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KASEY MICHAELS

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

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As a devastating summer storm hits Grand Springs, Colorado, the next thirty-six hours will change the town and its residents forever…

When school guidance counselor Cassandra Mercer spots cocky single dad Sean Frame stranded on the road in the middle of the worst storm Grand Springs has ever seen, it feels like poetic justice. He's questioned her methods with his troubled son every chance he gets. Having him at her mercy would be so satisfying. And he's pretty damn hot—especially soaking wet.

Sean would rather be trapped in a bank vault than accept help from the infuriating Cassandra. But when a mudslide traps the couple inside her car, the intense chemistry that has fueled their battles sparks an entanglement of a different kind.

When the skies clear, they have a chance at rescue. But where do they go from there?

Book 2 of the 36 Hours series. Don't miss Book 3: The storm brings new life and a chance for new beginnings in Ooh Baby, Baby by Diana K. Whitney.

Strange Bedfellows
Kasey Michaels

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Chapter One

As she rounded a curve in the highway, Cassandra Mercer recognized the tall form she saw about one hundred yards in the distance.

And then she smiled, quietly deciding that there was a God—and She was on her side.

Because, after a grueling three-hour school board meeting during which her nemesis, her thorn in the side, her most blockheaded, stubborn, unreasonable parent, had once more made her life miserable by questioning her methods in the area of student counseling, she was now watching this same nemesis walk along the side of the road in a driving rainstorm.

Some might even call it a bit of well-deserved poetic justice.

"Ah," she said mockingly, her smile turning to a cheek-splitting grin even as she lifted her foot from the gas pedal. "Was that your brand-new Mercedes I saw abandoned about a half mile back, Mr. Sean Oughta-be-fitted-for-a-Frame and then hanged? I thought so, but I guess I just didn't believe life could be this good. Lovely weather for a long, cold, wet walk, don't you think?"

And she laughed.

The June weather in Grand Springs had been rather pleasant when she had driven up this same twisting road on her way to Burke Senior High School that same morning. But, as she'd learned during her years living in Colorado, the weather was always subject to quick change, and June had been a more than usually damp month this year.

Wet, soggy.

But the sun had come out for a while that morning, so Cassandra had optimistically left her raincoat at home. Now, as yet another rainstorm battered against the windshield, she was beginning to rethink her joke to her cat, Festus, just this morning about building her own ark.

She slowed her Jeep to a crawl after making sure nobody was behind her, wishing Sean Frame had also optimistically left his raincoat at home. But not him. Not Mr. Perfect. He looked ready to do a speech on Being Prepared for any Emergency. Raincoat on—designer, of course. Waterproof hat jammed down on his head—at a jaunty angle, damn him. Flashlight in his hand—and the batteries worked.

Cassandra squinted through the rain and deepening dusk. "Son of a gun—he's even wearing boots. Boots! What else? Could he possibly also have dental floss in his pocket? Hey, you never know when you'll be lost in the woods and need to live on nuts and berries. Can't neglect dental hygiene just because you're stranded, for crying out loud. Jeez! Is it any wonder I hate this guy?"

Which she didn't, not really. Hate him, that was. She wished she could, but she didn't. He was stubborn but intriguing. Thickheaded, yet genuinely intelligent. Stern and straight-arrow, and with the most damnable way of taking her words and twisting them into something silly and shallow, but… but…

But now he was wet. And stranded. And being forced to walk all the way down the hill in the rain. She really should be feeling sorry for him, not vetting his appearance, trying to rationalize her mixed feelings for him. Yes. That was it. She should be feeling sorry for the handsome, infuriating rat. Okay. She'd give him some sympathy.

Poor baby…snicker, snicker.

Well, that didn't work. She still pretty much loathed the mud he was slipping and sliding in. But maybe it was the thought that counted. And, boy, was she thinking! She was thinking: Oh, joy. Oh, happiness. Oh, how much fun it would be to speed past the miserable man, spraying cold rainwater in her wake, maybe even tooting her horn and waving as she flashed past.

And it would serve the man right!

If only Cassandra, the sole child born to already middle-aged parents, hadn't been raised always to be nothing less than a "thoughtful, polite, proper young lady." A very conventional young lady. A

young lady who would never, ever, even be tempted to stick out her tongue at Sean Frame and call out "nah-nah-nah-nah-nah-nah" as she went whizzing by in her dependable four-wheel-drive Jeep, splashing him with muddy water.

It wasn't easy being proper, but it was all she had, all she had been told to be, raised to be. The Cassandra Mercer who lived in the real world—as opposed to the Cassandra Mercer who sang and played inside her head, or the one who had rebelled, once, so long ago, for that short, terrible time—was entirely too responsible and lacking in gumption to ever do any of the things she was thinking.

She simply couldn't. Really.

Bummer.

Banishing her irreverent thoughts, and knowing she'd hate herself in the morning either way, Cassandra edged the Jeep forward until she was beside Sean Frame, lowered the passenger-side window and tooted her horn to get his attention.

"Need a lift?" she asked. Drown, sucker! her inner imp wanted to say. Clearly she was still having trouble with this Good Samaritan stuff.

And then Sean Frame, father of a wonderful if troubled young teen, and probably the main reason poor Jason was acting out in school to the point of having been put on three-day suspensions twice this term, pushed his designer-cut but now sopping wet golden brown hair out of his eyes and wiped a long-fingered hand over his handsome, wet face.

That done, he glared at Cassandra through the gorgeous, long-lashed hazel eyes the "inner" Cassandra had seen in entirely too many of her embarrassingly romantic dreams, and said, "It took you long enough, Ms. Mercer. What were you thinking as you hovered back there? Were you wondering if you could give me a small bump, pushing me off the mountain? Were you judging your chances of getting away with murdering your least favorite school board member? Or were you going to just gun the motor a time or two and then shoot past me, hoping to splash me with mud from head to foot?"

Because he was uncomfortably close to being right, Cassandra took refuge behind her twenty-seven years of experience in saying what she should say instead of what she wanted to say. In other words, she took a deep breath, reluctantly beat down the inner voice that wanted to shout back, "Oh, yeah? Oh, yeah?" and proceeded to lie through her teeth.

"I haven't the slightest idea as to what you're implying, Mr. Frame," she said tightly, "and can only wonder what sort of mind would think up such nonsense. I am not in the habit of picking up lone male strangers, no matter how dire their circumstances. Only after assuring myself that you were indeed who I thought you were, did I offer to assist you."

There you go, Sean baby—now, stuff that in your nifty rainproof hat and smoke it!

"How very, um, prudent of you, Ms. Mercer, I'm sure. My apologies. However, I believe I can manage on my own," Sean said, somehow managing to look intimidating, determined, successful and too damn gorgeous for Cassandra's good—and at the same time beginning to look like he'd gone through a car wash while forgetting to bring his car.

Cassandra was tempted to take the proud, stubborn man at his word and leave him to walk the three miles to the bottom of the hill and the first service station that might still be open. Sorely tempted.

"Are you quite sure?" she asked before he could step away from the open window.

Don't be an idiot, she meant.

"There was just a flash flood and mud slide warning on the radio," she added, to drive home her point.

If they find you dead tomorrow, I'll feel bad, she wanted to say. Not terribly bad, but bad. After all, I think Jason might miss you. Though I'd be hard-pressed not to do a dance of joy around my kitchen table with a rose stuck between my teeth. At least then maybe I'd stop dreaming about you!

"I'm wet and my boots are full of mud," Sean said, spreading his arms as if inviting her to inspect his long, lean frame.

She didn't think that was such a good idea. No, thanks. I'll leave that image in my dreams, where it belongs.

"Besides, Ms. Mercer," he added as she told her inner self to be helpful and just shut up, "I'll ruin your upholstery."

Cassandra pushed at her glasses, shoving them back up on her nose. Handsome or not, in her dreams or in her nightmares, this guy was really starting to get on her nerves.

"You can take off the boots and pay to have the upholstery cleaned," she suggested reasonably, wondering if he noticed that she was now speaking through clenched teeth. "Or are you simply afraid to be in a car with a woman who, if I remember your words correctly, 'mollycoddles students with her harebrained theories and lamentable lack of discipline'?"

Sean opened his mouth, probably to say something particularly cold and cutting. A brilliant flash of lightning was followed almost immediately by a crack of thunder that shook the Jeep. The instant increase in rain would have made a lesser man think Mother Nature had just yelled, "Hey, bozo, buy a clue, why don't you—you can't win against me!"

Cassandra hid a fairly triumphant smile as Sean closed his mouth, reached for the door handle and climbed inside the Jeep. With the door still open, he efficiently slid out of his boots and put them on the rubber mat behind the front seat, then shrugged out of his wet raincoat, revealing his expensive three-piece suit—which was still dry except for the pant legs, damn him.

She could smell his aftershave, and the tangy scent quickly traveled through her bloodstream and dissolved her kneecaps. Damn him, damn him, damn him!

"Are we going to sit here all night, Ms. Mercer, or had you planned to drive on anytime soon? And where were those mud slides you heard about on the radio?" he asked as Cassandra, who was now seriously considering having her head examined next chance she got, eased her foot back onto the gas and leaned toward the windshield, trying to see through the deluge outside.

"I don't know," she told him nervously as another streak of lightning split the sky. She realized she was grateful to have company for the ride down the mountain. Any company. Even Sean Frame's most disturbing, infuriating company. "The radio cut out in the middle of the warning at the beginning of the seven o'clock newscast. I think the station went off the air. And I haven't seen any lights on when I can get a glimpse of town through the trees, even though it's getting dark, so I have a feeling the power is out all through the area. There's a towel in the back seat you might want to use."

"My cell phone wasn't working, either," Sean replied. "But it never does on this section of the highway. Building Burke up here farther from town where land is cheaper might have been good economically, but at times like these it's a real headache the school board should have considered. Once we're out of the hills and I get reception I'll phone ahead and see what's going on. Jason might be worried."

Jason is probably hoping you'll be marooned at the high school for the weekend. And is there anything the school board did before you were on it that meets with your approval? Like, how they signed me to an ironclad contract, which has really got to twist your tail? Cassandra thought those questions, but she only said, "That sounds like a good idea. I suppose."

And then she said nothing at all, because simply driving the Jeep took all her attention—and she could only spare a small part of her brain to take in Sean's closeness, the way his towel-dried hair made him look so boyish, so human.

Human? Oh, Cassandra, her inner self tweaked at her. Get a grip. Don't let's get carried away here….

And then it happened. Swiftly. Quietly. Without warning. The seemingly solid wall of rock and dirt to Cassandra's left, the rock and dirt that made up the mountain drive, collapsed. Just fell.

Chapter Two

Boom, and the solid wall of mountain was gone. Like a sand castle undermined by an incoming tide.

One moment there had been a mountain wall safely straight and solid on the other side of the two-lane highway, and the next moment the Jeep was sliding sideways onto the wide gravel shoulder of the road, surrounded by a river of living mud and boulders, being swept along down the hillside as if the vehicle weighed no more than a feather.

The only thing that stopped the Jeep from moving as one with the mud and rock tumbling down the steep embankment was the strong guardrail at the side of the road, which caught and held the vehicle.

Many things happened in the first few seconds after the Jeep finally slid and bumped to a halt. For one, Cassandra realized that she was screaming, and she immediately stopped, slapping both hands over her mouth just to be certain a small, involuntary squeak couldn't still escape.

Which was a pity, because she could have used one of those hands to prudently cover her wide-open eyes, so that she couldn't look out the window and watch the whole mountain rushing past the Jeep's headlights.

Then Sean took over, exchanging places at the wheel with a numb and clumsy but still pathetically willing-to-move Cassandra, and trying to use her four-wheel drive to extricate them from their precarious position before more of the mountainside gave way and they could be swept farther into disaster.

It didn't take more than a few tense, gear-grinding, wheel-spinning minutes for Cassandra to be pretty certain that they were well and truly stuck. Hearing Sean Frame's fairly eloquent if low-pitched string of profanity as he shoved the gear stick into park and turned off the ignition nailed it down for her. Still, when she could pry her hands from her mouth, it was to hear herself ask, "We're stuck, aren't we?"

"Yes, Ms. Mercer, we're stuck," Sean answered, running a hand through his hair, then exhaling his breath in an angry whoosh. "If it weren't for the guardrail—but never mind that. Someone else from the meeting will be along soon enough, I'm sure."

"I—I was the last one to leave the school," Cassandra told him. "Smitty let me lock up."

He sliced her a quick, angry look. "The janitor allowed you to lock the school? That's not in your job description, is it, Ms. Mercer?"

Cassandra rolled her eyes, wondering if the man ever listened to himself speak. "No, Mr. Frame, it's not. But there was no reason for Smitty to be late for his dinner because I wanted to get a few files from my office, now, was there?"

He lowered his head, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck. "No. No, I suppose not. I apologize. Sometimes I come on too strong, don't I?"

Cassandra wanted to stick her little finger in her ear and give it a shake, just to clear the passageway. She couldn't have heard the guy right. "You're a businessman, Mr. Frame," she said in reply, wondering how her parents had managed to instill such good manners in their only child, when that same only child was obviously harboring a second personality, one that wanted to say, "Strong, Sean baby? Do the words like a Mack truck mean anything to you?"

A clap of thunder equal to the decibel output of five Rolling Stones concerts playing at the same time shook the mountain.

Cassandra couldn't help herself. She whimpered. "Oh, God," she groaned, then pulled her feet onto the seat, wrapped her arms around her lower legs and buried her head against her knees. "Watch for the next lightning bolt, would you? Please," she mumbled. "And then count one-one thousand, two-one thousand, until we hear the next boom, okay? I want to know how far away that lightning is."

"How very scientific, Ms. Mercer," Sean commented, then added, "or we could simply pretend that God is bowling, and the sound we hear is the pins going down? That's the fairy tale they told us at the home."

Cassandra turned her head slightly toward him and looked at him through the deepening dusk, forgetting about the storm raging outside. "The home? Are you an orphan, Mr. Frame?"

That would explain a lot. He was urbane and sophisticated, yes, but she hadn't been able to help noticing that he had this edge to him. It was a slightly rough edge, as if he had one foot firmly anchored in the tough but civilized corporate world, and the other somewhere to the left of success, standing in a more human, fallible, even vulnerable place.

His smile revealed straight white teeth, with one top tooth just the slightest bit crooked, showing that he'd never had braces. "And here you were, Ms. Mercer, all this time believing I'd been hatched from an egg like the other reptiles. But, no, I wasn't an orphan. Not in the ordinary sense."

She frowned. "There's an un-ordinary sense?"

"Actually, there is, and it's becoming more frequent all the time. You see, my father abandoned us before I was born, and my mother had this habit of forgetting where she'd put me from time to time. Unfortunately, she wouldn't give up custody so I could be adopted when I was still young and reasonably adorable."

Cassandra didn't hear the next clap of thunder, much less react to it. "That's horrible!"

"It was all right, once I got used to it. I'd spend time with her, then in the home, and occasionally, in someone's house as a foster child. It was an interesting childhood, and one I strove to overcome from the time I was old enough to know what I wanted. What I needed to do to get what I wanted. It was also a childhood I made certain Jason avoided. Three miles, Ms. Mercer."

"Three—oh! The lightning is only three miles away? It might as well be on top of us!" Cassandra buried her head against her knees once more, then flinched as a tumbling boulder crashed into the side of the Jeep, mashing it more firmly against the guardrail.

To keep her mind occupied—to keep from screaming—she concentrated on the other things Sean Frame had said. She looked at him again, wishing it were darker so she couldn't see his intelligent hazel eyes, his incongruously long, lush black lashes.

"Your own childhood must have made it doubly important for you to have Jason raised in a firm family situation," she commented at last. "And yet, after allowing him to live with his mother since he was born, you've now taken total custody and moved him here to Grand Springs. How does that equate with this image of permanency you're talking about?"

He looked at her for a long moment, during which Cassandra realized that he was talking, telling her about his personal life, only to keep her mind off their current predicament, off the fact that they might, at any moment, become a part of the mountain. That was rather sweet of him—which didn't mean that she liked him. She couldn't possibly like him!

"Sally remarried about two years ago," he explained. "When Jason was fifteen. He didn't take it well, didn't care much for Bob, her new husband. And I'm pretty sure he doesn't much like the fact that there's now a new baby in the household."

He shook his head. "Sally doesn't know the first thing about dealing with teenage boys, I'm afraid, not that she was much better when Sean was younger. I tried to be there for him, but I was building my company and working ninety-hour weeks. And a child should be with his mother, or so the books say. When he ran away from home for the third time in a month, she called me in hysterics and said it was my turn. I agreed, wholeheartedly, and Jason moved in with me. Now, instead of fighting Sally's ridiculous coddling of my son, I'm fighting your off-the-wall methods, which are equally softhearted and maddening. And Jason is still—what do you call it?"

"Acting out," Cassandra told him, bristling. "And now I understand why! How could you not have told me about the new stepfather? The new baby? Don't you know that these things have a

profound impact on a boy Jason's age? He loves his mother, and now his mother has a new man in her life, a new child. Of course he's feeling displaced, unloved, passed over."

"Oh, really. You should have seen his bedroom, Ms. Mercer. From the time he was born, that kid had everything he ever wanted."

"Material things are no substitute for love. I'm telling you, he was feeling displaced, shunted aside. And then his mother goes and proves it to him by all but throwing him out of the house, straight at a man who pulled himself up from nothing and probably thinks a child like Jason is spoiled rotten and in need of a good smack upside the head to settle him down."

"There you go—more mumbo jumbo, more textbook pap meant to—"

But Cassandra cut him off. "God!" she exclaimed, laying her head back against the seat as she slumped down on her spine. "That poor kid! I'm surprised all he's done is break a couple of windows and almost fail a couple of classes."

"Let's just hope you haven't told Jason that almost failing a couple of classes and breaking a couple of windows is permissible behavior because he now lives with his father instead of his mother," Sean shot back, reaching up a hand to jerk loose his designer tie and then roughly unbutton the collar of his designer shirt. "Or is this the new 'in' thing with guidance counselors—explaining away unacceptable behavior and placing all the blame on the parents and not the kid?"

"Mr. Frame," Cassandra began, pulling herself upright on the seat. "You have no idea how difficult it is to deal with the teenage child. I see what he does in school, yes, but unless I am informed as to his home background, his relationship with his parents, his general physical health—circumstances that are not apparent when I sit across the desk from a mulish young boy who thinks he hates everything and everyone in his life when, in reality, he is simply a painfully unhappy lump of insecurity and fear—well, it just makes my job all that more difficult, that's all."

"So you forgive him, play cheerleader, tell him to go away and sin no more, and you think you've done enough? This is your main problem, Ms. Mercer, as I've said time and again—your psychobabble methods. Where's the discipline, the punishment? When does he learn that all actions have their consequences? Surely not in Ms. Cassandra Mercer's office."

Cassandra felt her mouth open, heard words coming from it, and still couldn't believe what she said. And, to her everlasting embarrassment, the words she had said, the words that hung in the stuffy air inside the Jeep for long moments, were "You, sir, are a horse's ass!"

"That does it!" Sean shouted over the roar of the storm as he started the Jeep, slamming the vehicle back into gear and easing his foot onto the gas pedal. "Either we get out of here or I'm going to murder you," he said as he began rocking the Jeep, throwing it into reverse, pushing it into low gear—and getting them nowhere.

Cassandra was furious. "Oh, stop it! We're stuck, and that's that!"

"Damn it!" he exploded as he turned off the ignition and slammed his fist against the steering wheel before pressing his head back against the headrest. "I'd rather be in Alaska, snowbound with a polar bear!"

Cassandra pleated the skirt of her long, full cotton dress with her fingers, wondering why her anger had felt so good, why she suddenly felt so free, so liberated. Why had watching the unflappable Sean Frame lose his cool made her feel so much more in control?

Who knew?

Who cared?

She only knew she liked the feeling. "Oh, really, Mr. Frame?" she shot back, staring straight at him. "Well, I'd rather be tossed overboard into a school of hungry piranha. Or is that piranhas? Piranhi?"

He turned his head on the headrest and eyed her carefully, assessingly. She saw the way his open, sparkling-white shirt collar pressed against the side of his tanned chin, and her stomach did

a small flip. “I’d rather,” he bit out challengingly, “be in orbit for six months with a rabid rhesus monkey.”

So, he wanted to play “can you top this insult?” did he? She narrowed her eyes, her heart pounding. “I’d rather be trapped in an elevator with an amateur rap group on their way to their first audition.”

“I’d rather be locked in a bank vault with the entire Mormon Tabernacle Choir—all of them singing the Hallelujah Chorus and suffering with laryngitis.”

This was fun!

“Ha! Kid stuff!” Cassandra exclaimed joyfully, then struggled for another comeback. “I’d rather—I’d rather be shipwrecked with Bill O’Reilly!”

Sean gave out a shout of laughter, then held up his hands in surrender. “You win, Cassandra. You win. Although, I must say, I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Neither did I,” Cassandra answered quietly, frowning at her own audacity, then smiling as she realized he had addressed her by her first name.

Then Sean waved his right hand as if asking for silence. “I think I see something moving out there,” he said, using his sleeve to wipe steam off the inside of the window and peer into the now almost total darkness outside the Jeep. “Hand me my flashlight.”

“Since you asked so nicely, Sean,” Cassandra grumbled, remembering again how much she really didn’t like this man, although it had been rather nice to hear him call her Cassandra instead of Ms. Mercer. But that didn’t change the fact that he probably couldn’t find the word please with half a dozen flashlights!

“Here,” she said, shoving the thing at him. “Maybe it’s Bullwinkle Moose come to rescue us. Because, if you haven’t noticed, there aren’t any lights to be seen anywhere below us, except those at the hospital. The substation must have been knocked out by the slide, considering it’s only about a half mile higher up on the mountainside.”

Sean didn’t answer her but only cursed as he reached to roll down the window, then realized that the Jeep had push-button controls and the engine had to be engaged in order to operate them. He turned the ignition key to the “accessories” position with a determined hand, then lowered the window and stuck the flashlight outside. “There! Over there! Some nut’s trying to walk out of here. Hey! Buddy! We’re over here!”

Cassandra leaned across the seat, her chin on Sean’s shoulder as they both peered into the rain and darkness. “I see him!” she shouted excitedly, earning herself a dark look from her companion. “Sorry,” she added more softly. “But I do see him. If he can make it through the mud, why can’t we? I mean, anything has to be better than spending the rest of this miserable night up here.”

She didn’t say it, but the words with you hung in the air, heard by them both. She took off her glasses, which she really only needed for driving—but wore almost constantly—and which were steaming up, anyway, and placed them on the dashboard.

“Do you want to take the chance of being caught in another slide?” Sean leaned his head out the window, looking down. “There’s a boulder smack up against my door and the back door, holding both of them closed. Lovely dent in the metal, by the way. The road, if we could reach it from the shoulder, is nothing but a river of mud and boulders. We can’t get out your side because your doors are smashed up against the guardrail. If we do get out of here, it’s going to have to be through the back hatch.”

“If we could reach it? If we get out of here?” Cassandra moved her body a little closer to his. “Don’t you mean when we get out of here?”

He turned his head, looking at her from only mere inches away, then put his hand on hers, squeezing it—which was the first time she noticed that she had been gripping his shoulder tightly. “We’ll get out of here, Cassandra. I promise.”

Well, as long as he promises, her inner self said, even as Cassandra tried, and failed, to relax her hold on his shoulders.

Then Sean aimed the flashlight onto the muddy roadway once more, and at the man who now stood about twenty yards away from them, obviously not able to move closer without possibly injuring himself in the debris littering the roadside. “Do you think it’s really wise to try to walk out of here, sir?” he called over the sound of driving rain and crashing thunder.

The man waved his hands as if trying to ward off some unseen danger. “I must go on!” he yelled at them. “I—I must go on!”

“What a strange reaction. Do you think he’s injured?” Cassandra asked, immediately concerned for the man. “Do you recognize him?”

“I wouldn’t recognize Jason in this dark and rain,” Sean told her, then motioned for her to be silent while he spoke to the man once more. “I think you can make it to the Jeep if I light the way with my flashlight. You’ll be safer with us until the storm’s over and somebody comes to check on the slide.”

“No!” the man shouted back, sounding frantic. “I must go on! There’s something I must do… someone I must—I need your flashlight. Yes, that’s it. Give me your flashlight! I’ll send help.”

Sean moved the flashlight, centering its beam on the stranger’s face so that Cassandra saw the man’s wet hair—it seemed to be blond, but she couldn’t be sure. His eyes, however, made her gasp aloud, for they were an intense blue, and they seemed oddly vacant, as if the man was unsure of himself, of his surroundings. Which was silly, because she had never seen a more determined-looking man—save Sean Frame, of course.

The man held up his hand to block the harsh light from his eyes, took a few steps toward the Jeep, then called again. “The flashlight. Just give me your flashlight. And tell me the name of this road so I can give directions to a tow truck.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes as Sean did as the stranger said, then watched as the flashlight arced through the air, to be caught by the tall, lean man with the strange blue eyes. “Well, there goes our only light,” she grumbled, not knowing why she was angry. “We could have used it as a rescue beacon, you know.”

“I think he’ll make it,” Sean said as he watched the man moving away, picking his way through the mud and boulders. “The slide can’t be more than a quarter-mile wide, I imagine. Once he’s free of this area he shouldn’t have any problem making it to the gas station at the bottom of the hill. With any luck, we’ll be out of here by morning.”

Cassandra couldn’t help it. She wanted to be out of here now, out of the Jeep, away from Sean Frame, away from her thoughts about Sean Frame. “Oh, really. He’ll make it. But we have to stay here. That doesn’t make sense, Sean, and you know it.”

“Look at your shoes, Cassandra,” he told her, closing the window and turning on the radio. “You can’t walk out of here in those high heels, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to carry you. That man, whoever he is, is only responsible for himself. I’m responsible for you, and you’re staying right here. We’re staying right here until someone comes and gets us. Now, be quiet, and I’ll see if I can find a radio station that’s still working.”

“You’re the living definition of a benevolent despot, do you know that? One man in charge of everything, and thinking he’s doing his subjects a great big favor by taking care of them. I mean, Mr. Grimes could use you for show-and-tell in his European history class,” she groused, silently agreeing that her shoes had definitely not been made for slogging through calf-deep mud.

And if there were another slide…?

No. She’d stay where she was. She wouldn’t like it, but she’d stay.

The speakers crackled as Sean punched buttons, trying to find a working station. “You’ll run down the battery unless you turn the motor back on while you do that,” she told him, looking for reasons to hate him. “It can get cold up here, you know, and I’d like to think we can use the heater once in a while.”

"I don't know if the mud has covered the tailpipe, but I'm fairly certain it has. Better to be a little cold than die of carbon monoxide poisoning, I've always said. It's a good thing you picked me up, Cassandra, because you never would have made it out here alone."

"If I hadn't stopped to pick you up I'd be home right now, warm and dry and feeding Festus, who is probably starving by now and writing me out of his will," she pointed out, she hoped, reasonably.

"Festus? Who in hell is Festus? Ah—got one! Let's listen."

"Pandemonium continues throughout the Grand Springs area, with Vanderbilt Memorial Hospital running on its backup generators as the blackout continues. The power outage is to blame for many accidents at intersections where the signals are not working. There have been several mud slides in the area, and motorists are urged to remain at home except in cases of emergency.

"Just a minute, folks. I've just been handed a few updates. All right. There are still several dozen people trapped in elevators around the city, so if your loved one is late tonight, don't panic—he or she may still be stuck at the office.

"And now, back to music. We'll give a rundown of cancellations and postponements at ten past the hour and interrupt for any updates. Also check us out on Twitter and Facebook. And please, folks, remember. It's still raining out there, and the weather center is warning of dangerous lightning and the possibility of more slides. There are no reported fatalities yet, but this isn't over. Again, please, stay where you are."

Sean turned off the radio, and Cassandra stared at the windshield, at the dark and the rain and the continuing streaks of lightning.

"Oh, God," she breathed quietly, and closed her eyes.

Chapter Three

Sean switched off the ignition and sat back against the seat, his eyes on Cassandra Mercer.

He realized that he'd never looked at her before—really looked at her. He'd known her for nearly two years, both before and after Jason had transferred to Burke. They'd tangled immediately and often, also both before and since Jason had taken to destroying school property and otherwise "acting out," as Cassandra called such unacceptable behavior.

But he'd never really looked at her before.

She had a lovely face, actually, one that was usually hidden behind oversize tortoiseshell eyeglass frames. A flawless complexion. Her nose was small, pert, perhaps a bit audacious. And he liked her eyes—a soft brown ringed with amber and framed by long, thick, straight black lashes.

He liked her eyes. A lot.

He was certain her hair, however, would have to be considered by many to be her best feature. It was long and thick and a warm honey brown, streaked with blond highlights. A pity she always seemed to just scrape it back from her face and tie it at the nape, as if she didn't know how to do anything else with it.

Sean reached up and scratched his right cheek with his left hand, then rubbed his chin—a habit he'd had so long he didn't even wonder when it had begun—and contemplated Cassandra Mercer's mouth. Wide. Full. Quite lovely when she smiled. Not that she'd ever smiled at him before tonight.

Did she smile at Jason when she had him in for their "little talks"?

She had a long, slender neck. He hadn't noticed that before, either. But, then, he'd never seen her with her head pressed back against a car seat before, her profile brought into clear focus with each new slashing bolt of lightning, a long, thick strand of gold-streaked brown hair having escaped its prison to caress her cheek, frame her face.

Damn.

"I'm sure Frank Sanderson has everything well in hand," he said, hoping to reassure Cassandra as he faced front once more, putting both hands on the steering wheel as if ready to drive out of the mud and back down the mountain—to safety, to sanity. "He's been a good police chief."

Cassandra rolled her head to the left, and Sean felt her gaze on him. "There's someone in Grand Springs who actually meets with the grand Sean Frame's approval? Wow. Now, who was it who said there was nothing new under the sun?"

He raised an eyebrow, trying not to smile at her remark. "My congratulations, Cassandra. You've hidden your Mr. Hyde personality for two entire years. I never would have suspected you had an affinity for sarcasm—or a sense of humor. I thought you were pure Dr. Jekyll, hell-bent on solving all the world's problems through love and compassion—with several dozen off-the-wall theories about children, that have nothing to do with common sense, thrown into the mix."

"I apologize. Being balanced on the side of a cliff, waiting for either rescue or the next mud slide must have unleashed the wild woman in me. But, to get back to what we were discussing—what would you do for Jason if you were in charge of his guidance and development?"

He rubbed his chin again, harder this time. "Cassandra, I am in charge of Jason's guidance and development. I'm his father, remember?"

Cassandra sat up straighter in her seat. "Oh, don't be so thick, Sean," she said quickly, probably not noticing that his mouth opened before he quickly bit back what he was going to say. For he had decided that this was a very interesting development, watching Cassandra Mercer outside the meeting room, with nary a single copy of Robert's Rules of Order to get in the way of whatever she felt, whatever she had to say.

It was as if he was watching a wren metamorphose into an eagle.

"We all know you're his father," she continued in a rush. "I'm speaking of Jason's academic guidance, and his social development as evidenced by his interaction with his peers and teachers. I'm here to guide Jason. That's why I'm called his guidance counselor."

"How did you guide him last week, Cassandra?" Sean shot back, getting angry in spite of himself. Besides, he felt more comfortable being angry with Cassandra Mercer. That way he didn't have to think about the fact she was wearing a particularly appealing perfume that was difficult not to notice within the confines of the Jeep. "Point out that there are bigger windows in the gym? You know, where he'd get more bang for his buck? Hey—why waste time with small windows when he could break ones that cost twice as much?"

"Now you're just being asinine!" Cassandra slapped a hand over her mouth almost before the words had escaped, her lovely brown eyes opened comically wide in what had to be shock at her own audacity. "Oh! I didn't mean to say that," she protested through her slightly spread fingers. "I'm so sorry! Really!"

"No," Sean returned quietly, shaking his head. "You meant to say it. You've probably got a sampler at home with those very words embroidered on it. You're a good actress, Cassandra Mercer, playing the caring, nurturing female and the consummate educational professional, speaking in that quiet, repressed-virgin way of yours, quoting statistics at me in meeting after meeting, your voice like water dripping on a stone as you cite sources that back up your harebrained theories. But all the time, deep inside yourself, you're making little voodoo dolls of me, aren't you? And mentally sticking pins in them. Tell me, do you go home from school board meetings and throw darts at a picture of me you've nailed to your wall?"

Cassandra's bottom lip began to tremble, and Sean was immediately contrite, knowing he'd gone too far, said too much. Why did this woman have this effect on him? Why did he dislike her so much? It wasn't as if she was some sort of threat to him, for crying out loud!

"Look, Cassandra," he began, not exactly in the mood for female waterworks. He had enough to deal with tonight, stranded here smack in the middle of nowhere, with the distinct possibility of being buried under several hundred tons of mud and rock if the rest of the mountainside decided to give way. "I'm sorry if I said—"

His apology, his plea for calm, both quickly dissolved under the warm, throaty sound of Cassandra's bubbling laughter.

"Jason is so much your son that it's almost scary!" she said as she struggled to control her giggles. "All bluster and bravado—all bristly and willing to attack at the drop of a hat in order to cover up any hurt, any pain. Voodoo dolls? Dartboards? Jason accused me of searching his locker, maybe even bugging it, because I seem to know too much about him."

Then she sobered. "And neither of you realize that you're both as clear as any of those gymnasium windowpanes Jason smashed. That you're both so scared and insecure and full of love that you're simply afraid to give for fear of having it flung back in your faces. You, because of your childhood, Jason because of the divorce, his mother's remarriage, even the new baby."

"That's ridiculous," Sean said angrily, but he didn't look at Cassandra as he denied her words, couldn't look at her. "Jason is spoiled rotten, and that's why he's a discipline problem. Sally always bribed him to be good, bought him a brand-new car the day he turned sixteen, forgave him when he started lifting money from her wallet last summer to buy videogames and new jeans, allowed him to set his own curfew. He doesn't want love, Cassandra. He wants to be left alone. He wants his own way. He wants to control his own life, even though he has no idea what real life even is. And he hates me because I took away that new car, I make him stay on a reasonable allowance, and I damn well make sure he's home at a decent hour."

Cassandra shook her head in what looked to be exasperation, and her words tumbled out quickly, as if she was thinking and speaking at the same time. "Don't you see what's wrong here? Don't you see? Both you and your ex-wife are teaching Jason that outlandish, unacceptable behavior

is the way to privilege and material things and—even more important to him, I'm sure—what he believes should be his share of parental attention. When he lived with your ex-wife, and was bad, he got anything he wanted. Did you say this started last summer? Interesting. His grades were good until he transferred to Burke this past fall."

She shook her head, frowning. "But never mind that now. We'll get to that another time. Now that he lives with you, he may have lost some of his material things, some of his privileges, but he certainly isn't wallowing in abject poverty, and he sure as heck has gained your full attention. Do you understand now? You and your ex-wife have been allowing the tail to wag the dog, and neither of you is right!"

"Oh, really?" Sean answered, feeling his jaw muscles growing tight. "So Sally and I are both lousy parents, and we're responsible for Jason's stupid behavior in school, his lousy grades. Is that the footnoted version? Will you be citing sources for me next?"

Cassandra turned sideways on the front seat, drawing her long legs up beside her on the cushion, her features animated, her eyes sparkling as another flash of lightning turned the deepening night to day. "Think about it, Sean. I talked Jason into taking early SATs—Scholastic Aptitude Tests."

"I know what SATs are," Sean interrupted. "I just didn't know Jason took them. He never told me."

"Of course he didn't! If you knew he'd had the highest score in all of Burke, you'd probably be ten times as hard on him for darn near failing two subjects this past quarter. Jason is a lot of things, but he isn't stupid! Why, he's probably smarter than you and your ex-wife and me put together. Which is why it's so terribly sad to watch him throwing all his potential away because he thinks he's so totally unloved. He's intelligent, yes, but he's still not mature enough, emotionally, to see what he's doing. But you are! Which is why I'm actually feeling rather glad we're stuck here—not that I want to be here much longer, of course. Now that you've told me more about Jason's background, your own background, maybe I can really make some progress with him."

She subsided against the seat once more, as if she'd just realized she'd said too much. "If you want to, that is. And if you promise not to go running to Jason and tell him you know about his SAT scores. Because if he thinks I ratted on him, I'll lose what little ground I've gained with him this past semester, and—well…"

"You don't have to explain that one to me, Cassandra," Sean admitted, his anger draining away. "I'm very much aware of the term, and would never rat on you." Then he looked at her again, envying Jason for his ability to bring such animation, such genuine interest, to Cassandra's face. "You really like him, don't you."

Her smile lit up the night with twice the voltage of the continuing lightning strikes. "Oh, yes. He's a great kid. Funny, intelligent, inventive. But always with this underlying sense of sadness about him, you know? It's like he's this clumsy, eager, half-grown puppy with big sad eyes. I just want to hug him sometimes." She shook her head. "He'd have a fit if he heard me say that!"

"Yes, he probably—listen! Listen closely. Did you hear that?"

Cassandra sat up straight, turning her head from side to side, as if activating some inner radar. "Did I hear what?"

"I'm not sure," Sean said, turning the ignition key to the accessories position again and pushing the button that lowered his side window, so that he could see out into the darkness. "Some sort of whooshing noise…like something's on the move out there again."

And then he saw it. Saw the mountain moving, sliding toward them. Again.

"Damn it all to hell!" He closed the window, turned off the ignition and made a grab for Cassandra, cradling her body tight against his as a wall of rock and mud slammed into the side of the Jeep.

The sound went on forever. The slam of rocks, the oozing, sucking, rushing sound of ground giving way and turning to a river of mud. Boulders hit the side of the Jeep, rocking the vehicle on its chassis, grinding it against the guardrail as it lifted and began to slide downhill along with the mud.

Sean employed his long legs to brace himself against the floorboards and used one hand to pull on the headlights, something telling him that, even if they tumbled down the mountainside, maybe the Jeep's battery would last long enough to allow the headlights to serve as a beacon for possible rescuers.

If the Jeep wasn't buried ten feet deep beneath a mountain of mud.

If one of the boulders didn't come crashing into the Jeep at window level, ripping off the roof and killing the two of them instantly.

With Cassandra's head buried against his shoulder, he looked out the front windshield, watching the area the headlights illuminated, seeing the melting mountainside even more clearly with each new bolt of lightning.

They were going forward, parallel with the roadway, sliding down the mountainside toward Grand Springs one lurching, heart-stopping yard at a time, the Jeep kept upright only by the strength of the guardrail.

The screech of metal against metal, the Jeep's frame scraping along the guardrail, sent sparks into the air and turned their wild ride into a bizarre, frightening, macabre amusement park adventure.

And then he saw it. A boulder so big it was higher than the roof of the Jeep. Wider. Wedged between the guardrail and a huge, overturned tree.

And the Jeep was heading straight for it, swept along at about thirty miles an hour—or so it seemed to Sean—held against the rail like one of those tin rabbits that circle a dog-race track.

"Hold on!" he shouted over the escalating noise…the rush of rain…the rolling thunder that slammed and reverberated inside his chest…Cassandra's single scream, which cut straight into his heart.

Chapter Four

It was like a head-on collision with a brick wall, and the hood of the Jeep folded up like an accordion even as Sean threw himself across the front seat and on top of Cassandra, knowing he had to get himself away from the steering wheel, which could otherwise have ended up halfway through his chest.

He stayed very still, trying to decide if they had reached the end of this latest storm-induced journey, listening to the relative quiet that followed, watching for lightning, then silently counting one one-thousand, two one-thousand, just as Cassandra had suggested.

Yes, the rain was beginning to slacken off.

Yes, the storm seemed, at last, to be moving away from them.

But the mud remained, and the danger was still with them. There could still be another slide.

Slowly, he began to realize that Cassandra was lying quietly beneath him—quietly, but with her arms wrapped around his back in a death grip, her body pressed against his, her teeth chattering.

"It's all right, Cassandra," he breathed quietly, soothingly, whispering the words through the tangle of her hair, his lips against the warm skin of her ear. "It's all right. I promise."

She swallowed. Once. Twice. He could feel the movement of her throat, sense her fear, hear the small catch in her throat as she took several deep, steadying breaths. "Just hold me, all right?" she asked after a moment. "Please. Just hold me. Keep telling me it's going to be all right."

The smell of her perfume teased at his nostrils. The warmth of her body, fitting so perfectly against his, set off warning bells in his head. She held on to him with all of her strength, all of her desperation, all of her very reasonable fear.

Because they could die out here. One more large slide and the guardrail was sure to break away, or they'd be buried alive under the mud and boulders.

He knew it. She knew it.

And lying to her, saying everything was going to be "all right," didn't mean squat.

She probably knew that, too.

He pressed his lips against the side of her throat, tasting her, trying to soothe her, divert her attention away from what might be the inevitable tragedy that awaited them. "I'm here with you, Cassandra. I won't let anything hurt you."

God! She felt so good. So alive. And he needed to feel alive.

He allowed his mouth the liberty of another kiss, and then another, tasting the sweet skin of her throat, easing himself backward slightly, moving his body lower along the length of her, so that he could lift his head.

Lift his head…and look down at Cassandra as she lay against the seat, her hair now loosened from its ridiculously severe style to tangle in a golden softness around her head, to frame that so vulnerable, so unexpectedly beautiful face.

Lift his head…so that he could watch Cassandra's face as the now infrequent lightning gifted him with enticing glimpses of her doelike eyes, her clean, flawless sweep of cheek, her full, trembling mouth.

Lift his head…so that he could attempt to read her expression, gauge her level of fear, be comforted and aroused by the trust he saw there, her willingness to believe he was there for her, wouldn't leave her, would never, ever leave her.

Lift his head…then lower it to find her mouth.

White-hot lightning exploded behind his eyes, a thunder he'd never heard before shook his entire body with its intensity.

Her mouth was warm in the damp coolness of the night. Her body, a blast furnace giving off the heat he sought, the heat he needed. It was the life force he so desperately required to prove that

he was alive, that she was alive, that they both would survive, and would not possibly perish here on the side of a mountain.

The first seconds of tentativeness quickly gave way to a fierce intensity that had him slanting his mouth against hers again and again, pressing her head back against the cushions as her full lips opened, allowing him to deepen the kiss.

She didn't move to push him away. Her arms tightened around him, drawing him closer, even as he realized that his hands were on her body, finding her, molding her, learning her lush beauty through the camouflage of her business suit. The crisp white blouse seemed to disappear beneath his oddly fumbling fingers.

It was all so High School Harry, his brain warned him. So crazy. Making out in the front seat, frustrating himself with kisses and petting and long hours of unfulfilled sexual longing. The steering wheel jamming into his thigh, the chrome door handle only an inch from his head, his suit jacket twice as difficult to remove than his letter sweater had even been.

But he couldn't stop. And Cassandra didn't want him to stop. Not when she had somehow undone the buttons of his shirt, not when she was even now pressing kisses against his neck, his bare chest.

They didn't speak, for there were no words. There was only this strange urgency, this need to feel alive. To give. To take. To share.

To keep the bogeymen away…

She was silk beneath his fingers, fire burning his flesh. He unsnapped her front-closing bra, a small part of his brain amazed by the feminine beauty of her undergarments, the lace and satin she hid beneath her business suits and long, shapeless cotton dresses.

He pressed the flat of his hand against her slightly concave stomach, then found the lacy band of the slight wisp that eased so satisfyingly down her thighs, over the thigh-high stockings that were another vague, marvelously unexpected surprise.

This was a woman who was innately sensual, no matter how she strove to show the world her professional front, her businesslike facade.

And it all had been there, in her eyes, all along. He simply hadn't seen beyond the tortoiseshell glasses, the scraped-back hair, the image she so carefully projected. She hid behind her glasses, her clothing, her professional exterior, the sources she quoted, the terms and theories and statistics—and all the while wearing underclothes that were designed to drive a man out of his mind.

Why? his brain asked even as he dipped his lips into the soft indentation of her waist, sliding his tongue along the path his hands had taken, even while listening to the soft whimpering moans Cassandra breathed out with each shallow breath.

I don't care why, another part of him answered dismissively as she cradled his head between her hands, possibly to stop his downward investigations, possibly to urge him on to this greater intimacy.

He kissed her belly, the silky insides of her thighs above her stockings, the curve behind her knee.

He ran his hands along her flaring hips, teased his way across her lower stomach, then nervously slid his fingers between her legs, feeling her tense against him, then slowly relax her tight muscles as her hips lifted off the seat, as her legs fell open, as she allowed him to explore her deepest secrets.

Only when he moved to replace his fingers with his mouth did she pull away from him, her eyes still tightly closed as her head pressed back against the passenger-side door, and she held out her arms to him, urging him to hold her.

Because she needed him. Needed him close, needed an anchor to keep her from spinning off the mountainside, possibly off the earth entirely. Yes. That was how he understood her actions, and her next words confirmed what he had thought.

"Please," she whispered brokenly, her tone seemingly caught between passion and unexpected embarrassment. "Please, Sean. Hold me. Hold me."

He silently cursed the confines of the front seat, wishing he'd had the foresight to move them both into the wider back seat, but he was suddenly afraid that any hesitation, any conversation at all, would not only shatter Cassandra's mood, but Cassandra herself.

So he did just as she wished, lowering himself against her, his hand never losing contact with her, never lessening its sweet assault.

He kissed her breasts, rubbing his tongue over her nipples, kissing her, nuzzling her, his breath leaving him in a long sigh as she wrapped her arms around him once more, her body once more turning liquid, willing, eager.

He took her mouth again, hungry for her, feeding on her, finding his life through her, clinging to life even as he knew it could slip away at any time, reaffirming her existence and his own.

Simple. Elemental.

Man. Woman.

Life.

She was ready for him. And he was oh-so ready for her. To bury himself within her warmth. To feel the pulse of life between them. This beautiful, unreadable, unfathomable, intriguing, exciting woman. He wanted her. Had to have her. Might always need her…

And then he felt the barrier between them. Sensed it. Realized that she was once more tense, holding her muscles tight even as she continued to cling to him, continued returning his kiss.

Could it be? Was it possible?

"Cassandra, are you sure…?" he murmured questioningly against her lips. Blood drummed in his ears, trying to block him from thought. But he was no raw high school jock experimenting with sex, and she was no giggling, willing cheerleader.

Was this possible? Was this real? Was he actually in the front seat of a Jeep poised to roll down a mountainside—ten feet from a particularly unpleasant death—with a virgin?

God surely had a lousy sense of humor….

"Please," she whispered against his ear as she tore her mouth away from his, then buried her head against his shoulder and neck. "Please, Sean. I want this. I truly want this. I—I shouldn't have to die without…without knowing. Please!"

And then, of all the craziness that had happened that night, Cassandra did the craziest thing of all—or at least that's how Sean viewed it.

She held on to him tightly, her head raised from the seat to press against his shoulder.

And she began to move.

Move her hips, her whole lower torso. One long, silk-clad leg snaked up and over his thigh, slid up onto his back, holding him to her, imprisoning him, urging him on, helping him, aiding and abetting him.

And he was lost.

The barrier disappeared, broken by passion, by a need that made his throat raw, choked off his breath, and he was sheathed in her warmth—fully, completely.

His heart was going to burst, he knew it.

His brain had already exploded, leaving all reason to vaporize into the night air without a trace.

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