

# Kingdom Hill

*By*

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## PROLOGUE

It was a place that didn't seem to fit into the surrounding landscape. There is a natural lay to land; certain features are expected to fall into place when you've studied it all your life. Cassandra Henley knew about land. She was raised to observe, with a keen eye, the way Mother Nature arranged herself. Her family had a long history in topography, cartography, and surveying. Seven generations could be traced back to some of the original men who helped map out the United States. She was the first woman in the family to become a Geomatics Engineer and eventually the co-owner of her father's international surveying company, Henley Global Geomatics.

She put together a team of eighty of her best employees to tackle the job of remapping a large swath down the center of the United Kingdom, and although she wasn't familiar with this foreign landscape, her father once told her, land is land. Not only had her company won the bid, but she had also been highly recommended for her expertise and the pace at which she could complete a job. She would do this with her usual speed and accuracy, but for the moment, curiosity had her paused.

Three years ago, this same curiosity stopped her in the mesa in Arizona and helped her team identify a lost city of the ancient mesa inhabitants. She wasn't an archeologist, but it didn't take long when wind of something unusual in the land brought them snooping. The city had been buried in a catastrophic sandstorm thousands of years ago, leaving nothing but an unusual ridge where her knowledge told her there should only be flat land. If she'd known how much money was to be made from such a discovery, she never would have opened her mouth before exploring for herself.

There was good reason to come back to this place when she could feel comfortable to look around. She didn't know what, if anything, she'd discover. Perhaps it was just a geological anomaly, but she'd find out on her own.

"What are you looking at?" her companion asked.

She glanced at Dirk. There was no way she was mentioning this to him, but she'd have a moment's fun, "Do you see anything around here worth looking at?"

He grinned, "Take those clothes off and ask me that question again."

She smacked him hard in the chest, "Landscape, idiot, do you see anything in the landscape worth looking at?"

His gaze panned the surroundings briefly, without interest, “A big paycheck at the end of six weeks? Come on, Cass, I don’t like guessing games. You take forever to pick exactly where you want to start a job; is this it or not?”

“No, we’ll start at the spot I showed you about fifteen or twenty kilometers back.”

“Why don’t you like starting out with everyone at a motel? Wouldn’t that be simpler?”

“Was there a motel twenty kilometers back?”

“Shit, no. You pick the middle of frickin’ nowhere every time.”

“If I do it every time, then what did you expect, the middle of London?”

“After all the aggravation you went through getting your permits from the RICS, no. And if I know you, you’ll take the northern route just to avoid London completely.”

A faint smile tugged briefly at the corners of her lips. He wasn’t quite as dumb as he looked. “Come on, I have a lot of things to finalize before the guys fly in tomorrow, and Charlie is flying in tonight.”

“You didn’t. Tell me you didn’t bring him along for this?”

“I love Charlie. And besides, he hates it when I leave him behind.”

“He’s *not* keeping me out of your bed.”

“Probably not, but you will have to share. If you try to throw him out, I’ll throw you out.” There was no teasing in her statement. She meant every word, and she made sure he understood her point.

## Chapter One

Cassandra waited impatiently as the Land Cruiser came to a slow stop. The insignia of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors was on the door. She clenched her teeth.

“Remember to be nice to the natives,” Dirk whispered through a half-grin.

“I’ve jumped through every hoop, filled out mountains of paper...” she started to growl when the driver’s door opened, causing her to pause. She promptly replaced her scowl with a forced smile. She recognized him as one of the young men she’d dealt with when she cleared all the permits through the Institute.

*Name, name, name?* She had an excellent memory, but for some reason she was struggling with his name. He had been the man who spent most of his time stealing glances at her then blushing when she returned eye contact—and he was still blushing as he looked at her

now. “Mister Rose,” she finally said, glad that his blushing cheeks triggered the mnemonic in her head.

His blush turned scarlet. It must have surprised and impressed him that, with all the people she met at the Institute, she remembered his name. At the same moment, the passenger door opened, and a second man emerged. Unconsciously, and quite accidentally, her smile became genuine. She definitely hadn’t met him before because a man who looked like *that* would have stuck in her memory like a knife. His hair was dark brown and wavy over a somewhat heart shaped face, his skin had a golden glow unlike the pale English, and he had muscular arms bulging under his long-sleeved dress shirt.

She sensed her reaction to the second man caused Dirk to straighten to his full height. She turned her head slightly and gave him a wink unseen by the two approaching men, “You did say be nice to the natives.”

He sighed in annoyance.

She stepped forward to accept Mister Rose’s extended hand, “You’re a long way from home. Please don’t tell me, Mister Rose, I missed a permit.”

“Call me Bobby, and no, you didn’t. Everything is in perfect order. I am actually here to ask a favor.”

She fought against the frown that immediately bubbled up at his statement. She only met him twice and, although he was also a handsome man, she certainly didn’t owe him any *favours*. Being nice to the natives often sucked. “Really? What kind of favor?”

“Miss Henley,” he said and then motioned to the man standing beside him, “this is a good friend of mine, AJ Lisowski; he’s with National Geographic.”

She slipped her hand into Mister Lisowski's warm, firm grip. *Nice handshake.*

"National Geographic—that's pretty impressive," she still held his hand as she turned to look at Bobby, "but what does this have to do with my company working in your country?"

"He's wondering if—"

"I'd like to," Mister Lisowski interrupted with a very American dialect, "tag along with your crew to see if I can find a story in what you're doing."

She felt her eyebrows rise as she started to answer, but he spoke before she could.

"If that's okay with you?" He flashed an impressive smile, "I'm actually vacationing for a couple of weeks between projects, and when Bobby told me what you guys were doing, I thought it sounded interesting."

Dirk chuckled as he turned to walk away, "Good luck, guys."

His remark pissed her off. Of course, there weren't too many things Dirk did that didn't piss her off. Unfortunately, he was right because she did not like anyone getting involved in or, more precisely, interfering with her job.

"I don't usually—"

"I won't get in the way. You won't even know I'm around."

"Mister Lisowski—"

"Call me AJ. Mister Lisowski sounds like you're talking to my dad," he said with a small laugh.

"I would really appreciate it if you—" Bobby started to interject, but she cut him off.

"Mister Rose," she flared, dropping all friendliness, "would denying your favor affect the status of my permits with the Institute?" She believed in cutting to the chase; she didn't like kissing ass unless it involved her business, and even then she did so reluctantly.

“Oh, no—of course not,” his face reddened again, “this has nothing to do with the Institute.”

“I set a hard pace for my crew; time really is money. I’ve never allowed outsiders to get involved on a job. Our equipment is expensive, our insurance is expensive, and,” she added, looking at AJ’s surprised expression with disdain, “I’m a real bitch when I’m working. I don’t like reporters.”

“I’m not a reporter,” he stated sounding as if the term offended him, “I’m a writer. And I promise this isn’t an exposé on your company. Give me a couple of days and if I’m getting under your skin, I’ll go.”

“Really? How do I know some nasty little write-up isn’t going to appear next month in your magazine, or anywhere else for that matter?”

“Whoa,” AJ said, putting his hands up in defense, “somehow we’ve started on the wrong foot. I won’t put anything about your business out there unless you approve it. National Geo doesn’t like lawsuits anymore than the next guy. My boss might not even be interested in an angle about an American geomatics engineer who’s remapping in the UK.”

Her eyelids lowered slightly as she stared at him, “Then why waste the time?”

He smiled broadly, “I told you; I’m on vacation. Wasted time might turn into money with the right story. And who knows, maybe I won’t be able to keep pace with your team, and I’ll pack it up after a day anyway. But if I can turn this into a story, you could get some good, free press for your company.”

She studied him for a silent moment. Unless his exquisite build was fluff and steroids, he would certainly keep pace. Why did he have to be so damn good looking? There were a million reasons screaming in her head for her to look into those stunning green eyes and tell him no, but

if she said no and then needed more permissions or permits from the Institute... “Fine,” she blurted, actually astounded that it came out of her mouth, “you get one day for me to see if this is going to create a problem. If you distract the crew or stumble over any equipment, you’re out immediately—no rebuttals, no questions.”

“Great, I’ll just grab my gear.”

She watched as he opened the door of the Land Cruiser and pulled out a large backpack, an even larger duffle, and a camera case. She already regretted her decision. Dirk would be angry when he found out she agreed, and he’d say she only did it to try out the eye-candy standing in front of her. She felt a small, sly grin creep to the corners of her lips. Very few men looked as good as AJ Lisowski.

*Hell*, she sighed to herself, *he probably has a girlfriend, or, with those impish looks, maybe a boyfriend*. She studied Bobby briefly and decided he might possibly be the boyfriend. Plus, she doubted AJ was uncivilized enough to get into the base, rough stuff she liked anyway.

“I was surprised when Bobby told me you were actually camping out.”

“Do you see any Holiday Inns around here?” The growling, unfriendly snap didn’t hesitate to come out. She could tell her tone startled him by the look on his face. “If you’re going to be with my crew, don’t expect me to be sociable. We’re right where I want to start tomorrow morning. We only stay outdoors when it’s convenient. If you last, I’m sure we’ll be in a motel soon enough.” That didn’t come out exactly as she planned, and she noticed, even under his great tan, his cheeks pinked.

“Thanks, Bobby,” he said, turning to face his friend and shaking his hand.



“Call me and let me know how it goes.” Then Bobby turned to Cassandra, “Miss Henley, it was very good to see you again, and I really appreciate you doing this for me. I’m sure AJ won’t cause any problems.” With that, Bobby cranked the Cruiser and pulled away.

“Frank,” she yelled, “we have a *guest*. Show Mister Lisowski where he can sleep tonight then fill him in on our schedule for tomorrow.” She turned to leave when she felt a light touch on her arm.

“I—I was actually hoping, after I put my stuff away, I could ask you a few questions—get to know you a little bit—for my story.”

“No,” came her terse response. “Frank has been with me almost two years—ask him.” She turned to the lanky man who approached, “This is AJ with National Geographic. Put him on my crew tomorrow so I can keep an eye on him. Oh, and Frank, he’s going to be asking you a lot of questions; make sure *I’ll* like your answers.”

Frank smiled, “Sure thing, Miss Cass.”

She walked to her Hummer to grab her jacket. Even though it was late May, a cool evening mist was starting to roll in.

“I can’t believe you agreed,” Dirk stated, leaning on the fender. “You’re either losing your touch for being queen of the bitches, or else you’re planning to hump his brains out.”

She slipped into her leather jacket as she leveled her unnerving, blue-green eyes at him then flipped her thick, honey-blond hair out from under her collar, “Does either one of those bother you?”

“You not being a bitch anymore? I don’t think I could handle it,” he said with a small chuckle, but then grew serious. “And, yeah, who you spread those legs for *should* bother me, don’t you think?”

“Dirk, are we married?”

“No, but—”

“Engaged?”

“No, but that’s not the—”

“No claims, no games, remember? You find some little twit with a need to be ridden hard, then go for it. It’s not my business; what I do isn’t yours.”

“Maybe I need to start making it my business,” he said with a threatening tone, as he pulled her against his chest.

Suddenly, his hot mouth covered hers and he forced the kiss. She wanted to bite his tongue, but it would only serve to push him over the edge—and she didn’t want *that* kind of a fight tonight.

“You should be mine, Cassie,” he whispered when their lips parted.

“Wrong thing to say!” she shouted, slugging him hard in the arm.

The crew turned their direction, and all went quiet.

“Damn it, Cass—that hurt!” he yelped, rubbing his shoulder.

“Don’t call me that again, or the next time it’ll be your face!” She turned and headed for her tent. When she looked at the crew, they immediately looked away—the only one still staring as she disappeared under the canvas, was AJ.

Within an hour, twilight descended. She could hear the men bantering with AJ as they sat around a small campfire. He was telling them tales about all the places his job had taken him as they fired back with stories of their own. Frequently, she would hear him laugh. His laugh was easily discerned from everyone else’s. She liked it. It was an honest, deep-throated laugh, immediately revealing he was truly enjoying himself. She’d never heard someone whose

sincerity was apparent in something so insignificant, yet so telling. She found herself smiling and waiting for the next moment it would ring out.

Her tent flap opened; Dirk ducked inside.

Charlie, her Boston terrier, growled at the intruder.

“Shut up, Charlie,” he growled back.

“This isn’t a good idea tonight,” she snapped, as she sat up on her cot and closed the book she hadn’t been reading.

“I’m sorry I called you—”

“Don’t!” she said, raising her hand, “You’d be repeating a mistake.”

He sat down gingerly beside her, “What are you so tense? I know it isn’t pretty-boy out there because you’ve been acting this way ever since we got here days ago.”

She was tense—and tired. It wasn’t physical exhaustion; the hard work would begin tomorrow. It wasn’t the mental exhaustion that came with preparing four crews of twenty men each to work in a foreign country; she’d done that plenty of times. It was something else draining her, and she couldn’t unravel the mystery. Her dad had been on her mind lately; her relationship (or lack thereof) with Dirk nagged at her, but it was more than just those two things—it was something inside her. Her hard persona felt more brittle than usual; emotional explosions were barely kept under control, and all the while, she sensed something in her carefully arranged world was getting ready to shift like an earthquake under her feet.

Her gaze drifted to Charlie, who sat nervously shivering beside her cot. He felt it, too. She often thought of herself in closer similarity to animals in that respect; they knew when something was about to happen. Just like the elephants that headed for high ground during the devastating tsunami in Indonesia, or the horses she watched in Utah that grouped together with

their heads down and tails into the wind as dust devils suddenly emerged from seemingly everywhere, instinct alerted them before the event. Something in her world was about to change, and she was scared, but she'd never admit it.

“This is a big job, and—”

“You’ve tackled bigger.”

“Yeah, well, Dad hasn’t been much help this time.”

“Shit, Cass, when was he ever much help?” The spark in her eyes immediately ignited, but he apologized before it set off her emotional powder-keg, “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean that. We’re both tense. Why spend tonight separated?” He reached over and began to massage her tight shoulders. “You need me, baby,” he breathed against her ear, “and I need you. I want you, Cass. You always leave me wanting.” His warm breath turned into hot kisses as he exposed her elegant neck and began exploring lower.

She moaned and tipped her head to the side, giving him better access. He didn’t need any other provocation as he pushed her to recline and settled himself between her legs.

“Oh, yes, baby, yes,” he whispered, as he unbuttoned her top and unhooked her bra.

His hands were large, but her breasts, full and firm, filled them. He teased her nipples between his lips as the needful sensation started to pool somewhere low in her pelvis; her hips beginning to gyrate against his jeans. She knew she was slipping away. It felt like love; it always started this way but never ended this way. She pushed at his chest, trying to put some distance between them, but it only excited him.

“Stop, Dirk, I mean it.”

“You always mean it, baby, but you still want it; you still like it.” His grip tightened down on her arms as she struggled beneath him, “Show me how much you *don’t* want it, Cass.” He gave a soft, panting laugh and then reached over and turned out the lantern.

## Chapter Two

At four a.m., the camp came to life as everyone pitched in to breakdown the tents and pack the gear. The sun would be up in an hour, and as soon as it was light, the teams would

disperse. Cass had been up since three. She liked it when everything was quiet; she could work and plan without distractions—except for Dirk. He was still a bit of a distraction. He was acting as if he was still horny, although she couldn't believe it after the workout she gave him last night. He pestered her while she dressed, bothered her as she set up her computer, and now he was attempting to cop a feel while she fixed a cup of coffee. She had enough. She slammed her elbow into his ribs with startling force, taking the wind right out of him.

He was still sucking for air when she turned toward him, "I'd really hate to have to fire you, but if you can't keep your days and nights separate, I may have to."

He grinned through the pain as he straightened himself, "Right, I keep forgetting: boss-bitch in the morning, my bitch at night."

"I definitely am a bitch, but you can scratch your last comment; I don't belong to any man."

He opened his mouth, but she cut him off.

"Get my team leaders over here, and wipe that stupid grin off your face."

"Yes, ma'am," came his patronizing reply, as he saluted and walked away.

"Good morning."

She turned quickly toward the intruding voice to find AJ standing a few feet away. She didn't respond to his greeting; she never responded to 'good morning' unless it was spoken by someone whom she had to win over for a contract or a government favor. He looked a little disheveled and sleepy faced. "Not a morning person, Mister Lisowski?"

"Please—AJ. And actually, I'm pretty flexible. I can be a morning person or a night-owl; sleep just interferes with my style."

She laughed unintentionally then quickly tucked the moment of humor away, “Did Frank explain everything last night?”

She wasn’t positive in the predawn glow, but he appeared a little embarrassed.

“Pretty much. He just didn’t know whether you wanted me to work or if I was going to be free to roam to take pictures, and—”

“You’ll work,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“I don’t know much about—”

She grabbed a handful of fine electronic devices with nickel-sized heads and short two inch stems that looked similar to dollar-weeds, “My dad invented these. They’re called DSTs for disposable satellite transponders. This device,” she said pulling out what looked like a small GPS, “will indicate precisely where to put the transponder. Pull the little plastic tab, shove the transponder in the dirt, or pull off the stem to stick it to rock or whatever happens to be at ground level, and then walk away to the next location. It’s pretty much fool-proof.”

He took one of the slender devices and twirled it between this thumb and index finger, “Yay, idiot work.”

She arched an eyebrow, “Do you have a problem?”

He smiled. “No, I’m kidding. Is that a GPS?” he asked, reaching for the device in her hand.

“It’s a slight modification of a GPS, so it’s similar. It coordinates between the last placed transponder, the satellite, and the next placement location depending on the grid pattern. I already have it set. Don’t play with the buttons,” she warned.

“Did your dad invent this, too?” his tone was humorous as if he wouldn’t believe her if she said yes.

“No. I did.”

His smile wilted, “Oh.”

If the conversation hadn’t stopped cold from the look she gave him, it was going to end anyway as Dirk brought the team leaders over to her SUV.

“Okay, gentleman, six weeks of hard work starts in half an hour.” She grabbed one of a dozen slender briefcases from the hood and handed the first one to Frank. “Everything you need as far as permits, permissions, identification badges, credit cards, and a small cash fund is in your crew’s case. Don’t use the cash unless they absolutely won’t accept credit. And if you don’t have a receipt, it’s coming out of your pay. Keep your cell phones and computers charged at all times, and I expect the usual check-in twice a day with your coordinates. Download your readings to me by 8 p.m. And, for pity’s sake, Norton, make sure you actually backup your data *before* you transmit.”

“One bloody mistake,” the thick necked Australian quipped, “and she’s never going to let me forget it.”

“That’s right,” she said with a sardonic smile, “because every time I remind you of the extra work you caused me, it reminds everybody else they don’t want to be in your shoes. Any questions before we plant our first transponder and get this show on the road?”

“Do we get a bonus if we finish early?” one of the men asked.

She actually smiled, “We have permits and approvals for six weeks. I’d be happy to be home in four. If we can wrap-up in four weeks, you’ll get six weeks’ pay and a two-thousand dollar bonus.”

“And if we run over six weeks?” Dirk asked.



She knew he knew the answer; he just wanted her to remind them all how much she hated to be overextended. “You’ll get six weeks pay and I’ll dock you for every personal expense after those forty-two days are used up, including food and lodging. Hell, I might even make you pay for your plane ticket home.”

“Let’s get going,” one of the other men said, grabbing a briefcase.

“And by the way,” she added, “Rubio put your magnetic door decals in the driver’s seat of each vehicle. Have them displayed during the day, but if you’re at a motel at night, keep them locked in the truck. I don’t want some yahoo out there posing as a survey company—especially when it’s my company.”

She received a unified, “Yes, ma’am,” just in time to see the first streak of sunlight burst over the horizon.

She took a transponder from AJ’s hand, pulled the plastic tab, and shoved it into the ground with her shoe, “Gentleman, you’re burning daylight.” That was what her dad always said to christen the start of a new project, and then he would go find a place to get drunk. Cassandra didn’t drink, and she also didn’t put quite as much faith into her teams as her father often did. He trusted them to get done what he trained them to do without intervention; Cass preferred to keep a tighter rein. That was probably why she always finished ahead of schedule. Of course, bonuses didn’t hurt, either.

“I’ll take Teddy, Riley, and AJ with me. Frank, you and Desmond—”

“Put AJ with Frank and I’ll go with you,” Dirk tossed out.

The steam rising from her ears was almost visible, “Excuse me?” Her 5’8” frame seemed to extend a couple of inches, “You’re a crew chief. I’m a crew chief. Why in hell’s name would we both ride in the same truck?”

“I just thought—”

“When you own your own company, you can think. Right now, you need to get your four team members and get your ass on the road. As I was saying,” she continued, still giving Dirk a hard look, “Frank and Desmond, split the other ten and let’s get going.”

Dirk snatched his briefcase from the hood, motioned to four of the guys and stormed off. She thought about saying something to him about his attitude, but she’d already pushed his buttons pretty hard, and although he was known for pushing back, he sucked it up this time.

“I don’t want to cause any problems,” AJ quietly stated, as he placed his bags into the back of her Hummer.

“Trust me; I’ll let you know if you do. Dirk’s attitude is his own problem.”

By noon, they were twenty-four kilometers due north from where their trip began. AJ seemed to be quite adept at reading the coordinates and finding where he needed to place his next transponder. Cass spent much of her time shooting elevations with Teddy and Riley—and watching AJ on the four-wheeler.

They were close to the unusual hill, and she wanted time to do a little private exploring. The countryside in this area was sparsely populated, which was one of the reasons she’d chosen the northern heading. She preferred wide-open spaces to towns and cities. She radioed the men and told them to return to the SUV for a lunch break. Lunch today wouldn’t be more than energy bars and Gatorade, but by tomorrow evening, they would be in a small town, and the food would definitely improve.

AJ arrived first, with Riley on the back of the four-wheeler, carrying the Total Station and gear. He started to drive up onto the trailer when Cass put up her hand to stop him.

“Leave it off for now. I’m gonna take it while you guys have something to eat and take a breather.”

“Where’s Teddy?”

“He’s just beyond that rise. Why?”

Riley was climbing off the back as AJ cut the front wheels the direction she indicated, “I’ll go get him.”

Normally, she would be quick to point out she just said she wanted to use it, but he seemed to be having such a good time; she simply shrugged her shoulders and watched him leave. Within a few minutes, he returned with Teddy, and both of them climbed off.

She tucked an energy bar in her jacket pocket and was about to swing her leg over the seat when AJ asked if he could join her. The word no popped out without thought.

“I’d really love to get some pictures, but we’ve been too busy to—”

“Fine,” she relented. He wouldn’t have a clue what she was up to anyway. “But I’m driving.”

“Hey, Boss,” Teddy began in his deep Cajun accent, “you want me and Riley to wait on you two, or keep shooting when were done?”

“We’ll be back in a little bit, so just wait for us. Teddy, throw the leash on Charlie so he doesn’t try to follow me.”

AJ settled in behind her, and she gunned the engine. His hands moved instinctively to her hips. The faster she went, the firmer his grip. She started to smile, and was glad he couldn’t see her face. Actually, she doubted he could see anything as her hair blew backward. Suddenly, she felt one hand leave her hip and scoop her tangled blonde mane aside; then his chin came to

rest on her right shoulder. She didn't expect that, and for a moment, she veered slightly off course.

His deep-throated laugh rolled up from his chest, "Sorry," he said above the roar of the engine, "I like to see where I'm going."

*Damn it!* Now he could see she was smiling—and for some stupid reason, she couldn't quit.

Once over the rise, the unusual hill came into view. She circled it then parked under a large oak near a wide stream which ran from the west side. She didn't need to say anything to him; he dismounted immediately and opened his camera case.

She found a side that wasn't terribly overgrown and began her ascent. When she reached the top, she realized the hill was oddly shaped. From the bottom, it appeared rounded, however, it was actually more squared and rather steep with the exception of the uniquely shaped side from where the stream flowed. She could see for quite a distance. There was a lake to the south, and her SUV was visible to the southwest, but where was AJ? She turned and found him; he had come up the opposite side and was taking a picture—*of her!*

"I didn't agree to any photos," she growled. "Erase it."

"But if this becomes a story, I'll..."

When she was really pissed, she had been told, her expression was sharp enough to slice a throat, and by the look on his face, it was true..

He sighed and looked down at his camera, "It's a great pic. You're very photogenic." He looked up and met an even angrier intense stare, "Okay, I'm erasing it."

Her temper cooled slightly, "You already marked this area, right?"

"Yup. Strange place for a hill, though."

She couldn't believe what came out of his mouth. "Oh, really? And how long have you been a professional topographer?"

His slight remnant of a smile dissolved when she snapped at him. "Why are you so defensive? I just find it strange that, with the exception of the rises that practically make a fence around this hill, there aren't any others."

He was right. She'd been so fixated on a singular hill which didn't fit into the landscape, she hadn't noticed the peculiar features of the rises which were only apparent when viewed from the hilltop. Natural geography didn't have a habit of forming ninety degree angles—and certainly not four times. How could she have stared across the landscape moments ago and not noticed? She suddenly realized just how deep this strange new funk settling over her had become.

"I'm—I'm sorry, AJ, I didn't mean to be so sarcastic." Now she knew she was in deep shit; she actually apologized for something!

"Are you okay?"

She nodded, afraid to open her mouth at this point. Her emotions were off the charts, and she just apologized for something she wouldn't normally have given a second thought. *Crap, what's next? Tears?* She'd throw herself off this hill before she'd cry in front of a man. She began walking away, but he quickly caught up with her.

"I'd like to talk with you for a little bit. Frank was helpful but—"

"No."

"I was just going to ask some questions about the survey. I thought the process would be a little slower."

She sighed slightly and turned to face him, “This isn’t a cadastral or boundary survey—I don’t need to identify individual pieces of property and ownership—it would take friggin’ years to map the whole UK.”

“Then what are we surveying?”

“This is a geodetic survey. Well, it’s also going to include the classic topographical survey elements, too.” She sensed his confusion and knew he needed a better understanding, and (for once) she actually felt like being a little bit helpful, “We’re going to make an exact mapping of contours and exact spatial positions of points on the land. It’s like the base model for all other types of surveys.”

“Can’t you do this from a plane with sonar or radar?”

“Sure we can,” she said, as she began to carefully navigate her way down the side of the hill. “My dad just finished working on one of those in South America for the Brazilian Government. And those can be accurate within fractions of an inch to several inches, but what I do is exact. TNR World Wide Communications wanted the best—and that would be me. They managed to talk Rand McNally into splitting the cost with them, so here we are.” Her foot hit a loose stone, and she felt herself starting to slide when his firm grip latched onto her upper arm.

“I can manage,” she said, pulling away.

“It’s okay to let someone help you once in a while.”

“I don’t need any help,” she huffed, regaining her balance.

“So, now that you’ve answered my survey question, how about you? Why the tough act all the time?”

“I think you’ve asked enough questions,” she stated, as she finally reached the bottom and started making her way around to the stream.

“I don’t believe you’re like this all the time. I mean, I saw a different glimpse of you at the top of the hill.”

“How about today being your last day?”

“Come on Cass; let me in your head a little.”

“Is being a shrink also a sideline of yours?”

“It wasn’t one of my majors, but I bartend between jobs; you’d be amazed at how much psychology that employs.”

She made it to the stream, and, though the stream was what she originally wanted to look at, she turned around to face him, “You’re a—a bartender?”

“Did I just lower my social status?” he quipped.

“Doesn’t your National Geographic gig pay enough?” Her shoe started to sink into the soft, water-soaked earth, and she could feel the cold seeping through her sock. The immediate thought distracting her from the question she just asked was that it wasn’t a geo-thermal spring. This was cold water from either a natural spring or perhaps a very old artesian-type well.

“I make my living by writing and taking pictures for the magazine, but I like to keep busy.”

“Yeah,” she chuckled, “like working for a survey company on your vacation.”

“See! That’s the person I want to get to know; you dropped your shield for a minute.”

The shield went immediately back in place. She turned, hands on her hips, and stared across the expanse to observe where the head of the stream roiled the surface of the water. She studied the dark source which appeared to be about eight to ten feet across. A furrow etched her brow. “This isn’t right,” she blurted, “it’s has to be man-made, but it must be really old.”

“I’m not into geology, but doesn’t it seem weird that the hill—”

“Seems to end on the edge of the spring?”

“Yeah.”

She considered giving him a load of geological bullshit about how it was perfectly natural—just to throw him off—but she found it simply amazing that he recognized on all the oddities that ninety-nine percent of the population would never notice, “It’s getting late, and we’re wasting time; I’ll be damned if my team has the least amount of ground covered today.” She pulled her soaked foot from the edge and headed toward the four-wheeler.

“Well, you do have the smallest team—and a rookie.”

She shot him a look that clearly indicated having the smallest team was no excuse, in her mind, for lack of performance.

“Can I drive?” he asked before she mounted the seat, “I hate to say it, but I think I ate a couple mouthfuls of your hair before I pulled it out of my face.”

*Damn asshole! He has me smiling—again!* She let a little growl of frustration escape; she was going to give in to his request—and it really pissed her off. “Whatever,” she said, motioning him to get on. She slid behind him and considered where she wanted to place her hands. She didn’t want to be clinging to him when they pulled up to the Hummer; Teddy and Riley would be surprised enough to know she agreed to be a passenger; however, it was a great opportunity to demonstrate the kind of thighs she possessed. She fit perfectly against his rock-solid ass. She reached back, grabbed the gear rack, and then tightened down on him with her legs as if she had mounted a horse.

His head turned slightly, enabling him to see her in his peripheral vision. He had a light smile, “Ready?”



“What do you think?” It came out a little sultrier than she intended, and she was certain she saw him blush as he faced forward and hit the start button.

She set a brutal pace for the remainder of the day. The grid was set in two kilometer squares which meant a lot of driving. She decided against shooting elevations and left that to Teddy and Riley. She left AJ on the four-wheeler as she took the SUV and started placing DSTs, although it meant a lot of backtracking to help them keep up with her. By evening, they were still out in the middle of nowhere. She set up her equipment and satellite receivers and began compiling data while the guys erected the camp. She was frowning when AJ brought her a drink and settled beside her.

“Are those all the places we’ve been today or is that everyone?” he asked as he stared at the glowing pin-points on the screen.

She preferred to wallow in silence, but she was just too tired to argue, “That’s just us. I won’t get their data for another forty-five minutes.”

“It looks like we did pretty well for the first day.”

“Do you see me smiling?”

“Okay, I guess this means we didn’t do so well.”

“I have four teams of twenty men each. There are three trucks and three four-wheelers per team, except for ours. I should have four trucks and eight four-wheelers per team for better balance. If this job is going to be finished in six weeks, I’m going to end up wasting a day to get more equipment.”

“Can you work more equipment into your project budget?”

“Don’t tell me, please. Let me guess. You’ve worked in construction before, right?”

“I took a hiatus from writing about five years ago and, yeah, I had an uncle who ran a big construction company, and he needed some help. They put me in management.”

“You didn’t like it, did you?” she said with a light laugh.

“At first it was okay,” he admitted, “but then it became just a nine-to-five job like everyone else in the world. I like a little more freedom.”

“Like bartending and surveying?”

“We only go around once; I’m not afraid to try different things. What’s your budget?”

“You realize most people wouldn’t have the nerve to ask me that, right?” She was actually starting to like the way he could make her laugh when anyone else would have had his head bitten off. “And you honestly have a look on your face like you’re expecting an answer.”

“Sorry, I guess I don’t know everything that’s taboo about you.”

“My true projections ran 3.75 million, but I padded it up to 4.5 in case I needed extras.”

“Those are your costs, right? Not what you bid for the job.”

“Tell me something, AJ: is any of this going to figure into your possible story?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then why ask?”

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled, “Insatiable curiosity, I guess.”

“Most companies will triple their budget to arrive at a bid. When it’s international or government work, those numbers go even higher. I like what I do, and I’m happy with doubling—I win most of my jobs that way—well that, and we have a hell of a reputation.”

“And you’re co-owner with your dad? I mean, I think it’s pretty cool what you do, but you seem—ah, well, kinda young for so much responsibility.”

She could feel herself retracting and regretting opening up to him—however miniscule it had been. The hard expression she normally wore returned, “I grew up fast.” There was no way to disguise the bitterness those words were steeped in. “I have a lot of work to do and you’re distracting me from my job—that’s a no-no, remember? Why don’t you see if Teddy and Riley need any help.”

He took the hint and left her alone. She spent the next thirty minutes online ordering additional trucks, trailers, and four-wheelers. She emailed the confirmations to her crew chiefs, told them to take tomorrow off to go to Newcastle Upon Tyne, pick up the extras, and then redistribute the crews. The only good thing in this entire mess was knowing the trailers she originally rented were large enough to hold two four-wheelers so she wouldn’t have to trade them in. But her small glimmer of happiness faded when she downloaded the data from each group and discovered she had, indeed, covered the smallest area today of any crew—that never happened. Her cell phone rang as the last bit of information filled the screen. Without looking, she knew it’d be Dirk. She would never trust crucial job information to one hard drive—Dirk was her backup before she transferred the files to her dad in Texas.

“What?” came her surly greeting.

He was laughing—which really infuriated her; she hung up on him. Three seconds later, he called back. This time she didn’t say anything when she opened the phone, but he wasn’t laughing.

“I hope you’re planning on sending him packing tonight.”

“Now why would I do that, asshole?”

“Well, he evidently put a kink in your style, unless you were busy doing other things with him and left the work to Teddy and Riley?”

“Actually,” she replied with a smile that could only be described as completely wicked, “he did so well today I’m thinking about hiring him—for your job.”

“I know that’s bullshit.”

“He’s learning quickly, but I do have the smallest crew,” she relented.

“That never put you on the bottom before.”

“Do you have a point, or did you just call to annoy *the wrong person*?”

“Actually, I was going to say it was a good idea to add an extra truck and additional four-wheelers; we felt kind of bogged down today.”

His compliment took her off guard and left her speechless.

He continued, “I see you’ve rearranged the crews; that should help. How about you and I have lunch together tomorrow before we leave town? Cass?”

“I—I have something I want to check out tomorrow—on my own. I probably won’t go into town.”

There was a two second pause.

“Really? All by yourself? Or is AJ staying with you?”

“He can do what he wants, but I can tell you this: your newfound oh-my-god-I’m-gonna-behave-like-some-kind-of-jealous-high-school-boyfriend act isn’t doing anything to impress me; we aren’t a couple.”

“Maybe I want to change that,” came the surprising reply.

“I don’t. And *what* brought all this on?”

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about us lately. Cass, you know I’ve always been crazy about you, and—”

“I have to go,” she snapped the phone shut before he could say anything else. “And I thought I was in a weird funk, huh, Charlie?” she said, reaching down to scratch the indent between his bulgy eyes. She scooped him up onto her lap and nuzzled his little round head as he licked her face, “I’ve been ignoring you, haven’t I, buddy? Sorry. We don’t want a boyfriend, do we? You don’t even like Dirk-the-Jerk; you growl at him.” She laughed as he became frantically happy simply because she was finally paying some attention to him. For a few minutes, she relaxed and forgot everything that had been bothering her.

“Sounds like someone’s in a better mood,” AJ stated, seating himself beside her.

She was prepared to shift back to bitch-mode when Charlie jumped into his lap and lunged for his face. For a split second, she feared his intent was to bite AJ, but to her utter shock, he licked him and acted as though they were old friends.

AJ laughed as he allowed the dog to lap the salt from his skin yet careful to avoid letting the dog lick him directly on the mouth, “Yeah, I do need a bath, Charlie.”

“Yeah, you do,” Cass laughed, and then feigned as if he actually did stink.

“You’re no water-lily yourself,” he reminded her.

She reached over and scratched Charlie behind the ears, “It’s funny, but he doesn’t normally like guys. I thought he was going to bite you.”

Charlie settled into AJ’s lap and looked up at Cassandra.

“Animals like me. I was actually adopted into a family of gorillas when I was writing a story on the Karisoke Research Center in Rwanda last year.”

She burst out laughing, causing Charlie’s head to cock sideways. Riley and Teddy both looked their direction.

“I’m sorry,” she giggled, tears actually forming in the corners of her eyes, “but I can just picture you scrunched down between gorillas while they pick through your hair.”

“That’s exactly what they did! And then they tried to make me eat leaves.”

She couldn’t remember the last time she laughed so hard. He kept going on about how the gorillas treated him, and how he finally had to signal one of the researchers to get him out of there because a female gorilla was trying to put some ‘amorous’ moves on him.

She couldn’t breathe, and her sides were aching, “Stop—please—stop!” she gasped.

Charlie seemed horribly concerned as to what was wrong with her and started whining and pawing at her hands as she covered her face.

“I’m okay, Charlie. Settle down, buddy.” Her laughter slowly ebbed. She dried her cheeks with her sleeve and regained her composure.

“Hey Boss,” Teddy called to her from across the camp, “it’s good to hear you laugh.”

She only smiled, “Thanks, AJ, I needed that.”

“I heard part of your conversation, so I’m assuming it was Dirk on the phone. I guess we were last today, huh?”

“Normally, it would really bother me, but you know what? We worked hard, and I don’t care.”

“Can I see the data? How bad was it?”

She clicked her computer files open and brought up the multicolored map. “Our team is represented by the white dots, but it includes Dirk, Frank, and Desmond’s crews. The other teams are the blue, yellow, and red.” She hit a combination of keys, and the white dots suddenly contained either a 1, 2, 3, or 4. “We’re the ones.”

“We weren’t *that* far behind.”

“No, we weren’t,” she said closing the computer. “It’s late. I’m gonna turn in for the night.” She let her hand brush firmly against the inside of his thigh as she retrieved Charlie up from his lap. She stood and then turned toward him with a wink, “I won’t fall asleep for a while,” she murmured.

His face wore an expression she couldn’t decipher, but she had a strong inclination it meant he wasn’t going to accept her invitation.

“Goodnight, Cassandra.”