



TIERNEY
O'MALLEY

WICKED



PROPOSAL

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Wicked Proposal
Copyright © 2009 Tierney O'Malley
ISBN: 978-1-55487-376-0
Cover art by Martine Jardin

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by eXtasy Books
Look for us online at:
www.extasybooks.com

Wicked Proposal

By

Tierney O'Malley

Dedication

*To my husband, Tom.
Thank you so much for your support,
unconditional love and two beautiful girls who
are as smart and kind as you.
With you, life is wonderful.
Always, me.*

Chapter One

Madeline Honeylee hissed as her Achilles tendons rubbed against the back of her four-inch high heeled shoes. She leaned against the promenade deck's railing and removed her left shoe to look at the back of her foot. The peeled skin revealed a red oozing flesh. Damn it, she didn't need another blister. She was already blistered enough from her broken engagement.

She needed band-aids. Diana said Wolf kept a good supply of condoms in every bathroom in this yacht. Maybe he kept a first-aid kit, too. As soon as she put her shoe back on, her raw, irritated skin touched the back of the shoe seam again. She groaned from the pain and lowered her head. Stupid shoes! If it weren't so embarrassing, she'd walk barefoot.

Unaccustomed to wearing closed shoes, her feet perspired and blistered from the hours of walking and standing around the yacht. Crud, why did she let Diana convince her to buy these stupid shoes? Unable to stand the pain, Madeline decided to

find a bathroom. She turned her head to the left and then to her right. Crap, which one was the closest bathroom? The one in the aft deck or in party lounge? She bet the party lounge's bathroom was busy with women checking their makeup and applying powder on their noses. She'd just go to the aft deck.

Madeline put her weight on the cold metal rail as she half-walked and half-dragged her left foot. Her right foot hurt, too, but the blister had not popped yet. She followed the long and narrow promenade deck that was lit with a soft glow from the Chinese lanterns she had helped set up. Guests milled around the deck. Most of them were couples admiring the dark silhouette of the Olympic Mountains, peninsula, and the glittering water of the Puget Sound.

What a perfect weather for a yacht party. No rain, not windy, and not cold. Madeline glanced at the moon. Thin clouds covered the bottom half of it, but its reflection still cast a thin white line on the water, giving an illusion of divided water. Lights blinked from the dark form of the peninsula like fireflies, and the small sea crafts dotted the water like floating candles. The view was magnificent. Too bad, she didn't have anyone to share it with. The only people she knew on this yacht were her friends, Diana and her brother, Wolf. But they were busy entertaining their

guests. Madeline sighed and wrapped her arm around her self. Lordy, she was at a party with over a hundred guests in attendance, but still she felt so alone.

If only Edward... No, even if she was still with him, he would never come to this party. Madeline shook her head to stop thinking about Edward, their breakup, and his letter.

A group of men and women, each holding a long-stemmed wine glass, walked by her. Their blended perfume surrounded her head and assaulted her senses as if someone hit her with a pan worsening her oncoming headache. Damn, what did they do? Bathe in it? Madeline stood quietly and watched them. The men looked spiffy in their tailored clothes and the women glittered from jewelry of all colors and sizes.

When Diana handed her the invitation tied with a silk white ribbon, she had an idea this party would be formal. But she didn't realize formal would mean *wearing* your wealth. Almost everyone in attendance wore jewels, pins, gold watches, cuff links and other glinting items she couldn't identify. She even spotted glitters on the women's shoes.

A trio of women in ankle length, open back, cleavage-revealing dresses passed her. On impulse, she flattened her hands on her dress. God, they made her feel out of place and very

uncomfortable. She thought about her shop where she'd rather be right now, wearing flip-flops and an apron instead of pinching shoes. She preferred to be surrounded by her flowers, terracotta and plastic pots, and gardening tools. Attending parties wasn't her idea of having fun, but she couldn't say no to Captain Wolf O'Connor's offer to buy all the flowers in her shop if she would help decorate this yacht and attend the party. Dang, if she didn't need the money from Wolf, she would have said no to his invitation. God knew she needed all the orders she could get to keep her flower shop open.

Madeline was almost to the stairs leading to the aft deck when a young woman with shoulder-length blonde hair stood in front of her. The blonde's strapless royal blue silk dress hugged her body, emphasizing her high-breasts, small waist, and long arms. And her skin was as smooth as a white marble. Maybe she was one of those women who bathed in mud. Earlier, she spotted her with Wolf in the private lounge. Only a fool wouldn't notice the telltale sign that the two had been under the same sheets together.

The blonde pointed her manicured red fingernail directly on her chest. "Where in god's name did you get that?"

"What?" Madeline looked down where the woman pointed.

“That dress you’re wearing. Did your grandmother sew her kitchen curtains and make it into *that*?”

The malicious look on the woman’s face told Madeline she found pleasure in demeaning her. *What a bitch!* Madeline’s painful heel put her in the bad mood, but the woman’s bitchy comment made her gnash her teeth. She wanted to charge and hit her with a bullhorn. And she did—with words. “Yeah, my grandmother made this. I like it, not revealing enough for people to see the shape of my breasts unlike your silk dress. But I suppose you don’t mind showing your breasts even if one is lopsided and with an inverted nipple.”

The blonde’s mouth formed a big O. Her hand splayed on her chest.

Good, she shocked the bitch. But the way the woman’s eyes narrowed told her their spat wasn’t over. Madeline held her breath, waited for a nasty retort. Instead, the woman pursed her lips and walked away. Just like that. No riposte. No nothing.

Madeline let out a long sigh. Crap, if it weren’t for Wolf’s insane offer, she wouldn’t be here. Inverted nipple? What the heck was she thinking, hissing back like a cat to that woman? Exchanging insults was low. Dang, if she didn’t need the money from Wolf, she would have said no to his

invitation.

Glad to be alone, she walked toward the aft deck. But with each step she took, it felt like a knife cut her skin. She couldn't take another step without biting her lower lip and dragging her heels. Not caring if someone was looking, she kicked off her shoes.

Free at last, she wiggled her toes. She looked at the water. Maybe she should just throw her cheapo shoes in the water. Shopping for shoes was fun. It wasn't everyday she got to wear a new pair of shoes. But if they would kill her feet, she'd rather stay barefoot. She wondered if Ross Dress for Less would take the shoes back even if she used them all day. She continued walking. The yacht's cool floor felt good on her feet... When she reached the stairs, two spherical green buoys twice the size of a basketball, tied on the lower steps prevented her from climbing up. A sign reading *No guests beyond this point* hung between the buoys.

What was this about? The sign wasn't there this afternoon. In fact, she was able to take a small arrangement of flowers in the upper aft deck Diana referred to as The Wolf's Den.

As she stared at the sign, horrible memories of seeing her brother in the water whirled in her mind. Years ago, she and her brother, Mike, had walked on the old dock in Greenlake. She told him

it was okay to ignore the old sign dangling on the post. Always a good boy, he listened to her and followed her up to the end of the old dock. Unrelenting, she teased him until he agreed to put his sailboat in the water. What happened next ruined the rest of their lives. All she had wanted was to see him have fun, instead, she —

Madeline swallowed. She'd pushed the memory in the back of her mind for a long time now. She wouldn't let it resurface again. Shaking her head, she decided to heed the sign. Madeline turned around and noticed two women standing a few feet away from her in their finery, smirking, looking at her feet. She did an about face. Darn, she hated snobs. If another woman attacked her verbally, she might find good use for her worthless shoes. She didn't need this. What she needed was to be alone, rest her sore legs, and nurse her heart. She looked at the buoys. What bad could happen if she ignored the sign? She wasn't a child anymore and wouldn't coax anyone to jump off the yacht. She stepped over the buoys. Damn the consequences.

Madeline felt the yacht sway beneath her feet. Her hand clamped loosely on the cold rails, sliding them as she took each step. She hated water and boats. Both served as reminders of tragedies, and caused her heart to ache. But she agreed to accept Captain Wolf O'Connor's

invitation. She may not like being close to all types of bodies of water, but she wasn't a fool to pass on a good offer.

Too bad salvaging her engagement wasn't as easy as ordering a stem of roses. Sheez, she was one dumb businesswoman, horrible sister, and a dull fiancée. How awful. Madeline's shoulders sagged. She shouldn't think about her business right now.

The stairs led her to the tinted double doors. Madeline walked inside the room and went straight to the bathroom. But the door was locked. Damn it! Wiggling her toes, she decided to go out the aft deck.

Fresh air filled her lungs. Here, she was up higher. The soft breeze cooled her heated face. She leaned against the railing and looked up at the starlit sky and then down the Puget Sound's calm, dark water. It was a sight any couple would find romantic. But in her case, it only made her feel more miserable, lonely.

Damn Edward! Why did he wait until everything was planned before he broke up with her. What an ass. The whole breakup thing hurts like hell, but canceling all the wedding plans was a pain in the ass, too. She would have to send the invitees a note, cancel the JC Penny Bridal Registry list, and reservation for the Senior Center Hall. What about the food, cake, flowers...they were all

paid for. What was she going to do with them? Maybe just have them delivered to the Senior Center for a donation. Her gown didn't even make it out of the suit bag. Maybe she could sell it to EBay or Craig's List close to its original price since it hadn't been used. Madeline sighed. Jesus! What a nightmare. Now, she could sympathize with the jilted brides who'd rather dig a hole and hide.

Drat, how was she going to break the news to her friends at the center? She wasn't one to care about what other people say about whom, but this time, she knew, she would. Once the news about her broken engagement was out, gossips and maybe pity would start flying. And she hated both. She knew firsthand how destructive gossips could be and the whisperings...ugh!

Her heart twisted in a painful knot, making it hard to breathe. It was the kind of pain Tums Antacid wouldn't cure either. She inhaled deeply, then breathed out slowly. All afternoon she tried to function as if her heart wasn't torn into pieces, she moved as though the skies were still blue, and she smiled at people, pretending all was well. Now that she was alone and away from the noise, her mind focused on the problem ahead. Suddenly her body felt heavy, her fingers tired and achy. She was glad for the protection of the dark deck where no one could see her.

Giggling and laughter carried by the wind

reached her ears. Somewhere in the yacht, a couple must be having their time together. Edward never took her in a dark alcove or in an empty hallway to kiss and peck. He was always proper and hated holding hands in public. Well, now he wouldn't have to hold her hand, kiss, or even look at her.

The back of her nose started stinging. Damn! She promised herself not to get emotional over her broken engagement anymore. It was just a waste of energy. But she couldn't stop herself from crying. Her nose started dripping. With the aid of the glowing snow-white Chinese lanterns, she opened her purse to find a tissue. What she found was the stupid, hurtful breakup letter Edward had given her this morning. She had read it only once before putting it away. Maybe she missed a message between the lines and should read it again.

Word for word, she read the letter. No, she didn't miss a thing. The message was as clear as the first time she'd read it. Their engagement was over. After seven months of living together, Edward realized they weren't compatible and that he had found a special, interesting, and exciting woman who sparked his interest. As if his reasons for breaking up with her weren't painful enough, he added she wasn't the same woman he fell in love with a year ago. She changed, he wrote,

widthwise.

In other words, I'm boring and fat.

How could he write something like this? So blunt and without regard for her dignity. Fine, he knew she would grill him for reasons, but couldn't he just say people change, I changed and I want to move on? There, that was a simple enough explanation without hurting her feelings. But damn his straight nose, he had to use the sore issue about her weight.

She'd been chubby since she was a little girl. Kids laughed and called her piglet at school because her pale skin turned bright pink when exposed to the sun. And even worse, she had thick dark brown curls that were impossible to contain. Okay, she was a size twelve. But she didn't think her physical stature could cause her to lose a man, especially a fiancé.

Madeline pushed back the loose tendrils off her face, grunting in frustration. They were supposed to get married in two weeks. Yes, it would be a small wedding with thirty people attending, and far from her dream wedding at the St. James Cathedral but she worked hard on it.

I'm stupid! With her mind wrapped around the wedding details and on figuring out how to save her shop from closing, she didn't notice Edward drifting away from her. She should have known Edward had lost interest in her when he stopped

kissing her goodnight. Come to think of it, when was the last time they had sex?

God, she wished her mother were still around. She really needed her guidance right now. But she wasn't here anymore nor her father and younger brother. They hadn't been for a long time.

Reflected lights casts by the lanterns on the dark water turned blurry. She pinched the bridge of her nose. A habit she'd learned since she was a child to stop herself from crying. But it never worked. Warm tears rolled down her cheeks. Her shoulders shook as the loud sob escaped her mouth.

"Should I punch him for you?"

Madeline turned and wiped the tears off her cheeks. She was so engrossed with her hurt feelings, she didn't notice Wolf standing a couple feet away from her. Like a phantom, he moved away from the dark corner and stood closer to her. "Hello, Wolf."

"Are you okay?" He looked at her with concern written all over his face.

His furrowed brows reminded Madeline of how Mike used to furrow his when something was bothering him. The memory of her baby brother only made her cry uncontrollably.

"What the hell! Madeline?"

"I'm fine." She cleared her throat. "I thought you were downstairs."

"Below deck," Wolf corrected.

"Below deck. Did I disturb you and..." She looked behind him to see if he had company.

"I'm alone, Madeline. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I was going to use your bathroom, but it was locked."

"Brandi's in there. I can show you another bathroom if—"

"No, thanks." Sheez, it didn't even occur to her that he could be up here entertaining someone when she didn't see him below deck. "I'm sorry. I thought this room is available. I'll just leave."

"You don't have to leave. I don't mind if you stay."

"I bet Brandi would."

"Brandi? I don't think so. As long as his food bowl is full, he won't mind anything."

"Brandi's a dog?"

"Cooper and Piper's baby."

Hearing the word baby, Madeline felt even sadder. She had hoped to start a family right away. But a hastily scribbled letter dashed her hope. She wiped the tears off her eyes before they fell.

"Did you come here to cry?"

"Crying? I'm just stuffed up." She sniffed and then rubbed the tip of her nose.

"Did you learn that line from my sister or she

from you? She says the same thing when she tries to hide her tears from me."

Madeline ignored his comment. "I haven't thanked you for buying my flowers. Was it your idea or Diana's to offer to buy all of my flowers so I would come here tonight?"

"No. It was mine."

"But she told you that I am on the verge of losing my shop."

"Diana tells me everything."

"Ah," she said. Really, what else could she say? Knowing someone other than herself and her best friend knew about her unstable financial situation was humiliating. She was glad of the semidarkness that hid the flush in her cheeks.

"You've been denying our invitations to attend my parties. I thought I should give you reason to come."

"Thanks."

"Glad you made it this time."

"The bribe was too good to ignore." She blew her nose on the Kleenex. "I'm sorry if I've been snubbing your parties. It's just...you always hold parties in this yacht and, you know I hate water, boats, ships. Anything that floats on water."

"I didn't know. I would have rented a hall for Cooper and Piper's party if I knew."

"Rent a hall for my sake. Yeah, right. You wouldn't do that."

"Madeline, if I knew you're terrified of being in a boat, I would have done it just so you could come."

"I said hate not terrified of water."

"You're not?"

"Fine. I am terrified of water and being in this yacht right now. Do you think you could drop me off at the marina?"

Wolf laughed and touched her cheek. "Don't worry, this is a two hundred thirty foot chartered yacht. It'll take a storm and big waves to sink this. We're not out in the Pacific Ocean so we don't have to worry about big waves. And as you can see." He stood closer to her and pointed at the water. "The water is calm. Besides, we're close to the marina. If something weird happens and we started sinking, we'd be safe before this thing hit the bottom of the sound."

"So it's still possible we could go down." She shivered at the thought of going under water.

Wolf smiled and scooped the tear running down her cheek with his forefinger. "Some people feel a bit comfortable being in a boat or ship if they know where to find the life vests. Would you like me to show you where they're stored?"

"No, thanks. I don't feel like walking around right now."

"Is it because of your shoes? What happened to them anyway?" He pointed at the shoes she held.

"Can't wear them anymore. I got blisters."

"Would you like to borrow mine? Too big for you, but I think they're comfortable."

"Thanks. I just need a couple Band-aids and I'll be able to wear these again. Do you have Band-aids here?" She placed the shoes on the floor and again flexed her toes. The action was more of a habit than exercising her toe knuckles.

"Every vessel is required to carry a first-aid kit. I can get it for you, but you have to promise you'll still be standing here when I get back. I'm not dressed to go swimming tonight."

"Are you saying I'm suicidal?"

"You looked at the water with your sad eyes, you're crying and not wearing shoes. What am I supposed to think?"

"I'm not *that* stupid to think about jumping off your yacht."

"Good. I'll be right back." Wolf disappeared behind the double doors.

She let out a deep breath. When Wolf touched her cheek, she thought her heart would pound its way out of her chest. He always had that effect on her. Maybe it was because she harbored a secret crush on him. Who wouldn't? Wolf had a body and face women dreamed of touching and sighed about. But as far as she could tell, he didn't share the same high-schoolish feelings toward her.

Madeline remembered Edward telling her Wolf

had a thing for her. *"He wouldn't be called Wolf for nothing. Stay away from that scum,"* he said. She didn't think Edward was right to insult the man. Besides he was wrong about Wolf.

She'd known Wolf for quite some time now. Other than the casual hi and hello here and there, Wolf never showed any interest in her or hinted that he found her attractive. Of course, Wolf wouldn't feel anything for a fatso like her. He'd been surrounded with beautiful women who belonged to higher social strata all time. A mop-head and roly-poly like her wouldn't catch his attention even if she walked in front of him naked.

Wolf came back with the orange rectangular box in one hand and a pair of white slippers on the other. He kneeled in front of her and set the box down. "You can use my slippers. Here put them on."

"I just need a couple band-aids, Wolf."

"Got them here. I insist you wear my slippers. You don't want to offend me, do you?" An easy smile played at the corners of his mouth.

Madeline slipped her feet inside the cushioned slippers. "Thank you."

"Let me see your foot." He didn't wait. Wolf reached for her foot and placed it on his thigh. When he examined her heel, his hands avoided touching her blisters. "You should have removed your shoes right away, love."

Love? Did he just call her love? "Thought about it, but didn't want your guests to think you're friends with a Neanderthal."

Wolf rubbed her sore foot while frowning up at her. "Who cares about them? I watched you all afternoon. You were on your feet all the time, walking as if you're on a race."

"I was checking the flowers and lamps. It was part of your offer, to decorate and attend this party. I was just making sure I meet my end of the bargain." He applied two band-aids on each of her heels and stood, but not before giving her legs a well needed, full fifteen-minute massage. At least she thought it was fifteen. "Thanks." His gentleness touched her heart and fat tears rolled down her cheeks. Damn it, she hated being so emotional.

"You're welcome. So the food was that bad, huh? I knew Pierre wasn't a real French chef."

Madeline forced a smile at Wolf's attempt to cheer her up. She pinched her nose again. If she wasn't hurting right now, she would ride on his joke. "The food is great, Wolf. I particularly love the crab cakes." She must have eaten a pound of those little fried breaded patties, which she now stored around her hips.

"Did you try the Salmon caviar from three countries?"

"You mean Russian, Alaskan, and Canadian

Salmon Roe Caviar? No." Madeline shuddered visibly. "Sorry, but I don't have the stomach to eat eggs of female fish. It seems barbaric."

Wolf laughed richly. "So you're done crying now? You know, when Diana was seven years old, she scraped her knee and cried for hours. Mom and Dad had to take her to the ER just to make her stop."

"Ha. Ha. I'm not a baby."

Wolf, for the second time, touched her cheek. "I know, love."

"Yeah, I'm done crying." For now, she thought.

"Are you hurt?"

"Not physically." Her voiced sounded low because of her stuffed up nose.

"I saw you talking to the guests. So I am guessing you're not hurting socially."

His girlfriend's insult echoed in her head. Madeline sniffed. "No, not really."

"And you're in a good mental state since you don't plan on throwing yourself overboard."

"Yes."

"So the letter made you cry."

Madeline blew her nose before letting out a long-suffering sigh. She considered denying him the truth, but he offered to punch Edward's nose and purchased her whole supply of flowers. She should at least tell him he was right. Besides, he would find out the real scoop from his sister

anyway. *If* Diana hadn't told him about her broken engagement yet.

Madeline crumpled the letter in her hand and threw it in the air along with her wish Edward would trip on his way to New York and break his perfect nose. The paper sailed in the air before it disappeared in the darkness below. "That was Edward's breakup letter. He gave it to me this morning."

"Diana told me."

"Why I am not surprised."

"Diana tells me everything. Sometimes things I don't even want to know. You should have heard her when she was in elementary grade, she'd come home full of stories. And when she turned teenager, I had to buy earplugs to save my eardrums from bursting."

Madeline felt her smile widen. She was close to covering her ears, too, when Diana ranted for hours about the vicious things that they should do to get even with Edward. By the time Diana started complaining about her brother's friend Todd and his new girlfriend snubbing her amber products, she couldn't hear anything anymore except for the ringing sound in her ears. "Diana definitely took my mind off Edward when she came over."

"Breaking up through a letter was low, but at least Edward has the decency to write one. Todd's

girlfriend, don't know which one, sent him a text message on his cell phone with a TTFG as an end note."

Wolf uttered Edward's name with contempt like he was short of cursing it. Edward was the same way with Wolf. He never liked hearing anything about Wolf. She wondered why. "I'll take a Ta-ta-for-good anytime. At least Todd's girlfriend didn't text YFF."

Wolf's brows creased. "What's YFF?"

"You're freaking fat. I was dumped because I'm getting wider, changing widthwise and boring." Edward's harsh words brought another round of painful pricks in her chest. She closed her eyes, willing herself not to cry again. She hated being such a ninny, for letting Edwards comment affect her. Why didn't she see his superficiality and shallowness before? Anger, irritation, and frustration rose from deep inside her gut.

"What an ass," Wolf muttered and leaned his hip on the railing. He tugged a lock of her hair. "Hey, look at me. Don't believe him. He isn't telling you the truth. And don't think Edward broke up with you because there is something wrong with your body. Edward is an ass. Plain and simple. The man is blind, if he's a man at all."

"You don't have to defend me to make me feel better. Diana has been doing that already. Anyway, you probably thought the same way

about me—unattractive and disproportionately large.”

“What made you think that?”

“Well, let me see. You have a thing for skinny women. I’ve never seen you go out with a woman bigger than size eight, you’re known to date life-size Barbie’s and beautiful models thin enough to break if you flick them. I know your type, breathtaking women with flawless complexions and so skinny their bones stick out everywhere. The opposite of me—all boobs and butt with calluses from cutting flower stems. Edward apparently couldn’t stand looking at me anymore either. So he found an interesting woman who probably is reed thin, wears makeup and high heels just like your girlfriend. Come on, Wolf, you prefer starving looking women beautiful, not a dispropor...”

Wolf shook his head from side to side. His smile vanished, replaced by a deep frown.

Madeline realized she ranted at him like a shrew. God’s foot. What had come over her? He was only trying to cheer her up. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to compare and unload my anger on you.”

“You’re wrong if you think I don’t see you as a beautiful woman.” His tone was coolly disapproving.

“You don’t have to lie just to make me feel

better."

"I'm not lying."

"Okay, you're acting like a big brother then?"

"I am not."

"It's okay, Wolf."

"Madeline, you should know you're unlike any other women here."

Uh-huh. She was a pig in the midst of graceful gazelles wearing a stupid out of style flower printed green dress fitted to be worn in the field rather than a cocktail party. She knew how she paled compared to the sea of glamorous women in attendance tonight. She was the only one not wearing anything glittery around her neck and earlobes. And Wolf was just being a gentleman. "You're right, Wolf. I'm not like the other women here."

"Madeline, I meant it as a positive comment. There is something about you that sets you apart from the others. Especially tonight. I noticed your hair, it's—"

"Wild. Long or short, it's a disaster, I know. Edward told me so many times," she supplied and smoothed her hair back.

"Luscious and shone in the dark. And your dress—"

"Dull and looks like my grandmother's kitchen curtain." She looked at the glittering lights of the Edmonds Marina. She should just go home, lie

down in bed and cry where she could at least hug her pillow.

"Pretty," Wolf finished.

She scoffed at his comments. What did her aunt say about pretty girls? Oh yeah, they were only one step ahead of ugly girls. "Pretty? Your blonde girlfriend you were smooching with this afternoon told me my dress must have been made out of my grandmother's kitchen curtain."

"I was smooching with a blonde?" His eyebrows raised inquiringly.

"Well, maybe not smooching, but you know who I'm talking about."

"Maxine, you saw me *talking* to her below deck. She told me you look charming when I told her who you are."

"Charming? I wouldn't call her attack on me charming."

"She attacked you?"

"My dress."

"Ah, ignore her. Your dress is really pretty on you. *You* are pretty."

"Not pretty enough, otherwise, I wouldn't lose a fiancé. He said I am changing widthwise."

"Good."

"Good that I'm getting wider?"

Wolf laughed.

His voice was rich and so masculine. Like always, his laugh did something to her insides.

“Good that he’s gone. You should say good riddance. He’s a freaking idiot. You’re not wide. You’re...perfect.”

Madeline frowned and shook her head. How could she believe a man known for dating models, aspiring actresses, and for leaving many broken hearts in his wake? “Perfect. Ha! That’s hard to believe.”

“I’m telling the truth.”

Her heart missed a beat when Wolf gave her his wolfish smile. Crud, this happened whenever he was near. Even the dim light couldn’t hide his mouth-watering features. With his dark hair in need of a trim curling becomingly around his face, thick dark lashes, strong jaws and high cheekbone, MV Sea Pleasure Captain, Wolf O’Connor, was a Greek god personified. But it was his pale blue eyes, which earned him his name Wolf, that fascinated her most. He looked predatory and magnetic at the same time. She made a quick full body assessment. Wolf not only possessed an almost perfectly sculpted face, he also had a commercial body type. The kind she always gawked at in different vogue magazines. He was over six feet tall, with wide shoulders, flat stomach, and long legs. Lordy, he’s got the package. Wolf, in her vocabulary, was the very definition of a gorgeous man.

Wolf raised a brow.

Madeline realized she stared for far too long.
"So that's how you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Charm women. You use that grin and stare at them with your wolfish eyes to get them to your bed."

"Are you saying I just charmed you?"

"Me? No. I'm just saying...never mind."

"Listen, all of my friends are here. We can find Edward and throw him in the Sound if you like."

"Thanks, Wolf. But I don't use physical force to solve my problems."

"Breaking up an engagement with that bastard shouldn't be considered a problem. You know, a lot of men would be happy to hear you're available again."

"Now that's a joke." At her age of twenty-six, Edward was only the second man in her life. The first one was her best friend in high school who also dumped her.

"You're beautiful, Madeline."

"Ha! Coming from a man often seen wrapped around a woman with physical attributes the society describes as anorexically beautiful, that's hard to believe."

"Is anorexically a word?"

"Don't know. I think I just made it up."

Wolf continued to stare at her.

There was something in his gaze, but she

couldn't quite grasp it. Concern. Yes, that could be it. After all, he was a brother of her friend trying to console her, to make her feel better because a member of his gender hurt her.

"You have no idea how powerful your charm is, do you?" Wolf said in a soft tone that caressed her stomach.

Beautiful and perfect. Now I'm charming. "You think I have a charm?"

"Yes."

"And you find me attractive."

"Very."

Was he telling the truth or it was his nature to be kind to any woman he found crying in the dark. "Are you being honest right now?"

"Madeline, I am telling you the truth."

Madeline took a deep breath and met his stare. "So if I ask you to make love with me right now, you'll do it." It wasn't a question but a challenge.

"What?"

"Make love with me. Right here. Now."

Wolf raised his brows, then blinked as if trying to remove something stuck in his eyes "I beg your pardon?"

She knew it. The you-look-perfect-charming-and-pretty bit was a lie, an attempt to make her feel better. A joke. Reality bit her hard and it hurt. Madeline bit her lower lip to stop from crying. The effort didn't work. She looked away as fresh tears

rolled down her cheeks. This time she didn't bother wiping them. Edward hated it when she cried. And Wolf would probably swim on the cold Puget Sound water just to get away from a crybaby like her if he wasn't Diana's brother.

Wolf's finger touched her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Madeline, look at me. I'm not sure I heard you correctly."

"Yes, you heard me right. I asked you to make love with me. You said I'm attractive. I wanted to know if you're lying."

"I'm not lying. But I don't think I could —"

"I know. It was an irrationally stupid question."

"Don't get me wrong. You're very attractive, but —"

"I'm not your type."

"Madeline, your question surprised me and —"

"Having sex with a woman with rough hands from cutting stems never crossed your mind. Don't worry, I'm not mad. I put you on the spot. That's not very nice of me. It's just what you said challenged me. Now I know the truth."

"The truth being..."

"You're only being kind to me because I am Diana's friend."

"You are beautiful."

"Stop. We're just going around in circles. Besides, it doesn't matter. Edward broke up with me because he realized I'm not attractive and

interesting. I can accept that."

"Ignore what he said and stop belittling yourself."

"Wolf, I'm dispropor—" Warm hands cupped her face, preventing her from moving her head even an inch. "What are you doing?"

"Shutting you up."

Before her mind could process what he was up to, his lips crushed hers. Surprised, she did nothing but look at his closed eyes.

"Close your eyes, Madeline, and open your mouth."

"But you're shutting me up, hmm..." Whatever it was she wanted to say left her brain when Wolf's swift tongue plunged and explored every recess of her mouth, leaving wonderful tastes of wine and man. Like a hot drink going down her throat, his touch and kiss warmed her body. Giving herself freely to the passion of his kiss, she began to relax. She should stop him, but like an ice cream on a hot sunny day, she wanted one more lick. There was something in his kiss. Like fire, it quickly consumed her. Countless times in the past, she imagined how it would feel like to be kissed by him. Now she knew. It was like soldering heat that joins metal.

Madeline closed her eyes. Her senses quickly zeroed in on his hands against her cheeks and...heavens, the hard pulsing cock pressed

against her hipbone. She flattened her hands on his chest. Warm and hard, his chest muscles flexed every time he moved. He felt good beneath her palms. While her need to be touched grew stronger, her knees felt weaker. She felt intoxicated and...god help her, lusty.

Drunk from the heady sensation, Madeline captured his exploring tongue and sucked him gently. The groaning sound he made encouraged her to get bolder. She wrapped her arms around him and closed whatever small gap was left between them.

"Madeline, you taste so good, better than an expensive wine," he whispered. "I could kiss you all night." He gripped her hip and pulled her tight against him.

"You're just saying that to make me feel better." She felt him pulse against her belly.

"Will you stop and believe me when I say you're a very attractive woman?"

Hearing the word attractive again, she ended the breathy kiss. "I wish I could believe you."

"What can I do to make you believe me?"

"Make love with me."

Chapter Two

*H*oly fuckin' shit! He'd dreamed about making love with her since the first time Diana introduced them together. It was lust at first sight, which quickly evolved to deep infatuation. He found Madeline's wit, beauty, simplicity and uniqueness appealing and attractive. But damn, he didn't know she had a passionate nature lurking deep inside her. She was also bold, warm, and voluptuous and tasted so damn sweet. Maybe if he had spent more time talking to her, looking at her brown eyes instead of staying away, he would have known those things about her.

But he knew why he ignored his infatuation and didn't dare deepen their friendship. Because she belonged to another man, Edward, a man he hated to the depth of his soul. Unlike the bastard, he would never steal someone's girlfriend because his dick throbbed for her. No matter how strong the infatuation was.

Now Madeline was free. But as much as he

wanted to bury his head in between her thighs, he wouldn't take advantage of her vulnerability. Yes, she wasn't engaged with Edward anymore, still her heart belonged to him. She wouldn't be here hiding, crying if their breakup didn't mean a thing. Her offer to make love with him was the result of her self-esteem going down. Wolf pressed his hand against her rounded butt and ground his erection against her pubic bone. "Can you feel me?"

"Yes." Round dark brown eyes still wet from tears looked back at him.

Somewhere deep in his chest, anger rose. He wanted to break Edward's nose for making her cry. In fact, he wanted to do it since he found out she'd been Edward's girlfriend. At first, he thought it was a natural feeling because she was his sister's friend and Edward was the bastard he hated since college. But when he nearly went crazy after hearing she was engaged, reality hit him square in the head—he was deeply infatuated with her.

He kissed her lashes and whispered in her ear. "I am this aroused because you're beautiful and as attractive as Athena. Is this—" he thrust his hips—"enough to make you believe me?"

Madeline's response was a lusty moan. Her lashes fluttered. "More. Please."

Hell and thunder! "Madeline, do you really want

to...this?" He wanted to use the word fuck when he asked. One thing he liked about having sex was uttering the things he wanted to do to his partner and hear what she wanted him to do. But he had to stop himself. He didn't want to shock Madeline.

"I'm sure. Please."

Damn. With raw passion screaming from inside and out, he buried his hand in her hair and kissed her. Without breaking the kiss, he wrapped his arms around her waist. He walked her backward and stopped when her back was against the deck wall. He never made it a habit of having sex outside his bedroom, but Madeline made him ignore his principle.

Unlike other women who walked in and out of his room, Madeline could wear a sack and she would still look beautiful. Tonight, she looked so out of place in her simple dress and yet she outshone the rest of the women covered in jewels and perfume. She reminded him of his mother's favorite painting, of a woman sitting on a meadow in Ireland surrounded by tiny flowers. Except Madeline was warmer and smelled of flowers, not a canvass in oil.

When he saw her tonight, he imagined her walking in a field full of blooming flowers, laughing gaily, flirting. His imagination even went as far as laying her on the bed of grass and flowers while he stripped her naked. And right that

moment, he wanted to do more than stripping her, he wanted to plunge his dick deep inside her.

With the wall supporting her back, he slowly lifted her dress. His knuckles grazed her thighs. When his fingers found her bikini, he smiled. Women wearing bikinis were more attractive to him than if wearing thongs. He leaned his head against the crook of her neck and inhaled her scent. She smelled of a flower, but he couldn't discern what kind.

"Madeline," he nipped at her lower lip. Madeline kissed him back with her eyes shining like fire. As if they had all the time in the world, he skimmed her shapely hip before hooking a finger on her panty. He lowered the soft material and slipped it off her feet. A keepsake, he thought and balled the material to stuff it in his pocket.

With both hands, he cupped her buttocks and lifted her. "Wrap your legs around me." He didn't need to ask twice. Madeline complied right away. With her legs wrapped around his hips, she was wide open. He wanted to go down on her and find out if she was as sweet as her mouth had tasted, but this wasn't the place. Wolf snaked his hand in between their bodies and touched her warm heat. His breath came out as a hiss at the discovery. "You're drenched."

Madeline moaned.

Her sweet breath fanned his cheek. He'd give

her what she needed right now, to make her feel beautiful and wanted. With enough pressure, he rotated his thumb against her engorged clitoris. Her hips jerked forward.

“Oh, God...Wolf...”

Just as he had imagined, she felt like velvet. “So soft.” He pressed harder on her clit before inserting one long finger inside her. She was so slick. Her cry of pleasure encouraged him to squeeze in his ring finger to join the other and began finger fucking her. She wept in his hands. His cock pulsed. “I want to see your breasts, love.”

Before his eyes, she lowered her straps to expose her firm, round breasts. They were luscious and with dark pink areolas. He stared. A small sailboat pendant hung from a thin leather chain and rested just above her cleavage as it shone in the dark.

“They’re too big,” she said.

Wolf chuckled. “Love, they’re perfect in size. Enough to fill my hands.” He cupped one breast. “And with a little more to spare.” He lowered his head and opened his mouth wide to suck her nipple. A low growling sound came from the back of his throat. Sweet Jesus, he suckled her repeatedly, imagining her clitoris inside his mouth. He flicked the hard pebble with his tongue and then suckled her again while his fingers remained inside her, thumb pressed against her

clit.

Madeline answered by thrusting her breasts.

Her scent penetrated his senses. Man, he wanted to throw her over his shoulder, take her to his room, strip her naked and take her in a vicious manner. Something about Madeline brought out the animal urges out of him. His scalp tingled from her tight grip. His cock pulsed against his tight slacks. And he was having the greatest time of his life.

The sounds of music, laughter, and clinking of dishes were close but far enough away to avoid worry someone might hear them. He had a party to host, but the moment was too good to pass. He moved to her other breast and gave it same attention he gave the other one.

Beneath his palm, Madeline's butt muscles contracted as she rode his hand. "Oh, dear. I never thought...Ohh, it feels good."

Wolf smiled and blew on her nipple. "It feels good for me, too."

"Please, give me more, Wolf."

"You'll have it." Each pull of his mouth matched his fingers' thrusts. She was throbbing around his fingers. He could tell the way she moved her ass she was close to reaching her orgasm. With an increased pace, he worked his fingers the same way he would if his cock was inside her, deep and fast.

"Yes! Oh, lord. Wolf..." Madeline nearly pushed out his fingers and trembled in his arms. Her heartbeat pounded loud on his ear.

Despite the pain in his groin, knowing he had given her pleasure made him smile. His own release could wait.

And then she begged. "Wolf, come to me. Please..."

"Madeline, love, there is nothing I want more in this world right now than to make love with you. But if we do this, you might regret what happened tomorrow or the next day."

"Wolf, I'm begging. Make love to me."

He didn't need more encouraging. With a flick of his hand, he unbuttoned his slacks. His erection sprung. He groaned when the tip of his cock pointed at her wet opening. "Madeline, you still have a —"

"Now, Wolf. I want you now," Madeline whimpered.

With his whole body shaking from restraint, he entered her. Madeline moaned with vigor and passion. The intense pleasure of being inside her shook him. Wolf opened his mouth and clamped his teeth without pressure on the base of her neck.

Madeline glided her hands on his chest and back.

Her warm skin against his made him thrust harder, feel her womb, and ease the pain in his

cock, but this night was all about her. He needed to slow down. Pulling out a little bit, he took his time easing back deep inside her again. The smooth glide tested his limit. But he held back. "Madeline, come for me again. Meet me. That's it. Yes." Once again, he touched her slick sensitive clit and helped her come the second time.

"Ohh, Wolf...yes."

Her legs tightened around him. Madeline's fingers raked his skin. Every time he penetrated her, she would squeezed him with her inner muscles, making it hard to prolong his release. "Hang on to me, sweet." He gripped her sweet, round butt and pumped his hips. Her juice wet his sac, building his pleasure to its highest. He watched her head move from side to side. Thin sheen of perspiration glistened on her forehead and upper lip. Wolf licked her lips.

She stuck her tongue out.

He took it and sucked with greed. The blood pounding down his cock was too much. He continued to fuck her with a savage need until he tasted the sweet taste of oncoming orgasm. He'd pull out on time even if it killed him. He was coming. One more thrust...

Then Madeline wrapped her legs tight around his hips, trapping him. With her heels digging his butt, she bit his neck. "Wolf, I'm coming! Ohhh..."

Trapped and shaking, he ejaculated, inside. A

few minutes passed before he felt her sag against him.

"That was...remarkable." Madeline said with a dazed look on her face. Her lips glistened from his wet, open-mouth kisses.

"You're wonderful." He kissed her nose, cheeks, and lips. When he felt her grip loosen, he helped her find her footing, but didn't let go of her. Instead, he held her tight. Like a perfect mold, she felt so right inside his embrace. "You just made my night."

Madeline looked at him and showed a weak smile. She looked thoroughly kissed and beautiful in her wildly mussed hair.

"Madeline, I didn't use protection."

"Don't worry, I'm on pills."

Yesiree, he let out a sigh of relief. Complications in their lives were the last thing he wanted for both of them. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "Wolf, don't tell anyone about this and I want you to forget this ever happened."

"Not telling anyone is doable, but forgetting this ever happened would be impossible." How could he forget a great sex?

"Please?"

"We need to talk."

"No. There's nothing to talk about. You know the saying what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

Why don't we just—"

A male voice came on the speaker. They both turned their heads toward the overhead intercom to listen. "This is Captain Cooper to Captain Wolf. Come out, come out where ever you are. It's time to have a toast."

"Damn. That's Cooper." He organized this party for his friend and his new wife, Piper.

"I'm glad he didn't come here. And the other guests, too."

"They know what the buoys are for."

"The buoys, yeah, I ignored the things."

"It's okay."

"How come you didn't want the guests here?"

"Believe it or not, even a party animal like me needs a place to be alone, sometimes. And having an off-limit area helps."

"Sorry, I ignored it."

"I'm not." He kissed her lips and was about to lower his head to kiss her breasts when Cooper called his name again.

"Wolf! If you're doing what I think you're doing, you'd better put your pants on."

The look Madeline gave him was clear. She didn't want to be discovered. And with her straps still dangling around her arms, he didn't want anyone to see her either. "Shit. Stay here and I'll be right back." With a quick, deep kiss, he let go of her and left the deck.

Chapter Three

Holy heck! She was one horny loser. Yes, there was no other way she could describe how she acted when Wolf kissed her. Crap, one kiss and she lost all sense of propriety. What in the burger's name was she thinking, begging a man to have sex with her. She had only one glass of Madeira so it couldn't be the reason. Her face heated up at the memory of what she'd just done. She was angry and hurting that night, but to beg her best friend's brother, like some sex-deprived woman, was humiliating. And worst, even after her tryst with Wolf, she found hours after she got home, she wanted more.

Could anger trigger a libido to the point of losing one's shame or was it her weeks of sexual depravity that made her act like a slut in heat? Or should she blame Wolf's sexual appeal for her wanton behavior? Yes, maybe he came from a god's lineage of sexual desire capable of bringing out uninhibited sexual behavior from any woman

who happened to stand too close to him. With his well-toned muscles, flat stomach, lean waist, strong thighs, and powerful hips, he moved with sensuality, and had long thick penis she ached to have in between her legs again. He was simply beautiful. Wolf was a man who needed only use his deep, penetrating gaze to make a woman come to him.

In the dark alcove of his yacht, he showed her what wild and yet gentle sex was about. But it was the way he had treated her after their passion ebbed away that touched her deeply. No one, not even Edward made her feel treasured the way Wolf did that night. He hugged her tight as if she was a porcelain doll, special, precious, a beautiful woman.

The way he touched her intimately, kissed her breasts with pure pleasure on his face as if she was sweet nectar, moved in and out of her with intent to pleasure her not just him, would forever be engraved in her mind. Yes, he definitely succeeded in making her beautiful.

Thinking about his touch, his hard cock pulsing inside her made her breasts grew heavy. Her clit pulsed. Holy James Dean! At times like this, she wished she didn't return the dildo at the Lover's Package store Diana gave her for a birthday present.

Would that magical night happen again?

Snap out of it, Madeline. He probably regretted what happened, that's why he left the next day and has been gone for a week. Maybe he sailed his private 57-foot trawler to Orcas Island as if his butt was on fire because he woke up the next day and realized he just fucked a fat pig. Well, she told him to forget what happened. He probably agreed with her and left in a hurry.

Cooper's loud announcement over the speaker saved them both from the after-sex moment and gave her time to compose herself before searching for her missing underwear. But the darn thing went missing. She wasn't sure if Wolf and his friends would come up to the deck so she decided to go down to the kitchen, without underwear, where she hid until the yacht docked at the marina.

Madeline turned her computer off. Fudge! Really, what the heck happened to her underwear? It wasn't breezy that night, so it couldn't have gotten blown off the yacht. If it did, the darn thing was now floating on the Sound or stuck somewhere. Maybe hanging on the side of the yacht? Lord, she hoped not.

It was Edward's fault. If it weren't for his stupid vanity and demeaning letter, she wouldn't have begged Wolf to prove his claim that he found her attractive. And she would still have her favorite new Victoria's Secret underwear. Crud.

She opened herself to Wolf that night and he penetrated her all the way to her soul.

The memory brought enough heat down her middle to singe her underwear. Damn dildo. Who would have thought she'd have a need for it. With haste, Madeline walked in the bathroom and turned on the shower. The water came out in full force from the new showerhead.

She stripped her clothes and stepped into the shower. Turning the dial, she changed the shower's setting to make the stream come out in four fast sprays. The water felt wonderful on her shoulders. She stepped back a little and tipped her head up. The powerful spray hit her nipple. She moaned from the unexpected stimulation. Closing her eyes, she just stood and let the stream of water massage her nipple. Unable to bear the sensation, she cupped her other breast and teased her nipple the way Wolf had done.

"Oh, Wolf, what have you done to me?" she whispered. Using her thumbs, she continued playing with her breasts until a familiar desire quickly climbed to a higher degree. The mixture of hot water and desire burned her, bringing her back to her senses. She let go of her breasts.

"No, I won't do this. Forget Wolf and his wicked hands." She took a step back. The back of her knee touched her tiled bench, forcing her to sit down. The result shocked her. The shower spray

hit her directly on the pubic bone. She looked down to watch the water's strong pressure hit her skin. Teased, she raised her hips in the air with her legs open. The hot stream hit her clitoris. "Ahh! Oh, my..." She closed her eyes, imagining Wolf's magnificent fingers rotating her clit.

Using her two fingers, she spread her labia, exposing her whole vagina. The effect made her heart beat faster. She felt her own juice drip. Panting for release, she cupped her breast again with one hand. The combined stimulation brought her closer to the depth of sweet orgasm in a faster speed. The night Wolf fingered her came rushing back. She wanted that feeling again. The kind of pleasure not only one but his three fingers had given her. And his ring... She'd never thought a ring on man's finger could do wicked things to a woman.

Feeling warm and anxious for release, she stood up. Her hands weren't enough. Her body was seeking for a different touch, Wolf's touch. She reached for a bar of soap and lathered herself. With every slide of the white, unscented soap on her skin, her body turned hotter. When she reached the hollowed spot in between her legs, she ran the soap back and forth over her vagina.

"Ooh, yes..." She panted for release. She dropped the slimy soap and used her two fingers to masturbate with her mind focused on the night

when Wolf forced his fingers inside her, his ring rubbing against her sensitive skin. She'd heard of men with rings on their penises. Now she knew why. Wolf's ring...

Ring, ring, ring.

Ring? Madeline opened her eyes. Her phone was ringing. Fudge! It must be Nerissa. She raised her hands to rinse her hair, but elbowed the shower knob by accident, switching the water temperature to cold. She yelped and hopped back. What the heck? As if someone had switched off the lights on her, shame replaced lust in a hurry.

She should be getting ready to go to the Senior Center, not stimulating herself. *I'm losing my sanity.* Damn Edward. Because of him, she turned into a one lusty loser. She dried herself and put on her clothes. After applying her lipstick and mascara, she grabbed her keys and left.

* * * *

Wolf surveyed the room as he listened to his friend, Todd, give comments about every woman who walked past them. The center was full. Whoever was behind the idea of Couples Dance Night Fundraising event was smart. It looked like everyone in town had bought a ticket to come and dance their night away. The center would definitely collect a good amount of donations this

year unlike last year. He heard last year's baking contest wasn't a success.

He observed the attendees while drinking his beer. Young and old were mingling together, gathered in one place, having fun. The generations were set aside, but politeness and good manners were still being practiced. The behavior was admirable.

Maybe the younger people finally figured if they wanted free food and drinks this is the place to be. Not him though. If he wanted a *real* party, he could organize his own, in a bigger venue with plenty of wine and available women around. But tonight was different. He didn't care if the dance hall was as big as a closet, he'd stay no matter how long this party was going to be.

One week away from Madeline after their glorious, albeit, short night, was all he could handle. He thought if he stayed away from her, his libido would go back normal. He took off to Orcas Island the next day to stay at the cabin where he and his friends hung out or hid from clingy one-night-stand women. But like a hormonal teenager who experienced sex for the first time, he thought of what he and Madeline had shared every freaking day. He slept with her underwear inside his pillowcase like some pervert and replayed what had happened in his mind over and over, of how sweet she had tasted and

felt good in his arms, especially when he slid in and out of her soft, wet pussy.

His dick stood at attention like a private soldier facing his superior. Hell! He took a swig of his beer to divert his mind away from the curvaceous body he wanted that moment. Damn, Madeline gave him the best orgasm he'd ever released. Yes, he'd been infatuated with her for a long time, but it must have raised a notch because he couldn't stop thinking about her. The strong feeling scratching on his chest was hard to understand. Whatever it was, it was foreign and kept him awake all night.

Wolf dug in his left pocket to feel the silk material. He had been keeping the underwear in his pocket with a full intention of returning it to Madeline tonight. The underwear felt so smooth on his fingertips, just like her velvety walls. His dick pulsed. "God damn it!"

Todd looked at him with his one brow up. "What's wrong, bro?"

He shook his head while staring at his beer can.

"Are you out of beer? I know who's in charge with the cooler."

"No, I'm fine." A freakin' lie. How could a thirty-year-old man walking with a boner for a week be fine? He'd never been this crazy with Madeline before. Or any other women. He'd talked to her many times, been in the same room

with her, watched her from a distance, but never had a constant erection. Well, maybe he had a hard-on, but not like this. He thought being gone for a week would help clear his mind, forget how beautiful she had looked in his arms. He was wrong. Their one short night at his yacht stirred something inside him. What the hell did she do to him? Was it their first kiss?

Before his chartered yacht leaves for the Strait of Georgia, he'd talk to her. Maybe he needed closure. Yes, maybe his infatuation hadn't escalated at all and the irritating scratch on his chest was guilt for screwing his sister's friend while she was so vulnerable. Yes, just talk to her and give her underwear back, it was all he needed.

"We should go upstairs. I want to listen to Debi's band. Diana must be up there, too." Todd said.

"No, Diana's not here. She's got a new boyfriend. They went to Tacoma this afternoon to visit the Museum of Glass. Diana's meeting other artists over there, too, for dinner."

Todd let out a loud string of curses, surprising the young woman standing a foot away from them. "Do I know this new boyfriend?"

"Dale Measly."

"The glass chemist of Avant-garde Glassworks?"

"Yeah. You know Diana. She's attracted to

anything that has to do with glass. And you should be happy. At least she's got a new one to pester."

"She's not a pest, but she is a brat." Todd shoved his empty beer can to a young man flirting with a young woman walking by them. The man yelled at him, but quickly apologized when Todd gave him a menacing stare. "This whole building is full of dickheads."

Wolf ignored his friend's sudden change of mood. Right that moment, his attention was captured by the woman who had just arrived, walking with grace, confidence, and looked flushed the way she had looked in his arms. Madeline.

* * * *

The Center was in full swing. All parking spots were full and she had to park three blocks away. Inside was no better. The whole community must have been in attendance. Good. Maybe they'd be successful this time. Last year's fundraising was fun and entertaining, but was a complete failure. Only few people showed up and those who did only ate the samples. She end up bringing home the unsold baked cake and cookies. For days, she ate cake for dessert and cookies for breakfast until she was sick of it.

Madeline glanced around the room. Everyone looked happy. Some people lingered around the refreshments table and others were out in the balcony where a spectacular night view of the Olympic Mountains and the Kingston Ferry gliding off the glittering water of Puget Sound could be viewed. She spotted Nerissa, the center's manager, standing by the refreshment table with a scowl on her face. Dear, she should have been the one standing there if she arrived on time. "Nerissa, sorry I'm late."

"Madeline," Nerissa smiled, showing her teeth clamped together. "I didn't think you'd make it. I am so worried. So you got my phone message."

Madeline nodded. The shameful reason why she was late jabbed at her conscience. "How are we doing?"

"I think we are good. A lot of handsome gentlemen are in attendance. I bet they will all make their bids." Nerissa clasped her hand in front of her as if in prayer. "Dinner for two at the Space Needle Restaurant, two tickets for the Mariner's game—behind the home plate I was told—and of course, a day with the *auctioned girl*, courtesy of Edmonds Senior Center is the best idea ever. We might hit our target amount tonight."

Seeing how the center was overflowing with people, Nerissa must be right. This year they needed to cover the loss of their funding. They

had a steady flow of donations from the regular donors, but with the county's sudden cut back on the funds, some of the programs, including the Senior Technology Literacy her mother had started, would be impossible to continue. So she came up with a new idea—dance night and auctioning women.

Madeline cringed inside. In the beginning, the idea sounded great. Now, few minutes before the actual bidding, somehow auctioning a woman to make ends meet felt so wrong. "We shouldn't auction women, Nerissa," Madeline said.

"Why? Can't you see these men? They will put everything on the table just to win you and the other volunteer ladies. I saw Greg in there. He still likes you even now that you're engaged. I bet he'll try to win you tonight so he can have a day with you before your wedding."

Madeline had to look down to stop her eyes from rolling heavenward. Greg the Keg, the four foot eleven inch owner of Sugar and Spice Club, had been her avid suitor. He also had a bad reputation when it comes to dating women and bad breath. Greg loved his club so much he'd take his date there to watch the dancers perform while eating liver and onions. "Nerissa, I think auctioning women is not right. And it might give the bidder wrong ideas about the ladies."

"I haven't heard any single complaint from the

women and the feminist movement.” Nerissa tilted her chin and pursed her lips. “Hmpht! I don’t know about you, but to me, this center is very important. Maybe you haven’t noticed, but the programs on the verge of closing are our only source of entertainment and very important to our senior members.”

“I know that, Nerissa.”

“Good. If you feel guilty, who knows why, just think of your mother and the program she had started.”

There it was. The guilt trick. Why didn’t she see it coming?

“All we ask is for you to go out with whoever wins you for one day. Is that too much?”

“No, Nerissa, it’s not.”

“Then it’s settled.” Nerissa’s eyes narrowed, studying her with intense curiosity. “Wait a minute. It’s Edward, isn’t it? He’s jealous and didn’t want you to go out on a date with the winner.”

“No, Edward’s not the problem.” Not on this one, at least.

“Well then, end of the conversation. Right now, I would like you to station yourself here. Watch the punch. I saw a group of youngsters hovering around there. We don’t want a repeat of last year’s unforgettable event. And you know what? I spotted them, they’re here. The nerves!” Nerissa

said in a conspiratorial way.

Madeline sighed and took the ladle to stir the punch. Her mind went back to last year's event. Three senior women had gotten drunk from drinking spiked punch. They started giggling and flirting with men, lifting and unbuttoning their dresses while selling their fresh baked cookies. Seeing drunken old women stripping was the funniest thing she'd ever seen, but Nerissa thought they were a disgrace to the human race. "All right, I'll guard this punch table like a good volunteer armed with a ladle." And pray whoever bid the highest to win her was not a maniac, lunatic, or with killer-breath.

"I'll replace you an hour before the auction so you and Edward could enjoy the party. I haven't seen him. He's here, isn't he?"

"No. Edward is...out of town." If she would pick someone to tell about her recent breakup, Nerissa wouldn't be the one. The woman had a big mouth and was known to spread gossip faster than a plague. She was the reason why the center had a high number of members. She could put gossip magazines to shame.

"Out of town? You have less than two weeks before your wedding. Oh, I heard Betty's working hard on decorating your Gazebo. I bet it's going to be a pretty one."

Madeline mentally kicked herself. She forgot

about Betty and her Gazebo. She'd better start calling people involved in her wedding preparations. Questions and gossips would start flying, but there was no way around it. Darn, she would have to face them sooner or later. "Yeah, she's a sweetheart."

"Have you tried your gown on?"

"No. I was told its bad luck."

"Pshaw. Old wives' tale. It'll be bad luck if you can't wear your gown on your wedding day because it doesn't fit right. Our body could change in a month, you know."

Even if she gained ten or a hundred pounds, there was no use trying on the gown. But she couldn't tell Nerissa the truth. Not just yet. "I'll look at the gown, Nerissa."

"Good. If your mother was here, she'd say the same thing. I'm just giving you some advice. You heard what happened with Olivia's daughter, right?"

"Yes. Her gown showed her bump."

"And the bump wasn't her fiancé's. Lord, Olivia was humiliated."

"Well, I don't have to worry about showing a bump on my wedding day, Nerissa."

Nerissa looked at Madeline's stomach, then nodded her head approvingly. "Okay, I have to go and check the dessert table."

Madeline sighed. For a moment, she thought

Nerissa would say something stupid like *but you look pregnant*. Wolf didn't use a condom when they had sex, but she was still on pills. She wouldn't get pregnant. Besides, their tryst happened only a week ago. A bump only showed after two weeks of pregnancy, right? Crap, so this was how it felt when hiding something, guilty and suspicious of others. She dipped the ladle into the bowl, stirred the punch and scanned the room. Her eyes spotted two men inches taller than the rest of the attendees talking to each other. They looked like they had just finished with a photo shoot. Both men possessed attention-getter looks. But the tall dark-haired one stood out like a buck in a clearing. And she'd recognize the buck anywhere. Captain Wolf O'Connor.

Her heart raced as if she'd been on a marathon. What was Wolf doing here? She thought he'd left for Orcas Island. When did he arrive? God, was he here to see her or to bid?

Wolf tipped the can to his lips. She narrowed her eyes. Was he holding a can of beer? She didn't know they served beer. Alcoholic beverages were against the center's policy. Had the policy been changed? What was the use of guarding the punch table when there were beers to drink?

Wolf tapped the lip of the can to his chin.

She had a taste of that chin and only god knew how much she wanted to bite and lick his chin

again, and all of him. Oh, lord. She wasn't a virgin the first time they made love, but Wolf stoked embers from within her and it kept burning. Wolf looked in her direction. She turned away, avoiding eye contact with him. He knew she was here. Pretending to look busy, she started ladling punch in the plastic cups, ignoring the hammering heartbeat against her chest like a hundred drums.

* * * *

Wolf watched Madeline line up the red plastic cups on the table as they were filled. She was even more beautiful with her hair tied up loosely behind her head and adorned with tiny white flowers. Wisps of hair floating around her face must have tickled her, she scrunched her nose, then tucked a few strands behind her ear. She wore a pale pink silk blouse with a low neckline, showing a good amount of white flesh and, if he was right, the same necklace she wore at his party. Her brown, ankle-length, straight-cut skirt hugged her shapely ass like a second skin. The dress was simple, but with her shapely figure, she looked simply wonderful. Like a debutante, fresh and full of promises. Madeline waved and smiled at someone she spotted across the room. Even if the smile wasn't directed at him, it still made his heart thud.

"Anybody caught your interest?" Todd elbowed his side.

"Yeah," he answered without taking his gaze off Madeline.

Todd elbowed him in the rib again. "Madeline? Yeah, she's a hottie. Edward's a lucky bastard."

"I know she's a hottie and if you call her hottie again, I'll beat you up, tie my anchor around your dick and throw you in the Sound."

"The hell! What's wrong with you, bro?" Todd looked at Madeline and looked back at him. "I know you've got a crush on her, but...the hell, I didn't know you liked her more than that to threaten my dick because I called her a hottie."

Didn't know it either until...recently. Wolf gave his empty can to Todd and made a move to see Madeline.

Todd smacked his hand on his shoulder none too gently. "Whoa, bro. She's off limits you know. She's getting married."

Wolf grinned at Todd. "Diana must be real busy with her new boyfriend to bother you about the latest on Madeline's wedding."

Todd scowled.

It was a reaction Wolf expected to see.

"What about Madeline's engagement?"

"Cancelled." A pretty, young brunette stopped to talk to Todd, saving him from having to explain Madeline's broken engagement. He directed his

eyes back where Madeline was standing. The sea of thirsty young men lined up to get their drinks doubled. He spotted his friend, Kip, and cut in line. Unlike the other people, he didn't grab a cup from a table, instead, he waited for Madeline to hand him one.

Kip leaned forward and whispered in Madeline's ear. Whatever he said made Madeline laugh.

A sharp pang of jealousy, like a blow in the gut, hit Wolf. He shouldn't, but, yes, he was freaking jealous of his own friend for talking to the woman he was in...love with? Wolf shook his head in disbelief. The irritating scratch inside his chest was love?

Kip finally left the table and waved at him. Not far behind him were Cooper and his new wife, Piper. Lenard, the pediatrician, along with Colin who was recently transferred from his FBI office in New York to the Seattle office arrived, too. With his friends over six feet in height, they were impossible to miss. By the time everyone had decided to go to the dance hall on the second floor, Madeline wasn't serving drinks anymore. She was nowhere in sight.

Wolf waited until the crowd thinned. When he didn't see her, he decided to follow his friends upstairs. He didn't get a chance to look for Madeline. Two elderly ladies paired him with a

young woman who tried her best to fondle him. She was followed by a middle-aged woman who gyrated her hips like a turning turbine. Damn, if she was a ship, she could sail real fast. When the music ended, he thanked the woman, brought her back to her friends then went out in the veranda in a hurry. Todd didn't take long to join him.

"Come on, man. Go back inside. We still have time to dance before the auction." Todd nodded toward the stairs.

"What auction? I thought tonight's the Couple's Dance Night?"

"And auction. Don't you know? Women will be auctioned tonight. This year, the center came up with a good idea to raise their funds, women!"

Geez, no wonder the center was full. "I thought this is the twenty-first century. Women are free to vote and —"

"Come on, man. It's not like the women will be auctioned to become slaves. In bed maybe."

Bidding in an auction to win a woman was cruel and demeaning. The center needed their funding so badly they have to resort to auctioning women? Damn, the women must be as desperate if they agreed to be a part of the auction. He wouldn't bid with any of them. Besides, his mind was already occupied by one sensual woman. The same woman he had just realized he loved.

Chapter Four

Two more girls and it would be her turn. Madeline's stomach did a somersault. The pound cake she had for snack threatened to come back up. Drat! Not only it was so embarrassing to be auctioned, Wolf would witness her being sold like a pig in a circus.

Behind the old mothball perfumed curtain, she heard the crowd hoot and clap as one of the gentleman won the bid. Another one followed and then it was her turn. Madeline peeked through the curtain. The room was full of people laughing and teasing each other. Last time she'd seen a boisterous crowd like this was during the U2 concert she and Diana went to see.

Madeline stuck her head out a bit farther to find Wolf. She couldn't see him. Good, maybe he left already. This wasn't his kind of party anyway. His parties involved a waiter, first class catered food

and real wine glasses, not plastic. Taking a deep breath, she turned her eyes in Nerissa's direction. The poor woman had been nodding her head, giving her the sign that it was her turn to be sold.

Why did I ever think of this stupid idea? Shaking her hands in front of her to rid her nervousness, she lifted her chin and moved the curtain aside. She walked on the makeshift platform, feeling like an idiot. She'd bet her rundown flower shop her mother wouldn't have agreed to participating in an auction like this one.

The crowd clapped and hooted. She pasted a smile on her face and directed her eyes toward the back of the room. A hard sock in the gut made her heart stop from beating. There, leaning against the wall, was Wolf, staring at her with an unreadable expression on his face. Right that moment, she wanted to run back behind the mothball-scented curtain, wrap it around her until she suffocated.

Mr. Anderson, the eighty-year-old auctioneer must have sensed her hesitation. He lowered his head to stare above his thick wire-framed glasses sitting precariously at the tip of his long nose.

Madeline read the silent question through his gray eyes. She smiled and gave him a short nod.

He smiled back, showing his nicotine stained yellow teeth. With his knobby long fingers, he took the microphone and begun with the auction. "Ladies and gentlemen, may I present to you, our

last prize for tonight. The very beautiful, our very own, Miss Madeline Honeylee.”

People clapped, whistled, and even yelled obscenities. Some men waved their bills in the air. Heck, she wanted to die from embarrassment.

The first bidder was Pepe, the Mexican Restaurant owner. Madeline liked him and his restaurant. Not bad if she end up going out with him. A chorus of oohhs and ahhs erupted when Toshi of Toshi’s Teriyaki outbid him. Madeline smiled to herself. Teriyaki beef or shrimp would be great with rice. Her smile didn’t last because Toshi lost with the owner of Marble and Marble.

More bids were offered, but none came from Wolf. Of course, he wouldn’t offer a bid to win her. Not after he’d seen how huge her breasts were. And her butt... He probably didn’t want to touch her again. *Lordy! I’d hate to know what he’s thinking about me right now.*

Finally, an outrageous bid came from Greg the Keg, silencing the rest of the men. Madeline’s heart found its way down behind her diaphragm and without delay, started sinking low as the seconds ticked by.

“Seven thousand dollars from Greg the K— er, owner of the Sugar and Spice Bar. Do I hear a higher bid? Anyone?”

“Ten thousand!”

Madeline had to stop herself from clapping

when she saw Kip standing on the other side of the room. Kip belonged to Wolf's group of friends. She had met him during Wolf's party. Like the rest of them, he was tall, possessed charisma that could charm any women's underwear to drop on the floor, and he reminded her of the lead actor in the *Eastern Promises* movie she and Diana watched over and over. Without a doubt in her mind, he'd look as yummy as the actor when naked.

"Ten thousand from the handsome gentleman standing on the right corner of the room." Mr. Anderson pointed his finger at Kip before looking at Madeline to give her a slow wink. "Okay, going once, going twice and the winner is—"

"Forty-five thousand!"

The outrageous amount shut everyone up. Like a drill, everyone turned their heads in synchrony and looked at Wolf casually leaning against the wall. The silence in the room was deafening. Madeline met his dull, unspeaking eyes, prolonging the moment. Nobody said a thing until Wolf raised his cup to Madeline.

Thunderous noises erupted inside the hall. She'd never seen a crowd cheer, give each other high-fives, and smack each others' backs as if they all had won the lottery. The sound, however, was nothing compared to the loud pounding of blood in her ear.

Pepé Le Pew! He won...me.

* * * *

He wasn't going to let any man, even a friend, win her. When he learned she was one of the *prizes*, he nearly lost his mind. He wanted to drag her out of the building, wring her neck to bring her back to her senses and kiss her until they were both breathless. Didn't she understand the look on the men's faces who had offered their bids? Didn't she hear the obscene words they tossed at her? They wanted more than a day with her. They wanted what he wanted, to see her naked, feel her naked, and get lost in between her thighs. And they'd try everything to accomplish those things within a day she spent with them.

Wolf wanted to punch the men who looked at Madeline from head to toe as if they wanted to fuck here right there on the platform. Damn, thinking about their hands on Madeline's breasts, feeling her soft skin, laughing with her, didn't sit well in his stomach. It was the same feeling he had felt when he learned she was Edward's girlfriend. He didn't do anything then, it was different now. Since the bastard was out of the picture, he wouldn't let another man get in.

"What the hell, man. Forty-five grand?" Todd whispered.

"It's nothing, man." His friend had no idea he

would bid higher than forty-five, if necessary, to win Madeline.

"I know you have the dough, but forty grand is forty grand."

"You'll do the same thing if my sister is on the auction block." It was time his friend realized Diana was more to him than just a friend.

"What the fuck are you talking about? I never watch Diana like some hungry —"

"Todd, have you seen yourself watch Diana?" Wolf jeered when Todd raked his hair with his fingers.

Todd didn't say anything.

Wolf diverted his attention back to where Madeline disappeared behind the ugliest curtain he'd ever seen. Todd was wrong about him getting only one day from Madeline. "I'll be right back."

"Bro, is this about what Edward did years ago? You're still after his blood?"

"You know I hate the son of a bitch. But he's not the reason why I'm after Madeline."

Todd smacked him on the shoulder none too gently. "I hope to hell you're not contagious."

"What are you talking about?"

"Damn, bro. Don't deny it. You're freaking in love."

"Yes, I am." *And I doubt it'll be reciprocated.*

* * * *

Forty-five thousand dollars in exchange for one day with her was preposterous. Someone must have told Wolf about the center's financial problem and, since he happened to have the money to throw away, that's why he decided to bid so high. Was it generosity or he was hoping to get something more in return? Like a repeat of what happened on his yacht?

Crud, thinking about their tryst made her feel warm all over as if she just drank a strong wine. The feeling contrasted with the cool breeze from the pacific gliding over her arms. She made an involuntary shiver. Madeline shook her head from side to side as if saying no to someone. What a weird thing to think about. Her fiancé had just broken up with her and she was already lusting after another man. She shouldn't entertain those thoughts. What she should be focusing on was her life ahead as a single woman.

She kept walking toward the public fishing pier. The sun had long been gone and hid behind the mountains outlining its majestic shape. Above in the midnight sky, the round moon shone so bright lovers found their way along the Olympic beach.

Rain or shine, the boardwalk was busy with joggers, visitors, anglers casting for salmon,

bottom fish, and jigged for squid. Tonight, with the aid of the bright moon, she could see the 950-foot pier was empty.

The park rangers had decided to close the pier at night because of the previous night's incident. Teenagers made a foolish bet on who could swim longer in the frigid water of Puget Sound, naked. None lasted and all ended in the hospital to be treated for hypothermia.

Madeline stopped in front of the barricade that looked like a hurdle in a track and field. It looked heavy and made out of wood with two crisscross bars at the bottom. Sheez, what did the park rangers think? A barricade like this could stop anyone from going over? She looked at the dark ranger station. The park rangers only worked here until five in the afternoon, so they were gone. Except for the iron statue of a family, she didn't see anybody around. Lifting her skirt, she climbed over the wood barrier, jumped on the other side and headed toward the end of the pier.

At the end, she leaned against the weather-battered wood and took a deep breath. The night scene was so romantic. The bright moon shed light over the dark water, making it shine. It looked so beautiful she wanted to reach in and touch it. But she knew better. Water, no matter what color on the surface, was always ugly and treacherous underneath. She hated any body of water. Be it

shallow or deep.

The soft wind blew, kissing her face and exposed arms. Madeline wrapped her arms around her. She was in such a hurry to get out of the building, away from the crowd that she neglected to grab her sweater. The cold damp wood against her thin dress produced bumps all over her skin.

"I can imagine you as a little girl getting into trouble because you don't follow rules and signs."

Madeline turned around so fast, she scraped her finger on the wood railing. "Wolf? Ouch!"

"Let me see." Wolf made it to her side in quick strides. He took her hand to peer at her finger. "No sliver only a little cut." With his gaze on her, he raised her finger to his lips.

Surprised, Madeline could do nothing but hold her breath. But when he sucked the pad of her finger before slowly gliding it in and out of his mouth, she squeaked like a trapped, tiny mouse.

"Did I hurt you?"

Madeline shook her head. His action shocked her, words wedged in her throat. Of course, he didn't hurt her. What she felt was a lurch of excitement within her. She closed her eyes, hoping to control the riot of emotions currently taking over her body. Instead, she found herself extremely conscious of his velvety tongue caressing the pad of her finger. "Oh my God," she

murmured.

"You're naughty. You ignored the sign, Madeline."

Madeline opened her eyes to find him watching her. "I know. But this is the only place where I can be right now without anyone bothering me." She tried her hardest not to whimper when a friction created by his repetitive suckling motion traveled down the very center of her body.

"Should I leave?" He rubbed her wrist and forearm with his fingers.

"No." Her response came out too quickly. Sweet Dove Bars! She didn't want him to leave or stop whatever he was doing.

"I can stay?"

"Not if you don't want to. Thanks for the high bid, Wolf. The center needs the money."

"You're welcome."

"Why did you bid that high? You could have raised a dollar higher than Kip."

"I could have, but I didn't. Besides, the money goes to the center. So it's okay."

"Did you follow me here to schedule a time when you could claim your prize?"

Wolf stared at her. "I followed you because I wanted to talk to you."

Madeline's heart gave a hard thud on her chest. Dear lord, he probably regretted succumbing to her shameless begging that he make love with her.

"Is it about what happened between us? If yes, don't worry I won't tell a soul. Wolf, I apologize for my actions. I was angry and wasn't thinking right that night. I wanted to get even with Edward. Maybe that's why I forced you to make love with me. Honestly though, I'm not sure why I begged you. What came over me? Who knows? I promise you though, I won't tell anyone about what happened. Wolf, I was serious when I said what happened in Vegas stays in Vegas."

"Tsk, ts. You sound like Diana when she's riled. Talking so fast, like a firing machine gun."

The wind blew again and she shivered. "I'm not. Only I'm saying—" Wolf took her other hand and snaked both inside his sports coat. He tugged his coat so they were both practically covered before placing his one hand around her waist and the other on her back. The position was so intimate. There wasn't a space in between them. They were chest to chest, thighs to thighs. Madeline could feel his heart beat and feel his warm breath on her neck. "What are you doing?"

"Keeping you warm."

"Thanks. I forgot to bring my sweater."

"So you were saying?"

Madeline had to think first. It wasn't easy, especially when his hand was slowly going up and down her spine, caressing her. "Well, what I was trying to say is I can keep a secret."

"Love, I don't care if you tell the whole world about what happened. I wanted to talk to you about how you managed to disappear at the party. I went back to the aft room, but you weren't there. I didn't dance with anyone because I was hoping we could dance together."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You hear that music playing right now?"

Madeline looked at the brightly lit center and listened. "Yes. I think its Waltz."

"Now, I can have my dance."

"Here?"

"Yes, here is better. Not crowded and loud. Besides, the moon is better than the strobe light, don't you think?"

Damn right, the moon and the stars were better. Not even her most romantic dream could beat this. Madeline tilted her head up to look at the moon. Maybe it was just her imagination playing tricks on her, but it looked like the moon glowed even brighter. What was it about the moon that made people feel so romantic? Why was it called lover's moon? "I don't know how to Waltz."

Wolf started moving his feet forward and she followed. "Just let me lead you. Give your body to me and I will move us together like one entity. Relax, love."

She let out her breath and did exactly what he

said. Madeline let Wolf move her like a swinging pendulum. The movement was slow, keeping them in a close position. Their bodies rubbed together, creating tiny bolts of electricity shooting from her fingertips to her toes.

"Madeline, you were neglected."

"I'm sorry?"

"You said you don't know what came over you that night at my yacht. I think you were neglected."

"Me. Neglected?"

"Yes. You're a very sensual woman, Madeline. When Edward failed to show you how great, beautiful, and wonderful you are, to bring out the hidden fire deep inside you, your body searched for a way to express your sensuality. That's why you acted the way you did. You feel unattractive because your—pardon my French—son of a bitch ex-fiancé made you feel like one. You shouldn't. You're so attractive. Kind of like the actress in Nurse Betty."

"You have a thing for Renée Zellweger?"

Wolf chuckled and pressed his mouth against her temple. "I didn't say I have a thing for her. All I am saying is you're beautiful. And I know there's more to you than just this." He stopped dancing to cup her breast lightly.

Madeline quickly looked to see if someone was watching. No one was around. But what she

noticed was they were already standing in front of the L-shaped brick enclosure in the middle of the pier. They stood beside the wooden bench where people could rest and admire the view while being protected from the cold wind or hot sun during summer. What a perfect rendezvous.

Lordy, the whole world could have collapsed around her and she wouldn't know because her mind was focused only on Wolf's warm body moving against hers.

Wolf cupped her face with both hands. The moon's light reflected on his pale blue eyes. His hand trailed from the small of her back to the rise of her butt. "Love, you're a beautiful passionate woman."

"You really think so?"

"Are you fishing for more compliments?" he asked with laughter in his voice.

"No, but if you have more I don't mind hearing them. They make me feel good." She now understood that not only she was sexually neglected, but also compliment deprived. Edward, she now remembered, was not generous with his praises.

"Only my compliments? How about my touch?"

Madeline closed her eyes when Wolf's lips hovered on top of hers. "Yes. That, too." And then he kissed her. His hot mouth felt so good against

hers. Cupping her ass, Wolf pulled her closer. His erection pressed against her pubic bone and it felt heavenly. Madeline tiptoed. She wanted his thick phallus pressed where she ached the most.

For a week, she'd dreamed about him, his expert hands, strong thighs, hard chest, and thick cock and came awake panting, wet and throbbing. Now he was here in the flesh doing wicked things to her. Only it was a lot better than a dream. The scent of the Puget Sound carried by the mild wind swirled around them, mixing with the powerful essence of their desire. She wrapped her arms around his neck and returned his kisses with all the passion she'd bottled up all week. He tasted of beer and something uniquely Wolf. "I didn't think kissing would be this good."

"You had a bad tutor." He lowered his head and nipped at her neck.

The simple act was so erotic, she felt the heat between her thighs rising. She wanted more, but the cold breeze touched her back and whispered in her ears, reminding her of where they were, bringing her back to her senses. With regret, she placed her hand on his chest. "Wolf, we shouldn't. I'm not ready for this."

* * * *

Wolf trapped Madeline's head between his hands

and stared at her warm eyes. He knew his chance of Madeline going out with him was slim. Her heart maybe broken, but it still belonged to Edward. Despite what happened between them at his yacht, she wasn't ready to get involved with another man right after her breakup. He would bide his time. Eventually, he'd make her his. "Edward is a fool to let you go."

"I think I am the fool for believing we have a future together. What I got is a headache. My friends at the center still believe I am marrying him. I couldn't tell them Edward dumped me and left for New York to start his family law office. They're my friends, but when it comes to spreading gossips, friend or not, they'll flay you alive. I've been in a center of talk before, I hate for it to happen again."

He kissed her knitted brows. An idea formed quickly in his head. This would be his chance to stay beside her. "The gossip will be unavoidable, but you can soften the blow and maybe make them talk about Edward instead. Turn things around."

"How?"

"Use me."

"What?"

"Part of my prize for winning you in the auction is to go out with your for a day. Well, do it more than that. Say, a week or so. Go out with me.

If people see us together, they'll make speculations, assumptions, and whatever else they gossip about. And with Edward gone, they'll put two and two together."

"That Edward and I are no longer together."

"Yes. They'll think there won't be a wedding and if we get lucky, the gossip would be that you dumped Edward. If they ask, we'll tell them that you did."

"That I dumped Edward."

"Yes."

"But if they see us together, they'll think I'm a two-timer or unfaithful. A plenty good reason for the gossipmongers to attack me."

"If you go out with me, they'll understand why you did it."

"They will? Why?"

"Because I'm Captain Wolf O'Connor."

"Get off your high horse, Captain."

The way she scrunched up her nose made him laugh. Damn, she was one beautiful woman. Unable to help the feeling, he planted tiny kisses all over her face. "We'll show people how happy we are. Also, your friends might not flay you alive because they're part of why you broke the engagement. They put us together when you were auctioned. They're partly responsible for what happened. And who knows, they might think of what happened as romantic. You will still be

talked about, but let's hope it'll be about you making a good decision for dumping the arrogant bastard. And in a way, the gossip, if what I hope happens, will be your revenge against him. When Edward hears people talking about you dumping him, it'll hurt his ego."

"How did you know he will mind the gossips?"

"Because I know him. Love, Edward will go down in history as the man Madeline Honeylee dumped." He slowly massaged her temples.

"With your theory, I can't quite decide who's more arrogant." She narrowed her eyes at him. "You, Captain Wolf, are not only a libertine, but bigheaded, too."

"Libertine, huh?" He darted his tongue inside her earlobe.

"Stop! That tickles. I don't want to take revenge on Edward or have anything to do with his ego. To forget him is what I want."

"You will. And if you go out with me, you will definitely forget about him, fast."

"Wolf, be serious."

"I am serious."

"But I could just tell my friends I broke the engagement. There's no need for us to pretend that we're going out."

Damn! She was right. "Madeline, it'll be more believable if you go out with me. Edward left town, if they don't see you going out with anyone,

they would assume right away that he left you. But if they see you with me, it'll give them something else. They won't be asking you the whys about the broken engagement. We'll show them."

"They'll spread the gossip about me dumping Edward because we fell in love after the auction."

And I hope to god the falling in love part will come true. "Yes. The gossip will definitely reach Edward's ears. And even if he ignored them, I'm sure Edward will be affected by it one way or another."

"You really want to hurt Edward's ego, why?"

"I don't like the guy, never did since college. Not to mention he's the worst kind of divorce lawyer. He'll ruin anyone for the sake of making money. But, love, I want to get even with him for hurting your feelings."

"You sound like my brother when he used to get angry with bullies from our school. Are you trying to be my champion?"

"Yes. Come on, Madeline. Just try it. You have nothing to lose. Have fun. Use me."

"I would know a whacky way to have fun if I hear one. And this is a really whacky one."

"Not to me."

"Why are you doing this, Wolf?"

"Because I want more than just a day with you."

"You want to pretend because you want to be with me?"

"Yes. And I want this." He lowered his head and kissed the corners of her mouth, her chin, the column of her neck and her shoulder blades. He felt Madeline shiver.

"You expect sex in return?" she asked softly while giving him more access to kiss the soft skin below her ears.

He was tempted to tell her what he really wanted, but it was too soon. Later, when she recovered from losing Edward, he'd tell her the truth about him, about his feelings, and about his intentions. He would inch slowly in her life until he found a spot in her heart. In a circular motion, he rubbed her temples. "I'm not expecting anything. If I could dance with you like this, I'm fine with it. But I won't deny that I want you." *Come on, Madeline, give me a chance.*

* * * *

He wanted her. Since when? He never showed a sign he was interested in her before. But the how and when didn't matter. Good god, if she was honest with herself, she wanted Wolf, too. She wanted to be near him and feel his hands against hers again.

Madeline had never been daring in her life.

Edward was only right to call her boring. Since that horrible day in the lake, everything she did was planned. She'd never been spontaneous except the night in Wolf's yacht. She could do it again. Prove she was capable of doing exciting, daring things. She'd do this. What little benefit she would get from this, she'd take it. The heck with consequences. She would cross whatever bridge she had to cross later and hope it wouldn't collapse on her. "How long are we going to pretend?"

"Until the gossip winds down or however long you want it to last. It doesn't matter."

"Okay, I'll do it. Yes. I'll pretend to be your girlfriend."

"Really?"

"Yes, but don't get any wrong ideas. When I begged you to make love with me, I wasn't myself. Like you said, I was neglected and it was my body that dictated my actions. Stop smiling like that."

"Like what?" Wolf continued grinning.

"As if you want to eat me alive."

"Oh, I want to eat you all right."

"Wolf."

"I do, Madeline. I want to taste your skin, your wet pussy and come. Right now. Let me pleasure you again the way I did last time, love." Wolf's hand caressed her ass, her sides and the cupped

her breasts, his lips nipping at her chin. "Madeline, I missed you."

His use of words didn't offend her. In fact, they aroused her and she'd probably climax if he touched her clitoris. "Wolf, I know you're a wicked man and—oh god," she moaned as Wolf's thumb found its way inside her blouse. The cool breeze fanned her heated skin. But it didn't stop her temperature from rising. She felt her blouse loosened on the back before sagging on the front to expose her strapless bra. But it, too, loosened and showed her breasts.

"Beautiful. So fucking beautiful." Wolf squeezed her breasts together. "Do you like it when I talk dirty to you?"

"Yes."

"Good. There's nothing wrong with it. You're body will respond without the least bit of inhibition if you voice what you want, Madeline."

"Say what I want..."

"Yes. I want to fuck you in between your breasts right now and I want to thrust hard deep inside you repeatedly. I'm voicing what I want, love. Now, tell me what you want."

Madeline had never done this before. With Edward, all she had to do was lie down and spread her legs. No dirty talk, no prolonged release. "I want you to suck my breasts and lick my pussy until I come."

"That's my girl. You'll get it, love." Cupping the underside of her breast, Wolf dipped his head and captured her nipple. He swirled his tongue around the areola before sucking her nipple. While his mouth was clamped on one, he massaged her other breast with his big palm. "Hmm, you taste so good." He switched from the other breast and gave it the same attention he had given the other one.

Madeline ran her fingers in his scalp in a caressing way as warm liquid pooled in between her legs. Wolf's tongue and hot, wet mouth set her body on fire. "I love your mouth on me."

"And I love your skin touching mine." He lowered Madeline's blouse further down. He found her skirt's zipper on the back and unzipped it.

With a quick tug, her skirt dropped on her feet. Madeline felt exposed and at the same time giddy. She couldn't wait for Wolf's hand to glide against her skin, to touch her where she throbbed, like last time. She caught her breath when she felt his hand touch her mound. And when he rubbed her pubic bone, her knees buckled. "Wolf, don't let me wait. Touch me now."

"Here?" He dipped his middle finger and pressed it against her clitoris.

"Yes!" God, she'd never had foreplay like this before. It was maddening and erotic.

"Spread your legs. So I can finger fuck you, love."

The word finger fuck sent her head reeling. She felt like a drunk. And like a drunk, she'd do anything just to get what she wanted. Madeline spread her legs and opened herself to his invasion. "Now, Wolf. Please...yes, yes...ohh, ohh." His long fingers moved in and out of her pussy. She rocked her hips, meeting his fingers thrusts. The heightened pleasure was almost unbearable. She felt like crying. With her nipple inside his mouth and his fingers inside her pussy, she felt sexy, needed and beautiful. When she was close to reaching her orgasm, Wolf released her nipple and pulled his fingers out. Unable to stop herself, she reached down to rub her own clit, but Wolf stopped her.

"Don't. Let me help you come. You said you want my mouth on your clit."

"Yes. I do."

Wolf went down on his knees. "Spread your pussy. Show me your clit. Oh, fuck! Beautiful." He stuck his tongue out and licked her weeping cunt from down up. He repeated the action until she couldn't bear it anymore. But Wolf wasn't done. Again, he inserted three fingers inside her and rotated them.

When he pulled them out, Madeline saw how wet they were.

"You're dripping wet. I love it." He smeared her juice around her pussy and then lowered his mouth once again for a good suck.

Madeline screamed his name as he pulled her clitoris out of its nest. Wolf continued drawing her nub into his mouth until at last she peaked. Her orgasm was so explosive, she felt as if her body would shatter into bits and pieces. She rocked her hips until her body turned whole again, and her mind cleared.

Wolf kissed his way up until he was facing her again.

"I've never had, uhm, an..."

"Orgasm like that?" he supplied while grinning.

"Yes." Drat, why was it that uneasiness always came after sex?

Wolf kissed her and stuck his tongue inside her mouth.

She tasted her own come.

"And I've never tasted anything sweeter. So we sealed our deal."

"I guess."

"I can hug, dance with you, and kiss you whenever I want?"

Looking at his eyes, she couldn't deny him the truth. "Yes. I want to dance under the light of the moon and be kissed by you any time you want." *And god help me, I want more.*

Chapter Five

“That’s it? Madeline, I want to know everything. I asked my brother, but he won’t say anything. He just looked at me grinning like an idiot. I called Todd to get some information, but he was so ornery, snapping at me like an irritable...turtle.”

Diana scooped the leaves off the countertop and dumped them in the garbage can. She’d been helping Madeline arrange the newly delivered batch of flowers. She was a great helper, too. But Lordy, Diana gabbed the whole time. She needed help around the shop, not a trigger to a migraine.

Diana thumbed a leaf with a faraway look on her face. She always had that expression whenever she mentioned Todd. In fact, it was the only time when Diana was tongue-tied.

Madeline picked up the leaves Diana missed and collected them on her palm. She thought about the time when she met Diana at the Arts Festival last year. They had their booths side by

side. Diana approached her first. She introduced herself and bought three bundles of flowers to put in her booth. It was the beginning of their friendship. When Diana invited her to come to her Amber Jewelry Store in downtown Seattle, she happily accepted. There, she saw Wolf for the first time. He was helping a woman put on a necklace. When he saw her, he winked and then continued charming the woman into buying Diana's amber necklace. She believed her crush on him started that day.

She dumped the leaves in the garbage can and looked at Diana. "Turtle? Todd doesn't strike me as a slow man. I think he's as fast as Wolf, especially in spotting pretty women. I think all they did was spot women during the auction."

"He's got green eyes with brown rims, like the colors of turtles. Whenever I look at him, I always think about turtles. Anyway, he's not the issue here. Come on, Madeline, I'll die if you don't tell me more about what happened after the auction."

"I already told you. Your brother and I will pretend to be going out. Gossip will spread about us falling in love with each other when we went out as a part of his prize for winning me at the auction. Since Edward skipped town, the news will spread that *I* dumped him. Edward will get mad, his ego will splatter like a broken egg yolk on a pan. And that will be my revenge."

"Tell me again why you have to pretend you two are going out."

"To soften the gossip about me. You know how vicious the gossipmongers are. Wolf is just helping block the attack on me. But basically, I think your brother is just trying to help me have fun instead of feeling sorry for myself."

"Well, I've been telling you not to feel sorry for losing Edward, but you won't listen. Did my brother say if he'll be there to protect you when Edward comes back mad as a bull?"

Madeline handed Diana the bunch of roses to put in the water-filled black buckets. "I don't think Edward would do anything to hurt me physically."

"And what if he did?"

"Diana, Edward wrote me a breakup letter because he's such a coward. I think hurting me physically would be close to impossible."

Diana shrugged her shoulders. "You know him better than I do. What a coward. So that's it?"

"That's it."

Diana wiped her hands on the towel. "Madeline, you know I'd be the happiest woman in the world if you become my sister in-law, but I'd be the saddest if Wolf breaks your heart. And it's possible because he, like his friends, with the exception of Cooper because he's so in love with Piper, lives to lengthen their list of conquered

women. No woman is immune to my brother's charm. I hope this little fun the two of you started will not spin around, kick you in the butt and leave you in a worst situation than you are in now."

"Don't worry, it won't happen."

"I hope to God you won't end up with a broken heart when you're done."

"Your brother can't break an already broken heart, Diana."

Diana's face turned softer. "I'm sorry you fell in love with a pig, Maddie."

In love. Amazingly, since the night Wolf held her tenderly at his yacht, she hadn't missed Edward at all. And when he had danced with her under the light of the moon, she forgot about Edward all together. How could she not miss and forget a man she wanted to marry and was supposed to be marrying in less than two weeks? Was it possible for a short blissful moment in the arms of another to erase memories and feelings that were shared for months? Dear, what was in his kiss? "I think it's good Edward broke an engagement and not marriage, Diana."

"I suppose if you look at it that way, broken engagement is better than a divorce. I wish you good luck on your scheme."

"Thanks."

"So have you thought about my suggestion of

displaying my jewelry here? It might help attract customers."

Madeline scanned her shop and shook her head. "Yes, I thought about your offer."

"But?"

"My answer is no. Your amber necklaces will definitely attract customers, Diana. Unfortunately, they will attract thieves' attention, too. And I won't be responsible for your stolen jewelry because my shop is easily penetrable. Thanks for your offer anyway."

"All right. Let me know when you change your mind."

Lordy, she loved her friend, but when Diana left, she felt relieved. The woman could burst ears with her incessant chattering. Madeline took a deep breath and let it out in a whoosh. She couldn't tell her friend Wolf indeed charmed her to the point where she spontaneously offered him to have sex with her, twice.

* * * *

Port of Edmonds Marina was alive with locals and tourists. Some were shopping, browsing, eating, or just listening to music. Wow, this year's Annual Edmonds Waterfront Festival offered more fun events than last years. There was a five-kilometer walk and run, classic wooden watercrafts race,

ducks on parade, and dance contests for kids. Fun! This was her idea of enjoying life.

A local band kept the family stage alive. The for-adults-only beer garden was crammed with couples drinking while kiosks offering family fun activities were swarmed with parents with strollers, girls in their pretty dresses and boys running around being what they were, boys. The whole crowded scene was perfect for what she and Wolf had in mind.

With the sky as clear as it could be, the sun beat down on everyone, but the soft breeze balanced the heat. Man, the weather was perfect. The sting of sunshine heating her exposed shoulders felt good.

Madeline walked through the narrowed paths in between tents and booths. She skirted around kids on rollerblades. Today would be her first official pretend date with Wolf. Holy Le Pew! Thinking about him made her heart go pitter-patter. The closer she got to where Wolf said he would be, the faster her heartbeat thumped inside her chest.

A woman chased her runaway toddler, caught the wriggling bundle of energy in front of her and blocked her path. Glad to have her thoughts interrupted, she waited until the woman moved to put her child back in the stroller. She needed a minute or two to calm her nerves anyway. When

her line of vision cleared, she looked straight ahead and there he was.

Wearing a pair of low-rise boot cut jeans and white shirt with three-quarter length red sleeves, Wolf looked divine and oozing with sex appeal. The temperature rose a couple degrees hotter. At least the way she was feeling right now. Wolf was looking at her the way he did at the pier while she was slowly riding his fingers. She gripped the side of her sundress to keep from fanning herself. Good grief! The man only had to look at her and she was already quivering with anticipation.

Two slender women in their pastel-colored tank tops and short shorts approached Wolf. Judging by the way that the two women were pointing at each other, Madeline surmised they were introducing themselves. Her suspicion was confirmed when Wolf extended his hand, which the women took turns shaking. One of the women kept touching Wolf's right arm while the other scribbled something in a piece of paper before handing it to Wolf.

If the women's action wasn't a blatant sign of flirtation, Madeline couldn't imagine what was. She waited until the women finally said their goodbyes. Standing there, watching the whole scene, she realized no one was safe with the captain's charm. Including her.

* * * *

Wolf was glad when the women left him alone. He didn't want to waste time in idle chats when he could be with Madeline. When he spotted her a few feet away from him, she was even lovelier in daylight. He could see the softness of her skin, her smooth cheeks, and...damn! Luscious curves. Her simple pale yellow spaghetti strap dress hugged her curvaceous hips. She was enchanting and refreshing. Her image was not spectacular and yet she made his blood simmer. And hell, he was simply looking at her. Madeline's effect on him was worse than a strong wine. She was an addiction he knew he wouldn't dare cure. An obsession.

He noticed her steps slowed down a bit when the women stopped to talk to him. He understood why. Just like the night in his yacht, she saw herself lacking again. Not attractive enough and all boobs-and-butt type. What a silly woman.

Damn Edward for sinking Madeline's self-esteem so low. *If I get my hands on his fat neck, I'll choke him until his eyes bug out.* He almost smiled at the idea. Pushing off the picnic table, he met her halfway.

"Hi, Wolf," Madeline greeted with a winsome smile.

He answered by snaking his arm around her

waist and kissed her. Her soft body, scented with soap and flowers, felt heavenly against him. His house in Innis Arden came to mind. He imagined stripping her in broad daylight. Twice now, he made love with her, but both times, they were in the dark. He wanted to see her in the morning, in the afternoon, and before sun down—before and after making love.

Loud whistling from the crowd penetrated his senses. Smiling, he broke the kiss. "I believe I'm obsessed with you. You are an addiction, you know that?"

"No, I didn't know that. But I do know people will start talking. Probably half of the people here will recognize us both. This is a small town." She looked flushed.

Maybe from the embarrassment or kiss. He hoped it was the later. "Well, that's what we want, right?"

"Right." He put his arm around her shoulders. "Those men gawking at us, they wish they were the ones kissing you right now."

"Yeah, right. They're gawking because they couldn't understand why a man like you would waste your time with a woman like me."

"Like you? What do you mean?"

"I'm embarrassingly big...in certain areas."

"The right areas, mind you" He leaned in to whisper in her ear, "Areas I want to visit right

now. Don't you feel like being spontaneous right now?"

"No. And stop being naughty."

"You made me act so."

* * * *

They walked along the port, stopping only to browse at different kiosk's displayed products, listen to musicians, or to kiss. Madeline never felt so alive and beautiful in her life. And seeing other women look at her with obvious envy in their eyes made her smile.

They reached the face-painting booth and watched the children squirm while getting their faces painted. The artist with a printed scarf wrapped around her head smiled at Wolf, showing her metal braces. She urged him to have Wolf's face painted for a donation. Wolf offered his twenty-dollar bill and said no to the face painting part. But the artist refused to take his money, instead, she patted her stool. Wolf accepted the offer. The artist beamed, her face turning beet red. Egad, another victim of Wolf's charm.

Madeline stood and watched. A lock of hair fell on Wolf's right eye when he looked down to look at the pictures on the binder. The artist was quick to fix it by pushing the hair back and tucked it

behind Wolf's ear. Madeline wanted to jump and smack the artist's hand.

The whole face-painting process took a long time and the line of kids waiting for their turn doubled. After an agonizing wait, the artist finally finished applying Wolf's face paint.

"I thought we'd have to stay there until she closed that booth."

"Jealous?"

"Hah! You wish."

Wolf wrapped his arm around her shoulder and they continued walking along Edmonds Port. Madeline spotted a hotdog stand. Her stomach reacted to the wafting smell of burned oil. She hugged her belly, wishing Wolf didn't hear the embarrassing grumbling sound.

"Chicken Pot Pie has that same effect on me. Come on let's get you a hotdog."

Madeline laughed. So he heard her stomach rumble, but didn't make fun of her. Edward would have acted differently. "*Control your hunger if you want to keep your wardrobe,*" he would say. She shook her head and focused her attention to the fat and crispy looking hotdog the vendor was wrapping in a foil. Loaded with three hotdogs and two large cokes, they sat on the bench and ate.

"I like the flower you picked for your face paint."

"Me, too. It reminds me of a special someone."

Ouch! It was a tiny prick, but hurt nevertheless. Here she was dating the most gorgeous man alive, but he was thinking about someone else he had to have a flower painted on his face as a reminder of that special someone. She stole a glance from him. He was looking toward the pier where people were casting their lines, the same place where she showed him her uninhibited side. She wondered if he was now finally regretting giving the suggestion they go out on a date, albeit, a pretend one, and wished he was with a different woman instead—the blonde girl maybe. What was her name again? Ah, Maxine. A feeling closely resembling jealousy wrapped around her heart. She shouldn't! It was Edward she should care and think about. Not the man sitting across from her.

"Are you okay? The hotdog isn't that bad." He took her hand and laced their fingers together.

"Sorry. I was just thinking about *someone*."

Wolf's brows furrowed and squeezed her hand. "What do you want to do today?"

Before Madeline could respond, a middle-aged woman she recognized right away approached them.

"Maddie! Oh, so good to see you."

"Hello, Betty. How are you?"

"I am good. I was going to call you the other day about your Gazebo. Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you have company."

"Betty, this is Captain Wolf O'Connor."

"Oh, yes. Nice to meet you, Captain. Everyone at the center is so impressed about your bid. And we are all impressed seeing your friends, too. I've never seen so many tall, handsome, young men flock together in one place before."

"Hello, Betty. Glad to meet you."

"So I see you two are on a date. One of the three prizes for winning Madeline, of course."

"So you're in charge with Madeline's Gazebo, Betty."

"Yes I am. Lucky me. I love decorating so I offered to help decorate Maddie's gazebo. She needed help for her wedding. And we, her friends at the center, are all willing to help. Maddie must have told you already. She and Edward are getting married."

"Yeah, I know Maddie *was* getting married."

"Well, Maddie *is* getting married. Right, Maddie?" She looked at Madeline with her tattooed dark brows arched so high they created three deep lines on her forehead.

"Can you keep a secret, Betty?" Wolf asked, smiling.

"Of course, I can. Isn't that right, Maddie?"

Dear, what was he up to now. Madeline nodded at Wolf.

"Well, Madeline and I came to an understanding. Thanks to Senior Center's auction

for bringing us together. You see, Madeline and I have known each other for quite some time now, but it was only on the night of the auction that we realized what we truly feel for each other."

Betty covered her mouth with her quivering hand. "Oh, Maddie, you broke your engagement."

"I did." Madeline exchanged a subtle look of amusement with Wolf.

"But what about the Gazebo?"

"Don't worry about the Gazebo, Betty. I'll pay for it." Wolf lifted Madeline's hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "I thought being Madeline's friend, you should know about us."

"Oh yes, I should. This is good, really good to know." Betty nodded.

"Can we keep this a secret, Betty?"

"Of course, yes, of course. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a friend to visit."

"Bye, Betty. And say hi to your friends for us."

She watched the old woman leave in a hurry. "Wolf, Betty is number two on the list of gossipmongers in this town. Her best friend is Nerissa, the number one gossip. They won't keep a secret. They'll die if they don't do it."

"Good. I figured why not spread the news a little bit. Maybe by the end of this week the whole town will hear about us, not just you, and your broken engagement. And if we're lucky, your bastard of an ex-boyfriend will be dubbed as the

dumped boyfriend sooner than next week."

"You know, I noticed you always call Edward bastard instead of saying his name."

"Let's just say his name leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. Okay, we have to move around if we want to be seen together. It'll also give me reason to wrap my arms around you."

"I hope I won't get hit by a bullet coming from your angry girlfriend's gun when she spotted us here like this."

Wolf stopped walking. He turned her so they were facing each other. "I don't have a girlfriend, yet."

"Maxine isn't your girlfriend?"

Wolf shrugged his shoulders in indifference. "It depends on how you define the word."

"You're incorrigible. Wolf, we don't have to do this. I don't want you sacrificing your time spreading false rumors about us just to save me from being the center of the talk in this town and to hurt Edward's ego when you should be dating someone else."

"Yes, I have to do this. Nothing is sweeter than besting another man, especially a pig pretending to be a man. And I get to be with a beautiful woman who smells like flowers, as soft as a rose petal, and could f—"

"Wolf!" Madeline covered his mouth with her hand.

"What? I was just going to say you could *fill* a man's head with your scent."

"Yeah, right." He nipped the base of her palm before kissing her mouth.

Hand in hand, they walked around the fair. She noticed the women glancing at them. So this was how it feels to be Wolf's girlfriend, envied. My, she could get used to this. But better not. What they were doing was temporary, a pretend relationship. They stopped at a stall full of printed scarves and wrap-around-skirts. "Why do you hate Edward?"

Wolf thumb the Hawaiian designed scarf, smiling at the young lady eyeing him with obvious admiration in her eyes. Just as when she thought he wouldn't reply, he said, "For making you cry."

Instead of feeling happy for having a knight in shining armor, Madeline felt sad. Her brother used to say those exact words, too, when bullies at school gave her a hard time. Too bad her brother wasn't here to play her hero anymore. "You sound like my brother. But he didn't just hate the person who made me cry, he punched them and bit their ears."

"He was your champion. And a good protector, too, I bet."

"Yes, he was. You know, my brother loved anything that floats on water since he was little.

Were you like him when you were young?"

Wolf bought the scarf and paid using his debit card. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and together they walked toward the beach. "Mom told me my fascination with anything that floats started when I was just a baby. I was always happy being in the tub playing with rubber duckies. I don't remember anything I was interested in except for being around water."

"Really? You must be an aqua man. You know, part man, part fish."

"I could be part fish, I'm a good swimmer."

"I don't like water. I mean being in water, but I do love walking down by the beach. My brother and I used to go down to the beach behind Anthony's restaurant."

"That's too bad because I could show you fun things that we could do while in the water."

"Forget it. I have to be dead before you can make me go in water."

"My, my. My Madeline is a cat."

She pinched him on the side. "A cat? For your information, I love to take baths and showers. I just don't feel comfortable being around water deep enough to reach my knees."

Wolf's smile could rival a wild animal who had just found a helpless pup he could devour. "Hmm...bath tubs would work with what I have in mind."

"Oh dear. Tell me, were you a girl chaser when you were a boy?"

"Maybe. But most of the time I chased a dream of building my own boat when I was young."

"And you did."

"Yes I did. Finished the darn thing, but it sank minutes after I sailed it. Since then I told myself someday I'll own something that will not sink, but is also fast and beautiful. My life and sailing became one. Just let me hold a ship's wheel and I'll be the happiest man alive."

"And you are right now. You made your family proud."

"Yes. Someday I'll make my own family proud."

"Your own family?"

"Yeah. Gotta have someone to inherit my passion for sailing, right? And I want to share the special places I often visit alone, the sunset until it disappears into the horizon, and most especially the sunrise with my future wife. Have you watched the sunrise? You should see it."

"No, I haven't. I bet it's beautiful."

Wolf stopped walking and faced her. He combed her hair back with his fingers to keep the strands from blocking her eyes. "The first light of day. It's the most beautiful thing in the world. It's like watching a new day being born. To see the dark horizon slowly brighten up into a new dawn

before turning into a bright or foggy day makes you appreciate life, the air you breathe, the people around you, and for simply being alive."

"Oh my god! That is so beautiful. I think I'm going to cry."

Wolf laughed softly. "Stop it, I'm trying to be serious, you crybaby. I dream of holding someone while we both enjoy watching the sunrise, and the smooth ride of my yacht. Sailing is much better if shared with someone."

She'd known Wolf changed girlfriends faster than his yacht could sail. Now she understood why—he'd been searching for his mate. "You like to dance under the starlit skies, watch sunsets. My, you're a hopeless romantic."

"Don't tell anyone."

Madeline's heart swelled. It must have been hard for him to divulge a secret of being soft and romantic and yet he told her. "Your secret is safe with me. I'll still be your friend even if you tell me you cry whenever you see the Hallmark advertisements."

Wolf laughed and hugged her tight. "You're funny."

They headed toward the ferry terminal, passed the Edmonds Theater, Garden Gate Gift Shop, and Kinder Britches. When they were in front of Cusina Cusina, Wolf opened the topic she'd been avoiding all her life.

"Do you hate water because of what happened to your brother?"

She never wanted to talk about what had happened to her brother because it would only open the deep wound that took her years to close. Once and only once she'd tried sharing her brother and parents' demise with Edward, but he refused to listen. He said he didn't like hearing tragic stories. Bad for indigestion. Right now though, she didn't feel like hedging the topic anymore. "I hated water before Mike's accident and hated it even more after. I shouldn't. It isn't the lake's fault Mike's not here anymore and why Mom and Dad followed shortly after. It was mine."

"Mike drowned, Madeline. It was an accident."

"Wolf, the accident should never have happened if I didn't ignore the sign posted on an old dock in Greenlake."

"So ignoring signs wasn't a recently acquired habit."

"No."

"I didn't hear about the sign. Want to tell me what happened?"

"My brother and parents' story aren't happy. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"Yeah, but only if you want to tell me." He took her hand and laced their fingers together.

A sense of assurance coming from his strong

hold gave her the courage to tell him what she'd kept to herself for years. "Mom and Dad took Mike and me one day to walk around Greenlake. I was twelve, Mike was ten. He brought his plastic wind-up toy sailboat that day. When I spotted an old dock, I convinced him to go there. There was a sign *Dock closed - No swimming*. I told Mike to ignore it. He did. While Mom and Dad sat on the bench, we walked to the end of the dock." The sound of the passenger train made her look up. The interruption was great. At least, she'd have time to control her emotions. The memory never failed to fill her chest with misery, drowning her.

"Madeline, we can talk about this some other time."

"No. I've kept this to myself for so long. I want to tell you what happened. Unless you don't want to listen anymore."

Wolf nodded.

She could do this. Madeline took a deep breath and continued to spill everything she remembered. "Mike sat beside me. I told him to place the boat in the water. I remember seeing his face. He was reluctant and afraid, but he was probably more afraid I'd hit him if he didn't listen to me. So he leaned forward to put his toy in the water. You know, it happened in a slow motion. I watched him go down on his knees and lean forward more and more until he landed in water.

There was a splash, but I was too shocked to react. I did try reaching for him, but couldn't. Swim, I told him." Madeline cleared her throat. The sound of her brother's voice came back. Mike was a kid with a whiny sounding voice. But that day he didn't sound whiny, he sounded so scared.

"Love, we can continue next time. Why don't we go to the beach?"

"No, Wolf. I already started. Might as well finish."

Wolf nodded and again pushed her hair back that had been disturbed by the wind.

"Mike could swim, so I left him to call for Mom and Dad. But they weren't on the bench anymore, they walked father away. When I caught up with them, we ran back. I showed them where Mike was, but he wasn't where I left him. We thought he got out so we called his name. People started asking what happened. We told them Mike was missing. They helped look for him." She stopped as her parents' frantic calling sounded loud in her ear as if they were still standing by the dock.

Wolf squeezed her hand. "Madeline, I think—"

"I remember hearing Dad saying something to Mom and then he jumped in the lake. Mom was screaming for Mike. Finally, Dad came out of the water. He was carrying Mike. Dad found him—underneath the old dock. Mike was still holding his...oh, god! His boat." A sob escaped her mouth,

but she didn't stop. "Mike wasn't moving. Dad kneeled on the dock, holding Mike. Mom was crying so loud, picking leaves and dirt off Mike's hair and face, and clothes. I held Mike's hand the way we always did when we thumb fought and pushed my thumb against his. He didn't fight back."

"I am so sorry, sweetheart."

"You see it was my fault the accident happened."

"You were young. The accident wasn't your fault."

"It was according to my parents because I told them about the sign. They hated me after that. My father suffered from a heart attack while yelling at me for killing my brother. And Mom followed him the following year. My aunt told me she died from grief. A lot of people sympathized with us and some blamed my brother for what happened. They said he shouldn't have gone to the dock to play. I was angry at those people. I wanted to tell them Mike wasn't playing in the dock. It was me who told him to put his stupid toy in the water. The fault was mine. Mike was a good brother, smart, knew about boats and sails. A good thumb-wrestler, protector, my best friend, and...and..." She couldn't go on.

Wolf pulled her against him, hugged her tight and buried her head just below his chin. His lips

on her ear accompanied his whisper, "It's okay."

The simple act broke her. Shielded by his arms, she wailed against his chest, sobbed and cried again. Living with her aunt and cousins who hated having another mouth to feed and share food with, there wasn't a time and place for her to grieve. Now in Wolf's arms, for the first time in years, she let herself immerse in the painful feeling of loss. Memories with Mike and their parents were the only thing left for her to hang onto along with Mike's favorite necklace she'd been wearing since his funeral.

She couldn't tell how long they stood there, not minding people walking by them, all she knew was Wolf, his warmth, and soothing words.

Chapter Six

Madeline stood in front of his floor to ceiling glass window overlooking the water. The lowering sun shone on her. Her shoulders showed mild sunburn from their walk. She looked ethereal, his tired enchantress.

When he willed her pain to transfer to him, anger at fate rose from his chest. He hated everything that caused the glow in her eyes to dim. The pain he saw in her eyes crushed him. She obviously loved and adored her parents and brother. The scars their deaths had left in her soul would stay forever and nothing he could do would make them go away. But he hoped the one thing he had in mind could bring the mirth back into her beautiful eyes.

He watched her suppress a yawn. From behind, he wrapped his arms around her waist, nuzzled her neck, inhaling the scent he longed to smell every night. For a moment, he savored their closeness. He loved the feel of her hands against

his arms and the way she leaned her body against his. Somewhere deep in his soul, he wished for the moment to last. It was insane, but just standing there, together, looking at the setting sun, made him feel happy and content. "I'm obsessed," he whispered.

Madeline lifted her hand to touch his cheek. "You really are a romantic at heart to feel that way."

Romantic and in-heat. "Hmm, somehow my romantic side always emerges when I'm with you." He kissed the column of her neck while slowly lifting her dress. He waited for her to object, but she didn't.

"But like any other romantic, you think you're obsessed with me because we're on a game, like a quest. Our situation is what made you feel what you're feeling right now. As soon as this charade is over, you'll go back to your life without me."

"Let's not talk about that right now. You're here with me. That's all that matters."

She raised her arm and let him pull off her dress.

The sun painted the horizon with dark orange and red. The colors reflected on Madeline's pale skin. He unhooked her strapless bra and let it fall on the floor. With him still standing behind her, he caressed her skin. He kissed the redness of her shoulders, the smoothness of her nape and back

while his hands took their time tracing every curve of her body. The way she juttied her breasts when he cupped them heightened his excitement. He went down on his knees. This might help her forget her pain, if not temporarily.

"Wolf...what are you doing?" Madeline tried to turn around, but he stopped her.

"Helping you think of nothing else right now. Please, let me." He pulled her skimpy white underwear down and slipped it off her feet. Déjà vu, if he continued doing this, he'd have to buy her new sets of underwear. Not a bad idea. Buying her personal items would be a sign of intimacy, which is what they have right now. "Spread your legs, Madeline."

She did, but not wide enough to his satisfaction.

"Wider," he urged. From his position, he could see her plump lips. She had the most beautiful ass he'd ever seen. Perfectly rounded and firm.

"Wolf, you shouldn't..." her voice was so soft, almost sounded sleepy.

"I'm just trying to find a way to make you forget your pain." From behind, he cupped her pussy and raked her pubic hair.

Madeline moaned and slightly lifted her butt. "You're wicked."

"I'll show you how obsessed I am with you." He licked the dimples on the small of her back. Using his two fingers, he separated her folds

before penetrating her. She was so wet, his fingers made an erotic sound when he went in and out. He had to bite the plump rise of her backside to keep from howling like a beast.

"Hmm...this is naughty," she said. Her voice was strained.

Wolf smiled at the sight of Madeline's skin blushing. "This is just the beginning, love," he said before touching her clitoris.

"Wolf..."

"Yes, Madeline?"

"Hug me."

Slowly, he stood, but stayed behind her. He wrapped one arm across her chest with one hand cupping her breast while the other continued to search and move deep inside her warm opening. "Is this good?"

"Oh, yes." Madeline leaned her head back and turned to nuzzle his neck. "You smell like early morning sunshine."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Uh-huh. Hmm..."

"And you smell like morning dew and fresh flowers."

Madeline moved her hips.

"Good, rub your clit against my fingers." He clamped his teeth lightly on her shoulder and closed his eyes. Madeline felt good against his chest, her ass rubbing against his engorged dick.

He continued with his foreplay until Madeline cried when she reached her orgasm. For a moment, they stood there and watched the sun change its colors to deep red.

"That was yummy."

He walked around to face her. She looked languid and sleepy he had to laugh. "Are you falling asleep on me?"

"No...maybe. I'm tired."

"We did a lot of walking and standing today. Why don't I carry you to bed?"

"It's not necessary."

She didn't complain when he picked her up. Her arms wound around his neck as he carried her to his room.

"Not fair. I'm all naked while you're still fully dressed."

"Don't worry. I won't stay in these clothes very long." He placed her in the middle of the bed, pulled the covers down from underneath her and then covered her with it.

"Come lay with me," she said and closed her eyes. Madeline covered her mouth with her hand and yawned.

Poor baby.

Wolf stretched his long form beside Madeline and wrapped his arms around her stomach protectively. He couldn't remember being this close with a woman and feeling nothing but

bottomless peace and satisfaction. With Madeline, all he needed was to hold her, feel her heartbeat, hear her breathe and he was blissfully happy, fully alive. Closing his eyes, he listened to Madeline's even breathing. *I love you, baby.*

* * * *

Madeline hummed while arranging her newly delivered flowers. She couldn't stop. She'd never felt happier in her life. Since her breakup with Edward, there was not even once that she thought of him when she was in Wolf's arms.

Wolf treated her like an icon he worshipped night and day. He made her feel comfortable in and out of her clothes. He even made her think he had true feelings for her.

For the past weeks, she enjoyed sharing his habit of drinking tea after dinner, drinking beer in the afternoon, and long lazy hours of cuddling and making love when her flower shop wasn't busy. The camaraderie, leisurely talks, naps in her shop's backroom, and intimacy in bed, she would miss those things. Life with him, she thought, was something she wouldn't mind having.

She felt her smile waver. Sadly, this life, this relationship was just a pretend one. Wolf was just having fun with her. He would go back to his life of sailing, flirting, partying, once their silly

revenge against Edward was over. After all, he had a reputation to uphold. Drat, maybe he was even anxious now to go back to his routine. Madeline looked at the clock. Her mind started wandering, images of Wolf with his girlfriend and what they were they doing right that moment popped in her head.

All of a sudden, the shop looked lifeless, the flowers devoid of their colors. And it dawned on her, without Wolf, life would be dull. No laughter, spice, and bland. Wolf, for a short period of time quickly took the spot Edward had carelessly abandoned. How did it happen? When did she fall in love with him? Love, yes, this is love. And thinking he'd be gone anytime hurt worse than losing Edward.

So it was possible to break an already broken heart. Shatter and turn it into million pieces. Diana was right. Their planned revenge would bite her back in the butt. And the way she was hurting deep inside, it would take a chunk of her heart, too, when this whole thing was over.

Damn it! All she had wanted was to be spontaneous, to have fun and avoid the gossip and talks about her broken engagement. Where was her sense of judgment? She failed to use her brain again and see the danger of being with Wolf. The same way she failed to see the danger Greenlake had posed to her brother. She should

have listened to Diana.

Upset with herself, she picked up a bunch of Angel's Breath. The tiny white flowers reminded her of the flower the artist had painted on Wolf's cheek. Damn flowers, she shoved the stem in the flower vase together with daisies. The fragile stems broke from her rough handling, but she didn't care. The Leather leaves and Delphinium Bella Donna Blue flowers suffered from the same fate, too.

"Good God! What did the flowers do?"

Madeline rolled her eyes before looking at the man who had cost her a bouquet of flowers. Wolf was standing by the door, looking at the flowers. He looked so fresh and yummy in faded jeans and a white t-shirt. A vanilla ice cream on a hot day. He'd been licked a hundred times today probably. The notion made her frown. Grabbing the Myrtle stems, she forced them into the tight vase.

Wolf cleared his throat, bringing her back to why her poor flowers were broken.

"What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be doing something with your yacht and..."

"And?"

"Nothing." She forced more Leather leaves inside the vase. Jesus! If she wasn't careful, he might suspect she was jealous of whom he had shared his bed today, and of whoever occupied his

mind every day...night. What the hell was wrong with her? Wolf offered a pretend date because she, without shame, offered her body to him. He was only after sex. That's it.

"Are you all right?" Wolf kicked the doorstopper and pulled the door shut. He walked toward her worktable. When he came close, he stopped her hands from applying more damages to her broken flowers.

"I'm fine," she replied with force. Just helplessly in love, that's all. It's nothing. She groaned at her own thought.

"You're upset."

"Sheez! What gave you that idea?"

"Is it because of your wedding?"

"What wedding? No. I haven't thought about it since, a long time ago."

"It had only been three weeks since Edward broke up with you."

Funny, that she should be grieving about Edward and not the end of her pretend relationship with Wolf. "I know, but believe me, I'm over him."

"Really? Then what upsets you?"

My falling in love with you. "The flowers," she snapped.

"I think you need a break. The pollens and fertilizers are getting into your pretty head. How about if we eat at Sahib for lunch? I'm starving."

"I'm not dressed to dine out. I'm covered with gametes."

"So we'd better take your dress off. I don't like any other sexual reproductive cells all over you."

"I can have whatever and whoever I want around me."

"No, you can't." Wolf touched her chin and leaned forward to level his gaze with her.

"Why? I am single and available. This--" she moved her finger back and forth pointing at them both— "is just a pretend. Our relationship is a farce. You know it. You're probably seeing your size-eight girlfriend when you're not here anyway. So don't tell me I can't have a man beside me other than you." She put an emphasis on the last word, which she quickly realized a second too late.

"Are you mad because you're thinking I was with someone else when I'm not here? You're jealous, aren't you?" He waggled his brows.

"Hah! Why would I be? I have no reason to be jealous." She turned her head to dislodge his finger from her chin.

"Okay. I'll blame the fertilizers and pollens on why you're acting like this. If you don't want to dine out, we'll order to-go. We can eat in the back room where you can take your damn dress off. I hate gametes." Wolf went around the counter to stand behind her. "Madeline, I believe we're

having our first lover's quarrel."

"Pretend lovers."

"Still lovers." He wrapped his arms around her middle. "I think staying here is a good idea."

I'm doomed. Over the past weeks, she had become so used to him standing behind her with his arms squeezing her middle gently. Every time he enclosed her in his arms, she felt a strong sense of belonging to someone, of being treasured, and of feeling loved. Why couldn't their relationship be for real? Surely, he cared for her even a tiny bit. But wouldn't it be nice if he woke up one day and realized he loved her?

She would miss him terribly when this whole thing was over. But why wait? Only a masochist would want to continue this kind of punishment. And she wasn't one. She leaned back and fought the urge to cry.

* * * *

The moment he walked in her shop and found her smashing the flowers in the vase, he knew something wasn't right. Fuck, the insane feeling she was tired of pretending to be his girlfriend and of his company worried him. She couldn't be. Whenever they were together, he'd tried so damn hard to keep her happy in his arms. The last thing

he wanted was for her to end their relationship. Maybe he should tell her the truth now. What he truly felt for her and his real intention for asking her to pretend they were going out. She said she was over Edward now, maybe she was ready to take him in place of Edward.

A few weeks ago, to have another taste of heaven in between her legs and bathe in her scent was a constant in his brain. Not anymore. His physical attraction was superseded by his emotional connection. A few hours with her were no longer enough. Every day, he looked forward to standing in the same room with her, hearing her laugh, watching her eat, and even comforting her during one of her emotional outbursts over a silly movie.

The final realization had come to him when he woke up this morning. Without Madeline, his room was devoid of life, color and music. Like a bee on a mission, he quickly showered and came to her shop. He needed to see, feel and touch her. Life was Madeline. But when he found her smashing her flowers, he couldn't help but think he had something to do with it. He hoped to God she wasn't tired of being with him.

"Did I do something wrong?"

He felt her stiffen. "What made you think I'm upset because of you?"

"Please, just tell me."

The bell hanging on the shop's door sounded. Damn it, he didn't want to be interrupted right now. He looked up and saw a massive dog coming in. It was Brandi, Piper and Cooper's dog. If Brandi was here, the two must not be far behind.

"Good afternoon. I thought the shop's open." Cooper walked in, grinning from ear to ear.

"The shop's open." Madeline tried to move, but he refused to let go.

"Thinking about closing it for a few minutes?" Cooper winked at Madeline.

"Not a bad idea," answered Wolf.

"We can come back later," added Cooper, then winced when Piper pinched him on the stomach.

"Madeline, ignore these men. Sometimes they forget their manners."

"Good to see you again, Piper."

Brandi stood on his hind legs and placed both massive paws on the counter.

Madeline reacted by leaning back, her body pressed against Wolf.

"Down, Brandi. Sorry about that. I didn't get a chance to thank you at the party, you disappeared. So we came here to thank you for the beautiful flowers. By the way, I saw the stack of procurement forms you left. I took them all. The guests must have been really busy not to notice them. Anyway, I'll take care of the forms and help

the center get more donations. I heard you were the mastermind behind the dance and auction at the center. You were brilliant."

"Thank you."

"Well, if you're not too busy and not, uhm—" Piper glanced meaningfully at Wolf's arms— "tied up, give me a call. Maybe you can show me how to arrange flowers. Or just hang out, if it's okay with you."

"Sure. I normally hang out with Diana, but you're welcome to join us."

"Okay. And I'll bring Debi, too. How about—"

"She'll be busy for the next few weeks, Piper." Wolf caught Madeline's hand when she tried to pinch him.

"Don't monopolize her, Wolf. She's not at all yours."

Piper's words hit the mark. No, Madeline wasn't his, at least not yet.

* * * *

Emotionally and physically tired, Madeline trudged on the front steps of her duplex. She decided to close the shop two hours later than her usual closing time to clean up. Cleaning always helped her think. And the whole time she swept the floor and scrubbed her counter, she thought of how Wolf's body stiffened at Piper's words. *She's*

not at all yours."

When Cooper and Piper left, they had their lunch in the back room. Wolf quietly ate his food and stared at her as if trying to read inside her mind. He didn't repeat his question about what upset her. Did he suddenly remember whom it was that belonged to him?

Crap! She must be born stupid to make mistakes back-to-back. Falling in love with another man who wanted her only for sex right after splitting up with her fiancé who found her boring and fat, was the stupidest thing she'd ever done. Standing outside her door, she finally made a decision. No more pretending. She would talk to Wolf and break her pretend relationship with him once and for all.

The sweet smell of caramel-scented candles welcomed her as soon as she opened her duplex. Lit votive candles placed in every corner warmed the room up. On the floor was a blanket littered with tiny flowers—Angel's Breath. The sight was so romantic.

"Hello, beautiful." Wolf stood at the far end of her small living room, barefoot. He wore nothing but his faded jeans riding his hips so low the beginning of his hipbone showed. He was twirling a bouquet of Angel's Breath between his fingers.

As soon as their eyes met, the hammering of her heart against her chest stopped. Everything in

the room dissolved all together. At the moment, there was only him, Wolf. "Hello," she answered. Her voice cracked. For some embarrassing reason, she wanted to weep. How was she going to live her life when all of this was over? Good God! It would probably kill her not to see him. Her heart started beating again when Wolf slowly closed their gap. He reached behind her and shut the door.

"For you." He handed her the bouquet.

"Thanks. They're my favorite."

"After seeing you at the center wearing these on your hair, I figured as much. But I didn't know these were called Angel's Breath until the artist at Edmonds festival showed me her list."

"Yeah, you said you had this painted on your face because it reminded you of...someone."

"Someone named Madeline Anne Honeylee."

Madeline's heart skipped a beat. God, she was the reason why he had the flower painted on his cheek? "I thought you were thinking about someone else."

He looked at her with a sheepish look on his face. "It's impossible to do that when I'm with you, Madeline. In fact, I've been thinking about you since the day Diana introduced us."

"Now, you're joking."

Wolf only shook his head no.

"I didn't know."

They were standing too closely. She could smell his fresh scent, his soap. Madeline noticed his hair was still wet. He took a shower. Wolf's hands covered both sides of her face. She closed her eyes and tried to get rid the lump in her throat. Her unshed tears fell fast when Wolf's lips touched her own.

"Please don't cry. My heart breaks when I see you cry."

"I wish you'd stop being wonderful."

Wolf laughed and took her in his arms. "Can't. I'm obsessed."

For how long? "Wolf, I can't do this anymore."

His arms stilled. "What do you mean? Aren't you—I thought you're enjoying this, us."

"Yes. I had fun. We had our fun. Now I'm done."

"I'm not."

"But I don't want to continue this charade. My friends are no longer talking about my broken engagement. They only talk about us and how compatible we look—don't know how they could tell that—and how I made a good decision about leaving Edward. They even told me how they hated him for ruining many marriages by coercing his clients to tell horrible stories about their spouses just to win his divorce case. So we can stop pretending now."

"Good. We can stop our charade now."

"We can?"

"Yes, so we can continue with a real one, Madeline."

"What real one?"

"Ours. Madeline, I want you to be my real girlfriend and more." While holding her hand, he went down on his knees.

"Oh no, Wolf." *Wake up, Madeline, wake up. You're dreaming.* She closed her eyes, thinking when she opened them he'd be gone. But she was wrong. He was still there, looking up at her expectantly. Holy Potato! The candle smoke inhalation must have muddled his brain. Yes, that must be it. Why else would he go down on his one knee? "Wolf, this is not funny. Get up, please." The dancing candlelight reflected in his eyes. He was smiling at her as he dug something from his pocket. He produced a blue box tied with a matching blue ribbon.

"Open it. Please. What's inside only symbolizes my promise, a promise I'll give my love and life to you." Wolf held the box in front of her.

"I can't, Wolf."

"Why?"

"Because I can't promise you back. I'm not someone you hoped to share the secret special spots with that you mentioned before or be in your yacht in the middle of the ocean watching stars at night. I hate water with passion. I hate

sailing, therefore I can't be a part of your life."

Wolf stood. "No problem. I won't sail."

"What? No, you can't. Wolf, sailing is your life.

"If giving up sailing is what it takes to have you, I'll do it."

"Wolf..."

"I know it's too soon for you to love another man again, Madeline. But I can wait. That's why I am offering you a promise ring. I promise that I'll be here when you're ready to accept me. Please, don't end us."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I love you."

Three simple words and yet powerful enough to make a person crumble. Madeline's knees weakened and she kneeled on the floor with him. "Wolf, I think you misunderstood your obsession with me."

"I know what I feel for you. And I hope you feel the same way for me. You never said it, but the way you responded to me gives me hope that you feel something for me, too. And your eyes...you look at me the way no others ever have. Am I wrong to assume you have a tiny bit of a feeling for me?"

Good heavens. Tiny bit? The hopeful look he gave undid her. "Wolf, I never knew what love was until...you."

"You love me?"

"Yes. I love you."

"Thank God."

* * * *

It didn't take him long to divest both their clothes. Right there on the blanket he spread on the carpeted floor, with the candles burning around them, he made love with her. He basked at the sight of her nakedness. She met his thrusts with her eyes half-closed and lips slightly apart.

While holding her hips, he pumped inside her in a slow rhythm. Madeline reached for him. He took her hand and kissed each pad of her fingers. "You're beautiful." He lifted her legs and placed both on his shoulders. The position enabled him to bury his cock to the hilt. Madeline's breasts moved with each thrust he gave her. "Cup your breasts, love, yes, that's it."

She groaned as she did what he asked her to do.

He could see she was pinching her own nipples the way he would.

"Wolf, more."

"Say what you want me to do. Open your mind and heart to me, love." Slowly, he pulled out, lowered her legs and spread them apart. She was so wet. Madeline let go of her breast and tried to reach for him again. He took her hand and sucked her fingers. "Say what you want, Madeline."

"I want your mouth on my pussy, then fuck me fast and hard as I come."

He wanted the same fucking thing.

Lowering her hand, she placed her two fingers on her labia.

"Spread yourself, sweet." He stared at her open and glistening cunt. As if standing on the edge of the roof, he felt the strong gravity pull him down. Down he went and tongued her. She tasted of sex and pre-cum. Up and down he traced her seams before sucking her distended clitoris. Madeline bucked and cried his name. He didn't stop. This was what she wanted. To be orally stimulated. Her weakness. Using his thumb, he reached for her G-spot and pressed hard. He was so stone hard and in the brink of coming himself. But he waited. Feeling her contract whenever she reached her orgasm gave him satisfaction that was foreign to him before. He continued to tongue her while the pad of his finger teased the spot where he knew it would help give her multiple orgasms.

Madeline moaned and moved her hips to rub her clit on his tongue.

He replaced his thumb with three fingers that easily glided in and out of her pussy. Back to her clitoris, his mouth gave it a hard pull.

"Yes!" she cupped his head, pressing his mouth even harder on her vagina as she came.

Wolf cupped her butt to lift her hips. He

positioned himself in between her legs and thrust. "I love you." With strong primal need, he mated with her. He moved with deep and hard thrusts at first until he couldn't control the urge to move as fast as his heartbeat. With one final stroke, he released his seed. Spent, he collapsed on top of her. When his arms started to shake from holding his weight, he rolled them both to their sides and spooned with her. He fell asleep, his hand on her breast.

Chapter Seven

Madeline opened her eyes and stared straight up on the ceiling. She stretched her legs and winced from the soreness coming from her hips and thighs. Last night until the early morning, Wolf made love with her. Yum, what a glorious night. She lifted her hand to look at the ring Wolf finally placed on her finger after they made love. The tiny diamonds in a circular form glittered.

"That's one expensive ring."

Madeline squeaked, then sat straight up. Who the heck? "Edward? What are you...how did you get in?"

"I used to live here, Maddie." He dangled a brass key in front of him. "Some of my things are still here."

She pulled the sheet to cover herself when she noticed where Edward's eyes were trained. Madeline was glad he remained seated on the chair. Still, the distance between them wasn't big enough. She felt uncomfortable the way Edward

stared at her breasts. Weird, it wasn't like he was a total stranger ogling her. She couldn't believe she thought of herself in love with him. He was a perfectionist, too pretty, and a vegetarian. What had she seen in him? And what did he see in her to begin with? "Get your things and get out."

"Tsk, ts. What happened to my fiancée?"

"I'm not your fiancée anymore."

"Pardon me. My mistake. I just remembered I was dumped, by you. Yeah, everyone was saying that, right."

The sarcasm in his voice was heavy enough for Madeline to shrink back. Wolf was right. The news would affect Edward. And as arrogant as he was, he wouldn't just stand and listen to the gossip, especially if it involved his ego. "I'm not going to apologize for spreading the gossip. You hurt me by —"

"Darling, who told you I'm blaming you for the gossip. I know you, you're not capable of retaliating by coming up with a clever idea of turning the whole breakup thing around. Arranging flowers is what you're good at, not tactics or clever ways to get even."

His insult hit her like a barbwire. "Please leave my room, I need to get dressed." She started to scoot off the bed, pulling the sheet with her to cover her body.

"I've seen every part of you, Maddie. Before

Wolf."

Her head snapped back at Edward.

"Come on. Don't give me that sharp look. You're a hand-me-down, Maddie. And a man like Wolf would not go out with you without his own hidden agenda."

"What are you talking about? You don't know him."

"And you do? Poor Maddie. I've known Wolf since our college days. *I* know him. Do you know why he *moved-in* when I left?"

"You said he has a thing for me. That's why you never wanted me to go near him."

"Of course he has a thing for you. He has a thing for anything that moves. He's a womanizer. But do you want to know the truth? He used you to get even with me."

"You're right. He wanted to get even with you for making me cry."

"Jesus! You are so freaking naïve. He doesn't care whether I hurt you or not. He used your vulnerability to get back at me because he caught me and his fiancée, Leila. In bed. Together. Naked."

"You're lying."

"You see, Wolf is an arrogant man who thought highly of himself because he's Wolf O'Connor. He couldn't accept the fact Leila had found another man better than him. Instead, he accused me of

stealing her. Wolf never forgave me. Now, he finally found the way to get even with me, through you."

"That's not true." God, he was lying. Edward was a liar and an ass. She shouldn't believe him.

"Sorry, Maddie. You obviously fell under his spell. A rich philanderer like him—brother of your friend or not—wouldn't care for the likes of you. You're just a flower shop owner delivering and arranging flowers. He can have the most beautiful women in his bedroom so why would he waste his time with you. Think about it, Madeline. What do you think he'd gain for having you?"

"Maybe for the same reason why you asked me to marry you."

"I proposed to you because, believe it or not, I cared and fell in love with your kind nature. You like to help people and always put others before you. Sensitive, that's what you are. We have the same background. Orphan, needy. We needed each other. And despite what you'd done, I'm still here for you. I came to warn you about Wolf. I still care, you know."

"You stopped caring when you wrote the letter." No. He wasn't supposed to come and say he still cared. He was supposed to be angry because the town had been talking about him. A confrontation was more apt in this situation, not him warning her about Wolf.

"Breaking up with someone doesn't mean the person doesn't care at all."

"Then why did you break off our engagement?"

"Because I realized we don't match. I'm sure, now that we have lived apart, you realize it, too. I was a cad not to say it to your face, but I didn't want to see your pain."

"You want me to believe that?"

"Believe what you want, Maddie. But I tell you, Wolf is just using you for his own personal gain. Girl, I hope you didn't fall for him, yet."

Too late. I am deeply and stupidly in love. "Thanks for your warning, Edward. Now, could you please leave me alone?" The room began to spin. Her stomach heaved. She felt sick.

"Dump him, Maddie. Wolf is an asshole for using you and shouldn't win."

Win. It all came down to that. Like a game, they both wanted to win while she was caught in the middle like a pawn. "Leave me, Edward, and do me a favor. Don't come back."

"But, Maddie. Are you going to let him use you like this?"

"Just leave please."

Edward walked to her and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry for hurting you. Anytime you need me, just call."

Madeline didn't move until she heard her door

clicked shut. She laid back down and curled into a fetus position, wishing what she'd heard was nothing but a lie, a dream. Weeks ago, when her heart was torn into pieces, she cried until her eyelids were puffed. This time she didn't. She couldn't. The pain was there, in her heart, mind, and soul, but she couldn't feel a thing. Her eyes caught her framed family portrait. She was smiling with her arms wrapped around her brother's shoulder. Her parents standing behind them looked happy, full of life. Life that was taken away because of her stupidity. Madeline wondered if her life would have been different if they were here. Edward could be sporting a broken nose now, and Wolf...Wolf would never have been part of her life.

He knew she was mad and vulnerable when she asked Wolf to make love with her, still he took advantage. But no matter which angle she looked at it, no one was to blame for her second downfall but her. Yes, he used her. But she had no one to blame but herself. She seduced the guy for God's sake, giving him wrong ideas about her. The yacht, the sweat producing sex they had in her flower shop and where ever they found a place to make love was just that, plain sex. Jesus, she was nothing but a common slut. And everything that happened was her fault. Just like her habit of ignoring signs, she ignored the warnings about

Wolf. Only she got lucky this time because no one died for her inanity except her hope to find happiness and her heart. This must be a curse, a bad karma for her mistakes.

It was all her fault. And only she could make everything right. Madeline stared at her ring as tears rolled down her temple. When she found the energy to get up, she took the phone book and flipped through the pages until she found what she was looking for. She spun her ring around her finger while contemplating her decision. Nodding to herself, she dialed the number.

* * * *

Wolf drove down to the fuel dock in Edmonds Marina and parked his Targa 911 on the only remaining spot served for an employee of the month. Fuck the sign. He was only half a block away from the Anthony's restaurant. Madeline had mentioned she used to hang out at the beach by the restaurant with her brother. The beach was the last place he hadn't checked. He hope Madeline was here, otherwise, he'd put an ad on the paper for a missing woman and a big reward to whoever found her first.

With a long hurried stride, he took the direction toward the restaurant. Damn, why couldn't the city build parking spots close to the beach? In

between walking and jogging, he made it to the beach. He exhaled deeply when he spotted Madeline sitting on a blanket. She was facing the beach, toward the horizon with the sun shining down on her face. Too bad he didn't have a camera to capture her.

Other than the two young boys throwing rocks on the water and three frogmen suited with diving gears, Madeline was the only one sitting there. He looked around. The rocks and seaweeds explained why no families or sunbathers were around. But for divers, this area was the best. Twenty-seven acres of underwater park lay beneath the water.

He watched the flippered divers walk toward the water before approaching Madeline. She must have sensed his presence because she turned her head to look at him. She didn't smile. Just stared at him for a minute before looking straight back at the horizon again.

Wolf gripped the handle of the bag he was carrying. On his way here, he stopped by at the local bookstore to buy Madeline some books. His intention wasn't to buy her back. After all, what were books compared to the friendship 6.0 carat round brilliant diamond ring showcased by a single row of diamonds now sitting inside his pocket that he had given her last night.

Damn it. It was only last night when they had shared a wonderful time. This morning, he left her

sleeping in her room. He didn't bother waking her up because he knew he wouldn't be gone long. Also, they were up all night and she needed her sleep. He left her side to see her friends and people involved in her canceled wedding plans. All he wanted was to smooth out everything for her if they were to start their own beginning. He wanted a clean slate for her.

But when he came back, she wasn't home. Through her neighbor sweeping the porch, he learned Edward came shortly after he left. At first, he thought she was just upset because of Edward's reappearance and didn't feel enthused working in her shop. But then FedEx delivered a small box this morning. With it came a short note from Madeline. A freaking thank-you note for the great time they had had shared. No way, he'd accept her thank you. The ring doesn't belong in his pocket. Today it would find its way back on her finger. He'd make sure of that. Even if it means staying here at the beach all night. "Hi, do you have room for me?"

Madeline scooted on the end corner of the blanket. "How did you find me?"

He sat down, placing the bag in between them. "I always pay attention to everything you say, love, that's how."

"I'm not here for a picnic so I have nothing to share with you."

Oh, yeah. Your damn heart. "It's okay." Since he'd learned about Edward's visit today, he couldn't eat anything anyway. His insides were as unsteady as a ship on a stormy day. "I brought you something. Here."

* * * *

Madeline stared at the red bag. He bought her books. What was he trying to do, impress her with his money? He bid forty-five thousand at the center's auction and gave her a friendship ring that costs more than her sales for a year. This morning, Nerissa called to tell her he had paid everyone and everything she owed for her wedding, and now he brought her a bag of books. Why? He already succeeded in hurting Edward's ego. What else did he want from her?

She looked at Wolf. His elbows were leaning against his spread knees. He was watching the divers with an intent look on his face. Some people said he had stepped on people's toes to reach the spot where he was at right now. But she refused to believe them. She couldn't find it in her heart to think of him as a heartless blackguard. In fact, even after she learned he had only used her to get back at Edward, she didn't hate him at all. What she felt was sadness that continued to wrap around her soul, gripping and painful. She looked

at the bag Wolf placed in between them and pushed it toward him. "I'm not on the auction block anymore." Wolf's facial expression turned feral. His nostrils flared and he bared his teeth. This was the side of him she'd never seen before.

"I'm not trying to buy you." His voice was clipped.

"Why not? You purchased me before for an absurd amount of money."

"I have reasons other than helping the center keep its programs."

"So I've heard from Edward."

"Whatever you heard was wrong, believe me."

Believe me. I believed you all right. "Not this time."

"What?"

"I can't believe you this time, Wolf."

"How can you not believe me when you haven't heard my side?"

"It's not necessary."

"God damn it! Of course, it is. Whatever Edward told you was a lie."

"Are you denying you don't hate him for sleeping with your fiancée? What was her name? Leila?"

Wolf hung his head and combed his hair, using all of his fingers. "Yes, I hate him for that."

"And you hate him so much you wanted revenge."

"Yes."

His admission felt like a blow in her middle, knocking the wind out of her. The pain was unbearable and she thought she'd die from it. *I'm not going to cry, I'm not going to cry, please...* She pinched her nose, but failed to stop the tears from coming. Even when she covered her mouth with both of her hands, a loud sob still escaped.

Wolf reached for her.

She dodged his touch. She quickly stood to keep their distance. "So Edward wasn't lying. You used me. You asked me to pretend to be your girlfriend, to twist the story about our breakup because you wanted to get even with him by hurting his ego. And it was all because he slept with your fiancée. Not because he made me cry. You lied."

He was on his feet so fast Madeline didn't get a chance to react when he grabbed her hands. "I did not lie. It's true I hated Edward's guts and wanted his blood for ruining my relationship with Leila, but it wasn't the reason why I came up with the idea of going out with you. I wanted to be with you, Madeline."

"You wanted to be with me so you gave me a ring. So it was your dick talking then. When you said you love me—"

"God damn it! I want you because I love you. My fucking dick did not tell me to give you a ring,

it was my heart. Did you know I went nuts when Diana told me you're marrying Edward? I was that deeply infatuated with you. But I didn't do anything. You were Edward's fiancée. Despite my strong infatuation with you, I tried hard to ignore it. I wasn't going to be like him, stealing someone's girlfriend because his dick dictates his mind. What I feel for you isn't fabricated. Madeline, that night in my yacht was the best night of my life. I actually made love with someone I truly love and care for.

"When I left and stayed gone for a week, I thought I'd forget our night. But I didn't. And when I saw you again ladling punch and being auctioned, I knew then I wasn't just infatuated with you, I'm in love. I wanted to be with you again. And seeing those men bid on you, I thought I should do something, stick beside you and never let anyone court you. That's when I proposed the idea of going out, a pretend one, just so I could be closer to you."

"You really love me? Why didn't you just say it instead of pretending you want to go out with me?"

"I thought the timing was wrong. You just broke up with Edward and I assumed your heart still belonged to him, that you weren't ready to enter into another relationship. Damn it! I should have told you my intention from the beginning."

Wolf closed their gap in two quick strides. He cupped her cheeks with both hands. "Madeline, I love everything about you. Your hair, brown eyes, and stubborn chin. I love it that you're kind, smart, and free to speak your mind. I adore you."

"And you don't love Leila or Maxine or anyone."

"No one but you. You're my only obsession." He hugged her tight, squeezing her middle, molding her against him.

Two black heads and waving arms caught her attention. She thought the kids were just playing. "Wolf, I'm so..." When the wind picked up, she heard their voices. "Oh my God."

"What?"

"Look! Those kids. I think they're drowning."

"Jesus!" Wolf took off his shirt and shoes. "Madeline, stay here. Call 911. Quick." He ran toward the water and when the water was up to his thighs, dove.

Madeline flipped the phone and dialed the number, her eyes were trained on Wolf's receding form. The phone rang twice before the operator picked up. With her voice shaking, she explained the situation.

Ten minutes. The operator told her it would take ten minutes before help arrived. She looked around and screamed for help, but no one was present.

She could still see Wolf swimming. How long had it been? The operator was still talking to her, but the blood pounding in her ears was so loud she couldn't hear the voice on the other line. Again, she screamed for help, turning around in circles to see if someone was coming from behind her. No one was around. And then she spotted a red canoe. Her flip-flops sunk in the sand, rocks dug in her sole, but she kept running to where the canoe was sitting. She could use it to help Wolf and the boys.

The thought of going in the water made her dig her toes in the sand. The dreadful feeling of being in the water was what made her leave her brother alone in the water and run back for help to get her parents. She wouldn't make the same mistake again.

With all her might, she pushed the canoe until it started swaying when the bottom touched the water. The water was up to her knees when she decided to climb in. The canoe was unsteady, but she managed to stay inside. She found a paddle by her feet, buried underneath the orange vests. Quickly, she took the paddle and started rowing.

* * * *

He was closer to them now. The boy's quivering voices were clearer now. They were cold. Of

course, in this part of the Sound, the water was colder. How long the kids had been screaming and wading, he had no idea. What he knew was they must get out of the water as soon as possible.

Up close, he recognized the boys. They were the two throwing rocks in the water. He could tell they were both scared and tired of treading water. Their teeth were chattering and they were sporting purple lips.

"I got you now. Can you both swim back to shore?" he asked, grabbing both boys by the scruff of their shirts.

"Nnnoo, my brother's cramping. And I can barely move my legs," answered one of the bigger boys.

"What's your name?"

"I'm Will, this is my brother, Watt."

"How did you get too far away from the shore? Didn't you see the buoys'?"

"Yes, but—ferry boat passed—wake too big—rode it," Watt said in between his chatters.

"And then pushed you back away." He knew the boys were having a hard time talking, but he needed to divert their minds away from their current situation. He started swimming backward, pulling the boys with him. "Can you both float on your backs?"

"Try, Watt. Come on," Will said.

Wolf watched. Immediately, both started

sinking. They were too terrified and tired to keep their minds to task. "Damn. Okay, both of you just relax. Help is coming." He grabbed both boys by the shirt scruff and started pulling them back. It wasn't easy. Both boys started clinging to him like octopuses gripping him tight. They would all drown if help didn't arrive soon. He turned his head to look at the shore for sirens or ambulance. No blaring sounds or people running for help. What he saw was Madeline. At first, he couldn't believe it. She was rowing a canoe and going in circles. When she managed to point the canoe to where they were, she started zigzagging. At one point, she started going farther away from them. It would have been funny to watch if the situation wasn't so serious. Later he'd tease her about how funny she looked. "Hang in there, boys. Help is coming."

The two boys found their second wind. They started moving and splashing like fishes in an empty fishbowl.

"Wolf!" Madeline called. "I'm coming."

"Over here, Madeline!" The canoe once again started going in circles. This must be her first time rowing. Finally, Madeline made it to where he and the boys were treading. Up closer, he noticed something on Madeline's face. Terror. She told him she was terrified of water, but she didn't mention why. He guessed Madeline hated water

because she couldn't swim.

With each row she made, his respect, admiration, and pride grew bigger and bigger. She hated water especially if it reached above her knee, but here she was rowing a canoe, coming to save them. Her eyes were wide as a saucer and she looked as pale as the boys he was keeping above water.

"Wolf. Hang on. Almost there."

"Boys. Keep treading water. Madeline, give me your paddle."

Madeline pointed the paddle toward him.

"Now pull."

As soon as the canoe was within his reach, he helped the boys hold onto the side. "Careful. No need to panic." He made sure the boys were both hanging onto the side of the canoe before loosening his hold on them. They were cold, but at least they wouldn't drown now.

"I found life vests. Here." Madeline produced the life vests and shoved them one at a time on the boys' head.

"I'm cold. I want in." Will started climbing.

Madeline squeaked her mousy squeak when the canoe started tipping to its side. "Wolf, stop him. It's going to topple. No!" Madeline fell into the dark water headfirst.

His hand shot out to grab her, but his hands were too numb to feel his grip. "Madeline, grab

my hand." She was only a foot away from him.

"Wolf! Help!"

Her arms were flailing, smacking the water like one would who didn't know how to swim. Water splashed everywhere and he could barely see her. He swam toward her and grabbed her hand. She flung her arms around and whacked him on the face. "Madeline, relax." He lost his hold on her. Using his numb hand, he wiped the water off his face and when he opened his eyes, she was gone. Fear like no other paralyzed him. He couldn't move, think, or speak.

"She can't swim!" The boys yell jarred his senses.

No. God, no. He wouldn't lose her. Not now. Not never. He took a deep breath, closed his mouth and let himself go down. Through the dark water, he spotted her. Her eyes were wide and she clawed the water with her hands.

Madeline opened her mouth. Her hand reached up.

Wolf kicked his heavy legs. His jeans made it impossible to swim faster. With every kick he made, Madeline seemed to go down quicker. His lungs were ready to burst, but he would not leave her. If she went down, he would follow.

With all his might, he kicked real hard. His eyes were burning, but he kept his gaze on Madeline. He was about to grab her hand when she was

snatched away from him. Even with the murky water, he could see two dark figures moving around, but couldn't tell what they were. His mind screamed no. Fear tore him into bits. He kicked again, but lack of oxygen made him feel lightheaded. Just as he felt his consciousness about to slip away from him, a frogman appeared in front of him and shoved the mouthpiece on his mouth.

The diver pointed his finger up before he yanked his arm and together they went up to the water's surface. Good God, they were frogmen. Madeline was saved by the frogmen.

Wolf found himself surrounded by boats. The coastguard was there and at least two helicopters were flying above them. The kids were gone. He suspected they were already in the coastguard's boat. Someone helped him get in one of the rubber boats and then they took off. The shoreline was full of onlookers and at least two medic trucks, one fire truck, ambulance, and who knows how many police cars. "Where is she?" he tapped the coastguard on the shoulder.

"She's already taken to the shore. The kids are safe. They told us what happened. They're lucky your lady was around to save them."

My lady. "Is Madeline okay?" When this was all over, he would find the boys. They put not only their own lives in danger, but also Madeline's. The

brats must face some kind of punishments for their carelessness.

"She lost consciousness, but I do believe she'll be fine. By the way, you're Captain O'Connor, right?"

"Yes," he answered numbly. Now that his lungs were free to take in air, he realized the severity of the situation they had been in. He nearly lost Madeline.

"My wife and I were at the senior's auction. Mary, my wife, thought what you'd done was so romantic, bidding so high to win Ms. Honeylee."

"I just did what most men wanted to do that night, win her."

"But Mary said you did it for love. Women, they're so perceptive when it comes to romance. Well, here we are. Glad to meet you, Captain. And take care of your Ms. Honeylee. She's one of a kind. To save strangers the way she did, she got to have a heart of gold."

A heart Wolf was glad to know was still beating.

* * * *

Madeline opened her eyes. Her head hurt as if someone had been pushing hard on it. She tried to move, but her whole body hurt, too, and the blanket on top of her must have weighed like a

ton. But if she was in pain, then she must be alive.

She recalled seeing Wolf trying to reach for her and a frogman behind him. He must have survived, too. Well, he'd better. Because there were so many things she wanted to tell him, so many days she wanted to share making babies with him. So many...

Her nose begun to sting, but she didn't pinch it. What a fool she had been. Wolf risked his life saving the boys and her. The fear in his eyes, the unspoken words she sent him while he struggled to save her was enough to show her how much he loved her. Why didn't she see it before? She shouldn't have believed Edward. She must find Wolf and apologize for accusing him of using her. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

She tried to lift her hand to remove the blanket on top of her, but found her fingers were laced with someone else's. She stared at the long fingers she'd recognize anytime. Her gaze move up to his wrist, then arms and all the way to the most beautiful man she was so glad to see, Wolf. Covered with a thick, red blanket, he was leaning against the side of the medic car, sleeping. He looked wonderful. God, she loved him so much.

* * * *

Wolf felt her stir. He opened his eyes and stared at

Madeline. Overwhelming feelings of joy rooted him to where he sat. He didn't move or lift his head. He just stared. After what they'd been through, after what he'd seen—Madeline trying to reach him, unable to breathe, fear in her eyes—he couldn't believe she was still here, in the same plane with him. Alive.

Strong emotion caused his throat to constrict. And then he couldn't bottle it up anymore. In one swift move, he pushed himself off the side of the car, hugged Madeline with all of his strength and let his feelings flow. He cried until he couldn't anymore. "I thought I lost you. I thought..."

"You didn't. I'm still here to torment you."

He kissed her face, neck, shoulders, and arms. She was warm and covered with the smell of the Sound. As soon as she started feeling better, he would take her home and bathe her in flower-scented soap. "Madeline, you were so brave. You saved the boys, but you put your life in danger. I could have lost you."

"Glad to hear they're okay. Wolf, I couldn't just wait for help to come. I had to help you and the boys. I made a mistake of turning my back on my brother before. If I didn't, I could have saved him and maybe he'd be here with us."

"You were just a young girl. You did what most kids would do in that situation. But very few people would put their lives in danger just to save

me and two knuckleheads."

"I would do it again if it meant saving you. I love you too much."

"And I love you, too." He reached in his pocket and let out a sigh. The ring was wedged deep in the corner of his pocket. "I have something that belongs to you." He took her hand, kissed each pad of her fingertips before sliding her ring finger inside his mouth. He smiled as Madeline's eyes grew wider. His tongue swirled around before sliding it out.

"You mean your tongue belongs to me?"

"Yeah, and my whole body, soul, and shortcomings, whether you like it or not. But I am talking about this." He took out the ring and put it on the very tip of her wet finger. "Madeline Honeylee, will you be my wife?"

"The ring was in your pocket the whole time?"

"Yes. Marry me."

"You could have lost it."

"I am already on one knee."

"Did you know I had a hard time removing this off my finger? I love this ring."

"I love you."

"What if you lost it? How were you going to retrieve it?"

"Be my wife, Madeline."

Madeline bit her lower lip. "Yes. I will marry you, Captain Wolf O'Connor." She choked on her

sobs as he slid the ring on her finger.

Wolf let out a half-laugh, half-cry before burying his face in between Madeline's breasts. The loud thudding of her heart against his ears was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard. "Sweetheart, I want to take you home now." He began to nuzzle her breasts. They had precious lives to celebrate together and he wanted to do it in the comfort of his own bedroom.

"Yes, please. Take me home."

Chapter Eight

Madeline was glad when the medics gave their thumbs up when Wolf asked if they could leave. But they didn't get a chance to leave right away because Wolf's friends, who heard about what happened, all gathered around them. Diana and Piper fussed over her and stopped only when Cooper reminded them she needed to rest.

Thanks to Colin who used his influence as an FBI agent to get them escorted out of Edmonds, they made it to Wolf's house in short time. She was sleepy and tired when they reached the house. The whole ordeal they had faced took the energy out of her. She felt like crawling in a warm bed and going to sleep, but strangely enough, all she wanted to do right now was to stay awake and savor every second and minute with Wolf.

Wrapped in a thick white blanket Wolf had snatched from the medic van, she stood in the middle of his bedroom, admiring the masculine design of his mahogany headboard, the light blue

sheets that looked newly washed, and four huge pillows covered with matching blue pillowcases propped against the headboard. But the old looking quilted bedspread folded in half intrigued her the most. She had seen it last time she slept in this bed, but didn't pay attention to it until now. The material was worn and the edges were frayed. It didn't quite fit in the bed's ensemble. Madeline walked closer and ran her fingers on the soft quilt.

"Mom gave me the quilt when I turned thirteen. I've been using it since then."

"It's beautiful." She turned to look at Wolf. He showered. His long hair was mussed and needed combing—he looked like a wicked pirate.

Hands in his pockets, Wolf stood beside her and ran his fingers over the quilt. "Mom said it's better to make a huge quilt, twice the size of a king bed, rather than make a regular size one every year."

"Because you grew so fast like a weed."

"Yes. I remember seeing her staying up late making this. Making quilts is her passion. Dad even joked about it many times. He said he's jealous of her needles because she touches them more often than him. But he let her anyway. It makes Mom real happy to see this on my bed whenever she and Dad come over. Mom said I don't have to use it, it's old and frayed. But it's not the thickness or the size of it that made me keep

on sleeping with this over me. "

"It's the comfort. The quilt makes you feel closer to her and feel her love. It brings back all memories." She touched her necklace that once belonged to her brother.

"Yes. I use this quilt for the same reason you wear your brother's necklace. You want to keep him, at least his memory, closer to you. I hope you'll do the same with my ring because, because..." He cleared his throat.

"I love you. I'll keep wearing this ring as we build memories together so when I pass this on to our children, it's not the quality they'll see, but the importance of it. Wolf, you're not the only one obsessed, you know. Will you forgive me for doubting you, for believing Edward?"

Wolf's crushing embrace took all of her pain away. "Sweetheart, you're the best thing that's ever happened to me. There is nothing to forgive. It was my fault. If I was honest in the beginning, you wouldn't have doubted me. But if you leave me, I won't be able to forgive you because I'll die."

"Oh dear, I suppose being melodramatic, corny and exaggerated is part of being a romantic." She tilted her head to the side as he started following the column of her neck.

"Okay, maybe I won't die literally, but I'll be a walking zombie. And my friends will kick me around because they know I won't feel a thing."

"All right, I won't leave you. On one condition."

"Anything, love. Ask anything and you'll have it."

"Teach me how to swim."

* * * *

One piece at a time, he stripped her clothes. Damn, he loved watching her soft skin blush whenever he touched her. Using the back of his hand, he rubbed her nipples. "Are you ready, sweet?"

"Are you asking about swimming or something else?"

He laughed and kissed her forehead. "Swimming, for now."

"Well, I don't know how to swim, but I do know swimmers do wear something called a swimsuit. Do I have to be totally naked to learn how to swim? I'm glad this is an indoor pool." She tried to cover herself, but he stopped her. Madeline looked at the pool the way one would when looking at a cobra, wary.

If he wasn't holding her arms, he bet she'd run back up to their room. "Swimming naked is a lot better than swimming with a skimpy suit on. This way you'll feel the water against your skin."

"And with a swimsuit, I won't feel the water?"

"Tsk, tsk. I can imagine our kids now talking back to me because mommy does."

The slow smile she gave him was nothing compared to a blow in his midsection. For a minute, he held his breath. She was his destiny, his soul, his life. And he loved her. "I won't let anything bad happen to you, Madeline. I swear."

"I know, but...you know, the water looks so deep."

"We'll stay on this shallow side." He guided her down the steps. "See? Here, the water only reaches up to your hips."

"The water is warm, unlike the Puget Sound."

She was right. The pool water was warm and perfect for what he had in mind. They could stay in this pool for hours and she wouldn't be cold. He led her to the side so she could hang on to the gutter.

Madeline aimed her finger at him and then flicked the water.

"Don't be naughty. Now, I want you to close your eyes and feel the water."

"Why? You're not going to leave me here, are you?"

"No. I just want you to be comfortable and get used to the feeling of being in the water. I won't leave you." He watched her eyelids flutter shut. For a moment, he just stared at her face. He smoothed her furrowed brows with his fingers.

Wolf stepped closer until the tips of her breasts brushed against him. "Now, can you feel me?"

Madeline opened her eyes. "What took you so long?"

In one swift move, he captured her mouth and pressed his body against her. He was frantic. All at once, he wanted to touch her, feel her soft skin, and be one with her. Madeline must have felt the same. Her hands snaked inside his swim trunks and cupped his butt.

"Madeline," he smiled against her lips when she tried to lower his trunks. He lifted her breasts and kissed her puckered nipples. Madeline poured water on his head, laughing. The water and her wet skin added a tremendous feeling of eroticism he had a hard time controlling. He quaked with need to mate with her. But he took his time. Slowly, he traced the contour of her round ass and placed his thigh in between her legs.

Madeline started moving her hips.

"You like that, huh?"

"This feels so good."

"I know." He covered her mouth with his and kissed her deeply. "Sweetheart, I'll lift you up. I want you to sit on the edge of the pool."

"Are we still on the swimming lesson or entirely different subject?"

"You'll find out." He lifted and sat her on the

edge. Slowly, he spread her legs apart.

"Wolf."

"You're beautiful." He ran the pad of his thumb on her lips, back and forth before cupping her face with his wet hands. "I love you." And then he kissed her. Madeline opened her mouth for his tongue. God, he loved her.

For years, he thought he perfected the art of making love, but with Madeline, he didn't know what to do with his hands. All at once, he wanted to touch her. He gripped her thighs, then hips, and ran his hands up and down her sides.

"Wolf, stop torturing me."

"Always bossy, are you?"

"I'll be more than bossy if you don't do something."

"Such as?"

"Make love with me."

Honest to God, making love with her was what he had in mind when they were in the medic's van. He teased the sides of her breasts with the tips of his fingers before cupping them. For a full minute, he played with her nipples before he lowered his head to suck on them. Madeline arched, jutting her breasts higher. Lowering his hand, he fondled her vagina without touching her clit. He moved his fingers along her seams and down to her opening. Yes, she was ready and so was he. Using his two fingers, he entered her. She

was pulsating fast.

"Wolf. Oh, Jesus. I'm....ohh..." Madeline leaned back.

"Not yet, sweet." Placing his hands at the back of her knees, he lifted her legs and placed them on his shoulders. He nearly ejaculated at the sight of her glistening pussy.

Madeline raised her hips, whispering his name, "Please, Wolf. Help me come."

"Impatient, wench." While kissing the insides of her thighs, he penetrated her with his two fingers. Still he avoided touching her clitoris. He wanted her passion to build higher.

"Wolf, I can't stand it anymore."

Wolf took pity on her. Using his tongue, he finally touched her clit. Madeline's moan echoed in the room. He used all parts of his tongue in pleasuring her. Over and over, he flicked and suckled her pussy until she screamed his name.

"Oh my."

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he lowered her back in the pool. "Madeline, I want you to look at me." Madeline looked at him with her passion-clouded brown eyes. Her eyes blinked in a way a drunk would, slowly. He leaned her against the side of the pool, lifted one of her legs and hooked it around his hip. "From this day forward, you are mine." And then he entered her. Madeline gasped while he hissed from the intense

pleasure their union brought him. The sensuous roll of water against his skin and the velvety softness of her vaginal wall made it difficult to hold his orgasm.

Holding tight onto her butt, he pulled out a bit and slowly pushed in. He made a couple long deep thrusts until he couldn't take it anymore. He ground his hips and spilled his seed.

Madeline swiped his hair back and tucked it behind his ears. "Wow, I should have known swimming lessons could be this wicked. When can we do it again?" she yawned.

Wolf kissed her forehead, nose and lips. "Anytime, sweet. But first, you need rest."

"Will you come lay with me?"

"Of course. We'll dream together if you want."

Madeline laughed. "Such a romantic for a wicked Wolf. I on the other hand, am the sentimental one. What do you think will happen to our kids?"

"They'll be emotionally wrecked, but beautiful like their mommy." He hugged her tight and closed his eyes. Mommy. Wife. Mine. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Madeline yawned again.

"We really have to put you to bed. It's been a long and challenging day for you."

"Okay. By the way, what happened to the books you bought for me?"

"They're in our bedroom. I'll read them to you

if you want."

"What did you buy?"

"Let me see. I bought *Guess How Much I love You* by Sam McBratney, and *Sonnets From the Portuguese*, by —"

"Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Oh my God. I love her poems."

"Me, too. Mom and Dad used to recite her famous poem to each other. I remembered parts of it. How does it go? Oh, yeah, *How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach, when feeling out of sight. For the ends of Being and ideal Grace. I love thee to the level of everyday's most quiet need, by sun and candle-light...* I love you, Madeline."

"And I you."

About the Author

Tierney O'Malley graduated from PATTS College of Aeronautics and worked for an airline company. She also worked for a non-governmental organization dedicated to the conservation of natural resources. She resides in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, their two daughters and a golden retriever.