Ellora's Cave Presents



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Sure Thing

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SURE THING

Lorie O'Clare

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Chapter One

Joanie Showalter looked down at her hands. Her knuckles turned white as she held on to the banister.

"I'd like to be civil about this. We can still be friends, you know." Tommy Showalter fingered the mail and then picked it up off the vanity just inside the front door where Joanie always left it for him to see. "And I'd like to keep the house, which is best since your income couldn't handle the mortgage. If you need help finding an apartment, let me know."

She stared after him when he walked through the entryway toward his den.

Divorce? No way. Not them.

Tommy closed the door to his den, leaving her standing on the stairs, unable to let go of the banister. He started talking to someone on the phone. Her thoughts rumbled too loud in her head for her to concentrate on what he was saying.

Emotions should be pumping through her—pain, humiliation, fear, outrage. Anything. She searched her mind, waited for her gut to turn to a rock of dismay. Nothing. Suddenly she was at the top of the stairs and she didn't remember climbing them. This staircase always did suck. It twisted. There were no outlets near it. It made it impossible to vacuum. And white carpet—white carpet that her vacuum wouldn't reach. She hated this house.

Heading down the hallway toward the master bedroom, she glanced at the two other bedrooms. Wasted space. Tommy had a vasectomy two years into their marriage.

Kids just aren't for me, Joanie.

Her mom had told her that was a bad sign. She'd ignored the comment. And what did they do with these bedrooms? Nothing. Not a damned thing. Neatly arranged with furniture to make them appear like rooms that served a purpose. The only purpose they served was extra space for her to clean.

He could have the damned house.

Sinking onto their king-sized bed—another joke, like they ever used it for anything but sleeping—she slowly picked up the phone on her nightstand.

There was a dial tone. The last thing she wanted was to hear who Tommy might have been talking to, who he might have told with relief that he finally asked his wife for a divorce.

"Jenny?" Joanie was surprised at how calm she sounded. Where were the hysterics?

"Hey, Sis. I'm headed out the door. What's up?" Her sister was always running at a hundred miles an hour.

"Tommy just told me he wanted a divorce."

Silence. Dead silence. She didn't want her sister to be quiet. Her sister was never quiet. Again she searched her own thoughts. The pain would hit her any minute now.

"I know a good lawyer, a girlfriend of mine. You remember April Wright?" A loud, clamoring sound rang in her ear from Jenny's end. "Sorry. Dropped the phone. This is a good thing, right?"

Jenny never had liked Tommy. Actually, no one in her family cared for him. Even now, after being informed he wanted her out, Joanie wondered why. God, she should be committed. He offered no explanation. Just simply, *I want a divorce*. Was she supposed to ask for the explanation? God. How did one go about doing this divorce thing? Other than the lawyer, paperwork, what was she supposed to say to Tommy? Weren't there things he should be saying to her?

"I don't know how to feel about this," she admitted honestly. "We were leaving for our anniversary cruise on Monday."

"Oh that's right. I forgot all about that. God. I can't find my keys anywhere." Her sister would lose her head if it weren't attached.

"I'm kind of lost right now too," she confessed, knowing even though her sister was a scatterbrain, she was a good person to talk to. When times got hard for either one of them, they'd always been there for each other.

"That's just because you're scared to admit how happy this makes you. I've got to run and get the twins from school. I'd call you, but I forgot to charge the cell phone. Give me thirty minutes, okay? And don't worry. This is a good thing. I promise. I love you, Joanie."

Her sister hung up without saying goodbye, an action that would piss Joanie off if anyone else did it, but that was Jenny. Her heart was in the right place—it was everything else that she couldn't keep organized.

She stared around the only bedroom she'd known for the past ten years. Well, almost ten years. They'd moved into this home after returning from their honeymoon. Next Monday would be their tenth year wedding anniversary.

Her gift to Tommy—a cruise along the coast of Alaska, an escape from all their cares and time to get to know each other again—was something she'd planned for months. It was such a big deal that she couldn't make all the arrangements without confiding in him her plans. On their tenth year wedding anniversary they would embark on a cruise together, something she'd thought both of them dreamed of doing.

You've been living with a stranger for years.

His footsteps sounded on the stairs and she frantically tried to look busy doing something, anything.

"Why did you book nonrefundable tickets for that damned cruise?" he asked, pushing the door open and scowling at her.

There were streaks of gray highlighting his black hair. Crow's feet that once she thought were sexy now looked like wrinkles. When did he start looking so old? Her gaze fell down his starched shirt, the tie that he'd loosened since he got home and his perfectly pleated pants. Suddenly his anal-retentiveness made him look like a geek, an aging geek.

"Because I didn't plan on refunding them," she said, holding her head high. Staring into those cobalt blue eyes, suddenly she had the urge to laugh.

She sure hadn't expected the first emotion that would hit her to be humor. She cocked her head and bit her lip to keep the laughter in. God, she almost failed. Nothing here was funny. Tears would be more appropriate. Anger, remorse, sadness—but laughter? She was insane.

"Well I won't pay for the full price of them. And don't expect my half out of the next paycheck. Where are the tickets?" He held out his hand.

She studied his perfectly manicured fingernails.

"You want the tickets? Both of them?" The urge to laugh faded. There was the ball of apprehension that she'd anticipated slowly forming in her gut. "What are you going to do with the tickets? You just said they aren't refundable."

"Which is why I sure as hell don't plan on letting them go unused." His expression didn't change. "I need the tickets."

"Who are you going to take with you?"

"That's none of your business."

The rock in her gut turned into a boulder. She didn't realize she'd stood until she plopped back down on the bed.

"You're going to take someone else with you on our anniversary cruise?"

"It's not our anniversary cruise if we're getting a divorce. Now where are the tickets?"

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Her eyes suddenly burned. But it wasn't sadness like she'd thought she'd experience. Hardcore anger rose like bile and burned her tongue.

"I'm going on that cruise," she spit out, deciding at that moment she'd be damned if he took someone in her place. "You can't have them."

Tommy stared at her for a moment, his lower lip twitching the way it always did when he was angry. He lowered his hand, fisting both of them against his hips. His gaze traveled down her, and she looked away from him, focusing on a picture of the two of them at his family reunion the previous year. Arm in arm, they smiled for the snapshot she'd put in a silver frame and placed on her nightstand. He sure as hell had aged a lot in a year. And she, dressed in her leggings and a long t-shirt—perfect attire to hide her growing gut. Her hair was down in the shot, blowing around her face, a mixture of blonde and brown, while she grinned like an idiot at the camera. How many

times had Tommy suggested that she choose a shade and dye her hair either blonde or brunette? At least her unique hair color didn't have any strands of gray.

"Don't expect me to reimburse you for them." With that he turned and left her, closing the door silently behind him.

She fumbled with the bun that held her hair neatly in place behind her head. Squeezing her burning eyes shut, she waited for the tears to fall, but they didn't.

Throughout the week and into the next, between work and moving what few things she wanted out of the house into a storage unit, she didn't cry once.

"I still can't believe you didn't take more furniture." Jenny slowed for the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport exit, cutting off another driver when she hurried into the lane they needed.

Joanie played with her purse in her lap, staring at the ticket for her cruise. It had been insane burning the other ticket, insane and more fun than she'd had in a long time. It had left a nasty stain in the kitchen sink. Damn Tommy's luck.

"Your lawyer told you it would be harder to get items back later once the divorce proceedings start." Jenny could remember every detail of conversations she'd had over the past month but couldn't seem to wear matching socks. "And since he's had that bimbo starting to move her things in—"

Joanie cut her sister off. "He filed for divorce before he even told me about it. And there's furniture in my storage unit."

She didn't want to hear about Melanie Upright, her husband's legal assistant. Joanie had gone to Tommy's law firm after leaving her work more times than she cared to remember, helping him catch up when Melanie couldn't get the work done. Obviously Melanie hadn't been there to assist him with legal matters.

Many of her things—her hope chest, the old kitchen table her grandmother gave her when Joanie was in college—had been in storage throughout their marriage. She should have taken the hint, should have seen what everyone else saw over the past ten years. Tommy insisted she work while he went to law school. She'd kept them afloat with her legal secretary position when he'd first opened his own firm. When he started creating a client base, he'd hired his own staff, insisting they'd do better if they didn't work under the same roof. She'd been a necessity while he slowly climbed the ladder of success.

Jenny grunted and stopped at the booth to get her ticket before entering airport parking. She honked and yelled at the driver next to her while speeding up to push her way into traffic. Joanie learned a long time ago not to look out the window when her sister drove. Helped keep her sanity in check.

At her terminal, Jenny double-parked and then popped the trunk before hopping out to help Joanie with her luggage.

"I'm jealous, you know." She lifted the two suitcases out and handed them to Joanie. "I've never been on a cruise."

"I offered to let you go with me." Although privately she'd been glad when her sister told her there was no way her husband would survive with the twins while she was gone.

Jenny had found the perfect man. Ralph Clark was more disorganized than Jenny. Overweight with a laugh that made his gut jiggle just like Santa Clause, he adored the ground his wife walked on. She and her sister had married the same year, and still Jenny and Ralph acted like two kids head over heels with puppy love. Tommy had always found it disgusting. Like a good wife, she'd agreed with him, content that Tommy never laid a hand on her in public. Looking back, she couldn't remember when he'd last touched her privately either. Sex had become something she only dreamed about.

Jenny pulled her sister into a hug, kissing her fondly on the cheek. "Go get yourself laid, Sis. You deserve it more than anyone."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if her sister read minds. Instead Joanie kissed her in return, enjoying a moment of public affection that Tommy would have groaned over. No longer did it matter what the jerk thought. All that mattered now was what she thought. And Joanie didn't see anything wrong with enjoying life and what it would offer.

Maybe at thirty-five she was getting old and run-down. By the time she got off her plane, made it through the airport to the shuttle with barely a minute to spare and then waited an eternity to board the cruise ship, all she wanted to do was find her cabin and take a nice, long nap.

"Like hell you're going to stay in your room and do nothing for the next two weeks." She looked around the small compartment that would be her home for the duration of the cruise.

Instantly she knew Tommy would have hated it. The double bed was hard and there was only one closet. The attached bathroom wasn't much bigger than the closet. One small, round window looked out onto an endless ocean. She stood on tiptoe and gazed outside for a moment.

She was in for an adventure. Never in her life had she done anything like this. No plans, no arranged itinerary, just kicking back for a couple weeks and floating around on the ocean. She grinned, resting her chin on the cold metal, circular windowsill. There were no memories of the last time she'd done whatever the hell she wanted to do.

"So what do you want to do?" She turned around, looking down at her unpacked bags.

The first thing Tommy would do was unpack and organize their clothes neatly in the closet so they wouldn't get wrinkled. Her grin spreading, she marched out of her room, leaving the suitcases right where they were. It was time to shop. Spend money on things she didn't need. Live a little. What cash she had was hers and no one else's. Tommy had seen to that, closing out their mutual checking account and creating his own private one. Granted, she'd found out when the grocery store had refused her debit card, embarrassing her in front of a long line of customers. It had been a cruel thing to do. She'd been so damned pissed she almost marched into his office just for the satisfaction of punching him in the nose. That would mean seeing Tommy though. Giving him the satisfaction of knowing he'd made her miserable wouldn't do.

Instead she made a stop at the bank and created her own accounts. She had no one to answer to but herself when she got her bank statement at the end of the month.

Staring at the long, wide aisle running down the middle of the upper deck with every kind of shop a person could imagine lining both sides, Joanie slowed while people moved around her. It was just like being in a shopping mall. With over ten decks on the ship, she could easily forget she was on the ocean and get lost shopping. She headed toward a small jewelry shop, deciding something personal and pretty would be her perfect first purchase.

It was hard to believe less than an hour had passed when she organized her receipts in her wallet. If she didn't stop shopping now, she'd be broke for the rest of the cruise.

A woman's voice announced that they were about to leave port. The overexcited female voice echoed across the deck and instantly everyone around her seemed to pounce into hyperdrive. Joanie grabbed her bags, scared a stampede would crush her, and allowed the crowds to push her toward the elevators. Deciding for the stairs, she hurried to the upper deck.

It was just as crowded up there, but with such a different atmosphere. A cool ocean wind wrapped around her as she searched for a spot so she could see better.

"This your first cruise?" A young man, who had to be a good ten years younger than she was, grinned and gave her the once-over.

Joanie stepped forward, returning the friendly smile, and breathed in the damp salt air. His friend, a tall, suntanned blond, turned, smiling as well, and made room for her so she could join in waving at the people still on land.

"Sure is." She fingered the small turquoise carving that hung around her neck and then patted the bright blue hair tie she'd fixed around her ponytail, both new purchases.

Maybe it was silly, but her frivolous purchases lightened her mood and put a slight sway in her hips as she moved, as if she lived without a care in the world. Laughing, she waved at the crowd and joined in yelling, "Bon voyage" as the ship's horns blew and the deck underneath her began rocking.

"You know the best way to avoid getting seasick, don't you?" The tall, lanky blond moved to take her arm.

"What's that?" she asked, noting how his blue eyes matched the color of the sky.

The longhaired guy hurried to her other side. "You have a drink with me." He took her other arm, scowling at his friend.

Two men had never fought for her attention as long as she'd lived. And even though butterflies suddenly flew precariously in her stomach, she grinned. It was time to live it up. "I might be a little thirsty."

"And you now have an escort to the bar." The guy with the long brown hair stood just a little bit taller than she did. And at five-feet-five-inches, she'd never considered herself that tall.

By the time she returned to her room later that night, she was slightly tipsy from several drinks. It was more than a bit strange to have so many men flirting with her. Her divorce was underway though, and her soon-to-be ex was moving forward with his life. She might as well do the same.

Quite a few men talked to her, picked up on her and made her feel pretty. But none of them held that special something, that charisma she dreamed would sweep her off her feet.

"Who are you fooling though?" She laughed dryly, stripping out of her clothes and staring at the double sized bed where she and Tommy would have slept. Tommy didn't have that certain zing that a man should possess if he were to sweep her off her feet.

"Obviously he didn't even offer security," she mused, grabbing all the pillows and stacking them on top of each other. And that's what she believed he'd been for so many years—her rock, her foundation of stability. "Men like that only exist in fairy tales."

The sheets were cool and fresh against her skin and she stretched out under the blankets, enjoying how well-made the bed was. Now if only some gorgeous hunk of a man was lying next to her.

Her dream man didn't look like Tommy, nor had he ever. She closed her eyes, running her fingers down her middle until goose bumps rushed over her warm flesh. He was tall, well-built with muscles everywhere—hey, it was her fantasy. And he only had eyes for her. She would be his world. Although he would do some line of work that made him tons of money, he would live for the moments when he could spoil her and make love to her.

She touched her nipples, felt them pucker and harden against her fingertips. Then cupping her breasts, she squeezed, imagining her dream man adored them.

"I wish your mouth was on them now," she whispered into the darkness.

There was no answer, but her imagination didn't stop. He would have a day's worth of growth on his chin and it would brush roughly over her skin. She arched against the blankets, squeezing and tugging her breasts while her insides quickened with need.

And that was another thing. "Size definitely matters," she said out loud, smiling as she pictured her imaginary lover's hard, throbbing cock.

He teased and loved her with gentle kisses. Joanie sighed when his hands caressed her body. She shifted her legs and dreamed of his thick cock, moving closer to her pussy. Her moist flesh swelled in anticipation, as eager to feel him inside her as he was to fuck her. She could tell by how the muscles in his body tightened, solid and covered with smooth flesh. He pressed against her, touching her almost everywhere. His body was warm, hard and powerful. Joanie grinned with her eyes closed. And he would have a hairy chest. Not too hairy, but enough that she could flatten her fingers into it, run her palm over his beating heart and feel his roped muscles twitch against her touch while she felt the coarse hairs tangle over her fingertips.

She loved how he would whisper her name. He would say it with reverence, adoring her while voicing how he couldn't live without her. She tried picturing his face, but her mind leaned toward other parts of his body.

She tweaked her nipple and moved her other hand between her legs. Pressing just a little bit against her clit, she thought how he would start down there. Of course it would be with his mouth. Tommy never wanted to eat her out. Of course, he loved the idea of her rolling over, getting on her hands and knees and taking care of him. But with her dream man, all that would matter to him would be her pleasure. It was her dream, after all.

The small turquoise necklace pooled at her collarbone and she fingered it while her other hand slowly moved between her legs. It was harder to imagine his tongue and do the work with her fingers, but she squeezed her eyes shut, picturing his head between her legs. And she spread her legs until her thigh muscles stretched, giving him plenty of room. He would make a feast out of her, whispering how much he adored her and make her promise she would be by his side forever.

Forever. There was proof that this was nothing more than her fantasy. If only forever existed. The pang of regret, the guilt that she had failed, tried interrupting her fantasy lover's adoration of her. But her lover was too determined to allow such petty emotions to get in his way.

He thrust his tongue inside her, groaning as he lapped at her juices. Thick cream coated her fingers and she pushed several inside her, feeling her slick muscles contract around them. Maybe when the ship reached its first port, she would buy a sex toy, search until she found the perfect one that would match how she imagined her lover would be built.

Moving her fingers in and out of her with eager energy, she sucked in a breath as the pressure built inside her, swelling over the dam that she ached to tear down. More than anything she wanted her penned up lust to break the barrier that kept her from her orgasm.

And that's when he would stop. She opened her eyes, not bothering to focus in the darkness, and glanced down, picturing his mischievous grin. She saw the glistening moisture that covered his mouth and soaked the dark shadow on his chin. His eyes glowed with promises, and his to-die-for sexy face would stare at her for a long moment. Just enjoying seeing her on the brink of coming.

"I need it now. Please." She shook her head.

No. She wouldn't have to beg. He wouldn't have it. Her lover wanted her to know pleasure and to please her more than he needed to breathe. All that would matter to him would be the glow of satisfaction after he fucked her until she couldn't come anymore.

And he would tell her that. With a deep baritone whisper, he would promise to satisfy her in every way possible.

"It's all that matters to me. All that I think about all day," he would remind her. Even while he was working, earning all that money so he could buy her beautiful lingerie and lovely trinkets, she would always be on his mind.

She closed her eyes again. Knowing sleep wouldn't come until she could get off, she pictured him rising over her. He would have dark hair and it would be tousled. His hands ran over her body while he sang her praises.

He wouldn't see her as fat, or having any faults at all. But then of course this was her fantasy. She would be thin, perfect, with beautifully shaped breasts that were as perky as they were when she was twenty. And she would be limber.

He situated himself between her legs. Joanie bent her knees, imagining him lifting her legs, placing her heels on his shoulders and then pressing his large, hard cock at her entrance.

Kicking the covers out of the way quickly, she brought her knees to her chest and rubbed her pussy with her fingers, wishing more than anything his cock really was here, really could fill her and take the ache away.

"All I need," she whispered, and thrust her fingers as far inside her as they would go. "Make me come, my dark lover," she demanded.

She fucked herself with her fingers, moving them in and out with the aggression and determination that her lover would have. His expression was needy and focused. Not once did he close his eyes. He didn't want to fantasize about someone else. He wanted to see her, watch her while she moved closer to the edge.

"I'm almost there." Her voice was husky.

He smiled, leaning forward and kissing her while his thick cock impaled her and finally hit that spot. Again. Needing all of her. Knowing just when it would happen.

Blinking a few times, she felt the moisture around her fingers, soaking her palm as her muscles inside her quivered. Her orgasm hit her, the waves tumbling over each other while she breathed hard, keeping up the momentum until she couldn't handle it any longer.

Then pulling her hand out and holding it in front of her, she again fingered her necklace with her other hand. "Someday I'll find you," she promised herself.

Or better yet. He would find her.

Chapter Two

Joanie would set foot on Alaska for the first time in her life today. It was their only stop before moving north up the coastline. The brochure promised a view and education on icebergs while the cabin crew would break them into small groups and explain how global warming would change this part of the world over the next fifty years.

Joanie looked forward to the possibility of seeing animals that might be extinct in the near future. But today they would disembark at the small town of Seward. Her plan was to do some shopping, enjoy the breathtaking view of the mountains and hopefully indulge in some of the local cuisine.

After a quick shower, she fingered the clothes in her suitcase. Jeans and a sweater that would show off her figure. Something comfortable yet classy. The men on this ship noticed her, and it felt good getting all the attention. A moment to remember. An adventure filled with excitement, and a little flirting never hurt anyone.

"If I look good, I'll feel good." She dropped the clothes she chose on her unmade bed and walked into the small bathroom. One of the disadvantages of being top-heavy, with age the top sagged faster than the rest of her. She cupped her breasts and then pushed them up where they belonged. "Joanie, you are just going to have to make do with what you've got."

On the top of her list would be a new bra, maybe something made of lace. Her simple white support bras helped show off her breasts once the sweater was on, but it was the furthest thing from sexy.

"Maybe if I tried being sexy underneath my clothes, Tommy wouldn't have found someone else." She finished dressing and then wrinkled her nose and made a face at herself in the mirror until she smiled. "And maybe it's his own downfalls that couldn't keep him loyal, not yours."

Once again the pain of regret and what-ifs tried plaguing her. She shoved them out of her head, fingered her necklace and adjusted it so that it hung outside her sweater and then hurried to finish getting ready. The only way Tommy would ruin her cruise was if she let him. And that wasn't going to happen.

Maybe it was the salt water in the air that did something to the men on this cruise. Joanie knew she wasn't some erotic beauty. A size twelve with more than a few pounds that she should get rid of, nothing about her was anything other than just plain normal. She'd done all the diets, tried working out, but not a damned thing made her scale at home budge. Yet more than a handful of men noticed her and smiled, turning their heads and watching as she walked through the ship.

Joanie put a little strut into her walk, loving the attention, but kept her pace up, not wanting any of them to stop and try talking to her. The stop in Seward would be brief, and she planned on making the best of every minute she would have on dry ground.

The busy promenade sobered her a bit. A friendly woman's voice announced when they would be disembarking and safety measures that should be taken while ashore. Families and couples hurried around her, cameras flashing and everyone obviously already quite buzzed on caffeine. One might think they'd been aboard the ship for months and had just discovered dry land.

"Are you going ashore today, Miss?" A man in uniform, a bit on the pudgy side with silver hair stepped in front of her. His gaze traveled down her, then attentive eyes met hers as he smiled.

"Yes. Are you the captain?" she asked, searching his uniform for a sign of rank while wondering if cruise captains had a ranking system similar to military.

He laughed, taking her arm and patting her fingers as he closed them around his arm. "No. I'm one of the tour guides. Allow me to show you the time of your life."

"Wow. I didn't realize we would get such individual attention." She picked up her pace, allowing him to lead the way.

He expertly maneuvered them through the growing crowd of passengers, not stopping when he smiled down at her and momentarily ignored everyone around them. He ran his smooth, cool fingers over hers. "I don't usually do this. I just couldn't help but notice you walking toward me. I hope I'm not being too forward. There's just something about you. You're so captivating."

Some of the pickup lines guys used were rather overused. For some reason, his straight-up approach relaxed her a bit. It wasn't like he could maul her with so many people surrounding them. And he was a ship employee. She glanced at the line of passengers who waited for their passes to be scanned so they could leave the ship.

"I haven't really decided which tour to take," she pondered, looking up at each sign above the different lines of people.

"You'll take my tour." He pulled her along, leaving the long lines behind. "I can get you past all of this waiting." He sounded mighty sure of himself. "Leave with me and I'll make sure you get a good seat right beside me in the courtesy van."

"Should I get my pass scanned somewhere?" she asked, holding her boarding pass up for him to see.

He frowned at it for just a moment and it seemed he looked at it like he'd never seen one before. But the look passed quickly and she guessed her overactive imagination might still be in effect from the night before. Dwelling on her fantasy man and her private masturbation before falling asleep the night before, Joanie looked at the crew member who hurriedly walked her through the thick mass of people. He didn't even come close.

"Just stay with me the whole time and we won't have any worries," he told her, and grinned, showing off his crooked teeth.

Did all cruise personnel make a habit of picking up on their clientele? Getting past the long wait in lines did have its appeal. Her tour guide greeted all other ship personnel as if he ran the place and even snapped at a younger guy who leaned against the guard rail.

"At attention, young man," he told the kid with a superior tone.

The kid glared at him but then looked at her and winked. Her tour guide hurried her down a long plank and off the ship.

Joanie ended up having to wait in the courtesy van while everyone else slowly made their way through the lines and then filled each van. The noise level from chatter and excitement was almost unbearable when a perky young woman picked up her microphone and introduced herself while fastening her seatbelt in the driver's seat.

She hid her amusement when she glanced out the window to see her pudgy escort arguing with someone else in uniform that he was supposed to be driving the van she was in. The young girl at the wheel ignored his complaints when she hopped behind the driver's seat and glanced at the printout that said who was on the van with her.

"I won't take time to read off the list," she announced, and made her handheld microphone squeal when she first used it. "You all know who you are anyway, right?" She laughed at her own joke. "Just remember to get back on this van when we go back."

The people around her ignored the lady, talking to each other and pointing out the windows. Their driver pulled away from the curb, shuffling through papers on the dash while she drove until she found what she searched for.

"There are many things to enjoy while you're here." She popped gum while she spoke, winging her speech and hesitating until she'd situated a laminated fact sheet on the steering wheel and began reading.

"Seward, Alaska is the gateway to Kenai Fjords National Park," she said with too much enthusiasm.

The van was full of families and older couples. Joanie settled in, listening to the history of the small Alaskan town and enjoying the beautiful scenery outside her window. Glancing back and forth from the breathtaking mountains outside to the animated young lady offering history and insight into the culture of the people in this area, she quickly forgot about the tour guide who wanted to be her personal escort.

It wasn't like she came on this cruise to find a man. None of the guys who sought her out were all that impressive anyway. Granted, the attention boosted her ego a bit. And there wasn't anything wrong with a little flirting. But that was all that it was, and she certainly wouldn't let it be the highlight of her cruise.

The last thing she needed was to jump into another relationship while she still had the indention of her wedding ring on her finger.

"Fishing is quite the event in this small community," the tour guide continued. "Monster halibut weighing over three hundred pounds are caught each year in nearby waters. And if you have time, be sure and try one of the tuna steaks. They're to die for! Regardless of what local cuisine you sample, I promise you won't be disappointed. The

pamphlets included in your folders list descriptions of all the shops up and down this street."

Everyone around her shifted and began grabbing purses and cameras. The tour guide slowed and turned into a large parking lot. Other tour vans were ahead of them, already parking in a designated area that looked like a cement sea of oversized white gulls neatly arranged in rows.

Glancing at the other passengers around her, Joanie realized she didn't have the folders and pamphlets that the others studied or held tightly in their hands. Obviously her tour guide had been more concerned with her accompanying him than educating her on the sights.

"To your right you'll find some wonderfully quaint shops. This part of Seward prides itself in keeping with the older ways of their ancestors. So folks, it's time to shop 'til you drop," their tour guide said, turning and giving them a million-dollar smile. "The vans leave in one hour and we'll continue our tour into some of the scenic areas of the park. Be sure and buy film."

Joanie waited as the families with children climbed out of the van. She searched the van quickly, hoping someone might have left a brochure behind. No one did though. Which meant she would hoof it. She jumped out of the side door last and glanced at the large parking lot filled with tourists looking ready to attack this peaceful-looking town. She quickly took off in the opposite direction of the group surrounding her. Joanie hated the sensation of feeling like a gaudy tourist ready to invade the privacy of those around them.

The tour guide hadn't lied about the quaint shops. Glancing through the windows of a couple of them, Joanie was sure she'd stepped into another time, simpler, quieter, and no longer cared that she didn't have a brochure to bury her nose in. Instead she was forced to pay attention to her surroundings and learn that way. All she had to do was ignore the hundreds of tourists that persisted in buzzing around her.

If only she could escape all of them and experience Seward, Alaska in its natural state.

The air was brisk from the mountains, which provided a breathtaking panoramic view, but the sun shone brightly, warming her back. A short walk sounded good and she left the strip of shops and strolled a well-worn path between two buildings toward a quieter, less visited part of town. Within a couple blocks, she found a small café on the corner of a residential area. Now this was how to explore how the natives lived.

The smell of fried fish and coffee filled her nostrils when she pushed open the old wooden door.

After figuring out that she needed to order at the counter and then find her seat, Joanie approached an older woman who couldn't possibly stand five feet.

The woman said something to her in a language Joanie didn't know.

"I thought I'd order a sandwich and coffee." She pointed to the menu at the item she wanted.

The old lady didn't look down at Joanie's indicated choice. Instead she scowled at Joanie and rattled off something else that didn't sound very friendly. Maybe they didn't like tourists here. Joanie's cheeks slowly warmed.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," she said and raised the menu to the woman's vision, pointing at the fish sandwich selection.

The menu was in English. She looked past the counter toward the kitchen where a teenage girl was barely visible beyond a partition.

Continuing on in her own language, the older woman lowered her voice, sending her point home. Joanie didn't know the words, but the meaning in her tone was universal. She'd offended the lady but didn't have a clue what to do about it. She sucked in a breath, trying to decide if she should simply leave.

Then the older woman pointed a crooked finger at her. She hissed a few choice words that sounded like a severe reprimand. Maybe her native tongue just had a harsh tone to it. Nonetheless, Joanie shifted from one foot to the other, desperately wanting to turn and run out the door. Whatever the woman had said, they weren't kind words. Her expression showed her disgust even if her language was foreign to Joanie.

The teenager appeared in the doorway that led to the kitchen. She glanced at the old woman and then at Joanie.

"She won't serve you." The girl, probably somewhere around fifteen or sixteen years old, shrugged indifferently as if there were nothing she could do about it.

"What have I done wrong?" Joanie rubbed her neck, sure it had blotched with red spots from her embarrassment.

Again the old woman pointed at her, waving her arthritic finger in the air between them, and rambled on for a good minute or so. Probably now that she had a translator, she'd really let Joanie have it.

Joanie stared helplessly at the young girl who stepped forward to stand next to the old lady. The girl's dark brown eyes seemed to fill with amusement. She ran her thin hand through her shiny black hair, tucking a strand behind her ear before looking at Joanie.

"She says you abuse our magic and that it will only bring you harm. She calls you a fool for playing with something you don't understand."

"Magic?" Joanie frowned and then fought to relax her expression. The last thing she wanted to do was piss the old woman off even more. "Okay. I'll leave. And I'm sorry. But I'm not doing anything magic. I just wanted a sandwich."

"It's the sex charm you have around your neck." Now the girl did grin, but her expression turned serious instantly when the older woman looked harshly at her and turned her reprimanding tirade on the teenager. "I meant love charm," she corrected herself.

Obviously the old woman understood English. Joanie fingered the necklace around her neck. She swallowed, deciding the old woman probably spoke her language too, and more than likely had yelled at her in her native tongue to put Joanie on the spot. As irritating as that was, this was their home, not hers. She smiled politely at the older lady.

"I'm sorry if I offended you. Believe me, I bought this necklace at the gift shop on board the cruise ship I've been on the past few days. No one said anything about it being a love charm or anything like that."

This time when the older woman spoke, it was quietly and slowly. She still didn't utter a word of English.

"She says its magic is strong." The teenager shrugged, this time not changing her look of indifference when the older woman glanced her way. "You shouldn't manipulate men's minds with it. It will get you in trouble."

Joanie reached behind her neck and unclasped the necklace. It fell into her hand and she closed her fingers around it. Turning and walking out of this place would be her best move. For some reason, she had the urge to satisfy the older lady though. It wasn't every day she pissed people off and she wanted the satisfaction of knowing she was no longer being frowned upon.

"Will you serve me a sandwich now?"

The teenager cocked her head, looking at the older woman. The old lady studied Joanie, her gaze traveling down her slowly and then returning to meet Joanie's gaze. Finally she turned, saying something quietly to the teenager before walking behind the counter and disappearing into the kitchen.

"She says come back tomorrow and she will feed you." With that the teenager hurried after the older lady, not bothering to see if Joanie left or not.

She wouldn't even be here tomorrow. Still holding the necklace in her hand, she hated the defeated feeling that suddenly swelled inside her as she turned toward the door. Admittedly, she didn't like losing an argument. But a stranger had judged her and found her lacking. There wasn't a thing she could think of to do to change the woman's opinion of her.

Not that she'd done anything wrong. There hadn't been any packaging with the necklace, no explanation that it had an intended use. Narrowing her brows, she pushed her way through the door and back into the chilly air outside. She opened her hand, looking down at the necklace with its tangled, thin chain twisting around it.

It was small, no longer than her fingernail. The turquoise rock had an odd shape and the longer she stared at it, the more she realized it almost looked like two lovers, stretched out together with their arms and legs intertwined. Funny how she hadn't noticed that before.

She twisted the silver chain around her fingers. It hadn't been that expensive. She liked the color and its smooth texture. There wasn't much to it really. Amazing how some people could give power to such a small, inanimate object.

"A sex charm, huh?" she mumbled.

Her breath caught in her throat while she collected image after image of the different men who had stumbled over themselves for her attention on the ship. That had been baffling, almost unbelievable. Only celebrities got that kind of attention. She wasn't even that good-looking.

Well hell. Did this thing actually have some kind of power to it?

The old woman certainly had thrown a fit the moment she'd seen her. There was no way she would have known that so many men had flirted with her and propositioned her over the past few days. Families had been on that cruise, older couples—it wasn't as if the intention of the cruise was for singles to pair off and get laid. Yet every man who'd seen her had almost tackled her.

She choked on her next breath and a lump formed in her gut. She was nothing more than a plain Jane. Her husband hadn't wanted anything to do with her, and neither did any other man. It had been this damned necklace. Whether she believed in this sort of thing or not, the old woman did. And she had the proof that it worked in front of her face. The only reason all those men had hit on her was because she'd been wearing a charm that made them attracted to her.

On her own, she didn't stand a chance.

The tears that had refused to fall ever since Tommy told her he wanted a divorce suddenly burned her eyes. There wasn't a damn thing appealing about her. Her own husband had cast her away. She wasn't loved. She wasn't wanted. Without this damned necklace, she probably would have been bored out of her skull all alone on that huge ship.

Feeling sorry for herself really pissed her off. Talk about frustrating. Either she could be mad that she'd believed she had what it took to impress that many men or she could be angry at the old woman for ruining her good time.

Or she could let some tiny piece of jewelry control her.

"I'm not going to rely on some hexed piece of jewelry to provide me with entertainment," she grumbled and raised her hand to throw the damned thing away. "Ouch," she shrieked when she hit what seemed like a steel wall.

Backing up quickly, she reared into the door to the café.

"Why did you hit me?" A tall—very tall—dark man glared down at her.

Joanie looked up at a very broad chest. She looked up further past the tuft of black hair that curled over the top of his shirt. Leaning her head back, she stared into compelling green eyes that almost glowed against a dark complexion. Eyes a woman could drown in. The ground shifted underneath her.

"I'm...I'm sorry." Her mouth went dry and she realized it was because her jaw had dropped open. She shut it quickly. "I didn't see you."

He raised an eyebrow.

Joanie couldn't create more space between them with the door pressing against her back. So she stepped to the side and almost tripped over her shoes. Grabbing the edge

of a trashcan that sat to the side of the door, she balanced herself. Then let go of the trash receptacle quickly and rubbed her hands on her jeans.

"I'm usually hard to miss." The man cocked his head at her, probably trying to determine if she had all of her oars in the water. "Are you lost?"

"No," she said quickly. "I was trying to..." She looked at the necklace balled in her hand. "I mean, I wanted to throw this thing..."

Once again she strained her neck to stare up at the giant in front of her.

He had the longest eyelashes she'd ever seen on a man. They were shiny black, just like his hair, which was pulled away from his face. His shoulders were so broad and he was so tall that he filled her vision. How could she not notice him before hitting him in the chest?

His gaze dropped to her hand. She straightened her fingers, holding the tangled necklace up for him to see, as if that would explain her actions. She was making even a bigger fool of herself. And in front of the most beautiful man she'd ever laid eyes on.

He had to stand a good six-and-a-half-feet tall. He wasn't bulky though. He'd been right in front of her before she'd even noticed him. There was a strong silence about him, like a large, deadly predator capable of snagging prey before it even knew it was hunted.

Joanie let her attention return to his broad chest, thick arms and unreadable expression. He had a long, straight nose, high, broad cheekbones and a strong, firm jaw. This man was king of his world. She'd almost guarantee it. Thick, straight, black hair was pulled back from his face, bound behind him so she couldn't tell how long it was with him facing her. Not that she could see over his shoulders anyway. They were broad, like a linebacker, but he wasn't heavy—far from it. Her knuckles still tingled from accidentally punching all that hard, solid muscle.

"Is there some custom that I don't know about in the lower forty-eight where you throw necklaces?" If he was amused, there was no way of telling by the stony expression he gave her.

"Of course not. The old woman inside told me..." For some reason she couldn't form the words love or sex in front of this man. Heat burned her cheeks, swelled inside her, then tumbled down her insides until it pooled between her legs. She nibbled her lip, looking down at the necklace.

Maybe taking it off caused a reverse affect. Possibly it now worked its magic on her, turning her into a babbling idiot in front of the most gorgeous man possibly in all of Alaska.

Hell, maybe he wasn't even good-looking. After all, hadn't men told her for the past few days she was the best thing they'd seen in ages? The necklace had tricked them. Now it would make a fool out of her.

"Anyway, I got all mad and just wanted to throw it away." She continued chewing on her lip, realizing she wasn't making any sense.

The large man nodded, his expression still sober although she swore his black eyes suddenly sparkled like rare jewels.

"Grandmother's bark is worse than her bite. She wouldn't want you harboring hostility. Best to resolve this now." With that he put a strong hand on her shoulder. His touch scorched her skin through her sweater as he turned her around and guided her back into the café.

Chapter Three

"I'm Joanie, Joanie Showalter." She turned and extended her hand, which he walked into as they entered the door.

He stared at her hair, an incredibly distracting yet beautiful mixture of blonde and brown.

"Corbin Silver." He stepped to the side and took her hand for a quick handshake.

She had a strong, confident grip for a woman so small.

"Corbin? You no supposed to be here." His grandmother spoke in broken English.

Not a good sign. Even though over a month had passed since he'd been to Seward, some things didn't change. When Grandmother got pissed, her accent thickened quickly.

Although she spoke Yupik, the tongue her Inuit parents raised her on, she'd never taught it to her grandchildren. And she'd spoken English all her life. When it got choppy, she was pissed and it was a damned good sign to everyone in the family that she planned on getting her way about something.

Ever since he'd taken over this shop, funded it and fought to keep its doors open, he'd been at battle with his Grandmother, who was determined that she was still in charge. He didn't blame all of her kids for living in the lower forty-eight. She could be a pain in the ass. Nonetheless, there was something about her that he'd always liked. Her fire for life, her determination to continue working in the café that she'd started with her husband over forty years ago always inspired him. This tiny restaurant had fed all of them, clothed them and sent them to school.

Grandmother was getting too old to run the place herself. The newer, fancier tourist-oriented stores stole her business. But there were so many memories in this small place. Corbin didn't mind helping out. If he let the doors close, it would take away all that his grandmother had to live for. But Grandmother had to meet him halfway.

"You can't keep getting mad at the customers and sending them out the door," he warned her, leaning over quite a bit so he could hiss in her ear.

With his latest case wrapped up in Anchorage, he'd turned his attention to personal matters. After scanning the bills coming in for Grandmother's café and discovering no profit over the last quarter, he'd decided a visit to the woman who'd raised him, along with his brother and sister, was in order.

All he meant to do was stop by to see how her lunch rush fared, but something about the young lady hesitating outside the door to the café grabbed his attention.

He moved around the young, pretty tourist and placed his hand on his grandmother's back, guiding her around the counter. It was impossible not to take a second glance at Joanie. He noted her slender waist, rather large breasts and full, perfectly shaped hips. She was quite the distraction.

"I would never do such a thing. You see one customer and you judge an old woman." Grandmother looked up at him, her expression a mixture of shock and something else.

Was it disappointment? She whispered something in Yupik. Corbin frowned. This wasn't her usual stubborn streak. Her watery black eyes searched his face, and then she glanced at the woman he'd brought in with him...Joanie.

Corbin looked at her too. "Grandmother asks that you be seated wherever you like," he lied. "There are menus at the table."

At least he hoped there were. Every time he managed to make it into Seward, see how his Grandmother fared, she'd changed something about the café. And every time she swore it was how it had always been.

Joanie didn't look at him but nodded and headed toward a table by the wall. The sway of her walk distracted him and he stared until she sat down. The way her ass moved and her jeans hugged her perfect figure like they were painted on her just about got his dick hard. He wondered if she moved like that on purpose but then shook his head and looked away. Joanie was upset enough to try to hurl a necklace into the street. The last thing on her mind would be flirting with him. He was an oversized giant—nothing a woman like her would be impressed with.

"Hey, Silver." Tory strolled out from the kitchen, rubbing her hands down her apron and then grabbing a laminated menu from under the counter. She grinned from ear to ear, flashing her pretty, straight teeth that he'd paid a mint for her to have. "Grandmother won't wait on her until tomorrow. She doesn't approve of her jewelry today."

He cringed, quickly glancing at Joanie, who obviously overheard his mouthy niece. Joanie clasped her hands in her lap and looked down at them, posed like she would dart for the door in the next moment.

Just great. Tory, his younger sister's daughter, was almost as much a pain in the rear as Grandmother. Speaking like that in front of a customer. No wonder the place didn't bring in any money. He'd be smart to wash his hands of this place, arrange for Grandmother to have a wonderful apartment in a nice retirement community and ship Tory off to his sister and let her start playing mommy for a change.

Or he could just keep paying the bills and stay away from here as much as possible. A dull throb started at his temple and he rubbed it, watching Tory talk to the young woman who looked very uncomfortable as she shifted in her chair. Dealing with bullshit politics from the state prosecutor's office was easier than handling a stubborn old woman and defiant teenager.

"This is bad. Very bad." Grandmother had a pretty strong grip for a woman pushing eighty years. "You'll have sex with her and everything will be ruined. What can an old lady do?"

Corbin didn't hear her right.

"Why would I have sex with her?" His back muscles strained as he bent down and whispered in his grandmother's ear.

Joanie shifted her gaze from his niece to him while answering a question Tory asked her. He'd never seen hair quite that color before, not quite blonde and yet not a brunette either. She wasn't grossly skinny with too much makeup and a fake tan like most tourists. Realizing he was still hunched over, he straightened, his back popping from the strain.

Grandmother nodded toward Joanie. "She took it off, but she wore an Inuit sex charm. Why a lady like her would want to wear something like that..." She made a clucking sound of disapproval with her tongue. "She's up to no good and you know I only serve a respectable clientele."

Corbin remembered some of the derelicts that Grandmother referred to as her respectable clientele. Growing up and doing everything from washing dishes to helping his Grandfather keep the old stoves going, Corbin had quite a few memories of when this small café was a much livelier place. The Silver men, with their Scottish Highlander and Alaskan Inuit blood, were tall and muscular. It hadn't stopped the locals from saying their piece if someone offended them.

Grandmother pulled on his shirt, tugging until he almost bent halfway over once again so that she could stare him in the face.

"No decent woman wears a sex charm. And look, here you are. Why did you come here?"

"What do you mean, a sex charm?"

Grandmother wasn't usually so put out. Upset yes, pissed off, most definitely, but worried? Almost scared? Her free hand shook when she touched his chest.

"I saw it. She wore it around her neck. That she comes here and uses our magic, and on my grandson, my favorite grandchild... Caught me off guard, that's what she did." Grandmother spit on the ground and then looked around at the empty café. No one was in here but Grandmother, Tory, him and the young lady. "There has to be a way to reverse the spell."

"Grandmother." He straightened, putting his hands on her plump shoulders. "Some small necklace isn't going to make me have sex with a woman."

Grandmother slapped his hands away from her, her lips pursing while she made snapping sounds with her tongue. Her worried look disappeared. Now she was mad.

"Don't you discredit the magic of our ancestors! And you've seen the necklace? She doesn't wear it now. How did you see it?"

"She tried throwing it away and hit me in the chest with it." He glanced toward Joanie and kept his voice low. It wasn't a large café and it wouldn't take much for her to overhear them. She didn't need to be humiliated further while in his family's café. "You really upset her, and she didn't see me when she tried hurling it into the street."

"Good grief!" Grandmother waved her hands in front of him, doing nothing to keep her tone down. Her theatrics grabbed both Tory and Joanie's attention. "No one misses a Silver man. You think you can sneak up on someone with your size?"

Tory sauntered up to them, stuffing her pen behind her ear. He'd have to have a talk with Grandmother about letting the girl wear so much makeup.

"Joanie told me how men have been falling all over her since she's been on this cruise. She's pretty bummed out now that she knows it was that necklace and not her that got her all that attention." Tory shared what she'd learned in a conspiratory whisper. Excitement made her green eyes—a family trait passed down from their Highlander side—glow as she grinned. "I asked her if I could have the necklace if she didn't want it anymore."

Grandmother starting wailing in Yupik, flailing her arms around her until she grabbed her heart. Tory snickered, hurrying toward the kitchen, indifferent to the state she'd put her grandmother in.

Corbin rolled his eyes to the ceiling, praying for strength not to make the scene even worse by giving both of them a harsh reprimand. Getting away from work, coming home and enjoying the simplicity of his roots had sounded like such a good idea. Grandmother could create drama out of a dead fish though. This one was worse than the time she had almost every fisherman in Seward convinced the seals would attack if they went fishing on Sunday.

And it was all so ridiculous. Talking reason into his Grandmother was next to impossible at the best of times. Playing along with her antics often proved the only way to get her over her obsession. He took a long, slow breath, turning his attention again to Joanie. She seemed incredibly interested in her fingernails at the moment and didn't look up at him. Taking a moment to learn the curve of her cute nose and how her creamy white skin glowed with such natural beauty stole his breath. The sweater she wore stretched over full, ripe breasts, more than a handful. His palms itched when he imagined cupping them until her nipples hardened. The thought of nibbling on them and teasing them with his tongue made his mouth water.

Yup. Playing along with this bizarre charade might just be the thing to do.

He guided Grandmother behind the counter to her stool. Grandmother fanned herself, still mumbling in Yupik.

"You leave me no choice, Grandmother. Now sit here and be good while I make sure our young lady over there isn't going to sue us for humiliating her."

"Shit." Tory laughed, appearing in the kitchen doorway. "You were right, Grandmother."

"I'm always right." Grandmother's thick stockings made a swishing sound when she walked over to a stool. She adjusted her ample frame on it and then ran her thick fingers over her dress. "Bring me the phone, child. I need to find out what to do since the charm touched him. They'll be having sex on the tables. And a Silver man—who can stop a Silver man? Not to mention one under the influence of a spell."

"No phones." He wagged his finger in her face, then his irritation grew when Tory looked more than amused by all of this. He glared at his niece. "Go fix Joanie's lunch."

Tory disappeared into the kitchen and Grandmother pouted, refusing to look at him but straightening her skirt over her ample lap, mumbling still in a mixture of English and Yupik.

If all of this weren't so embarrassing, he'd be amused. Memories of taking one of his high school girlfriends on the table next to where Joanie sat sprang into his mind as he walked over to her. They'd almost been caught that night and to this day he wasn't sure if his grandfather had seen what they'd done or not. He never said a word if he had.

When his parents died kayaking and his grandparents took him and his brother and sister in, his grandfather became a dominant father figure in his life. Repeatedly, he warned Corbin that Silver men always found the most troublesome women to marry. Corbin had taken that warning to heart and so far had managed to stay away from that institution. His cases in Anchorage kept him busy enough and now as head of the family, the women in his life were enough of a headache. If he wanted one in his bed, it was a temporary thing at most.

Joanie glanced up at him warily when he stopped next to her table.

"If there is somewhere I could throw this thing away, then you wouldn't be compelled to come talk to me," she said, opening her hand and showing him the necklace she still held.

God, she bought into this bullshit as much as his grandmother did. It was a damn shame too. With those soft green eyes and her brown hair with streaks of blonde falling around her pretty face, finding a man shouldn't be that hard. He took the chair opposite her, turning it around and then leaning his arms on the backside while he sat facing her. "There is no power in that necklace."

She didn't look like she believed him.

"I'm sorry Grandmother upset you. Hopefully the good food will make up for it." He offered her his best smile, a grin he'd been told by more than one lady in the past had a charm all its own.

Anything he did from this point forward would be blamed on that damned necklace. He glanced at the tiny chain trailing over her fingers. She let the odd-shaped turquoise stone dangle from her hand, as if holding the thing bothered her. It bothered him too.

Whether any magic existed didn't matter. His Grandmother had given the tiny necklace power. The impact of her accusation had an effect on the poor woman sitting

opposite him. There were things he couldn't always explain, but this kind of magic was very logical. The power of persuasion at its best.

"Forgive me if I'm no longer that hungry. Until I arrived here, I had no idea what that necklace was." Her lips were moist and full. Something about her soft tone, calm and concerned, added to the regal way she held herself.

"Grandmother has a way of creating drama. She really doesn't mean any harm."

"In my case, it was the truth that hurt more than anything." She offered a small smile, but a hint of sadness simmered in her soft green eyes. "Men don't usually notice me. The last few days were different though. Your grandmother helped me see that I really am the plain Jane. It was the love charm that made the men act the way they did."

He could easily see men falling over each other to get her attention. Just in the way she talked to him, shared her thoughts and wasn't afraid to admit she wasn't perfect had its appeal. Although she was a lot closer to perfect than she gave herself credit for.

"Give me the necklace," he decided, holding his hand out.

She looked at him, then his open palm. Slowly she placed the necklace in it, her soft hand caressing his flesh. Something tingled over his skin when they touched each other. A hot sensation rippled over his flesh. Her creamy white skin contrasted nicely against his dark hand. When he looked up at her, a rosy hue brushed over her cheeks. Had she felt something too?

"I'll be right back." He kicked the ridiculous notion that the tingle he just felt meant something out of his head and hurried to the door of the café.

Opening the door, Corbin enjoyed a cool breeze that lifted his hair off the back of his neck. He reached over and dropped the necklace into the trash outside. Looking up, he noticed Aunt Moira waddling down the sidewalk toward the café. Aunt Moira didn't move quickly, and she was doing record time today. Only one thing made his aunt hurry like that. He turned around and looked into the café. Grandmother no longer sat on her stool.

Just lovely.

The gossip mill of Seward was about to have a field day. He didn't know Joanie Showalter. But he did know his Grandmother had shattered her self-esteem. Now her reputation would be tarnished before the day was out. No matter that she'd leave before any serious damage was done. The lady was on a cruise. Taking a vacation should be relaxing, a refreshing experience. He wouldn't have her visit to Seward be an unpleasant one.

When he returned to her table, he noticed Tory had set a plate of food in front of Joanie. She lifted her fork but didn't touch her food, instead looking like she was lost in thought. She dressed casually, but her sweater and jeans sure didn't hide what she had to offer. At the same time, she wasn't dressed like a slut either.

She was nicely built but probably one of those women who always battled keeping the weight down. She certainly wasn't some beanpole. Her breasts were really big, enough to make any man drool, and her sweater hugged them so perfectly. She wore her hair straight and not styled. Quite possibly that was her natural hair color. It would be hard to get that shade out of a bottle. Not that he had tons of knowledge on that subject but it was just too unique to be planned. She wore a little bit of makeup, but not too much. Overall, he'd say she had a very appealing natural look about her. Without the sex charm, he would have noticed her. He was sure of it.

Realizing she was being stared at, Joanie looked up at him, her gaze traveling down his body quickly before returning to his face.

"What did you do with the necklace?" she asked.

"I threw it away."

"Oh." She looked disappointed.

Damn. He was dragging in an empty net here. Once again he took the chair opposite her. "You wanted the necklace?"

She lifted one shoulder slightly and then let it drop. "I guess that's pretty stupid, huh? The attention was nice."

He wanted to point out to her that he still sat with her even though she no longer had the sex charm.

But her dismal mood was his family's fault. Maybe it was Grandfather's blood coursing through him, but when someone in the family made a mistake, all of them teamed together to make things right. That's how a Silver was. Loyalty and pride ran strong in his veins. If she left here thinking nothing else, he'd have her know the Silvers were good people.

"I tell you what, finish your lunch and I'll go with you and we'll buy another necklace."

For the first time, her expression changed. A glow made her green eyes seem like rare gems. The flush in her cheeks returned and she opened her mouth to say something when the door to the café burst open. He ran his hand over his hair when Aunt Moira stormed in, looking frantically around the place until her scrutinizing gaze fell on him. He groaned inwardly.

Aunt Moira ignored Grandmother when she appeared behind the counter but instead studied Joanie as she approached the two of them. It took her a minute to look away from her when she spoke to Corbin.

"What a pleasure when the man of the family comes home." She extended her pudgy arms for a hug.

Corbin stood and then bent over to hug his aunt. As always, a hint of bourbon clung to her. A vice she claimed was for medicinal purposes. He'd guess her small flask was tucked nicely in one of her large pockets of her long dress.

"Aunt Moira. It's good to see you." He let his aunt go, almost hating to give her freedom.

The fireworks would begin shortly. He had half a mind to drag Joanie out of here now. That would just send the old women into a fit of uncontrollable accusations. But

only he would have to hear them. Joanie would be tucked back on her cruise ship, never being the wiser.

"I would say it's good to see you." Aunt Moira shook her head, looking at him as if he had two heads. "But the charm is already boiling in your blood. You know I've always been able to feel these things."

Grandmother waddled over toward them, her mortified expression adding to the creases in her leathery face.

"What are we going to do?" she wailed. "They are complete strangers and already they can't be apart from each other. Oh Moira, you should have seen how it was before you got here."

Aunt Moira shook her head, probably envisioning Corbin trying to strip the clothes right off Joanie here in the café.

Corbin was a large man, but he wasn't sure even he could grab Joanie and plow past the two old women and make a leap toward the door without causing at least one of them serious damage. Everyone and their brother would talk about this for years to come if he didn't make his next move very carefully.

Joanie stood, reaching into her purse and pulling out a few bills. "The food was very good," she began quietly, not looking at any of them. And obviously lying since she hadn't touched any of it. "Thank you."

"Don't let her leave." Aunt Moira began digging through her pockets. The notorious small flask would appear any second now.

"Why can't I leave?" Joanie asked.

"Why can't she leave?" Grandmother repeated.

To his surprise, Aunt Moira produced a small paperback book instead of her flask. "Where is the love charm? I must see it so we can make sure she doesn't take Corbin's heart with her. If she does, they will have to marry."

"Oh good grief." Corbin fisted his hands on his hips, glaring at his aunt and grandmother. "You two are being absolutely ridiculous. I'm not going to marry her."

"If you'll excuse me." Joanie's voice cracked as she dropped the money she held in her hand on the table and inched her way around Aunt Moira. "I'm sorry I've created such a scene."

She hurried toward the door and Corbin fought the urge to hurry after her. At the door, she turned and looked at the three of them.

"Maybe you should do more than just throw that sex charm, or love charm or whatever it is, out. Crush it or something. Because it works. If I still wore it, you'd see how well it works."

They'd destroyed her image of herself. Corbin saw the tears brimming over her lashes. Aunt Moira and Grandmother stared at her with their jaws hanging like fish caught in a net. It was up to him to rectify this situation.

He moved around the two older women. "I'm going to buy her a new necklace," he told both women quietly and headed toward the door.

"The magic is stronger than I originally thought," Grandmother said before he guided Joanie out of the café and closed the door behind them.

Chapter Four

Joanie glanced at her watch. The tour vans would leave the parking lot in about fifteen minutes. It wouldn't take more than a few minutes to walk back to them, possibly sit in one of the vans and simply wait for everyone else to join her. More than likely the tour guide who'd almost molested her with his eagerness to have her by his side wouldn't give her a second glance now.

She licked her lips, glancing at the trash can next to her. Her turquoise necklace lay tangled around the corner of a newspaper on the top of the trash. The little turquoise rock slowly swayed as it hung free, the silver chain caught on the latest local news. Odd how it looked like two lovers sensually building the pace as they made passionate love to each other.

God. Just staring at the thing sent her blood pressure skyrocketing. Heat swarmed to life inside her and settled into raging need between her legs. She continued staring at it as her heart pumped furiously against her ribcage. Instantly her mind conjured an image of her body wrapped around Corbin's, the two of them swaying back and forth with their arms and legs intertwined. Just thinking of him buried deep inside her made her stagger toward the trash can.

There was definitely something about that necklace!

What harm would there be in taking it back? At least she now knew the actions of the men on the ship were manipulated by some ancient hex. But it had been fun.

She shook her head quickly and stared at the street in front of her just as Corbin opened the door behind her. This was ridiculous. She didn't believe in magic, spells, ghosts or hexes. None of it made any sense. Especially Corbin Silver. Maybe the damned charm was so strong it worked even from the trash can.

God. This was ludicrous.

She dared to look next to her, where he stood, the slight smell of men's cologne tickling her senses. Without looking up, she got an eyeful of his broad chest. The pullover sweater he wore stretched against his broad frame. It wasn't too tight, but with a body that size, she imagined anything he put on would hug all that muscle.

"There's a charming little shop at the end of the street," he said in a deep baritone, and then placed his hand on the small of her back. "We should be able to find you a necklace there."

"This really isn't necessary." She almost teetered from his touch.

A warm, tingly sensation spread over her skin where his hand rested on her back. It was like electrical charges rushing inside her, while his fingers moved gently against her. When he guided them off the walk and into the street, his hand moved up her back,

causing the tingles to turn into a heat that unnerved her. It was just like when she gave him the necklace inside the restaurant. Love charm or not, there was a very strong sexual energy that invaded her senses whenever they touched.

He moved alongside her with an elegant grace that didn't match his incredible size. His movements were quiet, controlled and very relaxed. For some reason he reminded her of a giant cat, capable of incredible damage but coming across as beautiful and cuddly. The combination rattled her nerves.

"Most of these shops are privately owned, the families having run them for years. Seward is a very charming town, filled with history and culture." He turned into the tour guide, continuing to chat with her easily when they reached the other side of the street and strolled down the wooden sidewalk. "The store I mentioned is right up here, but if you have time, I highly recommend stopping in each of these shops. Just tell the store owners I sent you their way. They'll treat you like one of our own."

Maybe he needed to make amends for the way his family had treated her. That made sense. She was silly to react to his touch. Any man with decent breeding would escort a lady the way Corbin did. Although if he grew up in that family, she wasn't sure where he got his decent breeding. Not only was he well-mannered, his looks were more than just a distraction. And not to just Joanie. Every woman they passed on the sidewalk said hello to him. And it wasn't just the casual greeting. Their hellos had meaning behind them—an invitation. Corbin Silver definitely was a man out of her league. He had ladies drooling after him every few feet. No way could Joanie compete.

"Here it is," Corbin announced, his hand moving up her back to her shoulder as he guided her into one of the shops. "Maggie, it's good to see you again." He greeted the older woman behind the counter, taking his hand off Joanie for the first time since they left his family's café.

"Well, Corbin Silver. Look at you. Bringing your lady to show off to all of us?" Maggie stepped around the counter, her arms outstretched and a huge grin on her face. An older lady, wearing jeans and a long, baggy shirt, her figure wasn't overly obvious. But the cheerful look on her face made Joanie like her instantly.

She almost felt sorry for Corbin having to explain again that he and Joanie were complete strangers and would stay that way.

When Corbin winked at her, everything inside her melted into a puddle on the floor. She couldn't even manage a smile, or return the wink, but instead just gawked at him. Incredibly sexy, god-like men just didn't wink at her, or even bless her with a second of their time. At least they hadn't before she'd purchased that damned sex charm.

"Look around and get whatever pleases you," he said quietly, brushing his hand down her arm in a familiar fashion.

All Joanie could do was nod, unable to think of a damned thing to say. Hell. Her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth as she stared at his backside when he returned his attention to the shop owner. Thick black hair, braided, fell down the length

of his spine. Never in her life, even on the cover of magazines that lined the checkout lanes at her grocery store, had she ever seen such a perfectly built man. She stared at the items on the shelves and on display tables for several minutes without seeing any of them. She was still too stunned that someone like Corbin was in her life, even if she only shared one hour of her life with him before they parted ways forever.

Somehow she managed to get him out of her system after a few minutes and began enjoying browsing through the items for sale. There were jewelry, candles, small statues and even clothes. She touched a few things, picked up several others. God. She could spend hours in this store. But then a small table caught her eye. Several circular hangers sat on it, with a variety of necklaces hanging off the round silver display holders. Something caught her eye and she stared at the oddly shaped turquoise gemstone hanging from a silver chain identical to the one she'd purchased on the ship.

"Excuse me," she said, and Corbin and the shop owner turned to her, both smiling. "Can you tell me what kind of necklace this is?"

Corbin's gaze captured hers and wouldn't let go. She suddenly felt silly holding the charm out in front of her, letting it hang from the delicate chain. All she could do was stare into his intense dark green eyes. Coal black hair, pulled back behind his ears, added to his dark, brooding stare. What would he look like with all of that thick, long black hair blowing freely around his large, muscular body?

"That is one of our necklaces that is mass-produced." Maggie waved at it dismissively. "Now if you want something from one of our local artists, there is a table back here."

Triumph washed through Joanie so hard and fast she almost laughed out loud.

"No. I want this one. I'll take it."

At that moment, Corbin glanced down at what she held in her hand. His entire expression changed. "Joanie. No. That necklace isn't an option."

"Didn't you hear what she just said?" She grinned, unable to stop the giddiness that overtook her. "It's just some silly necklace. There's no meaning behind it at all."

"I wouldn't call it a silly necklace." Maggie sounded hurt, but then turned from Corbin and lifted a finger. "There's paperwork that is shipped with them. Hold on, I'll go get it. Authenticity stuff and all. Stay right here."

Maggie disappeared through an open doorway behind the counter. Joanie stared after her, holding the necklace in her hand. Corbin moved in on her, twisting her giddiness into nervous energy.

"Why do you want that one?" he asked quietly, stopping when he stood inches in front of her. "Do you seriously believe no man would look at you without it?"

He pressed one finger under her chin, tilting her head back. She looked up into the most gorgeous face she'd ever seen in her life.

"I've never been treated this way before," she admitted. "Tommy never seemed impressed."

"Tommy?" he questioned.

"My husband."

"You're married?" He pulled his finger from her chin as if she'd burned him.

Joanie grimaced. Just thinking about Tommy put a foul taste in her mouth. She swallowed, searching for something in the store to stare at that would rip away the unpleasant memory of her husband's cold dismissal of their marriage.

"This was supposed to be our anniversary cruise—our tenth year anniversary." She spoke quickly, trying to get the words out before a lump closed around her throat. She would not cry while sharing this bit of information with a complete stranger. "A few days before we were supposed to leave, Tommy told me he wanted a divorce. That was three weeks ago and I haven't seen or talked to him since."

"Were you a bad wife?" he asked, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

Joanie shook her head before realizing she did it. She stared at muscles wrapping around each other and bulging in his arms. Her mouth went dry just imagining the raw strength Corbin must have.

"He left me for his secretary," she spit out, hating how bitter she sounded. But there, the cards were on the table. She took a step backward, spreading her arms out to give him a good look at what damaged goods looked like. "I couldn't even keep my husband happy. I thought I was a good wife. I didn't cheat. I kept the house clean, made his meals, had a good job."

She bit her lip, her cheeks burning as the words continued tumbling out of her mouth. "I was a good wife, a perfect wife. I supported him while he built his career. I helped him out in his office after hours when his hired help couldn't keep up. I did everything for him and it wasn't good enough. I'm not good enough. He left me for some bimbo because I didn't have what it takes to keep a man." Rambling on like this to a complete stranger, and a gorgeous one at that, made her feel worse than when Tommy had so coldly told her he was done with her.

"Never mind," she blurted out, knowing the tears would start falling any second. "Thanks for everything."

Although for the life of her she didn't know what she thanked him for. She turned, needing to get out of there, to be anywhere but near this incredibly virile man.

"Joanie. Don't leave." Corbin reached for her.

"You're leaving?" Maggie reappeared from the back room waving a piece of paper in her hand. "I found information on the necklace."

Joanie stared at the necklace that she still held in her hand. In order to put it back, she'd have to move past Corbin. He looked ready to tackle her. Or maybe it was her imagination. Either way, getting too close to him sounded like a bad idea. Maybe she'd tackle him.

Good grief. She just needed to get out of there.

"Thanks for everything. You've both been very kind." She placed the necklace on a nearby table displaying different shapes and colors of polished rocks.

The dainty chain tangled around her fingers. She ended up shaking her hand to rid herself of it and then hurried out the door.

"Joanie," Corbin called after her, his voice booming down the sidewalk and closing in around her.

It echoed in her ears but she ignored him, refusing to turn around, forcing one foot in front of the other and hurrying across the street. There would be no more necklaces. No more men. She would return to the ship and seek out something safe, some sort of distraction that had nothing to do with virile men or flirting or anything. Maybe there would be a quilting class filled with old women who wouldn't look at her twice, or care at all that she had zero luck when it came to men.

Almost running, she found the two buildings and the alley that she'd walked through earlier. An icy chill wrapped around her. Even when the sun hit her and she walked the length of the next block, she couldn't warm up. When she reached the parking lot, she turned in a complete circle. Corbin hadn't followed her. She stood alone with beautiful mountains creating a breathtaking backdrop. They were snowcapped and rugged, like powerful sentinels watching over the people who lived beneath them. She sucked in a breath, hating to pull her gaze from them. But she had to think.

The parking lot was empty. She must have returned to the wrong lot. Glancing at her watch, she stared at the digital numbers and the two dots blinking steadily as each second passed. Over an hour had passed since she'd arrived in Seward. She looked around again at the empty parking lot.

"Oh no," she breathed, panic rising quickly inside her. "They wouldn't have left me behind, would they?"

The flock of oversized white tour vans was gone. She didn't have the wrong parking lot. She knew she didn't. It hadn't been that far of a walk to the small diner, and then to the shops across the street from it. They had left her behind, and it would be a hell of a walk to the ocean where her cruise ship was probably preparing to leave right now. If her dingy tour van driver had only read off the list of who was supposed to be on her van. Joanie bet she didn't do it when everyone else got back on the van either.

"What do I do?" she wailed and searched the empty lot again.

There wasn't a soul around anywhere. It was as if she stood alone in the huge state of Alaska, with nothing but embarrassing memories of her brief time here surrounding her. Without thought she groped inside her purse, feeling for her cell phone. But whom would she call? She didn't even have a pamphlet or any other paperwork from the ship.

"Maybe I can find a taxi." She hurried back to the street where the shops were, stopping quickly on the sidewalk across from Corbin's family's diner. She walked in the opposite direction, staring at each store and searching for someone, anyone, who looked like they might be able to help. An older man stepped out of a shop, tossing his keys as

he headed toward his truck, "Excuse me, sir. Are there taxis? I need a ride to the cruise ship." She pointed in the direction of the ocean.

"You call for taxi," he muttered.

"Do you know their number?"

He shook his head. "You'll have to find a phone book."

Panic hit her. There wasn't much time. Maybe one of the shop owners would have a phone book. "I'm scared they'll leave without me."

"Maybe the bus." He pointed down the street and then left her standing there as he climbed into his truck and then took off in the opposite direction of the ocean.

She hurried down the street but saw no bus stops, not even a bench or a sign that showed a bus might stop anywhere nearby. After several more blocks, she was no longer in the area where the shops were. Either side of the street housed older buildings, a few boarded up and looking like they had been for many years. There weren't any cars and she didn't see anyone anywhere.

"Hell," she muttered, and clutched her purse as she sprinted toward the ocean.

She was out of breath and almost nauseous from inhaling salt in the air when the ocean slowly began spreading out in front of her. She didn't see any cruise ships or the docking area where the ship had been. The sidewalk had disappeared and the road she hurried along was broken, asphalt cracking and splitting, making it harder for her to hurry. She was lost, abandoned, left alone without a soul in the world who cared for her.

Lovely vacation. Damn. Seagulls circled around overhead, mocking her with their playful cries.

Joanie took a slow, deep, cleansing breath to clear her thoughts. There was a way out of this. She wasn't going to be left behind. Things like that simply didn't happen. She was an organized, efficient person. If she kept her head on straight, she would see a simple way out of her predicament.

A cruise ship of that size would have records of who they had aboard.

"No." She covered her mouth with her hand as horror bit at her. "Oh no!"

The crew member who'd escorted her past the lines where the tickets were scanned prevented her from letting their computers know she'd left the ship.

"It can't be true. It can't." But she had her boarding pass in her purse. Pulling it out, she quickly searched for a phone number and didn't find one.

"Everything will be fine," she reassured herself, watching the broken road carefully as she trudged over it. "I can call someone. That's what I can do. Directory assistance will know the number."

She grinned for the first time since she'd hurried from the small gift shop, running from the most incredibly beautiful man she'd ever laid eyes on, and pulled her phone out and stared at it, satisfied that at any moment it would solve all of her problems.

"In an hour, everything will be fine and all of this will just be a fading memory." She continued speaking out loud, walking along the broken road that paralleled the ocean.

Joanie punched buttons on her cell phone, glancing from it, to the road beneath her, to her surroundings.

"That damned ship is not going to leave me behind." She scrolled through her recently dialed numbers, and with triumph she found the toll free number she'd called the other day before boarding the cruise ship and beginning her vacation.

"Some vacation it's been so far," she mumbled and then glanced at the ocean that spread out endlessly to her left.

She punched the button to call the number and held the phone to her ear. A large, broken piece of asphalt had pushed its way up in the road. How the hell did cars drive over this road?

"What cars?" she asked herself, glancing behind her and then forward and not seeing a damned soul in either direction. "No one else around here is fool enough to take this broken-down street anywhere. "

But the ocean was next to her. The road faded into large rocks that spread a good thirty feet or so down to splashing waves that soaked the air with salt. The seagulls continued to call out to each other as they circled around above her, searching the water for fish and ignoring the helpless human who had wandered into their world. The pale blue sky seemed as endless as the water. But what bugged her the most was that there were no docks, no signs of people, no one anywhere.

The line rang several times in her ear before an automated answering service picked up at the other end. She recognized the prompts but couldn't remember what numbers she'd pushed the other day to get herself to a person. Joanie forced herself to be patient and continued listening, pulling the phone from her ear to push the appropriate button to be sent to another automated voice that encouraged her to choose between a list of options.

She'd forgotten about the road for a moment too long.

"Ouch. Oh shit." Joanie tripped over a large crack in the road, tumbling forward and sending her cell phone flying. "No!" she cried out, reaching for it just before she fell to the ground.

Immediately her hands and knees stung badly enough to make her eyes tear. She stood up slowly, grimacing from the pain burning from her scraped knees and biting her lip hard enough that it almost stung as badly as the rest of her did.

"Where the hell did my phone go?" She slapped at the tears that filled her eyes and ignored the pain in her knees that hurt enough to make her eyes water more.

The situation was bad enough that she wanted to simply sit down and cry. Something rumbled behind her and she turned, watching as an old truck that looked like it should be in a museum approached her. The truck slowed and a dark-skinned man with silver hair waved his hand at her, gesturing for her to move.

"Get off the road," he ordered several times, his truck idling several feet in front of her. "Get off the road now."

The heat of his motor and the strong smell of oil drowned out the smell of salt in the air. Joanie walked toward his driver's side, unwilling to let the first person she'd seen since she headed toward the ocean escape her that quickly.

"I'm lost," she told him, glancing at the ground for her phone and then with sinking despair spotting it behind his front tire, smashed into the uneven road that it lay on. "I'm lost," she repeated.

"You're drunk," he accused.

She looked up at him, startled. "I am not drunk."

"You're on drugs." His weathered face reminded her of someone she would see in a photograph out of National Geographic magazine.

"I'm not drunk and I'm not on drugs. I can't find my ship." The look he gave her assured her that she sounded as crazy to him as she did to herself at the moment. "Please," she said, trying her damndest to sound calm when all she wanted to do was scream. "Would you give me a ride to a phone?"

The man looked at her as if she might be dangerous. As terrible as her predicament was at the moment, the strangest urge to laugh at the situation built inside her. Here she was asking a strange man for a lift. She should be the one wary of him. Nonetheless, he studied her a moment longer before gesturing to the back of his truck.

He wasn't even going to let her ride in the cab next to him? Well hell. Beggars couldn't be choosers.

She walked to the back of his pickup truck and hopped onto the rusty, warm metal, barely situating herself before the man accelerated and they bounced around over the rough road. Joanie held on for dear life, her knees and hands burning as she squinted at the ocean. Maybe it was her imagination, but she swore she saw a large ship cutting through the deep blue water a mile or so away. It was a very large ship, like a cruise ship, leaving port, heading into deep water. If that was her ship, she'd been walking in the wrong direction.

Joanie almost fell off the truck when it slammed to a stop and the truck door opened with a noisy, rusty, squeaking sound.

"There's a phone in there," the old man told her, pointing to a wooden building.

Joanie stared at the building, which appeared to be some kind of bar, and at the couple of cars parked next to where the truck had parked.

"Look at it as an adventure," she told herself, ignoring the throbbing in her knees as she hopped out of the truck and walked to the door of the establishment.

"Good Lord." A woman about her age looked up from behind the bar when Joanie walked into the dimly lit establishment.

"She is drunk." The old man entered behind her.

"I am not drunk," she insisted, ready to argue with the guy in front of the few people inside who now all gave her their undivided attention.

The older guy tugged on his loose-fitting pants, pulling them up far enough to show off what little rear end he had and then plopped down on a barstool at the bar.

"She's hopping around in the middle of the road, bending over like she's doing some crazy kind of dance." The old guy shook his head and several of the patrons snickered as they watched Joanie. "If she's not drunk then drugs are bad."

This brought more laughter and another woman appeared in a doorway behind the bar. She gave Joanie a pensive look while moving behind the other barmaid, who poured the older man a beer from the tap and then placed it in front of him.

"I'm not on drugs either." Never in her entire life had she defended herself to a room full of strangers who all stared at her in disbelief. "I missed my tour bus and so hurried to the ocean. I tried calling the tour lines but stumbled over a rock in the road and dropped my cell phone. I was searching for it when he pulled up." She pointed at the older man and looked at the women behind the bar and the two other men who sat several barstools away from her at the other end of the counter. "I need to get back to my ship. He ran over my phone and I just need some help, please."

"I'll say," the older guy said, shaking his head and then settling in to sip at his beer.

The women behind the bar looked like they didn't know what to do with her. Both of them had the dark olive skin and black hair of the natives in this area. The one directly in front of her wiped her hands on her bar towel and gave her a scrutinizing look.

"Hon, there aren't any ships around here. What ship are you looking for?"

"It was here just an hour ago," she said quietly, staring down at her palms and the red scratches that streaked across them. She fisted her hands, the burn still making her eyes tear. "This was our first stop. The buses brought us into Seward and I tried to stop at a diner for some lunch, but the owner got mad at me because of the charm I wore around my neck. When her grandson came in, she went nuts, saying we would have sex on the tables because of this damned necklace. I threw it away but then her grandson insisted he buy me another necklace and that made the old woman even crazier and she had another lady show up with a book that would explain what the hex was. When her grandson took me to a gift shop and I found the exact same necklace and the lady said it wasn't anything special, I wanted to buy it. But Corbin got upset and so I ran out. I guess I was gone too long and the ship left without me. Now please, if I could just use a phone, maybe I could figure out what to do."

When she quit speaking, the room grew so quiet Joanie swore her breathing was the loudest sound in the room. Slowly she looked at the two women staring at her, then at the men at one end of the bar and finally at the old man who'd brought her in here. He shook his head at her, then took another long drink of his beer.

"Not sure why you let people with hexes on them into your establishment, Vicky," he muttered into his glass.

Joanie wanted to clobber him.

"You have to admit what you say sounds a bit crazy." The woman in front of her reached for a glass and poured iced water. She set the glass in front of Joanie. "What is this hex you're talking about?"

Joanie watched the other woman nod to one of the men at the end of the counter. She turned to see him pull a phone from his belt and then place a call. Why were these people so concerned about some imaginary hex when she'd just missed her ship?

Chapter Five

How could one sexy, completely distraught woman disappear so quickly in the small town of Seward?

Corbin stood in the empty parking lot where tour vans always parked when they brought sightseers into town. He sighed, amazed at the empty feeling creeping through him.

Maybe he should have rushed after Joanie when she walked out of the store instead of standing there like an idiot as she hurried down the street. Corbin didn't chase women down. He never had. If Joanie needed to be away from him so badly that she would take off running, he wouldn't make an ass out of himself by running through town and tackling her for everyone to see.

"And another one gets away," he mused, then closed his eyes and shook his head at how ridiculous he was being.

No one got away. A complete stranger entered his life for an hour. Granted, she was hot as hell. And in the short time he knew Joanie, he saw into her soul. So pretty and full of life and trampled on by some asshole husband. Men like that should be shot. What kind of guy would send someone like Joanie packing anyway?

Corbin stared up at the snowcapped mountains, focusing in on the ruggedness draped with white that in actuality was so far away. It had been a rough few months in Anchorage, the state having won some really tough cases recently. He needed to come home to clear his head, regroup and get a fresh perspective on things. It always seemed to help him think better when he took time off and slowed his pace in life down a bit.

This small town he'd grown up in always moved so slowly. Not much changed, and it was that stability that called him home from time to time. That and checking in on Grandmother. The small café he'd practically grown up in was run-down. New appliances were needed. A fresh coat of paint would pull in more tourists. He could spend a summer here and find plenty to do to keep him busy.

Of course Grandmother would fight him tooth and nail if he tried changing one little thing. Corbin smiled, still staring at the mountains. That would be half the fun of it. Getting Grandmother riled had been a hobby of his since he was a child. Back then he never gave thought to her health. She looked so frail these days that he worried pissing her off with his efforts to improve the café would be bad for her heart. Although there had been more color in her face when she went nuts over that damned necklace than he swore had been there for quite a while.

"You lost, stranger?" Teddy Bahr hung an elbow out the window of his pickup truck, grinning broadly.

"Teddy Bear!" Corbin laughed out loud, using the nickname his best friend growing up had endured with good humor. After all, it wasn't his fault his parents had named him Theodore. "Guess I was lost if I didn't hear you pull up in this rattrap."

Teddy simply grinned at the insult toward his brand-new, shiny truck. Everything Teddy owned was topnotch.

"What the hell you doing?" Teddy craned his neck, twisting to look up at the mountain that Corbin had been staring at.

"It's been a morning." And one he really didn't want to share the details on.

"Yeah, I heard you got bit by a sex charm." Teddy winked and then laughed.

"Nothing much changes in this town." He should have known his grandmother and aunt would have supplied the grapevine with their hot gossip the moment he left her sight.

"Nope. When did you get into town? Are you making the big bucks yet as a hotshot lawyer in Anchorage?"

"Just got in this morning. And I don't make the big money with the state's prosecution office, but I love the work."

In Teddy's eyes, success meant money. Corbin didn't even try explaining anymore the satisfaction in doing what he did. He loved the cases he got as state's prosecution. It wasn't all about the almighty dollar. The two of them would never see eye-to-eye on that one.

"Well, we just finished a shipment this morning. Came into town for some lunch and heard the wonderful news that you were going to have sex on the tables." Teddy shook his head, his deep laugh contagious. "Figured if she were hot, I'd watch for a bit."

"She's gone now." Corbin sounded more disappointed than he meant to. "But lunch sounds good if you haven't already eaten."

"Nope. Your grandmother threw such a fit that I figured I better come looking for you."

"Guess I should assure her the sex charm didn't work."

"She'll be disappointed."

Corbin bit his lip so that he wouldn't say he was too.

"I'm not going to ask what you're doing standing in this empty parking lot. Hop in and we'll head over to the café. Got another shipment this afternoon. Some of us don't get to take vacations." Teddy was positive he worked harder than anyone else.

Corbin wouldn't argue that fact with him. His friend was built up like a bodybuilder from all the hard work he did at the fishery. And he worked his way up to supervisor after high school, then finally bought a few boats. Teddy had made a name for himself and even headed several committees on the fishing division. It wasn't a line of work Corbin ever got too involved with, but he had all the respect in the world for Teddy.

He headed around the truck, admiring the extended cab and fancy chrome work. His phone buzzed when he pulled open the passenger door. He flipped it out to answer and pulled the seatbelt around him.

"Corbin here," he said, and then squinted when he couldn't understand the quiet voice hissing into his ear. "Who is this? Speak up, man. I can't understand you."

Frustration hit him as it crossed his mind that someone—possibly a client—was in trouble. So much for some time off. If Polly Mason, his personal secretary, had given out his number, then there were problems that couldn't wait. He pulled the phone away from his ear quickly, glancing at the number. It was local. That didn't make sense. He didn't have any clients in Seward.

"Corbin Silver," a man said. "You got to get over to The Crab Crawl. Some crazy woman is ranting and raving and she keeps saying your name. Vicky doesn't know whether to call the cops or what."

"A crazy woman is saying my name?" Corbin experienced a funny feeling deep in his gut. He glanced sideways at Teddy, who raised an eyebrow at him. "Okay. I'll head over and see if I can help."

"Crazy woman, huh?" Teddy looked more than amused.

"I guess lunch will have to wait. Just drop me off at the café. My truck is there and I can head out to The Crab Crawl and see what this is all about."

Teddy turned the opposite direction of the café when he left the parking lot. "I could use a bit of a distraction." He chuckled. "And if you're going to have sex on the tables, she might want a real man to help her out."

Corbin groaned. This would prove interesting.

The Crab Crawl was a fisherman's dive. Corbin hadn't been here since he was a boy. Back then, the old man who ran the place used to keep Corbin full on peanuts while Corbin's father, and later his grandfather, sat with a beer and discussed the latest news and gossip. Pulling into the large gravel lot in front of the salt-water faded wooden structure brought back some forgotten memories.

"Didn't that front porch used to be a lot bigger?" He frowned at the old building. It looked a lot more run-down than he remembered.

"Hell. We used to pretend that old porch was our ship." Teddy put his truck in park and killed the engine. "We'd go hunting whales."

Corbin snorted, shaking his head. "We caught some big ones, didn't we?"

"Remember when we caught Cindy Cole on that front porch?"

"I got so pissed when she kissed you first." Corbin grinned at the old memory.

"Blew me out of the water that she turned around and kissed you right after she'd laid one on me." Teddy moved easily for a large man, getting out of his truck and stuffing his thumbs in his belt loops while staring at the old building. "We could have had ourselves a wild night with her if we'd known better."

Corbin laughed. "I never did get down her pants. Did you?"

"Twice." Teddy winked at him. "And once with her sister."

"Lucky bastard." Corbin grinned and then smoothed his hair down on top of his head. "I got her sister—hell, what was her name?—but never Cindy. What ever happened to her?"

"She and her sister took off after high school. All the good ones leave." There wasn't an ounce of remorse in Teddy's tone.

"Yeah, just makes it easier for you to break in the new ones."

Teddy gave Corbin a knowing look. "Make time while you're here and I'll introduce you to a few of them."

"Sounds good, but I'm not doing sloppy seconds."

Their boots made the floorboards on the old porch creak and Corbin shook his head at how dilapidated the place looked. He swore it used to have a fresh coat of paint put on it every summer. Now the boards were worn, not a strip of paint on them, and rough looking. He pulled open the heavy front door and stepped to the side, letting Teddy enter first.

It took a minute to adjust his eyes to the dark bar, and Teddy's large frame in front of him blocked his view of the patrons inside.

Teddy stopped, turning his head and whispering. "If that is the crazy woman who you're going to have sex with on the tables, then I have no problem with sloppy seconds."

Corbin squinted, spotting Stu McClug hunched over at the bar. The old fart looked just as decrepit and weathered as he had when Corbin was a boy. There were a few others at the other end of the bar, but he didn't get a good look at them. Somehow he doubted Teddy meant seconds with Stu McClug.

"What are you talking about?" He frowned, stepping around Teddy and heading toward the bar.

"Corbin Silver. What a surprise seeing you in our place." Vicky Ransom looked relieved he was here, and the way her gaze darted from him and then down the bar made her look a bit frenzied.

"Good to see you too, Vicky." Teddy scowled, leaning against the bar and making a show of being ignored. "And Ruth, you're looking sexy as always." He nodded to the stout woman who stood several feet behind Vicky. "I don't suppose you could feed a hungry man? I had to bring my friend out here on an urgent mission."

Vicky shook her head at him, rolled her eyes, but then smiled and looked behind her at her partner. "Throw the man some peanuts."

Ruth chuckled, a deep, masculine sound, and her eyes glistened with amusement.

"Aww, come on ladies. Have some heart. I'm a starving man and drinking over my lunch could get me in trouble with the boss." His charm wasn't missed by the ladies

who knew damned good and well that Teddy ran the shipping docks and although he'd never been known to drink while working, he answered to no one.

Vicky let Teddy plea-bargain with Ruth and leaned over the bar, giving Corbin a concerned look. "Do you know that lady down there at the other end of the bar? I'm worried about her."

Corbin never understood the mindset behind keeping bars practically too dark to see in. More than likely it made whomever you were flirting with look a lot more appealing after a few beers. He squinted, leaning forward to see past Teddy's broad shoulders. Teddy also looked in that direction, then nudged Corbin.

"Would you get a look at her? Better introduce me. Remember, we go way back." Teddy winked at Vicky but his look to Corbin was serious.

"You boys go find a good girl. That one is on drugs." Stu McClug slid his empty beer mug toward Vicky.

"I am not on drugs." Joanie stomped over to Stu, sounding like she'd made this declaration several times.

Corbin turned, leaning against the bar, and hid a smile as he stared at her. Joanie was a bit dirtier than she'd been when she left him. The blonde in her hair didn't stand out as much in the dimly lit establishment. She fisted her hands against her hips and glared at Stu, her frazzled expression even more compelling when her full lips puckered, looking pouty and very, very kissable.

But then fire burned in her gaze when she looked at him. "You know, this is all your fault," she snapped and then tossed her hair over her shoulder and marched out of the bar.

"So much for sex on the tables," Teddy mumbled.

"Sex where?" Stu asked, and Vicky's jaw dropped.

"Excuse me." Corbin hurried out of the bar after Joanie.

She was at the end of the parking lot, putting some effort into making distance between her and The Crab Crawl.

"Joanie," he yelled, forgetting that he never ran after a lady and trotting after her. "Wait up."

She didn't stop and continued walking as fast as she could alongside the road leading into Seward.

"I can't believe this place," she said, throwing her arms up in the air when he fell into stride alongside her.

"What in the world were you doing out here?" he asked.

"I needed to use the phone." The sun highlighted a few adorable freckles across the bridge of her nose that he hadn't noticed before.

"You walked all the way out here to use a phone?"

"No. I walked part of the way out here and then this old man made me ride in the back of his truck just so I could use the phone."

She wasn't making a damned bit of sense. "Why were you walking along this road?"

"I was trying to get back to the ship."

"But the cruise lines aren't out this way."

"I know that now."

He scratched his head. She kept up a pretty fast pace. At this rate they'd be back in Seward within half an hour or so. Last thing he planned on doing today was walking along the ocean outside of town, although the view was almost as captivating as the company.

"Why didn't you take the cruise buses that bring everyone into town? That's how you came into town, right?"

She looked at him as if he'd just grown wings. "They left without me."

"What?" The cruise ships kept a pretty tight schedule. Most of the town could keep time by when they arrived and departed.

"Don't worry about it. You've done enough for me already." If she started walking faster thinking she'd get rid of him, she was sadly mistaken.

"I haven't done anything for you yet," he told her.

Joanie stumbled and he grabbed her arm. Embarrassment colored her cheeks and she licked her lips, shoving hair behind her ears and not looking at him.

"I'm fine. I'll be fine," she stammered.

Tires popped over gravel as a truck approached behind them. Corbin glanced over his shoulder. Teddy slowed in the middle of the road, matching their pace.

His driver's side window lowered silently, and Teddy's grin was classic. "Need a lift?"

Corbin had a feeling he'd be hearing about this for a long time.

"You will be fine." He didn't let go of her arm but pulled her around the front of the truck to the passenger side. "I'll see to it. And this time you can ride in the cab."

"What's going on?" Teddy asked after Joanie slid into the cab. He gave her an interested once-over, letting his gaze travel down her and then back to her face. "I'm Teddy Bahr at your service, ma'am."

"Teddy Bahr?" she asked, sounding like she didn't believe him.

"Theodore Bahr. It's a family name. Although I'm told I live up to it and am quite cuddly." He pressed down on the gas, taking them back into Seward.

Corbin scowled at his lifelong friend. It surprised him that he felt somewhat possessive of Joanie. She'd been in his life for a little over an hour now, but it didn't sit well that Teddy was picking up on her. Not that he blamed Teddy. Joanie was hot. And having her squished between the two of them, her soft arm brushing against his, did a

number on his senses. Again, it made no sense that he'd be so instantly attracted to her. They were strangers.

"That's nice to know." Joanie clutched her hands in her lap, her knuckles turning white.

She had slender hands, with long fingers that at the moment showed how nervous and upset she was by the way she held them tightly pressed between her legs.

"So help me understand everything here." Corbin knew he was a hell of lot more responsible for how distraught she was than she wanted him to believe. "And there's no reason for you to worry. I'm sure I can take care of everything."

"You've taken care of enough already." She was bitter and turned her back to him, facing Teddy. "If you could just drop me off somewhere where the cruise ships are. I'm sure I can find someone who can help me get back to my ship."

Teddy glanced at him, and his expression softened when he looked at her. "If your ship is gone, I'm afraid you're going to have to wait until it returns back down this way. But we'll get you in contact with the right people so they know where you are."

"What do you mean wait until it returns? How long will that be?"

"You can contact someone down at the docks and learn what their schedule is, can't you?" Corbin had a feeling the news wouldn't be good.

Teddy nodded, already pulling his cell phone out. He punched numbers while he drove, slowing when they reached the docks where the cruise ship had been. Joanie noticeably slumped between them when she saw where her ship had been and where it wasn't now.

"I can't believe this," she wailed. "I shouldn't have let that old lady affect me for a single moment. All because of that sex charm, I'm now stranded and alone."

"You don't look too alone to me," Corbin pointed out to her. "We aren't going to just drop you off on the docks and leave you."

"I don't see why not." She tangled her fingers through her hair, sincerely looking like she was ready to cry. "Maybe if I'd held onto that damned charm the cruise people would have remembered me and wouldn't have taken off without me. Oh God. Listen to me. I can't believe I'm even buying into any of this. It just all makes sense. What if your grandmother was right?"

"Do you really think you are so unappealing that a necklace would be the only reason men would give you the time of day?" Corbin shook his head, seeing he needed to put some sense in her head.

"I know I'm unappealing." She waved her hand at the busy docks, business as usual, and shook her head. "This is exactly how it's always been for me. Left behind. Ignored and forgotten. No matter how hard I tried, I was overlooked for better shores."

Corbin remembered her mentioning her husband leaving her. He understood she wasn't speaking about being left by the cruise ship as much as she was her life, and how deserted she felt at the moment.

"This isn't your fault. I insisted on buying you a necklace. You aren't stranded. And you aren't forgotten." If anything, he would build her self-esteem while she was here. And he had a feeling she was going to be with them in Seward for a while.

Teddy began speaking to someone on his phone. Joanie didn't answer Corbin, but stared with dry eyes at the docks while listening to Teddy's conversation. Teddy had connections, and it didn't take more than a few minutes before he was thanking whoever it was on the other end of the line and then ending the call.

"You were on the cruise ship that docked here earlier?" he asked, making it more of a statement than a question.

Joanie nodded.

"Well the bad news is that you've missed your ship. The good news is that it will return to Seward in a week, after cruising up the coasts and doing the iceberg tour. We're getting word to them right now that you're here." He turned into town and headed down the main street toward where Corbin's truck was in front of the café. "I'll jot down the number and you can call and confirm everything for yourself."

"Thank you," she mumbled, looking more than defeated. "I really wanted to see the icebergs."

Corbin ached to brush the strands of hair away from her face so that he could see her better. She didn't move, didn't look in his direction, didn't respond in any way to his touch. And it bugged the tar out of him that he wanted some kind of reaction from her.

Teddy parked next to Corbin's truck and reached across Joanie to his glove compartment to grab a note pad. Corbin got out of the truck, anxious for some reason to not have Joanie quite so close to Teddy.

She only moved a few inches toward him, still sitting in the truck and then accepting the piece of paper when Teddy handed it to her.

"My number is on there too," he told her, smiling that charming smile he bestowed on ladies when he was in full pickup mode. "Call me if you need anything."

"Thank you," she said again, her tone flat, and climbed out of the truck.

Joanie moved past him like he wasn't there and went up on to the porch toward the café's entrance. Standing under the worn sign with the burnt words *Silver Café* barely noticeable in the wood, Joanie hesitated, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Corbin didn't climb the porch and almost asked her why she just stood there, but the way her rear end moved as she adjusted her stance stole his words, and his breath.

She didn't enter the café but instead walked over and glanced down at the trash can next to the door. Her hair fell over her shoulder, blocking her expression as she stared at it for a moment. He moved toward her, worried for a moment that she might be sick. She then plunged her hand into the trash and pulled out the sex charm.

"What are you doing?" he asked, climbing the stairs, baffled that she'd want that damned thing back.

She turned quickly, her hair flying over her shoulder and looked up at him defiantly. Her green eyes glowed and dimples appeared on either side of her mouth when she gave him a tight smile.

"I've never believed in this sort of thing." She held the necklace up between them, the delicate chain twisting around her fingers. "But in the short time I had it, my life was better than it had been in years. And that was before I knew what it was. Maybe if I hold on to it, things will improve."

Corbin let out a sigh, his exasperation making her raise an eyebrow. Now she fisted her hands on her hips. She meant what she said. That necklace was her strength at the moment. Demanding that she see that it was just a necklace wouldn't help her right now. The way she held on to it, it was clear she believed her life would crumble completely without it.

"Maybe it will be the highlight of your vacation being here for a while."

"See?" She pointed at his face. "I see your interest. And a guy like you, so good-looking and all. You wouldn't give someone like me the time of day without this necklace."

He fought not to rip it out of her hand. "You think as long as you hold that necklace, I won't be able to resist you?"

Her eyes opened wide but then she glanced down, staring as the charm dangled from the chain, which was wrapped around her fingers.

"Is that what you think?" he asked again, stepping a bit closer.

"Maybe I should find a place to stay while I'm here or something." Her breath quickened as her gaze darted around them.

He pinned her between himself and the door to the café. And he doubted she wanted to go in there again any time soon. He placed his hand on the wall next to her head, relaxing into her. There was opportunity here. Something a guy didn't run into everyday. Joanie believed he couldn't resist her because she held the necklace. Most of the time, he fought not to drool over a sexy lady so as not to offend her. But now, Joanie expected him to do just that. And it wasn't just her—Grandmother and his aunt also assumed he would lust after her. No reason to let any of them down.

He'd give her the lust-driven guy, show her what it would be like to have a man who just couldn't have enough of her. There was no losing here. He would have free reign to flirt with her, because she expected it.

"You're going to stay with me while you're here in Seward."

"With you?"

"Yup." He took her hand that had the necklace wrapped around her fingers and brought it to his lips. "How could I possibly let you go anywhere else?" he whispered.

Chapter Six

Joanie had no clothes, no luggage, no toiletries—nothing. She'd never put much stock into personal possessions. Not having them, though, left her with an unsettling feeling. Thank God she hadn't opted for a storage unit for her valuables while traveling. She had her credit cards, travelers' cheques and some cash.

Corbin let her use his cell phone to call customer service with the cruise line. And all she'd learned was what Teddy, Corbin's friend who smelled like the ocean, had already told her. The ship would come back down the coast in one week. Since the cruise line accepted no blame for her being left behind, since they had no record of her ever leaving this ship, they wouldn't compensate her for the expense of staying in a motel room. She considered renting a car, but there wasn't anywhere to drive. Roads were limited in northern Alaska and the ship didn't plan on docking again before returning to Seward. She was too close to her limit on her new credit card after moving into her new apartment, so charging a room for a week wasn't an option. Her sister lived on a tighter budget than Joanie. There was no way she would ask to borrow money from her, even for a short time.

But was staying with Corbin such a good idea?

"I need to stop at a drugstore or something," she told him as she fingered the contents of her purse. At least that way she would have her own toothbrush and makeup.

She might not be a professional at applying makeup, but personally she thought she looked better with it than without it. And if she were going to be under the same roof as him, he would see her looking her best.

"That's a good idea. We'll go grocery shopping too." The way he smiled at her created a pool of fire that settled with throbbing energy between her legs. His dark eyes glowed, like he viewed shopping as some erotic adventure.

And with this man, any errand might be erotic. Joanie didn't know men in real life could be built like Corbin. He fit snugly in the driver's seat, his jeans hugging roped muscle. She'd bet his abdomen was rock-hard. And his dark skin, like milk chocolate, added to his irresistible sensuality. His black hair reminded her of a starless night sky. Just thinking about removing the tie that bound his thick locks together and watching it fan around his face made her fingers itch. Corbin was a man outside of his time. Like a warrior from another age—tall, muscular, with long, thick hair and so much sex appeal that he was dangerous.

How would it feel to have all that brawn leaning over her, impaling her and riding her until she screamed?

"You don't need to feed me," she said, imagining him doing just that.

"Yes. I need to." He barely glanced at her before pulling into a parking lot to a market that had a very local look about it.

Corbin climbed out of the truck and moved to her side by the time she'd opened her door. She almost regretted trying to get out on her own. His chivalry would be an easy addiction.

"This isn't a bad idea, I guess." She tried a cheerful note, feeling a need to get rid of his disappointed look when she let herself out of his truck. "I'll need to eat while I'm here and groceries would be better than eating out every meal."

"I live outside of town," he explained. "Driving in every time you get hungry can get old. The place needs to be stocked and that was on my list of things to do today anyway."

"Good. I don't want to think that you're buying food just because of me." She had no idea what he did for a living. But if his family survived off of that café, there couldn't be a lot of money.

Then another thought hit her. Corbin didn't live with his family, did he?

She lost her nerve to ask when he slipped his large, warm hand around hers and guided her into the store. It got even worse when every single person, down to the pimply faced teenaged bag boy, knew him. Corbin had a warm word for everyone, asking about their families, joking and smiling with anyone who said hi. And he introduced her to everyone, rubbing her back with his large hand or stroking a strand of hair from her face. By the time they were back in the truck, with enough groceries and personal hygiene supplies to last her a month, Joanie wasn't sure what the hell she'd gotten herself into. One thought distracted her—Corbin had everyone in that store thinking there was a new woman in his life.

And there was – but just for one week.

They made one last stop at a small store, no more than the size of a large closet, where she picked up a new cell phone. Corbin sat patiently while she dealt with her service and reactivated her phone number on her new phone.

"Since I just got into town this morning, I haven't been out to the place in a few months." Corbin grinned at her as if this announcement made the adventure all that more appealing. Once again he placed his hand on her back as he helped her into his truck. "There will be some work to do."

"Why haven't you been home in a couple of months?" she couldn't help asking.

His enthusiasm softened his warrior features. Now she saw a charming man, gentle-natured and soft-spoken. There were many sides to Corbin Silver. So far, none of them were unappealing.

"I work at the state prosecutor's office in Anchorage. We just tied up the loose ends on a few large cases and so I'm taking some time off." The truck bounced over the rough road they'd turned onto. Corbin gripped the steering wheel, muscles twitching and stretching in his large hands and forearms.

Joanie enjoyed the view for a moment. More than likely there was a sign here somewhere. Ten years of marriage to a lawyer, working to put him through law school, helping him get his own law firm off the ground, getting dumped for a legal secretary and now crashing into this strange man. And he'd just announced he ran a law firm in Anchorage.

Nuts. Absolutely nuts. It was that damned sex charm. Everything in her world had gone batty. At least she had a gorgeous hunk of a man by her side while she slowly went insane.

"What kind of law?" she asked, then wondered why she did.

"Criminal law." He glanced her way, his dark orbs sparkling while the warrior look slowly returned. "I know it's not where the big money is, but I couldn't help myself. I love the adventure of learning the truth in a crime." For a moment she saw him with his long hair blowing around his body, oiled muscles bulging and pulsing with more energy and life than an average man possessed. It was hardly the image of a lawyer cross-examining a witness. "What do you do for a living?"

Joanie opened her mouth to answer, fighting to peel her tongue from the roof of her mouth, then looked out the front window. That virile body sat way too close to her. Her mind just couldn't put him in a suit and tie inside a courtroom. Her thoughts swam in a puddle of growing lust. He'd asked a simple question, one she'd answered many times in her life. Hell. It was probably one of the most common questions asked when two people first met.

Yet should she tell him the truth? Let him see how closely paired they were? That damned sex charm was tricky. Somehow she'd out trick it though and figure out Corbin's true nature.

She focused on their surroundings, fighting to regain control of her wits. The road they drove on turned into nothing more than well-driven tire tracks over rough, rocky ground. Tall grass slapped the sides of the truck. In front of them, a log home stood proudly showing how it endured the test of time.

"Wow," she mumbled, worried for a moment she showed how out of her league she suddenly felt. No way on her and Tommy's income could they ever afford something like this.

"I was born and raised here." Corbin maneuvered the truck over the rough ground until they reached a circular drive that proved a lot smoother. "My grandparents raised us here after my parents passed on."

She glanced at him quickly but saw no remorse in his words. As little as she knew about him, she wouldn't peg him a man who lacked feelings. He'd just said he was raised here. Maybe his parents died a long time ago and the pain was gone. Whatever his history, asking too many questions didn't seem appropriate. Her insides warred with an ache to know him better, a hell of a lot better, and keeping her cool and keeping her curiosity to herself. Getting through this week and then heading back to her own world might be more of a challenge than she thought.

Joanie focused again on the large home with thick, long logs pressed together, creating a fort-like appearance in a house that could only be described as magnificent. She almost drooled over the wraparound front porch with a handful of rocking chairs and two porch swings secured to long chains hanging from the high porch ceiling. The setting was perfect for a large family lounging and enjoying happy times.

And the large mountains that provided the backdrop for the house gave the setting a secure, comforting feeling. The chilly air kept the surroundings clean, like everything was sanitized from any hostile or bad emotions. All anyone could experience here was happiness. If such a thing existed, Joanie had just found paradise.

How odd after meeting the grandmother who ran the worn-out diner. Either Joanie got a very inaccurate picture of what the old woman was truly like or she brought out a beast inside an otherwise peaceful, old soul. Because no one as horrendous as what Joanie met at the café could possibly have anything to do with the beautiful home and wonderful vibes that she got standing here.

Corbin got out on his side, this time reaching for groceries in the back of the truck instead of hurrying to open her door. Now she saw the mountain man, rough and grounded, keeping his homestead alive even after all the family had moved on.

"You never told me what you do for a living." He grabbed several brown bags and cradled them in his powerful looking arms.

Joanie reached in on her side, managing to grab two bags. "I'm a legal secretary in a law office and helped my husband start his own firm."

"You work with your *ex*-husband?"

She noted that Corbin emphasized the word ex, and that it wouldn't be too much longer before that was true. "No. Tommy thought our relationship would be stronger if I didn't work in his firm. I worked for another firm who practiced family law."

Obviously their not working together might have kept the relationship stronger—it just wasn't her and Tommy's relationship that maintained that strength. Thinking about him put a bitter taste in her mouth. If only putting ex in front of the word husband would blot the memory of him from her mind.

Corbin stared at her a moment longer than she was comfortable with. She turned toward the front of the truck first, walking over the smooth drive that led to a wide set of stone stairs. Everything in Corbin's world appeared solid and permanent, indestructible. Unlike her world, which had crumbled apart. The emotions washing over her at how different their lives were sobered her a bit. Where he was a rock, her world was more like a raging storm, destined to destroy everything in its path.

"That's rather amazing that we are both in the same line of work." Corbin wrestled with his keys while managing to keep all bags of groceries from falling.

"I'm not a lawyer." She studied the fancy painted glass in his front door. Nothing about this home was plain.

"Legal secretaries are important too." Somehow he got the key into the lock and pushed the door open with his foot.

Joanie watched his long braid sway over thick-roped muscle in his back. No shirt could hide all that brawn. He entered the dark home in front of her and as she followed him inside, something told her that her life would never be the same after this moment. As unsettling a sensation as it was, her tummy flip-flopped with excitement at the adventure about to unfold before her.

The tedious task of stocking the cabin turned out to be rather fun. There were boxes of groceries, cleaning supplies, toiletries and everything Corbin needed to stay here for a few weeks. Unloading everything with Joanie, chatting about nothing that mattered, turned the necessary chore into a pleasant experience. He reminded himself several times that they were strangers when talking to her seemed so easy to do.

"I think we've got everything put away," he grunted as he stacked the last of the boxes and paper bags outside on the back porch. "I'll tear these down later and add them to help start the fires tonight."

"Fires?" Joanie stepped outside with him, brushing a strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

There was a smudge of dirt on her cheek that he itched to wipe away.

Corbin couldn't help grinning down at her disheveled look. "Wood-burning stoves heat the place at night. You'd be surprised how warm it keeps most of the rooms. A person can walk around with almost nothing on."

Color rose in her cheeks as her gaze dropped over him quickly. But then she looked away. "Tell me you don't walk around your home naked at night."

He sighed purposely, enjoying teasing her. "I'll wear boxers if it makes you more comfortable."

She turned her back to him, looking like she searched for something to balance herself. "Do I get my own room?"

He moved in behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. Would it be terribly hard to seduce her? After all, she expected it from him after reclaiming that sex charm. She believed he couldn't keep his hands off her. Far be it for him to disappoint her.

"You can sleep in any room you wish," he told her, leaning down so that he whispered the words in her ear.

She shivered noticeably and quickly crossed her arms over her chest. "That's kind of you," she muttered, her voice huskier than it had been a moment before.

"I can't help myself. You know that." He brushed her hair away from her neck and then tasted her, pressing his mouth to the most sensitive area at her nape.

Joanie jumped and he wrapped one arm around her waist, pressing her to him. He'd see how far she took the power of this sex charm. Would she accept that he had to have her and therefore give in to the powers she'd conjured up and submit to him?

He found this study most enjoyable, especially when her soft ass twitched against his upper thighs. Joanie wasn't tall, but then not many women matched his six-and-ahalf feet. He knew he intimidated many, but he didn't sense that emotion in her. If he did, he'd back off. Instead she gasped, her entire body stiffening although she made no effort to fight him off.

Her words were strained when she spoke. "You've got to try. Maybe if I put the charm back in your truck or something." She shook her head, wrapping her fingers around his arm that was just under her breasts. She wasn't pushing him away. "Oh God. You can't. I mean, we shouldn't."

Suddenly she stammered and started breathing quickly. If he moved his grip just a bit, he would surely feel how hard her nipples must be.

"Why shouldn't we?" Never in his life had he come on so hard and fast to a woman. If he weren't enjoying himself so much, he might take a minute to think how ridiculous his actions were. He would clobber another guy for acting like this. Yet she still didn't tell him no or try to stop him. "And I'm sure that we can," he added for good measure.

"We're strangers. Complete strangers." She shook her head and the strands of hair already free from her ponytail fell over her face. "And we'll always be strangers. I'm only here for a week."

"A week I pray that will be full of time spent learning everything about each other." God. He sounded like one of those creeps he despised when he went into nightclubs. Did ladies really fall for this shit?

"Well." She licked her lips. "I'm sure obviously we'll know each other some since I'm staying here."

He'd hunched over her in order to enjoy her neck. When he straightened, he ran his fingers over her arm, feeling the swell of her breasts before resting his palm on her shoulder. Her hair was like silk as strands tortured his flesh. At this rate, they wouldn't need any damned fires.

There was only so far he would go with this style of seduction before he couldn't stomach it any longer. It was just so sleazy and definitely not his style. Not that he had a style. His seduction skills were more than rusty. But he wouldn't resort to sounding like an idiot, pawing at her when it would be so much more entertaining to seduce her mind.

He'd thought about removing her ponytail holder before and now decided to risk the rather intimate move. The whole point here was to see how far she'd let him go, how much she actually believed in the strength of magic. If he believed anything, it would be the power of the mind could master many things.

Corbin let go of her but she didn't turn around. Instead she remained with her back turned to him, her arms crossed, breathing heavily. His actions didn't leave him unaffected either. His heart thumped inside his chest, and at the moment he was grateful she kept her position. Touching her the way he just had stirred him to life. Feelings rushed through him that he hadn't allowed to surface in months. What with work pressing in on him so hard, socializing hadn't been an option. And he'd never

been one for quickies with strangers. Already his conscience warred with him that he took advantage of a ridiculous situation and if he continued, one of them would get hurt.

Nonetheless, his cock jerked inside his pants, taking on a mind of its own. Not that he blamed himself for physically responding to her. Joanie had everything that would turn a man on. Brains and beauty, guts and nerve.

He inhaled slowly. It was imperative that he keep his own emotions out of this. Joanie was right. In one week they would be out of each other's lives forever. Falling for her would be a fool's mission.

All he planned on doing, the only reasons for his actions, was to take advantage of her believing the damned thing possessed any powers in the first place. Now that he'd started, testing the strength of intellectual magic, the power of persuasion, fascinated him and turned him on as much as her hot little body did.

He justified his next action with that reasoning. Reaching out, he slipped his fingers under the white band that wrapped around her hair. It slid free with little effort and her blonde-and-brunette hair fanned over her shoulders.

Joanie spun around, her hair taking a wild look, like those women in shampoo commercials. It fell around her face sensually, overdramatically, while her eyes glowed with passion.

"Fine. If I must let my hair down, then you have to also." She put her hands on her hips, the fire burning in her sultry green eyes captivating him.

What if she was on to his act?

He straightened to his full height, relaxing his expression the way he would when countering a tough witness on the stand.

"I only let my hair down for one reason, my dear," he told her, intentionally lowering his voice so that he almost whispered.

Her eyes widened, and amazingly she seemed to consider this.

"And what reason is that?" she asked, matching his tone.

With her, it made her voice sultry, intoxicating with its alluring appeal. Green eyes sparkled at him defiantly. She pursed her lips as if silently requesting a kiss, although he doubted that was her intention.

The first answer that came to mind made him smile. Telling her he only let it down to take a shower probably wouldn't create the reaction in her that he wanted. This seduction thing pushed him out of his league. But he always enjoyed a good challenge.

"If I take it down, then you'll force me to show you," he told her, wondering if she'd call his bluff.

She considered this, tilting her head slightly so that her hair tumbled over part of her face. Finally, she held out her hand, palm up.

"My ponytail holder, please."

Corbin smiled. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather dismantle my braid?"

Something crossed over her expression. He'd spent many years learning to read witnesses—eye contact, a flushed expression, the way they held their mouths, how they breathed. So many things offered clues to what a person thought.

The way she sucked in a silent breath, letting her gaze move from his eyes and glancing at his head told him she seriously considered his offer. In fact, he'd swear she ached to find out what he did with his hair down. Just imagining her fingers running through his hair, slowly parting the waves until his thick, long hair weighed heavy down his back sent a rush of heat over his body he hadn't expected.

Deciding to act on the impulse that hit him, he turned away from her. One reason being if he got much harder, the bulge in his pants might send her running. If he did this right, the week might prove rather interesting for both of them.

Corbin pulled the chair away from the edge of the back porch, the old wooden chair his grandfather spent hours sitting in, whittling away at wood chips. He placed it in the center of the back porch and sat down, bringing him eye level with her breasts.

Even through her sweater he noticed her nipples puckered into tempting little knobs. This act they played turned her on as much as it did him. And she watched him, not moving, fascinated enough to play this scene out. At least he hoped he read her right.

"Undo my braid," he instructed.

He sat perfectly still, clasping his hands in his laps and purposely closing his eyes so that he wouldn't appear a threat to her. He listened for her movement. When he almost believed she'd finally call him a fool and march out on him, Joanie stepped toward him.

"What will happen if I do?" She touched his hair where it was bound at his neck.

Her fingers brushed against his skin, hardening every inch of his body. The slightest touch from her chilled him and made his insides burn at the same time. He really needed to maintain control of this situation.

"You'll find out what happens when I let my hair down."

Her hand didn't move. He ached to see her expression but didn't dare move his head.

"I'm alone out in the middle of nowhere with a complete stranger. I'm getting warning signs all over the place here, Corbin."

Damn it. He wouldn't lose her.

When he adjusted his body, she moved her hand. He slid his hand into his pants pocket, tightening the fabric that confined his dick. It pulsed violently, causing him serious pain. Gritting his teeth, he endured it and pulled out the small, round keychain that held the keys to the cabin and his truck. He held them in his palm, offering them to her without turning around. Instead he did his best to adjust himself in the chair again so that some of the blood would drain from his cock and return to the rest of his body.

"Take them," he told her. "House keys and keys to the only means of transportation out here. I swear to you, Joanie, while you're here, you will experience no pain and nothing will happen that you don't want."

She considered this. Silence draped over them. She didn't take the keys.

"Joanie," he said softly, not moving his hand, which was by his shoulder, flat with the keys resting on it. "Think about it. I run a successful law firm. My reputation is sound. You had to see a glimpse of it while we were in town. The people here respect me. Relax and know that you're safe."

She snagged the keys, taking them so quickly they scraped over his palm without her even touching him. She must have pocketed them because after a moment, both of her hands grabbed his braid.

Corbin closed his eyes. Round one went to him. Now to continue with his seduction. He relaxed while her fingers moved through his hair. Slowly she unwrapped the braid. If power existed in her sex charm, he'd just proven it was that of persuasion. Now to prepare for round two. He would take the strength of her sex charm to the next level. Corbin grinned, loving how her fingers felt caressing his back while she worked through his hair. No way would there be any losers in this game.

Chapter Seven

Joanie's fingers trembled while thick black hair streamed over them. Awkward didn't begin to describe how she felt. But nerves tingled over her with excitement too, creating an odd sensation that rippled inside her.

"Your hair is very thick." She tried for conversation as she parted the locks of hair.

"It always has been."

"Has it always been this long?"

"Since my teens when I decided to explore my culture further. I just haven't gotten the nerve to cut it since."

"It would be a crime to cut this hair. Women anywhere would die for all this beauty." She thought of asking him about his culture, and as soon as she got her heart to quit racing and her blood pressure to return to normal, an intellectual conversation would be nice.

"I'm glad you're enjoying it." He tilted his head and closed his eyes.

She worked her fingers up the braid toward the nape of his neck. Her heart pattered so hard in her chest she fought not to gasp for breath. So much for settling her blood pressure. Simply staring at his strong, firm forehead and black lashes that fluttered over his eyes made it hard to find enough air to breathe. It would be a lost cause trying for an educated conversation about anything.

"There." Her mouth was too dry to get the one word out without coughing.

She stepped backward and stared at the long black hair that fell in waves down his back. The sight stole her breath until her chest hurt. His hair was so black, full and long. It streamed over his shoulder like an inky river, tumbling down his broad back until it ended at his belt.

Corbin stood slowly, reminding her how tall he was, and turned to face her. Someone might as well have yanked her back in time, back to a more primitive era. He didn't smile, but looked down at her, his bright green eyes masked with long black lashes. Light brown skin added to the intensity of his gaze.

He held out his hand. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

It was the charm—that damned sex charm. Nothing else explained the heat in his gaze, the soft baritone of his voice. If she'd left it in the trash, she'd be checking into a motel right now, handling more practical matters than undoing a braid.

None of which would be as much fun.

Since when had fun mattered more to her than the practicalities of life?

He didn't answer her until she consented, placing her smaller hand in his.

"Inside," he said without elaborating.

He led her into the kitchen where they'd unloaded the groceries. Next to the door, he slipped out of his shoes and socks and instructed her to do the same. Taking her hand once again, they walked across carpet so thick she sank into it, loving how smooth it was against her bare feet.

"This house is amazing." The words simply slipped out of her.

The living room opened up from a dining area just as large. Everything in the house seemed oversized, from the spacious openness of each room to the large, overstuffed couch and furniture. A grandfather clock taller than she was stood keeping a steady thumping beat, unlike her heart. The head of a rather ferocious looking white bear hung on the wall. Next to it there was a fireplace big enough to walk into.

Corbin chuckled, making her retreat inside. The glamour and sophistication of his world left her simple existence in the dust. And to think how many times Tommy bragged of their success—or, more accurately, *his* success.

"It's a work in progress," he told her.

The wooden stairs had no banister and were wide, splitting once and disappearing to a second floor. Corbin let go of her hand, and she rubbed them together, still feeling his warmth. He started up the stairs while she watched. When he didn't turn around, but continued ascending, Joanie followed. Her feet were damp against each smooth stair. If she looked behind her, she was sure she would see her own footprints left on the well-worn stairs.

He moved several stairs ahead of her, giving her a view that almost killed her. Muscles constricted against his jeans. And his ass—firm and so masculine. She almost teetered off the staircase gawking and drooling. There wasn't anything to grab on to, unless she finished the staircase on all fours.

Damn. That would look good.

Maybe she should just crawl after him.

When they reached the second floor, she stared at the large, open area that formed a square. There was no hallway, just this upstairs foyer with closed doors holding mysteries behind them.

Her original fear that he didn't live here alone resurfaced. "How many bedrooms does this place have?"

"Right now there are four. We converted a room into a den and another into a library a few years ago or there would be six." He opened one of the doors, which pushed in silently. It was thick and solid like everything appeared to be in Corbin's world.

She glanced at the other closed doors before following him into the room where he'd disappeared. Standing just inside the doorway, she hesitated, her jaw dropping at the view.

And it wasn't the breathtaking king-sized bed that sprawled over a room so huge it dwarfed its size that distracted her. She barely focused on the long, crystal-clear windows that stretched from floor to ceiling, offering a picturesque view of the snowcapped mountains outside.

Corbin had already stripped out of his shirt, and long hair fell down ripped muscles. He turned, his fingers already on the top button of his jeans, and unzipped them while her mouth hung open.

She closed it quickly enough that her teeth clattered.

"I told you that I would show you what I did when I let my hair down and I'm a man of my word." He never hesitated. Muscles bulged and flexed throughout his body when he slid out of his jeans and tossed them to his bed with his shirt.

"What...what are you doing?" she asked.

"Taking a shower." His grin showed off perfectly white teeth that glowed against his light brown skin. "And you must shower with me. I don't want to be away from you, not even for the time it takes to shower."

He continued moving closer, never touching her, but not stopping until their bodies were inches apart. She swore electricity sparked between them, raising the tiny hairs on her flesh.

"We can't shower together," she protested, while a mental image of water streaming over all that muscle had her almost hyperventilating.

"Actually, we can." Once again he took her hand, which she was sure had turned cold and clammy.

His grip was firm and determined, and so hot that the puddle of need between her legs gushed into a sweltering pool of carnal lust. She followed him, wrapping her fingers around his large palm and holding on while her legs teetered.

Corbin pushed open a door with a full-length mirror on it and they entered a bathroom almost as large as her kitchen back home. She gawked at the long marble covered counter, the matching sinks with fixtures that would cost her a month's salary.

"See. Look," he said, releasing her and sliding back glass doors to reveal a sunken tub, long and wide enough for a damned orgy.

He gestured at the shower heads, two of them, perfectly designed for lovers. She shook her head, not sure if the direction her thoughts headed frightened or excited her.

"That's not what I meant," she mumbled, although getting naked with Corbin, enjoying luxuries she'd never dreamed of, indulging in the wickedness of showering with a stranger—a gorgeous fucking stranger—sounded like an adventure she'd be a fool to pass up.

"You must." He had the largest feet she'd ever seen. And the black hairs that perfectly covered what had to be size fourteens made them look exotic.

She was out of her damned mind. When had feet ever turned her on?

"I can't remember when I last showered with anyone."

Joanie looked up to see a smile that was priceless. Sharing this private bit of information with him apparently pleased him greatly. He stepped back and stripped out of his boxers, doing it like they'd undressed in front of each other daily.

"Oh my God," she mumbled, her cheeks burning with embarrassment instantly.

Either he didn't hear her or didn't mind her gasp of praise over his nudity. And that's exactly what she'd just done. Perfection barely described the man moving with ease and confidence as he stepped into the large bath and turned on the water.

She stared, unable to move, when muscles rippled in his back, over his hard ass and down his legs. He bent over, letting the water run over his fingers. She took advantage of the moment and stared between his legs at his full, dark balls and his cock that wasn't hard but nonetheless hung low and ready, shifting slightly under her gaze.

"I like hot showers. But we can adjust each nozzle to our tastes. Just leave your clothes there. We have plenty of towels under the sink." His black hair streamed over his shoulder, exposing more roped muscle in his back.

She shook her head. People claimed cruises outdid any other kind of vacation. No one would ever believe her if she told them this is what she experienced while gone.

Joanie could run. He stood naked and wet in his shower and she'd have a good head start. She had his keys. She could leave this incredible home, this sexy, virile god and this erotic adventure and never look back.

But damn.

Nothing like this would ever happen to her again. She bit her lip hard enough that she tasted blood, closed her eyes and quickly stripped out of her clothes.

Joanie felt like a child, counting to three and then jumping with her eyes squeezed tightly closed into a pool of water that could be cold or sizzling hot. Corbin had closed all but one of the sliding glass shower doors and already had his head under the water. She took her time folding her clothes neatly and placing them on the counter. There were mirrors everywhere, making it impossible not to catch a glimpse of her naked body before turning for the shower.

She stared at her pale skin, long hours behind a computer making it impossible to get any sun. And although Tommy had made it clear how damaging he believed tanning beds to be, Joanie had noticed immediately how bronze Melanie was. But not Joanie. She stood white as a ghost with her strands of blonde-and-brown hair making her look like someone who couldn't even pull off dying their hair right. Quickly she combed it with her fingers, pulling some of it around so that it fell slightly past her shoulders.

Which was ridiculous. Maybe she should apply a bit of makeup too before climbing into the shower with Corbin?

"Are you coming?" Corbin asked.

Joanie jumped. One look at shower water streaming over his muscular body and she sure might be.

"Yeah," she mumbled, deciding it was now or never.

Quickly, she hurried into the large, sunken bathtub, stepping down and then sliding, almost falling on her ass.

Corbin grabbed her, saving her from the humiliation of crashing naked at his feet but nonetheless embarrassing the hell out of her as he now stood naked and wet, holding her firmly.

"Are you okay?" he asked gently, his voice a deadly purr that shattered her reserve completely.

"No," she pouted, shivering more from an explosion of nerves than from being cold and partially wet. "I'm making a fool out of myself." No way would she look up to see him grinning at her.

"You're too beautiful to be a fool."

She almost slipped again.

"Please," she said when his hands moved to her waist. She'd never get her balance if he kept touching her like this.

"I don't mind a bit."

This time she did look up at him. His coal-black hair draped around the strong contours of his face. Droplets of water held his thick lashes together as his gaze traveled down her body. Certain that the interest she saw in his eyes would be gone when he returned his attention to her face, she turned, moving carefully over to her shower nozzle.

"We'll have to share the soap. I didn't think about that." Corbin stood next to her, the heat from his shower steaming the air between them.

Or maybe it was the lust she fought to deny seeping from her pores.

Joanie fumbled with the handle, adjusting the temperature of her own water and then pulling the knob to start the shower. Perfectly hot water pelted her skin. And she had to admit, it felt real damned good. After she'd submerged her face in the wonderful spray, her insides started to relax.

"Here you go," he said.

She had to brush water out of her eyes to look at him. Corbin had already put the soap in the tray on the shower wall and had begun scrubbing shampoo into his hair. His eyes were closed, his head tilted back and his arms raised. He began humming and she reached for the soap, taking her time so she could enjoy the wonderful view of suds streaming down his muscular frame.

Nothing about Corbin was small. From the length of his long fingers as he massaged his scalp to his thick, perfectly arched neck to his broad, muscular shoulders. Black curls stuck to a beautifully sculptured chest. And she truly understood the meaning of six-pack while she focused on his hard abdomen. When her gaze fell further and she stared at his cock, her mouth went dry and then she drooled. The soap almost slid from her fingers. She grabbed it and just about shot it out of her hands. Swallowing

the lump in her throat, she gulped in some of the hot water but couldn't pull her attention from his long, thick penis. If that was what they were supposed to look like, she'd been poorly deprived and Tommy had to be seriously deformed.

She doubted Corbin was hard. But his cock stuck out, hanging down but not limp. It had to be almost as thick as her wrist, and long—really, really long. A black mass of curls covered his body at its base. His dick looked dangerous, deadly, and her insides smoldered with need so intense she almost hyperventilated. He shifted under the water, rinsing his hair, and she turned to her own task, deciding it would look bad if she hadn't even started bathing by the time he was done.

She stared at the white bar in her hand, watching the water carry several black hairs off it. It caught her as amusing that as many times as she'd grumbled when Tommy didn't rinse the soap off after using it, watching the curly black hairs glide off it now almost appealed to her.

Additional proof that she'd truly lost her mind.

Where was that sex charm right now? How far away from them did it have to be before it would no longer affect them?

Because that had to be it. She stood in a shower with a god and adored the hairs that he'd left clinging to the soap.

Definite bona fide insanity.

Turning so the shower ran over her back, she took to her task. Bottles of shampoo and conditioner stood on a small shelf at the edge of the tub and she picked up the shampoo, placing the soap down. It was a common brand, not heavily scented, that could be used by either a man or a woman. She'd be practical about this. After all, a person needed to shower and she would be clean while staying as a guest in his home.

Joanie poured shampoo into her hand and then lathered it into her hair, closing her eyes and forcing herself to believe the most gorgeous man she'd ever laid eyes on didn't stand naked right next to her.

"Would you mind if I did that?" His voice was so close.

She opened her eyes, then rinsed her hands quickly so she could wipe the suds off her face.

"I'm done, and I think you'd really enjoy it." He didn't wait for her to answer but instead turned her around so the water streamed down her front. "Lean your head back."

Joanie did as he instructed, closing her eyes and arching her neck while his fingers rubbed her scalp. Nothing had ever felt better in her life.

His fingers worked magic and she sighed happily, deciding insanity must also mean complete and perfect bliss. She hardly relaxed though. Wherever he touched her, her skin grew oversensitive, tingling with excitement. She moaned, not meaning to, but it just slipped out.

Corbin's chuckle vibrated through her senses. "I told you it would feel good," he whispered next to her ear.

God. He was so damned close to her. And naked. Hot water soaked her front but her backside overheated just knowing his cock might brush against her at any moment. Every inch of her grew tight waiting for it to happen. All of her attention diverted to that one location, anticipating the moment when she would feel the tip of his cock tap against her spine.

"Okay. Turn around and rinse," he instructed, moving her body for her at the same time.

His long fingers glided over her shoulders until he had her under the water just the way he wanted her. And then he continued massaging, coaxing the soap out of her hair.

"Conditioner?"

"Hmm...please." She blinked, realizing the sated trance he'd placed her under. "I mean, I can do it."

"You aren't enjoying this?"

She blinked water out of her eyes and stared up at him. His focused expression stole her breath. He looked so solemn, as if cleaning her meant so much to him. Her heart swelled painfully.

Corbin ran his fingers down her arm, brushing them against her side and then spreading his hand over her back. She sucked in her breath, his touch scorching her. He held her in place and leaned over, reaching to her other side for the conditioner. His face stopped at her breasts.

"Joanie," he said, possibly asking permission, but he never finished what he might have said.

He took the bottle but didn't move his head. She stared down at him, his hand pressing into her back, holding her in place. If she moved at all, her breasts would touch him. Slowly he turned his face to her breast. She licked her lips, waiting, anticipation swelling inside her.

He opened his mouth and her nipple hardened, eagerly reaching for him, betraying her desire to keep her craving for him hidden. Water trickled over her breast just as his teeth latched on, scraping over the sensitive flesh.

"Oh God," she hissed, swearing her toes would curl toward the ceiling while she scraped her nails over his shoulders.

He tugged slightly and a rush of tingles surged through her breast and then leapt over her body. Joanie held on for dear life.

Corbin straightened. She fought the dire need to press down on his shoulders. No way could she think like this, with him teasing her and then leaving her body pulsing, craving so much more.

He met her gaze and she closed her gaping mouth. There was no way she could hide the fire he'd ignited inside her. All she could do was stare at him, take in the intense look he gave her. And wait for his next move.

Slowly he turned his attention to the conditioner, pouring some of the liquid into his palm and then reaching past her again to put the bottle on the shelf. This time he leaned closer, his chest hair brushing over her breasts. She shivered. He'd turned every inch of her into an overexposed, pulsing nerve ending.

Again he manipulated his fingers against her scalp, working up a lather. She closed her eyes and relaxed her head, allowing him to turn her head in whatever direction he chose.

"Feel good?" he whispered.

"Incredible," she answered honestly. She was too far gone to even fathom anything other than the truth.

"Good." He didn't elaborate.

And she kept her eyes closed, focusing only on his fingertips as they pressed into her scalp, until she swore she'd melt into a puddle at his feet. She lazily opened her eyes when he quit, and then focused quickly as he grabbed the soap.

"Oh man," she mumbled, her body already quivering with excited anticipation of him touching her everywhere.

He started rolling the bar in his large hands, creating a smooth lather that spilled over his fingers.

"Let me," he whispered.

All thoughts of keeping this shower platonic flowed down the drain with the suds from her body. Let him? She might possibly beg him.

Corbin rolled the soap in his hands. Lather flowed over his knuckles, down his arms and the water washed it away. Joanie held her breath, almost moved to tears over the beauty of his body.

She jumped when he touched her.

Corbin smiled. "Relax. If you want me to stop, just let me know."

"Okay," she mumbled, praying he wouldn't try to strike up a conversation.

Too many emotions tore through her. Embarrassment from standing naked in a shower with a stranger while he bathed her and excitement because never had such a gorgeous man given her so much attention.

He ran the soap over her arms, lifting each one and tenderly stroking her flesh. She'd be cleaner than she'd ever been in her life at this rate.

"Step out of the water," he instructed, his voice sounding huskier than it had a moment before.

She licked her lips. No matter the steam rising between them or the two shower heads spraying hot water, her mouth still seemed too dry to speak.

His hand slipped down her arm until he gripped her fingers and guided her so that they stood where the water wouldn't hit them. Corbin's expression remained relaxed but intense. He didn't focus on her face, but openly admired her body, keeping their fingers interlocked but holding her at arm's length.

"Now just stand there," he said, more like whispered, and again began lathering the soap.

Joanie locked her knees, bracing herself against the slippery shower floor while staring at the top of Corbin's head. He went down on his knees, reaching up to lather her shoulders and then moving down. When he cupped her breasts, he hissed through his teeth, exhaling loudly while droplets of water gathered on his thick eyelashes.

"Corbin," she uttered, barely able to find her voice.

But he didn't look up at her. His fingers caressed and stroked her breasts until they swelled with need that trembled inside her all the way to her toes. His thumbs brushed over her nipples and then he moved lower, stretching his grip around her ribcage. It was as if he learned every inch of her for some personal reason that he had no intention of sharing with her. She watched in awe while he moved the soap over her tummy, creating enough suds on her body to keep her clean for a week.

"Do you work out?" he asked, stroking her belly and then rubbing his fingers against her hips.

"You're kidding, right?" She looked down at the small bulge in her gut that she'd never been able to get to go away.

He smiled for the first time and looked up at her. His dark eyes glowed like emeralds and his black hair pressed over his head and draped down his muscular back. Now *he* looked like he kept in shape. Damn good shape.

"You're perfect, Joanie. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise."

She didn't need anyone else's opinion. She had eyes. But such praise didn't come around too often. The sincere expression on his face looked too good to wipe away with a snide comment.

"Thank you." But then she gulped when he cupped her pussy.

Tingles spread over her body and she grabbed his shoulders, needing to hold on so that she wouldn't topple over and make a fool out of herself again.

"Have you ever shaved here?"

"What?" Her ears rang while blood pumped inside her too fast for her to catch her breath.

His hand didn't move but continued cupping her while pressure built and spread.

"Your pubic hairs. Have you ever shaved them?"

"Oh." Joanie managed to look down between them, still gripping his shoulders. She fought the urge to caress the warm, moist flesh under her fingers. "No. I never have."

"Let me shave you." He stood, turning so roped muscle stretched under dark skin.

She stood there, stupefied, for some reason hearing Tommy's words when he commented on how only loose women would shave down there. To hell with Tommy. This sure as hell beat getting a manicure and pedicure at the most expensive of salons. The best-looking man she'd ever laid eyes on just offered to groom her in the most intimate area of her body. All the attention, every bit of him focused on her sensitive flesh.

"Okay." She sucked in her breath, fighting to get her heart to return to a normal beat.

"Sit here, on the edge of the shower," he told her, and pointed with the razor that he'd just picked up.

Joanie obliged and again he knelt before her, spreading her legs and resting one arm on her thigh while he ran a finger over her pussy lips. She spasmed and tried bringing her legs together, but he had a firmer grip on her than she realized.

He used meticulous care while running the razor over her, slowly removing hair that coiled over the blades. With each stroke he rinsed the razor, cupped water in his hand and then let it dribble over her. Light brown hair washed over the white tub, mixing with the sudsy water and trailing in a line to the drain.

Her pussy throbbed and swelled. She was so wet that they didn't need shower water, and cream coated her flesh, replacing any need for soap. Never in her life had she felt so exposed. A cool sensation tingled over her flesh while heat pulsed with more fury inside her than she feared she could handle.

"Okay. Stand up." Corbin grinned as if he'd just finished some masterpiece. "Let's rinse you off."

Water pounded over her oversensitive flesh and Corbin again stroked her body while helping the process. Her heart raced. What would happen next?

Corbin reached for the faucets, turning off the water and then opening the shower door. He handed her a towel and then began drying himself off.

"What do you say we grill some tuna steaks for supper?"

He wanted to eat? Joanie's towel did a number on her skin when she wiped between her legs. The last thing she wanted right now was food.

Chapter Eight

Corbin's damp hair didn't cool him down a damned bit. Standing outside as evening slowly settled around him and the chill in the air gave indication that they would have a cold night should have had him searching out a heavier sweater or coat. Instead he stood before the grill in a t-shirt and jeans and shoes without socks. It was the best he was able to pull off after showering with Joanie. Hell, for all he knew his clothes clashed and were inside-out. The only thing on his mind was the sweet smell of her freshly shaved pussy and what it would take to get inside her.

If he didn't fuck her tonight, he would go mad.

Normally he didn't move this fast. Hell, showering with a lady never happened before having sex with her. And he'd never shaved a woman before. But then already he accepted this week would be anything but normal.

Joanie's faith in that sex charm set the boundaries for their definition of normalcy.

Checking the grill, Corbin figured it was good to go and headed back into the kitchen. He grabbed an armful of firewood to get the house warmed up. If their time together so far was any indication of how the night would go, they wouldn't need much firewood to stay warm.

"Do you think this is enough?" Joanie's damp hair turned in sexy little curls past her shoulders and her skin was still pink from the hot shower. She had put her clothes from earlier back on, although she'd ditched the bra.

The view was breathtaking.

He tore his gaze from her hard nipples poking through her untucked shirt and made a show of looking at the vegetables she'd chopped.

"Perfect." He focused on the back of her neck, visible where her hair parted. The urge to lower his head, taste her right there, created a raw, primitive need inside him that he didn't often feel. He blinked a few times, sucking in his breath through his teeth. "Now we need foil to wrap them in and I'll grill them with the steaks," he managed to say, although his voice sounded as tight as his groin felt.

Joanie looked up at him, searching his face briefly before returning her attention to the vegetables. "Where is your foil?"

She stood in front of the drawers where his mother kept kitchen supplies over the years. Corbin never saw a reason to change the arrangement of the kitchen when he started coming back here.

"Right in front of you," he told her, but then pushed against her when she turned, searching, and then tried to step to the side. Sometimes there were advantages to being built like a giant. She couldn't get out of his way.

Joanie attempted turning and then ended up twisting in his arms. Her fingers spread across his chest, wrinkling the material of his shirt against her palms. "This is so crazy," she murmured, speaking to his chest.

"What is?" Her part was crooked. He wondered if she usually gave such little thought to how her hair lay. The way it fell naturally around her oval-shaped face was incredibly sexy.

"This. You and me." She scraped her index finger across his nipple.

The need simmering inside him exploded like electrical charges that surged across his skin.

He leaned into her, grabbing her ass and squeezing while rubbing his hard, throbbing cock against her warm body. Then letting go of her ass, he breathed in the clean smell of her damp hair while opening the drawer behind her and feeling around until he found the long, thin box of foil. For a moment, he couldn't remember why they needed it.

"Why are you and I crazy?" He put the foil down behind her then ran his fingers over her hair, tangling the strands around his hand. Pulling her hair until she tilted her head, he fought the urge to devour her mouth.

"When's the last time you knew a woman for an hour and then showered and..." She bit her lower lip and pierced him with glowing green eyes. There wasn't a prettier shade than the flush that spread over her cheeks.

"And prepared her for me?" he asked, then brushed his thumb over the blush.

She shook her head in his hand as she sighed loudly. "Corbin, this is just all too strange. I feel grossly out of my league here. Can't we just focus on dinner?"

"I am focusing on dinner," he told her, then did what he wanted to do since she started talking.

Keeping her head tilted, he lowered his mouth to hers, tasting her warmth, feeling her desire when he pressed his tongue between her lips.

Part of him expected her to fight him, break the kiss off. Instead her hands crawled up his chest to his shoulders and she held on as she opened for him. Holding her head, not daring to move his hands when she had just expressed her fears with how odd their circumstances were, he barely managed not to lose himself in her delicious warm mouth.

Joanie was baffled by his behavior and he didn't blame her. Kissing her spoke the volumes that he couldn't relay with words. He wanted her—and soon. The way she opened to him, allowed him in without protest, encouraged him to deepen the kiss. As his tongue swirled around hers, slowly she began kissing him back. Her fingers dug into his shoulders and she moved her tongue around his.

Corbin would bet good money that she seldom kissed a man like this. She didn't lack skills and her hesitation didn't come from lack of desire. The only thing missing in

her life was also grossly absent in his. Passion. She showed him how much she had to give with her movements, the sweet taste of her and her eagerness to keep kissing him.

When she went up on her tiptoes and locked her fingers behind his neck, he dragged his fingers through her hair, finally daring to move them. The dampness cooled his hands but did little to stop the fire rushing through his veins. He pressed her hair against her back and ran his hands down the slender curve of her spine. Then, squeezing her ass, he crushed her against him, impaling her mouth as he tasted all she offered. Maybe a moment before she had expressed how insane she viewed all this, but possibly a bit of insanity would be good for their souls.

She made a mewing sound, moving her head slightly and then panting. He didn't doubt she felt his hard cock which throbbed between them, unwilling to behave and remain placid. As she struggled for air, he didn't bother trying to catch his breath but instead nipped and licked his way down her neck. She let her head fall back and he held her, keeping her against him while he feasted on her warm flesh.

"God, Corbin," she cried and moved her hands into his hair.

What he wouldn't do to have her exploring every inch of him.

"I want you," he told her. He would give that damned sex charm credit for allowing them to speak openly with each other.

Her sigh brought him pause though. He straightened and his vision blurred for a moment as he stared at her flushed expression. Her lashes fluttered over her eyes before she focused on him.

"I think if I knew this were real, it would be easier." Her laughter was short and she diverted her gaze, working to straighten her body and put distance between them.

Which proved damned hard since he had her pinned between his body and the counter. And he really didn't feel like backing off.

"What part of this doesn't feel real to you?" He kept his cock pressed against her body, making his point when it pulsed between them. So much blood engorged his shaft that any quick movements would be difficult.

"Good grief, Corbin. All of it." This time her laughter was more sincere, but the way she patted his shoulders before lowering her arms wasn't reassuring. When he wouldn't move, she slid to the side. He wouldn't keep her anywhere she didn't want to be but hated letting her go. She edged her way around him and crossed her arms over her chest, covering her hard nipples. "None of this would be happening if it weren't for that sex charm."

"Do you really believe that thing is magic?" No matter that he had instigated all of this and taken advantage of that stupid necklace. Right now he had half a mind to find it and hurl it toward the mountains.

"I believe that if it weren't for that charm, you wouldn't have said a word to me when I was in your restaurant and that I wouldn't be here now." She turned her back to him and stared out his back door.

The silence grew between them. She had a point. He spoke to her earlier today because his grandmother had thrown a fit about the necklace she wore. Glancing down, searching for the right way to counter her argument, he focused on her purse sitting on his kitchen table. She had left it there when they unloaded groceries and it was open, its strap partially hanging off the edge of the table. He could see a wallet and a few papers—and a thin silver chain tangled over the top of what looked like a cell phone.

Joanie didn't turn around but instead probably stewed over how far she should let things go with him. They had a week, which wasn't enough time to develop a relationship, although they'd gotten off to a hell of a start. The last thing he wanted to do during the time he spent with her was destroy her ego. With one quick movement, careful not to make a sound, he reached over and grabbed the tiny chain and lifted the necklace out of her purse.

Walking toward her, he placed it on top of his refrigerator, out of view, and then rested his hands on top of her shoulders. She didn't jump but instead turned her head partially, letting out a small sigh as she glanced at his fingers.

"Even without that necklace, I would have shown up while you were there. No one else but Grandmother and my niece were there at the time. The odds are in our favor that we would have had a conversation."

"But I wouldn't be here."

"If you missed your tour bus, I sure as hell wouldn't have left you stranded."

"Would you have showered with me? Shaved me?"

An image burned into his brain of her legs spread, suds streaming down her smooth pussy as he ran his razor over her and removed her hair. "Neither one of us can predict how things might have been. We know how they are. And you want me as badly as I want you."

She spun around, her eyes glowing with emotion. "Because of that sex charm," she told him.

"You're wearing it?" he asked.

"No." She looked past him, raising her hand and then pointing. "I think it's still in my purse."

"If it bothers you so much, get rid of it. But when I take you into town tomorrow to get another necklace, you won't buy the same one."

Joanie stared at him a moment. He crossed his arms, allowing her time to make her own decision without further manipulating her thoughts. Finally she let out a sigh, tucking a loose strand behind her ear, and moved toward the table. When he didn't move, she ended up putting her hand on his arm and edging around him to her purse.

"It's not in here." She looked down at the contents of her purse.

Corbin stood behind her, waiting so that she would have ample time to search before making his point. She dumped the contents of her purse on the table, then ran her fingers over everything until she was satisfied that there was no necklace. She looked puzzled when she faced him and then slowly stuffed her hands in each of her jean's pockets.

"I don't know where it is," she finally confessed.

"And I still want to fuck you." He reached for her, getting his hands under her arms before she could stop him and then lifted her off the ground so that they stared at each other eye-to-eye. Turning and pinning her against the wall, he pressed his body against hers, drowning in the obvious lust that made her blush and nibble her lip. "Joanie, you are hot as fucking hell. That was my very first impression of you. It has nothing to do with some simple necklace that a couple of old ladies put stock in."

"You have me pinned against a wall, we just showered together and we've known each other less than a day. Doesn't any of that strike you as odd?"

"With you, no." And because she was being stubborn, refusing to accept that the two of them might be all over each other because they were attracted to each other, he kissed her again.

Devouring her mouth, he leaned in closer, holding her off the floor and against the wall with his body. When she wrapped her arms and legs around him, tilting her head and opening her mouth further to him, he took a step backward and cupped her ass.

"Corbin," she cried out, breaking the kiss and resting her head on his shoulder. "We'll starve to death if we keep attacking each other like this."

"Hell of a way to go." He buried his face in her hair and nibbled at her neck. All the meal he wanted was right here in his arms.

"What's that?" Every inch of her stiffened. "Corbin, put me down."

She struggled until he allowed her to slide down his body. When she stepped away, her tousled hair and hard nipples created the perfect image of a woman well on the way to a mind-blowing orgasm. But her flushed expression hardened and turned angry in the time it took her to exhale.

He understood when she reached above the refrigerator and pulled her necklace down. Holding it dangling between them, she glared at him.

"You put this up here," she hissed.

There wasn't any reason to deny it—it was just the two of them here.

"Yup."

"Why?"

"I want you to quit thinking about it."

She stared at him a moment, fury growing in her expression until finally she fisted and unfisted her hands. "I think all of this is a big mistake."

Joanie stormed past him, then marched through the house toward the front door. She still had his keys and he'd be damned if she would leave him. He wasn't too sure where she thought she was going. With a few quick strides, he reached her as she grabbed the front doorknob.

"Where are you going?"

She turned on him, spinning around so that the turquoise rock on the small silver chain swung back and forth like a hypnotic tool. "Am I a prisoner now?"

"You know you aren't. But you have my keys. I have a right to know where you're going."

She slapped his keys into his hand and then flipped her hair over her shoulder and yanked open his front door. "If you didn't believe in this thing, you wouldn't have tried to hide it from me. And I'll be damned if I let myself get hurt while I'm supposed to be having the time of my life."

She made it onto the front porch before he stopped her again, this time by wrapping his arms around her waist and simply holding her backside against him.

"Joanie," he said calmly, lowering his head and nestling his mouth against her nape. "All I wanted to show you was that the necklace had no bearing on any of our actions. You need to see that you are beautiful and sexy. Any man would kill for a week alone with you. Trust me. There don't have to be any expectations. It's one week. After that, we go our own ways with memories of having the best time of our lives."

She was still in his arms, not moving or saying anything. More than likely she digested his words and drew her conclusion of him from their implication. He implied they should have a fling and then part ways without a care in the world. The thought didn't sit well with him, and the longer he kept her wrapped up against him, the more his stomach turned at the thought of this week ending. She felt too damned good there.

"So what happens in Alaska stays in Alaska. Is that what you're saying?"

Damn. She made it sound even worse. The only part of that statement that appealed to him was the part about staying in Alaska. Although her life wasn't here.

"Sure." His tone sounded flat even to him.

"Let me go," she whispered, although the anger in her voice was gone. She sounded more...resigned.

He let her go reluctantly, ready to pounce on her again if she attempted to leave the porch. Instead she walked the other way, down the length of the wide old porch to the railing. Then lifting her arm, she hurled the necklace with all her strength.

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

"I feel cold." She didn't turn around but instead wrapped her arms around her waist.

"It gets that way around here at night." He wasted no time moving in on her and then swept her into his arms as she cried out in surprise. "Not to mention you're barefoot and have damp hair. But now that we have that small matter out of the way, let's see what we can do to warm you up."

Corbin carried her back into the house. His gut did a flip-flop when he carried her into the living room, crossing the threshold as a groom would do with his bride. But they just set the parameters for their week. There would be no commitment, nothing

that would involve their emotions. A physical, sexual week of playing and fucking. Nothing would come of it and there would be no regrets afterward.

Already he doubted either of them would be able to pull it off.

If his premonition was right, that meant one thing. At the end of the week, at least one of them would be hurt when they returned to their own lives. Lives that were thousands of miles apart from each other.

He shoved the unpleasant thoughts out of his head, not wanting her to pick up on how somber he suddenly felt. Instead, carrying her back to the kitchen, he turned her in his arms and then allowed her to slide down his front. When she met his gaze, she slowly licked her lips, surprising him by looking almost shy.

It wasn't hard to guess her thoughts. "Would you like to see how much you still turn me on?"

Her eyes widened and she shot a quick glance down between them before returning her attention to his face. "No. I mean, I believe you."

"Let's get those steaks and vegetables going on the grill. And although you believe me, I might still show you."

She pushed herself away from him and he kept his grin in check when she fumbled with the foil and wrapped the vegetables. Now that they had the sex charm out of the way, he could take his time and seduce her in a way that more suited him. Making himself at home in the kitchen he grew up in, a warm sensation rushed over him as they worked side by side, preparing the food. They would enjoy a nice dinner together, get to know each other better and possibly include some wine with their meal. Taking his time, learning her mind as well as her body, appealed to him so much that he caught himself whistling an old tune as he carried the meat out to the back porch.

"Do you notice the difference already?" Joanie wrapped her arms around her waist, hugging herself as she squinted at the view beyond the porch.

Corbin hung the tongs on the side of the electric grill and studied her for a moment. "What? That suddenly neither of us feels we have to act a certain way?"

She looked at him, shocked. "Do you think that is what it was?"

"Do you believe in magic?"

"Not really." A smile appeared on her lips and she puckered her mouth, letting her gaze drop down his body. "I've been married for ten years, worked hard to support my husband and help him get his firm off the ground. There wasn't much time for romance or seduction. All of this is new territory for me."

"You're handling it quite well."

She didn't blush but her smile showed she enjoyed his praise. He liked that look on her. So much intelligence gleamed in her pretty green eyes. Her hair was almost dry and she didn't wear any makeup. The t-shirt she wore hung to her hips and her jeans fit snug against her slender legs. Her toes were painted the same color as her fingernails, a dark plum shade—seductive, yet also a shade appropriate for a successful

businesswoman. Joanie was a perfect package of intelligence and seductress. He would love to thank the lame ass that let her go and gave Corbin the chance to be with her.

"I'm not handling anything well," she said, laughing easily and then coming closer to him so she could inspect their food. "I freaked out in front of your family, got accused of being a drunk or drug user by folks in your town. God only knows what your friend thought of me when he brought us back to your truck. And then I get mad at you for coming on to me after you offer me a place to stay when I miss my bus. I just wish we could start over."

"How would you like us to start?"

She thought about it for a minute then looked up at him, her grin contagious and her expression sincere. "Dinner and intelligent conversation sounds good to me."

"You've got it." He raised his hand to her face and for a moment she looked like she would jump out of his reach. She didn't though, and he cupped her cheek, relaxing his hand over her smooth, warm skin. "It's not starting over though. We're moving forward. There is nothing that has happened between us already that I regret. And I believe you feel the same way."

When she didn't answer yet didn't move away, he knew she agreed. Stroking her face for a moment, Corbin's insides hardened again as desire exploded inside him. He couldn't wait to sit down and learn more about her. And after they explored each other's minds, he planned on exploring every inch of her body.

Chapter Nine

Joanie doubted she'd ever tasted better tuna steak and vegetables in her entire life. Sipping on her second glass of wine, she leaned back in her chair and took in her surroundings.

"So you grew up here?" The china cabinet against the wall was stuffed full of a variety of old dishes. And the long dining room table they sat at made it easy to picture a large family chatting easily at the end of a day. "There's a warmth about this place, like there were many happy times here."

"There were." He looked up from his food briefly and glanced around the room, as if calling forth the memories. "My brother and sister and I lived here with my grandparents. We had plenty of good times and some bad, just like any family."

He didn't offer any information on his parents and she decided not to push the subject. "Who lives here now?" It would be nice to know if their privacy would be invaded any time soon.

"No one. After Granddad passed on, Grandmother moved in above the restaurant. I come back here when I get time. Unfortunately it's not as often as I like."

Relief rushed over her as she stared at his thick black hair, shinier than it might normally be since it was still damp. It tumbled over his shoulders, disappearing behind his back. Even sitting across the table, taking his time finishing off the thick tuna steak before him, Corbin looked so powerful and all-knowing. He was like a warrior, a king in his court, all that thick hair and incredible muscle, not to mention his size, making him so much more than any other man could possibly compete with.

She looked down at her plate before he caught her staring. "I just wondered," she said, her voice sounding too breathy. Sipping at her wine, she cleared her throat. "This place feels like there's been a lot of happy times here."

"Yeah, there were." He pulled a chunk of meat off his fork with his teeth and stared at her with a contemplative gaze. "What about you? Where did you grow up?"

"In Seattle. That's where I'm from. It was just me and my sister and my parents."

"Are you older or younger?"

"Oldest." Although sometimes it felt the other way around. "Jenny is wonderful, and has a great husband."

He straightened when she said the word husband. Joanie glanced down at her hand, noting the indention where her wedding ring had been. Odd that it didn't bother her not wearing it. She wasn't dwelling on Tommy at all. Would ten years of marriage simply vanish out of her mind with no regrets?

She doubted it would be that easy. Corbin offered a distraction to her life. She straightened as well, determined he would see that she was comfortable with the moment and the topic. This week would be her escape, a vacation to remember and fill her head with awesome memories that would help carry her into her future.

And she wouldn't focus on what that future might be at the moment.

"What did she think of your husband?"

"She didn't like him."

"Tell me about him."

"You want to know about my husband?" She frowned, confused that Corbin broached the subject.

"Yes." His dark green eyes didn't leave her face. There was no indication that he found the subject disgusting or amusing.

She hated that she couldn't figure out his intention for talking about this.

"Okay," she said slowly. "Tommy is a lawyer in Seattle. He has his own practice that I helped him get started after he got out of law school. He is fairly successful, aggressive and anal-retentive to a fault."

"Do you love him?"

She leaned back in her chair, hitting the wooden seat behind her with a thud strong enough to knock the wind out of her lungs. Sucking in a fresh breath, she gave the question some thought.

"I thought I did." This wasn't a subject she was ready to discuss, but the way Corbin stared at her, intent on hearing every word, she doubted they could change subjects until she satisfied his curiosity. "We grew apart somehow. I'm so busy with my work running the office and Tommy was off in his own little world. It got to where I didn't even know what cases he handled unless they showed up on a docket when we were scheduled to be down at the courthouse at the same time. And sitting here just now, when you asked about him, it dawned on me that I hadn't given him any thought at all today."

Again she stared down at her ring finger, this time stroking the soft skin that once was covered with a wedding band. "Maybe I'm just lousy at love," she added softly, not looking for his sympathy but accepting what quite possibly was the truth.

"Did you ignore him when he sought out your attention?"

She looked up quickly. "God, no." It was impossible not to laugh. "Tommy didn't seek me out. You have no idea how long it's been since I've had..."

Joanie stopped, hating the heat that attacked her cheeks. She grabbed her plate and slid her chair back. This conversation would move into dangerous water quickly and she wasn't sure she was ready for that. Her stomach was full and her defenses down. Although building up enough defenses to take on Corbin might be close to impossible. His calm tone didn't match his dominating presence. The mixture would make him a deadly aggressor.

"Since you've had sex?" He was right behind her with his plate when they headed into the kitchen.

"When did you last have sex?" Joanie rinsed her plate and then turned to take his. Deciding he didn't need the satisfaction of knowing he was right to boost that ego of his, she changed the subject. "I would imagine a man like you would have many girlfriends."

"A man like me." He handed her his plate but then didn't let go. Green eyes always seemed a boring color, but on Corbin, the shade was the most magnificent color she'd ever seen. He tilted his head slightly. "I don't remember the exact date, and what do you mean a man like me?"

She focused on his plate, relieved when it didn't shake in her hand. It wasn't his size that unnerved her. He didn't intimidate her in spite of being head and shoulders taller. But it was his presence. The way he watched her, dug deep into her mind just with his intense gaze put her on the verge of trembling from head to toe with more emotions than she wished to acknowledge.

Joanie rinsed his plate, knowing he waited for an answer. "You're gorgeous," she finally blurted out, then turned off the water and dared turn and stare him in the eye. "And you're definitely not shy."

When he grinned, his white teeth almost glowed against his dark skin. "Never been accused of that. Nor have I ever been accused of having too much of a social life. Sorry to disappoint you but my world is full of depositions and courtrooms."

"Sounds like mine," she said quietly, unable to pull her attention away from him. "Although you're the lawyer. I'm just the secretary."

"Then you know no lawyer makes it without a damned good legal secretary by his side."

She couldn't argue that point. In fact, moonlighting for so many years, keeping Tommy's office in order after spending all day behind her own desk, helped make her husband—soon to be ex-husband—the success he was today.

Corbin moved closer and when she stiffened, expecting and aching for his touch, he grinned and looked past her, reaching for dish soap, as if he knew what she wanted and decided she would wait for it.

She would be damned if he saw her craving him after getting outraged over the necklace. Quickly, she jumped in to help with dishes.

"There has to be compatibility no matter how good either one of them is." Keeping up with the conversation helped her focus on her task instead of the virile muscles bulging next to her. "But you're right, a law office works much better if it's organized. Do you have a good secretary?"

"The one I have right now is a gem." He handed her a rinsed dish and then reached for the next one to wash. "I've been through a handful of them, though."

"And it always takes awhile for a new legal secretary to get a feel for the office before making it her own." She remembered her frustration over the inadequate secretaries that filed in and out of Tommy's office. None of them were good enough or did the job as well as she did. "I hope the one you have now works out."

"If she doesn't, I know where to find a new one."

She looked up at him quickly, almost dropping the plate that she dried with a towel. There was amusement in his dark expression, but something else also. He liked the idea. What scared her even worse was that it was one hell of an appealing thought.

But ridiculous.

She shook her head, refusing to even entertain the notion of working in Alaska with Corbin. Her life was in Seattle. Not liking the way the thought sobered her, she focused on drying the dishes quickly so she could put physical distance between them.

"I already know we make a good team preparing supper and cleaning up afterward," Corbin said once the dishes were done. He winked at her then refilled their wineglasses. "Let's get fires going."

He handed her wineglass to her and then took her hand. His fingers were long and intertwined with hers. When he gripped her hand, a sensation that she was right where she belonged, secure and warm like being home after a long journey, attacked her while sparks shot up her arm.

Corbin led the way to the living room, stopping in the doorway and turning slightly. He glanced down at her, his eyes aglow with a heat that almost made her trip. She swore he must have felt something too, but her mouth was suddenly way too dry to ask him.

Not to mention it would sound utterly ridiculous. He was already home, in the house where he grew up. And she was with a stranger in a strange land, far away from anywhere that she would call home.

She didn't help start the fires but instead sat on the long, comfortable couch, sipping her wine while Corbin got the fire going in the huge hearth at the end of the room. He then disappeared for a few minutes, leaving her in the comfortable glow of the flames. She realized he went upstairs and guessed he lit a fire in his bedroom.

Was that the only room that he filled with warmth?

"Granddad used to have wood burning stoves in every bedroom upstairs." Corbin's baritone echoed as he trotted down the stairs noisily and entered the living room, no longer wearing his shirt.

Joanie stared at him, her heart suddenly pounding hard in her chest at the sight before her. A pressure swelled so quickly between her legs that she shifted on the couch, wondering if intelligent conversation was even a possibility with this sex god in front of her.

"They were so worn out, and so likely violated the fire code, that after he passed away, I convinced Grandmother to let me take them out. I haven't had time to replace

them yet." He moved closer and her gaze slid down his large, muscular frame. He wasn't wearing any shoes either. "I think you'll find that the fire down here and the one upstairs manage to keep the place fairly warm. But we have more quilts than we could possibly use at our disposal too."

"I'm sure I'll be fine." If he got much closer, she would be on fire.

"How about a movie?" He turned and instead of plopping down on the couch next to her as she expected him to, Corbin walked to the other side of the room where a large television was pushed up against the wall. "We don't have cable out here but there's a pretty good DVD selection. Why don't you pick out one that looks good to you?"

Corbin opened a cabinet next to the television, bending over and causing her to drool over buns of steel. A body like his should be illegal. It was most definitely a lethal weapon. He looked like the kind of man who would take out hardened criminals with his bare hands, not stand in a courtroom in a suit and put them behind bars.

It was a damned good thing that he didn't wait for her response. Leaving the cabinet open, he turned again, grinning at her then picking her half full wineglass up from the coffee table. She waited for him to disappear into the kitchen before standing on wobbly legs. There was no way in hell she would be able to focus on a movie with him anywhere near her.

And there was an incredible selection. Squatting in front of the movies, all shelved neatly, she stared at the titles. Her mind wouldn't focus on any of them though. Even without Corbin in the room, it was like he was right next to her. Obviously she hadn't thrown that damned sex charm far enough away.

"What sounds good to you?" Corbin's bare feet made a dull thudding sound as he moved across the living room.

He placed their glasses on the coffee table and then moved in behind her. Her senses were overly acute, every sound he made prickling her nerves. She didn't have to turn around or look up to know exactly what he was doing. Every tiny hair on her body seemed to lean toward him no matter where he moved around her, like he was a magnet and her body ached to crash against his.

"There's so many to choose from." She tried her damndest to focus on the selection and almost jumped when he put his hand on her shoulder.

Corbin knelt next to her, sliding his hand over her hair and the back of her neck then resting it there as he viewed the DVDs with her.

"We have all week to watch as many of them as you like," he said easily, then reached for one of them and pulled it out to show her. "How about a comedy? Ever seen this one?"

"I don't watch a lot of TV."

"Me either." He laughed, sounding so relaxed.

If only she could get her skin to quit tingling under his touch. And to think the man worried that she might get cold tonight. If she got any warmer, she would be stripping

out of her clothes in front of him. That thought about sent the blood in her veins to the boiling point.

Corbin held her close to him when he reached past her and slid the movie into the player on top of the television. When he stretched to grab the remote, hard muscle pressed against her side. She would either turn in to him or dart across the room. Fortunately she couldn't make a fool out of herself either way. Corbin kept a firm grip on her shoulder while turning on the TV and using the remote to start the movie.

"Come here and get comfortable with me." He practically picked her up off the floor.

And she swore her feet floated over the ground when he guided her to the couch and then sprawled out, keeping her tucked in next to him until he had her where he wanted her. Except this time his body touched every inch of her backside.

He expected her to watch a movie like this?

One arm was underneath her and his other arm relaxed over her waist. He stretched out against the back of the couch, and amazingly there was enough room for both of them. Her entire backside prickled and grew more and more oversensitive the longer they lay there, like a couple very comfortable with each other.

Or at least part of them seemed comfortable. Corbin's long, muscular body relaxed noticeably. His long arm was heavy lying over her, but not to where he hurt her. The only pain she experienced was in fighting to keep her body relaxed when she boiled over with need and craved stretching and rubbing herself against him like a cat in heat.

Her muscles started cramping from not moving and she ached to shift and adjust herself so she could relax. Possibly somewhere in another room where she wouldn't smell, or feel or see anything that had to do with Corbin Silver.

He chuckled and she jumped.

"Sorry," he said, lazily lifting one long finger and pointing at the screen. "This part is hilarious. You weren't asleep, were you?"

"No. I'm watching," she lied, and then decided that would be the best thing to do.

But try as she did to get into the movie, every time Corbin twitched, or adjusted his leg, or slightly moved his arm, or breathed, her attention shifted to the virile body wrapped around her. The pressure between her legs grew beyond distracting. Unable to help herself any longer, she shifted one leg over the other, using the material of her jeans to rub against her pussy. It didn't help.

"I'll be right back." She couldn't take it any longer.

But when she tried getting up, his arm that draped over her turned quickly to steel.

"Where are you going?" Apparently Corbin liked touching almost every inch of her without instigating any type of foreplay. He tightened his grip around her, making it impossible for her to move.

"To the bathroom." She said the first thing that came to mind.

"Oh." He released his grip. "Want me to pause the movie?"

"Sure." Not that she had a clue what was going on in it. "I'll be right back."

Her leg muscles were as sturdy as wet noodles and she almost fell off the couch, managing to fake an awesome save and move to her feet without making a complete ass out of herself.

Joanie reached the doorway when her mind pulled a complete blank on where the bathroom was. She headed for the stairs.

"There's a bathroom down here off the den," he offered.

If Corbin knew her precarious state at the moment, he gave no indication. Mumbling something completely incoherent, she darted down the hallway, in the opposite direction of the kitchen and entered a very dark room. Instantly the smell of old books and something that reminded her of the smoke from a pipe filled her nostrils. She made her way around solid-looking furniture and pulled open a dark-stained door. A closet full of odds and ends wasn't what she was looking for. Turning in the dark, she spotted the only other door in the room and headed for it.

She didn't notice the small end table until it was too late.

"Ouch!" She shrieked as the pain in her shin shot up her leg. She stumbled forward just as the light flashed on. "Oh hell," she cried, managing not to fall over the wooden table that she'd smacked her leg on.

"Are you okay?" It amazed her how quickly Corbin moved for such a large man. He was in the room and scooping her up just as her hands slapped the rope carpet that covered the wooden floor. "Good grief. Why didn't you turn on the light?"

His attentive gaze swooped down her body and then back to her face. No matter that she tried standing on her own, he stabled her with both arms wrapped around her. Her palms tingled when she pressed them against his bare chest. Curly black hair sprinkled over caramel-colored skin. And all that muscle, that bulging, perfectly sculptured muscle that twitched when her hands moved over it had her almost forgetting the stinging pain that pulsed in her shin.

"I'm fine," she said, ignoring his last question. "Other than I feel like a fool."

"There's way too much furniture in here, always has been. Granddad was somewhat of a packrat and this was his room. But are you hurt anywhere?"

"I'm fine," she repeated. It was obvious where the bathroom was now, its door partially ajar just ahead of her. She pushed away from his virile body and felt the knot in her shin send vibrating pain shooting through her when she put her weight on it.

"Yeah right." Once again Corbin's hands were on her, this time serving as crutches when he slipped them underneath her arms. "Maybe we should take a look at that leg."

"I'll check while I'm in the bathroom." If he kept touching her, all the pain in the world wouldn't outweigh the pulsing need between her legs.

"If you hurt yourself while on my property -" he began.

"Corbin," she snapped, turning around quickly and then just as fast adjusting her weight off her injured leg. "I'm not going to sue you."

For the briefest of moments she heard Tommy's voice in her head, always the lawyer and thinking only of how the law would benefit him. The distasteful thought must have reflected in her expression because Corbin's concerned look changed instantly. Something dark and predatory flickered in his eyes.

"If you hurt yourself on my property, then it is my responsibility to take care of you," he said in a low, slow drawl.

"Oh." Her heart suddenly pounded as hard as the steady pulse radiating heat between her legs, which matched the throbbing in her shin. Shit. She had three fucking heartbeats. She reached behind her, fumbling until she gripped the door, more of a mess now than she was while stretching out against him on the couch. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

"I'm getting something for you to change into. I want to see your leg." Obviously she hadn't convinced him that she wasn't hurt.

Joanie sighed heavily when he left the room, moving like a dangerous animal, silent and steady. She watched his long legs and the muscles that stretched against his jeans until he disappeared in the hallway. Then finding the light switch in the bathroom, she quickly closed herself in and stared at her reflection in the mirror. If he could read her so easily to know her level of pain, had he also detected her intense craving for him while they lay on the couch?

"This isn't working." She struggled with the button on her jeans.

Throwing the sex charm away didn't make any difference. Corbin almost proved more of a distraction since she'd hurled the thing away than when it was in the house. She shoved her jeans down her legs and then studied the goose egg that bulged from her shin.

"Damn. That just looks sexy as hell."

"What did you say?" Corbin spoke from the other side of the door.

And scared the crap out of her. "Shit."

Stumbling with her jeans wrapped around her ankles, she grabbed the sink and put too much weight on her injured leg. She hissed through her teeth, hating that she was a wimp with pain.

"Joanie?" The door opened a crack.

She turned and tried bending over at the same time to grab her jeans.

"Damn woman. You gave your leg quite a knocking." Corbin opened the door all the way and then filled her space with his massive frame.

For the life of her, she couldn't untangle her jeans. Reluctantly, she kicked them off her, using the sink to balance herself and refusing to look up to see his expression.

"Good idea. Take those things off." $\,$

Her jaw dropped at his candid suggestion and she snapped it shut when she saw amusement glowing in his eyes. So much for not looking at him. In the next moment, the amusement changed to hunger. "I've already seen you without your clothes on, remember?"

How could she forget?

"This is different." Her voice sounded scratchy.

"How so?"

"This isn't sexual." She cleared her throat, then swallowed the lump of apprehension that swelled there.

"Darling. You without clothes on is very sexual." He reached for her, taking her shirt and pulling it over her head.

She could stop him. If she struggled, something told her that he wouldn't force her into any situation that she didn't want. And damn it, she shouldn't want him.

But she did. More than she ever remembered wanting Tommy, she wanted Corbin.

"Put this on." At first his words didn't make any sense.

Brushing hair out of her face, she forgot to be embarrassed about standing before him naked when she saw the t-shirt in his hand.

"It's one of mine. I'm sure it will be large enough to serve as a decent nightgown for you." When he grinned at her mischievously, every inch of her ignited in flames. "Unless of course you prefer sleeping naked."

Joanie grabbed the t-shirt. "Thank you." Her hands were damp as she unfolded it and then found the hole to put over her head.

"Before you put it on..." He didn't finish his sentence but instead pulled her to him.

His nonchalant attitude threw her off guard. She didn't expect him to grab her and slap her naked body against his bare chest. Corbin gripped her chin, raising her face to his and then devoured her mouth. Her entire world spun sideways.

All she could do was hold on as a cry escaped her. He responded with a deep growl and then impaled her mouth with his tongue. Obviously he was better at suppressing his needs than she was, because at that moment there wasn't any doubt in her mind what he wanted. And it was highly unlikely that her falling and putting a doozy of a bruise on her leg had turned him on.

Corbin's hands ran down her back, giving her chills and burning her alive at the same time. She dropped the t-shirt and stretched against him, loving how his chest hair tickled and tortured her nipples. Her breasts swelled with need and she rubbed them over his rock-hard chest, finally moving against him the way she'd ached to when they'd been on the couch.

He gripped her ass, lifting her so that her feet barely touched the ground. A rumbling started in his throat, vibrating over his body. His tongue danced with hers, feeding her hunger and allowing her to taste his. If this was kissing, then she'd never been kissed before.

"I need you." His breath singed her flesh, taking the erect little hairs right off her skin. She would swear to it.

He traced a path from her mouth to her neck with his tongue. Then lifting her like she didn't weigh anything, he devoured first one breast and then the other. Her nipples were soaked, pinched hard with desire, and her breasts felt heavy as he suckled them like a starving man.

Joanie wrapped her arms and legs around him, stretching her soaked pussy and feeling the moisture clinging to her exposed flesh. She was vulnerable, on fire, and a wild side grew inside her, demanding she throw all sanity out the door and fuck the living shit out of Corbin.

Later she would be impressed that any rational thought existed in her mind at all. But it did, and the words tumbled out of her mouth when a sobering thought cleared her mind. "I'm not on any birth control."

"What?" His hair looked wild around his face as he lifted his head, leaving her breasts wet and swollen, and stared at her with wild eyes. "How could you not be on birth control?" He asked the question like her words didn't quite register.

"Tommy had a vasectomy. There was never any need." A weight of sadness hit her so hard she swore it made her heavier.

It must have. She slipped in his arms, although he recovered his wits about him quickly and held her until her rear end rested on the cold counter next to the sink. Her arms and legs remained wrapped around him, although she relaxed, suddenly aware of how strained and tight every muscle inside her felt.

"Shit," he hissed through his teeth.

She looked down and then focused on the long, thick beam straining the material of his jeans.

Holy fucking shit!

Corbin was built like a horse. And that erection had to hurt, confined in his pants. When she looked into his face, she saw the pain creased around his eyes, in the lines of his forehead and in the way he flattened his lips into a thin line.

Suddenly she wanted to cry. When he looked down at her, then brushed her hair away from her face with the gentleness a father would for a beloved child, her eyes burnt as intense emotions stabbed her in the gut.

Damn Tommy once again. Even with him thousands of miles away, he managed to materialize in her mind. Him along with his painted hussy of a girlfriend. It wouldn't matter if she were on birth control or not. She didn't have a fertile sex god drooling over her.

Suddenly she wanted to laugh. In the next moment she would have an emotional breakdown if she didn't get her wits about her quickly.

"It's okay," Corbin whispered. "We'll take care of everything tomorrow. Tonight there are other things we can do."

"Other things?" She barely had the words out of her mouth when he leaned into her, forcing her legs apart further as he captured her mouth.

The taste of his primal hunger was just as strong, if not stronger, than it was a moment ago. He nipped at her lip, kissed her chin, then bent over her further as he took his time tasting her neck.

Joanie wasn't sure what he had in mind, but her brain fogged over, no longer concerned with being sensible. Her head fell back and probably would have crashed into the mirror behind her. But Corbin cupped her with his hand, holding onto her hair as he cradled her head and continued his journey down her body, tasting and nipping at her over-sensitized flesh.

When he knelt in front of her, spreading her legs so far apart that the strain on her inner thighs made her muscles burn, he exhaled inches from her freshly shaved pussy. He took care not to touch her bruised shin. And then he pressed his lips directly over her swollen clit.

"Oh God. Corbin." She grabbed his head, weaving her fingers through all of that thick black hair and held on for dear life.

His tongue was magic. Maybe Corbin was the sex charm. Maybe all of the magic and unexplainable cravings that seemed to singe the air around them came from him and not some inanimate object. It would make sense—damned good sense. Corbin did things to her with his tongue and lips that she didn't know were possible.

She was so ripe, so incredibly close to the edge already, and her freshly shaved skin made her feel even more exposed and vulnerable. He moved his lips around her clit, then tugged gently. But it was more than she could handle. Being around him all evening already brought her too close to the edge. His mouth was more torture than she could endure. Joanie clamped her legs against either side of his head, crying out and exploding with so much intensity that sparks flew like fireflies before her eyes.

Corbin growled his satisfaction. He was relentless as he continued feeding off her, taking all she had to offer and then demanding more. Every inch of her trembled. If it weren't for his strong hands holding her, she would topple right off that sink. There wasn't much space for her rear end as it was. Yet he kept a strong hold on her. With his large hands keeping her legs in place and his shoulders pressing against her while he worked his magic, Joanie never felt more secure.

And more alive. Once again the waves rushed over her body, taking her on a most incredible and exhilarating ride.

"Shit. Shit." She bit her lip but didn't care.

He ran his tongue over her smooth flesh, then dipped inside her. Her skin was cool and wet, yet burning with fire so extremely hot she doubted anything would extinguish her need.

Then he latched onto her clit again, sucking on the small piece of flesh like it was his favorite thing to do. In spite of his size, she toppled forward, feeling everything underneath her disappear and knowing in the next moment she would black out.

Her scream ripped from her throat as an orgasm so intense it shook her to her very core exploded inside her.

For a moment she thought she floated. Even though her pussy still throbbed the sated sensation that took over her senses made her feel more at peace than she'd felt in weeks. Corbin lifted her, cuddling her against his powerful frame like she was his most cherished possession. They were at the top of the stairs before the fog slowly lifted from her brain.

"Care if we watch the rest of that movie later?" His words came to her from across a field of fluffy clouds and darkness.

"That's fine," she heard herself say. Even her voice sounded lazy.

When he tucked her into his bed and stretched out next to her, she told herself it was the few glasses of wine that suddenly had her so exhausted she couldn't move. Otherwise she was sure she would complain that they lay stretched out next to each other on this huge bed. And certainly she would have protested when he slipped out of his jeans and wrapped those incredibly muscular legs around hers. Tomorrow she would definitely say something about this.

Chapter Ten

Corbin dropped the box of condoms into the cart and hid a smile when Joanie quickly covered them up with the clothes she already had in there.

"I'll die if they say something at checkout," she mumbled.

He loved the shade of pink spreading over her cheeks as she blushed.

"You don't have to go through the line with me." He intentionally brushed his arm against hers. "We should go check out the lingerie while we're here."

She looked up at him with something akin to horror. He didn't miss the fire that ignited in those pretty green eyes of hers though.

Her hair glowed with wonderful shades of blonde and brown. Right before they left the house, she pulled it back into a ponytail. Now loose strands wisped around her face. Her mouth puckered into a small circle and he imagined sliding his cock between her moist lips.

Wouldn't do to get a hard-on while strolling through the aisles of the largest store Seward had to offer.

"You're joking, right?"

"Would you wear it for me?"

The expression that crossed her face next didn't quite make sense. She looked away from him quickly, shoving a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "We can go look," she muttered as something that looked like sadness softened her features.

He didn't give a rat's ass that they were in the middle of the large store where anyone could see them. Corbin lifted her chin, wanting a better look at what he just saw.

"Why do you suddenly look so sad?"

"I love lingerie." She bit her lip and met his gaze with a determined look. "And I'm fine. Everything's fine."

"Like hell."

Joanie looked surprised at his outburst, but only for a moment. She wouldn't meet his gaze and he ached to know what churned in that adorable head of hers.

"Well, Corbin Silver," a female voice purred behind him.

Joanie stiffened. He watched her glance around him and then do a quick survey of the items in their cart. The two liter bottles of pop, one for him and one for her, rested next to a large package of toilet paper. Then there were a couple pairs of jeans, several sweaters, a long, silky nightgown that he couldn't wait to see her in and a few other bathroom necessities. They very much painted the picture of a couple out shopping together.

Corbin turned around, then grinned at Rebecca Tulane. "Would you look at you," he said in form of greeting, then hugged his old high school friend the best he could considering her very pregnant state. "Oh man. I think someone just punched me."

Rebecca laughed, her black eyes glowing with happiness as she spread her hand over her very large belly. "Jack swears he's going to be a prize fighter." She ran her hand over the silky black hair of a toddler who sat in the cart and looked up curiously at the giant who had just hugged his mother. Rebecca glanced past him at Joanie. "Hello there. I'm Rebecca Tulane. I'm sure Corbin's never mentioned me to you, but we went to high school together."

Rebecca continued to hold her very pregnant middle as she moved around the cart and held her hand out to shake Joanie's. Joanie returned the friendly greeting, her expression now relaxed and glowing, matching Rebecca's happy smile.

"It's very nice to meet you," Joanie said, her voice soft and smooth. Not once did she look away from Rebecca. "I'm Joanie Showalter. When are you due?"

Rebecca looked pleased as punch to talk about her pregnancy. "Not for four weeks, but I swear he's coming sooner."

Joanie grinned and for a moment looked like she might reach out and touch Rebecca's giant belly. "Do you know if you're having another boy?"

Corbin remembered her commenting last night that her ex-husband had a vasectomy. Why any man would willingly do that was beyond his understanding. But the way Joanie glowed and eagerly talked to Rebecca made him wonder if she'd been deprived of having children when possibly she might want them.

And how many times did he wonder if he would ever be able to settle down and have a few kids of his own?

"I wanted to know so we could decorate the nursery appropriately." Rebecca beamed up at him like he would completely understand her line of thinking. He pulled his mind away from the direction it was heading and hoped she didn't catch him scowling.

"We will have to have you two over sometime really soon." Rebecca smiled at both of them and then turned her attention to her son.

Joanie opened her mouth to comment and Corbin took her arm, turning the cart to make a show of allowing the conversation to end. "Be sure and tell Jack that I said hello."

"I will." Rebecca moved to the front of her cart and hugged her toddler. "It was nice meeting you."

Joanie nodded and didn't stop him from guiding her down the aisle. She didn't pause until she realized what section he'd brought her to.

"You still want to shop for lingerie?" She truly looked surprised.

"Of course." A green, lacy item caught his eye. "What do you think of this one?"

Joanie glanced around her nervously when he held it up to her front. "What if someone sees us?"

Corbin closed the distance between them and then lowered his head so he could kiss her. Something powerful rushed through him when she didn't back away from him. As much as he wanted to devour her, he kept it simple, brushing his lips over hers and then nipping at her lower lip before slowly straightening. Her flushed expression filled him with pride.

"Are you ashamed to be seen with me?" he whispered so only she could hear.

"No," she answered immediately. "Of course I'm not."

"Good." He kissed her again, recognizing the swelling need inside him to possess and claim Joanie. For a moment it hit him stronger than any other emotion he'd experienced in a long time. And they'd only known each other for a day now.

No woman ever got under his skin this quickly before. Maybe that sex charm did have some kind of special power. If so, he would have to research its maker and thank them.

"Do you like the lingerie?" he asked her, his voice deep and raspy.

"Huh?" Then she did back away. But not from him. She made room between them to look down at the lacy green outfit he still held between them. "I doubt it would fit me."

Taking the hanger from him, she glanced at the tag and then made a face. "Now I know there's magic in that darn charm," she muttered, shoving the outfit against his chest.

He took it from her and returned it to the rack, noting a few other identical pieces in various sizes. "What size do you wear?"

"Several sizes larger than that one."

"What size?"

"A twelve, or in that case probably an extra large." Her expression was comical when he pulled the correct-sized outfit off the rack and turned to hand it to her.

It was as if sharing that bit of information with him rated in her mind as more personal than some of the things they'd already done. "Do you want to try it on or return it tomorrow if it doesn't fit?"

She snagged the lingerie from him and dropped it in the cart. "Is there anything else we need?"

He wouldn't comment on how she referred to them in the plural. "I think we have everything. Still want to dodge out and not go through the checkout line?"

It wouldn't take much to get used to the comical faces she made when she was frustrated with him. Although when she took the cart and pushed it toward the front of the store, he doubted frustration was the emotion running through her. They'd had a good morning shopping. Joanie wouldn't be able to deny it. She didn't even seem to

mind too much when Rayna Fisher, who scanned their items at the register, played twenty questions in order to catch up with his life.

"She knew my parents," he explained when they walked through the parking lot to his truck. "I really should check in on Grandmother while we're in town."

He waited for the fireworks.

"Okay." Joanie didn't even make one of her funny faces in exasperation at his comment. "I am getting a bit hungry."

It didn't take too long to drive to the older part of town where his family restaurant was. Joanie's head twisted when they passed the parking lot where tourists surrounded tour buses.

"They aren't from your cruise ship."

"I know." She looked at her hands, nibbling her lower lip.

An unpleasant sensation twisted in his gut. "What are you thinking?"

"It never crossed my mind that another ship might be heading back to Seattle."

"Uh huh. And?"

"Nothing."

"Good." He didn't want her leaving, not yet. She was with him for a week, and he wanted every minute of that time with her. Pulling into a stall in front of Silver Café, he parked the car and opened his door. The look on her face was priceless when he took her hand and pulled her to him, then helped her slide out on his side. "Allow me to buy you lunch."

"Are you going to drag me in there too?" Her words sounded reprimanding, but her eyes sparkled like jewels as she grinned up at him.

Without asking, he reached behind her neck quickly, grabbed her hair tie and slid it down the length of her ponytail.

He loved her hair down, and the way the breeze lifted it and fanned it over her shoulders. "Maybe," he told her, then brushed her hair away from her face.

"How much do you want to bet that your grandmother saw you do that?"

Joanie enjoyed his attention as much as he loved giving it to her. And he knew he grinned as broadly as she did. "She's not that bad. Come on, I can smell Grandmother's stew."

Corbin followed her onto the wooden porch and then reached over her to open the door. The place actually did a fair amount of business today. And he was sure the handful of patrons all turned and gave the two of them their attention. But not because rumors were spreading. He sensed something else.

There wasn't anyone eating at any of the tables that he didn't know. Most of them men, locals who worked in town and were here over their lunch. And their attention diverted immediately to Joanie. Corbin knew the look on a man's face when he approved of what he saw.

The urge to protect mixed with a prideful sensation that made him want to do something that would indicate she belonged to him.

Joanie did it for him. Turning as soon as they were inside, she brushed her fingertips over his arm, probably because he was so close, but the nonverbal action served his purpose.

"Where do you want to sit?" she whispered.

His hand pressed possessively against the middle of her back. "Over here is fine." He guided her to a table along the wall, next to the table where she sat the day before.

Almost twenty-four hours to the minute had passed since he first laid eyes on her. Amazing. Seemed like he knew her a lot longer than that. The comfort level between them was natural and relaxed. What would it be like for them at the end of the week?

"Hi guys." Tory grinned from ear to ear as she almost pranced to them with two menus in her hand. "Grandmother left me in charge. I'm doing pretty good, but don't order anything too complicated."

"What?" Grandmother never took any time off. "What's wrong with her?"

Tory scowled. "I don't know. She's upstairs doing something. I can handle it, Uncle Corbin. Order whatever you want. I'll prove it to you."

Realizing his niece mistook his concern for thinking she wasn't competent enough to run the place, he thumped her on the nose and grinned. "Why don't you bring us both a couple bowls of stew."

"Easy enough." Tory glanced past him at Joanie and for a moment looked like she would say something else. One of the guys at the table next to them got up with his bill and money in hand. "I'll be back in a minute," she said, taking the menus with her back up to the counter.

Tory would work extra hard while he was here, proving to him what he already knew. She wasn't anything like her carefree mother. Even though his younger sister meant the world to him, when Clara took off and left Grandmother to raise her daughter, Corbin's opinion of her dropped drastically. Tory could be a real pain in the ass sometimes but her work ethic was solid. She was Silver through and through.

"I'll be back in a few minutes. Let me make sure everything is okay with Grandmother."

Joanie sat down but then immediately stood up. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"No." If Grandmother wasn't feeling well, upsetting her with the knowledge that he had Joanie staying with him would make matters worse. "I'm just going to run upstairs and check on her. Stay here and wait for the stew. I won't be long."

"Okay." She shrugged like it didn't matter to her either way and relaxed in her chair.

Corbin took in everyone eating at various tables. More than anything he wanted to announce *mine*, make some claim on Joanie that would ensure her safety until he returned. Reaching for her, he took a strand of hair in his hand. She looked up at him

quickly, her expression curious, but then those pretty green eyes of hers turned darker and she licked her lips. Her gaze dropped down his body quickly before returning to his face. That was all he needed to know.

He let go of her hair and ran his fingers over her soft cheek. "Don't go anywhere." She nibbled her lower lip and nodded.

Bounding out of the restaurant, he headed around the building and then up the fire escape. Grandmother usually entered her home from the stairs inside, off the kitchen. They were wider and had a sturdy railing, unlike these stairs, which creaked under his weight. It really would be better to put her in a nice apartment somewhere where she didn't have to climb anything to get to her home. Getting her out of this place would be a battle though. It had been tough enough moving her out of the cabin and into this apartment, which once was additional storage space for the café.

"Grandmother?" He called out quietly when he opened the door at the top of the stairs, which wasn't locked. If it weren't for Tory, the restaurant probably wouldn't get locked up at night half of the time.

There were dishes in the sink and the place smelled of spices and old coffee. He would have to get on Tory about keeping their home cleaner. Heading into the living room, he noticed the newspaper spread out over the couch and a pair of dirty socks in the hallway outside of Tory's bedroom. Heading that direction, he peeked into the teenager's room before moving down the hallway to Grandmother's room.

"Grandmother?" he repeated, keeping his voice quiet so he wouldn't startle her.

But she wasn't in her room. The bathroom door was open at the end of the hall and no one was in there either. Hurrying out of the apartment, he took the stairs two at a time and was back in the restaurant in the next minute.

Two bowls of stew and tall glasses of milk were at their table. But Joanie wasn't there. She stood at the counter, laughing at something Teddy said while watching Tory load a new roll of paper into the register.

"How's it going, Silver?" Teddy grinned at him but then let his gaze travel down Joanie. "I was just getting ready to join Joanie here for some lunch."

"I'm sure you were." He glared at his good friend for only a moment before turning his attention to Tory. "Grandmother isn't upstairs."

"Yes she is. That's where she said she was headed." Tory stuck out her tongue and frowned at the register.

"I think it goes like this." Joanie leaned forward, pointing out how to load the register paper.

"You're right." Tory grinned triumphantly, then closed the register, pushing a button that made it chime to life. "Okay. Who's next?"

When she realized Joanie, Teddy and him weren't at the counter to pay a bill, she looked up at Corbin as if realizing what he'd said to her finally.

"Grandmother isn't upstairs?" she asked.

"Nope."

"I wonder where she went," Tory mused only for a moment, then moved around the counter, leaving them and starting to work the tables.

He wondered the same thing but had a feeling Grandmother would make her presence known when she was ready. It bugged him thinking she was out and about by herself, but searching for her would probably prove fruitless.

"Well, since your lunch date has decided not to ignore you, I'll let you two get to your food." Teddy gave Joanie's arm a quick squeeze.

She smiled at him. "You're more than welcome to join us."

Corbin looked over her head at Teddy, who met his gaze. Teddy's smile faded. "Three's a crowd. But if he doesn't treat you right, you know who to call." Teddy winked at her then turned and sauntered toward the tables where some of his crew ate.

Corbin forced his facial features to relax and worried for a moment that he might have growled. Joanie didn't say anything when he held her chair until she sat.

"You didn't find your grandmother?" Joanie nibbled at her stew, glancing around the room and then up at him.

He pulled out his own chair, instantly inhaling the rich smell of Grandmother's stew. "Nope. I'll make a couple phone calls and see if I can't track her down." He stared at her flushed expression. The color in her cheeks made her eyes glow. "What did Teddy say to you?"

"He's quite the flirt." She shook her head as if that knowledge confused her. "I've never really been flirted with before."

"I have a hard time believing that."

"It's true. Why do you think I put so much stock in that necklace?"

"But you don't have it now."

"I know. That's the part I don't understand."

"Joanie." He put his spoon down and covered her warm hand with his. "You're a knockout. If the men in Seattle didn't see that, then they all have some serious issues."

"Well, they might at that. I admit it's kind of nice suddenly being looked at like I'm someone worth talking to."

Corbin hated her soon-to-be ex for making Joanie believe she wasn't beautiful. And that had to be it. Obviously the asshole told Joanie enough times that she wasn't any good. Otherwise she was definitely intelligent enough to figure out the obvious.

A cell phone started ringing and Joanie pulled her hand out from under his and reached for her purse. Fumbling until she pulled out the phone, she answered it quietly as Tory came up to the table.

"Figures Grandmother would decide to play hooky when we're busy. If I did this, my ass would be grass."

"Watch your mouth," he scolded.

Tory didn't look daunted but turned her attention to Joanie and stood, having no qualms about listening in on her conversation. Joanie's sudden frown and her hushed words grabbed his attention as well.

"He wants to fax them to me here?" She ran her fingers through her hair, then nibbled her lip. "I'll have to find a fax number. Why can't it wait until I get home?"

She listened quietly to whoever spoke to her on the other end, then told them she would call back soon. Her face was so pale when she looked up at him that instantly his senses went on red alert.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"My lawyer," she told him, holding her cell phone in her hand and then twisting it between her fingers as she glanced up at Tory. "It's my ex. He's worked up the property settlement. He wants the papers signed today."

Chapter Eleven

Joanie stared out the small window at the quiet street outside. The window needed cleaning, a thin film from all the fried food cooked in this kitchen making her view rather hazy. Behind her, the scratching of a pen on paper grated her nerves. She didn't want to watch Corbin read over the morbid truth of the reality of her life. There wasn't anything worse than having her fantasy invaded like this.

She hugged herself, cold in spite of the hot appliances not too far from her. Why couldn't Tommy wait one lousy week before attacking her like this?

Because he couldn't handle the knowledge that possibly she might be having a good time.

Fucking bastard.

"Do you want him to have the house?" Corbin asked.

She swallowed the angry lump that practically made her nauseous. "I can't afford it and he can." His words.

"How long did you live there with him?"

"Our entire marriage practically – about ten years."

"And you worked that entire time?"

"Yes." She worked her ass off so that he could fulfill his dream.

Apparently he didn't see it as fair to allow her time to enjoy a dream of her own. Corbin sounded so official. The sex god she fought not to drool over all morning and the day before had suddenly turned into a lawyer. For the first time she saw a man who was all business, cutthroat and eager to nail the bad guy to the wall. It had been all Corbin could do not to rip the pages from the fax when they came through less than thirty minutes ago. Even though he wasn't a divorce lawyer, he sat at the cluttered desk in the back end of the restaurant, hovering over them and devouring every word.

"You've got equity built up. Your lawyer should demand he buy your half of the house from you."

"I didn't talk to her about any of this before leaving for my cruise." She wasn't ready to talk about it now either, but apparently the time had come.

"We're going to make sure she gets you your fair share. These demands are completely unacceptable. He cheated on you, not the other way around. He needs to pay dearly for that sin and you shouldn't have to walk away from years of dedication without a penny."

Sounded reasonable. Damn. What she wouldn't do to go back to discussing whether or not she should buy lingerie.

She rubbed her suddenly damp palms together. He wouldn't see her break down over this. "Sounds like something to look into." Her voice sounded calm in spite of her churning gut.

"I'm not a divorce lawyer, but a colleague of mine has handled some doozies. Do you have a good lawyer?" His calm baritone somehow made her even more uneasy.

Suddenly remembering talking to her sister about leaving Tommy, moving out and discussing the divorce with her lawyer on the phone sent trembles rushing over her body. They left goose bumps on her skin. Escaping her life, even if briefly, obviously wasn't a privilege she would be allowed to indulge in.

She turned around, her eyes burning, but not from tears. There were no tears for Tommy. Her eyes were dry and so was her mouth.

"My sister lined me up with her. Honestly I don't know a lot about her other than her reputation seems to be solid." She held her head high, keeping her tone level and holding her hands tightly in front of her so he wouldn't see her tremble.

Corbin looked up from where he sat at the cluttered desk. His green eyes were darker than she'd ever seen them before and for a moment he simply stared at her. Rushes of need washed her insides, making her too warm. She itched to tug at her shirt. Obviously, no matter the circumstances or what they discussed, Corbin Silver turned her on.

He saw her in a new light now. Saw the ugliness that was now her life. His expression wasn't readable as he continued watching her, not speaking for a moment. Under his scrutinizing gaze, her sensual world surrounding one simple little necklace fell to pieces.

Corbin stood slowly, barely making a sound as he moved with unbelievable agility around the desk until he stood directly in front of her. She could stare at his hard-packed chest or lean her head back and see his face.

She looked up.

"You told me that you didn't love him anymore." His words were no more than a hard whisper.

Chills rushed over her overheated flesh. "I don't." She'd never hated another soul more in her entire life.

"Then why is this upsetting you so much?"

She didn't look away from his piercing stare, no matter how much her heart swelled painfully. He was the most handsome man she'd ever laid eyes on. And he looked at her like she was the prettiest woman in the world. "Because this was supposed to be my week. My time away from the ugliness of my world. And now the adventure of spending this week with you has been destroyed."

He frowned, searching her face quickly. "Why do you say that?"

"Does knowing how ugly my life is really turn you on?"

"Oh hell." His frown faded quickly and he lifted his hand to her face and stroked her skin with his knuckles. "You turn me on. In twenty-four hours, I've learned enough about you to know that I'm more than willing to give you every minute of my time just to see how far things might go between us."

He lowered his mouth to hers, capturing her lower lip and scraping it with his teeth before kissing her so softly that she worried she might cry. Not because things were so screwy at the moment but because no one had ever said anything so wonderful to her in her entire life.

"Corbin Wayne Silver!" Grandmother's harsh words were followed by a spew of gibberish as she ranted in an unfamiliar language.

Joanie would have jumped to the other side of the room but Corbin wrapped his arm around her protectively before turning on his grandmother who stood just inside the doorway to the kitchen. Her hands were fisted into her plump figure. The way her gray hair twisted in a braid around her head made her look like some ancient witch out of a classic fable.

"Where have you been?" Corbin's tone matched the level of severity in her words.

Grandmother continued her rampage, which she elaborated on with hand gestures that didn't help Joanie at all in understanding what she said. Corbin was forced finally to let go of her and move in front of his grandmother. Gripping her thick arms, he gave her a gentle shake while speaking very calmly, like a parent would to a distraught child.

"She is a very nice lady and you'll be courteous around her. Am I clear?"

Joanie shifted slightly so she could meet the older woman's gaze when she glanced around Corbin and gave her the once-over. Her next comment was still in her own language, but spoken without the harsh tone.

"The necklace is gone. We threw it away." He then said something in his grandmother's language, although when he spoke it, the words sounded sensual, almost erotic.

Joanie couldn't keep her attention from shifting to his backside and admiring how his clothes stretched over so much muscle.

"Joanie, come here." Corbin turned slightly, extending his hand to her while keeping his other hand on his grandmother's arm. It almost looked like he held her in case she might attack. "I would like to formally introduce my grandmother, Zoie Silver."

Her legs teetered and she fought not to let it show while moving closer. Being introduced formally to family after what he just said really unnerved her.

"It's very nice to meet you." She wasn't sure if she should shake hands or not, and hating her moment of hesitancy, she thrust out her hand. "I'm Joanie Showalter."

"What kind of name is Showalter?" Grandmother glanced down at the extended hand long enough that Joanie's arm muscles started cramping as she fought the urge to

yank it back. Finally the old woman clutched it with her plump, cool fingers and gave it one quick shake.

Telling her it was her married name didn't sound like it would help the matter much at the moment. Instead she gave the old woman the information she was actually asking for. "I'm pretty much a product of the American melting pot. A little bit of Irish and Scotch, as well as German."

Grandmother snorted. She pulled her hand back and then crossed her heavy arms over her very ample chest. "We are Inuit and Scottish Highlander. Nothing is melting in us."

Corbin let go of her arm, shifting his weight so that his arm almost touched hers. His closeness made her flesh tingle. But her insides flipped around with nervous energy. There weren't too many more emotions she could take on right now without showing both of them how much melting was actually inside her.

"Now that we're all friends here," Corbin began. He gave Grandmother a harsh look. "I'd like to know where you were. Tory handled the lunch rush all by herself."

"It's good for her. The girl needs to learn what it's like to work."

Joanie hadn't seen many teenagers work harder. Singing the praises of Corbin's niece probably wouldn't give her any bonus points though.

"Where were you?" Corbin demanded.

"Moira needed me." Grandmother pressed her lips together, then instead of looking at Corbin, she took her time studying Joanie. "And it's a good thing that I went over there. Obviously that charm is powerful enough that its magic lingers even after it is out of your life."

"For crying out loud!" Corbin threw his hands up in the air, managing not to hit either one of them. Then walking over to the desk to pick up Joanie's divorce papers, he folded them in half and placed one hand on the back of her neck. "Call me if you need anything," he told Grandmother and then escorted Joanie out of the restaurant.

The early summer sun warmed her backside as she stared at the incredible mountain range behind Corbin's home. They parked out front and she picked up her divorce papers, then slid out her own side before Corbin reached for her.

"I need to restock firewood," he told her, putting his hand on her back in the spot where he always placed it. She was getting real used to the warm strength that spread over her skin when he touched her.

"I'll take these bags inside," she offered.

Corbin unlocked the front door for her and then left her to head around to the back of the house. After putting the bags on the kitchen table, she pulled out her cell phone, needing time alone and a levelheaded mind to bounce her thoughts off.

Glancing toward the back door, her mind went blank on the phone number for a moment when she caught a glimpse of Corbin heaving an axe over his head and then bringing it down. The axe sliced through the air and then split a log down the middle. The ease in which he handled the task put her in awe as much as the way his muscles bulged and flexed while he worked.

"And he said that I impressed him." She shook her head, baffled still by his words earlier. Any woman on this planet would go weak in the knees if he simply looked their way. With his size, all that muscle and good looks...not to mention he was a lawyer fighting for what he believed in, not for the almighty dollar. If perfection could be packaged, it would be labeled Corbin Silver.

Suddenly calling her sister didn't seem as important as focusing on the incredible view outside. But reality had slapped her in the face. Already her week was interrupted with those papers. Corbin would bring them up again. She sensed that much in him at the restaurant. It was a side of him she didn't know that well, but he was a lawyer, and given opportunity, he would investigate and attack any case if he thought he could win.

She knew what a lawyer's blood was like all too well.

He'd scribbled all over those faxed papers and then pocketed them without showing them to her. On the way out here, he was quieter than usual. And he took off around the house to cut wood without saying a word. Corbin needed time to digest what he'd learned about her lawyer. In spite of how he introduced her to his grandmother, told her how much he wanted to know her better, Joanie carried a hell of a lot of nasty baggage. The simple truth still rested in his shirt pocket—her divorce wasn't final yet. They both needed time to themselves right now.

It almost hurt yanking her gaze from the window and turning toward the hallway. Letting out a loud sigh, Joanie headed upstairs, feeling the slight throb in her shin grow when she reached the second floor. Distance from that virile god, who was damned close to sweeping her off her feet, might help clear her head of him. At least for a few minutes.

By the top of the stairs she remembered her sister's phone number, pushing the buttons without giving it too much thought. Then casually glancing into the other bedrooms, she strolled into one of them while listening to the phone ring.

"Joanie? Is everything okay?" Her sister answered the phone in her usual way, out of breath and sounding cheerful.

"Everything's fine. How are you?" She would break the events of her past few days to her sister slowly. It was best that way.

"I'm fine. Just picking up the house a bit. But why are you calling me? Are you lounging on the deck of the ship? Are you having a blast?"

Just hearing her sister's voice had her grinning. Even though her stomach tightened knowing where this conversation would lead, sharing everything with Jenny was a good idea.

"I'm not on the ship right now."

"Oh. Where are you?"

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"In a town called Seward, Alaska."
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Joanie sucked in a deep breath and then shared her experience during the time she was on the cruise ship. Jenny laughed out loud several times when Joanie told her how the men treated her during the days she was at sea. But when she mentioned the part about being left behind in Seward, Jenny gasped.

"Oh good God. Okay. We can fix this." Even though she couldn't see her, there was no doubt Jenny was pacing. "Maybe I should call Ralph."

Joanie walked around a neatly made double-sized bed and ignored the tightness in her knees and the pang from her bruised leg. There wasn't any reason to be nervous about sharing the rest of her adventure with her sister.

"I met someone, Jenny. I'm okay. I'm...umm...staying with him until my ship returns this way."

"You met someone?" There was silence for only a moment. "Who?"

Joanie explained the necklace in further detail, and then told Jenny about Corbin.

"He sounds yummy. And you must bring one of those necklaces back to me. I would just love to have Ralph crawling at my feet, begging me twenty-four/seven for sex." Her laughter was contagious. "So you're having a fling. There's nothing wrong with that. Your divorce will be final in no time flat. Live it up, girlfriend."

But even as Joanie smiled and stared out the front window at the large yard spreading away from the cabin, her palms were damp with trepidation. She adjusted the phone between her shoulder and ear and took a deep breath. So much for the fun part of the conversation.

"There's another reason that I called you."

"Oh?"

"Tommy had his lawyer fax some papers to me today."

"The creep. He knew you were on this cruise." Jenny grumbled under her breath, making it clear what she thought of Tommy. "And I suppose he wants everything after you supported him for so long."

"He wants the house but I knew that already. Jenny, is April Wright a good lawyer? I wasn't really thinking straight before I left and I didn't take time to check her out."

"From what I hear, she is. I don't know many divorced people, but when I asked around she was the one everyone said to get for you. And I know you weren't thinking straight, honey. Let your lawyer take care of that jerk and enjoy the rest of your vacation. Now tell me more about Corbin."

Just hearing his name sent heat rushing over her skin. She shifted the phone in her hand again and brushed hair away from her face.

[&]quot;Cool. Buy me a cool little trinket."

[&]quot;Actually, it was a trinket that got me here."

[&]quot;Huh?"

"He's the tallest, most well-built man I've ever seen in my life. And he's very driven. When he wants something, he makes it happen."

"You've fucked him already?" Jenny asked incredulously.

"No. I have not." She rubbed her hand over her leg, nervous anticipation preventing her from making the truth sound believable.

"You're going to..."

"Maybe." Definitely yes.

"Wow. That sex charm really does work. Do you really like him?"

"Yes." The word slipped past her lips so easily.

"Then I say live this week like there is no other."

Joanie exhaled. Her sister's blessing, even though Jenny didn't even know Corbin, meant more to her than she expected.

"I'll never see him again after this week."

"Never say never."

Jenny was always the romantic. And for the past couple of days, Joanie indulged in the lighter side of life too. But the realist in her screamed caution. Possibly the necklace was just a necklace. If anyone asked her before this cruise if she believed in magic, she would have laughed at the thought. Yet she wholeheartedly blamed that damned charm for every bit of her weaknesses so far.

"We live in different worlds. We're thousands of miles from each other, and always will be."

"You aren't this week," Jenny pointed out. "And you can't predict what will happen next week."

"It's not fair to either one of us to pretend there is any future with this."

"And it's not fair to condemn yourself when you have a chance for happiness." Jenny suddenly sounded way too serious. "Do you know this is the first time in years that you've sounded like this?"

"Like what?"

"You sound happy. Listen to me, big sister. Go with your heart. You deserve it. Quit being the practical one and be happy. If this Corbin Silver is everything you say he is, then I'm sure he sees how incredibly awesome you are. I bet he hasn't told you once since he's met you that he doesn't like your clothes, or the way you act. Don't chase him away simply because you've tried yourself before the jury." Jenny laughed. "See, even I can use your lawyer talk."

"Did Tommy say that to me that much?" Now that she focused on it, Tommy did complain about something when it came to her almost every time they talked.

"Don't get me started. You deserve the best there is. And if it's this Corbin guy, then something as trivial as distance will work its way out."

Joanie smiled, but her heart was so heavy that it sunk to her gut. She blurted out the one last thing she called to talk to her sister about before her throat constricted and she wouldn't be able to talk anymore. "Corbin thinks I should demand my share of the equity in the home."

"Oh, I do like this guy. Have you told your lawyer that?"

"No. Not yet."

"You go enjoy yourself with your sexy, intelligent hunk. I'll call your lawyer and tell her to make it happen."

"I'll call her." Joanie would rather do as her sister suggested. An image of Corbin swinging that axe made it really hard to focus on calling her lawyer. "I'll call you back and let you know what she says."

"Definitely keep me posted, on that and this new man of yours."

"I will." Joanie even managed to get a goodbye out of her sister before hanging up her phone. Her mind refused to think about calling her lawyer though. Even with some distance between them, Corbin distracted her thoughts so much, she would swear he was right next to her.

"Who are you going to call?" Corbin asked from behind her.

Joanie shrieked, spinning around so fast that the room spun with her. Corbin stood in the doorway, his shirt off and his body glistening with sweat. He smelled wonderful, like the outdoors and freshly chopped wood. Strands of black hair fell free from his braid and draped down either side of his face. He looked focused, like a man on a mission.

That swelling in her throat finally closed in and it took a moment to swallow it with her mouth suddenly so dry. "How long have you been standing there?" she squeaked out.

He moved closer and that's when she noticed the lingerie in his hand. Her heart hit a pace she swore it had never experienced before.

She loved lingerie. The feel of the silk, the lace, the soft sexiness against her body, was a secret passion she'd never shared with anyone. Up until now, there wasn't anyone she knew who also enjoyed lingerie. Tommy's comment had always been that they were too expensive and never stayed on her body long enough to make them worth the purchase price. Not that they ever purchased any to find out.

"Tell me who you're going to call," he repeated his question, this time making it a demand. And he didn't answer her question.

"My lawyer," she said quickly. "How much of my conversation did you hear?"

He lifted one shoulder lazily. "Not much."

She licked her lips. Damn it was hard focusing on figuring out what he might have overheard when at the moment she could hardly remember what she and her sister had said. The outfit draped over his hand and he stood in front of her, watching her.

"Take your clothes off, Joanie." His expression was intense and focused. "I don't want to wait any longer to see you in this."

Her hands went to her shirt before her brain registered his words. "It might not fit."

"Only one way to find out."

Did he bring condoms up here too?

There wasn't much room to back away from him with the bed next to her and the bed stand behind her. As if sensing that his nearness overwhelmed her, Corbin sat on the bed, holding the outfit in his lap. He looked the expectant audience, eager and anxious for a show he'd waited impatiently to see.

The way he stared at her made her feel beautiful. It tore at her heart. Corbin never pulled his gaze from her body, watching her hands move to the bottom of her sweater. His gaze darted to her face, just long enough to see what emotions she might reveal to him, and then returned his attention to her actions.

And she could only guess what emotions were displayed for him to see. Her insides boiled yet chills rushed over her at the same time. She wanted to give him the show of a lifetime, but considered grabbing the outfit and running to the privacy of a bathroom to change.

Her fingers were damp when she gripped her sweater and slowly pulled it over her head. In the brief moment that she was blinded, Corbin hissed in a breath, her only testimony that he liked what he saw.

Joanie dropped her sweater to the ground and reached behind her for the clasp of her bra.

"No. The jeans next," Corbin said, his voice strained and sounding like a husky whisper.

"Okay." She grasped the top button of her jeans, twisting the material and undoing it.

Her knuckles pressed into her soft tummy, a reminder of how not-perfect her body was. She could imagine having hard abs, the perfect curves, and twist and sway her body with that image in her mind. But truth be told, she pulled her zipper down over her slightly bulging belly.

She loved the rose-hued glasses that he wore. Even though she couldn't see them, he must have them on, because he practically drooled as she slid her jeans down her legs and then stepped out of them.

"Now the bra and underwear." His voice was so deep, no more than a raspy baritone that scraped over her flesh.

She felt raw, overly exposed and so hot that her pussy and breasts swelled, throbbed, while heat flushed over her. Unsnapping the bra first, she tried to reveal herself with a sexy show, taking her time and teasing him. But the straps slid down her arms and then from her fingers before she could stop it. She bent over and it slipped the rest of the way off her, falling to the floor. It was a damned good thing she never tried

to make a living at erotic dancing. Best to get it over with. She slid her underwear down her legs before straightening and then kicked them free of her feet.

"God. Joanie. Amazing." He offered her the lacy green lingerie, then reached for her breast with his other hand.

The swelling increased when he touched her. Such a raw, intense pressure surged through her insides that she almost stepped into his touch. "If you keep touching me, we'll never know if this outfit fits me or not," she complained, more so because she didn't want Tommy's theory about lingerie to be right.

She wanted that lingerie on her body.

Corbin's grin was wicked. "No matter how much I touch you, I promise you'll wear that outfit." In spite of his claim of control, he pulled his hand back.

Joanie studied the outfit for a minute, trying to decide the best way to put it on.

"Slide it over your head." Apparently Corbin read minds too.

He stood up, taking it from her, and skillfully rolled it up then slid it over her head and shoulders. The lace tortured her flesh and his hands touching her only made it worse. Already come pooled between her legs. The moisture filled her with even more need. If he didn't offer to fuck her after this, she might prove that a woman her size could actually take down a man his size.

His knuckles brushed over her breasts and then her waist as he tugged on the outfit, straightening it and adjusting it until it hugged her in all the right places.

"You're beautiful. Look. I'll show you." He didn't wait for her response but turned her and guided her from behind with his hands on her shoulders.

The only thoughts floating around in her overly fogged brain weren't very coherent. She let him take her out of the room and down the hall into the large master bedroom until she stood in front of the foot-long mirror attached to the bathroom door.

"See how sexy you are?"

Joanie stared at herself in the mirror. The silk tucked in her waist, giving her more curve than she normally had. And the lace covered her breasts, pushing them together and up just enough that she actually had some really cool-looking cleavage. The entire piece covered her just to the very top of her thighs. And she looked...amazing.

She glanced upward in the mirror into his expression. "You still look better," she told him.

Corbin grinned, massaging her shoulders, and then turned her around. "Let's find out how amazing we are together."

Chapter Twelve

Something transpired inside Joanie. If he weren't giving her every bit of his attention, he wouldn't have seen how quickly it happened. Minutes before he caught sight of the intelligent, motivated side of Joanie when he came up the stairs. He saw how this divorce tore at her. In spite of her unfaithful husband—very soon to be exhusband—Joanie wasn't out to destroy him. And she should be. She should want to crucify him. It gave him even more awareness of the nature of the incredibly sexy woman brushing against him. Joanie cared more about her peace of mind than physical and monetary possessions.

What an incredibly perfect package!

He ran his hand down the back of her head, then pulled at the fuzzy ponytail holder that confined her blonde-and-brown locks.

Joanie shook her head when he freed her hair and then looked up at him through the mirror as they tumbled past her shoulders. Her smile lit her eyes up like rare jewels.

His cock bulged and throbbed with anxious determination, causing a pain from the constriction of his jeans. At the same time, a fierce swelling in his chest made it damned hard to breathe. More than he wanted to capture his next breath, he wanted to make Joanie his woman. It shocked him how much he wanted that.

Corbin wasn't the kind of man who fell for a woman after just twenty-four hours.

Fool. It hadn't even taken twenty-four hours.

She latched on to him and stole his heart within just a few hours of knowing him. That knowledge should bring him pause. His usual practice would be to back off, contemplate such an odd situation and learn what his true feelings were all about.

He took a step backward but not because he wanted space between them. In his mind he needed her to turn around and follow him. There wasn't any reason to create distance between him and Joanie. He knew and understood exactly what throbbed throughout his insides. No matter that he hadn't felt this for any other woman, Corbin believed he was falling really hard for Joanie. He was intelligent enough to know what kind of woman would walk best by his side.

Joanie was that woman.

He let his gaze travel toward her sweet ass. The green lace hugged her waist and then silky material fell over the curve of her rear end, falling far enough that he couldn't see that spot where her thighs met her ass. The view would make him explode if he didn't do something about it very quickly.

Corbin moved to the bed, slipping the condoms out of his back pocket before undoing his jeans and forcing them over his swollen cock. He sprung free, pulsing and

growing in the coolness of the bedroom. Blood drained from his body, engorging his dick and making it a struggle to push his pants down his legs. If he didn't sit down, he would fall down.

That would be bad.

"Will a condom fit over that?" Joanie sounded breathless, like she'd just run to be by his side.

"Yes." The one word proved a challenge to get out of his mouth. Her words fed his ego more so than if she'd just sung his praises. Although in truth, she just had.

He managed to get his legs free of his jeans and shoved them to the side with his foot. At the edge of the bed, he simply sat and reached for her. She was like his security blanket, and he needed her wrapped around him.

"Come here."

Her small smile was priceless. With her hair wild around her face, she moved to stand in front of him. The lace itched his palms when he cupped them, encouraging him to brush his hands over their perfect shape. He adored the swell of her cleavage. It was a view any man would be honored to drool over. He gripped her waist and pulled her closer.

Joanie straddled his legs, bringing her moist pussy up against his hard cock. He wrapped his arms around her, cupping her ass and thrusting her closer.

"I've never enjoyed torturing myself so much," he whispered, closing his eyes and burying his face in her hair.

She kissed him, and her soft lips moved so slowly, so passionately, that sparks exploded in his brain. He pressed his tongue past her lips, tasting her need and feeling her heat, which matched the boiling desires escalating inside him.

"Do you want this?" Even in his fogged state of mind, he wouldn't enter her if she would regret it later.

"Very much so," she whispered on a breath.

Every inch of him hardened with a craving to possess her, fill her with everything he had and wipe her mind clear of any pain that another man caused. Her consent broke something inside him, released a carnal urgency so raw and primitive that he almost couldn't breathe.

He ran his hands up her back, feeling her arch into him and her perfectly captured breasts brush over his chest. Tangling his fingers in her hair, he tilted her head to deepen the kiss and growled his approval into her mouth. Joanie hummed in response, shifting her soft ass over his legs and then scraping her nails down his back.

Her fingers made a journey over his flesh, as if she, too, wanted every inch of him. And he wanted to give it to her.

Knowing he needed to take his time, allow her to know passion to its fullest extent, didn't make it any easier to curb his desire to sink deep inside her without bringing her to a full orgasm first.

Ripping his lips away from hers, he tasted her cheek, ran his tongue down the slender nape of her neck, then made a quick journey to her breasts. Her skin was warm and so damned soft.

"Corbin. God." Her head fell back as she surrendered to him, giving him complete control of her body.

He held her shoulders, keeping her from falling backward, while burying his face between her breasts. Then bracing her with one arm, he cupped her full, swollen flesh and used his thumb to move the lace from one of her nipples.

Corbin latched on like a baby craving his mother's milk and made a feast out of her. Her cries fed him just as much, and when she dug her nails into his back, branding him, charged currents raced over his flesh. He tightened with anticipation, knowing any quick movements at the moment would be damned near impossible.

Not that he wanted to move. Staying like this for the rest of his life sounded incredibly appealing. Her quick breaths made her breasts swell even more around his face. And he moved from one to the other, licking and nipping at her while she moaned and muttered broken words of approval.

"So perfect." Her head fell forward and she scraped her teeth over his earlobe. "I've never met a man who was so perfect," she added.

Her whispered words filled his brain with a scorching heat that brought him to the boiling point. Yet it was her who needed to come.

"Let me show you how perfect it can be." He couldn't wait any longer.

He reached for one of the packages next to him and struggled with blurred vision as he tore it open. Condoms weren't one of his favorite things. He didn't come from the generation that used them consistently. And although he understood completely the importance of using them right now, the slight yearning inside him to fill her with his come and watch life swell inside her did something funny to his heart.

It also cleared his vision with gross clarity. He always knew that a few children of his own would be a wonderful blessing. But at thirty-three years, Corbin accepted the simple fact that it might not be in the works for him. Giving thought to the possibility that maybe that could change in the future spilled a warmth over him that felt as good as her body brushing against his.

"I can help if you like." She suddenly sounded timid. Her face glowed with passion, though, when she met his gaze. "I don't have a lot of experience with these things, but I'd like to try."

"Be careful." If she spent too much time touching him, he wouldn't be able to handle it.

She took the small latex circle and scooted back a few inches. Then looking down between them, she stared at his engorged cock.

He watched with breathless fascination as her fingers pressed the lubricated condom over the tip of his dick. Fireworks exploded in his brain when she worked it down his shaft, her fingers careful and soft as she stroked and caressed the protection over him. His cock looked even larger with the clear glove sheathed into place.

"Oh my God," she uttered, and then brushed her fingertip up his length. "I've never known a man as large and thick as you are."

He wanted to tell her that she would never know another man like this ever again. Knowing it was way too soon in their relationship to utter the possessive statement, he stayed silent and allowed her to own the moment.

"Stay just like that, please." She adjusted herself as she spoke, straightening her legs and positioning herself over him.

The heat from her pussy sunk through the latex. Pushing the urge that tried to rattle his senses out of his head, he accepted that he would have to wait and pray the time came when he could feel what it would be like to be inside her without protection.

He loved how wet she was. Just touching him, kissing and rubbing her body against his prepared her enough to be able to sink down onto him. Heat more intense than he'd ever known surrounded his cock. And as confined as the condom was, her pussy was even tighter.

"Shit," he hissed, grabbing her waist and then fighting the urge not to force her down completely over his cock.

Corbin knew he had a good-sized dick. And as tight as Joanie was, obviously she wasn't used to a man as large as he was. That knowledge pleased him like it would any man. He would let her control their lovemaking, no matter how desperately he craved rolling her over and pounding into that intense warmth of hers.

Joanie dug into his shoulders with her fingers and her eyes rolled back in her head as she sunk down over half the length of his cock and then slowly raised herself off him. Then continuing the journey back down, she tortured the hell out of him while moving slowly, taking and then releasing while so many tiny muscles constricted and pulsed around his shaft.

"I want it better than this," she murmured. Her eyes opened wide and she puckered her lips like she wanted a kiss. Her cheeks were so flushed they made her green eyes an even deeper, darker shade. "I mean, this is incredible. Too good. But my legs aren't long enough..."

"Oh crap." It hadn't crossed his mind that she wasn't tall enough to straddle him while he sat at the edge of the bed. "Come here, sweetheart."

He held onto her and pushed back onto his bed. Stretching out underneath her, he kept her pinned to him, not wanting the heat from her pussy too far from his cock. Already he needed back inside her more than he needed his next breath.

Joanie grinned so preciously that his heart constricted. She looked very pleased with the view that was spread out underneath her. Moving her legs so that she squatted over him, she pressed her fists into the bed on either side of him. Her hair fanned around her face when she looked down between them. Then, with natural skill and

grace, she pressed her soaked entrance against the tip of his cock and took all of him deep inside her.

Intense flames nearly boiled him alive.

"Oh my God!" She yelled and tore at the bed, arching her back and tilting her head while her eyelids fluttered closed.

Her breasts nearly tumbled out of the lace. She was a vision of perfection as she rode his cock, lifting her body and then reclaimed him. With each stroke, her passion increased. Her hair fell over her shoulders, swaying back and forth as her rhythm picked up.

Corbin grabbed her hips, aching to help her and fighting to hold on so she could reach her peak.

"This is...so good," she panted, taking all of him now and riding him hard and fast.

"You're so good." Perfect was more like it.

Joanie stiffened, but only for a moment. Sinking down on him one more time, he watched with intense fascination as her orgasm exploded inside her.

She soaked his balls, cried out as every inch of her trembled and then collapsed on him, riding out each wave while she struggled to breathe.

"I just came," she sighed, sounding more at peace than she had since he met her.

Corbin slowly stroked her back, feeling himself twitch inside her. As anxious as he was to join her, release all he had inside her, she needed this moment to gain her wits. Something told him that Joanie hadn't come too often in the past.

When she looked up, her flushed expression filled him with pride. He brushed a loose strand away from her face.

"Ready for more?" he asked quietly.

"Oh yes." Her grin was all the answer needed.

Corbin wrapped his arms around her, crushing her to him, and rolled them over. She easily spread her legs, keeping him buried deep inside her when she wrapped them around his hips.

Then lifting himself over her, he braced his arms on either side of her and took control of their sexual adventure. Sinking deep into her hot, soaked pussy, he loved how her muscles twitched around him. So tight, like a glove made exactly for him, meant to keep him secure and never let him go. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the moment.

He wouldn't last long, not with how wonderful she felt. She scraped her nails down his arms and he opened his eyes. Staring into her face, something slipped inside him. Joanie watched him intently, her mouth open slightly. She licked her lips, never looking away, and wrapped her fingers around his biceps.

Her breasts bounced underneath him, stealing his attention from her awed expression. That's when he realized how hard he took her, filling her deep and pushing to go even deeper. Her grip on him tightened and her breath grew louder.

All blood drained to his cock. His balls tightened, ready for their release, and slowly everything started spinning around him. He relaxed, fighting to keep his eyes open when her face got brighter, her breath turned to pants and then a cry escaped her lips.

At the same time that she exploded again, he let go of all that he had, burying himself deep inside her and coming harder than he had in ages.

When he was able to move, he slipped out of her, careful not to let his weight crush her, and then moved to his side to unsheathe himself.

"I think I'll just lie here for a moment." Joanie sounded sleepy.

He rolled off the bed and turned to see her relaxed in the middle of the large bed, her lingerie slightly twisted on her body, but looking sexy as hell. Her hair tangled and fanned around her face. And she had the best "just-fucked" look on her face. No woman ever looked so at peace, so happy and content with life. Again a warm feeling of pride and possession sunk deep inside him.

"Lay there as long as you like."

She smiled as her eyes drifted closed. That he satisfied her so well that she couldn't move created a strength inside him that he couldn't ignore. Letting her go after a week would quite possibly be the hardest thing he would ever do in his life.

Chapter Thirteen

Joanie sat in the quiet café the next morning and stared at empty tables and chairs. The dining area smelled of bleach and other cleaning supplies that would soon be replaced with the fresh aroma of fried foods and coffee once the café opened for lunch. A rather erratic banging came from the kitchen, where Corbin worked to fix a plumbing leak. Fortunately, Grandmother opted to trail her grandson and leave Joanie in peace. She wasn't sure she'd be able to handle the older woman's all-knowing and rather scrutinizing looks.

"You're zoning out." Tory stood next to her, leaning on a broom handle.

Joanie didn't hear the teenager approach and couldn't deny the girl's words. She was more than distracted today after such incredible sex yesterday. Not to mention her fears that Corbin was doing more than just crawling under her skin. He was crawling into her heart. A very dangerous place for him to be.

"I guess you're right." Joanie leaned back, realizing she held her cell phone in her hand. She placed it on the table and took in the pretty girl with her black hair that was the same shade and texture as Corbin's. In faded blue jeans and a tank top, her girlish figure was more than on display. "Do you work here every day?"

Tory rolled her eyes and obviously took the question as invitation to sit and join Joanie for conversation. "With school out, I'm their slave labor. I have no life."

"You seem happy every time that I see you." Joanie personally didn't like the amount of makeup Tory wore. She would be so much prettier without the heavy black eyeliner and dark blush that covered her beautiful caramel-colored skin. "And I'm sure your grandmother couldn't handle everything without you."

"I do everything," she instantly complained. Then as if realizing she sounded whiny, she spoke quieter and with a softer tone. "Grandmother doesn't want to give this place up. It's all she has left. But she really can't do the work anymore."

"That makes you one incredibly wonderful young lady."

Tory's eyes sparkled from the compliment and she grinned so broadly that Joanie guessed she didn't hear praise that much.

"It still would be nice to hang out with my friends sometimes. The only time we get to hang is when they come in here. And than Grandmother treats every guy like he's a prospective husband for me."

Joanie couldn't help laughing at the image that popped into her mind at Tory's words. "I imagine that means not a lot of guys come down here to see you."

Tory shrugged, either implying it was true and she didn't care or that she didn't want Joanie to know how many guys her age tried seeking her out.

"So are you and my Uncle Corbin really hitting it off? Was all that sex charm stuff really for real?"

"I threw it away. Why would I need it to like your uncle? He's a really neat guy."

Tory rolled her eyes and then leaned on her elbows and studied Joanie carefully as if searching for something. Tory's soft green eyes looked darker with so much makeup.

"Maybe Grandmother's right. Maybe it is so powerful that just being exposed to it hooked the two of you up. I mean, no offense, and I don't want to burst your bubble or anything, but Uncle Corbin isn't all that."

"He's not?"

"No." Tory leaned in closer, like she had a secret no one else could hear. "He's boring as hell. Excuse my French. And Grandmother says he could be a millionaire and instead he puts bad guys in jail. She says there isn't any money in that. So he's got no drive. And when he's not working, all he wants to do is restore the old family cabin. It's out in the middle of nowhere. So on top of no drive, he's boring. I guess I already said that part—he's boring twice over."

Joanie fought a smile. Tory's definition of boring twice over sounded like perfection to Joanie. "I'll keep all of that in mind. Not that it matters. I'm leaving at the end of the week."

Saying the words out loud bummed her out. If this week could last forever, it would end too soon.

"Where are you from?" Tory kicked back in her chair, pulling one leg up to show off a large hole in the jeans at her knee, and then rested her hand over it. Black nail polish covered her short fingernails.

"Seattle, Washington. Have you ever been to the States?"

"We are a state, and no, I've never been to the lower forty-eight."

Joanie nodded solemnly. "I stand corrected."

"What's it like? Is it like here?"

"Seattle is a large city, so no, it's not like here."

"I've been to Anchorage where Uncle Corbin works. He tried to get me to do filing and stuff last summer while he was in between secretaries, but I'm not a suit and tie kind of gal."

Joanie imagined there was a fair amount of truth in that statement. "Does he go through a lot of secretaries?"

"Well, the one he's got now he's had since he hired her last summer. He's probably an ogre to work for too."

Joanie wondered if Tory was trying to convince her not to like Corbin. There might be some jealousy or protective love at play here. Well she wouldn't stress the young girl out by making her think she had another woman who might get in the way of her uncle's attention toward her.

"Sounds like he might be. Being a legal secretary is a hard job even when you have a wonderful boss."

"How would you know?"

"I'm a legal secretary."

"You're kidding. No shit?" This time Tory didn't apologize for her profanity. She chewed her lower lip, stewing over this new knowledge. "That's amazing that you're both in the same line of work." She then looked up hopefully. "You probably work for a lawyer who makes tons of bucks though, right?"

"Some of them like to make you believe that they make more money than they really do."

"I hate fake people."

"Me too."

Something clamored in the kitchen and Joanie looked in that direction as Tory glanced over her shoulder as well. "I'm sure Uncle Corbin will just make it worse back there."

"I have no idea," Joanie murmured and then silenced when Grandmother raised her voice and started yelling in her own language. "What is she speaking?"

"Yupik. She's telling Corbin that he's making too much noise and her headache will come back." Tory found this rather funny. "Walking across the carpet barefoot can make Grandmother's headache come back."

"She must not be all that bad if you spend so much time with her."

"I do only because Uncle Corbin won't let me stay with him." Suddenly the uncle she berated now sounded like someone she wanted to spend more time with.

"Where are your parents?"

"You're kidding, right?" Tory raised her eyebrow, looking even more defiant. "Last I heard, Mom was in Minnesota, I think. And Mom isn't even sure who my Dad is. At least that's what she's told me. You've met all the real family that I have."

"Oh. I'm really sorry." Joanie couldn't imagine anyone taking off on their child. Maybe her mother traveled with some kind of work, although the way Tory made it sound, she never came home. She decided not to press the subject from the way Tory's expression hardened so quickly at the mention of her parents.

"Don't look at me like that. Like I'm some pathetic creature because my Mom ditched me. I'm okay, you know?"

"God, Tory." Without thinking, she reached across the table and grabbed the girl's hand that rested on her knee before Tory could pull away. "Okay doesn't begin to describe you. I can't think of any teenager that I know of who is willing to work as hard as you do. And look at how pretty you are."

"Don't forget smart. I make all A's." Tory was quick to forgive as her smile returned at Joanie's praise. "And maybe I misjudged you. I'm pretty good at figuring out people. It's not your fault that you missed your ship, right?"

"I admit if I hadn't been so taken back by the meaning behind that necklace, I probably would have paid closer attention to the time."

"That makes it Grandmother's fault." Tory had the most beautiful smile. "You better beware though, she really believes in all of that stuff. She's losing sleep searching for a spell to undo the magic she is sure is wrapped around you and Corbin."

Magic would explain why she was falling so hard for a man she'd only known for a few days now. "She's not really losing sleep because of me, is she?"

Tory nodded seriously. "Yesterday when I busted my butt here all afternoon, she was over at Aunt Moira's house, sawing logs."

Joanie glanced past Tory toward the kitchen where the noise continued, although the yelling had stopped. "She is an old woman—maybe she just needed a nap."

"Maybe." Tory looked beyond Joanie, her expression changing quickly as she stared toward the front door.

Joanie glanced over her shoulder. At first she didn't see what might have grabbed Tory's attention, but then she did. Several teenagers stood across the street, and one of them seemed to glance at the restaurant continually. He was a tall, lanky boy, his hair a bit too long and the clothing he wore so baggy, it was impossible to tell if he was as gaunt as his face implied. She looked back at Tory, who shifted her attention quickly to her fingernails.

"Tell you what," Joanie said, whispering. "Go say hi. I'll sweep up in here. Just be back in fifteen minutes so you're not missed."

"Really?" Tory jumped up quickly and shoved the broom, which had been leaning against the table, at Joanie. "Maybe you aren't so bad. And I swear I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

The teenager galloped toward the door.

"Stay where you can be seen from the store." Joanie didn't call out too loud, fearful that if Grandmother heard her, the delight in Tory's face at the prospect of hanging out with kids her own age would vanish quickly.

Joanie stood as well, leaning on the broom handle and watching as Tory hurried across the street and up to the young boy who waited for her. It wasn't that she wanted brownie points with the teenager. Tory didn't need to like her, although Joanie wouldn't deny she hated it when anyone didn't think highly of her. But Joanie remembered working her summers away, determined to go to college when her family didn't have the money to send her. She hated not having a chance to flirt with the cute guys. It wasn't fair that all the other girls played their summers away without a care about their future.

And look where it got her. Tory had family who really loved her, in spite of the implication that her mother neglected her. But giving her a few minutes to enjoy herself wouldn't hurt anything. She quickly began sweeping, working her way under each table, and dared to risk hurting her heart even more by imagining what it might be like to actually be a part of this small family and their perfect, imperfect lives.

She almost didn't hear her cell phone ringing on the table over the steady hammering coming from the kitchen. Leaving the broom next to the small pile of dirt that she'd gathered, Joanie managed to grab her phone before it rang enough times to go to voicemail.

She'd already entered her lawyer's number in her phone when she'd tried calling it yesterday afternoon. Tingles crawled down her spine as she stared at her lawyer's name on her cell phone and then quickly answered it.

"Hello," she said. She started wondering if reality didn't intentionally decide to kick her in the butt every time she decided to fantasize about the unrealistic.

"Is this Joanie Showalter?" a female voice that was all business asked.

"Yes it is."

"Joanie, hi, this is April Wright. I got your voicemail message yesterday. How are you? I hear you are enjoying an Alaskan Cruise."

"Yes. I am." There wasn't any reason she could see as to why her lawyer needed to know the details surrounding her vacation.

"I look forward to hearing about it. Those cruises are supposed to be wonderful. We really need to set up a time to meet in person. When will you be home?"

"Next week. And I return to work immediately. Over lunch or in the evening would work best for me." Focusing on life after this week grounded her.

And knowing she would go home and focus on finalizing her divorce depressed her even further. If only the whole matter would be settled and she wouldn't have to deal with any of it.

"Let's try for next Wednesday night, a week from today? Does seven sound good to you? If you like, I'll shoot you an e-mail as a reminder. I'm sure all of this is the last thing you want to think about right now."

"You're right about that." Her laugh was dry and she glanced at the counter, wondering if she could help herself to a glass of water.

"After looking over everything and requesting financial information from Tommy Showalter, I see no problem in getting you half the value of that house." April cleared her throat and then was silent for a moment.

"That's amazing. Should I hire an appraiser so we know its value?"

"I'm already on it." This time when she sighed quickly, it was clear she'd called for another reason.

"Is there anything else?" Joanie's back itched, like annoying fingertips brushed over her in all the spots she couldn't reach with her hands.

"I guess it can wait until we meet next week. You're up there to have a good time, not focus on all of this mess."

"Mess?" She rubbed her eyes, scared to think what devious plotting Tommy might be up to while she'd been gone. "I should have chosen another word." Again April paused. "But okay, let me ask a quick question. Do you own part, or all, of your husband's business?"

"Of his law practice?"

"Yes."

"He handles all of his books. I wasn't allowed to have anything to do with his law firm." Once she would be quick to explain how Tommy felt it kept their marriage stronger if they each had their own careers. Obviously that explanation was moot. "I think when he first opened up his practice, he put both of our names on it."

"His lawyer faxed a request form, requiring your signature, stating that you acknowledge no ownership in his business. But after reading it, I noticed that your signature will state your agreement not to practice any type of law anywhere in the state of Washington for the next five years."

"Practice law? I'm not a lawyer."

"According to the terms laid out here, I take it to mean that you couldn't work in the legal field in this state for the next five years—that is, if you agree to sign it."

"Sounds like I need to read it." She couldn't believe Tommy would write up such a thing. Did he want her to leave town? Leave the state?

Who the hell was she fooling by getting upset over this? Minutes ago she fantasized about never returning to Washington.

"I can show it to you when we meet, or if you like, I can fax it to you."

"Fax it to me." She wouldn't ignore her life. "Give me a minute to get the fax number for you."

"Do you want me to send it to the same number I faxed the other papers to?"

If all Tommy got out of their ten years of marriage was the assumption that she was an idiot, that was his problem.

Remembering Grandmother was back there and might swipe anything that came in on her fax machine before Joanie or Corbin could get to it, she shook her head, then looked up.

Corbin stood nearby, leaning against the counter with hammer in hand, work belt hanging from his hip and an incredibly brooding expression on his face. He glanced past her and she did the same, noticing Tory leaning against the door to the place, looking like she just got caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

How long had the two of them been standing there?

She returned her attention to Corbin, refusing to cut her lawyer short simply because she had eavesdroppers. "I won't give up my only means of supporting myself simply because he's being an ass. Let me call you back with a fax number and I'll go over and amend where needed."

Now April laughed. "That's what you're paying me for."

Joanie tried smiling, but anger surged inside her. Tommy was a fucking bastard.

"I'm sure it will need proofed and edited," she said to assure her attorney.

Corbin walked to her table, his pace silent and determined, taking only a moment to glance at the broom and small pile of dirt next to it before reclining in the chair opposite her. She noticed then how white his knuckles were around the hammer.

"Is there something else to be faxed?" His baritone sounded as controlled as his expression looked.

She nodded. He rattled off a number and she repeated it to April. Then confirming once again their appointment the following week, she said her goodbyes and hung up. Trepidation rippled over her skin when she decided he looked anything but pleased. Maybe working alongside Grandmother simply put him in a foul mood and it had nothing to do with her phone conversation.

Corbin looked over at Tory. "Why did you leave the restaurant and not finish your work?"

Tory stalked over to him, looking ready to take him on as she fisted her hands next to her hips. Joanie stood up, deciding Corbin definitely looked angry.

"I suggested she take a fifteen minute break." She stepped between the teenager and Corbin. "And I'm the one who didn't finish sweeping because my phone rang."

Corbin reached for her, pulling her until she stood by his side, and cleared his path to Tory. The teenager's gaze dropped to where he held Joanie's arm, but then shifted quickly to look her uncle in the face.

"I just went outside for a few to talk to some friends. Is there a crime in that?"

Joanie sighed, wishing Tory understood that getting mouthy with an adult would never keep her out of trouble. But then what teenager had that figured out?

Tory met her gaze and bit her lip. Surprisingly, she actually appeared to comprehend Joanie's nonverbal communication. "All I did was go say hi. I was just outside. And I know I have work to do."

She hurried over to the broom and began sweeping furiously. Apparently that was Tory's best effort at showing respect toward her elders. Corbin stood slowly and Joanie turned to face him, placing her hand on his rock-hard chest. He looked down at her and whatever demons swarmed inside him a moment ago faded quickly and his green eyes turned a sultry shade, deepening in color.

"What are you having faxed to you?"

"Oh." It was too damned easy to forget everything around her when she was near him. "We need to get that before your grandmother picks it up."

"The number I gave you will fax it to my home." He brushed his knuckles down her cheek, his expression softening further. "And the leak is fixed. Are you ready to go? Or do you wish to nurture my wayward niece some more?"

"There isn't anything wrong with allowing her to enjoy being a kid from time to time." Joanie reminded herself that raising Tory wasn't any of her business. "She's an awesome kid though."

"Don't let her fool you." Corbin looked over her head in Tory's direction. "And yes, she is. Her grandmother and I are probably too strict with her. We just don't want her ending up like her mother."

Joanie nodded, fighting not to ask more about her. Getting involved with his family would make it even harder to let him go in a few days. And she already knew going home and never seeing Corbin again would be more painful than dealing with her divorce.

Dinner consisted of sandwiches, of which Corbin ate two. She barely finished one, and enjoyed her tossed salad immensely. There wasn't any wine tonight but at the suggestion of coffee, she discovered the connoisseur side of him.

Corbin produced his cappuccino maker and grinned at her. "Go relax in front of the fire. I'll make you a cup that you'll never forget."

She didn't relax in front of the fire, although she sat on the couch by it. Now, sipping on the heavenly brew, a rich chocolate flavor making it taste sinful, she leaned back in the corner, focusing on Corbin as he read the letter sent to her lawyer and her penciled comments that she'd scribbled all over it.

"Where is Tory's mother?" She'd fought the urge to ask and finally caved in to her curiosity.

Corbin glanced up from the paper. "When she called over Christmas, she was in Minnesota."

Joanie chewed her lip while Corbin watched her. Apparently he knew she wanted to ask more and would let her, although he wasn't going to simply offer the story of why Tory lived without a parent in her life.

"Tory made the comment that her mother ditched her. I was just curious."

"She's right. Clara took off when Tory was three and too much maintenance for my free-spirited sister to handle. My brother offered to take her in, but Seward is the only town Tory has ever known. Grandmother and I do our best with her. And I know I'm not around enough for her."

"She's really an awesome kid." She reached out and grabbed his knee, wanting to reassure him. "I didn't mean to be out of line today when I suggested she say hi to her friends. I got the impression she was doing everything in her power to show me how bad of a catch you would be. With every criticism, I could tell how much she really loves her uncle."

Corbin narrowed his brows and then ran his index finger down the length of the back of her hand. "Uh huh. I'm not sure how to take that."

"Take it that your niece is very protective and possessive of her uncle."

"Those are strong traits in Silvers when we care about someone."

"Then I can see that both of you care about each other very much." She couldn't pull her eyes away from the powerful gaze that devoured her.

Protective and possessive. She had no doubts.

When he didn't say anything, but continued stroking her hand and watching her, she cleared her throat and tore her attention from his face to the piece of paper in his hand.

"Here's what you're going to do. In all actuality, this letter cinches your ability to get what you want and need out of this divorce," he said, surprising her that he could suddenly turn all business when she would swear he was just undressing her with his eyes.

"How so?"

"Your ex wants something. My guess is that he remembered your name was on his business and panicked. It's the only reason I can think of that he would make such an asinine request." Corbin picked up her hand, holding it in his much larger hand. Their skin color contrasted and complemented each other nicely. He continued speaking while studying her fingers. "Like I said, here is what you're going to do. Tell him that you'll relinquish all shares of his law practice to him and in return, he will buy out your half of that home—and not equity, but half of the appraised value of the house."

"Damn." She wasn't sure of the current market value of their home, but half of it would be a pretty nice chunk.

"I know." Corbin grinned at her, flashing pearly whites while his eyes sparkled like emeralds. "I'm good."

"Yes. You are."

When she was positive he leaned into her in order to kiss her, he paused with his face so close to hers that his breath seared her skin. "And this clause about you not working in Washington will be deleted from this letter before you sign it, unless of course you would rather work in another state."

"I don't have a job in another state."

"I'd be willing to bet any law firm you approached would offer you a job."

She blinked, unwilling to let the meaning behind his statement sink in. It did anyway. "No attorney that is any good would hire a legal secretary without knowing her ability to work, her job history, references."

"You're right."

Had he done research on her? Her stomach twisted and suddenly she was lightheaded imagining him doing a search on her, learning everything there was to know about her. It was all too easy to picture him doing just that. Corbin was driven enough to go after anything he wanted. Again her tummy did a number on her system while nervous, excited energy shot through her.

"I guess I don't have to worry about any of that since you've helped me ensure that I can continue working where I am."

He growled, or maybe he muttered something under his breath. If so, she didn't catch it. And she couldn't ask him because he devoured her mouth, pulling her to him

by her hand. Joanie collapsed on his chest, feeling the solid beat of his heart as her own heart swelled even further with raw and unleashed feelings for him.

He ran his fingertips up her spine and then tangled them in her hair as he deepened the kiss. Swelling built inside her—and then someone knocked loudly on the door.

Chapter Fourteen

Joanie would have tumbled to the floor if Corbin didn't hold her firmly against him.

"Shit," he grumbled, already hating whoever just knocked on the door and interrupted what he had hoped would be an entire evening of awesome sex with Joanie.

The person outside knocked again, just as hard and with quick, solid raps. Obviously willing the intruder to disappear wasn't going to work.

"Who would be here?" Joanie looked more nervous than a cat.

He straightened, lifting her off him but holding her still. Then standing, he ran his hands over her hair that he'd just messed up and smiled down at her.

"Don't worry. Whoever it is, you have more right to be here than they do."

She didn't look convinced. "The way they're pounding? Sounds like they feel they have a right to be here too."

"I'll give you that." He loved the flush in her cheeks, how her lips were moist and slightly parted. She looked ready and eager to ride him, and their visitor better have incredibly important news or they were going right back where they came from.

He turned from her and went to the door. Joanie stayed where she was, shifting from one foot to the other and looking like she couldn't decide whether to stay put or bolt into the other room.

Turning the deadbolt, he pulled the door open and glared at his furious grandmother and the rather amused looking expression on his niece's face.

"Suddenly you have no manners?" Grandmother pushed past him and walked into the living room. "Since when do I have to hurt my own knuckles pounding just to enter my own home?"

"I knocked, Grandmother." Tory followed her inside, glancing up at Corbin with a shit-eating grin on her face.

More than likely she was glad he was going to get yelled at this time and not her.

"Why did you drive all the way out here at night?" he demanded, feeling grumpiness attack with a vengeance as Grandmother shuffled into the middle of the living room.

Grandmother's grin was triumphant when she turned to face him. She reached into the deep pocket of her smock, then pulled something out. "You forgot your screwdriver," she announced, holding it up like a sword between them.

"Got any food?" Tory made a beeline for the kitchen.

"I'm sure there's something." Joanie almost flew off the couch after her.

She didn't look at him or Grandmother as she followed his niece out of the living room. Corbin didn't blame her. Although it sucked that Grandmother worked harder to make people not like her than like her.

"You came all the way out here to return my screwdriver?" He accepted the tool, then gripped its cold handle and scowled down at the woman who raised him. "I've never known you to pussyfoot around what you really wanted to say."

She raised one eyebrow and he knew he shouldn't have said what he just did, even before she let him have it.

"You are living in sin in the very house where your Grandfather and I, bless his soul, raised you." She paused and kissed her fingers then looked adoringly at the ceiling, but not long enough for him to get a word in. "To think I loved you as if I birthed you myself and this is what it has come to."

"Grandmother," he interrupted her firmly. "You are making a big deal out of nothing."

"Out of nothing?" Grandmother raised her hands to the ceiling and then lowered them, patting her heart with one plump hand. She walked halfway across the room, then returned to face him, the smell of fried foods and coffee increasing the longer she tapped her hand against her chest. "So you have some spell caster locked up in your family home, fornicating more times than I'm sure I want to know, and all of it is nothing. Thank you for letting me know that I don't have to help plan a wedding."

Corbin took his grandmother by her arms and would have lowered his face to hers if she didn't start slapping at him to let her go.

"Don't you try to appease me with kind words, Corbin Wayne Silver. I know what kind of man you are. You're just like your father and his father before him." Again she looked at the ceiling. "May they rest in peace. You are a good man, a strong man. Granted, you could be richer, but what can a grandmother do?"

Lord help him if she started in on that subject. His grandmother always did believe he should have more money. If he didn't dump so much of it into her restaurant, he probably would.

This time when he grabbed her, he managed to back her up until she sat on the couch and then quickly sat next to her, holding her hands firmly. "You could be happy that I'm happy, Grandmother," he said, almost whispering as he stared into her watery brown eyes. "You should sit down with Joanie, see how wonderful she is for yourself."

"Bah!" She yanked her hands from his and then slapped his arm. "She's cast a spell on you. That's what all of this is."

"There is no spell!" He realized he had yelled and lowered his voice quickly. "That necklace was thrown away a couple days ago," he added, again almost whispering.

He fought his annoyance when Grandmother stuck out her lower jaw. It would take a magic spell to convince the old woman that no foul play existed here.

"Then obviously its magic is running deep in your veins." Grandmother shook her head, looking purposely disappointed. "There is no other explanation for you locking yourself away out here with that woman. She is nothing to you, nothing. If she had money, a good family, then she would be gone by now. And she certainly isn't some young, sweet thing who could give me loads of grandbabies."

"That's enough!" Corbin stood, again yelling when his temper took over. He wouldn't stand for her sitting here and insulting Joanie when she knew nothing about her. "Your comments are out of line, and if you aren't careful, I'll send you in there to apologize."

"Lord help us." She made a show of standing very slowly, when he knew damned good and well she could jump to her feet and come running if she wanted to. "Now you would insult your own family over her. Corbin, my favorite grandson, we need you to see that it's nothing more than a spell that makes you think she is something. It is so clear to the rest of us that she's nothing."

"Nothing is clear to you, Grandmother." His voice bounced off the walls and he paced the length of the room then turned and glared at her. "Your belief in all of that nonsense is blocking your vision, not mine. Take the time to get to know her and then cast your judgment."

"I'll do no such thing." She pushed her fists into her plump sides and spread her legs as if she would charge like a bull. He wasn't the only one blessed with the Silver temper. "You get that woman out of this house!"

"The only reason she is here is because of your psychobabble. She missed her cruise out of here because my family convinced her she'd done something wrong. That kind of news upsets a lady with class."

"With class, my big foot," Grandmother snapped. "I wouldn't be surprised if she knew all along that she wore a magic charm around her neck. She probably saw you, knew you were the catch of the town and manipulated your mind before you had a chance to fight her off."

"There is no magic!" He sliced his hand through the air, aching to pound his fist into something, anything. Putting a hole in the wall sounded grossly appealing right now.

"Yes there is! If there weren't, you wouldn't have her out here like this. You've never behaved like this in your whole life." Grandmother matched his level of yelling and stepped forward, looking up at him. She was angrier than he'd seen her in a long time.

"Enough!" Joanie's shrill voice got both of their attention. "I won't ruin a family like this." Tears streamed down her cheek and she breathed heavily as she looked from him to Grandmother. "I promise I didn't know anything about that necklace. But that doesn't matter now. You're right. It's wrong for me to be here. It's destroying the love that I've seen in your family. I don't want that. I'll leave."

"Like hell you will," Corbin growled.

She walked up to him, extending her hand like she would touch him, but then dropped it, looking utterly defeated. Damn Grandmother for making Joanie so miserable. Joanie looked at Grandmother and stayed arm's length away from him.

"I'm really sorry. So incredibly, very sorry. I hate thinking that I've made you so angry. You hate me and we don't even know each other. I'll leave. Let me get my bags and I'll leave right now."

Grandmother straightened, looking like she just won the big bingo, but was too stubborn to utter a word.

"Corbin!" Tory yelled at him from the doorway. "Grandmother!" His niece tried grabbing Joanie when she headed for the stairs. "God. Don't leave."

Joanie rushed past Tory, bounding up the stairs. Tory turned and glared at Corbin. "She's the best thing that has entered our family in forever. Don't you dare just let her walk out of here. I swear I'll never talk to you again if you do."

"Watch how you speak to your uncle, girl," Grandmother hissed, still looking proud enough to burst.

"No!" Tory stamped her foot. "Corbin is right. I tried telling Joanie in the kitchen when she started crying because you two were yelling. She wouldn't listen to me. No one ever listens to me. Joanie is terrific." She glared at both of them when neither said a word. Finally, exhaling and looking as defeated as Joanie just did, she walked up and hugged him. "Please don't let her leave, Uncle Corbin. Please."

Corbin couldn't remember the last time Tory had hugged him. Her thin little body, with her small arms that barely reached around him, trembled so hard he didn't have the heart to pull her away from him.

"Grandmother, you're wrong about there being a spell. And I'll prove it to you." He gently took Tory and unwrapped her arms from his waist. "She isn't going anywhere. Not because of any spell, but because it's the right thing to do to let her stay here after we filled her head with nonsense."

Grandmother opened her mouth to counter his statement and he held his hand up, silencing her. Amazingly, it worked.

"I will prove to you that no magic is at play between Joanie and me. She will remain here until her cruise leaves. I will leave." He let go of Tory and headed for the door, yanking it open and then closing it with a dull thud behind him.

"Okay. So let me see if I've got all of this right." Teddy carried a rolled-up sleeping bag into his living room. He looked confused but a small smile played on his face as he replayed everything Corbin just told him. "You left your own home to prove to your grandmother that there isn't some love spell cast on you by that hot little thing that missed her ship. Do I got it right?"

"Pretty much sums it up." Corbin rubbed his face with his hands as he sat on Teddy's lumpy couch. For a man who made so much money, he obviously didn't spend

it on furniture. This thing looked like it was left over from some college party—smelled like it too.

"So now you're going to render yourself homeless until she returns to wherever it is she came from?"

"Yup."

"And all to prove to your grandmother that you aren't under some spell."

Corbin looked up just as Teddy tossed the rolled sleeping bag in his direction. He caught the thing as an image of Joanie sleeping all alone in that large king-sized bed entered his mind. He would so much rather be with her than here on this lumpy couch.

"I did it for Joanie too." Putting the sleeping bag next to him, he reached down and began taking his boots off. "She doesn't deserve the slander Grandmother laid on her. She didn't know anything about that necklace. She can't handle thinking Grandmother hates her because of all this. Man, she was crying."

"Shit," Teddy hissed. "Sounds like I wouldn't be a best friend if I didn't go over and see what I could do to console her."

Corbin stiffened. "Stay away from her."

"Maybe that thing is magic."

"Not you too." Corbin kicked his boots off then stuffed his socks inside each of them. It was going to be one hell of a long night. Might as well at least try for comfort. "You got any more blankets? And care if I watch TV?"

"I'm just saying," Teddy went on, ignoring Corbin's requests. "You can't handle the thought of her crying and would kick my ass if I tried coming on to her."

"Right on both counts." Corbin spotted the remote on the edge of the coffee table and leaned over to grab it. Punching the sleeping bag with his fist, he then leaned back on it, turning it into a pillow, and aimed the remote at the TV.

Teddy pulled a knitted afghan off the back of one of his chairs, shook it open and then made a show out of covering up Corbin. "Want me to say prayers with you too?" he teased.

"I appreciate you letting me stay with you." He knew Teddy would let him in, and half anticipated all the ragging he was getting for being here.

Teddy moved around the coffee table and collapsed into the reclining chair that the afghan had been on. "Makes you think that charm, or whatever it is, might be more of a love spell thing than a sex spell thing. Or have you fucked her already too?"

"That's none of your business."

"Oh hell." Teddy grinned like a fool at him. "Is she good?"

"You think I can't still kick your ass?"

"Beat me up and I'll kick you out of my house," Teddy muttered, intentionally sounding deeply offended. Then shaking his head, he stared at Corbin like his friend didn't have long to live or something. "Maybe staying with me isn't the best idea. I

mean, if you got it that bad for the lady, you going to let your grandmother put an end to it?"

"I'm not going to let Grandmother ridicule her and ruin Joanie's time here. You didn't see how crushed she looked after overhearing Grandmother's insults."

"And staying here is going to make your grandmother come around?" Teddy asked, shaking his head and answering his question as he asked it.

"I had to do something."

"Whatever. If it were me, I'd at least be calling my lady and making sure she understood why I took off on her. If it were me," he added, mumbling under his breath. "But, like you said, there's no such thing as magic, or sex charms, or any of that bullshit. And after several days, you don't just fall in love with a lady and want to spend the rest of your life with her. We don't believe in fairy tales. I'm sure staying here probably is smart. Let you two clear your heads of each other. Maybe before she takes off, you two can have lunch and a good laugh over all of this then go back to your own worlds and never think of each other again."

"Right." Corbin instantly hated Teddy for his summation of the situation. "Maybe I will call her and make sure she's okay."

"Yeah. I'm just saying..." Teddy got up and stretched, scratching his belly and then rubbing his hair with his palm. He nodded once to Corbin, his expression stone serious, even though his dark eyes were full of amusement. "You do what you got to do. You know my place is here for you as long as you need it. Just don't drink all of my beer. I'm headed to bed. Some of us have to work in the morning."

Corbin waited until he quit hearing Teddy moving around in the back bedroom. Retrieving his phone from his pocket, he stared at it for a while, thinking about what he would say to Joanie. Would she still be at his home?

He willed her in his head to be so. Joanie didn't have a car. Grandmother wouldn't give her a ride anywhere. And even if for some miraculous reason Grandmother pulled a complete turnaround, Joanie wouldn't ask for a ride and would decline if one was offered.

Unless Grandmother kicked her out of the house. Tory wouldn't let that happen. But then, would either of them listen to his mouthy niece?

Punching the numbers for her cell phone, praying he remembered the number right—God, why hadn't he saved the number to his phone—an irritating sheen of sweat soaked his body as he listened to the number ring at the other end.

It rang three...four times. He pulled the phone from his ear and confirmed the time. Fucking nine-thirty in the evening. When the number went to voicemail, Joanie's cheerful tone rang in his ear.

"Joanie. This is Corbin. Call me back." He pulled the phone away from the side of his head and stared at the pale blue glow on its tiny screen as he hung up. He felt like pacing, putting his fist through a wall, jumping up and storming back out to his home, anything other than lying on this damned couch. Placing the phone on his gut, every muscle in his body felt racked as he aimed the remote at the TV and surfed for a minute. Finally he grabbed his cell again and pushed the button to call the last number dialed.

Once again he listened to the phone ring, counted each ring, and almost cracked the remote from holding it too tight when once again it went to voicemail.

Maybe her phone was in another room and she didn't hear it ringing.

Wouldn't it cross her mind that he might try to call her?

On an impulse, he hung up quickly and dialed the number to the cabin. There was an extension in the master bedroom. Even if she decided to sleep in another room, she would hear the house phone ringing. It dawned on him then that he hadn't started a fire upstairs. It could get damned cold at night without fires going in that place.

Dear Lord. Please let her know how to start a fire.

"Hello?" A weary-sounding woman's voice cracked over the one word as she answered after one ring.

"Joanie?"

"Corbin?" she asked, her tone suddenly sounding excited. "Oh, Corbin."

The pain that tore over every inch of his body dissipated when she whispered his name in his ear.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. But where are you? You didn't even take your wallet. It's on the dresser up here. Please tell me you aren't cramped and freezing somewhere in your truck."

She was worried about him. With all the pain gone, a new sensation washed over him. Pride...satisfaction...incredible happiness? It swelled inside him, warming every inch of his body and making him feel so damned good that his cheeks started aching from grinning like an idiot at the ceiling.

"Sweetheart, I'm fine. I went over to a good buddy of mine's house."

"Teddy Bear?" she asked.

His grin broadened. "Yeah. His couch sucks but I'm okay. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

She laughed and he imagined her adjusting herself under all the covers in that huge bed. Was she wearing any clothes? Had she found one of his shirts to sleep in? Maybe the lingerie that he bought her. His cock stretched inside his jeans and he reached under the afghan to loosen the top button of his pants.

"Tory and your grandmother left right after you did. And just a while ago, Tory showed back up. She's staying with me tonight."

For a moment he'd entertained the thought of heading back out there. Grandmother wouldn't return this late at night. But so much for that idea.

"Did you two make a fire?"

"Yes." Again she laughed. It was music in his ears. "And she's lying here next to me watching TV. We were having a nice conversation before you called."

He couldn't imagine anyone having a nice conversation with his mouthy niece. Joanie obviously brought out a side of Tory the rest of them hadn't been able to reach.

"Well I'm glad you're okay."

"Are you coming home? It's not right that you left just so I could stay here."

"I don't want you staying anywhere else."

"I won't," she agreed quietly, sounding like she wanted to say more but unable to with his niece lying next to her.

The little brat. She lay where he ached to be.

"So much for my illusion that you wore your lingerie."

This time she giggled. "That's a nice thought," she said, again obviously curbing her words.

"Joanie," he said, and then hesitated. What did he want to say to her?

He didn't want her to leave. Something was happening between the two of them. He would see her first thing in the morning. Maybe she should see about extending her vacation and staying with him longer.

So many possible things to say sprang into his mind.

Grandmother was right and I've fallen in love with you.

He sucked in his breath with that one and then quickly kicked the afghan off him and to the floor.

"What did you want?" she prodded, her voice so soft and soothing he wanted to keep the conversation going forever just to hear her speaking in his head.

"I'm very sorry for my Grandmother's outburst tonight. Nothing she said about you is right. She can be an annoying pain in the ass sometimes."

"That's what Tory said." She told his niece what he just said and Tory muttered something about putting Grandmother in her place for a change. Joanie quietly told Tory that the old woman simply cared very much for him and Tory and they all simply had to make allowances for her stubborn love, which would never change at this age. "Her words didn't bother me as much as I hated seeing how much she upset you," she told him, and he knew she lied.

"I couldn't bear seeing you cry," he confessed, able to share that much of his feelings with her.

"I wish you hadn't left."

"It's the only way to show her that there isn't some ridiculous spell latched onto the two of us."

"Seems to me a couple days ago you believed there was."

Tory said something excitedly in the background that he didn't catch. Joanie silenced her quickly, telling her it wasn't any of her business. It was damned amazing how easily Joanie could keep Tory in line.

"I played along. All I wanted to show you was how easy a man could fall for you and that there didn't need to be a charm involved for it to happen."

"Fall for me?" she whispered, her tone turning husky.

Heat washed over him and his dick swelled painfully inside his jeans. He reached down again and unzipped his pants, then glanced down at the tent of his boxers which thrust out of the confines of his pants.

"Yes. I think so." Telling her couldn't be a mistake.

"Same here," she whispered.

A shriek of excitement came from his obviously eavesdropping niece. At the same time, he almost fucking came. Joanie just admitted to him that she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

"Get some sleep." He needed to find a bathroom and masturbate. "We'll discuss this further when you don't have an audience."

"Good idea." There was a huge smile in her tone, and he easily saw it on her face in his mind.

Again he wanted to say more. Words were on the tip of his tongue and it shocked and amazed him that they almost tumbled out.

"Sleep well," he whispered, groaning at how musky and emotional his words sounded.

"You too," she whispered, sounding just as wound up as he did.

He told her goodbye and slowly put his cell phone down, knowing it would be hard as hell to fall asleep now. His muscles ached when he stood. But his brain was on fire, along with another part of his body. Praying Teddy wouldn't suddenly reappear from his bedroom, Corbin held onto his swollen and throbbing dick and made his way to the bathroom.

Chapter Fifteen

"Wait here and I'll go get Grandmother." Tory gave her a concerned look and then rushed back toward the kitchen.

Joanie turned around, searching the street outside and looking for Corbin's truck. It was after nine in the morning. He would show up soon. It wouldn't be long before she would be in his arms, feeling all of that muscle, seeing those deep, intense green eyes glowing as he looked down at her.

There were sounds in the kitchen and she distractedly glanced around at all of the empty tables until deciding to plop down in a chair at the table next to her. Thinking about Corbin right now would make this even harder. Although what she was about to say completely involved him.

She would focus on her side of it though. That was the only way Grandmother would buy any of it. Tory swore on a thousand Bibles that it had to be this way.

Joanie looked up so quickly she pinched the back of her neck when Tory and Grandmother appeared from the kitchen. Grandmother's hair was pulled exceptionally tight into a large bun behind her head. The flowery smock she wore made her look larger than she probably was. She crossed her arms over her bosom and pierced Joanie with dark, watery eyes.

Grandmother's consonants were harder when she uttered something under her breath.

Tory sighed. "She wants to know if you plan to use your magic on her."

Joanie held her breath, fighting to keep her expression calm. She shook her head. "Tell her no."

Tory opened her mouth to speak but Grandmother held up her hand. Her stockings made a swishing sound when her legs brushed against each other as she moved closer. She spoke again, continuing her tirade until she stood next to Joanie, looking down at her.

"She says she will only speak to you if you swear to whatever god you worship that you'll remove the spell from Corbin. If you don't swear, she will use her magic, which is much stronger than yours, to throw you out of her restaurant." Tory stood behind Grandmother, and when she finished speaking she rolled her eyes to the ceiling. Then pointing her index finger at her temple, she made a circular pattern in the air, implying her grandmother was nuts.

Joanie didn't focus on Tory but straightened, giving Grandmother an imploring look. "I'm glad you know magic. Maybe you can help me. I don't know how to remove the spell from Corbin."

Tory's jaw dropped, but Grandmother straightened, her expression softening instantly although she didn't say anything for a minute. Finally she pulled the chair next to Joanie away from the table and then sat. Her gaze narrowed on Joanie and crows feet increased the wrinkles on either side of her eyes. Joanie searched the old woman's face, looking for any family resemblance between Corbin and his grandmother. Grandmother was short and overweight, and her plump face was loaded with deep wrinkles. They were creased deeper around her mouth and eyes, giving the impression that she wore her emotions on her face most of her life. If so, Grandmother hadn't changed much. She frowned at Joanie, as if trying to learn her mind simply by looking at her. Finally, she leaned back in the chair, once again crossing her arms over her ample chest.

"You admit there is a spell." Her English was clear, although her accent slightly distracting.

"I don't know. I mean, I didn't know there was one until you pointed it out." Joanie softened her voice, doubting she would get a second chance to win Grandmother over. "But you know about this magic. And you were right. I don't know anything about it. And now I don't know what to do. Without Corbin, I'm lost."

Joanie threw her hands up in the air, praying a little theatrics wouldn't hurt. It wasn't right to mislead the older woman and she'd assured Tory she wouldn't do that. Grandmother wasn't a stupid woman, just a bit drawn to the theatrics. And Tory was at an incredibly impressionable age. Even if Joanie were in Tory's life for only a short time, she wouldn't teach the teenager that conning someone into believing something was the right thing to do.

"I know I am right." Grandmother's lips thinned into a straight line. "No one ever listens to an old woman."

"I'm listening now." Joanie tried not to interrupt but didn't want Grandmother taking off on a rant about how she was ignored. "Please help me. Tell me what to do. If not for me, for Corbin. A man should be in his own home, don't you think?"

Grandmother nodded fiercely. "Most definitely. No Silver ever abandons his home."

"Corbin didn't abandon his home," Tory cut in, ignoring Joanie's firm look. "He left so that Joanie wouldn't be homeless."

"Corbin knows that I didn't understand what the charm was. He's a very stubborn man. He thinks he is responsible for me now because his family discovered the magic charm. If only I knew what it was sooner and threw it away sooner."

Grandmother pushed herself to her feet, almost making the table topple when she leaned on it for leverage. "Corbin is very honorable. Always he does the right thing. And so now you come to Grandmother for help?"

She began pacing, shuffling across the floor and plucking at her lower lip when she turned around and made her way back to Joanie and Tory. Praying they'd accomplished what they came here to do, Joanie let Grandmother ponder their

conversation. Hopefully the old woman would see Joanie wasn't a bad person and that it wasn't her fault that she didn't know about the charm. Her only fault was ignorance.

"Yes," Joanie finally said. "I would like to know what I should do."

Grandmother poked Tory in the arm and said something in Yupik.

"You never said that," Tory snapped. She glared at Grandmother's back as the older woman hurried toward the kitchen. "I'm the one who told you that," she called after her.

"What?" Joanie whispered when Grandmother disappeared. "What's going on?"

"She said that she told me from the start that you were a good person." Tory still looked seriously put out.

Joanie grinned. "She did?"

Tory looked at her and for a moment didn't seem to understand why Joanie smiled.

"Where is she going?" It wasn't worth explaining to Tory that they came here to make Grandmother see that she was a good person, not the bad guy.

Tory shrugged. "I don't know what's she's doing."

Joanie started toward the kitchen hesitantly at the same time that Tory bounded after her grandmother. Joanie grabbed the teenager's thin arm before they made it around the counter.

"Let her think she was right about me all along," Joanie whispered.

"Why?" Tory whined.

"Because it's what we wanted—for Grandmother to approve of me. She's only going to do that if she thinks it was her idea for everyone to like me."

"I guess," Tory mumbled, rolling her eyes and obviously not liking the idea of humbling herself before her grandmother.

Joanie grinned at the young girl's backside and followed her to find Grandmother. The old woman paced the length of a curly chord attached to the wall phone as she spoke in excited Yupik. Joanie wondered if Corbin spoke this Inuit language and at the same time wondered where he was. If he went back home and discovered she wasn't there, he would come here next. Where else would she go?

Possibly he'd take time to search the house, see if her few personal items were still there. Not that she came with anything. All of her stuff was still in her assigned cabin on the ship. That is, if it were all still there. But the toothbrush, deodorant, hairbrush and makeup they'd bought the day she learned she would be staying here a week were all still on the bathroom counter. If for any reason he got some outlandish thought that she took off, those simple items should assure him otherwise.

So where was he?

What if there really were a spell and distance freed him of the magical charm? Joanie would die if Corbin didn't care to come find her. Because if he were somehow

charmed and now suddenly uncharmed, distance certainly didn't put indifference in her heart and mind.

In her heart. Shit.

Tory looked pale when she turned around and stared, dumbfounded, at Joanie. Her odd expression pulled Joanie from her thoughts.

"Uncle Corbin is going to kill us," she whispered.

"Why?" Joanie's tummy flip-flopped.

Grandmother's tone grew more and more excited as she spoke on the phone, gesturing wildly as if the person on the other end could see her. More than once she pushed the small lever on the wall phone to hang up the phone and then punched numbers with her stubby finger to place another call. Without knowing a single word that Grandmother said, trepidation still trickled down Joanie's spine like a fine line of sweat.

"Grandmother is calling everyone she knows, and probably a few she doesn't know, searching and begging for anyone who knows anything about spells to come forth and save her nephew." Tory shook her head slowly. Her skin looked almost pasty as she stared wide-eyed at Joanie. "This town gets superstitious over their own shadows. And Uncle Corbin isn't going to be thrilled about being the center of attention."

"I did this so she wouldn't hate me." Explaining her actions to a teenager wouldn't help matters.

If the picture Tory painted held any accuracy, she needed to find Corbin before he found her.

"She doesn't hate you." Tory grinned for the first time, although she still looked a bit scared. "She's telling everyone she talks to that this sweet lady and her nephew are in a jam and need help getting out from under a sex spell. She's worried about your health and stamina while the two of you are bewitched."

"Oh God." Joanie's hand went to her mouth while her cheeks burned. "That isn't what she's really saying, is it?"

"Yup. I'm not even exaggerating." Tory drew a cross over her chest with her finger. "I swear."

"Does Corbin have a really nasty, bad temper?"

Tory placed her cool hand on Joanie's arm. "He won't hit you, if that's what you're worried about. Mostly he just puts holes in walls and throws furniture."

"Lovely." She looked over her shoulder and scanned the empty dining area, then squinted at the glare coming through the windows. She couldn't see out into the street. "Do you know where Teddy Bear, Corbin's friend, lives?"

"I've been over there a few times with Uncle Corbin." Suddenly Tory was excited. "Do you want me to take you there?"

"I've got to find him by myself." Joanie wouldn't hear any of Tory's arguments. "Someone has to stay here and make sure Grandmother doesn't cause more trouble than she already is."

After a bit of arguing and, surprisingly, finally with Grandmother's support, Joanie left Tory at the restaurant on the premise that she needed to start working in order to open the place at noon. Grandmother sent Joanie out the door with her blessings, informing her that before sundown there would be no more magic cursing her poor body.

It seemed like she climbed inside Corbin when she slid behind the large, metal steering wheel of the old truck. Even though she knew how to drive a standard transmission, three on the tree was new to her. The clutch didn't have a lot of leeway to it, which made it easier as she fished around for reverse and then pulled out of the angled stall.

Finding first wasn't hard, and she ground her way into second without making too much of a racket. The truck steered with a mind of its own, however. Thankfully there weren't that many cars out on the road. Joanie followed the directions Tory gave her, which sounded fairly simple. She followed landmarks instead of street signs, which proved a smart move since most of the side streets appeared to be unmarked. Apparently those who lived here didn't care if outsiders knew their way around or not.

By the time she came to the third side street and spotted the gas station, which was her first landmark, she started recognizing this path as the one she took when she hiked back to the parking lot after leaving Corbin the first time. Although that was three days ago, it seemed a lifetime had passed since then.

More than likely there was some truth to that analogy. When she first met Corbin, she still clung to her old life with Tommy. Now, with the clock ticking, she wished there wasn't a time limit. It would be so damned cool to slow down, match the pace of this perfect town and take her time getting to know Corbin. Instead she felt like she was in some kind of fucked up race.

"There's no race," she mumbled out loud, turning left at the gas station and heading into a part of town she hadn't seen yet. Now to find the silver steeple on the church "that should be reflecting the sun off the mountains about this time of day", as Tory put it when describing her next landmark. Squinting, it seemed that everything reflected the bright morning sun.

She saw what looked like a church steeple but her view was blocked by a large truck approaching her. Then her heart almost exploded in her chest when the truck screeched to a stop right after passing her. Momentarily distracted, she looked over her shoulder in time to see the oversized, extended cab truck manage to pull a u-turn in the middle of the side street.

"Shit," she hissed, yanking on the steering wheel so that she wouldn't miss her turn.

The truck fishtailed over sand in the street, but she managed not to take out any curbs or mailboxes as she straightened and then tried catching her breath. She wasn't sure who was the worse driver, the natives or the tourist.

Trying on a smile, her still on-edge heart started thumping eagerly as she searched for her last landmark. This road split this part of town in half. It went on forever, and even though there weren't any stop signs, no one ever drove it over twenty miles per hour. Lots of families lived on this street and they would remember a vehicle that didn't respect their neighborhood and turn the description over to the police. Since she was in Corbin's truck, she best respect the laws of the town.

Those were the words from Grandmother, spoken in English with hardly any accent at all. Joanie noticed that when the old woman was upset or excited, her accent sprang to life, but when she was content, satisfied and her watery eyes glowed with happiness, it was hard to guess that she was bilingual.

Grandmother told her after the road went on forever, there would be a small grade school on the right. She would turn onto the narrow road just after the schoolyard. Teddy's house was at the end of the road, a small, white home that obviously showed no sign of a good woman around to keep it looking nice.

Those were her only directions and so far they didn't have her lost. At least not that she could tell. She glanced in the large side mirror and her nerves sprang to life when she saw the large truck nearly riding up on her ass.

"What the..."

When the driver laid on the horn, Joanie almost jumped out of her seat. She gripped the wheel with all of her strength, her attention darting from the road in front of her to the truck filling her mirrors behind her.

The driver sounded the horn again. The glare of the sun was now in her mirrors, making it harder to see who was behind her.

"Joanie!" Her heart skipped a beat when she swore someone screamed out her name.

It sounded just like Corbin.

The driver hit the horn several times with quick repetition.

"Joanie!" he yelled again.

Joanie dared turn and look over her shoulder, letting her foot off the accelerator, which immediately made the truck slow and cough from not being shifted to a lower gear. She shoved her foot down on the clutch. The truck slowed even further.

This time she caught a glimpse of someone jumping out of the truck behind her. They moved quickly, and with surprising agility flew into the air and grabbed a hold of the back of the truck. The entire cab shifted like a rowboat caught up in a large wave.

"Holy shit!" She turned around to look and saw part of Corbin's large body as he climbed into the bed of his truck.

Joanie stopped the truck and killed the engine without trying. It left her breathless when Corbin swung his long legs over the side of truck and landed with amazing ease onto the street. In the next instant he yanked open the driver's side door.

"Where do you think you're going?" He asked—more like demanded—to know at the same time that he pulled her out from behind the driver's side wheel.

Joanie was a terrible klutz as she tumbled out of the truck and fell against Corbin's rock-hard chest. Honestly she didn't know if she laughed or cried when strong arms wrapped around her, reminding her of his wonderful all-male scent that never quite left her senses in the time while they were apart.

"I was coming to get you." She spoke with her face smashed against his chest.

And she really didn't care to move.

Corbin lifted her like she was a rag doll and stared at her with such intense green eyes that she forgot to breathe. Not to mention she'd be damned if she could remember what she'd just said, or if they talked at all.

"Coming to get me?" He looked amused, then his features relaxed, the worry lines she'd just noticed vanishing as if they'd never been there at all.

She nodded stupidly, then realized when her cheeks started hurting that she was smiling like a fool as she lost herself in his powerful gaze.

"Grandmother told me how to find you." She couldn't grin any larger than she already was. But his dumbfounded expression made her want to, so she laughed instead. "I figured out how to make her like me."

"This I've got to hear." He placed her back down on the seat of the truck and then waved at the driver idling behind them. "Scoot over," he told her, then climbed behind the wheel to his truck.

Joanie didn't scoot over to the window, although she felt like a silly high school girl when she remained in the middle of the bench seat so that her entire side pressed against his solid frame.

Looking through the windshield, Joanie spotted folks coming out of their home. A woman possibly a few younger than she was, with strawberry-blonde hair and white skin walked quickly over her lawn. She spoke on a cell phone, her voice filled with excitement and carrying so that Joanie almost picked up a word or two.

"Corbin," she sang out and then waved at them.

It was like she announced his presence. A few other doors from surrounding houses opened.

"Corbin. I can help break the spell." The woman with strawberry-blonde hair stepped out into the street, looking like she would walk in front of the truck.

"Don't even think about it!" A woman across the street, who was possibly in her sixties, with white hair that had streaks of strawberry-blonde remaining and the same creamy white skin as the young girl, rushed at them from Corbin's side of the truck. "Corbin Silver, you just keep right on driving!"

"What the fuck?" Corbin growled under his breath. He reached behind Joanie's shoulder and pinned her to him, preventing her escape toward the passenger side door.

"I don't believe it," Joanie uttered, her mouth suddenly too dry to continue. Her skin prickled as her heart pattered nervously in her chest. Looked like it was time to find out the specifics about Corbin's temper.

Corbin didn't ask if she understood why people suddenly acted so strange. And he didn't burn out of there, which would have been Joanie's reaction. Keeping to the restraining speed limit, he hissed out more expletives when an older Inuit woman waddled toward the street, waving frantically at him as she cried out his name.

Joanie spotted the school and almost pointed at it before she caught herself. Corbin turned and accelerated a bit before hitting the break hard enough that Joanie slid forward. His strong hand grabbed her shoulder and slid her right back down the seat and into his rock-hard side.

Too distracted by the feel of his body next to hers, she missed what the tall, skinny man said when he ran up to the truck.

"I just heard." The man didn't have any lips, and his teeth looked too large for his skull when he grinned and then ran his tongue over the top row. "Can't say that I wouldn't take your place if I had the chance," he said. "But I got just what you need to reverse the spell."

Joanie swore he drooled as he stared at her. And he never took his eyes off her when he lifted one bony shoulder and dug into his pant's pocket.

"Mr. Jackson, what the hell are you talking about?" Corbin demanded.

He gunned the engine quietly but enough to show that he considered taking off before hearing the answer.

"Heard you got snagged by a sex charm and the two of you were doing it everywhere. Damn it, if I wouldn't like being snagged by the likes of her too."

Mr. Jackson lifted his hand and tried reaching into the truck.

"Talk like that around the lady again and I will kick your scrawny ass." Corbin made the back tires squeal when he took off.

The back end fishtailed and Joanie barely saw Mr. Jackson over Corbin's broad shoulder when she twisted to look out the back window.

"I can't believe it's like this." Joanie's gut churned and when she looked up at the powerfully set jaw line and the way Corbin glared out the front window, bile rose to her throat. When he learned the truth behind the townsfolk's sudden outlandish behavior, he might never speak to her again.

Corbin came to a stop in front of a simple white house and Teddy's truck pulled into the one lane driveway and parked. Corbin turned off the truck then shoved the gear stick into first. Roped muscle bulged in his arm and his action forced her to almost fall into him.

Instead of allowing her to straighten, he opened his door and jumped out, practically dragging her out with him. For a moment she thought she was leaving the cab of the truck headfirst, but he lifted her, gripping her under her arms until her feet found the ground.

In spite of nerves making her flesh clammy, the way he continually managed to touch almost every inch of her body made her breasts swell. Her heart shifted downward and lodged between her legs. And the heavy, dull throb created moisture in her pussy that had nothing to do with being nervous.

Teddy jumped out of his truck and then stared at the people running down the street toward them.

"I heard the news," a woman yelled at them, and her braided hair swung back and forth behind her as she jogged up to them. She held up a small bottle and stopped dead about ten feet from them, continuing to hold the bottle toward them. "Sprinkle this over your food and I promise you'll never want to have sex with her again."

"Must be some nasty shit," Teddy mumbled.

The woman ignored him. "Corbin! Corbin, you've got to listen to me. I know you're under a spell."

Corbin didn't acknowledge the lady but grabbed Joanie' hand and almost ran to the house.

"Teddy Bahr, you take this to him. I don't dare get any closer to either one of them. God forbid that spell rub off on me. My husband would kill me."

"He'd kill you for wanting to have sex with him?" Teddy's booming voice broke into a whoop of laughter just as Corbin pushed open the front door and dragged Joanie inside.

She didn't hear anything else that Teddy said. Corbin slammed the door behind them.

"I'm so sorry." Suddenly Joanie wanted to cry.

"Do you have something to do with the town suddenly going nuts?" Corbin sounded calm and his quiet, soothing baritone didn't sound angry.

Chills rushed over her damp flesh anyway. For the first time since hijacking his own truck, he didn't touch her. Joanie sucked in a breath and looked up at his face. His green eyes glowed and hooked her so that she couldn't look away.

"I'm afraid so," she told him, resigned to the fact that her explanation would wipe away any spell, even if it were imaginary. The humiliation the town would lay on him would be enough to make a much weaker man go limp permanently. She spoke quickly, deciding to get the truth over with. "I told Grandmother she was right. I wanted her to like me and hoped if she did then you would come home. I told her I didn't realize that I put a spell on you until she explained the necklace to me, then I asked for her help in removing the spell. I didn't want to break your family up."

Tears tumbled down her cheeks before she could stop them. "If there is a spell, distance doesn't make it go away."

"It sure doesn't." His words confused her for a minute until understanding washed over her with a wave of scorching hot need.

He missed her as much as she missed him. Her legs went wobbly underneath her and she almost fell into him. All that bulging muscle was like a magnet to her trembling body.

But if she didn't get it all out now, quite possibly he wouldn't understand the truth. And the longer she stood in front of him, the more her brain refused to focus on anything other than getting him out of his clothes and mounting that hard cock of his.

"Tory helped me convince your grandmother that I wasn't a bad person, and that I didn't do any of this on purpose. I never suspected that her accepting me meant that she would get on the phone and make a public announcement. I'm afraid I've turned a bad situation into a nightmare."

"I'm afraid you're probably right." Corbin reached for her, grabbed the side of her head and then dragged her mouth to his.

All thoughts of what they were talking about drained from her mind when his mouth devoured hers.

Chapter Sixteen

"Man, you two really do fuck each other anywhere that you can." Teddy slammed his front door into Corbin's back and then stepped around them. "If you're going to do it in my living room though, I get to watch."

Corbin kept Joanie in his arms and he was positive she buried her face against his chest out of embarrassment.

"Think you can sneak us out of here?" he asked, seeing no point in chastising his friend for his blunt comment. The whole situation was rather hilarious when he imagined it happening to someone else.

"You leave this house and every amateur wizard out there will be casting a spell on you." Teddy rocked up on his toes, not even trying to hide his grin. "Now possibly if you try screwing her in the front yard, they might all run away in shock."

"Quit enjoying this so damned much," he growled and then massaged Joanie's back when she stiffened against him. "I'm sure this isn't as bad as it seems," he whispered into her hair.

Joanie took a step backward and he reluctantly let go of her. She patted his chest, focusing on the action instead of looking up at his face.

"It seems pretty bad." She shook her head and then turned, crossing her arms over her chest. "I thought if I won her over and made her happy, she might accept me," she murmured.

"Looks like you made her very happy." Teddy grinned but then sobered when she looked at him. "Old ladies love being the center of attention and you must admit, there isn't news better to spread than what you offered her."

"No. I guess there isn't. But I didn't know she would tell everyone. I just wanted her to feel that she was important. I wanted her to like me."

Corbin swore his insides almost split open with pride. He rode up on to his toes, stuffing his fingers through the loops of his jeans and felt like the luckiest man in the world. Joanie wanted his grandmother to like her—an old woman who could be more annoying than anyone in town and push a saint's nerves to the edge.

"Grandmother's happy right now because you told her that you put a spell on me?"

"No. Well, I don't think so." She shook her head and then dragged a lock of hair behind her ear. She met his gaze and then slowly licked her lips, the small act doing a number on his insides. "I told her that I didn't know how to remove the spell, that I didn't know it was a spell until she told me and that now I needed her help."

"Oh God," Teddy groaned.

Joanie spun around to face him but Corbin took her arm, needing her attention on him. In spite of the trouble she just brought on both of them, being without her the past twelve hours really sucked. Now he wanted to yank her out of here, take off somewhere—anywhere—and fuck her just like the entire damned town expected him to do.

"You made her feel important." Seeing that Joanie would humble herself like this to his family just to gain their appreciation melted all his resistance.

He wanted this woman and for a lot longer than one lousy week.

She glanced at his hand, which was wrapped around her arm, and then up into his eyes. "I won't have her yelling at you like that," she whispered, her voice cracking with emotion while her eyes sparkled.

"Do you think I need protection?" Even though she arched her neck to see his face, he saw her draw up inner strength and breathe in deeply. Her breasts swelled and her nipples puckered and tried pushing through the sweater she'd purchased with him the other day.

"I think," she began, and exhaled slowly. "I don't think anyone should be spoken to like that," she said quickly.

He guessed she'd amended what she meant to say. Possibly, like him, emotions swarmed inside her that she couldn't, or wasn't ready yet, to put into words. He wanted her to reach the point where she would share her mind with him.

Looking past her at Teddy, he decided it was time to make plans. "With some of your neighbors already knowing we're here, and dying to prove their magical skills, we might need an escape plan."

"Or you could just stay here." Teddy shrugged.

"Nope." Leaning forward to peek out the small square window in the door, he scanned Teddy's front yard. All seemed quiet enough. Which didn't mean the vultures weren't waiting to swarm around them the second they stepped outside. "If the town makes headline news out of this, Joanie won't be found in a home with two single men."

It was doubtful that Seward would make that much of a stink about things. But Joanie didn't need any bad press when her divorce was looking like it would lean strongly in her favor.

"That's ridiculous, Corbin," Joanie argued. "No one would think—"

"They already think a necklace is making us have sex on the tables in restaurants," he interrupted. When he took her hand, her touch sizzled his skin. "We're heading out, Teddy. Thanks for the use of your couch." He pulled Joanie to him. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?" Joanie asked.

He led her out the door and Teddy followed them. "Sure hope the whole town doesn't follow you."

"It's a risk we'll take." And if they did, they would see that he was with Joanie because he wanted to be, not because some charm that no longer existed said they had to be. "Maybe we'll get lucky and learn something from one of their spells."

"Corbin." Joanie pulled back on his hand and then frowned when he turned and looked at her. "You don't believe in all of this nonsense. Please don't let anyone think that you do."

He pulled her to him, the concern in her expression warming his insides. She didn't fight him but stopped when her hand pressed against his chest. Slightly pinching the tip of her chin between his index finger and thumb, he enjoyed her smooth, warm skin and ached to caress the length of her jawbone.

"The only thing I believe is that there is something obvious and growing quickly between you and me," he whispered, his voice raspy.

Her eyes widened and then her thick lashes fluttered over her green eyes. His dick stretched to life when she made a perfect circle with her lips, then ran her tongue over them. She pondered his words, and he swore he saw her mind churn while she worked on her response.

When more than a couple heartbeats passed and she still looked perplexed, he took her hand and walked her to his truck.

"Take my truck if you want to remain incognito," Teddy suggested.

"What? And risk you damaging the paint job on my jalopy?"

Teddy snorted. "It's no secret you'd have a new truck if you didn't keep dumping every dime you have into brand new stoves, restaurant furniture—oh, and the new laminated menus are a nice touch."

Joanie looked up at him, sincerely surprised, while Corbin considered thumping Teddy in the side of the head with his knuckles. "Never said I wanted a new truck," he growled.

Teddy dug his keys out of his pocket. "Leave your keys. If someone I care about comes by, I'll hide the old thing."

Corbin shook his head, ignoring the slam at the old truck, which he wouldn't insult since it was paid for and kept running. Exchanging keys, he ran his hand down the slender slope of Joanie's spine.

"I appreciate it, Teddy Bear," he said, keeping it light although he was distracted by Joanie's sudden silence.

Teddy glanced at her before meeting his gaze and growing serious. "Don't let the people in this town get to you. Anchorage isn't so far away that rumors couldn't travel."

Joanie stiffened and Corbin frowned. "Nothing will get out of hand," he growled, and pushed the button on the keychain so that the truck beeped and unlocked.

He helped her in on the passenger side and then walked to the front of the truck to face Teddy.

"Take her up to your condo in Anchorage for a few days. To hell with this town," Teddy suggested.

The thought had its merit. "I doubt she would go for that." Her silence when he implied there was more than lust forming between them worried him more than he wanted to admit. "I'll give you a call later so we can swap back trucks."

Teddy nodded and backed off toward his front door. Corbin climbed into the truck, then adjusted the seat. Sliding it back as far as it would go, he cranked the engine and shifted into reverse.

"Where are we going?" Joanie sat stiffly on her side of the truck, her hands pressed together on her legs.

She fought to confine emotions that he knew swarmed inside her. "I think it's time to give you a tour of our beautiful countryside. After all, that is what you came up here to do." Getting her to relax some might be just what she needed.

"What are we going to tour?" She looked at him and then her gaze traveled down his body. Fire attacked his insides as she took him in.

"You'll see." He turned the large truck, getting a feel for it easily enough when he gunned it and headed the opposite direction of town. "It's been a while since I've driven these back roads. Teddy should be calling me any minute to howl about the dirt that will be all over his shiny truck."

"Tory and your grandmother will expect one or both of us to show up at the diner soon. I bet they'll be concerned when we disappear." But Joanie noticeably relaxed, looking like an adventure might be exactly what she needed.

"And you answer to them now?" He grinned in her direction when she scowled.

"Nope. I don't answer to anyone anymore."

A possessive surge of energy attacked him like a bolt of electricity, screaming through him and hardening his dick. He wanted her answering to him. The urge to claim her grew stronger every time he inhaled. He filled his lungs with her scent, a clean and fresh aroma that tangled around his senses.

"Then don't worry about them. Allow me to show you a good time."

"I'm sure you will." She almost purred the words.

Corbin didn't miss that it got noticeably warmer in the cabin. The road turned to gravel and dust flew up alongside them. He would run the truck through the carwash later. For now, as they bounced over the uneven road, he didn't mind a bit when she slipped over the seat and closer to him.

Grabbing her hand, he placed it under his, loving how perfectly she fit into his palm. Her slender fingers intertwined with his. Pulling her closer distracted his thoughts. Feeling her body move against his, her perfect curves, soft and firm in all the right places, would make this drive even more enjoyable.

But when she gasped and then let out a long, sultry sigh, he pulled her closer to him without giving it another thought. "I had a feeling you would react this way."

"It's the most beautiful sight I've ever seen," she said on a breath as she stared at the rocky cliffs ahead of them and the endless sea that sprawled out forever past that.

"Almost." Corbin ignored her blushing grin when she looked at him. Instead he drove a bit farther until he found the spot he had in mind. "I think we can park here for a while without anyone noticing us. Let's get out. You'll love what I have to show you."

He stopped the truck and cut the engine, then, keeping his grip on her hand, he pulled her over to his side and held onto her when he got out. Joanie pulled her hand free of his and then gripped his shoulders and let him lift her out of the truck.

As much as he wanted to show off the beauty of his homeland to her, holding her for just a moment took precedence. He let her slide down his body and then pinned her between him and the truck, with the door shielding them from the rough breeze tumbling in from the ocean.

Getting her out of her clothes and fucking her until she screamed sounded a hell of a lot better than sightseeing. His cock threatened to burst free of the confines of his jeans when he tilted her chin and then claimed her mouth. Her soft cry, and then complete submission, brought his blood to a quick boiling point.

A growl rumbled through his chest as he ran his tongue along the side of hers, tasting coffee and a hint of mint. He ran his palms down her arms and then up her back, causing her to stretch and rub into him like a cat loving having its body scratched. Her breasts pressed against his chest and slid back and forth slightly as she moved. He felt her nipples poke through her clothing, and his heartbeat pounded harder and faster.

She wanted him as desperately as he needed her. Being apart last night seemed to intensify their desire for each other. If he were going to prove to Grandmother that it didn't matter to him if he were around her or not, he would have to do a hell of a lot of work to get her out of his system first. Sounded like the best kind of work on the planet to him.

It took some effort to pull his mouth from hers. "Do you want to see the ocean?" he whispered against her cheek as he nipped and tasted her warm flesh.

"Huh?" she asked, turning her face and offering her neck.

He bent over her and dragged his teeth along the pulsing vein that throbbed under his lips. "The view is breathtaking over there."

"It's breathtaking here too." She wasn't making this easy.

Not to mention, in his current state, walking to the cliffs might prove more of a challenge than he would be able to handle. "What do you want, Joanie?" He would allow her the decision.

"You." She didn't hesitate.

He wanted to ask how she wanted him. Was this just physical? Did she toss and turn all night too? But were these questions even fair to ask? They'd known each other less than a week. In a few fast-flying days, Joanie turned his world upside-down. He didn't want to lose her. And somehow, he would keep her in his life. Sex charm or not,

Joanie belonged with him. Spending more time with her would only convince him more of that already very obvious fact.

"And I need you." He gave in to his needs, and her desires, and lifted her into his arms.

Joanie wrapped her arms around his neck, not clinging to him, but more relaxing against him. She trusted him completely as he stepped away from the truck. The least he would offer was respect for Teddy's new truck and not fuck Joanie inside it. Walking to the end of the truck was pure hell. Not because Joanie weighed too much. She was very easy to carry and with the way she molded against his chest, he would walk back to town with her right there and have no complaints. That is, if his dick weren't harder than stone, demanding attention and release immediately.

Corbin made it to the back of the truck and reached inside the back of the bed to release the spring that let down the hatch. Then placing Joanie on it, he reached for the top of his jeans.

She looked around at the endless countryside. "Are we safe out here?"

"More than likely." He really had no idea how often folks traveled on this old county road these days. At the moment, he really didn't care.

She bit her lip, looking a bit nervous, and studied his face. Her gaze then dropped to his cock when he released it from his jeans. "Like I can say no to that," she murmured.

"I wouldn't be able to handle it if you did." The cold breeze attacking his exposed dick created a lust-driven fever that attacked his insides.

He grabbed her foot, pulling one shoe off, then reached for the other and slipped it off as well. Managing to drop them next to her, he almost ripped the button at the waist of her jeans free, then yanked her zipper down. She lifted her ass off the metal bed when he tugged at her jeans and then slid them down her legs.

"God. No underwear. You are so fucking hot. I bet you're soaked as hell."

"How did you know?"

He chuckled, suddenly wanting this moment to last forever. "Because the same need is burning me alive."

At that moment, if someone mentioned the possibility of a spell intertwining the two of them together, he wouldn't have argued the fact for a minute. He was more swollen, more weighted down with a desperate craving to be inside her than he'd been since meeting her. It filled him with hardcore need that was ready to ignite and explode. Nothing mattered more in his life than fucking the shit out of her.

"Then fuck me." Her jeans wrinkled around her ankles as she shook her sweet ass. Still holding herself off the metal bed with her palms pressed flat into the truck on either side of her, Joanie filled the air between them with the rich, creamy smell of her come.

"I plan on it." If he wasn't inside her in the next moment, insanity would take over.

He didn't doubt that fact for a second.

Grabbing her jeans at the crotch, he knocked her off balance and her bare ass slapped against the bed of the truck. They were tossed over her shoes and forgotten. Her legs were spread, bent at the knees, and her shaved pussy was right in front of him. Nothing blocked his vision as he stared down at the swell of her lips, at that small, swollen knob of flesh, already glistening with moisture.

"God. Now, Corbin." She attempted lifting herself off the bed again.

He saw how her need burned through her like a fever out of control when her arms wouldn't hold her and her entire body trembled. Her orgasm was so close to the edge that he smelled it. It matched the ache that quickly turned into a throbbing pain as it swelled inside his cock. He was lightheaded from lack of blood in his brain. And only one thing would set their world right again.

"I can't remember ever making it a habit of carrying these things around." His voice was strained when he reached into his back pocket, pulled out his wallet and slid free the condom he'd put there the other day.

"I'm sorry." She held her position, panting as she watched him remove the foil and then stretch the condom over the length of his shaft.

"Don't be. I put a condom in my wallet so I would always be able to fuck you." He glanced up at her after fixing the condom in place and was overwhelmed by how pleased she looked that he would take precautions so that he could have her whenever the opportunity arose.

"Come here." She reached for him, wrapping her fingers around his sheathed cock, and using it as a leash, which she tugged on to bring him to her.

She guided him to her entrance. And he felt the intensity of her heat before she let go of him and then placed her damp hand on the side of his hip and scooted into position. Joanie barely had time to wrap her legs around him and lean backward when he impaled her.

"Holy crap!" Her head fell back, so many strands of blonde and brown streaming over her shoulders as he sunk deep inside her.

"Joanie!" He howled her name, bracing himself as he fisted his hands and pressed his knuckles against the cold, unrelenting metal of the truck bed.

Sliding into her fiery, soaked world, filling her, experiencing so many tiny vibrating muscles that clung to him and drew him even deeper turned his world upside down.

Make her yours, Silver. Claim her so no other man can have her. The mental order floated through his ransacked brain as he moved quickly, praying he could give them both relief and pleasure as he started pounding her soaked vagina.

She reached for him, scraping her nails over his chest and then gripping his arms, struggling to bring him closer.

"More. Give me more," she wailed, shaking her head and squeezing her eyes closed.

Nothing mattered right now other than seeing to her needs, offering her whatever she wanted. Every inch of him hardened as he leaned over her. Muscles in his hips and buttocks tightened and he felt his arms spasm as he locked them straight so he wouldn't fall on top of her. He crushed his teeth together, feeling the pain swell in his head and travel to lower parts of his body until the impending explosion threatened his body like a massive earthquake.

Or maybe a volcano. Hell, it could be both.

And she was the molten lava, spasming underneath him with fiery hot liquid that scalded his senses and eliminated his ability to comprehend why he did what he did at the moment.

But as she shuddered, released a cry so beautiful it made his heart melt, he ripped every muscle in his body apart and came harder than he ever came in his life. His world shattered around him and as much as he ached to claim her, he feared at that moment that she instead claimed him. Corbin lifted himself out of her, immediately attacked brutally and without mercy by the cold wind that he hadn't noticed whipping around them a moment before. And with that clarity, he knew that Joanie held his heart. She pulled off what no other woman had done before—he now belonged to her. He prayed, with time, that she would be his as well.

Chapter Seventeen

"I've never seen anything more beautiful." Joanie stared beneath them and watched the white spray as waves crashed against the dark, jagged rocks.

"I haven't been out this way since I was a boy." Corbin wrapped his arm around Joanie's shoulder, keeping her close as the wind grew harsher.

With the flames of desire somewhat subdued inside him, it seemed a hell of a lot colder out here now. Joanie shivered, inviting him silently to warm her further with his larger body. Protecting and assuring her comfort took precedence in his still overwrought brain.

"I spent a fair amount of time seeing the ocean when I was a kid too. Our parents would bring us to the coast and then we'd spend the afternoon shopping." Then somehow all of their lives got too busy to take precious moments and enjoy the rugged nature that they all grew up around.

"Seattle has beauty like this?"

She pulled her attention from the view beneath him and lifted her face to his. The glow of her orgasm still flushed over her cheeks. She smiled up at him with a warm grin. "Nothing I've ever seen compares with all of this. The ocean, the mountains, all of this rugged, untamed nature. You live in paradise."

"It's never seemed that way until recently." He wasn't used to exposing himself like this and pulled his attention from her first, squinting out at the endless ocean.

"Yeah. I know what you mean."

"When do you leave?"

"We've known from the start that I would be going," she whispered.

He looked down at her quickly. "Yup. We didn't know from the beginning though that we would fall for each other."

"Is that what's happening?" She turned her attention to the sea, squinting and looking like she tried hiding her frown from him.

"I think so." He brushed her hair away from her face, tilting his head slightly so that she knew he watched her. "What would you say is happening between us?"

She shook her head slightly. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" The way she came on the back of the truck, he had a feeling she had some idea.

Again she shook her head, more likely from denial than honestly not having a clue.

"I think maybe you do."

She turned on him, the flash in her piercing gaze indication that she didn't like being pushed. "Did you bring me out here to interrogate me or show me the countryside?"

He didn't like keeping things in the dark. "We can walk down to the beach if you want." If she wanted to make a show of keeping busy with a tour while discussing what was happening between them, he was cool with that.

"How do we get down there?" Her expression softened.

"I'll show you." Taking her hand, he led the way along the cliff, searching for the small trail he remembered exploring with his brother and sister when they were kids.

They didn't talk as they worked their way along the narrow path. When Corbin found what he was looking for, it was a lot narrower than it was when he was younger. Loose rocks slipped under their feet and rolled down the steep embankment. More than once her grip on his hand tightened, and once she grabbed the back of his shirt, squeaking in fear when it seemed the ground underneath them gave way and tumbled like a mini-avalanche toward the waves below.

"That was an adventure," she said, somewhat dryly, when the trail ended and they walked over damp sand and around dark rock as the water slapped against it and sprayed them with its fresh salt scent.

"I wouldn't let you get hurt." He turned, realizing he was grinning from ear to ear from their small hike.

"I know you wouldn't." She still held on to him and slowly raised her head to meet his gaze. "I believe you."

"Good. It's the truth." He rubbed her cheek with his thumb and thought about saying more. Like maybe she should extend her visit until she accepted that something more than lust grew between the two of them. "It can be dangerous down here though. Stay close and I'll show you something you wouldn't see on your cruise."

"What's that?" She looked around them but didn't try to create space between them.

Not that he would let her. He wasn't exaggerating about the potential danger down here. The rocks were slippery and the waves could be vicious. Keeping her close to him with his hand just above her soft ass, he was able to feel the sway of her hips move up his arm when she walked slowly at his side.

"They say pirates used to stash their treasures here." He pointed toward the dark cliffs as they approached them.

"Where?" She pulled her gaze from the frothy waves that extended like crooked fingers as they splashed against the rocks just below them to their right.

"Just up here." They didn't have far to walk, but it took a while since he kept their pace slow.

The path was narrow and the rocks quite slippery in places. He pointed when they reached the first cave. It wasn't anything more than a good-sized indention in the rock

and he hid his disappointment. When they were kids, these caves looked large enough to live in, and he remembered fantasizing about setting up house in one of them and living the life of a pirate.

"This is so cool," she whispered, as if she also felt the reverence that seemed to hang around this dark, moody place.

"I remember the caves being larger."

"How many are there?"

"Several at least."

"Maybe the next one is bigger."

They walked past the first cave and he held her tightly, no longer having his carefree attitude toward danger that ran thick through his blood as a boy. Both of his arms were wrapped around her waist and her backside pressed against his front when they stopped in front of the second cave. It was big enough that they couldn't see how deep it was.

"Move very slowly. Last thing we need is for both of us to crash and burn in here." She held on to him so tightly Corbin was more concerned about keeping his own footing than her losing hers. If he slipped, they would both go down.

"We're going in there?" She twisted, proving him right about the slippery rock when she slid and clawed at his shirt.

Corbin pulled her closer to him. "Not up for an adventure?"

"Not one that will get me killed." She tried laughing and showing him that she made light of it, but he could see that she was nervous.

"I told you I would show you the beauty of Alaska that you wouldn't see on any cruise. And I swear that you'll live through the experience."

It was easier to walk into the dark cave once she loosened her grip on him a bit. Not that he didn't love her hot little body brushing against his every time she moved. In spite of having just fucked her and walking over wet rocks in rather perilous surroundings, he still got hard as a rock every time she rubbed over his dick.

"Guess I should have brought a camera."

"I'm not sure the best of flashes would capture the intensity of these caves."

Her hand was cool and damp in his and her eyes large and glowing as she searched the darkness ahead of them.

"We can see other sights, possibly tomorrow, if you like. It's only right you have lots of pictures to show off from your vacation."

Her hand slipped a bit in his and he focused on her when they stopped a bit deeper in the cave. She didn't look up and didn't comment.

He would get a response out of her. "All of your friends will want to hear about all of the fun things you did, and see pictures when you tell them about your trip."

"I don't have tons of friends." She pressed her lips together and made a show out of trying to see the ceiling of the cave.

"What about your sister? I know you've called her. Not to mention, pictures help save the memories of a good vacation. We'll do more sightseeing tomorrow. It wouldn't be right not to send you home without plenty to talk about."

She did look at him then. Her mouth opened, a response ready to slip right out. He held her gaze captive, waiting to hear what she would say. One way or another, he would make her discuss leaving him. The more she talked about it, thought about it, the better he would be able to make her see that she shouldn't leave him.

"I guess that's a good idea," she finally said quietly.

"Good. It's settled then." Something dawned on him at that moment. "Oh shit. You don't even have a camera, do you? It's with all your stuff on the ship, isn't it? I guess we can use mine and I'll send you the pictures."

"That's nice of you to offer." Her tone suddenly was as chilly as her hand was in his.

"That's what friends are for."

He didn't stop her when she slipped her hand out of his. Joanie wrapped her arms around her chest and stood next to him. He would bet good money she wasn't studying the darkness in the cave. He waited out the silence until finally she let out a long sigh and turned to face him. Her hands shot out to her side when she slipped just a bit on the damp rock underneath. He stiffened, instinct kicking in and ready to grab her if she fell. Pulling her back into his arms sounded real damned good anyway. But the only way to pull out of her what he needed to know was to let her formulate her own conclusions and then say what they both needed to hear.

"I know what you're doing, Corbin Silver." She didn't move her mouth but spoke through clenched teeth. And with the darkness surrounding her, those green eyes glowed with so much emotion they seemed to light up the space between them. "And I don't appreciate you trying to manipulate my thoughts with your little comments."

"With my little comments?" If he pushed her until she exploded, nothing would be accomplished. But there was no way she would walk out of here until he knew for sure whether she was really content leaving him at the end of the week. "You don't like the idea of having pictures so you can remember your time here?"

"Do you think I'll forget what happened here any time soon?"

He knew she wouldn't. But that wasn't the point here. "Most people take pictures while on vacation so they can enjoy them when they go home and return to their lives."

"Fine. We'll take pictures," she shouted, and the echo in the cave repeated her angry outburst a couple times before the words faded together.

She marched past him toward the entrance and then squealed when she lost her footing. The echo quickly repeated her surprised and frantic cry. Corbin moved quickly, fighting not to lose his own balance, and practically scooped her into his arms.

It surprised him then to spot the tear that slid down her cheek before she turned her head, burying her face in his chest.

"Damn it, Joanie." Something roared inside of him, and it hardened his insides into painful knots as he focused on not squeezing her too tightly when he held her in his arms. "All I want you to do is see the obvious."

"I see the obvious. But what is the point?" Her voice cracked and she stubbornly kept her face pressed against his chest. "In a couple of days, I leave. That is how it is."

"Don't leave." The words slipped out even though he told himself that he wouldn't voice them. Holding her like this in the dark cave made it impossible to deny the strong, possessive impulses that surged through his veins. "Extend your vacation and stay here with me."

"And then what? I'll still have to go home. Or I should say, back to Seattle. I don't have my home to return to."

"Then there's no rush to hurry back there."

"I have my job." There wasn't any enthusiasm in her voice.

"You don't like your job?"

"Of course I like what I do. I'm a very good legal secretary. This vacation was the first time off I've taken since I started working there. And I've been with the same law firm for ten years."

"Damn. Want a job?" He was half joking, but when she stiffened against him, he knew the same thing raced through her mind that did his.

She could work for him. They were in the same line of work. Every good lawyer needed an even better legal secretary. One who never missed work was a catch. Corbin already knew her work attendance wasn't the only good qualification Joanie could brag about on a resume. Imagining her working in his office, being there with him daily got him as hard as holding her against him did.

"Didn't you say that you already have a good secretary?"

Actually, he did. One of the best he'd had so far. "Yes," he admitted.

She pushed herself to arm's length, taking her time and maintaining her balance. This time she turned on steadier feet and managed to walk out of the cave and disappear from his sight before he followed her.

Catching up took little effort. Joanie kept a steady pace, though, until they reached the incline that led up to his truck. Even then, she hiked up it without seeking his assistance. Her ass was in his face and he let her lead, focusing on the seam of her jeans that disappeared down her ass and hugged her pussy.

He would bet she was still soaked, although he was learning enough about her to know that she was mad. Once again allowing her silence so she could stew about whatever pissed her off, he didn't doubt she would share her thoughts when she was ready.

Not to mention, there were quite a few thoughts spinning around in his own head. She never admitted her growing feelings toward him. Although obviously discussing her returning home and entertaining the thought of working together triggered something inside her that didn't set well.

It certainly created unpleasant sensations in his gut. Not because he wished the subjects weren't brought up but because both topics pulled their reality to the forefront. And of course, that was exactly why he brought them up. They needed to think long and hard about her leaving and where that left them.

Joanie made it to the top of the cliff on all fours. Instead of standing, she flipped onto her rear and pressed her fists into the ground on either side of her.

"Why did you bring all of that up?" she demanded.

Obviously his point wasn't as clear to her as she tried to pretend it was a few minutes ago. Corbin stepped around her, standing behind her and staring out at the ocean.

"Because you're leaving."

"I know I'm leaving."

"We're acting like you aren't."

"We are not."

"Then why are we falling for each other?"

She didn't answer. In fact, when she remained quiet, he looked down to see her hair streaming around her face as she stared down at her lap.

Corbin squatted, then leaned back on his heels and grabbed her shoulders, pulling her backward into his arms. When he thought she would fight him, he used enough force to insure she didn't. She offered no resistance and ended up cradled in his lap.

"Joanie," he whispered, moving her hair out of her face and then staring at her as she squeezed her eyes shut. "Tell me that you don't have any feelings for me."

If he hadn't been stroking her hair away from her face, he wouldn't have seen her bite down on her lower lip. It was such a small action, but proof enough that she physically prevented herself from responding to his request.

Knowing she forced the words to stay inside her tore at his insides and filled him with bitter understanding at the same time. He was right. Their growing fondness for each other went well beyond lust. He also learned at that moment that Joanie completely comprehended the reality about their relationship. Maybe he was the one lost in the fantasy.

All this time he played the role of protector, thinking if he coerced her into an admission that he would help save their feelings—their hearts. But seeing her teeth press into her lower lip, capturing her words before she could voice them, was as painful as if she'd bit into his heart instead of her mouth.

Joanie might be falling in love with him. Saying so would hurt more than keeping the words choked down inside her.

Either way hurt like hell.

Corbin stood so fast that his stomach turned. Like a bit more discomfort mattered. He held Joanie, then flipped her around so that her hair fanned over her face. He kept a firm grip on her until she stood on her own two feet.

"Let's go." Tension thickened his words and the air around them.

He didn't care. He was too damned angry to care. If he didn't let her go, he would drag her to the truck like some Neanderthal. The visual had its appeal, although he doubted she would go for it. So he released her.

"Corbin!" Her cry sent gooseflesh creeping over his skin.

He ignored her, taking long strides and reaching the truck fast enough that he was behind the driver's wheel before she could run to her side and jump in.

"Corbin," she said again, desperation making her voice shrill. "Please."

"Please what?" He turned on her, white-knuckling the steering wheel. "What, Joanie? Tell me, now. I can't slow down time. There's no way I can reverse the events of this week. You're going to return to your job and I'll go back to my work. We'll get on with our lives and do our best to forget about this week. That's what you want, right?"

"Yes. No." Her breathing accelerated, forcing her nipples to ripen into full, hard nubs against her shirt. Running her tongue over the lip she just bit, she experienced emotions she wouldn't voice.

She crawled over the seat, wrapping her arms around his neck and devoured his mouth. He was stronger than she was. It wouldn't take any effort at all to force her back to her side, order that she stay there and get the hell out of here.

If only he could get a small part of his brain to want that, it would be such an easy act to carry out. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her, crushing her against him until he knew he must be hurting her. But her cry wasn't in pain, unless it was the final acknowledgment he worked so damn hard to get out of her while they were in the cave.

He growled in response. Deepening the kiss, feeling her breasts swell between them and her nipples rake over his chest, he turned her and fed from her.

And she had so much to offer. The smell of their lovemaking dripped from her, hardening him to stone, and filled him with a carnal, unrelenting urge to rip her clothes from her body and take her again. He wanted it rough, deep and aggressive. When she relaxed in his crushing hold, moving her small tongue around his and whimpering to show him how willing she was to give him what he wanted, he shoved her shirt up her body and cupped her breast.

"Mmm – yes," she whispered, moving her mouth against his.

Damn it. Fucking her again right now mattered more than taking his next breath.

There weren't any more condoms.

He ripped his mouth from hers, sucking in breaths that he didn't want to take. But he needed to if he were going to clear his head and manage some kind of rational thought. "I'll take you back to my truck." If he focused on necessary actions, other than fucking, he would at least get them out of this perilous situation.

"Are you going to follow me into town?" She didn't try to move but blinked a few times before staring up at him with need so raw and unleashed that it tore at his insides.

Sucking in another breath simply coated his lungs with the ripe scent of her lust.

"Go back to the cabin. I'll stay with Teddy until you leave Seward."

She struggled then, pushing away from him and almost leaping to her side of the truck. "If you do that then I'll leave today, Corbin. I swear I will. Don't you dare make me admit that I'm falling in love with you and then throw me away like that."

Chapter Eighteen

Joanie didn't have any tears left when she hung up the phone and stared at the quiet kitchen. Her flight was booked. Arrangements were made with the cruise line to send her luggage to the port in Seattle. She would pick everything up once she returned home.

Home. What an ugly-sounding four-letter word.

She would leave tomorrow. After sleeping in this large cabin alone, after driving here without Corbin, she should be excited to leave.

"So I can pace smaller rooms in my new apartment." She stopped walking and refused to turn around and continue her trek. "And why?" She glared at the wooden rack on the wall where small silver spoons hung on display. "So that I can mourn a relationship that never was?"

Barely a week. And not even that. Yet she'd wiped away more tears over Corbin than she'd shed for Tommy. Life was beyond weird.

Someone knocked on the door and her heart almost exploded in her chest. She gawked at the front door that she could barely see where she stood frozen in the dining room. Then bolting for the stairs, she raced up them like a teenager, scared to get caught somewhere she shouldn't be.

Except everyone knew she was here—alone. It was her tears and puffy eyes she wouldn't show to the world. She panted by the time she reached the bathroom and gripped the sink as she stared at her reflection in the mirror.

"Oh God." She cranked on the frigid water and started splashing it over her face.

"Hello?" Tory's voice boomed up the stairwell. "Joanie? Where are you?"

"Go make sure she's decent." Grandmother's scratchy voice carried just as far as Tory's did.

Joanie scrubbed her face with the hand towel and stuffed it over the towel bar on the wall. Straightening it, she frowned at her reflection and then at the makeup scattered around the edge of the sink. All of it would need to be packed in the small, recently purchased duffle bag that was now her only suitcase.

"I'm up here," she called out, buying herself precious moments to pat her face with powder and blush and pray the splotches would disappear. "I'm sure Corbin isn't crying his eyes out somewhere right now."

Tory trotted up the stairs and stopped in the doorway. "Grandmother decided we should bring you down to the restaurant."

"She did?"

"I think she wanted to see if Corbin was here."

Joanie prayed her expression didn't change when Tory said his name. "I found him after I left you yesterday. He was at his friend's house just like you said. When I suggested that I get a room and he stay here, he insisted I enjoy this old, rambling place until I left."

It was the line he had made her rehearse before hugging and kissing her goodbye yesterday. Corbin knew his family would seek him out and prepared her with a perfect response. She recited it now and smiled at Tory. Since what she just said was the truth, it wasn't like she had to worry about getting caught in a lie.

"You haven't seen him since yesterday?" Tory sounded so disappointed.

A lump formed in Joanie's throat. She hadn't rehearsed how to act if his family showed disappointment that they weren't together.

"Nope." She decided on some eye shadow—anything to keep her occupied so the nosy teenager wouldn't figure out her feelings on the matter.

"Damn." Obviously Tory didn't feel it a crime to use profanity in front of Joanie. "That must have sucked, staying out here all by yourself."

Joanie quickly cleared her throat, pulling the applicator from her eyelid before she stabbed her eye with it.

"Sorry." Tory backed out of the doorway. "I'm accustomed to watching my mouth around Grandmother but forget to speak properly around people I like."

Joanie didn't bother correcting Tory for mistaking her suddenly upset expression. Giving Tory a quick glance that she hoped said "we don't have to discuss this any further", she finished with her makeup, ran a brush through her hair for good measure and then left the bathroom.

"Does she really want me to go down to the restaurant with you two?" Getting out of the cabin possibly would increase her chances of seeing Corbin again. She followed Tory down the stairs. "That might be the perfect way to spend my last evening here."

"Your last evening?" Grandmother almost sounded like overhearing this bit of news disappointed her. "You're returning to your home – where is it again?"

"Yes. I'm heading home to Seattle tomorrow." Even though she managed a pleasant smile for the old woman, this wasn't a topic she wanted to discuss in any length. "And I think it would be fun to come down to the restaurant for a while. You're both so sweet to seek me out."

Grandmother muttered something under her breath and turned toward the door, waving the compliment away with a swipe of her hand. Tory and Joanie followed her out to the front porch. Joanie admitted feeling weird being the only person here who wasn't family, yet she took the time to lock the place up. If Grandmother had a key, she didn't mention it.

"What's that?" Grandmother pointed off to the side of the porch and then waddled to the stairs and leaned heavily on the railing until she stood on the sidewalk.

"What's what?" Tory asked.

Joanie followed Grandmother with her eyes as the old woman hurried across the yard and around to the side of the porch. The other two stood stupefied on the sidewalk, not seeing a thing and waiting to find what Grandmother might produce.

"Nothing's ever been planted over here. And we never put any tulip bulbs in the ground. What do you say about this?"

Since Grandmother didn't make any sense, Joanie walked around the porch to join her with Tory in tow.

"They're beautiful," she whispered, staring in awe at the two sturdy looking tulips growing intertwined in the yard. There weren't any other flowers around them, just grass. "I don't think I've ever seen such rich-looking blue tulips before. What an interesting color."

"Like turquoise," Grandmother mused.

Joanie's jaw dropped and she backed away from the tulips like they might bite. Glancing back at the porch, she mentally measured the distance and then looked back at the two flowers. It was insane, more ridiculous than believing the necklace had magical powers.

"What is it?" Tory gave her an odd look.

Joanie bit her lip, shaking her head, unwilling to let these two see that she really was certifiable.

"You don't like the flowers?" Grandmother almost sounded hurt.

"You said you didn't plant them." Joanie shot another glance at the porch, remembering the day that she'd thrown the charm over the side of the porch in this direction. She looked at the ground around where they stood. The necklace would still be here somewhere. "But no, that isn't it at all. In fact, they are incredibly beautiful and breathtaking."

"Why are you looking at them so funny?" Tory returned her attention to the two tulips. "I've never seen such a bright shade of blue tulips before, but they do all kinds of crazy things with flowers these days."

"This is where I threw the necklace." What the hell. They might as well know the truth.

"Oh, let's find it." Tory clapped her hands and immediately dropped to the ground and began running her hands gently over the grass.

"You threw the sex charm over here?" Grandmother stepped back carefully, watching Tory comb her fingers over the ground.

"Yes. Right after I came out here. I didn't notice the flowers then."

"Wait." Tory got excited. "I think I found it."

She tugged at a small chain that seemed to be buried in the ground. Joanie went down on her knees and Grandmother stepped closer, bending over and then putting a heavy hand on Joanie's shoulder to stable herself.

"It goes into the ground," Tory announced.

"The charm wouldn't be buried after being out here for a few days." Even though it was cool outside, sweat moistened her skin as she watched Tory try to pull up the chain. In spite of how ridiculous it was, her heart pounded when she couldn't deny the truth. She grabbed Tory's wrist. "Stop. You'll pull up the flowers."

"Is the chain attached to the tulips?" Grandmother whispered, her pudgy fingers digging into Joanie's shoulder. "Stop, Tory. Joanie is right. The chain is attached to the flowers."

"But how can it be?" Tory quit tugging but held part of a tiny chain in between her fingers. "It's like the flowers grew out of the chain."

"If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," Grandmother whispered. "Quick child. Give me your phone. This means something and we must find out what before it's too late."

"Too late for what?" Joanie straightened slowly, not wanting to throw Grandmother off balance.

The old woman's watery eyes beamed up at Joanie when Grandmother backed away and then took Tory's cell phone. She looked at the thing like it was some strange contraption and then handed it back to Tory. "Call your Aunt Moira. She is the expert in this area. Tell her the sex charm has changed into tulips." She ignored Tory when the teenager's jaw dropped and she just held the phone without placing the call. Instead she returned her attention to Joanie. "And we have to find out what this means before you leave. Maybe you can't leave. Those tulips growing together like that might be a sign. I'm sure they are."

"Maybe it's a sign that you're supposed to stay and become part of my family?" Tory looked up at her, grinning beautifully.

Grandmother turned, walking very quickly for a woman of her girth. Tory shook her head, muttering something about insane old people and slowly began pushing buttons on her phone. Joanie turned and looked at the flowers again. They were healthy looking, growing in the middle of the side yard with nothing around them but grass. Their stems twisted around each other and the flowers were in full bloom, showing off their captivating shade—just like turquoise. Bending down, she lifted the small chain with her index finger, barely tugging it but noting that it disappeared into the ground under the stems of the flowers.

The texture and size of the chain sure did seem to be the same as the chain of the necklace she'd thrown away. It was impossible though. Flowers didn't grow from necklaces.

Unless they were magic.

She jumped up and almost fell backward, no longer too warm but instead shaking as a breeze wrapped around her. Turning from the flowers, she ran to catch up with Grandmother and Tory.

If her head weren't spinning, then the chaos that slowly erupted in the restaurant might have annoyed her. Aunt Moira ignored Joanie when she arrived and quickly entered into a hushed conversation with Grandmother. As a few other patrons caught wind of the older ladies' anxious whispers, they jumped into the discussion. She was surrounded by conversations about magic spells and ancient charms. The curious and somewhat pointed glances directed toward her didn't bother her either.

Joanie nursed a cup of coffee and contemplated ways to see Corbin one more time before leaving in the morning. Just one last time in his arms, touching him, losing herself in his incredible kisses and feeling his large cock buried deep inside her. All she wanted was one more time. Even though if she got it, she knew she would then want him again—and again—one more time.

She saw his bare chest in her mind, the way his dark hair spread over bulging muscles. And his hard abdomen, tight and ripped. She ran her fingertips over the flat surface of the table she sat at, imagining that she touched him.

Where was he?

Corbin knew she would leave this weekend. Granted, if she waited for her ship to return, she would leave Sunday, but there wasn't any point in drawing out her agony. He walked out to make a point. And apparently he made the point more so than he realized. There wasn't any sex charm affecting his ability to stay away from her. If there were, then he would be here now.

The tulips popped into her mind. God, that was weird. Flowers growing like that out of nowhere, matching the shade of the little necklace. And the chain, identical to the one she'd had, sticking out of the ground underneath the flowers. Very, very weird.

None of it made any sense. Everyone around her carried on about how the charm obviously had more magic than any of them thought originally. Yet they overlooked one very important factor. If the necklace was charmed with so much power, then Corbin must be immune. Otherwise he wouldn't be able to stay away.

She gulped at her coffee, cringing at how cold it was. Apparently she'd been lost in her thoughts longer than she realized. Tory wouldn't saunter over and refill her cup. Joanie's legs tingled from lack of circulation when she stood and made her way to the coffee pot. A hush fell over the restaurant, as if her moving among them was some kind of reverent action.

"Well hello there, Teddy Bear," the woman who ran the gift shop down the street sang out melodically. "Have you heard the latest? I'm going to be rich selling those sex charms that I have in my store thanks to this wonderful young lady here."

Joanie looked at the lady, and then over her shoulder at Corbin's friend. There was a sad understanding in his smile when he met her gaze.

"Corbin sent me to find you," he told her quietly.

He might as well have announced it over a loudspeaker. The hush among the patrons didn't last as long this time and everyone quickly confirmed their thoughts with each other.

"Did you hear that?"

"They are definitely a charmed couple," someone said behind her.

Suddenly Joanie didn't want any more coffee. "Where is he?" she asked quietly, although what was the point? It seemed everyone around her leaned in, anxious not to miss a word of the conversation she had with Teddy.

"He had some emergency at his office and left last night for Anchorage. But he told me to keep an eye on you. I went out to the cabin, then came here on a hunch."

"He's gone?" She barely got the words out.

"Something about his secretary. I'm sure he'll fill you in soon. It's hard to tell by looking at the big lug but he actually is a pretty good prosecuting attorney."

Joanie nodded, never doubting his success. "And you don't know how long he'll be gone?"

"Last time he left, we saw him again in about six months." Grandmother waddled past them on the other side of the counter and kept walking as if she hadn't just inserted her two cents into their conversation.

Joanie wanted to run, to disappear and never come back. Too many eyes watched her, waiting to hear what she might say next. And it was all too much to bear.

Corbin was gone. And it didn't sound like she would ever see him again. Any minute now and she would make one hell of an embarrassing scene right here in front of all of these townspeople.

"Well, your job of keeping an eye on me won't last long." She straightened, holding her head high, and did her damndest to form an easy smile that possibly would fool those around her into believing it didn't matter to her where Corbin was.

"Why is that?" Teddy leaned against the counter. He really was a good-looking man but all that brawn simply made it harder to keep Corbin off the brain.

"Because I'm leaving."

"Leaving?" he asked.

"Yes. My flight is booked. Would you please thank Corbin for everything? And it was wonderful meeting you too." She turned, aware that Teddy called after her, but keeping her pace steady and not breaking into a run, she walked out to the truck—Corbin's truck.

It was a serious waste of money to arrange for a shuttle to take her all the way to the airport. And even more ridiculous to arrive the night before her flight left. But there was no way she could sit in the car with Teddy, or anyone else from Seward, if they drove her to the airport. Sleeping in the airport wouldn't be so bad. If Corbin called, then possibly she would be able to pass the time at least talking to him, but he didn't.

She didn't care how sore she was, or how terrible she probably looked the next morning when she boarded her flight after having slept on a hard bench all night. No one was there to see her off and no one would be there to greet her when she got home. Probably her sister would have been, if Joanie had called and told her when her flight arrived. But she didn't want to see anyone—not a soul.

Maybe the numbness that settled in deep would last long enough to get her through her divorce. She returned to work, met with her lawyer and fell back into the routine of her life. Even her small apartment, filled with boxes that she didn't have the energy to unpack, didn't bother her. Nothing bothered her.

Every inch of her shut down, possibly forever. After all, it was impossible to feel anything when her heart no longer worked. It seemed permanently broken.

Grabbing the phone as it rang, she dropped her purse in the bottom drawer of her desk after returning to work after lunch. "Hunter and Hailey," she said, lifting the pile of mail that had arrived while she'd been gone.

"Joanie? I want to talk to you."

It had been over a month since she heard Tommy's voice. He hadn't given her the time of day before she left on her cruise. The two weeks in Alaska, one on the cruise ship and the second with Corbin, and then the two weeks since she'd been home seemed like an eternity. And oddly enough, hearing him now didn't faze her. But then another man successfully broke her heart in one week and Tommy couldn't even pull that off after ten years. She sat in her chair and pulled out her long silver letter opener.

"What can I do for you?" It was the same professional, polite tone she used for anyone who called.

"You can cut the crap and sign the damned papers," he growled.

"Is your lawyer not doing his job right?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Why don't you have him call my lawyer instead of bothering me at work?" Maybe there was still some life in her.

For the first time since Joanie returned home, she was aware of her heart beating in her chest—proof it still worked. With each pump, blood rushed in her veins. She swore circulation returned to her limbs, no longer leaving her numb. She felt! And right now, anger never felt so good!

"Joanie," he began, using that condescending tone which had once made her anxious to put things right.

"Don't you ever use that tone with me again," she snapped, and then blinked when there was silence on the other end of the line. "The papers will be signed. Trust me, I can't wait to sign them. And I will, as soon as they are in proper order."

"They *are* in proper order." Tommy yelled so loud that she jumped and pulled the receiver from her ear.

Then put it back quickly, giving her newfound feeling and adrenaline a direction to flow. "They aren't in order to my satisfaction. Once they are, your lawyer can send them to my lawyer. Don't call me again, Tommy."

Joanie couldn't remember ever hanging up on anyone without saying goodbye first. But she did now, and with enough enthusiasm that the receiver made a crashing sound when it settled onto its base. She stared at it, grinning, then leaned back in her chair and fondled her silver letter opener.

"Boy, if that isn't one satisfied smile," Terry Hunter said, his voice full of praise.

Joanie jumped at the sound of her boss and couldn't manage to wipe the stupid grin off her face even when she blushed furiously.

"It did feel good," she confessed. "Did you hear me?"

"You should have told that fool off long ago," he told her, smiling like a proud father. "Is your lawyer on top of everything for you?"

Joanie's smile faded and her anger washed through her, disappearing quickly as she looked down at her mail. "I met with her last week, right after I got home from my vacation. But we haven't chatted since."

"Give her a call. Keep her up on everything that bastard says to you, and does. I'm sure you're paying her a pretty penny. Make the gal earn her keep."

Joanie nodded, sifting through the mail. For a moment, feeling emotion, even if it was anger, had felt so damned good. But allowing the emotions to come back to life inside her also allowed the pain to return. And it plummeted through her insides like a roaring waterfall, out of control and spraying everywhere.

Corbin would have suggested the exact same thing. She could hear him saying it to her now. His voice in her head ripped her insides apart.

"I know this is hard on you." Terry stepped forward, shifting awkwardly, and finally resting his spotted hand on the edge of her desk. "I promise you'll feel better when it's all over if you fight your way through this instead of letting him walk all over you."

"It's not that," she blurted out, fixing her attention on his age spots covering the back of his hand. "Someone else would have given me the same advice. And I thought I had them out of my head."

"Someone else? Already?"

The heat returned to her cheeks and she couldn't look up to meet his gaze. "It's ridiculous, actually. There isn't anyone else. Let's just say I met someone that I wished I could have known better."

And longer, much longer. But Terry accepted her explanation and patted the edge of her desk. "Call your lawyer. And do you have that Peterson file ready?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry." One thing that hadn't slacked was her work. Diving back into it kept her sane these days. She pulled the large manila file from the pile at the side of her desk and held it with two hands so its contents wouldn't tumble out.

"Perfect. We have court this afternoon."

"Yes. At two." Even if her own life had no order, at least she kept her boss organized.

"Did you hear if Gil won his case yet?"

Joanie shook her head. Gil Hailey, the other partner in the firm, and Terry had a running bet that started sometime after they started their partnership. If either of them lost a case when it went to trial, they caddied for the other at the club they both belonged to.

"He seemed pretty confident this morning," she said, reorganizing the stack of mail and searching for motivation to get her through the afternoon.

"The old bastard is always confident." Terry carried the file against his chest and headed for his office. Then standing in the open doorway in front of her desk, he turned and wagged his finger at her. "Call your lawyer."

"Okay." Dropping her letter opener and giving up on the mail for the moment, she swiveled her chair over and faced her computer. Ever since coming home, it was her only connection to the Internet. It would be a while before she owned a home computer. Especially when her small apartment seemed anything but home. The large, rambling cabin with the mountainous backdrop in Seward was more home than where she slept at night now. "Stop it," she hissed through her teeth, glaring at her screen as her inbox pulled up. Her lawyer's contact information was in her signature line, which, since she hadn't written it down, meant Joanie only contacted her while at work. "What's this?"

She stared at her new downloaded mail, quickly deleting the spam that managed to avoid her filters, and frowned at the one remaining e-mail in her box. The small white arrow cruised across her screen as she moved the mouse. Her finger twitched when she pushed to click on it. Clicking quickly several times as her nerves turned jumpy, her heart had no problem pumping furiously in her chest when her computer jammed momentarily.

"Come on, come on." Waiting an extra minute for it too un-jam seemed like an eternity. She stared at the sender's e-mail address, afraid to blink in case it might disappear. "Finally," she grunted, leaning forward impatiently when the box appeared in front of her, then the contents of the e-mail stared at her.

"My secretary just gave me notice. I have thirty days to find a new legal secretary and need one with lots of experience. Do you have any recommendations?"

"What?" She jumped back, forcing her chair to roll until the back wheels fell off the plastic chair mat.

"What's wrong?" Terry hurried out of his office, looking frazzled. "You screamed."

"I did?" She couldn't take her eyes off her screen. "There's no signature. No "how are you doing" — nothing."

"What are you talking about?"

Joanie raised her hand limply. It floated in the air and didn't feel connected to the rest of her body when she pointed at her computer. "He sent mail."

"Who sent mail?" Terry moved behind her, rocking her chair back when he put his hand on it. "What upset you?"

When she turned and looked at her boss, he took his hand off her chair and stepped back, giving her space, but then scowled when he took his attention from her computer and looked at her. It took a moment to feel the tear that streamed down her cheek.

"Damn, Terry. I'm sorry." She slapped at her cheek, then sucked in a deep breath before she made an even worse scene. Already her boss looked at her like she just grew a second head. "I told you that I met someone. But it was nothing, at least not to him. And well, I really didn't think I would hear from him again."

"And this e-mail is from this guy?" Terry let out a long breath and then rubbed his chin while giving her an appraising look. "You're going to tell him you don't know of any good legal help, right?"

Catching his meaning, Joanie swiveled around to look at her computer. "He isn't offering me a job."

"Looks like he is to me. How well did you get to know this guy?"

"Well," she began. How could she explain to Terry, an old gentleman who was like a father to her, that in less than a week she knew Corbin well enough that he stole her heart?

"I see," he said when she didn't continue. "What's his name and where does he work?"

"Corbin Silver and in Anchorage." She glanced up at her boss. "Why do you want to know?"

"Joanie, I've known you for years. Tommy never got you this emotional. Obviously I need to check this guy out." Terry disappeared into his office without giving her a second glance.

Joanie turned and rested her fingers over her keyboard. She chewed her lower lip as she typed quickly.

"Why did she leave?" Forcing her fingers to stop before she spilled more into words than Corbin probably wanted to hear, she moved her hand to her mouse and clicked send.

Her computer beeped a few moments later, letting her know that she had new mail. Moving her mouse over the small mailbox icon, she pressed her index finger down on the button to open her inbox. Corbin had answered her mail immediately.

"Because I was a jerk and let her get away."

"Oh God." Her fingers shook when she brushed fresh tears from her cheeks. "Corbin," she whispered, barely able to catch her breath.

Placing her fingers over her keyboard again, she thought for a moment before sending her response.

"That sucks. Good legal secretaries are hard to find." Again she clicked send before her fingers took off and spilled out the many things she ached to say.

This time she suppressed a giggle when his response appeared in her inbox. Ignoring her tear-stained cheek and unable to keep the ridiculous smile off her face, she opened his mail.

"I've already found the perfect one. What do I do to convince her to come back to me?"

"This Corbin Silver is quite an accomplished attorney." Terry appeared in his doorway. "I just Googled him. What are you doing?"

His concerned expression turned to worry as he hurried to her desk. "Joanie, what's wrong?"

"He wants me to come back." She wanted to get up and dance around her desk and collapse into a fit of nerves at the same time.

"Why are you crying?"

"Terry." Her boss was a good man and someone she always felt a strong kinship toward. But could she mouth the words? After being numb for two weeks, all the emotions that tumbled around inside her made it impossible to think straight. "I think I might..."

Already he shook his head. "You've got that same look on your face that my daughter had on hers when she told me she wanted to marry that bum of hers."

Joanie laughed. Terry's daughter was married to a wonderful man who was richer than Terry would ever be. She stood up and walked around her desk, giving Terry a quick hug. He got stiff as a board before slowly patting her on the back.

"I knew you would understand," she said, backing up as she sucked in a breath and wiped away her tears.

"I don't understand anything," he grumbled. "You've got to give me thirty days—no, sixty days. Someone will have to train your replacement."

"Oh, Terry." She jumped into his arms, almost knocking both of them over. "Oh, shit," she cried out, letting go of her disgruntled boss and hurrying back around her desk. "I have to answer him."

Sitting in front of her computer, she typed slowly, backspacing several times.

"Ask her to come back."

She leaned back in her chair, waiting for his new mail to appear. When it didn't, her heart constricted. Corbin was talking about her, right? Oh God. What if he seriously meant how should he ask his secretary to return to work? Joanie gripped her gut, willing new mail to appear. Her heart almost exploded when the small beep sounded and the red flag went up on the mailbox icon. She barely managed to work the mouse when she clicked to read it.

"Joanie – get your ass back up here where it belongs."

Chapter Nineteen

Corbin leaned back, stretched and closed his eyes for a moment. A thought hit him and he moved forward quickly, his special-ordered office chair squeaking under the strain of his large body. He hated the way the thing sounded like it would crash and burn under his weight at any moment.

But then breathing irritated him lately.

He opened a new e-mail and typed one word—"Please". Then he typed Joanie's e-mail address in to the recipient box and sent it on his way. He'd be the first to admit he'd been a real asshole lately. And, God love her heart, Polly put up with him and kept his office running.

"Corbin." She pushed open his office door and stuck her head in. "I've got a doctor's appointment in half an hour." She gave him an appraising look and pushed the door open further. "You contacted her, didn't you? You took my advice."

"Don't gloat over it." Instantly he softened his facial features and focused on relaxing his muscles. "And yes, Polly. I took your advice."

Polly clapped her hands together and hurried over to her desk, her limp barely noticeable. Not many employees would return early and work with a cast on their leg. After Polly's skiing accident, Corbin would have lost his mind trying to keep his cases running smoothly without her. If it weren't for the fact that it didn't matter to him if he kept his job with the prosecutor's office or not, he might have lost it completely.

"That crazed, demonic look is gone from your face." She wasn't the kind of lady who kept her thoughts to herself. "And good thing too. Prosecution wants aggressive lawyers, but not ones that terrify the jurors."

"I know I've been an asshole."

"That's putting it lightly." She smiled easily at him. "Corbin, admitting you're in love is the first step toward being happy for the rest of your life. Did she say yes?"

It dawned on him that she hadn't confirmed. He frowned at his laptop. "She hasn't answered."

Polly frowned and walked around his desk. Without asking, she turned his laptop and ran her finger over the mouse then clicked it a few times. A quick search gave her the business address where Joanie worked.

"Corbin, you really are a jerk." She sighed, and reached for his phone. Her fingernails clicked against the buttons as she pushed several of them. "I need a number for a business in Seattle, please—the Hunter and Hailey law office." she said after a minute.

He took his laptop back from her, turning it to face him once again. Still no new mail.

"Directory Assistance is putting me through," she told him. Before he could order her to hang up the phone, she cleared her throat and smiled at him. "Yes, hello. Joanie Showalter, please. This is her? Hello, Joanie, please hold while I transfer you to my boss."

Polly didn't push the hold button but handed the phone to him and then walked around his desk toward his office door. He gripped the receiver in his suddenly clammy hand and stared at it.

"I'll be back in an hour or so." She waved over her shoulder. "Your afternoon is clear – no appointments."

Polly closed his office door silently, leaving him with phone in hand. Suddenly he needed something to drink.

"Joanie?" he asked, hearing his voice crack and cringing at the silence at the other end of the line.

"This is Joanie." She sounded so professional, her voice soft and sultry.

His blood warmed, the chill that refused to leave his body over the past week suddenly dissipating. "Joanie, it's Corbin."

"Corbin." She said his name on a breath.

And when she sighed, he closed his eyes, willing her to be here next to him. God, he missed her. "You didn't answer my e-mail."

"Oh God." Her laugh sounded nervous. "You're right, I didn't."

"Tell me I can book a flight for you."

"Do you really need a new legal secretary?"

"Polly is pregnant. She and her husband decided she'll stay home after her baby is born. But she's willing to stay on and train someone new."

"That's what my boss said that I would have to do."

It took him a minute to grab the meaning behind her words. Suddenly he couldn't sit still. Jumping up and moving to his window, he stared out at the panoramic view of the city, then paced the length of his office.

"You've given your boss notice?"

"Yeah, just a few minutes ago."

He almost stumbled over his boots but managed to make it out of his office and into the outer waiting room. Bless Polly's heart for having a fresh pot of coffee brewed. He pulled a mug out of the cabinet and situated the phone between his ear and shoulder to pour himself a cup.

"Did you see the tulips growing in the yard out at the cabin?" he asked.

"Yes. I did. Wasn't that strange?"

"I almost yanked them up."

"No," she wailed into his ear. "Didn't you notice the chain to my necklace was wrapped around the roots?"

"The chain to your necklace *was* the roots." Corbin made his living proving the facts, which made accepting everything about this charm even harder.

"So did you dig them up?" Her soft-spoken words sounded so wonderful. If she would just keep speaking, say anything, talk about any subject, he didn't care. Just hearing her voice soothed the pain that tortured his insides ever since he let her go—without a fight.

Now, hearing her happiness, her excitement, knowing she wanted to be with him as much as he needed her made it real hard to focus on their conversation. All he wanted to know was when she would be here, safe, in his arms. "No. Last I saw them they still looked healthy and were in full bloom."

"Last time you saw them?"

"I've been in Anchorage." There wasn't any appeal in returning to Seward. Even though his grandmother needed him, facing the town, the empty cabin, everyone there just seemed too much without Joanie. "When can I book your flight?"

"Oh." She didn't say anything else and if she needed time to clear her schedule, that was fine. "My boss did ask for thirty days."

"I see." And asking her to stiff her boss wouldn't be fair. "I'll e-mail confirmation for your flight."

In spite of waiting thirty days, everything seemed brighter, like his world had gone from black and white to color.

"That will be fine." She didn't say anything else.

God. Talking on the phone sucked.

He mumbled his goodbyes and then quickly added that he would call her when she got off work.

Polly told him he didn't have any appointments that afternoon, which gave him personal time on the computer. Sitting behind his desk didn't appeal to him either right now though. But staying until Polly returned and the file clerk who showed up in the afternoons arrived would give him enough time to do what he needed to do.

After booking Joanie's flight for thirty days from today, another thought hit him, and he quickly pulled up his calendar for the rest of the week. He didn't see anything that his associates couldn't handle. How long had it been since he'd ventured down to the lower forty-eight?

As amazingly frustrating as airports could be, once in a great while, everything went smoothly. Maybe magic did guide him along. If so, it could continue leading the way.

"Keep the change," he told the cab driver, anxious to get out of the smelly backseat.

Stretching to get the kinks out, Corbin looked up and down the street. Gray skies hung low enough he was sure he could reach up and touch them. A light mist dampened his skin and the back of his shirt. People hurried up and down the sidewalk, using briefcases and purses for umbrellas, daring curious glances in his direction before continuing on with their business.

In spite of the dreary surroundings and unfriendly stares most gave him, Corbin straightened to his full height, confirmed the address on the stone building in front of him and took the wide stone steps two at a time. The glass doors were heavier than they looked but opened easily when he tugged on the slender door handle.

The Hunter and Hailey law office was on the second floor, and opting for the stairs, Corbin narrowed the distance between him and Joanie with each step that he took. He reached the law office and pushed open the door. A small waiting area, adorned with healthy-looking ferns and polished furniture, looked clean and professional.

He stepped around a dividing wall.

"Hello. May I help you?" A young girl, possibly college age, stood facing a filing cabinet. She stopped what she was doing, one file held over the open cabinet, and looked up at him, her jaw dropping. "Do..." Her voice cracked. "Do you have an appointment?"

That's when he heard her. There were several offices behind the receptionist's desk, and one office's door was open. Joanie stood, her back to him, in the doorway talking to whoever was inside.

"I didn't hire her. My sister found her for me. But she came with some awesome references." Joanie sounded strained as she spoke to whoever was in the office.

He took in her tan business suit, with her straight cut skirt ending just above her knees. His gaze swooped down her, noting the way the outfit showed off her firm ass, and then he took in her perfectly shaped calves and how her pantyhose clung to her.

"The fact remains the same. You need a lawyer who will fight this battle for you, not one who decides to take a vacation when you've hired her to handle your divorce." The man speaking wasn't visible, but his tone made his anger clear. "Tommy's demands are unreasonable, and a good lawyer would see immediately how easy he could be shot down. The jerk thinks you won't fight him."

"Somebody need to be shot down?" he asked.

Joanie spun around at the same time the girl behind the desk almost dropped the file in her hand as she let out a gasp.

Corbin didn't give the girl his attention. Joanie's green eyes were dull, her expression defeated. The color that glowed in her face most of the time she was with him now had faded. Her hair was pinned behind her head, making it look darker than when it was down. And, like her complexion, it didn't have its usual luster.

"Corbin!" Her face lit up with so much energy and passion that it almost knocked him backward. Fire suddenly burned in her vivid green eyes and color flushed over her skin. Not much would stroke his male ego better than the incredible change his presence did for her.

"Wait. What the hell are you doing here?" It didn't matter that she quickly regained her professional composure and scowled at him.

"I'm here because you're here." He moved in on her, ignoring the receptionist still standing on the other side of the desk.

Joanie's eyes widened and her mouth formed a perfect little circle. He ran his finger down the length of her nose, having no problem with anyone in this office seeing him put his mark on her.

"What is this?" A stocky older man with silver hair combed and greased back like he was stuck in a previous decade suddenly stood behind Joanie.

She jumped back, letting out an adorable little squeal. When she would have stumbled backward into the older man, she shifted to the side, fighting to keep her balance while her face blushed beautifully.

Corbin put one hand on her shoulder to stable her and held his other hand out to the old guy.

"I'm Corbin Silver," he announced himself.

"Ahh...we meet this Corbin Silver." The man shook his hand firmly, giving him an appraising once-over.

Corbin didn't get the impression that the old guy disapproved. And it felt better than good to know Joanie had talked about him to the people she worked with.

"I'm Terrance Hunter—call me Terry. And come on in, both of you." Terry glanced at the young lady still standing behind the desk and clutching a file to her chest. "Hold my calls for a bit, please, Nina."

Joanie looked up to him, a question in her eyes. He did her the favor of answering as he closed the door, shutting the three of them off from the rest of the office.

"Since you're here for thirty more days, I decided to come to you."

"You're here for thirty days?" The excitement in her voice added to the glow in her brilliant green eyes.

"No, my dear. I wish I could be, but work won't let me alone that long." He stroked her hair, careful not to pull it from the bun behind her head. Although yanking it free, watching it spill around her face sounded so damned good. "I just wanted to make sure my interests were intact."

"You did?" She licked her lips and fought to keep her grin from traveling across her face.

"Well now." Terry rocked up on his toes, beaming as much as Joanie was. "It's always good to see proof that love at first sight really does exist."

"Terry!" Joanie sounded appalled.

Corbin took advantage of the statement and pulled Joanie into his arms, something he'd wanted to do for too long. Now that she was where she belonged, he could focus on matters that needed addressed.

"I couldn't help but overhear that her lawyer isn't pulling her weight. And you were right, that jerk laid way for some awesome plays in securing Joanie a very nice divorce." Corbin didn't let go of Joanie and kept his arms wrapped securely around her.

She relaxed after just a moment, and her soft breathing pressed her breasts against his chest. Her scent wrapped around him. The softness of her skin and her smooth hair were reminders of the many things he missed and craved about Joanie. With the older guy's somewhat protective look showing Corbin he still needed to pass the man's test, Corbin simply held her. Although devouring that pouty mouth of hers sounded better than conversation.

"Are you a divorce lawyer?" Terry asked.

Corbin shook his head. "Criminal law. I'm a prosecutor in Anchorage, Alaska."

Terry nodded as if that settled some matter and turned to walk around his desk. "Joanie, I'll look over things, if you don't mind. I've handled a few divorces in my time." Joanie shifted in Corbin's arms but Terry didn't give her a chance to comment. "And since you have me ready to go for my afternoon and Nina is here to cover phones, take the rest of the afternoon off. Go show your guest the wonders of Seattle."

"I can't wait," Corbin announced.

Joanie mumbled something to Nina when she left Corbin's arms long enough to grab her purse, and then met his gaze when he held the door for her. She didn't say anything until the elevator door closed behind them.

"I can't believe you're actually here. I really thought—"

Corbin eliminated the distance between them, taking her into his arms and lifting her against him while at the same time pressing her against the wall of the elevator. It probably wasn't right to devour her in mid-sentence. And for someone who made a living with arguments, explanations and speeches that often won his cases, there were words he should be saying right now. Joanie needed to hear them and he knew it.

After walking out on her, leaving her in the hands of his overbearing grandmother simply to prove a point that he doubted anyone bought, she deserved the truth. He could argue his case with actions as well as words and crushing against her, impaling her with his tongue and filling his mind and body with the wonderful scent and taste of her, made one hell of a point.

Joanie got his point too. He didn't doubt it for a moment. The elevator doors beeped behind him and he straightened, focusing on her moist, swollen lips. "Believe that I'm here now?" he asked, again feeling the raw edge of guilt that he didn't say the words she needed to hear.

"That's not what I meant." She licked her lips and stepped out of the elevator. When she focused ahead of them and not on him, it cut even deeper. "Do you have a car?" she asked, turning to practical matters.

"I took a taxi from the airport."

"I wish I knew you were coming. My place isn't exactly in order for company." She pointed across the street at a large parking lot and then focused on traffic.

Joanie drove a small car, with the passenger seat barely going back far enough for him to fit his oversized body. It probably served him right that he practically gnawed on his kneecaps during the drive to her place. He told himself that she didn't weave in and out of traffic, jerking her car back and forth on purpose just so that he would bang against the door and then the emergency brake, before pulling into the parking lot of a plain-looking apartment complex.

"I really haven't taken the time to settle in here," she explained, speaking and looking at him for the first time since they left her office. "And we'll have to figure out something for supper."

"You weren't expecting me. It's okay." He was more than happy when she parked her car, but climbing out proved just as much of a chore. His bones popped when he unfolded himself and finally stood up straight.

Joanie was around to his side by the time he stood erect. Her expression showed she saw how uncomfortable her small car was for him. "I bet it's hard for you to buy cars," she said, and for the first time looked somewhat amused.

"I don't know. Haven't bought one in years." He glanced around at the complex.

Gray buildings, all looking identical, could have been a complex in any city. The place looked incredibly impersonal, like everyone living here didn't have time to make a home, or were simply in transition—like Joanie. And if he would start spitting out the words he came here to say, possibly she wouldn't focus any longer on trying to settle in to this place.

"My apartment is over here." She pointed and then led the way.

Her heels clicked on the asphalt, and her work skirt hugging her ass, ending halfway down her legs and those tan stockings accentuating her nicely curved calves created one hell of a view. His cock stretched uncomfortably in his jeans by the time she unlocked her apartment door.

And she wasn't joking about not having settled in to her apartment. Boxes were stacked along the walls, and shy of a card table with one chair pushed underneath it, there wasn't any living room furniture. He glanced at an open door off a short hallway when Joanie's phone rang and she left him standing where he was as she moved into her tiny kitchen. He spotted a single bed and a laundry basket filled with folded clothes in the room off the living area before turning his attention back to Joanie.

She bent over to slip out of her heels as she cradled the phone between her shoulder and side of her head. "He isn't a Neanderthal," she giggled, obviously amused by someone's comments on the other end of the line. "And yes. It's him. You're coming over now?"

That piqued his curiosity and he entered the hallway style kitchen, with counters on both sides of a small space barely large enough to turn around in. If anything, everything would be within arm's reach while cooking. Like her ass as she bent over to pull off her shoes. He couldn't help cupping the soft curve and stroking it so that she straightened quickly.

A single strand of hair fluttered free of its confines when she stood and spun around, looking at him wide-eyed and then focusing on the person who spoke to her.

"It's fine. We'll be here." She hung up after muttering goodbye and placed the cordless on its cradle on the counter. "You're about to meet my sister."

"Who thinks I'm a Neanderthal?" He reached for the single strand, ignoring her when she tried stopping him. "I guess it's only fair after you endured my family."

"She called the office and Nina told her that I was swept out of there by a giant barbarian with hair longer than any man's she'd ever seen."

"And that makes me a Neanderthal?" It wasn't the first time his physical appearance had made him a hard person to forget. For the most part, being unforgettable had its advantages.

"I'm sure Jenny will form her opinion of you by your actions, not your appearance." Joanie wrapped her fingers around his wrist but couldn't pull his hand from her hair. "She means a lot to me," she said finally, her voice dropping to a more sultry, quiet tone.

"Then she means a lot to me." He let go of her hair but then grabbed her wrist when she let go of his. Bringing it to his mouth, he nibbled on the soft flesh, feeling her pulse throb against his lips as she started breathing heavily through slightly parted lips.

"Why are you here, Corbin?" she whispered. "I've spent so many sleepless nights fighting to get you out of my head."

"That's why I'm here. I want to stay in your head, and in your heart," he added, dropping his voice to a whisper before finishing.

She visibly sucked in a breath, but then took a step backward. He tightened his grip slightly around her wrist, unable to let too much space grow between them.

"You took off, not me. Now you show up here after e-mailing me. I don't have it in me to play games."

"Do you think I'm playing games?"

"I don't know," she whispered.

He gripped her wrist harder but then forcibly relaxed his hand. She wasn't playing games, but sharing her heart and mind with him. Just like he asked.

"I'd like to know what you are doing here though," she added, relaxing her hand in his and staring up at him.

At a very young age, he learned how to keep his feelings to himself. As an adult, the skill was mastered. The loveliest of women, packing incredible jobs, promising futures and saying all the right words, never even got near his heart. He dated them, hung out with them, slept with them and assured them he would be fine when they moved on. One woman after another tried tying him down. Even those who swore

repeatedly that all they wanted was sex and no commitment sooner or later tried tricking him into buying a ring. By the time he reached his thirties, the game was so old it lost its appeal.

He accepted the fact that the best kind of woman was one who didn't want to spend the night once they were through with an evening of hot, passionate sex. All those rules, those lessons learned, the simple facts he lived with that kept his emotions, and heart, well protected, simply disappeared when he met Joanie.

And she asked what he was doing.

Damned good question.

"Okay. I'll tell you." He stroked the side of her fingers, noticing for the first time the fading indention around her ring finger where there once was a ring. He ran his index finger over the thin line that was a shade lighter than the rest of her skin. "I made a mistake."

"Oh?" Her hand stiffened when he continually stroked the finger that no longer had a ring on it. "What mistake was that?" she prodded, her voice more tense than it was a moment before.

His gaze shot to her eyes. "I tried convincing Grandmother of a lie. My pride got in the way and I let part of me slip through my fingers."

Her brows narrowed. Either she didn't follow him or she doubted his words. His gut twisted. There was no way he would return home without Joanie by his side.

"What part was that?" she asked.

"You."

"Me?" She searched his face but didn't smile, didn't frown, didn't even look doubtful.

"Yes. You." He stepped closer until he pressed her against her small refrigerator. When her gaze dropped to his chest, he took her chin, pushing her head back until he captured her attention completely. "I wanted everyone to believe that I couldn't be manipulated by some sex charm. No one would be able to say that Corbin Silver didn't have the strength to overcome the manipulative hex given strength by a couple of bored old ladies. And when I want people to believe something, I go all the way to make sure there isn't any doubt. I have years of practice and I'm damned good at it. So good that I convinced the only person who has ever crept into my heart that I didn't care for her."

"Corbin?" She whispered his name, making it a question.

But this was his moment. There would never be any doubt in Joanie's mind, in her heart, where she belonged and who she belonged with. He would see to it.

"I love you, Joanie. You might think that isn't possible after a few weeks—"

She put her finger over his lips. He grabbed her hand, ready to move her fingers. She would hear him. But then she grabbed his wrist, barely able to wrap her small fingers around him. Her touch scalded his flesh and a spark of electricity shot down his arm. It stilled his motions—and hers too. She opened her mouth to speak but then

hesitated, glancing at her hand with her cream-colored skin contrasted so perfectly against his dark skin.

"I know it's possible," she whispered, her lashes fluttering over her eyes before she slowly raised them. Her gaze glowed with an intensity that ripped his insides apart. "I know because I love you too."

Someone knocked on the door and his heart exploded in his chest. It began beating furiously and he turned, glaring in the direction of the unknown intruder.

"That would be my sister," Joanie told him, sighing as she moved away from him. She walked barefoot in her pantyhose. It was amazing that she looked just as sexy with her heels off as she did when she wore them.

Corbin made eye contact with a woman with short brown hair that looked windblown. The lady, obviously Joanie's sister, gave her sister only a moment's attention before pushing past her to let her gaze travel up and down Corbin several times. She stopped in the middle of the living room, continuing to stare at him before slowly turning toward Joanie.

"He's nothing like Tommy."

"Jenny!" Joanie's eyes grew wide and her pleading look at her sister would have been comical except that Corbin knew firsthand what embarrassing family was like. Joanie took a long deep breath, forcing her breasts to stretch the material of her blouse. "Jenny, this is Corbin Silver. Corbin, my sister and my best friend, Jenny Clark."

Jenny took a stiff step toward him and extended her hand. She shook his vigorously and then freed his hand and stared at hers as if he might have marked her in some way. Then combing her hair with her fingers and tousling it even more than it was a moment ago, she wrinkled her nose, looking for a moment like she might twitch it and cast yet another spell.

"What kind of name is Silver?" she asked.

"Jenny," Joanie whispered.

"My father was Scottish Highlander and my mother was Inuit."

"Was? They aren't anymore?"

"They still are, but they're also deceased."

"Oh." For a moment it looked like that would be the end of the questioning, but apparently Jenny had a long list. "Where did you meet my sister?"

"I already told you..." Joanie whispered pleadingly.

Jenny held up her hand, not looking at Joanie but piercing Corbin with a hard stare. A patch of freckles splashed across the bridge of Jenny's nose. Although probably a good twenty pounds heavier than Joanie and looking like she dressed in the dark and didn't believe in mirrors, there was a vivacious glow about Jenny. Something told him that if he passed her line of scrutiny, he might like this feisty sibling.

"I met her in my family's restaurant," he answered seriously.

"So you're in the restaurant business?"

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"I'm a lawyer."
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"I own a town home in Anchorage, Alaska but also have property in Seward." He didn't need to elaborate like this and wondered why he did. Although Jenny raised one eyebrow, an expression that possibly showed she was impressed. Even though Joanie couldn't see her sister's facial expression, she also noticeably relaxed. He had made headway.

"Are you going to stay there?" she asked.

Both women gave him their undivided attention.

"I've lived my whole life in Alaska," he answered honestly. "I would like to stay there."

"What do you think of family?" Her question was vague, but she watched him closely as if there was only one correct answer.

"I think we wouldn't make it without them."

She nodded, glanced at Joanie and then turned, looking ready to throw the big one at him. "And children? What about children?"

"I love them."

"Do you have any?"

"No."

"Do you want children of your own?"

"Jenny!" Joanie hissed.

"Yes," he told her, and both women looked at him like he was a god.

[&]quot;General practice?"

[&]quot;Criminal."

[&]quot;Where do you live?"

Chapter Twenty

The sun was so warm against her bare legs and arms. Just being out of the car felt so damned good that Joanie simply stood in the drive, breathing in the wonderfully fresh mountain air and staring at the large cabin in front of her. There had been so many trips over the past few months, her flying up here, Corbin coming to Seattle.

"All of that ends today." She grinned, letting her gaze travel over the span of mountains stretching along the horizon behind the cabin. "Home." It was where the heart was.

Blowing out an excited breath, she turned and stared at her small car, with the trailer that dwarfed it hitched behind. "I can't believe we made it."

"You had doubts?" Corbin stood from where he knelt on the other side of her car. "The patch held out on the tire. One of these days, one of us needs to buy a new car."

"Don't insult her." Joanie made a show of petting the hood of her car. "She just made the long haul driving up here. Let her rest in peace instead of killing her with insults."

Corbin's baritone laughter sent a rush of excited tingles dancing over her flesh. He walked around the front of her car, his long legs clearing the distance between them quickly. She squealed when he lifted her into his arms.

"What are you doing?" she cried out, managing to get one arm around the back of his neck and then relaxing when his strong grip held her securely against him. She kicked her legs up in the air and then bent them at the knees when he adjusted his arm under them.

"Carrying you across the threshold," he told her, turning serious as he headed toward the porch.

"We aren't married," she complained, growing more and more distracted by all the muscle bulging and flexing against her.

"That could be changed." He climbed the steps easily and then the muscles in his arm flexed against her shoulder blades when he reached for the doorknob with his other hand.

Her legs slid down him, her feet almost reaching the ground when the large wooden door was flung inward and Tory grinned from ear to ear as she stood before them.

"What are you doing here?" Corbin scowled in greeting.

Tory ignored her uncle's sudden irritability. "Welcome home!" she cried out loudly.

The room filled with explosive laughter and Corbin let Joanie slide to the floor once they were both inside. She barely heard the screen door close behind them as Grandmother and Aunt Moira clapped their hands and actually looked like they danced behind Tory. Then there was Teddy Bahr and a few others from town that Joanie recognized. Everyone talked at once, laughing and looking very pleased that they'd successfully invaded the intimate moment between Corbin and Joanie.

Joanie had been beyond elated when her divorce finalized within the ninety day period in spite of the haggling and frustrations that Tommy and the lawyers placed on her. With all of that behind her, she finally made the decision to move up here with Corbin. Helping Corbin out in his office in Anchorage, then flying home on weekends, had turned her life upside-down. The past few days they'd spent packing up her apartment that she never completely unpacked. And finally her life looked like it would fall into place.

Corbin's suggestion that they should marry hit her so hard, she barely heard everyone's excited welcome as they all took turns hugging her. It took a few minutes for their words to sink in.

"What are they talking about?" she whispered, grabbing Corbin when he started walking toward the kitchen with Teddy.

Corbin patted Teddy on the back. "Go see if Grandmother and Aunt Moira left any beers in the refrigerator."

"I'm sure they did," Teddy said, winking at her. "But I'd stay away from the coffee unless you want a buzz that will last into next week."

Everyone stood in the living room, carrying on as they talked about everyone. It amazed Joanie that Grandmother and the others were always able to find something new to share about someone in town. Their conversation didn't impress her as much as Corbin's hand on her back did. He guided her out of the living room, past the large dining room table and china cabinet and into the spacious kitchen. Already Teddy had his head in the refrigerator and pulled out a few longnecks.

"We'll catch up with everyone in a minute," Corbin told him quietly and accepted two of the bottles.

"Don't think you're going to get more than a few minutes before they find you," Teddy warned him and then held the back door open.

Corbin guided Joanie outside and past the table and chairs where she had undone his braid the first night that she met him. That seemed like such a long time ago. The memory made her ache to repeat the act though, run her fingers through his thick strands and slowly unwrap the braid that ran down the length of his spine.

"I want to show you something." Corbin took her hand and they left the back porch.

"What is it?" Again his words about marrying tripped over her thoughts and his hand wrapped around hers got warmer as he led the way across the yard.

She walked alongside him, not needing to be guided any longer as she sensed where he took her. They stopped at the same time as she stared down at the two flowers, looking magnificent in the afternoon sun.

"They're beautiful," she whispered, suddenly feeling as if the ground they stood on held some kind of reverence that demanded their respect.

"More than beautiful." His calm tone added to the mystique that filled the air around them. "And once you accept their magic, the power that they possess, you understand how such soft petals can continually look so radiant day after day."

She looked up at him, surprised by how serious he was. He met her gaze and his green eyes glowed against his tan skin.

"Their power is love. And the more love grows, the more beautiful and radiant it is."

"That's rather poetic." Even though she'd spent almost every day with Corbin over the past few months, there were continually new sides to him that she learned about daily. He was damned near perfect. And she was lucky as hell.

"Believe it or not, I'm quoting Grandmother."

"I don't think I would have enjoyed hearing it as much if I'd heard her say it."

"I didn't believe in the sex charm, or love charm, or whatever you want to call it. But fortunately, it believed in us."

Joanie glanced down at the flowers and then let her hand slide free of his, still feeling the heat from his fingers wrapped around hers. She knelt next to him and reached for the larger of the two tulips. They were such an amazing shade of blue, and the petals were softer than velvet. A drop of moisture clung to the inside fold of the flower and she spread it along the inner lip of the petal.

Her insides warmed and she grew overly aware of the moisture that clung to the smooth flesh between her legs. Flesh as smooth and satiny as the petals of the flower. The more she caressed the tulip, the stronger the need grew inside her.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Corbin whispered next to her as he squatted alongside her. "I swear they're both stretching toward you, as if anxious to feel your next touch."

His words were like a soft breeze that brushed over her flesh, making every tiny hair on her arms, down her neck and spine and over the rest of her stand at attention and grow oversensitive.

She spotted a small drop of dew, deep inside the flower, and carefully extended her finger until she touched the bead of moisture. Sucking in her breath, she experienced an incredible energy deep in her womb, as if part of her was suddenly stroked for the first time and dying to be touched again.

"Unbelievable," she whispered in awe.

"Did you notice that the chain is attached to both of them?" Corbin asked, pulling her attention from the soft petals and down the long stems. He lifted part of the delicate chain off the ground, able to pull it up a couple inches with his finger before it went taut.

"The flowers grew from the necklace." She shook her head, seeing the truth in all of it even though she stared at the impossible. "I never thought I would think turquoise was such a magnificent color."

"I'm glad that you think it is."

She looked up at him and lost herself in his brooding gaze.

"I have something for you."

"What?" she asked, the throbbing inside her creating a pressure that distracted her.

He straightened, taking her hand and pulling her up so that she stood before him. His expression wasn't readable when he stuffed his hand into his jeans pocket. She followed the act and her mouth went dry at the sight of the long, thick bulge that stretched under the denim. Even after he pulled his hand out of his pocket, she couldn't look away from the length of his shaft. If his family and friends didn't leave soon, she would go insane with the deep, hard pulse that made her pussy ache and her breasts feel too heavy and swollen.

"I sent pictures of the flowers to shops all over the world before finding the perfect match."

"What are you talking about?"

Corbin held out his hand, palm up, and showed her the small gold ring. A bright blue rock glittered in the sunlight, flashing a shade of blue that indeed matched the shade of the flowers.

"Oh my God." Her fingers shook when she lifted the ring from his palm.

"I wanted your ring to remind us always of the magic that brought us together." Corbin took the ring and then her hand and slipped it onto her ring finger. "Joanie, I want you to marry me."

"Oh Corbin." Tears filled her eyes, blurring her vision as she stared at the small rock and turned her hand. "I would love to marry you."

Joanie was beyond exhausted as she stretched out naked in the oversized bed in Corbin's room later that night. She held her hand out in front of her, staring at the imperfect shape of the small rock on her ring. Amazing how it seemed to resemble the shape of the necklace she'd owned for just a few days.

The bathroom door opened and light flooded the dark room as Corbin walked toward her. He smelled of soap and shampoo and his thick black hair hung loose past his shoulders and thick, muscular arms. Gazing lazily at his perfect physique, she stared at the warrior-like body, firm and hard and dark.

"You're still awake."

"Yes," she managed, not in the mood to talk as she drank in the perfect male body standing at the end of the bed.

Before leaving, everyone had insisted on unloading all of her belongings out of the trailer. Then the women pushed on, opening every box and arguing over where the perfect spot might be to place each and every one of her personal items. The process took even longer when Grandmother and Aunt Moira, and even Tory, stopped working every few minutes and lifted her hand, sighing and repeating over and over again how incredibly perfect and beautiful her ring was. She was surprised she had the strength to climb the stairs after they all left. And when she climbed onto the bed, then stretched out and undressed while lying down, the need to have Corbin buried inside her made it impossible to fall asleep.

"Damn good thing. Otherwise I might have woken you up when I made love to you." He moved quickly, like a creature capable of attack without any warning.

Corbin grabbed her ankles, sliding her down the bed and spreading her legs.

"Oh God," she cried out, unable to stop him when he lifted her legs, coming over her and stretching her until her inner thigh muscles burned.

Pressing his strong hands against the back of her legs, he lifted her until her ass came up off the bed. Then relaxing and kneeling on the bed, he lowered his mouth to her swollen, throbbing heat. His long hair slid over his shoulder and brushed over her flesh. Her nerve endings prickled and tingles rushed through her when he pressed his mouth to her pussy.

A low, satisfied hum vibrated through him and every inch of her tightened. She lost herself in the incredible sensations that mounted inside her. His tongue worked magic of its own, lapping at her juices, stroking her soaked flesh and pressing against her acutely sensitized clit.

"Shit! Corbin!" she screamed, tossing her head from side to side and clawing at the air between them.

"Oh no, baby. You taste too damned good to allow you to explode so quickly." He moved his mouth over her pussy as he spoke, teasing her when his lips brushed against her throbbing flesh. "A delicacy like this needs to be savored, allowed to simmer until all juices flow freely."

"They're flowing," she told him, feeling her orgasm press against her ability to think clearly.

"And I want every drop." He moved his mouth lower, then ran his tongue over her feverish entrance.

Her heart relocated, lodging between her legs and pumping with an intensity that pushed her closer to the edge. Hard, solid beats pulsed blood through her body and created feverish energy that continued to build as he fed from her.

Corbin impaled her with his tongue, then ran it along the length of her pussy walls. So many tiny muscles twitched, anxious for more of his attention as he probed and focused intently on every inch of her tortured pussy. Then lifting his mouth slightly, he closed his lips around her clit, tugging and sucking until every inch of her shook uncontrollably.

Joanie clawed at the comforter underneath her, feeling her world shift dangerously to the side. She would fall off, drift over the edge and into a state of blissful sexual cravings that might be impossible to recover from. Her groans and cries encouraged him as he continued enjoying his feast. She shivered and convulsed when he swirled his tongue around her throbbing flesh and then traveled down past her pussy until he found her ass.

"So tight," he whispered, torturing her puckered skin and then soaking it with his mouth and her own juices. "What a perfectly tight little ass."

His words were no more than growls that vibrated over her flesh and tortured her as much as his mouth and tongue did. He pushed inside her, stretching her and creating sensations inside that toppled her over the edge.

"It's too much." She fought to free her legs but Corbin tightened his grip, keeping her rear end off the bed and her legs stretched. "Please, oh please!"

She would beg, do anything, cry for mercy. Her orgasm released, exploding inside her. The bed spun around and then turned sideways. She would swear to it. Wave after wave of built-up pressure flooded her insides, carrying her along with it as it turned into a rushing waterfall of inescapable pleasure.

Not that she wanted to escape. Not that she could if she tried. But God help her, if she came any harder she would black out. And more than anything right now, she needed him inside her. Not his fingers. Not his tongue.

"Fuck me!" she demanded, twitching her hips and fighting with strength she didn't know she had in a feeble effort to bring her pussy closer to his cock.

"Oh sweetheart, I promise you," he began, still enjoying the feast she offered him as he stroked her drenched pussy slowly with his tongue. "You will be fucked very thoroughly by the time we're done."

It wasn't his words so much as the lazy, slurred way that he spoke them that sent shivers of pleasure dancing over her. She blinked more than a few times before managing to clear her vision enough to stare into his incredibly satisfied expression. And even then, there was a blur around him that made him look like he glowed.

Even though she was sure she'd done all the work, coming so hard that she couldn't catch her breath, a smooth sheen of moisture clung to his tanned skin. His muscles looked perfectly oiled and his hair fell thick and long, giving him a majestic and almost dangerous look. But the glow in his eyes when he raised his lashes enough to gaze at her twisted her insides with an anxious craving that bordered on desperation.

"Please, Corbin. You've got to fuck me now."

"I think you'll make it a few more minutes if I don't." He let go of her legs and they fell to the bed, useless for a moment before she remembered how to move them.

She rolled to her side before managing to push herself to all fours. Then facing him, she knelt and pressed her hands against his steel chest. She might as well have tried pushing the wall out of her way.

"Now you try to send me away," he teased when she proved unsuccessful in budging him. He grabbed her wrists and lifted her, then moved when he was ready.

Corbin turned them around and took her place, stretched out on the bed. He held her hands captive and pulled her over him. "Show me what you want," he instructed, keeping her hands tightly held together.

"You know what I want." She leaned into him as he held her hands in his over his chest. Her legs wobbled, the muscles inside them damned near useless. But she managed to straddle him and pressed her drenched pussy over the length of his shaft. "Maybe you don't want it as badly as I do."

Even though he kept her wrists pinned, she took advantage of his hands being unable to control where she moved. Stroking his dick with her pussy, she rubbed against him, rocking her hips over his thighs and moving up the length of his throbbing cock.

"Is that what you think?" His black hair fanned over his shoulders and along the bed on either side of him. Muscles twitched in his chest, with his jaw set firmly as he watched her tease both of them.

"I think you need to be brought to the boiling point just like you did to me." He felt so good underneath her. She rocked over him, preventing his entrance when his cock danced upward, leaping toward her entrance when she moved dangerously close to the swollen, soft tip of his dick. Then adjusting herself so that he couldn't impale her, she rubbed her pussy down the length of his shaft until his tight, round balls tickled her so that she couldn't breathe.

"I've been at that boiling point all evening, my dear."

"I'm not sure. You aren't begging."

Corbin let go of her hands and she almost fell forward before gaining control. But it was too late. He grabbed her hips and put her right where he wanted her. His cock danced upward again, and he kept her in place and glided deep inside her heat.

"Shit," he hissed, then thrust with so much power that if he hadn't been holding on to her, she possibly would have slid right off the bed.

But since he did keep her in place, his cock impaled her and split her in two.

Joanie arched over him, letting her head fall back as white sparks exploded before her eyes. A scream ripped from her throat and the pressure he released while feasting on her filled her insides again with dangerous speed. And just as quickly it exploded inside her, tearing her in two as she came all over his cock.

"That's it, sweetheart," he hissed, his teeth clenched together as he thrust his hips up again. "Come all over me. I love how you soak me."

"It feels so good." No longer did she want to tease him, or try to manipulate their actions. Holding on to his arms, it was all she could do to stay upright as he lay underneath her and thrust deep inside her, filling and stroking before gliding out of her until his smooth head barely touched her soaked entrance.

But then he filled her again, his cock so engorged and harder than steel that he hit tender muscles deep inside her that never experienced such attention before. Every inch of her throbbed. Muscles twitched and flexed as she clung to his shaft. If she had the strength to keep him buried inside her, touching her in places that needed his touch, she would have kept him there. She tightened, feeling every inch of him even when he built the momentum.

"Joanie," he growled, his facial muscles hard and a vein bulging in his neck. "Look at me."

She already was. Letting go of his arms, she reached for him, falling forward and lowering herself until she brushed her lips over his. Tasting herself on him created new energy that spun out of control inside her. She spread her legs and his hands moved over her rear end, stretching and kneading her as she deepened their kiss. Her fingers tangled in his hair and her breasts smashed against his hard chest. Their bodies were damp with sweat and she adjusted her knees so she could rub herself over him.

God. Nothing ever felt better.

He no longer impaled her feverishly, but his cock moved in and out of her with slow, deliberate movements that proved just as intense. His fingers ran up the length of her spine and then brushed over her flesh just as slow and meticulously as he fucked her.

Joanie shivered, feeling her insides twitch while he stretched and filled her. "We aren't using any protection." More than once over the past few months she considered getting on birth control. For some reason, every time she thought of preventing a pregnancy, his answer to her sister's question repeated in her mind. "Where are you going to come?"

Her face was an inch from his when she spoke and his lashes fluttered over his eyes before he lifted his gaze to hers. "Let me fill you, sweetheart."

He spoke the words with an almost reverent whisper. Heat washed over her insides. The way it made her heart swell and the way he looked at her, it would amaze the hell out of her if they didn't create life. This much love would make the most perfect child. She almost cried from the thought of it.

"I think you better marry me pretty quickly."

Joanie swore she'd never seen a man look happier than Corbin did at that moment. Again showing off how his size didn't prevent him from moving easily and quickly, he rolled them over, lifting her with ease. He didn't pick up the speed though, but continued moving in and out of her with torturous deliberation. When his cock started twitching, then grew as he stretched and filled her, a thousand tiny muscles suddenly shuttered uncontrollably inside her.

"My dear Joanie." He closed his eyes, raising his head and thrusting one last time. His orgasm ripped through him and he growled fiercely, his body hard and incredibly perfect over her. "I love you," he whispered, and then collapsed on top of her.

Joanie wrapped her arms around him, breathing in the rich smell of their lovemaking and swearing there wasn't anything that smelled better. He rolled to his side, managing to stay buried deep inside her, and then reached behind him to pull the

comforter over his body and around hers. Then cocooning them in a rich warmth, he brushed his knuckles down her cheek. Love was the most beautiful sight in the world as it glowed in his expression.

"I'm so lucky," she whispered, cuddling against roped muscle.

"Luck has nothing to do with it. Magic brought us together, my dear. It was a sure thing from the start." He stretched against her, then reached behind her and pulled more blankets up and over them.

"All we needed to do was believe," she whispered, knowing the heat that warmed every inch of her was what true happiness and love felt like. "I love you too, Corbin."

About the Author

All my life, I've wondered at how people fall into the routines of life. The paths we travel seemed to be well-trodden by society. We go to school, fall in love, find a line of work (and hope and pray it is one we like), have children and do our best to mold them into good people who will travel the same path. This is the path so commonly referred to as the "real world".

The characters in my books are destined to stray down a different path other than the one society suggests. Each story leads the reader into a world altered slightly from the one they know. For me, this is what good fiction is about, an opportunity to escape from the daily grind and wander down someone else's path.

Lorie O'Clare lives in Kansas with her three sons.

Lorie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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