



RUNNING FROM LOVE

(IN ALL THE RIGHT PLACES)

by

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Cover art by

New Concepts Publishing

5202 Humphreys Rd.

Lake Park, GA 31636

www.newconceptspublishing.com

Chapter One

Alex gripped the door handle as the single-engine Piper Cub lifted off. She was grateful that it had cleared the trees, because earlier when she climbed aboard from the small motorboat hauling a backpack and cameras, the Pilot, Cooly, had studied her with a skeptical eye, grumbling about her exceeding the weight limit. Just ahead of her now and all around she could see for miles--endless blue skies and a myriad of lakes that sparkled like glitter along the tundra. Trees, thick and green but stunted, carpeted the base of the bald jagged mountains that layered one in back of the other.

Sometimes the pilot would go around and through the sharp walls of granite, and sometimes he'd barely clear them and then dodge the next row that suddenly appeared.

She began to wonder if he knew what he was doing.

As if in answer, he took a sudden dive for a lake below and then spun into a 90 degree turn. When she white-knuckled the dash he chuckled softly.

For the first time since leaving Philadelphia, she questioned her sanity in coming here. While the thousands of acres of untouched landscape was beyond anything she could imagine, there was no sign of a road, let alone a house.

No sign of anything--people, help, a hospital, drug store to buy

tampons. She felt the beginnings of a self-imposed panic attack and took deep breaths, reminding herself that the isolation it offered was exactly the point. Instead, she rehearsed the story she'd concocted and counted the minutes until she could plant her feet on the ground again.

An hour later Cooley spoke into the radio through clenched teeth, black spittle pooling at the corners of his mouth. Alex could only distinguish the words "buzz the camp" over the hum of the engines.

She closed her eyes as he leaned forward and with perfect aim spit into a small vessel in the corner of the miniscule cabin. The smell of rancid chewing tobacco in the claustrophobic cabin had her biting back the bile rising in her throat. This was male territory, Bush Alaska. She had better get used to it.

A voice scratched over the radio, signaling that they were close. As they rounded another mountain, it suddenly appeared--lush and pristine, untouched. She drew in a breath and pressed her face against the cool side window until Cooley tapped her shoulder and pointed for her to look ahead.

The nose of the plane dipped and dove straight for the shimmering blue of the water, dazzling in the high afternoon sun. The engines roared, and the dials on the dashboard spun crazily. Her heart leaped into her throat.

This can't be how a floatplane lands.

Just as suddenly the plane nosed up and continued to climb until Cooley turned sharply and began another quick descent. The Rusty Rudder Café's morning special of sourdough pancakes and blueberries flipped in her stomach. If this was how she would die, she only hoped it was quick.

To think, this was only her fifth flight ever. It took two flights to get her to Seattle, another to Anchorage, and because her final destination was so isolated, it took two more flights just to get her where they were headed now. She'd been flying for almost 24 hours. Was her first exploit off the East Coast to end in a watery grave?

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the beefy grin of the pilot. When he gave an abrupt yank on the throttle she knew her pale skin must have turned dust white. Her heart hammered as the plane hovered just a few feet above Snake Lake and then skidded and bounced off the glassy water several times before it came at last to a stop.

She slumped back against the worn vinyl seat and breathed a sigh of

gratitude to the gods of fate. Cooley cut the engines and shook off his headphones, hooking them overhead. With a push of his shoulder he flung the door wide and stepped onto the floats.

The sudden silence and the clean scent of the air, cool against her heated skin, was a welcome relief.

But before she could catch her breath, Cooley called out to someone across the water.

"I got Hawk's photographer for you." He let out a deep-barreled laugh. "Come and see." He poked his head back in and smiled at her. "You can get out now."

Hawk. He must be a local ... maybe Professor Sheppard's assistant. She tightened the ponytail under her ball cap and tucked errant tendrils of curl under the rim before adjusting her sunglasses. It didn't hurt to make a good first impression on the world-renowned expert in entomology.

Not that she cared about science or knew anything about it. She was lucky she made it out of eighth grade, but she wasn't about to announce that to a stuffy old codger who studied bugs, a Ph.D. in biology and one of the University of Pennsylvania's claims to fame.

She snapped off her seatbelt and tugged at the door. Ramming her shoulder against the padded flat of it did no good, so she waited for the pilot to come around. A quick wipe of the window over the dash showed two men wading through the water with long black boots that came up to their hips. She glanced at her own knee-high plastic rain boots.

When the Center for Young Artists awarded her the grant for this project, she'd had one week to get her stuff together. Her film and chemicals were what mattered most.

In between, she pieced together as much information about Alaska as time allowed. It wasn't much, but she knew enough that May in Alaska meant thawing ground that turned to knee-deep mud. Now she knew why Cooley had the same boots as the others. While the water came to the tops of the men's thighs, on her five-foot-two frame it would reach her waist.

She sighed. She'd just have to wade to shore.

Cooley stood in front of the plane waiting for the men, his craggy brows raised in amusement. A young man about her age with a Hard Rock Café t-shirt stretched over his lanky frame approached. His sunburned nose

was peeling at its tip. He slowed down and gaped at her as he got closer. An older man followed a distance behind.

Cooley came around and flung the door open with a flourish. He grinned at her while the young man continued to gawk. Before she could puzzle over their strange behavior, the dark skinned man came up from behind and stepped around.

“Lemme see, Scott.” He was about fifty, with a round face and only a trace of facial hair. His small deep-set eyes were dark and tilted at their ends, and his straight coarse hair, dark as coal, fell to his shoulders. A carved ivory ring pinched the flesh of his thick fingers. Dr. Sheppard? He looked too rough for a distinguished professor.

“Agsh sha pitt ouck.” He stared. “A wooman?” he said in a guttural, harsh tone that sounded Russian.

“I told ya, Runner.” Cooley grinned.

“Hawk’s gonna be pissed,” Scott mumbled, pulling on his blonde goatee.

They turned in unison to the splashing sounds behind them, and Alex saw a third man in faded jeans and a worn blue work shirt coming at them. He was as tall as Scott but broader in build and more solid looking in every way, from the aggressive set of his jaw to the muscles of his forearms, bared by his rolled up sleeves. His wide brimmed safari hat and mirrored glasses shielded his face from her, but even at this distance she could see from the lines around his mouth that he wasn’t happy.

He raised his chin at Cooley. “You better be kidding.” As they cleared a path, he bounded up to her, the water parting as though flowing out of his way. She was over four thousand miles from home--home as she knew it--in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by four men, with this man, double her size, looking anything but glad to see her.

Feeling herself on shifting ground, she mentally regrouped. This was no different from other problems she had faced. Whatever the confusion, she would land on her feet.

The hard-looking man ducked and peered into the cabin. Her confidence faltered as she found herself facing a jaw of steel.

“What the hell is this?” he said, his voice low. He studied her a minute before turning slowly to Cooley. “This can’t be Alexander Perry.”

Cooley sniggered. "Like I told Runner here. This is Alex Perry, Hawk."

Alex had confronted enough men in her life to know it was safer to say nothing until you knew where you stood.

"Take her back." The man they called Hawk turned his back on the small group and flipped off his hat. As he walked away, a thick mesh of waves, restrained into a ponytail, fell down his neck and over his collar, dark against the light blue shirt.

Take her back? Who did he think he was?

She scrambled out onto the strut. "I'm here to see Dr. Sheppard," she called after him, making sure her voice was firm and steady. She might be little more than half his size, but she hadn't let that stop her before.

He stopped and turned, his expression beneath the mirrored glasses betraying nothing.

She lowered herself carefully onto the float and straightened. "And I won't leave until I see him."

"Is that right," he said and began walking slowly back to her.

Cooley guffawed. When the Hawk gave him a measuring look, the pilot clamped his hand over his mouth, but his shoulders shook.

Hawk came within a foot of her, and when he removed his glasses she met the coldest pair of eyes she had ever seen and as a photographer and aspiring artist she had studied plenty. The cobalt orbs held not a hint of light and dark lashes and brows added to his sinister aura. Couple that with the dark shadow of his beard on a razor-sharp jaw, and the effect would cause anyone to shudder. The only softness was his mouth, full and wide, but forming now into a hard line.

"You're looking at him," he said, not a trace of emotion in his voice.

She had been afraid of this, but still she held out hope. "You're *Professor* Sheppard?" Involuntarily her eyes dropped to his chest, down his long legs, and then swept up again.

She hadn't intended to size him up, but this muscled male with unruly hair conflicted with her vision of the bespectacled absent-minded academic she had been expecting. No argyle sweater and wingtips? She probably should have factored in that this was rural Alaska. At least he could have accommodated her stereotype by having graying temples. But this man was

too young. “Dr. *Nicholas* Sheppard?”

“You got it. I’m not happy either. This isn’t going to work. We were expecting a man.” With a dismissive wave he motioned for Cooley to get back in the plane, but she held up her hand to stop him.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said, addressing Cooley and then turning back to Professor Hawk. “I came here to shoot this trip. I have a contract.”

His eyes narrowed. “Let’s see that contract.” He held out his hand.

She didn’t have one. Instead she retrieved the yellow envelope that held her introduction letter from Stephanie, the director of the community arts center in Philadelphia. The thought of Stephanie in her paisley skirts with her long braid trailing down her back with this Hawk didn’t fit. Stephanie and Dr. Sheppard had been colleagues at a university in the late ‘80s. Alex couldn’t picture the unassuming former hippie with this ... Neanderthal.

After he read the letter, he refolded it and handed it back to her. “Says here your name is Alex. They thought you were a man. Since you’re not, that settles it.”

“What?” She took a step forward and nearly tripped into the water. When she flailed, he grabbed her up with amazing speed and thumped her back down onto the strut. The letter floated in the water between them. He picked it up and crushed it in one hand.

“Give me that.” She grabbed for the paper, but he stuffed it in his shirt pocket.

“Like I said--”

“Stephanie knew exactly who and what I was.”

She watched the men take in her nondescript jeans, long flannel jacket, ball cap, and dark square sunglasses so large they covered half her small face. All of it was carefully chosen to distract attention from her being female. What they didn’t know is that her unisex style of dressing had nothing to do with this assignment. She had adopted the strategy when she was fourteen. Life was safer when she did.

“Show me some identification.”

She withdrew a billfold from her back pocket and gave him the ID card that allowed her access to the center’s darkroom. Since she would

never risk getting a driver's license, it was the only picture identification she carried.

"Take off your hat and sunglasses."

When she removed them, he blinked, and his nostrils flared on his straight nose for the briefest of moments before he glanced down at her picture. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

Cooley leaned in closer. "Pretty little thing, isn't she?"

Hawk handed back her I.D. "No way you're twenty-three and Native American," he drawled, looking her over again. "And this grant--"

"I *am* Native American. One quarter."

His lips tipped at one corner. "Blue eyes and red hair--"

"My hair is ... mahogany. I take after my grandmother on my father's side."

Scott smiled at her. "It's like new copper pennies." She tucked her hair hastily back into her cap.

Hawk eyed her. "And the freckles?"

"They're ... blemishes."

Hawk lifted a dark brow.

Cooley jabbed his elbow at Scott. "I never seen blemishes *that* creamy." Scott shot him a grin.

Hawk gave them a silencing glare and then bore down on her. "You're here under false pretenses. You may even be a minor--"

"I'm twenty-three, quarter Iroquois, and my name is Alex Perry. You can't prove otherwise." At least one fact was true. After a lifetime of foster homes she found she could re-invent herself into anything, and she often had. "Besides, no other Native Americans applied, so I'm hardly taking anyone's job."

Without another word he turned away and trudged back through the water, speaking to Cooley as he left. "Like I said, take her back."

"The university and the center *agreed* to this," she called after him. "I am not leaving."

He continued walking.

"How do you think your supervisors will react when I charge you with gender discrimination? There are laws against that, you know," she shouted at his retreating back.

He emerged onto the bank and disappeared through the trees.

She turned calmly to the small group of men staring at her and tipped back the brim of her hat. "Open that hatch please, so I can get my bags."

The native man, Runner, and Scott were watching for Cooley's reaction. He shrugged at them and scratched his leathery cheek. "The Native Corporation paid me good money to bring her here. They like the idea of her snappin' pictures of the area. I'm not takin' her back."

Runner turned his expressionless face to her and studied her quietly.

Scott murmured. "Hawk's gonna be *real* pissed."

Chapter Two

Spring comes slow in Alaska.

Too bad that bit of information reached Alex a little late.

When she spotted the small pockets of snow at the base of the trees, Scott explained that while the temperatures during daytime in early May would sometimes reach the fifties, the nights would dip low to freezing. She thought of her Good-Will sleeping bag and inadequate supply of clothes. The little nylon pup tent, a grandson's discard borrowed from her neighbor across the hall, looked like a toy next to the heavy canvas ones set up in camp. And she doubted it was waterproof.

Her meager research covered information on Fairbanks and Juneau, which she found now were both hundreds of miles from here.

She cursed her ineptness as she had earlier when she realized that if she wanted to stay dry there was no way off the plane and onto land without Scott carrying her. She was grateful the Hawk wasn't around to witness it. Although she had insisted she'd wade through the water anyway, Scott explained that her clothes would take too long to dry in the heavy damp night air. They were breaking camp in the morning and traveling up the river by skiff. As it was, she had few clothes with her anyway, having saved most of the space in her pack for her cameras and equipment.

Tonight's dinner was to be fish and whole potatoes in their skins, baked over an open fire in the same tinfoil in which they were wrapped, cooked by Runner who she learned served as guide for Dr. Sheppard. After shooting the sun dipping behind the snow peaked mountains, she tried to do her part without getting in the way by washing the potatoes in the lake and collecting more kindling.

In between, she wandered, trying to get a handle on the land and the workings of the camp. She didn't dare let on that she had never camped in her life. Not even for a school trip or the kind sponsored by girl scouts. Her only knowledge came from TV.

It appeared that the men used the lake for washing up. She wondered if they heated the water on the portable stove or if they were expected to

tough it out. None of them looked like they shaved regularly, although Hawk's growth was the most noticeable. As she picked up the kindling, she wondered about an outhouse. Portable toilet? She was at such a loss.

The sun was still high now at seven o'clock, but she could feel the chill coming on. When she left Philadelphia, the temperature had been almost eighty. She clutched her heavy flannel jacket tighter.

A twig snapped behind her. When she turned, Hawk was standing in the clearing, watching her. He had startled her, but she made no move to address him. She simply clutched the kindling tighter and waited.

After an eternity of her watching those dark eyes stare at her, he spoke, his voice low. "Don't wander off."

She glanced around. "I was just--"

"I don't care what you were doing. This isn't Philly. The woods are teeming with wildlife, hungry for dinner."

"Oh ... I hadn't thought--"

"I'm sure you didn't, which is why I don't want you here, among other reasons."

"What other reasons?" She regretted it the moment she said it, but it was too late to take back. She had no desire to get into a big debate with him, now or ever.

"I'm not fond of women. You won't fit here."

Oh. Was that all. "Look, your sexual preferences won't bother--"

"What?" He scowled.

Scott's voice called to him from the direction of camp. "I've got dispatch on the radio, Hawk."

Hawk called over his shoulder that he was coming and then turned back and studied her a moment before he spoke again. "Make sure you listen to me."

She almost saluted him before she thought better of it and just kept quiet.

When he made no move to leave she tried not to fidget, but the silence grew heavy as the darkness settled around them.

She wasn't afraid of him, exactly. In fact, she felt safer with him here. She sensed that nothing slipped his notice, and that was good, except when it included sizing up a city girl who hadn't a clue what to do in the

wilderness. He made her nervous.

When she tried to breathe, she realized she had been holding her breath. If she released it now it would come out in a long whoosh so she struggled to breathe out slowly through her nose. What was he staring at? He tilted his head. Finally, he turned and disappeared through the brush.

As soon as he did, she nearly choked out the air. For Pete's sake, if she had to remind herself to breathe around the man, she wouldn't last a day. She couldn't allow him to intimidate her.

She glanced around, listening for danger, but the silence that surrounded her was deafening. Before she could attract any other wild creatures, she finished collecting the kindling and hurried back.

During dinner they sat on logs, circling the fire, and ate in silence. The fish was cooked to tender perfection in onions and butter, its skin sliding easily off the moist meat. Pike it was called, about two feet long.

She sat on the fallen log, enjoying the delicious aromas and the stillness of the wilderness, a quiet so different from the city and even the loud cricket sounds of the suburbs. She allowed the tranquility to envelope her, until the Hawk's deep voice penetrated through.

"Don't get too comfortable, you'll be leaving tomorrow." His gaze lingered before he turned his attention back to his potato. She watched as he rolled it between long tapered fingers, eating it hot dog style.

He didn't even give her the respect of awaiting a response. Probably didn't expect her to protest.

She didn't. For now, she said nothing.

With the Pike balanced on his knees, he picked up a large piece and popped it into his mouth, chewing slowly.

"I've radioed Stoyliganek."

She watched his jaw flex with each movement, the defining line sharp against his long neck. It occurred to her that his dark features against the healthy white of his eyes and teeth would make an excellent black & white.

"They'll be patching a call from the Arts Center in the morning," he continued. She assumed he was talking to her, but she was more interested in studying his angular face. It would be a good contrast of shadows and textures: the patrician line of his nose, the hollowed high cheekbones, the rough arrogant chin. Charcoal would be a good medium, too.

“Did you hear me?” His brows knit together.

For an educated man, he seemed to suffer no compunction about his high-handedness. But she wouldn't challenge a man like him. At least not outright. She knew how to pick her battles.

He must have taken her silence for acquiescence because next he turned to Runner and questioned him about the supply of ammunition and what temperatures to expect upriver. At the mention of bears and wolverine she listened closely, but they said no more.

Scott ripped into another potato, his face dark as he glanced at Hawk before fixing on the burning flames before them.

The lake made a silhouette against the steady fire and the snap of the logs was soothing in the stillness. With subtle shifts of the burning timber, sparks flew up and then sprayed, imitating small fireworks as the late evening sky grew darker. Another hole in her research.

The long days were a product of mid-summer just as the short ones marked mid-winter. Little more than halfway in between both seasons, the sun would set at nine o'clock versus the midnight she was told by well meaning people back East who didn't know any more than she did.

They claimed you could read newspapers by moonlight. Scott had heard the same and assured her now that by June 21st in these parts it was true that the sun wouldn't set until two in the morning. He was from New Jersey, a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, and doing an internship this summer with Dr. Sheppard, so he understood her confusion. She had immediately found an ally in him and was grateful for his help.

But now it was only eight o'clock, and she could feel the cold seeping in as the sun dipped further behind the mountains. Mountains that made the Pocono's look like hills faced them along one side. She inched closer to the fire, mentally wondering how she would manage to keep warm tonight.

Any help she sought would further reinforce Professor Hawk's claim that she was unsuited for the trip, and she couldn't rely on Scott too much. He was new, too, here as Hawk's assistant. Too bad he wasn't the professor's lover. She noticed the way Scott looked at her. She'd have to take care that she didn't unwittingly encourage him.

Runner rarely spoke to anyone, least of all her, although when he did look at her, his gaze was one of curiosity rather than rancor. Still, she

needed to do this on her own.

After she helped with a cleanup that consisted of tossing the foil into the fire and washing the few utensils in cold lake water with biodegradable soap, she excused herself to find a clearing to put her small tent. She picked a little spot within a cluster of trees at the end of the path. She was close enough to the others in case a wolf attacked or at least she hoped she was. She wouldn't allow herself to think about it.

Clutching her lined flannel jacket tighter about her, she dropped down to her knees and emptied the contents of the tent sack, hoping to get settled before dark set in. There had to be directions with this thing.

One hour later, cold and exhausted, the round little dome teetered crookedly over a tiny bed of moss. She didn't care. Jet lag had set in. After being up a full 36 hours, all she wanted was to crawl into her sleeping bag. But how was she to relieve herself? She wasn't about to ask. Instead, she wadded up the napkins she'd taken from the café that morning and slipped off into the trees. She would save all the worrisome questions this posed for the morning.

The tent was too low to stand in, but, despite her exhaustion, she made herself change into a thick pair of sweat pants and wool socks. After tossing off her bra, she donned a heavy sweatshirt. With her bag of cameras tucked safely along one side of the tent, she zipped the sleeping bag around her and curled up. Her one luxury was the tiny pillow she had lifted from her flight. Glad that she had given in to temptation, she tucked it under her cheek and drifted off.

In what seemed like minutes later, she awoke, her body stiff, her ears alert to the sound of the howling wind. It smelled like rain. Damp and heavy. Moisture seeped through her bones, and she could feel the cold under her back. A layer of nylon tent, an imitation down sleeping bag, and thrift shop sweats proved not enough to keep her warm. She snapped on the flashlight and checked her watch, three AM.

She should have listened when Stephanie warned her about the cold, but she had used up almost every precious cent to purchase the telescopic lens that would allow her to get close-ups of wildlife without getting near. The Native Corporation had particularly requested she get shots of the abundant game.

And least now she didn't have to worry about money. The grant covered airfare. And while this assignment came with no stipend, she did bring enough money to cover her personal needs, which were few. She was thankful that the university said her food was part of Dr. Sheppard's generous budget for his team so the necessities were covered. Dr. Sheppard. She couldn't antagonize him. It was hard to think of him as a professor. Hawk fit him.

A low mournful howl sounded up the mountains, an eerie lament she only hoped was a good distance away.

She curled up tighter, drawing her body heat into her, although she hated to shift for fear of finding another cold spot in the sleeping bag. If she could just keep from shaking, she could make it until dawn. She avoided checking the time again, not wanting to wear down the batteries of her flashlight.

Forcing herself to think of other things, her mind wandered back to her earliest memories ... the scent of soap and wildflowers, the feel of silken hair, all vague recollections of her mother ... her mother tugging on the smooth strands as Alex twirled them around her fingers and sucked them between her lips. Her mother's smile had long receded, only the scent and feel of her remained. Alex burrowed into the thoughts of those comforting sensations, stealing them away into the corners of her mind as she always had when she was troubled, and finally, she felt her body relax.

* * * *

The jagged mountain peaks that contoured against the streaks of color signaling sunrise spiked majestic and timeless in the frosty air. It didn't matter how many times Hawk witnessed this peaceful shift from night to day, he never tired of its feel. Few of life's truths remained as constant as the gentle rising of the sun.

He paused in his task of tending the logs to watch the colors deepen, smell the crisp clean air, and bathe his senses in the silence, until his serenity was disrupted by a sound at his right coming through the brush. Quietly, he picked up his rifle and butted the handle against his hip, cocking it to readiness.

When he caught the rich blur of burnished red, he lowered the Thirty-Aught-Six. Alex emerged seconds later, cradling a bundle of kindling to her breast and with a camera, bigger than her, draping her shoulder. The purple hue to her lips and her ashen skin told him what he had predicted, as did the shadows beneath her eyes. She hadn't gotten much sleep. He was glad he had warned Scott not to rescue her. Now she'd gladly leave after daybreak.

She dropped the small bundle at his feet and crouched down beside the burgeoning fire, rubbing her hands together furiously. Even over the burning logs he could smell the feminine scent ... a subtle honeysuckle fragrance.

"Sleep well?" he asked, stirring the coals with a long stick.

She gave a brief nod, but her small frame shook under the oversized jacket. Her tousled hair and the way her eyes darted around taking in the elements and the sight of his rifle made her look even more vulnerable than yesterday, reinforcing his conviction not to get saddled with her.

He sat back and studied her. The flickering light against her small profile heightened the stubborn lift to her chin. The fact that she said nothing made him think she might be digging in her heels.

"I expect the plane here at ten." He tossed a sprinkling of kindling and the flames caught. She continued to gaze at the growing blaze while the soft crackling cut through the quiet. "You'll be getting on it."

She gave a little sigh and tilted her face to him, brushing a thick coil of hair from her forehead before she spoke. If it weren't for her eyes he would believe her expression implacable, but the way they darkened to a violet color betrayed her anxiety.

"I don't want to fight with you, Dr. Sheppard," she said quietly. "I'll stay out of your way, and I'll do my part in working at the camp. But I won't leave." She held his gaze a moment before turning up her collar against the cold and hunching down closer to the heat.

The soaring fire cast golden shadows along her cheeks, and the warmth made her color return, no doubt along with her determination. Even so, her bottom lip trembled from the frigid temperature. 34 degrees at dawn.

"You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into, and I don't have the time or the interest to explain it to you ... and neither will Scott. It won't

matter how much you try not to be a problem. You know nothing of the Alaska wilderness--”

“How do you know?” Her head snapped up. She glared at him as though she could intimidate him into changing his mind. A glare that did nothing to harden the soft lines of her face nor came close to eradicating his sense of her as hopelessly innocent. If she were a day over twenty, he’d be surprised.

“Well, do you?” he asked.

She was weighing her answer, but apparently she decided against lying because she simply shrugged before looking away.

“And you’re a woman, which entails a host of problems. Camp living, close quarters--”

“I told you.” She threw a stick at the fire and did a quarter turn on her heels to face him squarely. “I’ll stay out of everybody’s way. I learn by watching. It won’t take me long to catch on to the routines.”

Runner emerged with two pails of water and placed them along the perimeter of the fire. He grunted a greeting and walked off.

Before Hawk could answer her, Scott bounded up, pushing his arms into his thick woolen jacket. The young man bunched up his shoulders and rubbed his palms together, nodding to them both, but his eyes lingered on her. You didn’t have to be a genius to know where this was headed.

Hawk nodded back. “Make sure you get that call patched in.”

“I already left word this morning.”

Hawk could tell his young intern was irritated. These last two weeks Hawk had had no problems with him and had valued his professionalism. Less than twenty-four hours into her arrival and there was trouble. “Let’s get set up for breakfast then.”

Before long Runner had a feast spread out that was laden with grease. The kind he claimed stuck to your ribs and carried you through the afternoon. Which was just as well, because Hawk wanted to make it to the next lake before sunset.

Break-up, Alaska’s spring thaw, was still in full swing making the overflowing banks of the river dangerous for travel. They needed their strength to fight the current and to ward off bears that were scrounging the river’s edge hoping for fish that had yet to spawn upstream.

Although the girl had been true to her word, helping with meal preparation and clean up, he still intended to have her gone before they left camp. And he was counting on T-man to back him up. After three summers here, Hawk and the Native Corporation president had an understanding that had come hard before bending to one of begrudging respect.

While Hawk had no interest in any commercial success connected with his study of organisms along the river and lake systems, T-man saw it as an opportunity to publicize the natural beauty of the area.

Alaska's oil-boom years were over, yet still represented a large share of state revenue. T-man's people, a blend of Eskimo and Aleut, depended on commercial fishing to supplement the economy.

During the leaner years when the salmon ran low, the local fisherman made a living guiding tourists, mostly men who visited the lodges in droves to hunt and fish. These were corporate executives and celebrities who, for one week, left their pressures and fame behind to immerse themselves in the local rhythms, where the pace slowed and the only stress was between man and nature.

Hawk experienced this each spring when he returned. Far from the bustling city and intellectualism of the university, he could once again surround himself in the natural flow of life, the truth of the eternal cycles.

Scott's laughter drew his attention. Whatever Alex said to him had caused the young man's eyes to light up in appreciation. *The eternal cycles*. He had to get her out of here.

Static flared over the radio, and call numbers slurred and hung in the air. Hawk rose and headed for the tent, knowing it was T-man and hoping he had been able to patch a call back east to Stephanie. He reminded himself to ask her if there was any word from his lawyer in Philadelphia.

He snatched the handle off its hook and cradled the receiver in his palm. "This is Hawk at 900, do you read me?"

More static. "Loud and clear, ole man. This is T-man at 740, over."

"You got that call for me? Over." Hawk pulled a crate towards him and straddled it.

"Miss Stephanie's right here on the phone, all the way from 'Feel-e-delphia' and not happy about being dragged out of an important meeting. She's grumbling that she knows it must be her old friend complaining about

the talented photographer she sent up.”

Hawk frowned. The Art Center’s director knew him too well, always had. “Tell her it’s not working out, T-man. I’m sending her back.”

“Aw now, Hawk. Cooley says she’s no bigger than a kitten. What harm could she do?”

“Even kittens have claws. Tell Stephanie.”

“Did you hear that, Stephanie?”

A static buzz hissed from the speaker, and then her voice came through clear. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of her, Hawk?” He could hear her chuckle. There were a lot of emotions women stirred in him, but fear was not one of them.

“You know what it’s like here, Stephanie. She’ll never make it, and I’m not babysitting.”

“You’ll have to take it up with the university, Hawk. They’re proud of their little community program. Helps deflect some criticism. You know the charges--elitism, undergraduates are ignored in favor of the graduate students, an increasing international student body.”

“I’m not the university’s public relations director.”

“Take it up with them, Hawk. Gotta go. Over and out.”

“Stephanie.”

“She hung up, Hawk.” T-man laughed. “By the way, Susan’s been asking around, fishin’ for information about when you might be coming into town next. Guess your reputation hasn’t preceded you with that one.”

Great. There wasn’t a woman in Stoyliganek--hell, the entire Salmon Bay area--who didn’t know his one night policy. And in three years he had never wavered. He liked Susan. She was honest, and he liked the feel of her full breasts, the weight of them in his palms, still he intended to stick to his policy.

“Don’t change the subject, T-man. I need to have Cooley up here with the plane by ten.”

“Well, now, I don’t think I can get him there by then. Got him buzzing the fish camps ’cross the bay, seeing if any of the older woman are having any trouble with their set-nets sites.”

“Come on, T-man. I need this favor.”

“Tell you what. Let the little one stay for these next three weeks, then

we can reevaluate when you come into town for your next scheduled trip. That way I'll have gotten some good pictures for our brochures, and you'll still have two more months of research left. What'd ya say?"

Hawk grumbled and ran a hand through his thick hair. "You know she can't be Native American. She's got purple eyes."

"Yeah. Cooley says she's real pretty, though."

"She's a fraud."

T-man laughed. "I'll save a place for you at the pinochle table when you come in, so cash in those CDs you've been sitting on 'cause I plan on cleaning up."

Hawk kneaded his temple and sighed. His friend was not going to budge on this. "Three weeks, that's all I'm giving her, you hear?"

"Sure, Hawk, see you then. Don't get eaten by a bear. They're real hungry this time of year. They'll even settle for a mean old grouch like you."

"Yeah, yeah. This is Hawk at 900, over and out."

* * * *

The three sturdy skiffs pitched high on the water, their 70 Horsepower outboards at full throttle as they fought their way through the clear raging rapids on Snake River. If the heavy clouds dampening the morning sky released their threatening torrent, the small fleet would lose all visibility and be forced to camp along the thickly brushed banks that offered no room for tents and little protection from wildlife. And if the skiffs were caught in the downpour along the mountain face, the small team would be forced to head swiftly downriver again. With that in mind they forged ahead at a punishing pace.

Alex sat on the hard bench in the middle of the fiberglass boat and clung with both hands to one side. She looked ahead, face into the wind, as Hawk sat behind her, steering from the stern and swerving the bow to avoid the rocks and trees that plummeted into their path at an alarming speed. She felt like she was in an arcade; the vast angry water rushing toward her and the obstacles thrown in their path were like a giant video screen, the throttle that Hawk maneuvered with effortless efficiency, the joystick. Only this

was real, with the prize for outwitting the adversary, their lives.

The boat bounced high over a wave sending Alex flying off the bench and onto the boat's bottom.

"Stay down there," he growled as the water sprayed at him, flattening his shirt against his chest and slicking his hair back off his face. She worried about her equipment, under a tarp in Runner's boat. Runner was leading the way, although the torturous twist and turns of the river kept him out of sight most of the time.

Scott was pulling up the rear of their little caravan, and Hawk kept looking back to make sure he was following while simultaneously trying to steer. Hawk's jaw clenched, and his eyes were fierce in their concentration as he sat tall, shoulders squared. He was like some Greek Warrior God, Alex thought as she sat on the floor of the boat looking up at him. The wet wind swept his wavy hair off his face. A threat of danger seemed to lurk just beneath his surface, and a veiled darkness hovered over his strong features. Apollo? No, although he was handsome enough, he was too insensitive to be compared with the good-hearted warrior. Definitely not Apollo.

Maybe Zeus. The god who controlled the movements of the sun and moon and who was responsible for the change of seasons. The Romans claimed he hurled thunderbolts down on earth when angered. Yes. That fit Hawk.

She could picture him now, on the cover of a romance novel. She'd have to open his shirt to a V and catch some of that hard muscle. He'd be perfect. Most models were gay, anyway. Or was that just a stereotype? It didn't matter, because she doubted she could get him to pose.

Another large wash thundered over the boat, soaking her again. She was thankful the weather had warmed.

Then almost instantly, the boat slowed and calmed, sliding gracefully through still waters. She scampered up onto her knees and looked around. The sight that greeted her was one of spectacular beauty.

A huge lake, nestled against a set of mountains, stretched out before them, aquamarine and glistening in the bright sun. Peaceful silence blanketed this natural cocoon, the only sound that of the motors and the gentle lapping of water against fiberglass.

She popped back up and looked around, twisting and turning on the bench, unable to take it in fast enough, and longing for her camera. In her enthusiasm, she went sliding off the bench again and would have gone overboard but for the large hand that clamped onto the front of her sweatshirt.

He hauled her back in like she was a rag doll and set her down firmly, frowning as his other hand gripped the throttle of the outboard motor.

“Hold this a minute,” he ordered when he released her, and then he started ripping open the buttons of his shirt. “The throttle,” he said, glancing down at it. “Just hold it steady.”

She leaned forward and grabbed hold, but as soon as he let go, it swung out of her grip.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” he mumbled, grabbing her other small hand and wrapping it around tight. “Just hold it a second. I don’t want to slow down the boat just to take off my shirt.” She knelt down before the motor and anchored the lever against her midriff as he stripped off his shirt and then dried his face and chest with it before flinging it across the floor of the boat.

He kneaded his neck a minute, arching back, before giving it a good twist. Acres of muscle rippled along his chest and biceps, and she thought of those ads for muscle building herbal supplements found in health magazines. There was a wealth of raw material in his body, she thought with a sigh, knowing full well she’d never get to tap it.

His hand closed over the throttle again, and when she looked up into his face, he was peering down at her with unnerving intensity.

As soon as she scrambled back and perched herself along the bench again, she wished she hadn’t. It brought her face to face with him. He wasn’t pleasant ... or easy. If he were Scott, he would be chatting affably, drawing her attention to the surrounding beauty. Even Runner would have been preferable in the way he stayed clear of her, pointedly avoiding even looking at her. But Hawk tended to stare. She came to think of it as his way of intimidating her, reminding her that he was in charge.

If she turned from him now, it would be an act of submission. And she couldn’t let him see how uneasy he made her. She straightened her shoulders and held his gaze. In an involuntary gesture of defense, she

tipped her chin up, mentally holding her ground.

His eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. "You can take your shirt off now," he said, his voice low and his gaze steady.

She drew in a long breath as his eyes dropped to her breasts. But, thanks to her thick sweatshirt, there was nothing to see.

"Cute," she replied, behaving as though she hardly gave his remark a thought. He could not have guessed how fast his flip comment got her heart racing. She quickly talked herself out of the panic attack she felt coming, knowing it was ridiculous. It had been a year since the last one, and she had convinced herself that being the lone female isolated with three men was nothing to worry about.

Scott drew up beside them just as a large black bird with a white feathery head glided along the surface of the water, like a small aircraft, its wing span majestic. Alex watched in awe. In a flash, it plunged beneath the surface, reappearing an instant later with a fish clutched in its long curved feet before soaring far into the sky. It landed gracefully upon a sheer cliff along the mountainside and spied on their small group as they passed, challenging their bold intrusion into its world.

Alex suddenly gasped in recognition. "Is that a bald eagle?" She turned to Scott. He was smiling over at her, his eyes lit with warmth at her obvious enjoyment. He nodded, and she sighed wistfully. "You think he'll stick around? I'd love to get a shot--"

Scott laughed. "Oh, he'll stick around. He won't let us out of his sight. Because he's a she." He motioned farther up the mountain. She saw the trace of vegetation along a sharp ledge that curved into the rock and glimpsed light reflecting off the small rounded objects within it, stark against the dark slabs of granite.

"A nest?" she asked, wide-eyed.

He smiled. "She'll be watching us real close."

She couldn't believe her luck. Such a beautiful creature. "Does it have a mate?"

"If she did, he'd be getting the food. Something happened to him."

"But they're endangered. He couldn't have been shot."

"They're not endangered in Alaska, but they are protected so he wouldn't have been hunted. Disease maybe. I don't know. But he's not

around and with those babies up there and her. Well ... eagles mate for life, Alex, so I doubt you'll see him."

Alex's face clouded. "Oh..." She thought of the nest of babies, this peaceful haven, and these human intruders. And no one to protect her. An unreasonable sadness swept over her. It was just a bird, yet she knew how it must feel.

Scott chuckled. "Maybe they just had an argument, and he's out with the boys."

She gave him a grateful smile. "You think so?" "Sure..." His gaze softened. She didn't care if he was lying. It felt better to think that, so that was what she would do.

She looked around her. She would never get over this. How utterly clean and fresh, untouched. God's Country. She remembered hearing that once, but she had never formed a mental picture until now.

The skiff picked up speed. She closed her eyes to the cool breeze for long minutes and took deep breaths of the clean moist air. When she opened her eyes her sense of well-being vanished. Hawk was studying her openly. For a professor, he seemed to lack the most basic of manners.

With a mental shrug, she closed her eyes again and shut him out.

Chapter Three

Hawk awoke to the sound of the rain pelting against the canvas roof of his tent. It took him a minute to clear his head and think why it should wake him, and then he remembered.

“Shit.” He unzipped his sleeping bag and dragged himself out. Grabbing his rain poncho off the hook, he stuck his bare feet into rain boots and then slipped on the poncho as he crossed the tent. When he stripped the Velcro latch and stepped out, the rain hit him square in the face.

He ran to the small pup tent, ripped open its flap, and crawled in. A tiny bundle of wet nylon lay in its center, the rain dripping relentlessly onto the little heap, soaking it further.

Scott appeared at his back. “She all right?”

At the sound of Scott’s voice, the bundle moved and rolled.

Hawk struggled with the drawcord and uncovered her small face. She stared at him, eyes wide and teeth chattering.

“Oh, for Chrissake,” he murmured. “Get out of there.”

But when he slid down the zipper, she shook her head and balled up tighter. She was clutching a large canvas bag to her middle. Camera equipment. He wrestled it from her shaking form and handed it to Scott.

“Put this in your tent and get the rest of her stuff.”

Her chattering teeth drowned out her words as he lifted her into his arms and carried her out.

“Damned useless piece of junk,” he muttered at the tent.

When they reached his tent, he dropped her down onto her feet. Immediately, she started to protest. “I’ll go ... go ... with Scott,” she stuttered, hugging herself as the shakes racked her body.

“You’re not sleeping with Scott,” he growled. He didn’t expect her to argue long. The trembling would take every ounce of her energy. “Now get out of those wet clothes.” He grabbed his terry robe off the hook. “Put this on and dry yourself with it.” He dropped it on the crate beside her. The longer her soaked flannel shirt clung to her, the harder it would be to warm her.

He turned his back on her and rifled through his crates for one of his soft chambray shirts and a pair of wool socks, speaking to her over his shoulder. "Hurry up."

When he turned around, he found her still fully dressed and shaking violently. She looked like a drowned bird, her eyes huge in her face and her hair in an awry tumble of wet knots. "I wa-want to go-go with Scott."

"Well you're not." He stepped forward.

She jumped back, clutching the neck of her shirt. "I-I'm not accusing you of wa-wanting to see me undress. I know you would have no interest--"

"I wouldn't?"

"Bu-but..." Her teeth were chattering so hard she couldn't form another word. A picture surfaced of a little Irish fairy, like on the box of that cereal he always ate as a kid. Pixies with tousled red hair ... Lucky Charms. He could see her on the box, her cloud of curls surrounding her small face.

Her eyes widened as she watched him. He was staring at her again. He shook off the ridiculous image and reached for her. When she gave a surprised jolt he bore down on her. "If you don't undress right now, I'll do it for you."

Her startled eyes showed that she believed him. With shaking fingers she began unbuttoning her shirt. He gave her a final look before turning around.

A few minutes later, when he saw the heap of wet clothes out of the corner of his eye, he turned back to her.

She was lost inside his robe. The sleeves hung off her arms, and the hem pooled at her feet. She just stood there, shivering, her white knuckles clenching it closed, apparently the effort it would take to dry herself too great.

"Come here--"

She stumbled back, eyeing him warily, and attempted to rub the cloth over her skin. It wasn't often he had a woman backing away to avoid him, he thought as he studied her quietly. When he was satisfied that she would dry herself, he placed the shirt and socks beside her and ordered her to put them on. He didn't think she'd argue with him this time.

While she dressed, he checked his watch. Three o'clock. As he

looked for something she could wear in the morning, he glanced up and caught her reflection in the mirror hanging off the end post. His shirt came down to her knees, and her skin was chalk-pale. She bent over and struggled to pull up the socks, but she was still shaking uncontrollably and was too unsteady. For all her concentration, she couldn't do it. Her bottom lip trembled. For a minute he was afraid she was going to cry.

He went to her. "Let me help--"

"No." She slumped onto the floor and scurried away from him, trying to shove her toes into the socks. With great effort she got her feet in and dragged the socks up to her knees. She looked up at him, hugging her legs, her eyes guarded, as though he were the enemy. A picture of her as a little girl, huddled in a corner and frightened, disturbed him for a minute.

At first, he hadn't believed she was twenty-three any more than he believed her name was Alex. Katie maybe or Colleen ... Colleen O'Malley-- that he would believe. But now he worried about his position. What if she was a minor? He tossed off the thought. She was ignorant of rural Alaska, but she didn't seem as young as she looked. And Stephanie was the one who signed her on, so why should he worry?

Christ, he was staring at her again. The blue of her lips warned him that it would take a good dose of his body heat to warm her up. As he stripped off his shirt, he watched what little color she had left in her face drain completely. He scrapped the idea of exchanging his sweatpants for a pair of boxers. She was sure to faint.

She was silently awaiting his instructions while he picked up her clothes and draped them over the crates. Her underwear was conspicuously absent. He didn't think she wore a bra to bed, but he knew enough about women to bet she was the kind who wore panties.

"Where are your underpants?"

Her eyes widened.

"I'm tired, Alex. Now get them off or I'll--"

She reached quickly under the shirt and slid down a non-descript pair of white cotton panties. He could have guessed that, too. When he held out his hand, she looked away and dropped them into his palm.

"Now get into the sleeping bag." He motioned to the thick polarguard sack.

She looked at the bag and then up at him. "I ca ... can't take your bag," she shivered through her teeth.

"Yes, you can, because I'm sleeping with you."

Her eyes couldn't have gotten any wider. They skittered over his chest and then up to his face, her look pleading. Either she was really afraid of him, or she was truly an innocent. He figured it for a little of both.

"I'm in no mood to fight, Alex." He knelt next to the bag and unzipped it further, laying it out fully. "Now get in here."

With a small whimper she crawled over, clutching the hem of his shirt around her and then lay down along the flannel lined edge. When he stretched out in back of her, he reached over her shoulder to zip up the bag. Her tremors hadn't subsided, and she vibrated like a motor at full throttle. He wrapped his arms around her, spooning her against him and tangling his legs with hers.

The scent of her hit him full force. It shouldn't have surprised him. There was little he found so erotic as a woman's smell. But he shrugged it off.

She had to be exhausted, but still she made an attempt to resist him, pulling away as he hugged her tight to him. It took her awhile to finally succumb to his strength.

He tucked her head under his chin and held her close, but she felt so fragile he was afraid she'd crack under the force of her shuddering.

They lay for some time before he felt her body begin to settle. Her shuddering subsided noticeably, and her breathing slowed. The time between spasms grew longer. Only a light tremble remained.

With the crisis over, he felt himself unwind and his eyes grow heavy. The storm had quieted, and the gentle patter of rain on the roof was like a soothing mantra.

Before too long she seemed to ease against him. It was about time, because he knew she was worn out, and so was he. He wondered how many hours she had lain there and thought how stupid it was of her not to come for help.

Her breathing sounded like soft sighs now.

"Alex?" he whispered.

She didn't respond, and her chest gently rose and fell. He could feel

her breathing settle into a peaceful rhythm.

She was asleep.

He shifted against her and frowned. It was a good thing she *was* asleep, or his rising erection would have thrown her into another panic. He took deep even breaths, trying to distract himself from the sweet feel of her backside nestled against him. Apparently that was one area in which she wasn't so tiny.

The blood in his groin pooled faster. Aw, hell, why fight it. He gave himself over to the pleasant sensation, knowing it wouldn't last while she lay unresponsive. Relaxing into the pillow only further aroused him as his lips settled into her hair, and the honeyed scent of her filled his nostrils.

Apparently he'd have to put some effort into changing gears. He mentally calculated how many trials he'd have to run on the viability of the tundra sap's potential for microorganisms in order for his results to be reliable and finally grew bored enough to fall asleep.

* * * *

Alex struggled, suffocating under male weight. She was trapped ... trapped by her female vulnerability, her size, her age, her lack of power. Some dreams were worse than others.

While her consciousness fought to rise out of her nightmare, her body wrestled the prison of masculine arms. But still she couldn't awaken. Her mind fled, raced, to another time, another memory.

A swing, the warm breeze against her face, her hair hugging her neck as she glided high, and then the curls lifting as she sailed toward open arms. But these distant memories, too few to last, were quickly shattered by others that pushed to the forefront.

Now she was on the steps of the minister's white clapboard house, standing beside the skinny caseworker whose pants hiked up past his waist. He rang the bell and then leaned forward. "This is it for you," he mocked. "Your last chance before Juvie Hall. And I'll be glad of it. Gets you out of my hair." His stingy lips pinched into a dismissive line.

He hadn't believed her when she told him why she had run the last two times. As bad as each home was when she was little, they became

unbearable when she reached puberty. If it wasn't the older foster boys harassing her it was the fathers' remarks and covert looks.

She had felt forced to run. Both times.

This time, as the couple greeted them on the large wrap-around porch, she prayed it would be different.

Dennis Martin was a minister with a beautiful wife who gave Alex her own room. Gingham curtains graced the windows and a matching white rocking chair held a small teddy bear. At fourteen, she was too old for stuffed animals, but she took it to bed anyway.

During the next few months she was sure she had found heaven. Mrs. Martin helped with her homework, and for the first time she thought maybe she'd pass science. Pastor Martin took her on his Sunday rounds to visit the elderly and the sick.

"Come here, honey," he called her over one night as he sat on the porch swing with a leather bound book resting on his lap. As she knelt down beside him he smoothed a kink of unruly hair from off her face. "You're a good girl. Smart, too. Do you know that?"

She shook her head.

He patted the bench beside him. As he read to her each night she looked forward to the warmth of his attention. She could pretend she had a family.

But before long it began. She awoke one night to the feel of a body pressed to her back. Her thin cotton nightgown was hiked up and twisted around her waist. A large hand cupped her breast. She fought against the restraints, clawing her way to the surface of her consciousness to find herself in the gingham curtained room and the scent of Pastor Martin hanging in the air.

"It's okay, honey," he murmured, his voice thick and heavy and his breathing labored.

She wanted to wretch, but somehow she managed to struggle free and stumble out of the bed. He lay along the crisp flowered sheets, stroking himself through his cotton shorts as his eyes glazed over and traveled along her body. "You're so beautiful. Do you know that, honey?"

With sickening revulsion, she watched as this man she thought so kind and good, a man of God, convulsed with lust. A low moan escaped

from his throat as the wet stain darkened his clean striped boxers.

And then he cried. His face crumpled, and he hid his shame behind his hands and sobbed, begging her to forgive him and promising he would never do it again.

Her revulsion mixed with sorrow for the hope lost that night. She turned to the gingham curtains and pressed them to her tears as he limped out of the room.

She stayed. Where could she go? The social worker would never believe her, and if she ran away she would be put in juvenile hall when caught.

Pastor Martin stayed away for one week.

On her last night, she awoke pinned under his weight with one of his hands over her mouth and nose while, with the other, he hiked up her nightgown. His knees wedged her legs apart. As she slowly suffocated, she stared into eyes, dark blue and wild now, beyond recognition, pleading with him. So intent was he on raping her that he didn't realize he was cutting off her breath.

As he struggled to slip down his pants with one hand, she reached behind her and encircled the brass lamp on the nightstand. She hadn't thought anything could be as horrifying as rape, but now she feared for her life.

Garnering her last ounce of strength, she brought the leaded base crashing down onto his skull. He collapsed on top of her, finally still. She heaved him off and then sobbed as sticky drops of warm blood splattered onto her face.

The rest of that night forever remained a blur. Her flight from Virginia ended on the streets of Philadelphia where she stayed ... far from social workers and foster homes.

Now she felt it happening again.

A strong body pressed against her, disturbing in its power, distinctly male. Panic clogged her throat and the scream, buried deep in her chest, fought to surface.

When she forced her eyes open, she saw no windows, no gingham curtains, only the large hand covering her breast and the covers that bound her tight to the body at her back.

She screamed and kicked and then bit into the bare shoulder of the arm clamped around her.

“Damn it,” the male voice growled, releasing her, but still the covers kept them pressed together. She jabbed her elbows, connecting with the hard chest behind her.

“Alex,” he hissed, climbing over her now.

Instinctively she snapped at his neck with her teeth at the same time her mind registered the voice. He brutally grabbed both her wrists, pinned them above her head, and then anchored her body down.

“What the hell is the matter with you?”

The night’s events returned with stark clarity along with the memory of her panic when he stripped off his shirt and then insisted she remove her panties. While at first she resisted, she eventually reasoned with herself that the dangers of hypothermia demanded that she absorb his body heat, and since he was gay she was worrying for nothing. Besides, he had looked like he was about to strip her himself if she didn’t. Finally, she had surrendered to exhaustion while still in his arms.

Dr. Sheppard, Hawk, was glaring at her now with those dark enigmatic eyes, impaling in their intensity.

“I’m ... I’m sorry,” she whispered, letting her gaze travel along the imprint of her teeth imbedded in his skin. She felt a need to explain. “You were touching my breast.”

“Oh, for Chrissake,” he scowled, his breath warm on her face. “I was sleeping.”

“Well, I didn’t know that and simply reacted.”

“Simply?” he said, studying her in that way that made her uncomfortable. “I’ll need a rabies shot.” His gaze traveled over her face, along her hair, and then settled on her throat. She shifted awkwardly and felt the press of his thighs between hers. In a moment of panic, she realized her shirt was hiked up around her waist. He must have realized it, too, because he lifted his hips uneasily and glanced away before speaking.

“If I let you go, you promise not to bite me?”

“Maybe.”

He took a drawing breath before releasing her.

“Kitten, my ass,” he grumbled and then finally slipped off her,

unzipped the bag and crawled out. She knelt up on the flannel lining, tugging the hem over her knees, reluctant to stand in the light of day with her legs bared, yet knowing her anxiety was ridiculous. He could care less that she was naked beneath.

Nevertheless, she breathed a sigh of relief when he snatched up his T-shirt and shoved it over his chest. It was too much male skin for her.

As though sensing her discomfort, he tossed her a pair of sweat shorts. "You can wear these until your clothes are dry." He walked to the tent flap and poked his head out. "Looks like we might get some dry weather. If that's the case, and it warms up, you can even sleep in that scrap of nylon you call a tent. But otherwise, you'll have to stay here." He turned back and stared down at her. He didn't look happy.

"I can stay with Scott."

"That's not a good idea." He kneaded the back of his neck.

"Or Runner," she suggested.

"Runner?" His head shot up. "Runner doesn't want you." He shifted his weight. "Look, out of the three of us, I'm the best one to sleep with ... sleep in the tent--" He grumbled impatiently. "Share a tent with."

Even considering that Scott was attracted to her, she still felt less vulnerable with Scott than with him. But as she watched him hastily tuck his T-shirt into his sweatpants, she knew he was right. She gave a weary sigh.

"You're right, I guess. I wouldn't have to worry about things turning sexual with you."

He gave her a curious frown and then shrugged. "No, you don't. That, I can guarantee."

* * * *

Alex's clothes hung on lines around the camp drying quickly, thanks to an unusual sunny day. She set up a little corner for herself in Hawk's tent. But if the rest of the days stayed warm like today, she wouldn't have to sleep pressed against his body. And on the first dry night, she intended to sleep in her little tent again. She only hoped that came soon.

As she helped prepare breakfast, she convinced herself that she had

become a little useful since she'd gotten accustomed to the camp routines, although she doubted Runner would ever admit it.

While Hawk and Scott labeled vials and set them in carrying trays, Alex helped Runner fry powdered eggs and freeze-dried bacon. He had thrown coffee grounds straight into a coffee pot and boiled it over the open fire. Kona coffee, from Hawaii, where he went each winter for vacation.

While they ate, Runner discussed his plans with Hawk. "Maybe I'll come back with something today."

Hawk nodded.

"Dinner. Maybe Ptarmigan." He took a long sip. "Akla."

Hawk looked up. "Yeah?"

Runner nodded.

Alex had no idea what animals they were referring to, but she needed shots of wildlife.

There had to be a way to convince Runner to take her along.

"I'll sure be glad when the kings start running," Scott interjected.

"Kings?" Alex asked.

He smiled. "You've never tasted anything like it. Sweeter than..." He stopped abruptly. Hawk and Runner eyed him with interest. Scott chuckled. "Sweeter than Godiva chocolates, Alex. That's something you can relate to."

"Barely." Alex grinned.

Scott continued in a dream-like murmur. "Better than a cold Budweiser on a humid day in Philadelphia, especially when the salmon is cooked over an open fire, fresh from the net, dripping with lemon and butter--"

"You've made your point," Hawk barked.

Alex smiled at Scott's enthusiasm and then turned to Runner. "Do you fish for salmon?" she asked as he spread huckleberry jam over a pilot cracker. She waited politely until she realized he wasn't going to answer, maybe hadn't even heard her since he was so used to tuning her out. If she got a complete sentence out of him, she would consider herself lucky. How could she convince him to take her hunting?

Scott sat beside her, and next to him Hawk seemed intent on dumping teaspoons of sugar into his coffee. He could certainly use the sweetening,

she thought. Only Scott appeared uncomfortable with the silence.

“You don’t usually fish for kings, Alex,” Scott explained. “Although you could. You gill or set-net because when they hit the net, you might get one-hundred in just one tide.”

“Oh....” The wealth of natural resources was staggering. “I’d like to see that.”

“When we go into town in a few weeks, I’ll show you a site. You can photograph the picking of the net.”

She gave him a grateful smile. “That would be great.”

Hawk lifted his head and scowled at them. She didn’t know why Hawk should care, but his annoyance with any attention Scott paid her was obvious. While she thought maybe he was jealous, he had to know that Scott wasn’t gay. Even so, she supposed logic didn’t factor into sexual attraction.

That gave her a thought. Breakfast was almost over, and she still intended to go with Runner.

“What are you doing today, Scott?”

His eyes lit up. “Hawk and I will be collecting samples of the thick vegetation in that clearing of tundra.” He motioned ahead.

“Oh, I’d like to photograph that--”

“You would?” Scott asked.

“Forget it,” Hawk said.

She flashed him a glare. “I can photograph whatever--”

“You’re not hanging around us all day--”

“Why not?”

He leaned in aggressively, his eyes dark. “Because I said so.”

“You’re not my supervisor.”

“Don’t make me throw you off this project.” His pushed across Scott to get in her face.

She went nose to nose with him, knowing it would rile him further.

“You’ve already tried that, and it didn’t work.”

His dark eyes lit up and then blazed. She tipped her chin a notch and eyed him levelly, willing herself not to back down. His eyes dropped to her mouth. A rush of heat took her by surprise, and she had to grab onto Scott’s knee to catch her balance. When he lifted his gaze his nostril flared, and

then he drew in a breath. Without taking his eyes off her, he spoke to Runner. "Take her with you."

It was a relief when Scott leaned in between them, forcing them to back away from each other. Her heart hammered uncomfortably. The feeling was more than a little disorienting.

She sat back and saw Runner's mouth agape.

Hawk growled at him. "Make her carry the lunch. Your buddy's the one who told her to take pictures of wild life. Blame it on him."

* * * *

"This always reminds me of my mother," Scott told Hawk as he labeled the last of the vials they had been collecting all week. "She's a chemist with Beecham & Kline. A Ph.D." His pride was obvious.

Hawk simply nodded, reminded of his own mother, and the glass bottles and atomizers lined up along the mirrored surface of her dressing table. As a child he liked to sit, cross-legged, on the window seat, watching as she applied color along her cheeks and painted her eyes with delicate brushes. Particularly fascinating to him was the small wand that curled and thickened her lashes. He had thought of his mother as the most beautiful mother in the world.

He tried to shrug off the memory of the last time he had watched her. She had brushed, sprayed, and twisted her silky blonde hair into every possible arrangement and then restrained it with glittering pins and clasps. He had wanted to ask where she and his father were going, but knew if he started with his endless questions, she would grow impatient and send for Rosa, his Nanny, to put him to bed.

Then his father had come. Without acknowledging Hawk, his father laid his hands gently on his mother's shoulders and pressed his lips to the hair she had so painstakingly styled. She gave an irritated shrug. His father's eyes had grown dark.

The next few weeks indelibly etched on his eight-year-old brain so that he could still hear the crying and recriminations, visualize the scene of his mother leaving, and feel his own confusion and sorrow at the time, lost now in the ruins. They had lived with his fraternal grandfather after that.

Rosa came with him.

Much later he learned of his mother's infidelities. Apparently he wasn't the only one who thought her beautiful.

"She used to take me with her," Scott said. Hawk looked up in question. "On field assignments, when she first started out. Couldn't bear to leave me, she said. My father and I got to eat junk food when she was gone." Scott smiled as he peeled off the last of the labels and affixed it to the final tray.

Hawk didn't respond as he lifted a couple of trays and placed them in the cart. He hoped Scott didn't intend to tell his life story. They had over five hundred samples to gather and not enough time to do so.

Some of his colleagues thought Hawk was foolish. He hypothesized that the Alaska Wilderness would yield microorganisms that rivaled the rain forests for its healing potential. Hawk just couldn't imagine that so much virgin territory, the likes of which was fairly unequaled in the world, could prove anything but priceless.

The other half of his zeal was the excuse it gave him to bury himself for months in the natural beauty and quiet. This retreat was far from the pressures of publishing academic papers, the civic and social expectations of his grandfather, and the co-eds more interested in studying his own personal biology than his academic research. No one really understood the importance of this male enclave that he regarded as inviolate ... at least before Alex.

The smooth polished stone on the gravel beach crunched beneath the metal wheels as they moved to the first spot. At the sound of the loud squawk, both men shielded their eyes from the sun and looked up. Frieda, the mother eagle Scott and Alex had named, swooped down and took a warning dive for their heads.

Frieda. Hawk couldn't figure how those two came up with such an ugly name for such a regal creature. But he hadn't asked.

"Her babies are about to hatch," Scott said as they navigated through the sinking mud. Hawk knew Scott and Alex had followed the incubation all week through binoculars every morning. And Alex was using her zoom lens to create a photographic journal.

Scott chuckled. "Alex is already thinking up names for the babies."

Hawk frowned. He didn't want these two getting too chummy and then have to worry about Scott mooning over her when she left.

As they pulled up to their first marked site Hawk got right to the point. "Your personal life is none of my business, but I want you to know that Alex will be leaving in a couple of weeks--"

"She said she's staying all summer."

Hawk sighed. "She won't last, and they'll be plenty of opportunity for pictures without her staying all summer."

"She likes it here."

"She just got here." *Damn, Scott better not push this.* "Look, when she was arguing with me about staying in my tent, she said she didn't want to worry about sexual advances from anyone. So, I'm just saying, unless you get some real clear signals--"

"I get what you're saying. But maybe she just meant you." Scott grabbed the shovel and starting attacking a thick patch of tundra.

"I'm sure she meant me, but it could get awkward if things are misunderstood. We're in close quarters."

"I got the message," Scott said, kicking the tool with the heel of his boot.

"Good." Hawk decided to forget it, but not before he gave a final comment. "She's leaving in two weeks, regardless of what she says."

Chapter Four

There was no comparison between a mile of flat Philadelphia sidewalk and a mile of hiking up hill through uncleared forest.

As Alex struggled to keep up with Runner, climbing over fallen trees and stone stepping across streams, she didn't dare ask "how much farther?"

After an eternity, they reached the edge of the timberline, and she looked above to moss covered hills. Little beads of moisture sparkled throughout the ground cover, and a sweet smell filtered through the breeze. She took a deep cleansing breath and smiled.

"Huckleberries," Runner grunted.

Apparently Runner didn't tune her out all the time. Maybe he'd finally answer a few questions while they hiked. She wondered exactly when the berries ripened and if she'd be around to pick them.

Before she could ask, a foul smell hit full force, so stark in contrast to the clean smell of the air and foliage that it sent her reeling. The rank stench was worse than any filthy alley she had slept in or any abandoned house with its attendant human excrement and body odor. It was enough to knock a person flat.

"What is tha--"

Runner held up a hand, alert and listening. His forehead creased in concentration as he searched the hill. His right hand curled around the butt of his rifle.

"Akla," he mumbled and then crouched down, directing her to do the same. "Downwind, wait and see."

Since Scott had told her that Ptarmigan was a bird, she assumed an Akla was, too. But the foul smell couldn't be a bird. Maybe a swamp close by?

A low growl echoed a distance behind them.

Runner swung around on his haunches, his agility belying his years. "Two Akla." He cocked his gun and anchored it beside him, his eyes scanning. Somehow Alex didn't think he'd be this intent about birds perched on both sides. The stench grew stronger.

Alex swung her camera around and snapped off the lens cap, ready for anything.

Anything, that is, other than what she saw.

A huge furry figure came at them fast through the trees downhill. Even from this distance, she could see its rippling back muscles. Runner moved quickly, dropping down to one knee and raising his rifle to the gray blur that grew more distinct by the second.

A scream froze in her throat when she realized what it was. The roaring growl echoed through the hills as the bear charged them, its speed and grace on such bulk and muscle staggering, its head huge. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her legs lost all feeling. As with a nightmare of paralyzing proportions, Alex willed herself to run for cover, but she couldn't move. She felt herself grow dizzy as Runner raised the rifle and aimed. Miraculously, her body moved of its own accord while her brain remained frozen in time. As though watching a film set on slow speed, she saw herself move to Runner's side and raise her camera to the wild beast before her and click away.

The next movements slowed as the bear reared up before them and stood on hind legs, fangs bared, its huge paws swiping the air and its mighty growl terrifying.

A single shot rang out. The bear's head snapped to one side, and her shutter stuttered. She twisted around to get Runner in the shot just as he fired again. Stumbling back to give herself a wider angle, she continued to depress the shutter, catching both hunter and prey in the frame.

Blood sprayed her clothes, but thankfully missed the lens as the bear staggered and moaned. A low guttural growl tore from its throat, and then more blood poured out of its mouth. Another shot to its neck, and it toppled into the brush. Its fall shook the ground under their feet.

Alex stopped clicking and lowered her camera. Runner turned several times in an arc, listening.

In the stillness that followed, the only sound was the hammering in Alex's chest and her quick gasps of breath. Trembling, she sat back on her heels as the full impact of what happened finally hit her. She grabbed onto a clump of bushes to steady herself and then cried out. Thorns stuck to her palm, but still she lowered herself to a small bed of moss for fear of fainting.

The smell of death and the silence was ghostlike, and when she looked at Runner she felt the air choking her lungs. They were still in danger.

He twisted sharply on his heels, discharged shells into his hand, and then reloaded the rifle with a swiftness that told her he'd done it a thousand times.

Runner wet his fingers and raised his palm to the breeze.

"Wind still blows south. Other grizzly still downwind."

The thought of another bear shot her adrenaline through the roof. She fumbled in her bag for the wooden box of bullets and with shaking hands knelt up in readiness.

"It can't smell us or the blood unless wind changes direction." He lifted his nose to the air and then rose. "It's moved away. You can put them back." He motioned to the bullets.

"Are you sure?" she asked, recognizing the question as ludicrous the minute she said it. She waited for his scowl.

It was then she saw the huge animal, bigger than the one he'd killed, standing on its hind legs, not thirty feet from them up hill. And it was looking straight at them.

Alex threw herself back into the bed of thorns as a roar rang out over the hills. Runner appeared completely unconcerned.

"Get down," she gasped.

To her amazement, Runner turned casually and eyed her hovering among the thorns. He studied her scraped up forearms. Then he shook his head, and, as if to answer her confusion, he murmured, "Grizzly eyesight isn't any better than humans. It can't see me here in the trees and the wind picked up. It knows we're here, but it can't smell us." He scratched his head. "Poor bastard is twirling in circles. It'll follow the first scent it picks up. We're upwind. It'll move away from us."

She struggled to her feet. He was right, of course. The animal continued to roar, but it was more of a whine now, and it circled in frustration. "Do you think we killed the mate?"

He nodded and then eyed her harshly. His craggy brows drew together in a frown. "You gonna cry?"

"Of course not," she said too quickly, but then couldn't help from turning and gazing down at the felled beast. She felt a moment of sadness

for the powerful creature.

“There it goes,” Runner said, motioning up hill.

The bear lumbered away, defeated. Its huge head swung up periodically to scent the air, and it let out a howl before limping farther away from them. Despite her sympathy for the bear, Alex let out a breath of relief. One predator was enough for an afternoon.

Then a sudden exhilaration took hold. She glanced at her counter. She’d gotten off thirty-four shots, and even in her excitement she’d automatically opened her aperture to F2 and increased her shutter speed to two-thousand in order to capture the action without blurring the images.

Runner disengaged his rifle and placed it alongside the backpack before circling the bear. He knelt and looked prayerful as he bent his head and closed his eyes, silent and unmoving for more than a moment. Then he looked up into the clear blue of the Alaskan sky. Reaching for his hip, he drew out the thick carved knife she had seen him use to clean fish. His “ulu” with the unusual handle that ran the length of the wide blade, inlaid with ivory. He attacked the thick fur of the carcass with long swipes.

Alex couldn’t look. On shaky legs, she rose and drifted away, breathing in large drafts of clean air and raising her face to the sun. When she ran her hand down her jacket front, her palm met blood-soaked fabric. Before the bile could rise in her throat, she lifted her face to feel the breeze, and her eyes lit on the never-ending horizon. So much open space, and she and Runner infinitesimal in comparison. Did they have a right to invade this private territory of the wild? Maybe the bears had babies they needed to protect.

A few grunts alerted her that Runner was calling. He emerged from the brush with his duffle hoisted onto his shoulder and his denim jacket tied around his waist. He motioned for her to follow.

As they stumbled over rocks and fallen branches, Alex was relieved to see the largest lake of the Tikchiks up ahead.

Runner let out a loud whoop, and began chuckling. He dropped his duffle and stomped through a snarl of vines.

She followed after him and looked down at the sloping valley to see a small pool of water nestled against a sheer rock face. Birds circled overhead, and it looked like fog rising from its surface.

Runner's grin stretched across his face, and he mumbled something in native before she caught the English "hot spring."

She studied the swirling water more closely. The gentle bubbling and the misty clouds hovering had to be warm water rising. She was afraid to hope. Could it mean no more sponge bathing out of galvanized tubs of barely tepid temperatures?

"Can ... can we bathe in it?" She felt so stupid for asking.

Runner just laughed and shook his head.

* * * *

The fire crackled and leaped, casting golden flickering shadows over the faces of the small group of campers as the sun began its slow descent behind the first mountain. Warmed to the bone from their soak in the "natural hot tub" and fully satisfied after a meal of bear steak cooked in teriyaki sauce, Runner--once again and at the urging of Scott--related his confrontation with the Grizzly.

Hawk was sorry he missed the kill. As soon as he was sure they were ahead of schedule in testing the samples, he'd take a day off himself to hunt. He listened with relish as Runner recounted his adventure.

"Akla reared up, her eyes fiery, long claws ready to strike and tear the flesh from my face."

"Oh." Alex looked startled as she stared at Runner. She had missed his earlier recounting. To Hawk's annoyance, Scott had suggested that she be the first to bathe in the spring, leaving the men to wait. Another inconvenience of having a woman along. She had taken forever.

Now she looked astonished at Runner's telling of the kill and the vulnerable set to her mouth momentarily silenced Runner. Her eyes grew liquid. "A female? It could have been a mother that we killed?"

Runner's brow furrowed. Hawk could barely stifle a laugh. She had to be the most naive woman he had ever met and so unsuited for this untamed territory. If she survived another day, he'd be surprised.

While Runner stammered self-consciously, Scott fidgeted. Hawk couldn't help regarding them all with amusement. Then, despite his resolve, he chuckled.

She shot Hawk an accusatory glare. "I ... I just didn't know." Her skin flushed to a light pink.

"Or what? You would have jumped Runner and grabbed his rifle?" he mocked her.

She looked away and stared into the fire, wrapping that ugly blood-stained jacket tighter around her. He waited for Scott to rescue her. Right on cue, Scott piped up.

"I guess it's kind of hard, Alex, to think about, but it's just the way of things."

Hawk laughed softly and enjoyed another sip of the warmed peppermint Schnapps they were drinking. The liquid slid down his throat, exquisite in its smoothness, like the feel of a woman's thigh. An almost perfect way to relax after a hard day. How lucky were they? That Runner had discovered the spring.

The darkness that drifted in and the peaceful silence that enveloped the camp unwound any remnants of tension. Soon the low howling of the wolverines echoed through the valley signaling the onset of night.

Alex rose slowly and yawned. "I'm turning in. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Alex," Scott said softly as she walked off.

She headed in the direction of the pup tent. "Where are you going?" Hawk called.

She turned and stopped. When she looked at him her eyes burned through him. The reflection from the fire caught the highlights in her wet hair and mimicked small flares of light igniting spontaneously.

"You're sleeping in the big tent tonight." He avoided adding "with me."

An audible sigh escaped her, and then she barely opened her lips, no doubt about to say she'd sleep with Scott or in her useless pup tent before he cut her off. "It's too cold. You'll get sick with that wet hair, and I'm not babysitting you."

Her eyes smoldered now as she studied him, but eventually she turned and walked toward his tent.

"I'll show you how to light the kerosene lantern."

"Scott already showed me," she said without turning back to him, her flashlight aimed at the tent flap just twenty feet away. He watched as she

entered gracefully, so small she didn't even have to duck.

Hawk stretched out his legs and leaned back against the thick pile of firewood to sip the rest of his drink while he watched the last of the embers peter to a slow mesmerizing burn. It would be too cold to stay out here much longer. The night sounds grew louder. A screech owl interrupted the silence and the darkness grew to pitch black.

Runner grunted something about turning in himself when Scott gave a small choking sound and mumbled something incoherent. He was looking in the direction of Hawk's tent, his mouth gaping.

Hawk followed the direction of Scott's gaze. A slow smile graced Hawk's lips at the delightful sight. His drowsiness receded, and his senses kicked into full alert.

Alex had lit the lantern inside the tent and stood between it and the side of the tent that faced them. The silhouette she created suggested that of the best peep shows. Every curl in her hair, even the tiny wisps caressing her neck, was clearly outlined, so stark was the image. She had stripped off her baggy sweatshirt and the small ridges on her shoulders indicated the straps of a bra. Unsnapping her jeans, she let them drop to her ankles.

He was amazed at the swell of curves on her small body that had been so well hidden by the loose fitting denim. She turned to the small hooks that Hawk had strung along the center beam, giving the men a profile view. Her bottom tilted full and high atop her slim legs, supple and seductive.

"Jesus," Scott groaned. "We should tell her."

Neither Hawk nor Runner made comment.

Hawk's gaze traveled to her breasts. He was trying to figure out why her chest looked crushed against her ribs and then she reached behind, arching her back, to unclasp her bra. He got his answer. Her breasts spilled free.

Scott sucked in his breath, and Runner leaned forward.

"Well, I'll be damned," Hawk chuckled. "Who would have guessed." Her breasts were full and beautifully shaped. High. And her nipples were erect. The light behind her illumined the ripe plump shape of them as clear as if they'd been sketched in relief. Their heavy weight caused them to sway provocatively with each small movement. *Damn, he would have liked to get his hands around them.* He laughed to himself at the spontaneous

thought.

Scott began to mumble. "It must be one of those athletic bras like the women on campus wear who jog around the track. The kind that bind the breasts."

Hawk felt the uninhibited swell of his groin with each suggestive move she made, the pleasant ache urged on by the strong liquor he was drinking. He groaned at the thought that she'd be sleeping just across the tent from him. He wondered now if she wore underpants to bed as he had predicted.

He found out when she bent to pull on a baggy pair of sweatpants without slipping down her panties.

She was a study in female curves. Her melon shaped breasts hung like fruit, ripe for the picking, and her round firm bottom formed a smooth C. As she stepped into the shapeless pair of sweatpants, his eyes naturally shifted to the V between her legs. Even with panties, her small mound was softly silhouetted against the lantern glow. He ran his hand over his face.

As she yanked the pants to her waist, her breasts bounced on her small frame.

Scott groaned.

Then she gracefully arched her back and reached to slide her arms into her baggy nightshirt. Her nipples pouted provocatively. He wanted to pluck one into his mouth. When the nightshirt finally dropped to her waist, he was almost relieved.

Once again she resembled a shapeless sack. Except that now he knew what lie beneath.

He frowned and shifted uncomfortably.

Scott swallowed and turned to Hawk. "She'd be really pissed if she knew what just happened."

Hawk shrugged. "You going to tell her?"

"Somebody should."

Hawk glanced back at the tent. She had crawled into his extra sleeping bag in the little area she had made for herself. "Listen. We'd be lucky to be rewarded like this again. Just chalk it up to a pleasant surprise and don't mention it. It's not likely we'll get an encore."

"Yeah ... I guess," Scott murmured.

Hawk was betting the poor kid would have some good dreams tonight.

* * * *

If Runner's grin stretched any wider he'd split his lips, Hawk thought with irritation as Runner and Scott riffled through another stack of photos depicting Runner, the fearsome hunter.

Since their work had moved ahead of schedule, Hawk had given Scott the day off and Runner and Alex had stayed behind to enjoy the rare clear skies. The gentle wind had died and now the sun burned high and hot as Scott and Alex stretched on a blanket along the beach with Runner beside them in a sand chair carving a small ivory seal.

Hawk hung back, comfortable in his portable stadium seat propped against a log, and studied his laptop, calculating the correlation coefficient for the fourth time. Seventy-five percent on average. Not bad for the first band of trials.

Alex's soft laughter drew his attention. Scott was teasing her, pulling her into the frigid water. Their shorts were rolled far up their legs, and Hawk would bet they forgot sunscreen. He didn't know whose skin was whiter. They'd both be burned to a crisp by tonight.

Alex escaped Scott only to have him chase her with scoopfuls of water that he was attempting to dump on her while she in turn tried to splash him. Runner was gathering together the stack of pictures and tucking them protectively back into the metal box.

Over two weeks ago when Scott had been sure no animals inhabited the small cave they'd found, the two of them set up a makeshift darkroom using her useless tent, black garbage bags, and some red bulbs from among Hawk's own equipment. Once Runner saw the glossy 8 X 10's she had developed, he never went hunting without her. But Hawk made sure that he didn't forget his duties around *here*.

Hawk peered out from the brim of his safari hat and watched Scott finally coat his forearms with sunscreen. Then Scott reached out spontaneously and dabbed a bit on Alex's nose.

She startled and then blushed, no longer playful in the wake of that

intimate touch. She ducked her head awkwardly and busied herself with tying back her uncooperative riot of curls. Scott's disappointment was unmasked.

Hawk gazed at her thoughtfully. She might hold her own when confronted with bears and stand her ground against his rigid demands, but she was lost with this subtle sex play. She couldn't have been more uncomfortable if she was strapped to a dentist's chair. She was completely without guile.

Just then Frieda swooped down and snatched up a large fish right before her admiring audience. An appreciative howl rose up from the trio. Alex clapped inanely for the show-off bird, and her cheeks flushed with excitement as she gazed at her charge with blatant adoration.

Hawk pushed his reading glasses up the bridge of his nose and returned his attention to the screen. If they didn't stop their playing, he'd never get anything done.

In two days they'd be heading into town to ship some vials to the university lab and to get a little R&R. He'd knock down a few drinks at the Anchor Mast, play a little pinochle. Maybe he'd even see Susan.

Alex let out a squeal. Runner was dangling a handful of starfish in front of her nose.

Hawk shouted. "Take that racket down shore, will you? I'm trying to concentrate."

Three heads stopped in sync and gawked at him as though he was the one making the commotion. Hawk went back to his keyboard and pounded at the control key a few times to bring the screen back up. He heard the quiet rustle of the pebbles recede as the small group moved down along the shore.

* * * *

"Will I get to see the northern lights this summer?" Alex asked as she and Scott studied the darkened sky searching for the Pleiades.

He chuckled. "That's only in winter. There's too much daylight this time of year."

"Oh, of course." Alex looked across the ripples of water at the moon

shining brilliantly across its surface. “You must think I’m stupid sometimes.” She gave herself a mental shake.

“No, I don’t.” His voice was soft, and she suddenly regretted her comment. She was far too aware of his growing attraction to her, and she didn’t want to appear like she was fishing for compliments and risk hurting him. She liked Scott. She felt him move closer.

“Look, the seven sisters.” He pointed to the double row of stars. “The Greeks say the hunter Orion saw the young daughters of the nymph, Pleione, and pursued them, but Zeus saved them by turning them into birds that could fly away in escape.”

“Zeus?” Alex perked up. “Now that’s something I know a little about.” She smiled. “I’m fascinated by the drawings in Greek Mythology.”

“I see.” His smile was so warm, but she knew where this might lead, and she hated to disappoint him. But then he continued. “The North American Indians see it as two rows of dancers. Dancing is important in their culture. It represents fertility so the dance itself is almost considered a prayer.”

“Just think,” she said brightly, trying to change the subject. “Tomorrow at this time we’ll be in a regular bed and--” She groaned inwardly at the stupid blunder and felt herself blush.

He just smiled. “Yup. And they’ll be restaurants and grocery stores with Tastycakes...” He reached up and caught a wisp of her hair on his fingertip. “Dancing...” He gave her a grin. “Will you save a dance for me, Alex?”

He was so sincerely sweet. Alex felt a little tug in her heart.

Before she could answer, Hawk’s deep voice pierced the quiet and resonated through the camp on a string of expletives.

“Uh, oh,” Scott said. “Sounds like Bertha got into the cache again.”

Alex pictured the pointy nosed fox deftly releasing the latch and helping herself to dried caribou strips. A clang of pots and Runner’s cursing in native drew a soft burst of laughter from them both.

“We should go help,” she suggested, although she was reluctant to leave the peace of the shore.

The timbre of Hawk’s growl proved impossible to ignore. Alex felt a shiver run down her spine. She drew her knees up under her sweatshirt and

stretched the hem down to her ankles. “Why is he always so grouchy?”

“Hawk?” Scott shrugged and then skidded a flat rock across the water. “He’s just ... eccentric.”

“Is that what it’s called?”

“I guess...” He gave a thoughtful pull at his goatee. “He’s a genius, Alex. He does things his own way. Like at the university. He doesn’t care about all the petty bullshit that goes on ... the competition.” Scott leaned back on his elbows and stared up at the stars. “When making decisions, other professors bend to public opinion just to get a paper published, but not Hawk. That’s why every graduate student fights to work with him.”

“I can’t imagine anyone wanting to work with him. He scares me to death.”

Scott laughed. “You’re not the only one. The University knows Hawk will go elsewhere if they don’t give him free rein. At the same time, they know he’s big on integrity ... he hates dishonesty, so they leave him alone. They can trust his results.”

“I see.” Although she didn’t really. Academia was as foreign to her as this wilderness. “Why do they call him Hawk?”

“Ever see the way he looks at people?” Scott laughed. “The locals coined it. In their culture it’s rude to look people directly in the eye when communicating. It’s confrontational.”

“So they think he’s rude?”

“Not anymore. They know he’s just Hawk. They also know that Hawk doesn’t miss a thing.”

Alex believed it. She felt it those times that he studied her, and she suspected that he didn’t quite believe her most of the time. She didn’t enjoy lying, but sometimes she had no choice.

She stifled a yawn. “I think I’ll turn in. If we’re going dancing tomorrow,” she said with a smile, “we’d better get some sleep.”

She allowed him to take her hand and help her up, but then she cautiously dropped it as they stood.

When they got to camp, Runner and Hawk were complaining about Bertha and continued to do so as Alex said goodnight and ducked into Hawk’s tent. She lit the lantern and pulled her sweatshirt up over her head, but before she stripped off her T-shirt, she remembered her pillow that she

and Scott had left outside.

When she went back out, Scott was sitting by the fire with Hawk and Runner. All three men were looking up at her silently and watching her approach, their expressions expectant. Runner and Scott went rigid as though sitting at attention. She looked behind her instinctively, thinking maybe an animal had crept up and caused them to suddenly go quiet. But all she glimpsed was the illuminated tent. When she returned her gaze, Scott ducked his head and Runner looked away.

For a puzzled moment, she wondered if she had walked up on male conversation not meant for a woman's ears. And then a sixth sense caused her to turn back to the tent.

Every item behind the canvas was etched in bold relief. A feathered dancing fan, a native craft that Hawk had dangled from the center post, stood out stark against the soft yellow glow. Even the shape of the tiny beads at the end of the ribbons could be distinguished one from the other.

She felt the blood drain from her face, and her pulse began to pound in her ears. When she whirled on them, Scott and Runner couldn't even meet her eyes and the silence that followed was deafening.

Only Hawk met her gaze. His eyes, like shiny marbles, seemed to see right into her and sense her humiliation, yet he continued to watch her without saying a word.

All she could think to do was run.

She tore through the brush, heedless of the snap and sting of the branches across her bare arms as she fought her way clear of them. A small furry animal pitched itself in her path before scurrying away, but still she ran undaunted. It was only when she saw the misty water rising through the vines that she stopped and dropped herself along the grassy bank. The tears burned tight in her throat. She was torn between a burning rage towards people she considered her friends--at least two of them--and a sense of frightening vulnerability as she unsuccessfully willed away the image of her peeling off her clothes for the circle of men.

She caught back a sob and lowered her forehead to her knees. Shutting her eyes and pretending it didn't happen wasn't going to work this time. How could she face them?

Her own gullibility had trapped her into hoping she'd be working

with serious academics in an ideal physical environment. Stephanie had told her how beautiful it was, and that part was true. But she had falsely believed that here she'd be viewed as a photographer first and a woman second, or maybe not seen as a woman at all.

Who was she kidding? No matter how sincere she believed Scott or how much headway she'd made with Runner, they were still only men. They couldn't be trusted to act civilized. She thought about them seeing her naked, even if it was in silhouette, and pressed her palms to her burning cheeks.

It was then she felt a presence behind her, and she froze, knowing that anything could stalk her out here. Afraid to turn, she listened sharply, but only the gentle bubbling of the spring just below traveled through the still air. With her heart in her throat she turned, hoping to find it was her imagination but instead found Hawk. Her relief was short lived.

He was standing in the light of the moon, his legs braced apart, and his right hand fisted around his rifle, watching her. He was the last person she wanted to see. She turned back to gaze at the waterfall. To her annoyance, she could feel him walk up behind her, feel the heat of his closeness. That always disturbed her ... another violation. She needed distance, but with him it was impossible. He was too ... over the top, everything about him ... too mean, too intense, too masculine. A rich scent of leather and his skin, so familiar to her having shared his tent, surrounded her.

"Go away," she breathed. He sat down beside her. When she tried to rise, he clamped strong fingers around her wrist. "Let me go." She tried to pry off his fingers.

"Just stay here a minute," he said, his voice low.

"I don't want to sit here." She punched at his arm and met with solid rock. "I don't want anything to do with you."

"I'm sure you don't." He looked at her quietly, the black orbs of his eyes like polished stone reflected in the moonlight. He held her firmly.

She lifted her chin and set her mouth in a determined line. She would not accept his apology. No excuse could justify their total lack of consideration, their blatant--

"Don't make such a big deal of this," he said in a casual tone.

Her mouth dropped, and she choked on a response that wouldn't come.

He gave her a bored sigh. "It's not as though it was planned ... and it only happened a few times."

"You're ... you're dismissing this as no big thing?"

"Look, they feel bad, they never meant to hurt you--"

"They? What about you?" She yanked out of his grip, rubbing the feel of him off her skin, her anger mounting at his studied calmness. "You, on the other hand, don't feel anything, do you?" Her eyes burned into his. "Which is ironic, because if anyone should feel guilty, it's you."

"Me?" His brows drew together.

"I can almost understand Scott and Runner's reaction, but the only reason you would have to violate my privacy is to humiliate me."

"What?"

"At least the other two can claim some idiotic male inability to look away, but that wouldn't excuse you."

"Why not?" he asked, his expression incredulous.

"You know very well why."

"No, I don't." He scowled.

"Because you're gay."

His expression stilled, and for one long moment she studied the shimmering moisture that had settled on his lashes. Then he blinked. She was too aware now of how close he sat, just watching her, unmoving.

Then he bent his head and peered directly into her eyes. "I'm gay..." He said it more as a half question.

"Yes, I know," she clipped, not quite understanding what he was asking, but too discomforted by his nearness to think. The air felt heavy and thick between them, and when he leaned in closer to study her she could feel his breath, warm against her skin and his eyes glittered.

"I see," he said with whispered softness.

The hair at the nape of her neck rose, and a cool prickle traveled down her neck and tightened her breasts. She wrapped her hands around her bare arms, suddenly chilled and warmed at the same time.

"And how do you know this?" His wide mouth curved up just a bit at the corners, and for a minute she thought he would smile. The lazy look

that crept into his eyes startled her. Then his gaze dropped to her mouth before returning to linger deep into her eyes. She understood his name.

Her heart skipped, and she drew in an anxious breath. “You ... you told me. You said you weren’t fond of women.” It was ridiculous to think he would kiss her, yet even more ludicrous was the thought that she *wanted* to feel his lips on hers. They looked so soft and warm ... so unlike him. The thought stunned her.

“Ah ... yes, I remember,” he said with an amused murmur, still studying her. His nostrils flared. “So naive...” And then his lips were on her, pressing gently, warm and soft, the feel of them so different than what she expected. And then his tongue, playfully sliding along her bottom lip, wet and smooth. A burst of fire ignited along her throat and traveled through her body at the exciting feel of it. His tongue slid past her lips and explored her mouth. The flood of warmth that stormed through her body sent her senses spinning. She grabbed onto his shoulders, and his tongue dipped deeper. On impulse she touched her tongue to his, not even sure if that’s what he expected, and then tingled at the sensation. He reacted immediately by clutching her waist and pulling her closer. A low moan vibrated in his throat and rippled up to settle on their lips. He tasted hot and sweet, and she felt herself melting. Until he pulled away, abruptly, and inhaled a breath. He looked as surprised as she felt. His eyes were soft and liquid, but it didn’t last.

With a forceful thrust, he set her from him and muttered a curse. She grabbed his biceps for balance, blinking in confusion, while his hands, still anchored around her waist, held her at bay. His eyes turned hard. “Does that convince you that I’m not gay?”

She gasped at his intensity and sudden coldness. In a split second his eyes had turned to glints of steel, and he seemed enraged with her.

“I ... I don’t know.” It was all she could think to say since she was in no position to judge a kiss. Yet, she instinctively knew not all kisses could be that explosive. She was still reeling from the exciting feel of his tongue touching hers.

He yanked her up by her shoulders and stood her before him, looking like he was about to give her a good scolding when he turned her hurriedly and faced her in the direction she’d come.

“Start walking. You could get killed out here.”

He pushed her from behind, rushing her through the underbrush and muttering soft curses to himself along the way. By the time they returned to camp, she was exhausted and didn't want to face Scott or Runner, but they stood waiting for her, hang dog looks gracing their guilty faces.

Before they could speak she held up a hand. “Look, I'm tired. And there is no need to explain. It was a mistake to think this would work. Tomorrow I'm leaving. I have enough pictures.”

Scott's mouth dropped open, and then he whirled on Hawk. “This is how you fix things?” He lunged for Hawk, but not fast enough to escape Runner's restraining hold.

Hawk barked. “I didn't tell her to leave.”

“But that's what you've wanted,” Scott accused.

Alex stepped between them. “Please Scott,” she placed a calming hand on his chest. She could feel Hawk behind her. Scott's eyes dropped to her hand, and he covered it with his own.

“Don't go, Alex,” he said. “I'm a jerk, I know it. But don't leave on our account. It's not fair to you.”

Hawk, standing behind her, grunted impatiently, and she could feel his warm breath against her hair. She couldn't think about things now. “I'll see you in the morning, Scott.”

She turned on all three men and ducked into the tent. Hawk's tent. She groaned. There was no way she could sleep with him tonight. While during the past two weeks it was unnecessary to give their arrangement a thought, now with the news that he wasn't gay, she loathed the idea of him undressing next to her. With that thought came another more frightening one. *She was afraid she'd be tempted to watch.* His taste still lingered on her tongue.

In a burst of energy, she gathered up his sleeping bag, opened the tent flap and threw it outside where he still argued with Scott. When it hit the back of his legs and landed in a heap, he whipped around and, spying the bag, leveled a deliberate glare.

She narrowed her eyes. “I would think, considering the circumstances, that it's the least you could do.” She yanked the flap closed and held her breath.

To her amazement, after a few initial grumbles, she heard them scuffle off in retreat.

Chapter Five

Alex was uncomfortable in the neon-lit, raucous, honky-tonk bar that blared with a sensuous Country-Western beat and had hips rolling and tipping along the parquet floor. But it was so stereotypical of the saloons in cowboy movies that it wasn't long before it brought a long overdue smile to her lips.

As she stole her way through gyrating bodies and the tobacco choked air, she pulled self-consciously at the hem of the soft leather skirt that rode far up her thigh with each step of her booted heel, searching for the man responsible for buying her this outrageous get-up. But it was only one night, and if it allowed her to get paid so she could leave, it was worth it. She planned on getting lost in Seattle this time.

A muscled thigh jostled her, and then male hands caught her waist in a steadying hold before he roved an appreciative glance over her breasts. He flashed her a grin.

"Well ... hi there. And who might you be?" He released her gently. Her gaze took in the starched pinstriped shirt and the stylish cut of his curly dark hair. But for his faded Levis and the relaxed set to his mouth, he would fit in Center City, Philadelphia, racing to his BMW, briefcase in hand. For one vigilant moment, she wondered if he was one of the board members that T-man warned her she needed to impress if she wanted her three weeks of photographs paid for. She clutched her portfolio tighter to her hip.

"I'm Alex." She smiled timorously. She lifted to her tip-toes to be heard above the music. "Alex Perry."

He laughed softly, pearly white teeth peeking from his tanned face. "How do you do, Alex?" He tipped his head politely. "I'm Doc, Dr. Allen Levin, but everyone calls me Doc."

She didn't recognize the name. About to courteously ask him what kind of doctor, Alex was interrupted by a jovial voice calling to her.

"Over here, Alex." T-man waved her over. He was sitting at a booth under a moose head that had ball caps hanging off its antlers, the animal's

large nostrils like black question marks painted on fur. The Doctor tilted her chin back up to him before she could excuse herself. "I'm a gynecologist," he said with a wink. "In case you were wondering."

Alex smiled weakly before darting off. She was sure he was just teasing her, because her few weeks here had convinced her that this very young male culture simply oozed sex.

T-man smoothed the ruby-red vinyl with his palm and patted a place next to him, giving her an approving nod.

"Now, that's more like it, Alex. I hope you burned that flannel shirt. And now that I can see you, you could have fitted two of you in those ugly jeans." He reached out to take her portfolio. "And we don't need this tonight. Pleasure first, business later." He tucked the leather pocket under the table.

Alex gave an exasperated sigh. She had instantly liked him this morning when Cooley glided the small plane into the bay and T-man had come to help their estranged group disembark at the dock. When Hawk barked at him about the hotel arrangements, T-man ignored him in favor of asking after Alex's comfort and then assuring her he'd gotten her the best suite on the top floor overlooking the water. And it was breathtaking.

She hadn't realized that he was setting her up to give in later when he encouraged her to see "Penny." Alex had emerged hours later from the older woman's shop in a violet lycra top that hugged her torso and allowed her cleavage to peek out from above the sweetheart neckline. And Alex was sure after she left that the women had taken a butcher knife to her sports bra.

"What are you drinking?" T-man lifted a thick Rolerdexed wrist and motioned for a waitress. The slim girl came over so quickly that Alex was sure she had been watching them discreetly. Her brown eyes had an exotic tilt to them, like Runner's, and her hair was like a long silk scarf. "Honey, this is Alex," he said.

The girl nodded quietly at Alex and then glanced back at T-man as though gauging their relationship. Alex looked at his broad face with renewed interest. His eyes twinkled with fun, yet she knew he was a shrewd businessman. His dark hair was thick and shiny, carefully groomed, and while she knew he had a boat and crew who worked hard fishing during the summer, his rugged hands were manicured.

He gave the girl a teasing smile. "This is Hawk's woman."

Alex's eyes popped wide. "What?"

The girl gave a relieved smile.

"Just give us two Long Island Teas, Honey," he said before the girl spun on her heels and left them.

She continued to study him in astonishment, waiting.

"Everyone knows Hawk's been ... has graciously consented to allow a woman on his team, and I'm just confirming that it's you."

"Oh," she responded on a calming breath.

"I've got a hundred bucks riding on you staying all summer, but few do. Bets ran more on you hightailing it out within a week, and most of the rest have you leaving now, after only three weeks, during this weekend break Hawk scheduled."

She wasn't surprised. She almost accused him of trying to get her to stay so he wouldn't lose his money, but he hardly looked like a man who'd worry about such a small sum.

"Does everyone know everybody's business around here?"

"Pretty much." He grinned.

Two Anchor Mast napkins plopped before them, and icy glass mugs were placed on top.

"I didn't get your name," Alex asked the girl.

"Honey," she replied with a shy smile before moving to the next table. *Of course*. Did any one here have real names? She sobered quickly. She could say the same for herself.

On the heels of that thought, the board members arrived, and T-man introduced her with formal ease. Hunter, Sonny, and Buck tipped their ball caps and cowboy hats to her before throwing them up onto the antlers. The logo "T-Brothers Aviation" on a dusty blue corduroy one caught her eye.

"Buck is Runner's brother," T-man said as he explained each man's position on the Council. Alex's artist eye could have guessed as much by looking at the two men, although, unlike Runner, his brother Buck had no compunction about looking at her. About ten years Runner's junior, he was polite but definitely attentive. Everyone but Hunter ordered beer, and when his white wine arrived the others ribbed him mercilessly, a scene that Alex guessed was played out regularly.

“Runner tells me you take wonderful photographs, Ms. Perry,” Hunter said, as he brought the long necked glass to his lips. He was significantly taller than the others and square jawed to their round faces. His dark gaze slipped so quickly to her cleavage before returning to her face that she couldn’t be sure it wasn’t just a blink.

Buck laughed. “My brother thinks they’re wonderful because he’s *in* half of ‘em.”

“T-man tells us your trying to renege on our contract,” Sonny grumbled, dragging a hand through the top of his unkempt hair. With his scraggly graying beard, he reminded Alex of that first Grizzly shot she captured up in the hills.

“Well--”

“The first King run ain’t for another month, and I need a wider market for my fish,” he interrupted. “I need advertisin’. I don’t have no fancy income like some of these guys with their guiding businesses and stocks. And don’t think just ‘cause my cousin’s rich, that I am, too. You won’t see a cent of mine, little lady, ‘till I see pitchers of salmon.”

“Your cousin?” Alex inquired politely, watching a small drizzle of beer drop from his chin onto his plaid shirt. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Cooley,” he said, and then sucked in a breath and burped.

“Of course...” She smiled.

“We’re cousins by his father’s first marriage to that Aleut from Unalaska--”

“*Unalaska?*” Alex’s head was spinning.

T-man groaned. “Jesus, don’t get him started. He’ll never shut up.” The others laughed and pushed Sonny’s beer at him, encouraging him to drink.

Just this group alone, Alex thought, was a photographer’s dream, but then if you captured the entire bar with its color and contrasts ... the vibrancy. She found herself smiling. The husky rasp of a blues singer rose above the din.

“Are you all natives of this area?” she inquired with more than a polite interest.

Sonny scratched his beard. “You probably can’t tell I’m native, but

I'm one-quarter Eskimo, the rest is Scandinavian. But we're all a mix of somethin' anyway. Hunter here is mostly Athabaskan Indian, and the T-brothers have Tlingit and Jap blood in them. Half-breeds, every one of us."

"But then, so are you, Alex?" T-man interjected. "One-quarter Iroquois on your grandfather's side is it?"

Alex thought quickly. "Yes, I mean no, it's on my grandmother's side."

"Ah, yes." T-man's eyes brightened. "Alex isn't going anywhere, are you Kitten?" He studied her closely.

Alex was glad the subject changed when Honey came with another round of drinks. Yet, she had barely touched her first. In a conciliatory gesture, she raised the glass to her lips and drank along with them. The surprising sweetness of the liquor tingled a delicious sensation on her tongue and warmed a smooth path to her belly. A dizzying buzz swirled in her head after each cautious sip, but she finished the first glass and then started on her second in an effort to avoid alienating her employers further.

The smoke grew thicker, the music louder, and her vision more fuzzy, but the tension that marked the last twenty-four hours receded. Even the silent hostile plane ride that carried every last vestige of her personal belongings despite Scott's objections seemed comical now. Poor Cooley. She smiled to herself. When he had cheerfully asked how the research was going after he executed a flawless take-off, three voices in perfect harmony had told him to shut up and fly.

She relaxed into the booth, sipping her cool drink and enjoying the sound of a smooth melody when she looked up and spotted Hawk, dancing with a tall curvy blonde.

A hot spark ignited low in her belly and then swiftly spread over her breasts. Her nipples tightened to hard buds. She was so startled by her reaction that she choked on her drink, spilling the cold liquid down her top. Three hands appeared with napkins and attempted to soak up the liquid at her breasts, but she fanned her chest with one hand and, with the other, quickly placed her drink onto the table. She waved them away with a friendly glare. "Don't you dare." She snatched the napkins.

When she looked back at Hawk, his insolent glare cut like a laser beam straight to their table. She stared back at him, unable to look away,

watching as he finally turned his attention back to his partner.

His hair was still wet. He wore it slicked back and tied at his neck with the leather check line he used at camp, but still it was hardly restrained. The thick waves fought to surface along his scalp and a few unruly strands framed his temples. As always, the rough shadow of his beard was starkly evident.

His hands held the women's hips close against his as they moved to the music, his lips burrowed in her hair. It annoyed her that she noticed how well his jeans fit his backside. The woman angled her face to his and gave him a sultry smile to which he responded by sliding his palms over her bottom. Alex felt the heat rise to her face and looked about to see if anyone else was watching the pair, but everyone seemed engaged in intimate exchanges of their own.

T-man whispered in her ear. "That's Susan. She's a legal services lawyer. She plays nurse to Hawk's doctor when he comes to town."

Alex blushed crimson. "She looks nice," she murmured inanely.

Hunter reached across and covered her hand. "Care to dance, Alex?" She caught the scent of his expensive cologne and nodded.

Out on the dance floor Hunter made no attempt at discretion. He held her close, but he was so tall, she couldn't see over his shoulder. She had no choice but to lay the side of her temple against his collarbone. She worried when he took the gesture as an invitation to press his lips to the top of her head, but when she looked around, their embrace seemed tame in contrast to the wealth of male hands on female bottoms and those brushing along the sides of breasts.

The sex-charged atmosphere, coupled with liquor that had gone straight to her head, caused her to feel weak in the knees. She clutched onto his crisp shirt to steady herself.

He moved her off to the side and leaned her against a cedar post. "Are you all right, Kitten?" He cupped her face and drew her gaze to his.

"Kitten?" She blinked.

"Cooley started it." He gave her a teasing smile. "But it fits. You can't be the only one around here without a nickname."

Her stomach churned. "What was in my drink?"

"Long Island Tea? Five different blends of smooth quality liquor."

He chuckled. "Let me take you back."

"No. Just point the way to the Ladies Room, and I'll meet you back at the table."

She stumbled through the door that depicted a wolf nursing a cub. Since the other had a wolf guarding a den, she figured she'd chosen correctly. Once through the door, she headed straight for the sink. When she looked at her image in the mirror, a pair of dark almond-shaped eyes were watching her. She ran her newly painted nails under the cool water and then patted her temple with her fingers. She closed her eyes a minute, and when she opened them again, the pretty brunette greeted her.

"You're Hawk's woman."

Alex groaned. "Not exactly."

The woman gave a friendly laugh. "No one is exactly. But many would like to be."

A cold blast of fresh air came through an open window, and Alex took a cleansing breath. Her stomach began to settle.

"What did you drink?" she asked, her brown eyes soft with sympathy.

"Long Island Tea. Two of them."

She groaned. "T-man should know better. I'll give him hell when I go out." She extended a smooth brown hand. "I'm Sister." She guided Alex to a padded chair. "T-man's--"

"Sister," Alex finished. "I can see." Unlike T-man, the young woman's features were small and delicate, almost Asian, and her hair dark and silky. But her eyes held the unmistakable twinkle of her brother's.

"Here." She handed her a damp folded paper towel. "Press this against your forehead."

In time Alex felt her nausea subside, replaced with a relaxed sense of ease. She took a deep breath. "I feel better now. Thanks." She hiccupped.

"You sure do, Kitten." Sister laughed. "Do you need help getting back to your table?"

Alex reassured her that she'd be fine and thanked her.

As women filed in and out, reapplying lipstick and spraying perfume, most gave her a quick smile of welcome. She came to realize there wasn't one who didn't know who she was and why she'd come. She wondered how many had slept with Hawk and then berated herself for the thought. It

was none of her business, and she had no reason to care other than to satisfy her astonished curiosity.

Earlier, while Penny had pinched and tucked her into outfits, the woman had kept up a running monologue on Hawk's sexual exploits. Although the older woman didn't actually say it, Alex knew the woman figured her for one of his conquests and was attempting to dispense some motherly advice. Penny assured her there was hardly a woman in Salmon Bay that he hadn't taken to bed, yet she did give him credit for staying away from the married ones, though not for lack of opportunity.

Like Penny, these women probably thought she was another one of his bed partners and that she was now pining away over his love lost. The thought gave her more than a moment of irritation.

But her mood changed as soon as she reentered the bar and met with a rousing hard rock beat. Doc Levin scooped his arm around her waist and guided her to the dance floor.

"Want to dance?" He beamed down at her as they slipped between other couples on the dance floor. He turned her to him, pressing hip to hip. His smile was so friendly, so openly flirtatious, that she felt swept up in his enthusiasm.

She was pleased at her new found sense of comfort. To be held close by two different men in one night, was two more than she'd ever allowed or desired. And she realized she felt more at home here than she had anywhere else. Maybe she could finally leave her past behind.

* * * *

Hawk was irritated to see that Scott was still standing rigid in the corner and gulping his fifth mug of beer while he watched Alex dance with one guy after another. He hoped the kid got himself good and drunk before he discovered that the two guys after her were well known for batting a thousand when it came to getting women into bed on the first night.

Hawk shook his head. Tonight Alex looked like somebody's daughter with the body of a high-class call girl, and she looked good enough to eat. When T-man told Hawk that tonight the board members all intended to convince her to stay, he had no doubt that Hunter would jump her at first

sight. Doc had wasted no time hitting on her as soon as she walked through the door. Both men were making asses out of themselves, like two adolescents competing over who gets to leave with the Prom Queen and--

“Hawk?” Susan placed her warm palm on his cheek and turned him to face her as she snuggled onto his lap. “Time to go?” she asked, giving her bottom a suggestive wriggle. He realized he was hard. Apparently, so had she.

He removed her hand smoothly and eased her off his lap to the seat beside him. “I can’t stay with you tonight. I’ve got a love sick graduate student to deal with and a teenage photographer who’s going to get herself in a jam if I’m not here to rescue her.”

“Runner says she’s leaving.”

“Not according to T-man. And without payment she’s got no money to go anywhere. So I’m stuck with her for awhile.”

Susan’s obvious annoyance gave way to disappointment and then seduction. She leaned in close and nibbled his lips. “Can’t Runner watch out for them?” Her tongue swept across his mouth, and she sucked lightly on his bottom lip. He could feel the tips of her breasts harden against his chest, yet his arousal subsided.

He tugged her off him gently. “If I can get away later, I’ll come to your place.”

“Fine,” she sniffed and then grabbed his hand to pull him up. “Let’s dance.”

“No.” His eyes riveted on Alex. Hunter’s hands were inching their way down her spine and resting just above the ample curve of her bottom.

“Hawk,” Susan whined.

“I said no.”

He jerked as a blast of cold liquid hit his warmed groin, drenching him. With a dramatic flourish, Susan emptied the last of his beer onto his lap and stomped away.

“Christ,” he hissed, motioning for Honey. After he soaked up most of the beer with a bar towel he went up to his room just two floors above and changed into a clean pair of Levis. By the time he returned, it was almost one AM, and the wet-T-shirt contest was in full swing.

Alex was sitting between T-man and Hunter, her eyes wide and her

face flushed to a rosy pink as a string of women, using the bar like a raised cat-walk, bounced along, braless, the wet fabric clinging to every curve and their nipples semi-transparent under the saturated cloth. As the men howled and whistled, Alex's cheeks grew pinker with each lewd catcall. She seemed about to faint when Hunter eased her up and out of the booth. They disappeared out the back entrance.

Before Hawk could follow through the front, Scott accosted him. "If yooz had let me go after her that night--" he slurred, taking an ineffectual swing at Hawk's jaw and then losing his balance when he missed. Runner grabbed Scott from behind and hauled him up.

"Put him to bed," Hawk ordered before dodging through the crowd. A sultry voice called his name, but he kept walking. Too late to avoid her, she stepped in front of him and blocked his way. "Hey there, Hawk. I noticed you're not with Susan." She stroked a playful hand down his chest.

"Give it a rest, Marilyn." He grabbed her wrist.

Her stricken look registered seconds before her booted heel crashed into his instep, and ground out a quick turn on his toes. He hobbled through the mob on a string of expletives and a promise of revenge on all females.

The cool moist air was a welcome relief as he rounded the corner to the back of the building. The moonlit parking lot cast gentle shadows on couples leaning against cars, seeking the quieter outdoors, some openly necking, some doing more. The thunderous beat of the music vibrated through the walls but not enough to break the night's stillness.

Hawk saw her resting against the door of a Nissan pickup while Hunter's hands curled around the chrome trim of the hood just over her head as he leaned in above her. He reached down with one hand and stroked his fingers lightly along her neck. The moon was bright enough that Hawk could see the deep shadow between her breasts. No doubt Hunter was enjoying the view, too. The crunch of gravel under Hawk's boots warned them of his approach.

Hunter looked up. "Hey, Hawk," he greeted him, when it became obvious Hawk was making a beeline for them. Hunter looked vaguely annoyed under his friendly smile and gave Hawk a questioning look. Still, Hunter extended his hand and the men shook firmly.

Alex studied Hawk with surprise. Her liquid eyes, dazed by the

alcohol, had turned a deep violet, and her skin was flushed to a soft rose.

“How much has she had to drink?” Hawk asked quietly.

“Hawk, if you’re suggesting--”

“She shouldn’t be out here with you--”

“What?” Hunter gave a chuckle.

“Come on, Alex.” Hawk reached for her as Hunter looked on in a moment of stunned silence before he balked.

“Look, Hawk.” His friend placed a restraining hand on his shoulder. “I’ll watch out for Alex.”

“I’ll bet,” Hawk snorted. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Alex slide down the door. He swept her into his arms before she hit the ground.

“Jesus,” Hunter murmured. “I guess those Teas got to her.”

“I’m putting her to bed,” Hawk called over his shoulder as he carried her away. “I’ll see you at the game tomorrow.”

By the time he retrieved her key at the desk and slipped her card through her door, she had regained consciousness and blinked her eyes open in confusion.

“Where am I?” she whispered.

He kicked the door closed with the heel of his boot and carried her over to the bed, perching her on its edge. “Give me your foot.”

She lifted a tentative leg and then fell backward onto the bed.

“Christ,” he hissed, unzipping her boots and sliding them off, forcing his gaze away from her smooth thighs parted before him. An ivory scrap of lace was the only thing separating his lips from the V between her legs. He could smell her light feminine scent.

Pushing to his feet, he quickly stripped down the covers and lifted her, laying her between the sheets and covering her to the waist. Then he reached underneath and with some effort unzipped her skirt. He slid it off and tossed it at the foot of the bed. Without lifting her top, he inched her arms out of the stretchy material and slid down her bra straps. He eased her arms back in and then reached behind and unclasped her bra. Her breasts sprang free against the flimsy fabric, and her nipples puckered the soft material. He hastily tucked the sheet up to her neck. The cups of her lacy bra felt warm to the touch as he folded it and placed it on the nightstand beside her.

The moonlight caught the red in curls that fanned across the pillow, and her skin looked nearly translucent in the shimmering light. Although she had lightly dusted her face with makeup, small freckles still peeked through. The little kick in his gut that surprised him the first time he saw her when he made her take off her ball cap and oversized glasses, surfaced again. It shouldn't surprise him, he thought as he watched her sleep. He trailed an idle finger along her throat. She was pretty. It was an instinctual reaction.

She opened her eyes and watched him quietly.

"Go to sleep," he said gruffly, sitting back.

She blinked slowly. "Why are being so nice to me?" Her lips parted and softened. He remembered her taste.

It had been a mistake to kiss her. What had started as a cocky demonstration of his masculinity ended with pure pleasure. A *big* mistake. Because he refused to get jammed up with any more lying females. Hell, he was finally nearing the end of the mess that had plagued him for a decade. He didn't need any new complications.

And he knew that she would be ... a complication. He reminded himself that, like the other women, she was a liar. As sure as he knew the standard deviation of any given set of numbers, he knew she was hiding something. Lying about who she was and maybe why she'd come. She wouldn't be the first person to hide up here. And he swore he'd never be deceived again.

Her eyes closed slowly, her lashes forming little dark crescents along her cheeks.

God, she was stupid ... to get drunk and leave with Hunter, and now, stretched out like this, half naked before him, allowing herself to fall asleep. Unlike when they were in the tent, no one would hear her with the ruckus below.

He smoothed back a tangle of curls from her forehead. Not only was she stupid and deceitful, but he'd have to include naïve, too. When it came to men, she was the most inexperienced woman he'd ever met.

* * * *

Within three hours, the pinochle ante climbed to one-hundred dollars a point. Runner dragged a sleeve across his brow with an exaggerated swipe. "Too rich for me."

"I'm right behind you," Buck grunted to his brother and partner for the night.

Sonny, along with his cousin Cooley, had been sitting out the game for over an hour. This left T-man with his brother and the usual two top takers for any evening, Hawk and Hunter. The four men eliminated the double deck and played singles while the others watched.

With the games moving into their final heat, tension hovered as thick as the smoke that curled from Hunter's slim cigar and rose in lazy curly cues to the cathedral ceiling of T-man's A-frame. The second story floor to ceiling windows of his home overlooked the Salmon Bay, giving the men a panoramic view of the fleets of thirty-two foot gill-netters mooring for the evening along the dock. Earlier a school of Beluga whales entertained them, swimming in graceful arcs along the coast.

While eight pairs of boots circled the table, each a reflection of their owner, from Sonny's J.C. Penney hikers to Hunter's softly tanned and treated Timberlands, by the end of the hand, all but Hawk and Hunter had begged off the next deal.

A lift of Hawk's chin signaled for Honey to refill his Absolute. Everyone but T-man and Hunter left to hit the can or refill his bar food, and now T-man kicked back a shot of Jack Daniels and placed the glass down with a thud. Hawk could see the liquor burn its way down his throat by the fire that flashed in his even-tempered eyes. "Damn. That's good," T-man hissed.

Hunter responded with an open smile as he sipped his brandy snifter slowly and closed his eyes, savoring the pleasure. Hawk could predict the stock market by the certainty of his friends' habits.

"Hunter," T-man said. "Alex tells me you've invited her to your house on Lake Iliamna."

"That's right."

"I thought you were headed for Juneau," Hawk interrupted, "to caucus with the Limited Entry Commission."

"I was. But I changed my plans when Alex accepted. I've got to

strike while I'm hot." He gave a lecherous smile.

Hawk frowned and placed his chair back on all fours. He lifted his rocks glass to his lips and sucked a cube of ice into his mouth.

"Wise move," T-man agreed. "I saw her with Doc today."

One by one the rest of the men were returning to their seats, fisting fresh bottles of beer and carrying plates loaded with fried zucchini strips.

"I saw her with Doc on my way over." Hunter's mouth formed a grim line before curving into his usual cocky grin. "But shit, won't be the first time Doc and I have gone up against--"

"She's not a competition," Hawk said, downing the last of his scotch. T-man drew his brows together in mock seriousness. Hawk returned the look as he anchored his boot against the table leg and gave his chair a shove backward. "Hell, she doesn't even like men."

Hunter gave a soft laugh, the tip of his cigar hanging from his lips. "I think it's you she doesn't like."

T-man smiled and signaled for Honey to bring him a new deck of cards. "She refused to go back with your team, Hawk, when I insisted she had to photograph the first salmon spawning. But she jumped at the chance to go with Hunter." T-man peered at him with thinly disguised amusement. "I think she's trying to avoid ya, Hawk."

"She's just ... sensitive," Hawk told them. The last player scraped his chair back and sat down.

"Anything in particular bothering her?" Hunter studied him intently while the others pushed into the table and readied for the main event.

T-man ripped into the new deck. "She was sleeping in your tent."

"So?"

"So she wouldn't be the first woman to run for cover after an experience like that," Hunter joked.

Sonny let out a deep-barreled laugh to which the other's readily joined as T-man passed the deck for Hawk to cut.

With a smooth swipe, Hawk completed the cut and then played along. "Aw, once the rope burns ease up, she'll be all right." Hawk could see by Hunter's relaxed smile that his friend had gotten the answer he wanted. "It's not a good idea for her to go with you," Hawk added, his tone matter-of-fact.

The men shifted impatiently, waiting for T-man to deal. He set the dummy hand aside and with a smooth hand dealt the first four. Hunter picked up carefully and studied them. "Why not?"

"She doesn't like men," Hawk repeated, spreading his cards with a slow hand.

"Ah, but our little kitten hasn't sampled the full measure of *my* charm"--Hunter flashed the group a predatory grin--"yet."

Hawk was tired of Hunter's cockiness and wanted to get on with the game. "She's ... unsophisticated," he explained, hoping that would put an end to it.

"Refreshingly innocent," Hunter countered.

"So innocent," Hawk emphasized for his stubborn friend, "that she probably thinks you're actually interested in helping her get those shots of Salmon."

"Your point?"

"It could backfire, is all I'm saying."

"I see." Hunter lifted a brow. "Thanks for the advice. I wouldn't want to appear ... inept."

Cooley's chuckle and Sonny's louder one that followed drew an annoyed grunt from Hawk. He turned to T-man. "You plan on dealing the rest of that deck?"

"Sure, Hawk." T-man nodded and dealt the second round of four, his bemused expression undermining the conciliatory gesture. *An ace, some meld, and four spades.* Not bad, Hawk thought. He drew a satisfied breath.

Hunter spread each of his cards equidistant from the others and arranged their corners in perfect alignment. His tone was friendly as he continued. "While I find your concern surprisingly commendable, Hawk, you needn't worry. Alex has mistakenly assumed she'll be staying with my grandparents. Since you know I like my woman wet and willing, that's always an option should the need arise. Though I don't anticipate a problem." He took a moment to study his cards. "On the other hand, if you have some claim on Alex, just say so."

Hawk gave a shrug. "No claim."

"Good."

Runner was studying Hawk quietly when he grabbed his third round

of cards and turned them over to find four strangers. *Nothing matched.* The next two games were smooth and fast. Hawk gained ten thousand and then in the next breath lost double. By all accounts it was still a conservative night. But the hour was late so he was surprised when Hunter wanted to continue.

“Ready for another, Hawk?” he asked.

Hawk took it as a challenge for reasons he didn’t understand. He and Hunter had been through this before, sometimes they’d go another game and sometimes not. But tonight it felt personal.

“Deal ’em up, T-man. My boy here and I are going nose to nose ... unless it’s not worth my time,” Hawk baited him.

Hunter gave a soft chuckle. “Will ten-thousand do it?”

Hawk raised a bored brow. “Money?” He chewed on a toothpick. “Haven’t we both got enough? It’ll just be more money for the government when the interest hits.”

“True enough,” Hunter said.

Cooley chuckled, as usual enjoying this subtle competition. If Hunter or Hawk needed any encouragement, they could count on the pilot to give it.

“Let’s make it hurt,” Hawk suggested. “A little pain to keep it interesting.”

“You’re on.”

“Our cars.” They both used the same garage in Seattle that catered to classic luxury vehicles.

Hunter’s eyes lit with interest. “You claim you love that XKE more than you could ever love a woman.”

“That’s not hard,” Hawk scoffed. “But I don’t plan on losing.”

“Neither do I.” Hunter trailed a thoughtful finger around the rim of his goblet and then reached into his back pocket. His smile was genuine. “Well, my friend, I hope you’ve been religious about changing the oil.” He flipped the registration for his BMW onto the table.

Hawk did the same. “Deal them, T-man.”

In smooth quick strokes, T-man dealt the sixteen cards. Hunter opened. Hawk knew his friend would go high since it was a winner-takes-all game. But when the bidding got to thirty-three and Hawk had only seventeen meld, he started to count every card. A little luck and a little help

from the dummy hand would do it.

On the last trick, Hawk made it. Thirty-three on the nose.

“Shit. You bastard,” Hunter cursed good-naturedly and then slapped down his cards.

“Toss over those keys.”

Their large group of spectators laughed and then devoured the last of their food before scraping back their chairs and clearing the house on the promise to return Friday.

Hawk upended the bottle of Absolut and dripped the last of it into his shot glass. He let it wind a slow burn down his throat. There were times, Hawk thought, when the lingering heat was more satisfying than the quick rush, and tonight was one of those nights.

When T-man left for bed where Honey awaited him, Hunter was still nursing a brandy. Neither he nor Hunter had any reason to leave. They could stay all night if they chose, pass out, and start again in the morning, and no one would question. They had the kind of freedom for which other men could only dream.

They discussed Hawk’s research and the impact of finding eighty organisms within one acre, a discovery that rivaled that of the rainforests. Hunter speculated on necessary regulations should the pharmaceutical companies want in and predicted that T-man would see that the native corporation handled any land-leasing arrangements and royalty issues.

The moon hovered low over the horizon as the sun rose higher over the bay. The water was calm tonight and empty. By tomorrow’s sunset the water would be jammed with boats. Alaska’s Department’s of Fish and Game called an open fishing period for twenty-four hours. With Kings up twenty-two cents a pound and the run predicted high, everyone expected to make money.

While the frenzy of activity these last two days was entertaining, Hawk looked forward to the peacefulness of his lake camp.

“Heading out tomorrow?” Hunter asked.

Hawk nodded and rocked against a wall of cedar tongue and groove decking.

“Me, too.” Hunter said and stretched out his legs. “I haven’t been upriver in over a month. I’m glad Kitten gave me an excuse to go.”

Hawk poured himself another stiff scotch and hooked his heels on the chair rung. He downed it fast. "I'm going to enjoy that Beamer, old friend. Hope it's filled with premium gas."

Hunter smiled.

"We could make it double or nothing," Hawk suggested.

Hunter raised a brow. "Another bet?"

"A counter-offer. You get your BMW back and my Jag with it if you win."

Hunter folded his arms across his chest, an amused glint in his eyes. "This oughta be good. I'm listening."

"I'll bet you can't keep your hands off Alex for the week she's with you."

Hunter sat up. "You're right. I doubt that I can. Nor do I want to."

"Good, that makes it a sure bet for me."

Hunter leaned forward, interest sparking his eyes. "Let me get this straight. If I succeed in keeping my hands off her for one week, I get my car back, and I win yours?"

Hawk nodded and resumed his rocking.

"The Jaguar, not the Honda."

"Right. But you can't do it. So I'm not worried. I just like beating you."

Hunter studied him quietly for a long minute before answering. "It's an interesting proposition." He clasped his hands behind his neck. "And you know how much I like my Beamer." Hawk nodded in acknowledgement as he listened to him drone on about its soft leather interior.

Then Hunter smiled and gazed out over the bay. "But I'll tell you, Hawk. I'm thirty-seven years old ... and I haven't been enchanted with a woman in some time."

Hawk stopped his rocking.

"Besides..." Hunter let his voice drift off on a soft chuckle. "It's only a car."

Hawk was stunned, more by his friend's sentimental tone than the fact he might be rejecting the offer.

But then Hunter continued, facing Hawk as though watching his

reaction. “Perhaps if we set parameters?” He slid another cigar out of the box and wet the end between his lips. “For example. If I don’t sleep with her, then I win and you lose.”

Hawk dropped down his chair and thought a minute. In essence it was the same thing. “Okay. That’s how we’ll figure it. You sleep with her, and you lose. The Beamers mine ... for good.”

“It’s a deal.”

A firm shake sealed the bet. Hawk resumed his rocking, and Hunter relaxed back, a satisfied grin on his face before he asked. “One problem. Since I don’t kiss and tell, how are you going to know?”

“I’ll know.”

Chapter Six

Just four hours into another week with them and already Alex felt herself in the eye of a storm. A storm that raged whenever Hawk was near.

The pleasant aftereffects of her week with Hunter disintegrated after just one look into Hawk's turbulent gaze. Her emotions spun in continual confusion. She felt drawn to him and terrified at once. The feelings that he evoked in her were as foreign to her as this land.

There was nothing ... absolutely nothing easy about Hawk.

While her thoughts wrestled with her emotions, tangling her nerves tight, she approached the campfire with well-rehearsed calm.

The men were already devouring the fresh King steaks Cooley had dropped off when he flew her over this afternoon. She noticed a warm wind had picked up, and the sky was darker than usual. The moist heaviness in the air warned of a storm approaching. Even the birds seemed restless. As though in tune with nature, her tension seemed reflective of her surroundings.

Frieda had welcomed her hours ago, her babies flying in formation behind her, less graceful than their mother but no less eager to show off. Alex smiled grimly. The human welcoming had paled in comparison. Hawk had scowled, and once again she cursed T-man for sending her. But he claimed that Stephanie would fly up from Philadelphia and personally shoot him if he didn't force Alex to return to Hawk's area for more photos.

"All settled?" Scott greeted her cautiously, handing her a paper cup of white wine. She nodded and settled down next to him, thanking him again for helping her set up the borrowed tent from T-man. He loaded her plate with salmon and fresh lemon, the sweet aroma stirring her taste buds. Her third night having salmon, and she was far from immune to its delights.

She slipped a moist chunk past her lips and suckled the juice before sliding the remainder into her mouth. She chewed slowly, savoring each morsel and closed her eyes in enjoyment. When she opened them Hawk was eyeing her darkly.

She choked back the piece, swallowing quickly. What was she doing

wrong now? A flutter of nerves bubbled in her stomach, and she felt the heat rise to her face. His gaze traveled down her throat. He so unnerved her that she almost pushed aside her plate.

Scott's tentative question rescued her. "Did you get some good shots in Iliamna, Alex?"

Runner looked up with interest and seemed to await her response. She was glad for his attention. Her lifetime of disappointment with men left her few she respected, but like her week with Hunter, her memories of tracking with Runner were ones she would always treasure. His quiet ways and spiritual connection with his environment had taught her to see limitless beauty.

"Actually," she said, drawing Runner into their conversation and reluctantly including Hawk, "the salmon weren't even running that far up north yet. I was surprised that T-man didn't know that."

The sudden heat of Hawk's gaze burned a hole through her as she spoke. Runner looked amused. She couldn't imagine what blunder she had perpetrated this time. Had she insulted T-man whom she knew to be Hawk's close friend?

"That's too bad," Scott sympathized. "So you got nothing?"

"Oh no," she assured him. "Hunter made it a wonderful trip. The photos I took of wildlife were only the half of it," she said, thinking of the wealth of native art she photographed and how she was made privy to the oral traditions of his grandfather. "I hated to leave--"

Hawk tossed down his plate and rose abruptly without a word of explanation. For one hurtful moment, she wanted to fling her cup at him. Why was he always so difficult?

But her anger dissipated into a sigh of frustration when her next impulse, a feminine desire that she didn't understand, urged her to go after him. She didn't. The knot in her stomach squeezed tighter.

Pushing all thoughts of him out of her mind, she shared stories with Runner and Scott about Hunter's family while carefully leaving out his undisguised interest in her. Unlike the guilt she felt at her inability to return Scott's shy affection, she found Hunter's confidence charming. While Hunter made it clear he was disappointed, he was hardly dissuaded, though Alex couldn't imagine why.

Later that night she sat along the lake's edge enjoying the unusual warm air, drawing shapes in the sand with a small branch and waiting for Frieda to signal her goodnight. For eleven o'clock, the sky was dark and the water rippled in disturbance. An eerie chill ran up her spine, yet the weather had turned balmy. She hugged her knees to her chest and breathed in the fragrant air.

From nowhere, Frieda soared towards her, executed a graceful turn, and then skidded along the water. She hovered mere inches above, her long wings pumping slowly. Alex clapped softly, releasing a small bubble of laughter.

"That's wonderful, Frieda," she whispered softly. The bird seemed to glide closer, yet still kept a safe distance. Alex cocked her head to one side and studied the animal in awe. "You'd like to come closer, wouldn't you?" she asked and then sighed in sympathy. "So would I."

The bird stilled for a fraction of a second as though listening closely before pumping once more. Still, she hovered, neither moving closer nor retreating.

"But I'm told you're a dangerous creature," she explained, amusement lacing her words. Frieda drifted nearer until she looked just ten feet away. Alex's breath stopped. Although she'd learned that eagles could be trained while in captivity, this was a marvelously wild predator and shouldn't be trusted. But this was Frieda.

She held out her hand and coaxed her. "Come here, girl." The bird stopped moving, the shining orbs of its eyes glistening from the reflection of the water. The moon moved from behind a cloud and cut a bright path from the bird to Alex, a golden path. Magical.

Then, as though sensing danger, the bird took to the sky on a frantic beat of her wings, her piercing squawk echoing through the mountains like a warning call to her neighbors.

Alex sighed in disappointment as she watched Frieda's retreat to her cliffside haven. A cloud drifted half across the moon, and the magical path moved off to Alex's side.

A sudden sound caused Alex to turn on her heels. She peered into the darkness, a kernel of fear nudging its way up her throat. The moon cleared a new path, and this time Hawk's figure emerged out of the darkness. He

was leaning against the rough bark of a white birch at the end of the path, arms folded across his bare chest, watching her.

She jumped up, clutching the branch self-consciously. It snapped in her hand. "Oh ... it's you." She stood apprehensively, glancing once behind her at the water and then back at him. "I was just..."--she licked her dry lips and swallowed reflexively--"sitting by the water."

His eyes locked with hers. She startled, more from her disturbing reaction to him than any fear. A small fire stirred low in her belly with each silent moment he drew out, and her heart raced in the quick way it had the night she thought he would kiss her, no matter how illogical it had seemed. And she had been right. The taste of him was still fresh in her mind.

"I ... I know I shouldn't wander about," she explained, her voice barely above a whisper.

"No, you shouldn't, Alex," he said, regarding her calmly, no trace of his usual irritation punctuating his words. "Come to bed now."

The image his words conjured up robbed the breath from her lungs. His voice, like a rough whisper, caused a rush of heat to spread so quickly to her face that she was sure he would notice. Somehow she managed to respond. She nodded and walked to the path, dreading having to pass him and feel his closeness. The moon played over the dark hairs of his chest and reflected off the corded muscles bunching his arms and torso. His skin looked smooth in the soft light.

Something dangerous in her caused her to stop before him. With just inches between them she turned and looked up into his face, the scent of him penetrating her senses and awakening a yearning in her. His brooding stare never wavered, but his eyes grew heavy lidded.

She studied the dark shade that roughened his face and glistened with moisture, and she barely resisted the urge to run her palm over the feel of it. His dark brows drew together in a movement barely noticeable.

She spoke without thinking. "Thank you for watching out for me." She almost reached up to touch him, the idea of the bold gesture nearly as shocking as the fact that the inclination didn't surprise her ... she wanted to touch him and to be touched.

A subtle movement of his hand made her think for one hopeful moment that he was reaching for her, but instead he spoke gruffly. "Go to

sleep, Alex.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she stifled a sigh and nodded. “Goodnight.” She stepped into the darkness and followed the path back to her tent.

* * * *

True to its coastal nature, without warning the temperature dropped to forty-two degrees, and the winds picked up to seventy-five knots. Only the strongest, deeply rooted trees were safe, but with the discontinuous permafrost, those trees were few. As the winds grew louder, the wildlife quieted, taking refuge in dens and caves and underground tunnels. Only the unsuspecting humans were caught unaware.

The night was at its darkest when high-pitched squeals woke Hawk from a dead sleep. He didn’t have to wonder what it was. In automatic reaction, he jammed on his boots and grabbed only his knife. While it turned out that it hadn’t been the best night to sleep in boxers, stopping to put on clothes now would cost valuable time.

Outside his tent, he took out the center supports with two quick slashes of the blade and then ran for the other tents just as he saw Runner emerge and do the same. Hawk struggled to be heard above the wind’s howl and motioned Runner to Scott’s tent as he ducked into Alex’s. Stripping down the zipper, he then lifted her out, the time it would take to wake her too precious to waste. He could feel the temperature dropping with each second that passed.

He shoved through the flap with her and spotted Scott coming to help. “Take her, Scott,” he shouted as he dropped a waking Alex onto her feet.

In a clean swipe, he took out an anchoring tie in her tent and went for the other.

“No.” She dropped down in front of him and frantically struggled to crawl through the now collapsed flap. He grabbed her hips and snatched her back. The wind was so strong it threatened to blow them over. “Go with Scott,” he growled, dragging her back and forcing her to stand just as the rain started, its stinging pellets like shards of glass attacking the thin T-shirt that plastered her chest and scarcely covered her stomach. Her bare

legs would be bruised if he didn't get her out of here.

"Please," she sobbed. "My equipment."

He yanked her up and threw her at Scott. "Goddamn it. Get her out of here."

The sky picked that moment to release its burden. Within seconds, visibility reduced to a foot in front of him. The sight of Scott dragging her away faded. Runner would have finished with the mess tent and the cave was familiar enough now that even near zero visibility wouldn't stop those three from finding their way. On a string of expletives, he ducked into her tent and searched for the heavy canvas bag. He scraped it up before he took his knife to the last rope holding the tent frame. He didn't wait to watch it fall.

* * * *

Runner had the start of a promising fire going within minutes after they stumbled into the cave, soaked and near freezing. Alex couldn't understand how she could have gone to bed in a small T-shirt and panties, perfectly comfortable just hours ago listening to the familiar evening sounds of the night creatures, only to awake hours later to the end of the world. Even now as they huddled in the cave, branches and roots whizzed past the cave entrance at a terrifying speed, and the wind mimicked the best ear-splitting city sirens.

Hawk was still out there. She looked to Scott and Runner, wanting to ask if they were worried, but the fear of voicing the words kept them lodged in her throat.

They waited silently, watching the burning embers catch and spark for what seemed too long.

Then Hawk burst through the entrance. Zeus. The thought sprang to her so naturally. No harm could come to the god that controlled the change of seasons and who hurled thunderbolts. Looking at him now, she believed it. Every hard-muscled pound of him was slick with rain and covered only by what looked like a loincloth clinging to his prominent bulge and sculpted thighs. The dark mat of hair sprinkling his chest glistened with droplets and shimmered in the golden firelight.

He crossed the cave with purposeful strides and eased his burden down onto the dirt floor. Her thundering heart that just moments ago feared for him now feared *him* and her powerful reaction to him. The storm that raged within her was suddenly more dangerous than the one outside.

With characteristic impatience he swiped a hand through his wet hair, loose now and falling down to his shoulders. With the image he cast, she half expected a bolt of lightening to strike from his fingertips.

She didn't know how long she'd been staring at him when she realized he'd said something. She lifted her eyes from his flexing muscles and looked at him.

He frowned. "I *said*, that better be the right bag."

It was then she noticed the large sack he had tucked along the far wall of the cavern. She sucked in her breath. "My equipment?" She blinked at him and then jumped up. He gave a careless shrug and stood by the fire while she tore over to examine it.

It was hers. He had gone to get it, despite the urgency of the growing storm. When they entered the cave, Runner had placed his barometer against the wall facing the wind and estimated the winds had reached 100 knots. He predicted that back in Salmon Bay roofs would be flying off. Their only hope of saving anything here was that the flattened tents would offer no lift for the wind to catch under and the dense woods would offer some barrier to the wind's speed.

Shame burned across her cheeks at the little fit she threw when Hawk wouldn't let her back in her tent. He was right. She was naïve about this dangerous and unpredictable country, and she had had no right to question him.

She drew up beside him, but he wouldn't look at her. Scott and Runner kept their eyes pinned on the fire. She needed to apologize for her impulsive behavior. While they did their part collapsing tents and securing tools, she fretted over equipment that had no bearing on survival.

"I'm sorry I gave you a hard time. I should have just listened." He nodded but still avoided her gaze. She had struggled with Scott, too, so she turned to him now. "And you, too, Scott. Sometimes I get so--"

"It's okay, Alex," he said quickly, still looking away instead of offering his usual smile of encouragement.

She sighed. "I know you're still mad--"

"Oh, for Chrissake," Hawk barked. "Scott, since you're the only one with clothes, give her your shirt."

Without looking up, Scott stripped off his T-shirt and flung it at Hawk, leaving himself with just dripping wet sweatpants.

She drew in a breath as her eyes dropped to her wet T-shirt and cotton underpants, knowing she must be near transparent. Turning her back to the men, she pulled Scott's T-shirt over her head. Thankfully, it covered to mid-thigh, but now she was too embarrassed to face them.

Making a show of checking her equipment, she rifled through the bag. She'd really make an idiot out of herself now if she cried, but the enormity of her loneliness overwhelmed her. For short moments, when she was in town and upriver with Hunter's family, she felt like she fit in, but now, once again, she felt woefully inadequate, a burden to these men and the important work they did. Being here made things more difficult for them in every way.

She listened behind her to their easy conversation, not understanding the half of it with talk of barometer readings and permafrost, pressure lifting along with increased precipitation and what that predicted. Runner never seemed to speak in complete sentences, yet Hawk readily understood him. When Runner explained the change in wind's direction, she was lost. Alex didn't want to return to the fire just to sit there mute and uncomprehending. She doubted she appeared very bright to begin with.

She busied herself with uncapping her filter lenses and checking for scratches and then played around with the wide-angle lenses, taking some shots of the cave. But the chill that crept along her spine was too cold to ignore. Reluctantly, she returned to the circle of warmth and joined the men without acknowledgment, leaving them to continue speaking in their foreign language.

* * * *

With the break of dawn, the winds died, but the destruction the storm rendered broke Alex's heart. This peaceful haven was a mass of torn tree limbs and felled branches. While the tents faired pretty well, anything that

was left out was leveled. It took more than a day to restore everything they'd lost.

New lines were strung, the campfire reconstructed, and the wooden stands for cooking and washing were all rebuilt. The padlocked cache was the only structure standing. Thankfully, Runner's stretched bearskins had survived with little tearing since they were strung to his tent walls.

After the men raised the mess tent, Alex volunteered to tackle it, since she couldn't swing a hammer or drive a straight nail. In the process, she rearranged some of the food and found a different way to organize the pots and pans that might streamline food preparation. On impulse, she gathered bunches of the tiny violet wildflowers that had cropped up on the hill and hung them in clumps around the inside to dry, making sure they were out of the way.

By the third day after the storm the camp was back to normal. With just three days remaining before she returned to town, she made plans for photo shoots of salmon. The lake housed the largest schools of spawning salmon in the world, but she wasn't entirely looking forward to her task. Runner explained that after the females hatched their eggs into the clear lake water, they died.

While she hiked toward the mouth of the lake, the high-pitched squawks of Frieda's twins drew her attention, and she looked eagerly about. Her little friends had stayed hidden for days, no doubt rebuilding their nest just as their human friends had done. She watched them dive to a spot up ahead where the trees met the beach and then circle frantically, only to repeat the movement in another frenzied rush. Alex quickened her steps, a sense of foreboding steeling up her spine.

Then she saw her. A lifeless Frieda lay crumpled along a mossy hump. Alex ran to the huge bundle of feathers and screamed when she saw the flattened white skull and the gaping holes in her flesh where predators had eaten away.

The young birds squealed louder and beat their wings recklessly, diving and then climbing in rapid succession. Alex fell to her knees beside the fallen creature, screaming and crying, lost in a reality that was more a nightmare. It was impossible that the powerful noble beast was dead.

Dimly, she grew aware of voices and the crunch of boots. Hawk's

large frame appeared before her as he crouched on one knee beside the crushed bird. Alex rocked and sobbed and felt Scott ease down beside her. Hawk hung his head and then looked up at Scott.

"Take her back," he said softly, glancing at her once before looking back at Frieda.

"No..." She shook her head as Scott's gentle hands lifted her to stand, only to feel herself collapse against him a moment later. She buried her face in his shirt. "I hate Mother Nature," she sobbed, clutching at his shirt and struggling to stand. "It's not fair." The pain in her heart threatened to burst her apart.

"It's okay," Scott murmured, his hands stroking a path down her back.

She rested her cheek against him and looked to Frieda's unprotected babies flying in confused circles overhead. "What will they do?"

Scott sighed. "At least they have each other, Alex."

He drew her closer and smoothed a hand through her hair, the touch so gentle that she felt herself settle. He was right. As horrible as she felt, it was a comforting thought. And they were old enough to find food themselves. It was the way of things, she told herself, the only way to survive.

She drew a shuddering breath and wiped her tears with the back of her hand. When she looked back at Frieda, Hawk's penetrating gaze followed her. His eyes grew dark, like smoldering coals. With a subtle nod, he signaled Scott to take her away. She watched him glance overhead at a large black bird silently circling the clear skies directly above. A scavenger ... the natural order of things. They had tried to explain this many times, but she always rebelled against the cruelty of the environment. Now that ugly bird would clean up the decomposing body of her beautiful Frieda. She allowed Scott to lead her away.

Before they got too far, Hawk called after them. "Tell Runner to bring the shovel."

Chapter Seven

Alex looped around the lake for the last time, her camera weighted heavy on her shoulder. She had gotten over three hundred shots during the remainder of the week. Some photos included the aftermath of the storm that T-man wanted to use in his bid for disaster funds from the federal government. The bunkers for the hospital in Salmon Bay had taken a severe beating along with the pilings at the docks. Half of one dock had completely washed away, and fishing season was about to peak. As soon as she arrived in town tomorrow, T-man had her lined up to work.

She stepped over another spawned salmon, washed up on the beach, its large hooked nose and bloated purple body, testimony to its long swim from the Pacific to drop its eggs along the shallow lake edge. She stopped along the little grave that Hawk had dug for Frieda and touched the delicate petals of the wild violets he had planted on top. The tender gesture had brought tears to her eyes when first she saw them. She had barely been able to thank him without bursting into tears.

But she needn't have worried about approaching him, and her worry over her increasingly disturbing responses to him had proved unnecessary. He rarely talked to her or even acknowledged her. Although he watched over her closely, she felt he didn't really see her. A sadness she couldn't explain engulfed her as she fingered the waxy leaves of the violets and patted the soft mound of moss covering Frieda's grave.

She rose on weary legs and headed back to take her bath before sunset. Cooley would be landing bright and early. She was all packed. With one last sweep of her eyes she said goodbye to her peaceful haven.

* * * *

"She's where?" Hawk barked.

"At the hot springs," Scott explained to him as he watched Hawk scrape the mud off his chest hairs.

"She's been there over an hour. What the hell is taking her so long?"

It'll be dark soon."

Scott looked to Runner and then back at Hawk and shrugged.

Hawk snapped a towel off the line and growled. "Well she's done now ... if I have to carry her out."

In a fit of irritation, he strode to the spring, not giving a care that she would faint when she saw him. Maybe next time she'd think twice. He never understood why women couldn't just get in and get out. Her body was half his size ... how long could it take? He was still grumbling to himself when his questions were graphically answered as he stepped through the tropical leaves of the vegetation surrounding the pool and saw her. *Skin that soft looking had to require a lot of care.*

His anger dissolved on a rush of lust at the sight of her rose tipped breasts, like fully ripened raspberries peaked on swelling mounds of cream. He hardened instantly.

Damn. She was poised under the small waterfall, back arched and eyes closed, smoothing her hair off her face as the water that slid over her lush curves formed little droplets at the tips of her nipples. His eyes dropped to the downy mound at the juncture of her thighs. She was a natural redhead. He closed his eyes and tamped down his arousal. Telling her off with a full erection was bound to undermine its impact.

He stripped off his clothes and slid into the warm mist, completely submerging himself to rinse off the caked grime of the clay soil before he burst above the surface and headed toward the slick slab of granite they used to house the bathing supplies. The water barely cleared his navel and was so clean that, but for the gentle bubbling and the silvery mist, it would be transparent. He grabbed the plastic bottle of liquid soap and poured it over his chest. The waterfall was one level of rock above him, and as she continued to rinse her hair, he watched, tantalized by the gentle swaying of her breasts. He wondered how long it would take her to notice him. He didn't have to wonder long.

She choked on a scream when she opened her eyes to see him scrubbing his chest and watching her. He ran an insolent gaze down her body as she crossed her arms over those gorgeous breasts as though her small hands could cover them. His eyes then dropped to the soft tuft of red hair to demonstrate the futility of her efforts.

“Turn around,” she screeched, a full blush flooding her body, torturing him beyond measure.

“Not on your life,” he drawled.

So *she* turned around. He almost groaned aloud. How could she think that would help? As she skimmed along the wall to the edge, he feasted on the smooth rounded curves of her bottom just a reach away. The arousal he’d successfully controlled, caved. The urge to leap to the ledge and ease her down on all fours and rut in her was primal, impossible for any other animal to ignore, but as she slipped over the edge and under the water somehow he regained his Herculean control.

She turned on him, submerged to her neck, her eyes burning with indignation. “What are you doing?” She gaped, her eyes darting from his face to the water line at his hips and then back again.

“I’m taking a bath.”

“*I’m* in here,” she sputtered.

“I can see that,” he growled. “But I intended to clean up before midnight.”

She raised her hands in silent prayer. “Okay, I’m going back to the bank. Please turn around so I can get out.”

“I’m staying right here, so you can just dispense with the theatrics.”

She turned crimson. “Why are you doing this? To humiliate me? Well, I’m humiliated. Are you satisfied?”

“I’m hardly satisfied.” For one pregnant moment, he thought she would slap him. “When you play with the boys, you should prepare for the consequences.”

She leaped up and slapped him, hard, but he hardly noticed. And while the sight of her naked skin so close stopped all rational thought, it was the contact with her flesh when her small fists punched his muscles with a fury that brought him to the edge.

“You’re hateful,” she sobbed.

He tried to grab her wrists to yank her back. “Stop it, Alex, or you’ll be sorry.”

She struggled and lost her footing, the shock of her nipples skimming along his chest, agonizing. “Goddamn it,” he barked as she fell against him. He was no match against the slick female curves sliding along his chest.

He groaned and locked their hips together in a reflex as natural as breathing and then covered her mouth with his. She gasped, but he held her tight, forcing himself into the soft recesses of her mouth and stroking his tongue along hers. Any lingering edges of control broke when she turned soft and yielding in his arms. She returned his kisses, tangling her tongue with his, the scent and taste of her so delicious.

He pulled away. "Alex," he groaned. "Look at me." He cupped her bottom and lifted her, leaving no doubt as to his intent and giving her a chance to protest. The answering sob that caught in her throat as she clutched him was pure torment. He slipped her onto him and probed gently. Her eyes widened, liquid. *God, she was tight.* He closed his mind against the warm wet feel of her and hitched deeper, savoring each delicious inch. Then he froze.

His mind kicked into overdrive, the siren screaming in his brain fighting with nerves that were strung tight and begging for release.

He yanked her up and set her on the smooth marbled slab. He wanted to shake her. "Why didn't you tell me?" he hissed, grabbing onto her shoulders and making her face him. "Why?"

She blinked in confusion.

"You're a virgin," he growled.

"I know," she whispered.

He ran a frustrated hand through his hair and shook his head, his body vibrating with a need he had no hope of satisfying.

"I'm sorry," she breathed, staring at his arousal. The violet of her eyes deepened to purple in awed fascination.

He tipped her chin up with more force than he'd intended. "Get to that bank and get dressed before I change my mind."

"No." One word, whispered so softly he wasn't sure he'd heard, but the open invitation she gave him next left no room for doubt. She spread herself for him, leaning back along the smooth dark granite, the white of her skin stark in contrast, her feminine folds flush with arousal in an entirely female position that barred no secrets.

"Alex..." His voice carried on a hoarse whisper.

He smoothed his palm along the soft inside of her thigh. The hot silky feel of her was more than any man could resist. He stepped between

her legs and stroked with both hands.

She arched into his touch. The soft yearning sounds that broke through her lips destroyed any noble thoughts he had about not touching her. "Please, Hawk."

Her inexperience made her incapable of knowing how irresistible she was as she sat up and slid her delicate hands along his biceps, urging him to her.

He cupped her chin. "Jesus," he murmured, shaking his head even as he descended toward her, nuzzling his lips under her chin to run kisses along her throat. He eased her back and laid himself against her length, skin to skin, and then kissed her full on the mouth.

She whimpered, digging her nails into his back and moving restlessly.

"Shh..." he whispered. "We're going to do this right." He rested himself between her thighs, poised at the entrance to her heated center as he ran his tongue over her lips and then dipped next to catch one nipple and then the other in his mouth in a slow soothing rhythm. She cried out. His sensitized glands felt the answering throb in her soft outer lips and again as he grazed her pebbled nipples with his teeth. Her silky folds opened to him with each gentle tug on her breasts, and he slipped in a fraction.

"Hawk..." She shivered and clutched him, protesting when he lifted his lips and looked at her.

"Do you want more, Alex?" She was so innocent the sweetness of what he was going to do was unbearable.

She nodded, trusting herself to him.

Drawing her knee up, he opened her wider, tangling his fingers in the soft curls shielding her desire and then gently stroking the tiny bud that he knew longed for his touch. Her gasp of surprise and the soft moan of pleasure as he increased the pressure urged him on.

"Oh ... my God," she murmured. "This feels so..." she gasped, and a low moan vibrated deep in her throat.

"You like this, Alex." He eased into her slowly, stretching her and then withdrawing. "Don't you."

"Yes." She clutched at him wildly, silently begging him to take her. He slipped into her again and then gently withdrew in the wake of her cries of protest. "Hawk, please," she gasped. Still he thrust gently, feeling her

open to him with each pleasuring stroke of his thumb. She was wet and soft. The plump tissue gloving him made him shudder with need. With one quick thrust he pushed through the fragile barrier and filled her. On a shocked cry, she clamped down on him, tight.

“Hawk,” she choked, pushing at him.

He held her still. “Just relax.”

“I’m bursting apart.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” He ran his lips through her hair.

“You’re too tight, Alex. I couldn’t pull out if I wanted to,” he explained to her, knowing she had no idea what to expect. “Let your body adjust to me.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

He ran his hands over the delicate underskin of her breasts, feeling their weight in his hands. “It’s a biological fact that we fit together, Alex. Don’t fight it.” He dragged his lips along the swell of her breasts, breathing in the scent of her skin. “I’m a biologist. Trust me.”

While he’d been told he talked more during sex than all other times combined, this was not the usual conversation. But Alex was hardly usual, and the break in tension helped him bite back his punishing need to take her. He skimmed his palm along the excruciating softness of her inner thigh. “Your smell is torture,” he murmured.

She shifted subtly, yielding to him, her skin hot to his touch. Without moving inside her, he drew her knee up again and stroked her small bud. He groaned at her instant response as her soft inner walls hugged him tightly and then released him to repeat it seconds later. In the time it took to sigh, she was breathing erratically while he murmured reassurances. He continued to pin her down despite her thrashing beneath him and despite the urgency of his own desire until he felt the gentle release coursing through her. She shuddered and moaned, pulling him deeper. It took heroic effort to keep himself from spilling into her.

Her soft breath fanned his cheek, and she ran her tiny hands idly down his back. She was unbelievably swollen. “I had no idea....”

He growled deep in her ear. “No, you don’t have any idea.” No longer fighting to control his raging need, he wrapped an arm under her hips in one strong move and lifted her. With the other, he pressed the heel of his hand above her soft tangle of curls, intent of delivering maximum pleasure.

“This is the other half of it,” he grunted.

He could see the moment she felt it, the exquisite agony that took over, more powerful than before, when he pressed inside at the sensitive spot. He rode her hard.

Every gland he possessed exploded in sensation as he plunged into her with an urgency he couldn't stop. He wanted all of her.

“Look at me,” he demanded, once and then again as her gaze faltered. Her cries of pleasure and her frantic clinging, the sheer torturous heat of her, threatened to break him. And then she came apart in little sobs and breathless gasps, her eyes liquid and soft, incredibly vulnerable. He groaned and let himself go, the release he craved blasting from him with an intensity he'd never felt.

When she burst into tears, he held her close. For an immeasurable time, his world tilted and narrowed while he lost himself inside her sweet warmth, submerged in a state of motionless suspension. But it wasn't long before the cold reality of what he'd done came surging back. Her soft contented sighs pushed him into action before he could compound his mistake.

While he was still hard, he slipped out of her. Her small cry of protest nearly drove him back before he straightened and stepped back a pace. Her eyes clouded in confusion. Even in her inexperience, she had given herself to him completely and left herself open and defenseless.

She lifted herself onto her elbows. “Hawk?”

He hesitated, frustrated with his own reluctance to push her away. But he forced indifference, and in a calloused gesture scraped his thumb over her nipple. “Pretty good for your first time.”

The reaction he expected didn't come. No modest covering of her flushed breasts or shocked hurt in those virginal eyes. Other than the latent tears of passion, her eyes remained dry and calm. And she never took her eyes off him.

Boldly, he locked his gaze onto hers, knowing she would retreat in seconds. But instead she slid off the smooth rock and stood before him. Even after such an explosive release he felt his body stir with her nearness.

She laid a tentative hand on his chest. He locked his fingers around her fragile wrist with a punishing grip, afraid that if she continued her gentle

touch he'd lose the battle he was waging with himself. "More ... so soon?"

Her eyes searched his for a long moment before she spoke. "You're more afraid than I am," she said, her voice a whisper.

"Don't kid yourself, Alex." When she reached for him again, he blocked her and strode to the granite shelf, grabbing the loofah cloth and scrubbing his shoulders with enough force to peel off the skin. "Don't make this more than it is."

"I know what I see." Her voice was like a soft breeze across the water.

He turned slowly. "Maybe you should stop looking through your lenses and see things as they really are." He gave a sympathetic shrug. "You're a good lay, Alex. But leave it at that."

He might as well have slapped her for the reaction he got. "I think you're lying," she choked, the guileless tears that he found so disturbing springing to her eyes.

He was furious she was dragging this out. "I've never lied to you."

She looked at him with brutal longing, her eyes glassy and wide, completely vulnerable to him. God, she was stupid. He wanted to knock some sense into her.

"No, you haven't lied to me," she said, her voice trembling. "You just lie to yourself."

He laughed. "Very good, Alex. Clever." He resumed his scrubbing, purposely dipping toward his groin to unnerve her and watching for her reaction.

She shook her head. "For a genius ... you're not very smart."

"Grow up, Alex."

She blanched, and fresh tears welled up in those beautiful eyes. "I don't believe you."

He gave an impatient shrug and turned his back on her.

"Hawk?"

"I mean it, Alex. Grow up." He glared at her.

She watched him a moment, the blue of her eyes turning a deep violet. Then she turned on him and pushed through the water to the bank. He watched her until she disappeared through the trees, and then he lowered himself wearily along the smooth stone, propping his elbows on his knees

and raking his fingers through his scalp. She was too tender-hearted for this. He had known that. He hung his head between his knees. He should never have touched her.

Chapter Eight

With notable precision, Hawk folded the legal size paper in even fourths and then creased it carefully along its width. He fingered it again before picking up his shooter of scotch and downing it. Then he motioned Honey for another as he glanced again at the entrance of the Anchor Mast. With the fishing period closed hours ago, on this Friday the room was filling quickly.

“Is that it?” T-man slid in next to him and indicated the letter from his lawyer.

Hawk slipped it into his breast pocket. “Yup.”

“Looks pretty puny for such a momentous document.”

Hawk shrugged. “I called Stephanie and told her. She said I should celebrate. So, here I am.”

T-man raised a skeptical brow at the row of shot glasses lined up. “Looks like you got a head start.” He called over to Honey to bring his usual. She placed the Jack Daniels down with a thud and turned abruptly to leave. “Hey...” T-man chuckled, giving her bottom a pat.

She yanked his hand off and glared at him before stomping away.

T-man gave Hawk a puzzled look. “What did I do?”

Hawk snorted. “It’s probably what you don’t do that’s eating her.”

T-man frowned and nodded at the letter. “This is the end of it?” It was more of a statement than a question.

Hawk nodded. It was the end to countless legal battles and DNA testing that had originated back at MIT when he was seventeen and the young coeds discovered that he was the heir to the *Intel* fortune. Schemes to trick him into marriage with false pregnancies were not unusual. But his father and grandfather warned him that they hadn’t fought for a decade to keep money from Hawk’s mother just to have him make a mockery out of their struggle by getting trapped by some opportunist bimbo. Hawk had been careful about how he enjoyed what the women offered him.

But no one could have predicted what happened. The black market for genius sperm was at premium prices. He was twenty-six when

Stephanie had come to him with knowledge gained from a woman who had unwittingly allowed her own eggs to be harvested, years before, in the name of medical research. Some of the same women who had enjoyed seducing him were involved in the scheme.

He hadn't minded women using him for his body, he did the same, and it didn't surprise him that they'd try to use him for his money, but it had never occurred to him that he'd be used for his genetic material.

Now, ten years after Stephanie's discovery, it was over.

"So," T-man continued. "That means no little Hawks running around the country ... calculating differential equations ... and scowling."

Hawk grunted in acknowledgement.

"How come you don't look too happy?"

"I'm happy," Hawk said. "For me, this is happy."

"As pathetic as that sounds, you're probably right."

Hunter slipped into the booth and seated himself next to Hawk. Almost immediately, a long stemmed crystal goblet with sparkling Chablis was placed before him by a disgruntled Honey. "What's wrong with her?"

T-man frowned. "You got me."

Hunter turned to Hawk. "Heard your nightmare's ended. Congratulations, buddy."

"Yeah ... thanks." Hawk slid Hunter the two laminated cards he'd been waiting to give him.

"What's this?"

T-man leaned in. "Looks like it's both your car registrations. He's anteing up on your bet."

"I can see that." Hunter eyed T-man. "How do you know about it?"

"When I went to bed that night, Honey kept me up long enough for me to overhear your little pissing contest."

"Yeah ... well," Hawk mumbled. "We were drunk."

"Yeah, right," T-man drawled.

Hunter peered at Hawk. "How do you know I didn't sleep with her?"

"I know."

"You seem pretty sure of yourself."

"I am."

Hunter frowned and picked up his registration, but he pushed Hawk's

back to him. "You can keep the Jag. It wasn't for lack of trying."

Minutes later, Runner sat down across from Hawk with his brother. Cooley followed. A soulful beat shook the walls.

"When's the game start?" Cooley asked. "I've got a couple of grand burning a hole in my pocket."

Hawk looked again to the entrance.

"After the wet T-shirt contest," T-man murmured with a distracted frown as his eyes roved the room.

"Oh yeah, now that's gonna' be fun," Cooley chortled. "Susan's gonna enter, and then I heard someone say--"

Hawk snorted. "I doubt that. Not that she wouldn't look good up there, but Susan's too smart. Hell, if it wasn't for the college girls letting loose up here summers, we'd have no entertainment."

"Where's Honey with our beer?" Buck asked.

"Hey..." Cooley looked up and motioned across the room at a couple dancing. "Isn't that her over there, with Scott?"

"Yeah," Hunter remarked, his lips tipping at the corners. "And isn't that his hand on her ass."

T-man slapped his palms onto the table and gave Buck a shove. "Let me out." He jostled him. "Hurry up."

They watched him cross the room with a few quick paces.

"I don't think I've ever seen him mad," Buck murmured.

"Me neither," Cooley added as they watched him stalk the couple. He dipped low to speak into Honey's ear and tried to draw her aside, but she shrugged out of his hold and dashed off to the Ladies Room, stopping only to talk to Sister before swinging through the door. T-man looked as if he wanted to go after her, but his sister barred the way. He paced a minute, arguing with her, and then finally left.

Honey's replacement for their smoke filled corner served them another round when T-man rejoined them a few minutes later. The music grew louder while couples jammed the dance floor. A seventies disco beat rocked the floor and vibrated the tables in tune with the strobe light. Hawk glanced at his watch. At eleven o'clock they'd switch to smooth jazz. He shifted impatiently.

"Who you lookin' for, Hawk?" Cooley called across the table,

sloshing his beer down his shirt for the hundredth time.

"No one."

"Yeah, you are. You keep checkin' that door."

Hawk shrugged. "Habit."

"What's wrong with Honey?" Cooley asked T-man, good-naturedly, before he leaned over the side of the booth and landed a straight shot of chew into his spittoon.

"How should I know?" T-man grumbled.

Hunter nudged him. "Here comes your sister. She'll tell me what's up."

While Sister was any man's stuff of fantasies, Hawk always saw her as T-man's sister first, and in love with Hunter second, although Hunter was unaware. Hawk attributed it to their having known each other since she was a little girl and that Hunter was fourteen years her senior. Hunter couldn't see what every other man did--a tall, dark, exotic beauty with the heart of an angel.

"Sister," Hunter called. "Come here."

She turned slowly and regarded him with ill-concealed distaste. Hawk was so surprised that he sucked an ice chip down his throat. Hunter looked at her askance and impatiently continued to wave her over. She took her time approaching the table and then lifted one disgusted brow.

"I'd appreciate, *Hunter*,"--she drew out his name as though the very sound of it was offensive--"if you wouldn't call for me as though I'm some kind of pet." She gave him a sultry stare.

"Pet?" Hunter's mouth dropped open.

With a graceful turn, she tossed her silky hair, showed him her back, and left.

"What's with her?" Hunter asked, his gaze traveling down the long length of her as he watched her walk away.

T-man poked him. "You better not be looking at what I think you are," he said with a hint of irritation.

"What?" Hunter murmured, his eyes still pinned on her bottom. "No ... Christ, she's your sister, T-man," he assured him without looking up. "Jesus," he muttered. "What's with these women tonight?"

Finally, Hawk saw her. His spirits lifted and then plummeted seconds

later when he saw Doc move right in, a cocky grin splitting his face. Alex smiled and tipped her head back, brushing her hair off her neck with delicate fingers and offering him the smooth porcelain skin along her throat. It was a mating stance, typical of animals in heat, and Hawk felt his temper rise.

“Is that who you’ve been waiting for?” Cooley shouted above the noise.

Hawk ignored him and continued to follow her with his eyes until he lost her in the crowd. He thought she had slipped away from Doc, but he couldn’t be sure.

“Our little Kitten looks real pretty tonight,” Cooley rambled.

Hawk saw her reappear. She was smiling up at Scott, and he was looking at her with the adoration of a priest for the Virgin Mary. Hawk grinned to himself with male satisfaction. She was hardly a virgin anymore. Then she was gone, too small to adequately track.

He was still trying to find her when Buck’s lecherous greeting alerted him that she was standing at their table.

“Hi there, little Kitten,” Buck said.

“You look real nice,” Cooley joined in.

She nodded to the table of men, a soft blush rising to her cheeks in response to their obvious pleasure. The ivory silk blouse she was wearing draped her shapely breasts just snug enough to hint at the bit of lace underneath. Hawk felt himself swell and ache with the knowledge of what that delicate lace held.

“Join us?” Hunter offered.

“No. I just wanted to let you know, T-man, that I scheduled that shoot for dawn. I wanted to catch the sun hitting the dock head on, to give the appearance of fire and disaster.”

“Good idea,” T-man agreed with less than his usual enthusiasm. “I trust you, Kitten. You’ve certainly proven yourself.”

“I appreciate that.”

While she graced Runner with a smile fit for deity, she hadn’t bothered to look at Hawk. But he couldn’t blame her. No doubt she was still hurting from last week. But she was a big girl; she’d get over it, he thought, taking a casual sip of his drink.

Cooley beamed at her. "Is that the blouse you'll be wearing for the T-shirt contest?"

Hawk's hand froze mid-way from his lips. He crushed the ice between his teeth.

Her tantalizing blush deepened. "No. I'll be wearing a T-shirt like everyone else."

Cooley's grin spread clear across his face. While T-man appeared oblivious to what was said, Hunter looked as stunned as Hawk felt. Alex clutched her hands before her ... wringing them was more apt a description, Hawk thought, just in time to figure out what she was up to. He wasn't the top winner at pinochle without recognizing a bluff when he saw one.

Cooley touched her hand. "You'll win, hands down, Kitten." He gave her a wink.

Hunter finally got a grip on himself. "You're ... entering the wet T-shirt contest, Alex?"

Hawk snorted. "Fat chance of that."

"You don't think I'm qualified?"

He feigned choking on his drink. "Oh, you're qualified, all right."

When the others chuckled, he glowered and leaned into the table and then spoke in an even tone. "Don't get yourselves worked up. Alex is not entering that contest."

"She is," Cooley said. "She--"

Alex held up a hand and looked at Hawk patiently. "I am, Hawk. You were right. I'm really very naïve, and it's time I grew up."

He felt a muscle jump in his jaw.

The bartender called over to their table. "Alex, I got you down for number four, right after Marilyn." She gave him a grateful smile. Hawk watched in fury as Buck and Cooley's eyes dropped to her breasts.

"Alex," Hawk said, his voice low and just on the edge of a threat. "It's not a good idea to do that."

Her expression grew puzzled, and then she gave a reassuring smile. "There's no reason to make a big deal about this."

"That's right, Kitten," Cooley interjected. "It'll be fun."

Hawk dropped his glass down with a thud and barked at Cooley. "Stay out of this."

Alex gave a startled gasp. "Cooley's just being encouraging."

"Stop this, Alex. You're just playing a game."

"A game?" She lifted a puzzled brow. "What kind of a game?"

They were all looking at him, awaiting an answer. Hunter's perceptive gaze settled on him.

"No one else thinks it's a bad idea, Hawk," she said with soft innocence.

Hunter gave her a shrewd smile. "I think it's a delightful idea, Kitten."

"See?" She smiled.

Hawk planned to beat the hell out of Hunter, but first he was going to make Alex sorry she started this. "I'm not letting you, and that's final."

Her eyes blinked wide. "I..." She shifted nervously. "You don't have any right to tell me what to do."

"I think I do."

She swallowed. He had her squirming. The men were watching them intently, and Hawk knew she would back down rather than let on that anything happened between them. Runner leaned forward, watching her as he sipped his beer.

She straightened a bit and ran an anxious hand down her skirt. "I would think"--she took a little breath--"for those kinds of rights, you'd have to do more than simply take my virginity."

Runner spewed out his beer. After a stunned silence, Hunter burst into laughter and Cooley pounded the table with glee.

Hawk's jaw clenched. Hot blood coursed through him, half in fury, half in arousal. When he opened his mouth, she'd be sorry.

"Excuse me." She spun on her heels.

Hawk slapped down his palm. "Alex, get back here."

They watched her disappear. Buck snorted. "I don't think she's listening to ya, Hawk."

Hawk gave him a look of cold fury. "She will," he bit out, grabbing up his glass and then shoving back into the padded booth. He'd just *see* how far she'd take this little game.

* * * *

Without Sister's encouragement, Alex would never have been able to face Hawk, let alone pull off her little stunt. Sister, buoyed by her own ability to finally get Hunter's attention and by Honey's success in making T-man jealous, insisted that Alex couldn't back down now.

"Sister," Alex wailed. "I can't get up on that bar."

"Yes, you can," Sister encouraged her, flipping through the pages of the book she had stowed away on the high shelf of the bathroom window in the Anchor Mast. "Listen to this. Rule number thirty, for dealing with rejection." When Alex winced, Sister gave her a sympathetic smile. "According to this, the idea is not to get hung up on him. Get on with your life ... and who knows. He may realize--"

"You can't think this will work? The man's a genius--"

"I wouldn't have thought it either. But I had nothing to lose by giving this a try and now, after eight long years, I may have finally gotten Hunter to see me as a woman."

"You did," Alex assured her. Alex and Honey had watched the way Hunter's eyes roved over Sister as she sauntered away from him. Sister had taken great delight in their telling of how Hunter had looked mesmerized.

Sister placed a comforting hand on Alex's shoulder. "They're another species, altogether. Since I was fifteen, I've done my best to grow into the kind of woman that Hunter could love. It hasn't worked. While it's still a worthy goal, it's ironic that I had to get mean, haughty, and utterly disinterested in him to get noticed."

"But Hawk hates dishonesty."

"And you say there is pain in his haunted eyes. You may be right. But your 'Zeus' also has women falling all over him, and no one has been able to open him up yet. If you're the one to do it, this will spur him on, and if not, it's best you know now and not waste time like Honey and I have done ... or thought we did. We should have done this years ago." She ran her fingers through her hair and checked her make-up. "Let's go."

Alex drew a steadying breath before they slipped out the door.

"Now for plan B with Hunter's arch-rival," Sister murmured as they neared the dance floor.

Hunter loomed up before them, stopping Sister in her tracks. "Girls?"

He tipped his head in an elaborate display of charm, clearly expecting them to linger.

“Hi, Hunter,” Sister smiled and then breezed right passed.

Hunter’s smile faded, and Alex watched his bewildered gaze follow after Sister. Then his brows drew together. Doc Levin had scooped her up. They made quite a couple, locked hip to hip on the dance floor.

“What’s she doing with him?” Hunter grumbled. “She knows the guy’s got a reputation worse--she should stay away from him.”

“Doc?” Alex feigned surprise. “He’s a great dancer. A lot of fun, too.”

Hunter grabbed her hand. “Come dance with me, Alex,” he said, glancing back at Sister.

Alex managed to escape him and lose herself in the crowd.

* * * *

“It’s almost time,” Cooley told them, turning in the booth to face the bar dead on so nothing blocked his view.

Hawk sucked on his ice and lifted his glass, signaling for a refill. He glanced around casually, sure that Alex wouldn’t show.

“She’s over there,” Cooley said.

Hawk looked at the pilot sharply, wishing he would mind his own business. Still, he couldn’t resist looking. She was standing by women who Hawk knew regularly displayed themselves to the hungry male audience.

“I don’t see Susan over there,” Buck commented.

“I told you, she has more sense.” The contest wouldn’t start for another ten minutes. Hawk was confident that in that time Alex would back down. He muttered to himself. “God, she is the most stupid woman...” He grabbed the fresh glass of scotch and took a satisfying drink.

“Aw, Kitten’s just having fun.”

Hawk impaled Cooley with his eyes. “She’s too inexperienced to know what she’s starting. Every guy here--”

T-man interrupted him. “You don’t have to worry about it. She’s off your hands now. Within the week she’ll be done here and be off to Seattle.”

Hawk grunted. Runner had been studying him quietly, and Hawk

found himself avoiding his gaze.

"Hawk?" Cooley gave a nervous laugh. "You're not gonna' be mad if we look at her up there, are ya?"

"Why should I be mad?"

"I don't know, but you look pretty mad."

"Well I'm not," Hawk scowled.

"Okay ... good." Cooley took a large swallow of his beer, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I mean I'd understand if you--"

"Will you shut up."

"You did sleep with her--"

"I didn't sleep with her, damn it. I fu--" Hawk fisted his drink tight before raising it to his mouth. He took the burning liquid in one fast gulp. "I unwisely gave into an impulse while we were in the hot spring."

"Why unwise?" Hunter asked.

"She was a virgin." Hawk was dumbfounded his friend could be so dense.

Hunter gave a dismissive shrug. "Doesn't seem to bother *her*."

"You don't understand her," Hawk murmured.

"You do?" T-man chuckled.

"Better than you understand Honey," Hawk shot back.

"What's Honey got to do with this?"

The lights dimmed, interrupting the argument. A sensuous rhythmic beat signaled for contestant number one. A few feminine groans rose up that were quickly drowned by the rumble of male anticipation. The neon lights blinked through the smoke filled haze.

Hawk tensed, his eyes darting through the crowd. He spotted Alex standing near Sister, twisting a long lock of her "mahogany" hair around her index finger. The blouse was buttoned closed and tucked neatly into her silky skirt.

Jessica somebody was preening on the cat walk, already allowing the men seated along the bar to stroke their hands up her calf while she waited for the splash of water that would drench the front of her braless tank-top. Her nipples were large and darkened the lightly ribbed fabric. While the men at his table whistled and hollered, Hawk had no interest. He was watching with satisfaction as Alex, standing beside Sister, chewed

frantically on her lower lip. Sister dipped low to talk to her.

"If I didn't know better," Hawk drawled. "I'd think Sister was encouraging Alex."

Hunter leaned forward. "She's probably trying to talk her out of it," he said just as they saw Honey appear and take her place along the other side of Alex.

"What's Honey doing there?" T-man asked, slamming down his drink.

"You think all three of 'em are gettin' up there?" Cooley asked with a hopeful glance in their direction. "One's prettier than the other."

Hunter chuckled, but Hawk could hear the strain in his voice. "You're not going to let her, are you, T-man?"

"No way she's getting up there," T-man hissed. "I've had all I can take tonight. Aghst cum ik. She better not push any further."

"We're talking about Honey, aren't we?" Hunter sighed. "What about your sister?"

"I can barely handle one woman tonight, Hunter. My sister's going to have to take care of herself."

The second contestant was a small blonde. Hawk shook his head in disgust. It was obvious by her unsteady gate that she'd been plied with too much liquor. She laughed when the bartender drenched her front, and her small nipples pebbled up against the thin T-shirt. She barely managed to make it down the length of the bar when she keeled over and landed in the bouncer's arms.

Hawk felt his tension spiral when Marilyn was helped onto the bar. Alex stood at the end, next in line and watching her, with a forced smile gracing her delicate features. She looked about fifteen, and she still had on the ultra feminine blouse. He knew she wouldn't do it.

"Alex is next," Cooley alerted them. "Hope they're gonna' have her take off that blous--"

Hawk spun around. "If you don't shut up, I'm going to force my fist down your throat."

Cooley gaped. "You said you wouldn't be mad."

Hunter slid Cooley's beer closer to him and nodded over at Hawk. "You don't want to get him *really* mad."

“There she goes.” Buck chuckled.

Hawk watched as though in slow motion as the huge hands of the bouncer encircled her tiny waist and lift her easily onto the bar. With delicate fingers she threaded the first button on her blouse through the hole and then the others came quickly. The shock of her up there caused him to seize up and lose precious seconds before he dove out of the booth and raced across the room. She had just slipped the blouse off her shoulders to reveal a glimpse of gorgeous full breasts that strained against a pale tank-top when he plucked her off the bar in one swift movement. The splash of water sailed past her and landed in the faces of two guys sitting on bar stools.

“What are you doing?” she gasped when he dropped her onto her feet. Without answering her, he snatched her up into his arms and in a few long strides reached the door. A string of laughter and howling followed on their heels as he bounded down the steps with her to the outside door.

“Hey, Hawk, no fair,” a mocking voice called. It was the last thing he heard as the door snapped shut on its hinges.

Chapter Nine

Alex's head was spinning. The cool evening air was a welcome relief from the smoke choked bar, the deadening beat of the music that drummed in her ears, and the male faces ogling her expectantly.

If Hawk hadn't rescued her when he did, she knew by now she would be lying out flat in a faint. But looking at his fierce scowl and the small vein throbbing in his temple as he raced across the parking lot with her, she wondered if it wouldn't have been safer to faint.

She gave a silent prayer for strength as he dumped her onto her feet before a large cedar and propped her against its trunk. He leaned in over her, palms flat on either side of her face.

"What in the *hell* do you think you're doing?" His black eyes flared, and the muscles in his face tensed and jumped. He was the most beautiful male specimen she had ever seen. Zeus, crackling with lightning and thunder. She wanted to run her palm along the hard feel of his jaw and touch her fingertips to his lips.

But she had come this far, she couldn't let this opportunity pass, no matter how much she wanted to melt into his heat.

She pushed at the hard wall of his chest and felt his muscles jump under her touch. "You had no right to embarrass me like that--"

"You embarrassed yourself, you little idiot--"

"Don't you dare call me an idiot. I don't need you to explain anything, and I don't need your guidance. If I want to embarrass myself, I will. *You're* the one who made an idiot out of yourself." She held his ferocious glare and watched his jaw flex under the strain of his controlled anger, knowing he could snap her neck with a bare flick of his wrist, yet she was unafraid. Any man who would protect a fierce predator by burying it and then planting a tiny wildflower on its grave harbored tenderness in his heart.

She lifted her chin a notch.

His lips were inches away, and the rich male scent of him overwhelmed her senses. She wanted to taste his skin ... do the things she

had been dreaming about all week ... the long week during which he never contacted her while she rationalized that he didn't know she was staying with Sister only to be crushed when he'd come into town this morning and made no effort to see her.

Honey and Sister's words kept repeating in her brain like a mantra, urging her to be strong.

The moment his eyes softened, she saw it, although his words hardened.

"Fine," he growled. "Go ahead and strip off all your clothes for all I care."

"I will."

"Fine."

He leaned in closer. "Don't say I didn't warn you when--"

"I won't," she clipped. His lips were so close she had to stifle the tiny cry of need that bubbled up her throat. The warmth that filled her as he surrounded her was more than she could stand. His breath fanned her face, a sweet tang of scotch and mint, warm and delicious, like his kisses. But she wanted more. The thought forced its way forward, drowning out all others and fueling her determination. "Now that we understand each other, let me go."

He didn't move, but she could see the anger drain from his face in the way his lips softened. The bunched muscles in his shoulders eased, and his eyes turned soft. "Please, Alex," he rasped and then closed his eyes a moment. When he opened them, she saw the plea, so fleeting but real.

"Why?" She barely heard herself speak.

He glanced away, but she would not let him off so easy. The pain of the last week was enough to fortify her resolve. She had given herself so fully only to be rejected. And while she refused to believe his cruel words, more than a kernel of doubt lingered.

He reached up and stroked her neck. The feel of his fingertips along her skin sent fissions of heat spiraling through her pores. If he continued, she'd melt into a puddle. "That's not you..." He shrugged.

"How do you know?"

"Alex..." He shook his head but didn't continue.

"Maybe I'll do a dance after I strip off all my clothes," she suggested

with a casual wave of her hand. "Lap dancing or something. Isn't that what they call it?"

"Do you know what that is, Alex?" He frowned, and for just a moment she thought a small glimmer of amusement shone in his dark eyes.

"Not exactly, but I'll learn."

He leaned in and pressed his lips against her ear and started to explain in graphic detail. The shock of it sent heat rising to her face. With a shove, she pushed him away.

"I didn't think so." He smiled. It was just a small smile, but the shock of it was more powerful than his lewd description. He had dimples ... two of them ... little dents on either side of his lips that softened his entire face.

"You're beautiful," she breathed before she could stop herself, and then she rested the tip of one finger in the small depression. The instant she made contact, his eyes darkened and he tipped her face up to his and kissed her. A deep, sensual kiss that promised more when his tongue probed, sending little electric jolts down her spine that settled between her legs. All the delicious sensations he had awakened in her came tumbling back.

He lifted her and pressed her against the tree. She was suddenly aware of how little separated her from him when her nipples, hardened and braless, strained through the thin tank-top and brushed against the rough cloth of his shirt.

His hands were up her skirt and on her thighs before she understood how it happened and she could feel him, hard against her. She would allow him to do anything he wanted with her if she let this go on for one more moment.

With a sob of regret she tugged at his hand without success. She whimpered against his onslaught of kisses and the warm smooth taste of his tongue, knowing she would drown any second.

He lifted his lips for a moment, and his hands stilled their stroking of her inner thighs where his fingers were just inches away from her burning center. She longed for him to touch her, yet still she tried to keep him at bay. "Alex?" he murmured. She hated this. Why couldn't he just love her?

He slid her down onto her feet and straightened her skirt. The arousal in his voice when he spoke sent tremors of longing through her. "Let's go

to my hotel room.”

“No.”

The hand he ran through his hair as if to clear his head stopped mid-stroke. “No?”

She pushed down on her skirt and licked her lips, still warm from him. She could taste him on her tongue. “No,” she confirmed. He looked so stunned that she wondered if any woman, any person, had ever said it to him.

Her attention was drawn to the sound of a deep sensuous rhythm straining through the walls of the Anchor Mast, replacing the driving beat of before and signaling that the contest had ended. She breathed a sigh of relief until she felt his eyes on her and looked to see him studying her breasts. Her nipples were hard and tingling and outlined perfectly in the thin tank-top that dipped low.

He reached up to touch her, but she stepped back just in time and slipped her arms through the silk blouse that hung from her waist. He should have no reason to think that he could touch her. She sighed and quickly buttoned her blouse while she tried not to think about how his thumb would feel scraping along her nipple. It wasn't fair that she'd felt paradise and now must deny herself ... deny him, when she wanted him so much. She felt like crying. What a colossal mistake that would be.

She shuddered with her need for him and with the struggle to control her emotions.

“Are you cold?” His voice was soft, almost gentle.

She was too overcome to speak. She simply shook her head.

“Will you dance with me?” He nodded over toward the bar. “It's smooth jazz. I like it.”

She listened to the slow sexy rhythm of a woman's voice, deep and smooth. While Alex couldn't discern the words, she could feel the soulful stir of the singer's heart and the longing in her voice that touched Alex in the way she needed.

Tired of games, she welcomed the innocent pleasure of being held by him as they danced. No expectations, no promises, just the movement of their bodies in harmony.

She nodded, and to her surprise, he picked up her hand and walked

her back. It seemed such a tender gesture.

He continued to hold her hand until he guided her onto the dance floor where he placed the flat of her palm against his chest and then covered her hand with his.

The warmth of their bodies mixed as he held her close, but she knew exactly where her body ended and his began. Every plane and ridge was pure muscle beneath his shirt and the yielding curves of her thighs met with rock as he pressed them hip to hip. Such a marvel of nature that two very different bodies fit together so well. It gave her hope. Two more different people couldn't be found, yet she naively sensed they belonged together.

She sighed contentedly, at peace with just being held by him, until she felt the unmistakable rise between his legs. He shifted and let out a muffled groan. He must have felt her tense because he pressed his lips against her hair and apologized.

"You would think at thirty-six that I'd have more control," he said dryly. With the feel of him warmer and harder against her with each passing moment, she was thankful for the crowded floor and the dim light. He shifted subtly, and her blood began to pump in intimate places. What had started out so innocent had quickly turned sexual, yet he kept his hand on her back while the other still clutched hers.

When the music stopped, she was sure he would ask her back to his hotel, but he led her to a corner table and pulled out her chair. As they waited for their drinks, he covered her hand again with his and stroked along her knuckles with his thumb. "Will you stay with me tonight, Alex?"

She wished he hadn't asked, but she answered honestly. "I don't know." Then she wondered inanely if he had made a mistake. His habits were well known around the bay. Going to his bed partner's house allowed him to leave before she awoke in the morning. He never took women to his room.

"What do I need to do to convince you?"

"Talk to me."

He gave her an amused frown, just enough to show off one dimple, and then shifted uncomfortably. "What do you want me to say?"

She smiled. "What's your favorite color?"

His brows drew together. "Color? I don't know. I never thought

about it.” When she looked at him incredulously he feigned concentration, looking around the room for ideas and then finally answered. “Purple.”

“Purple? That’s unusual,” she said.

“See, it wasn’t even the right answer.” Miraculously, he smiled, again, wider this time and for longer, although his eyes still held her enthralled, dark and enigmatic.

“It’s just an unusual color for a man.”

His eyes grew heavy lidded. “I think we’ve cleared up that I’m not gay.”

A soft bubble of laughter escaped her, and he looked truly relaxed. She wanted to savor this.

With some effort she got him to talk about his work. And she learned where he lived in Philadelphia, even though it painfully reminded her that she could never return to that city. When she asked about his family he was less forthcoming, and she tried to hide her shock in learning that his mother had abandoned him when he was eight, although he described it in less dramatic terms.

“That must have been hard, Hawk.”

He shrugged. “I hardly remember it. I woke up one morning, and she was gone.”

“But you never saw her again?”

He looked away and ordered another drink. When a Long Island Ice Tea was placed before her, she gave him a wary look. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“I’m with you, Alex.” He reached up and swept a bit of hair from her face.

“Maybe that’s what I’m afraid of.”

He bent and pressed his lips gently against hers. “I want you, Alex, but I’ll settle for dancing,” he murmured. “Come on,” he said huskily, drawing her up.

Another Ice Tea, and several dances later, she was no match against his persuasive charm, but neither did she want to be.

Chapter Ten

Hawk closed the door quietly behind him, walked across the darkened room to the bed, and switched on the night-table lamp. Other than its soft glow, the only other illumination came through the west windows as the sun set, casting brilliant shades of orange and pink and shrouding the room in a hazy glow.

The smooth rhythm of the Anchor Mast's late night easy listening music vibrated gently through the floor beneath them.

Alex stood in the middle of the room and looked around. Such a nondescript room for so momentous an event, with its plain laminate dresser and earth tone easy chair tucked in one corner. The only personal things were the papers strewn along the dining set that housed his laptop and calculators. She knew he loved his work, but she also suspected it was where he hid.

She glanced at the rumpled bed with his silk boxers in a small heap at the bottom. A vision of him in the cave sprang up to excite her followed by the thought of him slipping them off. In the hot spring, everything had happened too fast for her to get a good look at him.

"Alex?"

When she turned he approached her slowly. He brushed her hair away from her neck and idly stroked her throat. "Are you nervous?"

"No." She reached up to cover his hand.

"Maybe you should be," he said, his tone silky.

A throb of desire slid over her. Her heart quickened as he began unbuttoning her blouse, studying her with naked hunger. He let his knuckles graze over the thin tank top covering her bare breasts. Her nipples hardened instantly.

"You're sensitive," he murmured, descending toward her and pressing her lips in an achingly tender kiss, tangling their tongues with lazy strokes. He slid her blouse off her shoulders. "I don't want to hurt you, Alex." His hands smoothed up under her tank-top to caress bare breasts.

She sighed at the pleasuring contact. "I thought it only hurts the first

time?”

He pulled back a fraction, his expression unreadable. “No,” he murmured, closing his eyes a moment. “It won’t hurt tonight. Nothing will. God, you’re so--”

“Don’t say naïve--”

“Innocent ... so innocent.” She arched her back. His fingers were doing marvelous things with her nipples, and the little shock waves that he sent through her body were making it hard for her to think. “And sheltered,” he said.

“Not so sheltered,” she managed to whisper and then, “Ohhh ... what was that?” A new sting of pleasure had her nerves leaping across her skin.

“Oh, I think very sheltered,” he growled and then slipped off her tank-top. He looked at her for so long that she grew crimson. The rosy buds of her nipples tingled mercilessly, and then he scraped along them with his thumbnail.

“Please, Hawk.” She grabbed his wrists, wanting him to stop but wanting more. She closed her eyes to the delicious feel of him and felt herself burning up.

“Hold your skirt up, Alex.” He dropped to his knees, reaching under her skirt. Before she could register what he meant, he slid down her panties and stepped her out of them, tossing them over his shoulder. The cool air coming through the windows hit her bare bottom. “Hold it up, Alex.”

“Hawk,” she gasped, the shock of his words causing her heart to beat frantically.

“Prove you’re not sheltered.” His voice was softly dangerous. “Let me look at you.”

She stepped back a pace, clutching her skirt hem and flushed with both arousal and alarm. “I don’t think this is decent ... is it?”

He let out a throaty chuckle. “Hell, no.” He took her hips and sat her down at the foot of the bed. “Now lift your skirt, Alex.”

She sat breathless and still as he ran his hand down her calf and then slipped off her sandals. His warm palms settled on her knees. “I’m waiting.” He stroked up her thighs, nudging her legs apart. She was trembling with embarrassment and need. His eyes traveled hungrily over her breasts and then dropped to the soft patch between her legs that she was

shielding so expertly from his gaze. “Just a peek.” His lips twitched in amusement while she burned with shyness.

With a smooth grace he lifted her leg and anchored her heel against his shoulder. She had no will to stop him as she watched in awe as he licked the sensitive skin behind her knee. She wondered if he would lick every inch of her and shuddered at the delicious thought.

“I’m still waiting, Alex.” He tugged playfully at her hem, his gaze heated, while still she clutched the scrap of fabric between her legs. She could feel how wet she was and the little throbs that came after each titillating lick of his tongue were excruciating. He slipped his hand up her thigh and stroked languidly, just short of her sensitive folds, teasing her, and finally running his fingertips lightly over the silky fabric of her skirt. Flames licked between her legs. He spread her wider and leaned closer. “The scent of your arousal is driving me crazy,” he whispered in a husky timbre that sent heat bursting through her. Then he kissed her through the fabric with delicate strokes of his tongue.

She groaned with the little stabs of pleasure, writhing under his seductive touch.

“You have to lift it for me. I’m waiting.”

With a soft sigh of surrender, she slid the satiny fabric up over her thighs and to her waist. The cool slide of the fabric did nothing to quench the burning ache.

He groaned and palmed her thighs. “Ah, such a succulent flower,” he teased her, “opening for me like petals to the sun.” He spread her gently with his thumbs. When she felt his tongue, hot and wet on her, she knew she would die. A low groan vibrated deep in the back of her throat as she gave herself over to the sweet torture, the burning heat scorching her from the friction of his tongue and his thumbs grazing along her folds. The raw tension was too much.

“Hawk.” He thrust his finger into her heat, and she burst with the thrill, crying out his name, her fingers buried in his thick raven locks. Waves of heat and sweet pleasure tumbled over her. He soothed her gently with his tongue until the aching aftershocks drifted away.

She lifted her lashes and rose out of her hazy fog to see him standing between her legs and stripping off his shirt and then his shoes in a fury, his

eyes riveted on her stretched out before him on the bed, knees drawn up and legs splayed.

“Don’t move,” he rasped, unbuckling his belt with a few swift yanks. He cursed at the buttons of his Levis and then shoved them over his hips, taking his boxers with him as he stepped out. All the while, his gaze never faltered from his target.

He was hard and beautifully male. Now she would die, just looking at him. He took himself in hand and positioned his hips between her legs, but she scampered up onto her knees before he could reach her.

“What are you doing?” He blinked in surprise, his eyes glazed with lust. She bent toward him and stroked the deep red tip of him. He jumped with the touch. She gasped in surprise. He was so smooth yet hard beneath the velvety skin. “Alex,” he groaned. She traced with one finger the powerful vein that ran the length of him. He grabbed her wrist. “I don’t think I can take this tonight.”

“Please, Hawk?”

He let out a soft moan and relaxed his hold. When she ran her fingertips lightly along his length, he throbbed under her gentle touch. She reached beneath to cradle him, fascinated at how he was built. He hissed and began cursing softly. She reached back further, and he grabbed her wrist again.

“Are you finished yet?” he growled.

She looked up at him, wide-eyed. “Can I taste you?”

He closed his eyes and moaned. “Jesus, you’re a pain in the ass.” Yet he eased himself toward her lips. She licked him shyly, running the tip of her tongue along the salty drop of liquid that seeped out. She wondered if this was his seed.

“Can I see what happens,” she asked tentatively, “when you lose control?”

“That does it.” He lifted her to her feet and laid her back along the bed. “Later, Alex. Right now I need to be inside you.” His eyes darkened and flared as he loomed over her. She should have been anxious in the face of such raw strength, the bunch of his muscles as he balanced himself above her. He could crush by his sheer size and weight.

But the restrained power of his passion thrilled her as he slowly

rested between her thighs. Sweat broke out along his forehead. She knew what his patience was costing him.

“I’ll be gentle this time, Alex.”

With delicate hands, she palmed soothing strokes along his biceps, thrilling to the hard feel of him. The wonderful pressure of him seeking entrance was heaven. She arched to meet him and pull him deeper, but he held back, propping his elbows on either side of her. He framed her face with his large hands. “I want to savor you, Alex.” He slid deeper and stopped. “Like a treasure ... to be cherished.”

He slipped in too slowly for her. “Hawk,” she sobbed.

“Such ... sweetness...” He pushed home, filling her and shuddering with the stroke. The full feel of him inside her was a completion she craved. When he began to move he had her crying and clutching him again, begging him to take her as she tore at the hard muscles of his back until she collapsed under him in one long ecliptic explosion. She clung to him and shook.

And, still, he was hard.

She lay limp and exhausted beneath him. His muscled torso glistened with sweat from the effort to control himself, every muscle in his body taut ... Zeus, in all his power, beautiful and earthy.

“Hawk?” She stroked the rough shadow of his jaw. He turned his lips into her palm. “So ... sweet,” he murmured and then closed his eyes. His face softened in an agony of pleasure as he pumped into her in slow thundering release.

His strong body heaved and then caved, in touching surrender. Never had she felt so powerful.

* * * *

Alex balanced herself along the edge of the dock and held down her camera’s shutter as the sun cleared the horizon. She’d heard about Sunset Beach in Hawaii, named for its spectacular beauty, and knew these sunrises had to be its counterparts. She breathed in the salt-tinged morning air and didn’t believe, after last night, that she could be more at peace.

She sensed him as surely as if he’d touched her and turned to see

Hawk leaning against a tall cedar post some distance away, watching her. When she smiled at him, he began a lazy approach down the dock, his boots thudding softly through the quiet mist rising from the bay. His hair was unrestrained, and the muscles beneath his T-shirt rippled with the subtle movement of his arms.

He eased down next to her and threaded his fingers through the side of her hair. "You weren't beside me when I woke up." His voice brushed over her like a soft caress. He kissed her forehead and ran his lips along her brows, then her eyelids. His smell was wonderful.

She was in love with him. The thought shocked her. Like a thunderbolt it pierced straight to her heart and shook her. While her annoying brain warned her in caution, her heart soared. She never wanted to leave him. She wondered how it could have happened so suddenly, how it had crept up and taken her by surprise.

"I told T-man I'd be out here at sunrise."

He gave her a measuring look. "Don't leave like that, Alex. Wake me next time." Her heart turned over and quickened. He drew her between his legs and rested his chin on the top of her head as they faced the sun, rising quickly above the water. He wrapped his arms around her completely and burrowed her against his chest. The warm breeze coming off the bay and the stillness had been soothing, but being wrapped in his arms in such a non-sexual way filled her with a contentment she hadn't known was possible. His words "next time" played over in her heart.

"I love this place," he breathed, the deep timbre of his voice vibrating through her. A few boats dotted the landscape, waiting to hear when the next open fishing period was scheduled, but most were moored while their captains and crew enjoyed the comforts of town. At this hour the town's people still slept, storing up for the days when they'd be up round-the-clock, pulling in nets and picking fish. Seagulls dived into the rippling bay, emerging seconds later with a feast of fish clutched in their beaks. Their intermittent squawking was the only sound.

Alex was afraid to breathe lest she break this magical spell.

"Did I interrupt your work?"

"I'm finished now," she said, turning to him.

He tilted her face up. "Alex?" He cupped her chin with one large

hand. She placed her own palm over his and waited. His eyes searched hers, and the haunted look that she'd seen for fleeting moments before swept across his face.

"What is it, Hawk?"

He studied her quietly for a long moment and then dipped to kiss her fully on the mouth. "Nothing." He brushed her lips. "I just like being here with you."

"I do, too," she sighed.

When they turned back to the natural kaleidoscope unfolding before them, the last of the fog burned off the water and a small flutter of human activity signaled daybreak.

* * * *

"Hey, Hawk," Hunter greeted him as Hawk slid into the booth beside him at the Rusty Rudder Café. "What's wrong with you? You're smiling."

Hawk ignored him but wasn't surprised by his friend's perceptive comment.

"Maybe you guys are trading auras?" Hunter glanced at T-man sitting across from him and at the notable scowl on his broad face.

T-man sneered.

"Honey's moving to Anchorage," Hunter said by way of explanation. "She's taking some Microsoft Networking course. It's a four-month deal."

"She'd be good at that," Hawk commented, glancing at the café entrance. "She's got a good memory for all the possible blends of liquor and their combinations while factoring in glass type, garnish. It's all in her head like a flow chart with its branches."

T-man's scowl deepened.

"I don't think you're helping, Hawk," Hunter chuckled.

T-man pushed aside his plate. "It means she'll work in Anchorage, too. The job market here is too narrow."

"You live in Anchorage yourself half the year."

"That's because I've got to with all the meetings I attend. I'd rather live here, and this is where I want Honey."

"Maybe you need to think about what Honey wants?" Hawk

suggested.

T-man gave a sigh. "I like you better when you don't talk."

The café was filling with fisherman nursing hangovers. Orders barking for more coffee abounded, and waitresses scurried between tables and booths that were set too close together. The chaotic atmosphere mirrored the restlessness of crews who knew the bay was filled with salmon that they couldn't get at for another twenty-four hours.

"You looking for Alex?" Hunter smiled.

Hawk nodded. He missed her already. They had gone back to his hotel room from the dock and showered together before she'd gone to meet Honey and Sister. Damn if he didn't stiffen now just thinking about it. He had never wanted a woman so much. While at first he told himself this desperate need of her was purely sexual, he knew better now. He wanted her close. In bed and out.

"Here comes Doc," Hunter mumbled. He lifted his chin to T-man. "You going to talk to him about your sister?"

T-man gave him an incredulous look. "And say what?"

Hunter eyed him as though he'd lost his mind. "To stay away from her. You want a guy like that hanging around your sister?"

"You mean a guy who has a good job, fits in well with the local people, and even though he's east coast city bred loves the hunting and fishing here so much that he'll probably stay forever?" T-man shrugged. "Yeah, that would be a bad type for my sister to get involved with all right."

"You know what I mean," Hunter said.

"My sister's a big girl. You're the only one who can't see that."

As though summoned forth by the discussion, Sister slipped through the waiting crowd by the register and started down the aisle toward their table. Hunter caught her eye and smiled, waving her over, but she smiled at Doc and signaled to him that she would join him.

Alex suddenly appeared with her and then *disappeared* behind two huge crewmen getting out of their booth. Hawk started to rise impatiently when Sister stopped briefly and peered down her straight nose at them with undisguised disdain.

Hawk studied her with curiosity, wondering what torture she'd heap next on the unsuspecting Hunter.

"I wasn't surprised by your behavior, Hunter," she said, her voice scathing, "but I expected more from you, Hawk."

The comment puzzled Hawk, but before he had time to wonder she moved to leave, dropping a parting remark in her wake. "For two highly educated men," she said with a toss of her head, "it's unbelievable."

Alex's small figure nudged through a group of people ahead and then she came darting down the narrow aisle. As she weaved under heavy trays uplifted by busboys and darted around hostesses wiping tables, Hawk found himself smiling. It was amazing how easy she could do that to him. And he felt an inordinate need to rescue her. He didn't know why he thought of her as fragile. She was strong. But he was struck with the need to insure that nothing touched her, like a newly discovered treasure that he didn't want to share. If he thought he could reach her without creating more chaos, he would.

When she finally made it to their table she was out of breath, and her face was flushed a beautiful rosy hue. It took him a minute to realize her agitation had nothing to do with the frenetic surroundings. He reached for her hand, but she pulled back as if she'd been stung, knocking into the bus tray perched precariously on the stand.

He grabbed the stand to steady it. "What's wrong, Alex?"

"You made a *bet* over me?"

He froze. Her lovely violet eyes were turning the purple that he remembered in the hot spring just prior to her pounding him. He hoped this little misunderstanding had a similar outcome. While her eyes blinked wide, his mind scrambled with questions he didn't dare ask. *How in the hell did she find out?*

He and Hunter shot a quick glance at one another and then looked quickly back at her.

"Did you?" Her small voice rose above the noisy din.

"Alex, sit down," he coaxed her.

"No, just tell me," she choked, obviously teetering on the edge of control. A few curious customers stopped their own conversations to listen. "Did you make a bet over which one of you could get me into bed first?"

Hawk leaped up. "No." The loud clinking of silverware against dishes suddenly quieted.

“That wasn’t the bet,” T-man said.

She covered her mouth, horrified. “Then it’s true,” she cried, tears springing to her eyes.

“You’re not helping,” Hawk barked at him and then turned a pleading eye to Alex. “Listen to me,” he said softly as he clasped her wrists in an attempt to draw her to him. The room had grown quiet.

“You lied to me.” Her tears turned to rage. “Or should I be pleased that I rate up there with a BMW and a Jaguar?” A small groan rose from the café. With a good shove she yanked out of his grip. The bus pan went flying, crashing to the feet of the waitress approaching with a tray of drinks that then upended, sending a wash of drinks over Hawk and Hunter’s heads.

She whirled on them and raced away.

Hawk tripped forward, swatting at the sticky liquid dripping down his ears and into his neck collar. “Damn it, Alex. Get back here.” She was just a few feet away but moving at a quick pace as large bodies parted for her like she was Moses at the Red Sea. A soft wave of chuckles reverberated through the café. He didn’t care who was amused. He only cared that Alex understood. “The bet was to keep you *out* of Hunter’s bed.”

She glanced back before she slipped through the last of the fishermen. As he lunged forward, he sidetracked the water station and then careened head on with another waitress who balanced a full load of dishes up along her arm. The next thing he knew, he was flat on his ass with egg yoke dripping from his chin, and Alex was nowhere in sight.

“Hey, Hawk,” Hunter called to him. “I think you’re in trouble.”

A loud chorus of laughter filled the little café.

* * * *

When Alex dashed out of the Rusty Rudder and tore across the street to where she’d parked T-man’s pick-up, she had no idea where she was headed or what she would do when she got there. All she knew was that she had to get as far away from Hawk as possible. She couldn’t bear the thought that last night had been some male spitting contest with her as the prize. And while she told herself that she didn’t want to believe that she had been so stupidly taken in, the real hurt and humiliation she suffered was

having believed she loved him. She hated him. What was wrong with her that she could be so stupid?

Her thoughts came to an abrupt halt when she collided head on with Runner and jammed into a large rifle he was cradling at his shoulder. He grabbed the gun before it fell to the ground. She jumped back in alarm.

"It's okay, it's not loaded." He took her by the shoulders. "What's wrong? Our professor again?"

The compassion she saw in his warm brown eyes almost brought her to tears, but she was too embarrassed to tell him. She shrugged off his concern.

He leaned the rifle against T-man's truck and turned her to him. "Alex, why would a private investigator be nosing around about you?"

"What?" She stepped back from him. "Where?" She looked about her, half expecting a sinister-looking man in a trench coat sporting handcuffs to leap out from between the rows of clapboard shops that lined the main street. She saw Hawk instead, barreling toward her full steam. A small gathering of onlookers came out on the wooden sidewalk to watch him. His hair was wet and slicked back, and he looked furious, the dust from the mud-packed street rising in clouds as he stomped toward her, every male muscle flexing in agitation.

She didn't know what panicked her more--his ferocious glare or the fact that an investigator might have traced her up here to turn her over to the police.

"Cooley radioed me," Runner continued. "He says Stephanie called T-man's Aviation Dispatch and said a Private Eye had been asking questions of her. She didn't tell them anything but he seems to--"

Hawk swung her around and clamped his hands onto her shoulders. "Alex, listen to me." His black orbs blazed, and his jaw clenched. But her fear of him was nothing compared to the terror she felt at Runner's last words.

"--seems to know that you're here in Salmon Bay," he finished.

"What?" She whirled on Runner, twisting frantically against Hawk's grip. "Stephanie's sure? The investigator knows where I am?"

Runner nodded.

"I've got to get out of here," she stammered, her panic rising to zenith

heights.

Hawk relaxed his grip but was coaxing her to turn to him. "You're not going anywhere," he said softly.

"Yes, I am," she gasped. "You don't understand." She pushed on his chest. She could only stay long enough to collect her things at Sister's. With that last payment from T-man she could get to Seattle and lose herself. "Runner, call Cooley and ask him to have his plane ready."

"Wait," Hawk said, signaling Runner not to call.

She struggled in Hawk's arms. "Let me go." She yanked on his forearm and dug her nails into his skin.

"Jesus," he snapped. But he gripped her harder. "Just listen." He gave her a shake.

"I can't," she choked. "And I can't explain. Don't fight me--" She kicked him in the shins with the toe of her boot. "Let me go. I've got to leave." She locked her teeth onto his forearm and bore down.

He howled and abruptly released her. She stumbled back, expecting him to grab her again, but she managed to make it to the side of the Kingcab. As she turned to swing open the door, she heard him speak in a low apologetic voice. "I hired the private investigator."

Her hand froze on the handle, and then she turned to him slowly. "What did you say?"

He heaved his shoulders in a long-suffering sigh. "I hired him." He ran a hand through his hair.

All the possibilities that had stormed through her mind, followed by all her plans of escape that were always ready, shut down. *He* had hired the investigator? She looked at him incredulously.

"Don't make--"

"No," she screamed. "Don't you say it."

"What?" He blinked.

"Don't you *dare* say it."

She walked to him, her pace slow and deliberate, taking in his perplexed expression.

"Say what?" He looked truly puzzled.

She impaled him with her gaze. "If you tell me not to make more of this than there is, I'll ... I'll--" A flash of steel glinted in the sunlight.

Runner's rifle. She grabbed it and pointed it straight at his chest.

He stumbled back. "Put that down," he ordered. She poked him in the ribs. "Alex," he barked, trying to grab the tip of the gun's barrel, but she yanked it away, its weight heavy in her arms. She lost her balance and tripped before regaining her footing again.

"Jesus Christ, Alex. That thing could go off."

"Get away from me, Hawk. I'm warning you."

"Shoot him, Kitten," a female voice called out.

When Hawk took a few cautious steps back, Alex looked to see that a small crowd had gathered along the boardwalk that lined the street. As others came out of the post office they joined the amused onlookers, lighting cigarettes and elbowing each other. Trucks were stopping, and drivers emerged to lean against their pickups and take in the entertainment.

"Keep going, Hawk," she warned.

"That's it, Kitten," a laughing male voice encouraged her. "You tell him."

It was clear to her that Runner, standing behind Hawk, was signaling the crowd that the gun wasn't loaded. Hawk would be furious when he found out, but for now this was such sweet revenge. "Get back, and don't you ever come near me again," she warned him.

"Stop the theatrics--"

Her eyes widened. She could tell the moment he said it, that he regretted it.

"Wait, Alex." He held up a restraining hand. "I didn't mean--"

"Yes, you did." She raised the gun higher and held it steady. He flinched and backed up more. She wished she knew how to make the clicking sound that signaled she'd cocked the gun.

"You know you won't shoot me," he hedged. "You'd never hurt another living thing. And you don't even know how to shoot."

"Yes, I do."

"She's right, Hawk," Runner said from off to the side. "I taught her." He gave Alex an encouraging smile.

She lifted her chin and straightened.

"Just let me explain, Alex," he said calmly, but she could tell he was anxious about her ability to handle the gun. Good.

“Put your hands in back of your neck. I don’t trust you and move back farther.”

“Alex, for God’s sake--”

She pulled on the trigger, and the gun cocked. He lifted his hands and stepped back obediently.

“Now, which do you want to explain first? That awful bet you made with Hunter to see which one of you could get me into bed, or do you want to start with why you sent a private investigator after me?”

“Make him tell you about the bet,” Marilyn called out. A chorus of women voiced their agreement.

“It figures Hunter would be involved,” Sister snorted in disgust. A row of woman nodded.

Hunter’s normally unperturbed voice rang out. “Hawk, clear that up, will you?”

“It wasn’t to get you into bed,” Hawk growled, taking his hands away from his neck.

“Put them up.” She steadied her aim.

He rolled his eyes and lifted his hands again. “It was to keep Hunter *out* of your bed.”

“Why?”

“Why?” He looked at her as though she had asked an impossibly difficult question. Then he glanced around at the crowd of spectators.

“Alex,” he spoke barely above a whisper. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Why was it so important to keep me out of Hunter’s bed?”

“Yeah, why, Hawk?” Susan baited him. “You don’t have any compunction about bed-hopping.”

“Stay out of this, Susan,” Hawk barked. He turned on Alex with a fury. “You know why,” he hissed, the strong muscles in his neck flexing. “Don’t make a mockery out of this.”

“Out of what? I don’t even know what you’re talking about. And I don’t trust you, or anything you say.”

“Then what’s the point of my explaining?”

“To humiliate you, like you humiliated me.” She choked back tears. She would not cry and give him the satisfaction of knowing how much he hurt her. But her hold on the heavy rifle faltered, and her hands began to

shake.

“Alex,” he said softly. “Give me the rifle.”

“No.” She held it tighter. “Tell me.”

“You know why, damn it.”

“Was it a game because you knew I was a virgin?”

“What? For Chrissake, Alex.”

“Then why?”

“You want me to tell you in front of all these gawkers?” he shouted.

“Fine.” He rubbed his hands down his face. “Just great. Okay. I’ll tell you why, goddam it. Because I’m in love with you.”

She shook her head in confusion. “What?” The sound of her own voice seemed foreign to her. The heavy silence that blanketed the street locked the moment in time. She was afraid to breathe.

“We couldn’t really hear him back here,” a familiar voice called out. “Make him tell ya again.” Wrapped in a fog of disbelief, she turned to the voice. It was Cooley, with a grin that stretched from ear to ear. “What was that he said, Kitten?” He chuckled.

“Very funny ... all of you,” Hawk drawled, turning to the small crowd gathered. “You want to hear it again?” he said, his voice amazingly calm. He placed his hands on his hips. “Fine, I’m in love with Alex. Is that clear enough?” His handsome face turned back to her, and one dimple surfaced. “I love you, Alex.” He whispered for her ears only.

She shook her head in an effort to clear it. “But you hired an investigator to check up on me?”

He hung his head and kneaded the back of his neck.

“What about that, Hawk?” Runner challenged.

Hawk’s head snapped up. “I don’t have to explain that to you,” he growled at Runner.

“But I deserve an explanation,” Alex said, wanting to believe he loved her but afraid to trust him.

“Alex...” He shifted his weight. “When I came into town yesterday morning I didn’t trust myself to see you.” He frowned. “I hadn’t planned on calling my investigator, but he had contacted me on another matter ... and I...” He glanced away and scowled at the crowd before returning his gaze to her. “It was an easy thing to ask of him while we were talking. My intent

was to stay away from you until I heard something. But ... I couldn't stay away from you. Until now, I'd forgotten all about him." He took a step toward her, his eyes pleading. "You've got to believe me, Alex. None of that matters anymore."

"How do you know?" she breathed. "What if you find out I'm a thief ... or a murderer of some kind?"

"I love you, Alex. Nothing is going to change that. I'll call the investigator and cancel the whole thing."

He was wrong. It would change everything when he found out, and eventually he would. She had foolishly failed to consider that. She nodded numbly and slowly lowered the rifle, finally letting it hang at her side. Her little dream world she'd imagined with him at her side came to a crashing halt. He took the rifle from her gently and placed it against the truck.

"Alex?" He sifted long fingers through her curls and tilted her face to him. "Are you all right?"

Her eyes filled with tears. He took it as a sign of happiness and smiled before taking her in his arms for a long tender kiss that broke her heart. A small round of applause rose from the pleased crowd.

She breathed in the wonderful scent of his skin and basked in the warmth of his strong arms before she wondered how long she could live this lie before she had to run, once again.

Chapter Eleven

Hawk flung his calculator across the hotel room and smashed the mirror. Then he turned on Hunter in a fury. "When?"

"Just over an hour ago. Sister couldn't get anything out of Alex. Just that she was scared. Cooley was the one who said that an FBI Agent was asking after an Alex Perry. Little did the agent know that Alex was in Cooley's hangar taking those pictures he needed for the insurance company. As soon as she got her things at Sister's, Cooley flew her to Naknek where she said she was getting a plane to Anchorage."

"Wait 'til I get my hands on Cooley," Hawk growled.

Hunter flinched. "Look. You know Cooley would do anything for Kitten. That's not the problem. Why would the FBI be looking for her?"

Hawk dropped down into a chair and ran his hands clear through the top of scalp and down his neck, his anger suddenly draining.

His first thought had been that she'd left him, confirming his long held belief that women couldn't be trusted. Last night she said she loved him ... that she wanted to be with him. But she had lied, just like every other woman he'd known aside from Stephanie. From the *beginning*, he had known she was a liar.

Still, when he thought of her, he couldn't hold onto his anger. It dissipated with his worry over the trouble she must be in. She needed him.

He picked up the phone and placed a call through to his investigator for the third time in three days. This time to *rehire* him, both to find Alex and to investigate her so he could get her out of whatever trouble she was in.

He realized he didn't even have a picture of her. Out of the hundreds she had taken, he didn't remember one with her in it. Now he was sure this was deliberate. After giving Richard, the P.I., what little information he knew about Alex, he told him to contact Stephanie and let her know Richard was working for him. She would help anyway she could.

Then he headed out to the hangar to get Cooley to fly him to Naknek and track down where she'd gone after Anchorage. While it was against the

law to give out passenger lists, the Salmon Bay was small.

It proved easy to find out that she'd boarded the plane to Anchorage, and from there she got a connecting flight to Seattle. Richard already had someone in Seattle working on tracking her. At least her hair was noticeable but he'd bet she donned her non-descript outfits again so she wouldn't stand out.

Hawk had no idea how to proceed after catching the red-eye to Seattle. He couldn't just wander the streets. But he couldn't stay in Alaska knowing she was so far away, in trouble--maybe even in custody--while he waited for some word. He wanted to be as close to her as possible when she was found.

After checking into a hotel near the airport, he phoned Richard to let him know he had arrived and would have his cell phone on him at all times while he too did what he could to find her. He would start with the boarding houses. He knew she had little money. Then he'd start on the photography supply shops, knowing it was her only source of income. No matter what she did to get herself in trouble with the FBI he would get her out of it ... if it took every dime he had. She couldn't keep running. He didn't allow himself to think about what would happen if she weren't found. He refused to think of a future without her.

As he lay on the comforter in his hotel room, staring up at the fake crystal shade above him, he thought of all the little plans he had made in his head over the last twenty-four hours. He had played with the idea of taking a sabbatical and staying in Salmon Bay for the winter. They could hole up in one of the A-frames out the lake road and watch the snow pile up to eight feet in December while the scent of burning birch filled the living room and they made love before the fireplace on the bear skin rug.

His mind rushed back to the last time they'd made love and how, at first, he was alarmed to realize that he'd not used a condom ... not the first time in the hot spring nor and other time they'd made love. Never had he made that mistake. Not even when he was fourteen. Yet, with Alex, it had never occurred to him, and, in her naiveté, she had never asked. The ramifications of not finding her were too painful to contemplate. He closed his mind to the thought and allowed himself to dream that he was holding her, wrapping his fingers around the silky wisps of her hair and listening to

her voice. He should have told her how much he loved the questions she asked him. He actually smiled remembering her last inquisition when he made slow tantalizing love to her. She was so easy to shock.

And so easy to love. He *would* find her.

Chapter Twelve

“Tell the Dean no, Stephanie,” Hawk barked as he paced the rented A-frame in the wooded lot in East Salmon Bay.

T-man shot her a warning look across the log-hewn table that was covered with Hawk’s papers and laptop. In the two weeks since Alex disappeared, his university files looked untouched and were replaced with stacks of information about Alex.

Stephanie waved a dismissive hand at T-man’s concern. “Hawk’s been yelling at me for twenty years. I don’t pay any attention.”

Hawk sank down next to her. “I can’t concentrate,” he murmured, running a weary hand through his hair. “And if the university doesn’t stop bugging me, they can forget about the sabbatical I requested. I’ll resign instead.”

“Okay,” Stephanie said. “When they sent me up here, I promised I’d do everything to dissuade you.”

“You have.”

T-man looked at the two fondly. “Looks like you were right about this all along,” he told Stephanie.

Hawk eyed her. “What’s he talking about?”

Stephanie covered Hawk’s hand. “I knew she’d be good for you. I just wished I’d known that she was running from something.”

“I’ll get her back.” Hawk jumped up and resumed his pacing.

“Let me see that dossier Richard put together.”

Hawk handed her a stack of papers and watched her lift the copy of Alex’s birth certificate. It didn’t take long for his investigator to turn up nearly every year of her life up until now. Richard and his team had done everything but find her.

Hawk picked up the yellowed photo of a little three-year-old girl, tangled red hair pulled back with lopsided clips to reveal a small freckled face, wary, with sad blue eyes. Her first foster identification--Caitlin McBride, mother deceased from tuberculosis, father unknown, no living relatives. Caitlin ... he had almost guessed that the first time he saw her.

With each new foster placement her eyes grew more guarded and the vulnerable set to her mouth heartbreaking. At twelve, her mouth took on the sensuous curves of budding womanhood as did her small frame. Hawk didn't have to guess why these years coincided with reports of her running away. The foster trail stopped with her last placement with the minister and his wife when she was fourteen. Since that time, she had surfaced with more names than Hawk could keep track.

"Twenty-three," Stephanie murmured. "I told you she wasn't a minor."

Stephanie read the reports that Hawk and T-man had gone over numerous times together trying to find some clue to where she'd be hiding now. Her eyes snapped to his.

Hawk explained to her, "You can see why she had to run again."

Stephanie studied him with appraising eyes. "You don't blame her, do you?"

"For what?"

"For leaving you." Her eyes softened. "You really *do* love her."

"She didn't leave me," Hawk explained quietly. "She did what she thought she had to. I'm sure she thinks she killed that minister, but in questioning the wife, Richard found that Alex disappeared around two AM that night. The coroner's report places the time of death at no earlier than six AM with the cause listed as affixation. The wife claimed she found him face down in a pillow on their bed after leaving him to make breakfast one hour before. The blood on the sharp corner of their nightstand was his. The story is that he stumbled, hit his head, and then fell face down unconscious."

"Long enough to smother himself?" Stephanie said. "That sounds pretty far fetched."

"T-man and I thought so, too," Hawk replied. "But Richard figures the sleepy little town was happy to write it off as an accident."

"Where does Alex factor into this?"

"No one thought she did. When Richard spoke with the wife about the circumstances surrounding Alex leaving, she went into a monologue instead about her husband's horrible accident that night. Richard put the facts together and figured the wife offed him. That she found the bastard in

Alex's bedroom with his pants down and alive but injured by some blunt instrument and unconscious, finished the job by suffocating him, and then dragged him back into their bedroom, making sure she cleaned up any evidence in Alex's room. Who knows how many times before that night she had caught him in similar circumstances? Guys like that make a career out of abusing children."

"Jesus," T-man muttered.

Stephanie sighed. "In Alex's fourteen-year-old mind, when she discovered the minister was dead, she must have assumed she killed him."

"Yeah," Hawk growled. "She's been running for nothing. I need to find her and tell her everything will be all right."

T-man's cell-phone beeped. It was Cooley. He had more news for Hawk.

Hawk grabbed the phone. "What is it, Cooley?"

With the static that filled the line, Hawk knew he was in his plane. His words were barely discernible. "I'll tell you when I see you."

"Tell me now," Hawk demanded.

Cooley chuckled. "Meet me at that little cabin at mile four along the creek in about an hour. Over and out." The line went dead.

"When I get my hands on him, I swear..." Hawk grabbed his hat off the bedpost and headed toward the door.

"Where are you going?" T-man asked. "He said in an hour."

"What else have I got to do?" Hawk barked as he flung open the door.

* * * *

Hawk fisted his knuckles on the windowsill and peered out through the grimy window of the seldom used cabin, impatient to see Cooley's three-wheeler barreling down the path. But when he looked out over the gently bubbling creek, all he saw was a young boy crouched down by the bank, watching a small family of beavers. The kid seemed fascinated.

While one beaver swam easily through the rippling water, snatching sticks and floating bark between his teeth, the others were scooping mud from the creek bottom with their tails and slapping it onto the burgeoning

dam.

He thought of Alex and the friend she had made of the mother eagle. It still made him smile to think of the silly name she gave the queen among predators.

He remembered her stricken look when Scott first told her that the male must have been killed. Hawk knew at that moment that, with such a tender heart, Alex would never make it--not in the Alaska wilderness and not in life.

He had been wrong. She was stronger than most people.

She'd make a wonderful mother. The thought pierced deep, the hurt squeezing his chest so he couldn't breathe. He couldn't allow himself to think that he might not find her.

He glanced at the kid again. He was tossing bark to the lone beaver that dashed back and forth between the bank and the dam. It was a helpful gesture that would get the kid bit if he didn't watch out. Stupid kid--anyone raised here knew that beavers carry rabies.

It was as stupid as when Alex was trying to get Frieda to come to her that night on the beach. Damned bird almost did. One was crazier than the other. But he supposed if anyone could tame a wild predator, Alex could. He was a living example.

He smiled despite his frustration and his bone deep fear of losing her.

The kid sat back on his haunches and lifted his face to the sun. Hawk froze at the sight of the tiny freckled face under the large bill of the ballcap. His eyes dropped to the flannel shirt and the shapely breasts now straining against the thick fabric. Blood rushed to his temple.

Before he could get his brain to tell his feet to move, she looked toward the cabin and saw him. But rather than smile, she jumped up and stood rigid. The ballcap flew off her head to free the rich swirl of bronze that fell to her shoulders.

Even from this distance, he could sense her wariness. It broke his heart to think she'd be afraid of him. How could she not know how much he loved her?

Dashing out of the cabin, he headed down to the bank and picked his way across the flat rocks and fallen logs of the shallow water downriver of the beavers, while she stood quiet and tense, watching him.

When he was not more than ten feet from her, she looked at him and burst into tears.

Hawk groaned and grabbed her up into his arms and held her fiercely. "You came back."

"I'm sorry," she sobbed, running kisses along his neck and burying her fingers in his hair. "I'm so sorry."

"Shh..." he whispered. "You came back. That's all that matters." He dried her tears with his thumbs and cradled her face. "You came back," he repeated, so relieved to feel her in his arms again.

She looked at him in wonder. "But I never left, Hawk. I gave my ticket to Seattle to a young woman in Naknek to throw off my trail." She shook her head when he started to question her and gazed at him, her eyes wide. "Cooley took me upriver to Hunter's grandparents until I was sure it was safe." She stroked his cheek. "I'd never leave you, Hawk," she whispered incredulously. "Never."

Had any ice lingered around his heart it would have melted with her sweet admission. "I love you, Alex." He held her close. "God, I love you."

He would never let her go this time, if he had to watch her--he smiled to himself--like a hawk.

* * * *

Alex sighed and snuggled in closer against Hawk's chest as they shared the redwood lounge, reveling in the feel of his lips against her hair, and the warmth of his heart beating against her back. They looked out from the deck of his cedar A-frame that overlooked the bay and watched the moon, high over the horizon, compete with the low dipping sun for position. She could see Sister's cabin across the way. Earlier Hunter had cooked Sister a delicious dinner at her cabin, and she and Hawk had joined them. It was after the four of them saw her brother T-man off at the airport. He was going after Honey who had left that morning for Anchorage.

Now, it was two in the morning, and the sun had yet to set.

"Say it again, Hawk," she murmured.

"What?" He smiled against her hair.

"My name. It's been so long since anyone called me by my real

name. I didn't realize how much I'd missed it."

"Caitlin," he whispered. "God, that fits you. Almost as good as Kitten."

She smiled in contentment, praying this week of bliss would never end but then soon frowned, remembering tomorrow. "I'm nervous about meeting with the FBI, Hawk. How do I know it's not some kind of a trick?"

He turned her in his arms. "Caitlin, I'd never let anything happen to you. You believe that, don't you?"

She did. She believed he could protect her from anything. He was her Zeus, and she longed to be his Hera, wife of the god of light and truth.

"The FBI just wants anything you can give them on the real Alex Perry. They're sure her name was given to her by the couple who kidnapped her when she was a toddler. Anything you can remember her saying about where she lived or places they took her could help the FBI ... and her parents." He rubbed his chin along her forehead. "Besides," he crooned, "you didn't really assume her identity, you just used her name."

"When you're on the street as we were, Hawk, you don't share much, but I guess I'd have more information than anyone. We lived in the condemned house together with a group of other kids for two years."

"The FBI will want their names, too. They might know something."

"I'll do my best." Alex sighed. "And they won't question me on Pastor Martin?"

He slid his fingers along her jaw. "I told you, that night was written off as an accident as soon as it happened. I still think his wife killed him."

"No," she gasped. "She would never do that."

Hawk grimaced. "And the good pastor was a model of virtue."

She shrugged lightly and sighed, knowing he was probably right.

He tilted her chin up. "That's what I love about you, your innocence, despite all you've been through. Lucky for me you saw through the miserable bastard I was."

"Hawk, you weren't--"

He swooped down and captured her mouth in a tender kiss. "Let's stay here all winter, Alex."

"Stay here?" she murmured, nibbling his warm lips. "But what about your work?"

“I took a year sabbatical. We can have a whole year together here before we figure out what’s next.”

She thought a moment. Although it wasn’t the marriage proposal for which she’d hoped, she stifled her disappointment, content that he wanted her close. “I can support us with my photography, Hawk, and I’m good at budgeting.”

He let out a raw chuckle. “You don’t have to worry about money. I have enough to last us five lifetimes,” he said, his tone indulgent.

“You do?”

He smiled at her confusion. “I was hoping we could both cut back on work. Spend our time instead making a baby?”

“A baby?” She gasped.

“We’ll have a wedding first.” He gave her a teasing smile and then turned serious. “Say you’ll marry me, Caitlin. I know you love me.” He pressed his lips to hers. “We can have the family we both never had. Be my Hera?”

“How do you know about that?”

He laughed. “I managed to squeeze a few things out of Sister while you were gone.” He ran his lips over her forehead. “You haven’t answered me.”

“Yes,” she breathed. “I’ll be your Hera and have little Hawk babies.” A single tear trailed down her face. “I love you. And I always will. And I’ll never lie to you, again. I promise.” It was so wonderful to know that she’d always be able to tell him the truth.

“In that case,” he murmured against her lips. “Tell me the truth. Would you have gone through with that wet T-shirt contest if I hadn’t rescued you?”

She laughed. “Ask me on our tenth anniversary, and maybe I’ll tell you.” She breathed in the scent of him. “I don’t want to talk now, Hawk.” She unbuttoned his shirt, needing to feel the warmth of his skin against her palms.

“If you’re trying to get out of answering me, you’re doing a good job,” he growled, slipping his hands up her shirt. “I love you, Caitlin.”

“Mmmm.... Show me, Hawk,” she purred contentedly.

“My pleasure, Kitten.” He nipped at her throat. “My pleasure.”

