame cabin had a large, open expanse consisting of a living room and dining area. The main level also contained a kitchen and a bathroom. Upstairs was a loft overlooking part of the living room, two bedrooms and a deck that stretched all the way across the front of the cabin above the porch. The cabin was big enough that it wasn’t confining and was surrounded by forest where he could hike without running into other people.

His entire life seemed to be in turmoil, and he was not sure what to do about it. He needed to think things out, to make some decisions...and to do it quickly before things became worse. His thoughts turned to Stanley and Rose Clarkson. He shoved away the horrible guilt that welled inside him whenever he thought of them.

Coffee...he needed some coffee. He headed for the kitchen. The electric coffeemaker on the counter was useless without any electricity. He shuffled through the kitchen cabinets in search of an old percolator to use on the stove. He finally got down on his hands and knees to look in the back of the lower cupboards.

Jessica came downstairs after changing clothes. She paused at the kitchen door and watched him as he rummaged around looking for something. His jeans fit his legs and across his rear end like a second skin. Even with his loose sweater, she could still discern his muscular back and broad shoulders. She closed her eyes, but it didn’t help. She couldn’t keep out the vision from early that morning—Dylan propped up on his elbow with the blanket down around his hips, the well-defined planes of his hard chest clearly visible in the early-morning light, the impish grin on his handsome face and the devilish twinkle in his eyes.

She shook away the unwelcome image and tried to settle the butterflies in her stomach. She forced a calm tone to her words that was far removed from what she felt. “What are you looking for?”

He jerked his head up at the sound of her voice and promptly banged it on the edge of the countertop. He scrunched up his face in pain as he rubbed his hand across the sore spot. Jessica suppressed an amused chuckle, although it wasn’t easy. This certainly was not the time or the place for laughter.

A moment later he withdrew his other hand from the cabinet, his fingers wrapped firmly around the handle of the old coffeepot. He held his prize out toward her, the triumphant grin covering his face. “I was looking for this.”

She flipped the light switch on and off again, somehow needing to personally confirm that the electricity was still out. “Well...I’m glad you found it. Coffee was the foremost thing on my mind, too.” The foremost thing if she discounted the very appealing image of Dylan Russell in her bed.

Two

Dylan stood up, set the coffeepot on the counter and flashed his most engaging smile. “I’m glad we found something we could agree on. Now, where do you keep the coffee?”

“I’ll do that. I know where everything is.” Jessica opened the door of the small pantry and removed the canister.

He took it from her, his tone showing a hint of irritation at her continued derogatory attitude about his capabilities. “I know how to make coffee.” He added water to the pot, measured the coffee and lit the burner on the stove. He took two coffee mugs from the cupboard and set them on the kitchen counter. Then he stared intently at the coffeepot as if willing it to start perking.

She turned toward the bathroom. “The water heater should have done its job and produced some hot water by now. I’m going to take a shower.”

“Sure...” He glanced in her direction. “I’ll grab a quick shower when you’ve finished.” He ran his hand over the stubble that covered his chin and cheeks. “I need to shave, too.” He saw the expression on her face again, the one that said she wanted to say something but had decided against it. He returned his attention to the coffeepot, hoping she would accept that as a sign to go about her business. A couple of minutes later he heard the shower.

Dylan leaned against the kitchen counter and expelled a sigh of relief that she had gone. Other than a couple of delightful minutes when he first woke up, the entire morning had been uncomfortable and very awkward. He had turned on the old charm, but she had refused to succumb.

Jessica McGuire was obviously a very capable woman. He had no experience with women like that—smart, capable, unpretentious and down to earth. He could not imagine even one of the women he had dated over the years actually running out into the rain and mud to check on a propane tank, let alone knowing what to do with it when she got there. He had racked up lots of exciting days and memorable nights, but during the past three months he had been forced to admit, if only to himself, that in spite of everything it had been a lonely existence. It was a bitter pill to swallow and one that had not gone down easily, but he knew it was the truth.

A hard stab of despair hit him when the memory of what happened to Stanley and Rose Clarkson popped into his mind again. Where it had always been a game for him in the past, it had finally dawned on him that he was now thirty-five years old and did not have anything important to show for his life. He had lots of memorable adventures, thousands of acquaintances around the world and a net worth of several million dollars, but he didn’t have a real home, a family or any really close friends other than Justin McGuire. He didn’t have the things that truly mattered.

Jessica was so different from any other woman he had ever known. She did not hang on his every word, laugh at his jokes whether they were funny or not, jump to fulfill his every whim. In short, she made no effort to impress him or play up to his ego, and he was not sure exactly how to handle it. In time gone past he wouldn’t have given it any more thought. He would have simply moved on to someone more receptive. But now...well, she had him confused. He was sure of one thing, though. He had to do something to counter her obviously negative opinion of him. But what?

As soon as the coffee was ready he poured himself a mug and took it into the living room. He opened the front door and stared out at the rain. The cold, damp air chilled him in spite of the coffee that heated the inside of his mouth and his throat. He had to find something he could do that would show Jessica he was not as out of place at the cabin or as inept as she seemed to think. Then his gaze fell on the firewood stacked neatly on the porch.

He glanced back at the cold fireplace. That was it. There was nothing like a warm, cozy fire to break the ice. He returned his coffee mug to the kitchen counter, then set to work carrying in firewood and building a fire. He definitely knew about using a cozy fire to create a romantic mood. Or, in this case, at least a friendly mood that was devoid of the prevailing tension.

He could not stop the little grin that tugged at the corners of his mouth. They could pull chairs up close to the fire and drink their morning coffee in a setting conducive to conversation. He would be able to change her abject opinion of him. Yes, indeed. He was very pleased with himself and his plan.

When he had finished with the fireplace he went to the kitchen to retrieve his coffee mug. He called to Jessica when he heard her emerge from the bathroom. “Coffee’s ready. Do you take anything in it or is black okay?” He stood poised with the pot in his hand waiting for her answer.

“Oh, my God! What have you done?” Jessica’s cry of alarm filled the air as much as the smell of smoke that quickly replaced the aroma of fresh coffee. It billowed out of the fireplace and into the living room. Her first thought said the cabin was on fire, but before she could act on that assumption she realized it was something else.

Dylan charged across the room toward the fireplace while shouting instructions. “Open the front door and a couple of windows to draw the smoke out.” He snatched the largest logs that had not yet caught fire and dropped them on the hearth. He used the poker and scattered the burning kindling around the fireplace to break up the fire’s fuel. Then he grabbed the bucket of sand he had spotted on the front porch and spread it over what was left of the fire to smother it.

Jessica stepped out to the front porch and took a deep breath of the crisp fresh air. She was not sure exactly what to think. It was obvious to her that he had stupidly left the damper in the chimney closed—too much high living and not enough practical experience with real life. She furrowed her brow in thought as another realization hit her. He had also taken immediate charge of the emergency and handled it with calm efficiency.

She set her jaw into a firm line and shook her head to clear her mind of the unwanted, compromising thought. After all, she had every right to be angry with him for enveloping her cabin in smoke and causing a potential disaster. She stubbornly refused to allow any contradictory thoughts to cloud the issue. She stepped back inside the living room, paused for a moment, then made her way over to the fireplace where Dylan had busied himself cleaning up the mess.

The morning had been filled with more than enough tension, and she was not sure exactly what to think or feel about the events that had already transpired. She knew she had been a little harsh, and possibly even unfair, but she didn’t seem to be able to stop herself. It was as if some sort of self-defense mechanism had automatically kicked in to protect her from the charms of this handsome and far-too-sexy scoundrel.

She tried to prevent any irritation from creeping into her voice. “Apparently you failed to open the damper before starting the fire.”

He straightened and leveled an appraising look at her. Was she challenging him? Accusing him? He did not know how to read her. “I’ve lit more than my share of fires in various fireplaces. I can assure you that I know enough to check. The damper was open.” With that, he turned toward the kitchen and the coffee he had left there.

He glanced back at the fireplace just in time to see her kneel down in front of the hearth and reach for the lever that controlled the damper. A little flicker of satisfaction settled inside him as the sheepish expression covered her face when she looked up and saw him watching her. She brushed her hands against her jeans, then slowly walked across the living room to the kitchen.

Dylan cocked his head and arched an eyebrow. “Well?” He saw the crimson tinge of embarrassment spread across her cheeks. She glanced at the floor before regaining eye contact with him.

“You...uh...you were right. The damper is open. I...uh...well, apparently there’s something else blocking the chimney.”

His sharply clipped words carried an edge of sarcasm. “That’s a safe guess.”

He continued to stare at her, waiting for her to make the next move. She had accused him of not knowing enough to check the damper and doubted his word when he told her it was open, even

to the point of checking it for herself. She had no option other than admitting that he had not been responsible for the fiasco.

The entire morning he had been on the receiving end of her disapproval and skepticism. Now that he had finally gained the upper hand over the circumstances, he wasn't sure he wanted to let her off the hook quite so easily. Things were finally starting to feel a little more comfortable and familiar. He suppressed a grin and settled into the game. It was an interesting situation packed with lots of possibilities. So why was he still feeling a little uneasy...and a lot unsure?

He tried to maintain a stern expression, but it wasn't easy. Even though his feelings about her were very confused, they certainly were not hostile. He took a quick inventory of the physical attributes of this very enticing woman. A band tightened across his chest, and the heat of desire churned deep inside him. His feelings were definitely not hostile...quite the contrary.

She squirmed uncomfortably for a moment, then visibly pulled her composure together. She squared her shoulders and aimed an unflinching stare at him. "You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?"

He purposely widened his eyes in feigned innocence. "Make what easy for you?" Justin had told him about his sister hating to admit being wrong, that she was very stubborn in that regard. For reasons he could not clearly define, he was enjoying her being on the spot for a change rather than him. It was an interesting moment of pointed banter with the delightful Jessica McGuire.

She took in a calming breath, then loudly expelled it. An edge of irritation clung to her words. "All right!" She took another calming breath. "You were right and I was wrong. The damper was open." She glared at him with as much of a challenge in her eyes as in her voice. "There—are you satisfied now?"

He flashed her a dazzling smile, freely allowing the sound of victory to fill his voice. "That wasn't really so difficult, was it?"

"Yes, it was!" Her angry retort quickly turned to an awkward moment as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She rubbed her hand across the back of her neck and glanced at the floor. Her words were soft, her voice a whisper. "I just assumed—"

"You assumed...what? That I'm a hopelessly inept jerk who isn't capable of handling the most basic task?" He saw the embarrassment color her cheeks again and he immediately regretted the harshness of his words, regardless of how true they had been.

She tried to recover the upper hand. "You have to admit that your lifestyle certainly doesn't lend itself to—"

"Perhaps my 'lifestyle' isn't what you think it is." He clenched his jaw in an attempt to bite off his anger. "True, I've spent the past few years more or less wandering around..." The sadness and despair that suddenly welled inside him forced an end to his comments.

He turned the word over in his mind. Lifestyle. He had no purpose in life or even any goals. Always a party to go to, but no one special with whom to share the joys or the sorrows...especially the sorrows. That was not a lifestyle—it was loneliness.

He had always envied Justin, who seemed to have everything he didn't. Even though Justin was divorced, he had family and was very close to his sister. He had a career he loved, a home and close friends. He had roots, something that was important to him. And Jessica—she was a very together lady. They had everything that mattered. They had what he very much wanted.

What little family Dylan started with had long ago been taken away. He was an only child. His father had deserted the family when he was ten years old. He eventually learned that his father had died five years later. His mother died within two weeks of the time he had been left literally at the altar on his wedding day. It seemed that those closest to him had deserted him. It was a lesson he had learned the hard way—if you allow someone into your heart or to touch your place of vulnerability you will end up being hurt. Close emotional attachments weren't for him, but he truly envied Justin and Jessica.

Dylan turned away before his moment of melancholy became obvious to Jessica. It was just the type of vulnerability he did not want to show to this woman who had already developed some very definite opinions of him. He grabbed the empty coffee mug from the kitchen counter, filled it and handed it to her. He forced an upbeat attitude to his tone. "You never answered me about cream or sugar."

"Just black." She reached out to take the mug from his hand. Their fingers touched for an instant, the warmth much more than what was being generated by the coffee. Her gaze locked with his, held there as if by some force beyond her control. Her breath froze in her lungs. She finally managed to look away, but it did not still the pounding of her heart.

He carried his coffee mug to the living room, taking a swallow as he walked. He desperately wanted to smooth out the tension that permeated the air. Then an incident from his youth popped into his mind. He couldn't stop the chuckle that accompanied it.

She stared at him, her expression part curiosity and part irritation. "This entire morning has been a disaster. Just what is it that you find so funny?"

He took another sip of his coffee and settled into a comfortable chair. "The disaster with the fireplace reminded me of something that happened a long time ago, when I was about fifteen years old." Another soft chuckle escaped his throat as the recollection from his past settled over him.

"My mother and I lived in an old house that had a fireplace left over from a time before the furnace had been installed. She was down the block playing cards with the neighbors. I decided it was a perfect evening to invite my girlfriend over on the pretext of our studying together. I planned to build this romantic fire in the fireplace the way I'd seen in movies."

"At fifteen years old you were planning romantic evenings?"

He shot her a sly sidelong glance. "Fifteen-year-old hormones are difficult to argue with." He allowed a quiet moment of reflection as the memory of simpler times warmed his consciousness.

"I had wood, newspapers and matches, all the things I thought I needed to build this romantic fire. I had everything put together the way I thought it should be, with newspaper on the bottom, little pieces of wood on top of that, then bigger pieces on the top of the pile. It was time for her to arrive. I struck a match and lit the newspaper which immediately flared up and caught the small pieces of wood. When I was sure the fire was going I opened the front door and went out on the porch to watch for her. Before I knew what was happening, the room filled with smoke and it billowed out the door. A neighbor saw the smoke and called the fire department."

He turned and looked at her. "And that's how I learned about dampers in a fireplace." He emitted another gentle laugh mixed with a hint of embarrassment. "What about you? Do you have any most embarrassing moment from your past that you'd like to share?"

Only two truly embarrassing moments leaped to her mind. The first one was having several people show up for what she thought was her lunch date with Dylan when she was sixteen years old. The other was catching her husband in bed with another woman. She had no intention of mentioning either incident. "I...uh...can't think of anything right now."

"Oh, I see. I'm left here with my embarrassment exposed, and you're keeping yours a secret." His teasing grin let her know he wasn't angry or upset.

He had shared a personal experience with her, something from his past. It was a warm few minutes that left her enveloped in a feeling of closeness, one totally different from anything she had been prepared for. It was as if she was seeing a totally different Dylan Russell than the one she assumed she knew. The reflective moment was broken when he rose from the chair.

"I guess the next order of business is to figure out exactly what's blocking the chimney." He bent down on the hearth and attempted to look up into the darkness, then turned back toward her. "Do you have a flashlight somewhere around here?"

"Yes, in the kitchen. I'll get it for you." She hurried to the kitchen. Her desire to escape the smooth presence that had been lulling her into a very receptive mood was as strong as the need to

retrieve the flashlight. She quelled the uncertainty churning in her stomach. Nothing was as it should be—least of all Dylan Russell. It was more than Justin having let him use the cabin. More than her having inadvertently climbed into bed with him. She feared just how much more it might turn out to be.

Every time she tried to force him into a predetermined mold of who and what he was, he refused to fit. The harder she pushed and shoved, the more he seemed to resist. She found it very perplexing and very frustrating. She had a knack for being able to tag people as to who and what they were, but he refused to cooperate. Every time he flashed that sexy smile she increased her efforts to put him in his place and he seemed to resist all that much harder.

She toyed with the idea that she wanted him neatly classified because she felt threatened by his devil-may-care freedom to do as he pleased whenever it pleased him. It angered her that without even seeming to try, he had managed to make a mockery of her ordered and sensible life. But that wasn't the worst of it.

His nearness sent little tremors of excitement racing through her body...tremors over which she had no control. And all this just from his presence. Other than when he wrapped his arm around her waist while he was asleep, there had been no physical contact between them. Unless you counted the brief moment when their fingers touched—a moment she could still feel as if it had happened only a second ago.

He was not a physical threat, but he surely was a very real emotional one. She reminded herself that she was no longer that impressionable fifteen-year-old schoolgirl who had the major crush on her older brother's friend. Nor was she the sixteen-year-old whose heart had been broken by the very same Dylan Russell. She swept the inappropriate thoughts from her mind and went in search of the flashlight and spare batteries.

Dylan shuffled through a couple of closets while Jessica looked for the flashlight. He found a broom, an old mop handle and some duct tape. By overlapping the ends of the handles and taping them together, he had ended up with a long pole.

"What's that supposed to be?" Jessica asked as she handed him the flashlight.

He leaned the pole against the wall and took the flashlight from her. "I'm making something long enough to reach up the chimney so I can dislodge whatever it is without having to go up on the roof and tackle it from that direction."

"Go up on the roof?" Surely he wasn't serious about actually doing it. "It's still raining. The roof has a very steep slope. It's much too dangerous."

"I know." He cupped her chin in his hand and uttered the words slowly, as if talking to a child. "That's why I don't want to go up on the roof if it can be avoided." He saw the irritation dart across her face and immediately flashed a grin to let her know he was teasing.

Then his gaze found hers. His fingers brushed across her cheek. It was a fleeting moment of intimacy that nearly took his breath away and left him totally confused. He tried to ignore the rush of heated desire by returning to the problem with the chimney.

He snapped on the flashlight, leaned on the hearth and stuck his head into the fireplace. He sighted along the beam of light as it penetrated the darkness. "There's something there, all right. It looks like it's pretty far up. I hope this makeshift pole can reach it."

He withdrew from the fireplace and handed her the flashlight. "Here. Shine the light up there while I try to dislodge the obstruction."

Jessica leaned into the fireplace and turned on the flashlight, shining the beam up into the darkness. Dylan stared at her for a moment, then broke out in a soft chuckle. "You might want to get your head out of there unless you want whatever comes down the chimney to fall in your face."

She scooted out of the way while muttering under her breath, "I knew that."

He teased her obvious irritation at her own mistake. "Uh...what was that? I didn't hear what you said."

She angrily snapped out a response to his teasing. “Are we going to try to clear out this chimney or not?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am. That’s exactly what we’re going to do.” Again, he could not contain his amusement.

He turned his attention to the business at hand. He kept as far away from the chimney opening as he could, yet still be in a position to see what he was doing. It was not an ideal situation, but he was willing to give it a try. He shoved the pole as far up into the chimney as he could, finally making contact with whatever had the opening blocked. He jabbed at it. Bits of dried twigs and leaves began to drift down, then suddenly everything gave way.

The accumulated debris broke loose and crashed down the flue into the interior of the fireplace. Jessica jumped to her feet, dropping the flashlight as she tried to keep the flying dust out of her eyes. Dylan choked back a cough as he escaped the cloud of soot and ashes that billowed across the hearth.

They dashed out to the front porch to escape the choking air inside the cabin. Jessica ruffled her fingers through her hair to dislodge some leaves, then brushed her hands across her forehead and cheeks to wipe away the dust. “What a mess.”

“I think we got the blockage cleared out.” Dylan picked the bits of twigs from his clothes. “Do you have a vacuum cleaner? That powdery, fine, fireplace ash is going to be hard to get with a broom.”

“Yes, but there’s no—”

“No electricity!” Dylan finished her sentence.

Each broke out into a spontaneous laugh at the totally ludicrous situation. Almost as quickly as it began the laughter faded when their gazes locked again for a moment...a very heated moment. It was almost an involuntary gesture on Dylan’s part as he reached out and gently brushed some of the dirt from her cheek. He allowed his fingertips to linger, then cupped her face in his hands. At that moment he very much wanted to take her in his arms and kiss that delicious-looking mouth. He steeled himself against the temptation and quickly withdrew his hands. He had never before been in the position of wanting to kiss someone so much yet knowing that he didn’t dare try.

A shiver tickled across Jessica’s nape in response to his touch. It was as unsettling as Dylan himself. She backed away from him. He was as wrong for her as a man could be, yet his mere presence excited her in a way she had never before experienced. She tried to shake off the mesmerizing sensations that enveloped her. It was a bad situation, and it needed to be terminated as quickly as possible.

She took another step away from him as she rubbed her hand across her nape to still the tremor. “Well...” She shoved down the sudden nervousness that jittered through her body. She could still feel the heat generated by his touch. “There’s a mess that needs to be cleaned.” She returned to the living room, leaving Dylan standing on the porch.

He watched her retreating form. His gaze traced the line of her hip and the curve of her bottom beneath the well-worn denim. The tightness spread across his chest, and the heat settled low inside him. Even his fingertips tingled from the brief contact with her cheek. Jessica McGuire was as tantalizingly desirable as any woman he had ever met, yet so unlike any woman he had ever been with. He shook his head as he followed her inside. He needed to add structure and purpose to his life, not complicate it by making a pass at this woman...who also happened to be his best friend’s sister.

Jessica purposely kept her distance from Dylan while they cleaned up the mess as best they could. By the time they finished, it was nearly noon. The entire morning had been devoted to one disaster after another. A new layer of anxiety built up on the already established base. Her neat and tidy existence had been turned into a shambles by Dylan Russell, and she did not like it. And worse yet, she didn’t know what to do about it. She could still feel his fingertips on her cheek and the heat of his touch.

Dylan was aware of her every movement and gesture, her body language telling him she was out of patience with the series of minidisasters. He made the decision to retreat and give her a little bit of

time to calm down. He adopted the facade of the world-weary traveler who had seen it all and done it all. He glanced around the room, satisfied that it was as orderly as possible under the circumstances.

“Things here seem to be under control. I think this would be a good time for me to grab a quick shower.” He disappeared into the bathroom.

Many years ago an awkward fifteen-year-old Jessica had followed him around for an entire weekend like a lovesick puppy, and he had not been able to get rid of her. He remembered how funny Justin thought it had been. Then a year later he saw how much the sixteen-year-old Jessica had blossomed. A four-year age difference wasn’t much, but the difference between a sixteen-year-old high school girl and a twenty-year-old college man was considerable. He had not had any interest in asking for trouble by making a pass at an underage girl and especially not his best friend’s sister.

His mind drifted back to early that morning as he lay in bed watching her pick up her clothes—the way her T-shirt clung to her curves, her long bare legs, the sexy abandon of her mussed hair. The fifteen-year-old Jessica had been a nuisance. Funny how drastically things had changed. He allowed a brief thought about how he might be able to get her to follow him around like that again.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror, ran his hand across his whisker stubble, then heaved a sigh of resignation. Absolutely nothing had gone in his favor since he had gotten out of bed that morning. Actually, nothing had gone in his favor for the past three months. He clicked on his electric razor, hoping the battery had enough charge left for him to shave.

Jessica heard the shower go on. Finally, a chance for some peace and quiet without the distraction of Dylan Russell to set her heart pounding and her pulse racing. She poured herself another cup of coffee, turned on the battery-operated radio, then curled up in the corner of the couch. She reflected on the morning’s activities. All she had wanted was a couple of days of quiet and solitude. That was not asking too much, was it? Instead everything seemed to be conspiring against her. She had found herself enmeshed in one calamity after another. First it was the rain as she drove to the cabin, then finding the power out when she had arrived and finally total bedlam masquerading in the person of Dylan Russell.

It was an impossible situation. He would have to leave as soon as he finished in the bathroom. It was bad enough to wake up in the same bed with him by accident, but to allow him to continue to stay in her cabin was out of the question. Determination took a strong hold. Her mind was made up. She would be tactful, but firm. Maybe Justin had promised him the use of the cabin, but even Dylan should be able to recognize what an impossible situation they had.

Then that same determined mind drifted back to the moment when she woke that morning to find his arm curled around her waist and his body snuggled against hers. She could still feel the sensual warmth that radiated from his bare skin in those moments of half sleep and half wakefulness. She vividly recalled each and every plane, angle and line of his well-defined torso when he had propped himself up on his elbow and flashed that deliciously wicked grin. Rogue, scoundrel, playboy, charmer—whatever word you wanted to use, it personified Dylan Russell to a T. No way was he the type of man she could ever be seriously interested in, the kind who would be happy to settle down with a home and family—no way at all.

She shook off the thoughts and the mental image, then took another swallow of her coffee as if trying to drown out her errant musings. She reaffirmed her resolve. Her mind was made up. He definitely had to go, and the sooner the better. Her decision was final. There was no way she would change her mind—no way at all.

A second later, in an act of total defiance against her conscious wishes, her mind drifted to what it would be like to kiss him. The idea had come uninvited and did nothing to calm the desires she had been trying to deny. She set down her empty coffee mug with a resounding thump and busied herself closing windows to keep out the cold air.

A few minutes later she heard the bathroom door open. She fought the urge to look in his direction. She could not allow him the opportunity to sucker her in again with those green eyes and

that devastating smile. But as before, her heated desires overruled her intentions. Against her better judgment she glanced in his direction. That was all it took. Her resolve instantly melted away. He looked casual, comfortable and far too sexy.

Three

Jessica knew she needed to say what was on her mind before she totally succumbed to the suggestion of untold pleasures hidden in the depth of Dylan's eyes and behind that smile.

She turned her gaze away from him, preferring to focus her attention on an inanimate object. She chose the table lamp. A nervous tremor made its way through her body. "I...uh...I've been giving this some thought. Before anything else happens, we need to settle the problem of who is going to use the cabin. I do understand that Justin promised the cabin to you based on the fact that I was supposed to be in New York, but it should be obvious to you that the circumstances have changed. I'm not in New York. And...well, what with the electricity being out and all..."

She drew in a steady breath in an attempt to quell her rising anxiety. "Well, I just think you'd be more comfortable at the lodge. It's only a few miles from here, down on the main road."

"No. I wouldn't be more comfortable at the lodge."

"What?" She snapped her head in his direction as the shock spread through her body. His words caught her totally off guard. His unwavering gaze provided no hint of what he was thinking, yet it set her anxieties on edge. She stared at the lamp again, unable to hold the directness of his eye contact. There was nothing tentative or unsure about his attitude or the physical stance of his body language.

She forced her words, even though she knew they sounded less firm than when she started. "The lodge is very nice. I'm also sure it will be much more to your liking than being here without any activities or other people to socialize with."

He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the wall. His voice was calm and very matter-of-fact, his words firm without being argumentative. "This cabin is only half yours. The other half belongs to Justin. You informed him you would be in New York for three weeks. So, taking you at your word, he promised use of the cabin to me. Since you're the one who showed up without checking first, I believe I have the right to stay."

She grabbed the fireplace poker and jabbed at the remnants of the morning's disastrous fire in an effort to play for time as she carefully chose her words. She didn't want to get into an argument, but she wanted to make her position clear. She turned to face him.

"Whether I'm supposed to be in New York or not isn't the point. The fact is that I'm not in New York...I'm here." She caught the edge surrounding her voice and took a steady breath in hopes of smoothing it out. "I'm truly sorry this unfortunate situation had to occur, but I really do feel that the lodge will be far more to your liking. This cabin certainly can't be the kind of place where you would usually stay. This type of isolation must be quite different from your normal routine."

She wrinkled her brow in concentration for a moment. "In fact, I can't imagine why you would want to stay here at all."

A spark of anger flared with his words. "My normal routine has its times of isolation." He paused and took a deep breath before muttering, "But I'm sure you wouldn't understand that."

She saw something in his eyes and heard it for a brief moment in his voice. A hint of vulnerability? As quickly as it materialized it quickly disappeared, to be replaced by a facade of calm control. It was just a glimpse, but enough to tell her that there was more going on inside his head than he was saying or willing to show. What was he hiding? Then another thought occurred to her. Rather than hiding something, could he be hiding from someone?

She had no idea what he had specifically been doing over the years, only what her brother had told her. Perhaps his "business deals" were really scams to fleece unsuspecting people out of their money. A sick churning in the pit of her stomach told her just how much she hoped that wasn't true. She studied him for a moment. He looked so calm and collected, as if nothing could ruffle him. She wished she felt as in control as he looked.

It didn't matter to Dylan how much she pushed him, there was no way he had any intention of staying at a lodge surrounded by the distraction of vacationing people who were there to enjoy themselves. Nor did he want to end up confined inside the four walls of a hotel room in order to have quiet and solitude. And the small apartment he maintained in Los Angeles wasn't as large as the cabin. It was hardly anything more than a place to change clothes and grab a night's sleep between flights to some exotic vacation locale or an international business meeting. The idea of pacing the floor of his apartment surrounded by other buildings in traffic-congested Los Angeles didn't work for him at all. Justin's mountain cabin in the middle of the forest was the ideal solution to his needs. And even with Jessica there, it was still much better than any of the other options.

Or perhaps it was because of Jessica being there.

A little shiver of panic darted through his body in response to the unwelcome thought. It was more than wanting the use of the cabin, he needed it. He hadn't even informed Justin of exactly how much he needed to be away from everything, to think out his life and make decisions. He knew his best bet was to offer her a compromise, to try to convince her to do it his way, even though her expression projected a stubborn determination that left him uneasy.

He relaxed his stance, unfolded his arms and softened his manner as he crossed the room toward her. He turned on the charm that had served him so well over the years. "There's no reason for this to be causing such a big problem. This cabin is large enough to easily accommodate both of us without our being crowded together." He warmed to the idea, his voice taking on a seductive quality. "You have your bedroom, and I've already moved my things to the other one. I think we can coexist without any problems." He flashed his best trust me smile. "Don't you agree?"

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