

Casey was not a complainer, and she tried not to be one now. But wrestling a heavy bike up a steep slope while sharp pain radiated from her knee with every step was not her idea of a pleasant afternoon. Still, she grit her teeth and marshaled on, not wanting Max to think she was a complete wuss.

She was breathing hard and grimacing by the time they reached the street again. Max helped her pull the bike up the last steep incline to the street, and patted her shoulder in a comforting gesture. “You’re doing great,” he said. “And it probably doesn’t feel like it now, but walking will be good for your knee. It’ll keep it from stiffening up.”

“I’ve never been all that keen on doing unpleasant things that are good for me,” she said.

“Just think of it as part of that drudgery that makes the fun times better.”

She stuck her tongue out him and he laughed. He had a wonderful laugh – deep and melodious, sending pleasant vibrations through her.

He wasn’t like any other man she’d met. He was so easy to be with, maybe because he was so easy with himself. He had no expectations as to how she should behave, what she should wear or say.

“You don’t ever worry about impressing anyone, do you?” she asked.

He glanced at her. “Why should I? Or is that a sarcastic comment on my appearance?” He raked one hand through his shaggy hair.

She shook her head. “No comment. It’s one of the things I like about you. You are what you are, and you don’t care what people think.” Something she’d struggled with for as long as she could remember – that internal battle between personal desire and public expectation.

“I guess you could say that’s my philosophy in life,” he said. “People should be authentic.”

She nodded. He made it sound so easy. “But how you know what’s authentic for you?” she asked. “I can think of lots of things I don’t want, but I’m not sure I know what I do want.” One of the reasons she’d come to CB was to try to find out the answer to those questions.

He looked thoughtful. “Part of it goes back to when I was growing up. I don’t mean I had a horrible childhood or anything – my family was great. They still are. But I never felt like I fit in with them.” He glanced at her, as if weighing his next words. “Everyone else in my family is really smart and really successful. Everything comes easy to them. I wasn’t anything like my brother or sister and my parents couldn’t understand it. I mean, I was supposed to go to college, get a degree, come home and help Dad run the family business, marry a local girl and raise a family. Instead, I left school and moved thousands of miles away. And I’ll probably never get married. I’m happy with that.”

This last revelation startled her. “Why do you say you’ll never marry?”

He shrugged. “Some people are cut out for marriage and I’m not.”

He sounded so certain. And so comfortable with the idea. “Won’t you be lonely?”

“I won’t be alone.” He gave her a look that made her feel warm clear through. “I like women. And they like me.”

She had no doubt he was right about that. She found him awfully hard to resist herself. She tightened her fingers on the handlebars and looked away. “Then what’s wrong with marriage?”

“Nothing. It’s just not for me. I need to find a woman who feels the same way – one who values her independence as much as I value mine.”

Independence. It was a heady word. Something she hadn’t experienced much of until she’d left Chicago to come here. She’d never done anything truly on her own prior to making that trip. She’d attended the school her mother had gone to, as it had been expected she would, joined the clubs her

parents favored. Her job in marketing was at a firm owned by a family friend. Even Paul had been introduced to her by her mother.

And now she was here. Living by herself, working in a job she'd gotten by herself. Walking with a man who believed a woman who made her own decisions and lived her own life was a wonderful thing.

“Why are you looking at me that way?” he asked.

She blinked. “Why am I looking at you what way?”

“As if you're not sure whether to measure me for a straight jacket or kiss me.”

She smiled, and leaned toward him. “Why don't we start with the kiss?”

When their lips touched, she realized she'd been anticipating this moment all day – or maybe even from the first moment they'd met. He slid his hand around her waist, bringing her closer, angling his mouth to more fully cover hers. She felt the scrape of his beard stubble against her cheek, and inhaled the woodsmoke and washed cotton aroma that clung to him. The sun warmed the top of her head and her bare arms and though they stood in the middle of an open valley they might have been the only two people in the world at that moment.

It was one of those rare moments in her life that had no other agenda. She was unhurried, focused on the feel of his lips, the taste of his tongue, and the pleasure to be found in the embrace of someone who made her feel more alive to every sensation simply by his presence.

When they broke apart at last, she was lightheaded and amazed at her own recklessness. “That was nice,” he said, his eyes bright with a definite heat.

Nice didn't begin to describe the sensations that still sparked through her. She rubbed her arms, which were chilled without his hands on them, and took a deep breath. “It was,” she agreed, then had to turn away, breathless at her own impulsiveness. What was she getting into with this man who so different from anyone else she'd known and so exactly what she needed in her life right now?