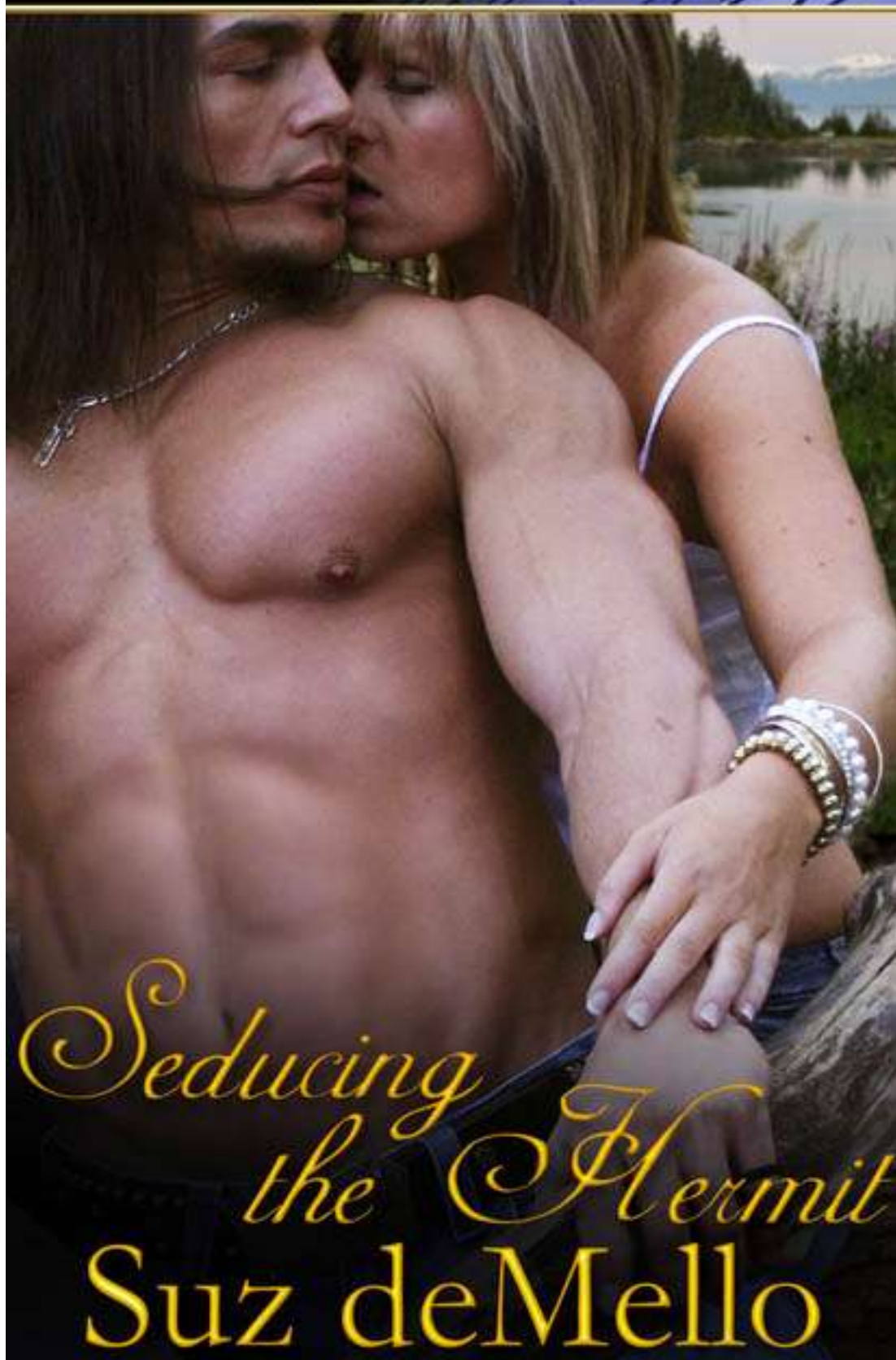


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Seducing the Hermit

Suz deMello

Deejay Valerie Percy rejects the phony life she's led in L.A. and travels to remote Takinsha Island, Alaska, determined to start over. She's looking for a fuck buddy, an accessory she considers more important than mascara. She wants a warm, outgoing man to laugh with her, hang out with her and shag her silly. She doesn't think she'll encounter any difficulty in Alaska, where the odds of men to women are twenty to one. But as the locals say, the odds are good, but the goods are...odd.

Valerie falls for Fisher Chugatt, a loner who doesn't do relationships. But Cupid has other plans for this couple, and so does Valerie. She doesn't waste any time seducing Fisher. Sex in the shower, hummers on the couch and a spectacular encounter beneath the northern lights seal the deal in Valerie's mind. Having fallen in love, she wants it all—home, husband, babies. But shadows from his past may prevent Fisher from committing to anyone...Valerie included.

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Seducing the Hermit

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Chapter One

flamboyant, flam-boy-ant: (adj): vivid, bright

Fisher Chugatt eyed the woman on the ferry approaching Takinsha Island and realized that she embodied his most recent word of the day.

Though he'd spent most of his life on the remote Alaskan island, his brief foray into the world convinced him that the education he'd received in Takinsha's small high school had been inadequate. Thus the words of the day. Every morning, Fisher worked on *The New York Times* crossword puzzle, which always yielded something new to learn.

Ms. Flamboyant wore ankle-length, zebra-print jeans that revealed fuchsia socks with fake fur trim. Her short, thin-soled boots would be useless against the fearsome Alaska winter. Her more sensible gear included a fuchsia and black parka, fuchsia gloves and a matching knitted hat. She tugged off her hat by its cutesy little pom-pom, revealing shoulder-length blonde hair that whipped in the wind.

Yes, Ms. Flamboyant was definitely a babe. A hot babe.

She shoved the hat into her pocket then stripped off her gloves, exposing ridiculously long, fuchsia-painted nails. Fisher chuckled to himself. They wouldn't last.

No wedding ring. His pulse quickened.

Was flamboyant related to flambé? This woman was definitely hot, scorching hot, and Fisher wouldn't mind a little Female Flambé occasionally warming him up through the long Alaska winter.

Stop, he told himself. Chances were this girl wasn't Valerie Percy, the woman he'd come to meet. The new station manager and disk jockey was most likely a hardened Hollywood type, not this slender, wide-eyed blonde. This female was probably just another day-tripping tourist, here to see the orcas, eagles and bears.

Too bad. He raised his gaze to the woman's eyes and grinned.

Valerie Percy smiled at the tall, dark hunk standing on the boat docked by the Takinsha Island pier. He leaped from his boat to the surface of the wharf, agile as a sleek, sable otter. The man must have antifreeze in his veins since he wore only khaki shorts and a faded black T-shirt in the cool Alaska summer. His skimpy clothes showed off one hell of a body, golden and muscular.

Valerie shivered inside her sweater and parka. A southern California girl, born and bred, she could tolerate heat rocketing into the nineties or even triple digits in the summertime. She'd learned that in this part of Alaska, a temperature of seventy degrees Fahrenheit was unusually warm. She bet it was only in the sixties today, despite the August sunshine.

She shivered again then remembered, *You chose this, didn't you? You wanted a change.* When her company RadioWorks USA had acquired Takinsha Island's only station, they'd offered her big bucks to move from L.A. to manage the place since the previous owner was nearing retirement and unwilling to stay on for much longer. Bored and restless, she'd jumped at the chance.

The ferry bumped against the dock, and she went below to get into her faithful VW Bug and drive it off the boat. Packed with her belongings, Old Faithful had somehow crawled from Los Angeles all the way to Bellingham, Washington, where Valerie had boarded the *Alaska Marine Highway*, the ferry system to Takinsha.

She crammed herself into the small car, crowded with boxes and bags. Digging the key out of her purse, she started O.F. and slowly drove out, rolling and clattering over the ferry's metal bib.

When she emerged into the thin sunshine illuminating the dock, a box slipped from the top of the stack in the front seat. It fell, jamming the brake. "Shit!" She pumped furiously at the pedal, but O.F. kept rolling along the crowded dock.

Dammit, she couldn't stop her car. Images flashed by her panicked eyes. Tourists jumping out of her way, cameras swinging like misshapen pendulums. Fishermen swearing as they dodged O.F. The crunch of crab pots and assorted other gear she couldn't identify, not when it was being crushed beneath Old Faithful's tires.

The tall, dark hottie she'd seen from the ferry turned, his eyes widening. Just before the Bug rolled into him, he leaped onto the hood of her car, shouting, "Jesus fucking Christ!"

Scrabbling for a grip, he grabbed a wiper. It broke off in his hand. Swatches of angry red flagged the hunk's furious face. He spread his hands on the window, plastering himself along it as best he could, bending his knees onto the hood so he wouldn't lose a leg.

Old Faithful bumped into the side of a battered red pickup.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Screeching with dismay, Valerie dug her hand between two boxes to grab the brake below. Something snapped, probably one of her acrylic fingernails. She didn't care. Thankfully, the

car had stopped before it could inflict much more damage to the truck and dock, to say nothing of the hottie.

She slumped back into her seat, panting. Tracks of sticky sweat oozed down her chest under her sweater. Damp pools soaked her armpits. Fumbling in her pocket for a tissue, she wiped her forehead with a shaky hand.

Hearing a tap, she jerked up her head. A tanned, impassive face waited outside the driver's side of the Bug. The hunk appeared to have calmed from his previous fear and fury, so Valerie started to roll down the window. She struggled with the cranky handle, which had stiffened from cold during the week-long ferry trip.

"Hi," the hunk said in a conversational tone of voice. He didn't smile, but his eyes glinted. "You wouldn't happen to have car insurance, would you?"

"Oh my God!" Valerie shoved the door open, whacking his midsection. He fell back with an "Oof". She exploded out of the Bug. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

He rubbed his belly. "I'll live. Tell me—are you always so accident-prone?"

"Oh no." Valerie opened her blue eyes wide, hoping for an earnest expression. "Normally I'm a very good driver."

"Of course." His smile didn't reach his cool, dark gaze. Damn. Her innocent routine hadn't impressed him. He leaned against the side of her car with an easy, masculine grace. "But have you noticed that everyone thinks he or she is a good driver?"

She gaped. Had she just been insulted? "Uh, uh, I guess you're right." She searched her memory. "I can't think of anyone who's ever said he's a bad driver."

"Precisely my point." He scrutinized her car, his slightly narrow, Asiatic eyes lingering first on a scrape in the door and then on the twisted antenna. He walked to the front where he no doubt noticed the dents in the hood.

"They're not my fault," she said defensively. Besides, he had a lot of nerve. His old clunker was hardly an advertisement for its owner's good driving habits.

The hunk tipped his head to one side like a curious raven. His long, black hair, tied neatly at his nape with a leather cord, shone in the sun. "Did I say something?"

"Uh, no. And by the way, I have excellent car insurance. With a good driver discount."

"That's...remarkable." His eyebrows lifted. "Can you reverse a little? I'd like to see how my truck—"

"Oh, of course." Valerie hastily climbed back into Old Faithful and turned the motor back on. O.F. edged back with a jerk and a pop.

This was great, just great. The man was obviously a local. Lacking a wedding ring, he was a prime candidate for the position of fuck buddy, an accessory she considered even more essential than mascara. But he seemed to have formed the opinion she was a goof, and with good reason.

Still, the odds were in her favor. Twenty to one. At least that was what she'd heard from other women on the ferry—so maybe he'd want to hang out with her anyhow.

Valerie brightened as she searched for her insurance information. After scribbling her name and that of her insurance company on an old gum wrapper, she peeked out the window again.

Hot Stuff was bending over, checking out the side of his truck, giving her a view of his nice, tight ass. *Ooh baby.*

When he straightened, she got out of the car to hand him the paper. "By the way, I'm supposed to be meeting someone here. I think the name was..." She frowned in thought. "Fishman or something. Do you know someone named Fish, uh, man?"

This time he gave her a real grin, one that gleamed against his dark golden skin. "Lots of fishermen around here. Maybe we can pin it down to a species. Sure it wasn't Shrimper or even Halibut?"

Was he making fun of her again? "N-no. But it was a fishy name. Um, just for the halibut, can you stop teasing me?"

"But you're so entertaining," he murmured. "I'm Fisher," he said in a clearer tone. "Fisher Chugatt."

Well, hell. Foot-in-mouth disease had struck. She wanted to sink into the pilings of the dock.

"Welcome to Takinsha Island, Ms. Percy." He smirked at her, extending a hand.

His warm, strong grasp made her wonder if the rest of him would feel as fine. Losing her wits momentarily, she managed to say, "Oh, uh, you can call me, umm, Valerie. Won't we be working together?"

"Yep. If you leave the radio station standing," he muttered.

"What?" Had he insulted her again?

"Yes," he said in a louder voice. "I keep the equipment in order. I understand that the new owners sent you. You're the new station manager and will be handling part of the deejay work, right?"

"Right."

"Follow me to the station. I think my truck's drivable. I guess I can get into it using the other door since you stove in this one." He nodded at the driver's side.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry.” Could matters get worse?

“Don’t worry. I can pop it out again.” His keen gaze again swept O.F. “Your car’s probably okay. VWs have the trunk in the front, don’t they?”

“Uh-huh. The engine’s in the back, so it’ll be all right. I don’t care about another ding in the bumper.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you don’t.”

Valerie winced. Had she turned off a total hottie who was also a coworker? What if he told everyone on the little island she was a ditz? She’d have a dimwit reputation before even a single day had passed.

* * * * *

Fisher clambered across the bench seat of his truck to squirm behind the steering wheel. After starting the truck and pulling away, he peered through the rearview mirror to make sure Ms. Flamboyant—Valerie Percy—followed.

Maybe he should rename her Miss Disaster. Or Ms. Hap. Or perhaps Miss Adventure.

He chuckled to himself. She was as lightweight as they came, all sass and flash with no staying power. After the first snowfall, she’d probably flee Takinsha on the next ferry that docked, leaving behind a broken heart or two and the radio station in chaos.

Miss Fit. Though she looked pretty fit—she had a cute little body under all those clothes, he reckoned—she wouldn’t fit in here at all. But that didn’t bother him. He’d get a nice, fat insurance payoff for what she’d done to the truck. Maybe he’d even be able to afford a new pickup.

Whistling through his teeth, he headed at a decorous pace toward the station. He drove around the back of the building and parked in the rutted lot behind. She followed, pulling her Bug into the parking space next to his, close to the back door of the station.

She hadn’t taken Archie Miller’s place, Fisher noted with relief. Archie, K-AKA’s current, cranky owner, didn’t scare Fisher. But life was sure better if staff humored the old boy’s eccentricities.

He glanced at Valerie as she exited the Bug, slamming the door. Should he warn her about Archie’s predilections?

She winked at him then sauntered past to enter the station. Her sweetly rounded butt shimmied back and forth as she strutted. She'd already broken one fingernail.

He grinned and kept his mouth shut.

* * * * *

K-AKA was housed in a two-story cinderblock square, painted a sickly green. Squat and ugly, it sat adjacent to a length of cracked sidewalk at the edge of town.

Valerie walked into the building by the back door, forcing herself to ignore the shabbiness of the place. She'd known what she was getting into when she left Los Angeles. The familiar sounds and smells of a radio station tickled her senses. Burnt coffee and static pushed her into work mode. Her fingers itched to tap buttons, turn dials, work a mic. She loved the subtle communication that grew between a deejay and her audience, and looked forward to creating a fan base in Alaska.

A battered wooden counter divided the small public area in the front from the work space they'd entered. Behind the counter, a sullen-faced receptionist sat at a desk, flipping through a magazine. With long, goth-black hair, matching lipstick and too-white makeup, she couldn't be more than twenty, Valerie guessed.

Banks of radio equipment, including an old reel-to-reel tape player, ran along two walls of the cramped room. She frowned. No station on the planet still used reel-to-reel. Perhaps the old owner had kept it as a memento.

Fisher approached her side, and a sizzle of sexual awareness zipped along her synapses. The tiny hairs at her nape lifted. She didn't want to hit on him too soon, so she asked, "Who's that?" She nodded toward the microphone.

A balding, elderly fellow with a Jersey accent spoke into the mic, his voice rising as he described a barroom brawl and a shooting.

Valerie grabbed Fisher's arm. "Oh my God! Late-breaking news! Should we send out our mobile unit?"

His thin, well-cut lips twitched. "That's the shooting of Dan McGrew."

Damn. Her foot-in-mouth disease again. "I'm so sorry." She touched his bare arm in sympathy. Ooh, rad biceps. "Was he a friend of yours?"

This time, he chuckled. He had a dazzling smile, she thought, wondering why he didn't use it more often. The man at the mic turned and glared at him. Fisher dropped his voice. "*The Shooting of Dan McGrew* is a famous poem of Alaska's frontier. Archie, there, is a fan of Service." He nodded at the older fellow at the mic.

Alaska was a very strange place, she thought, and crinkled her brow. "I also like good service. What does that have to do with—"

"Robert W. Service is the author of the poem," Fisher whispered.

"Oh. Okay." She felt like a fool. Again.

He grinned at her, obviously enjoying her discomfiture, and she tried to smile back. He helped her take off her parka and hung it on a hook near the station door.

Gentlemanly but very confusing, she decided. Enigmatic, sexy Fisher definitely deserved closer inspection.

The old man's voice rose to a crescendo as he recited the poem, gesticulating wildly. His ample paunch, clad in a faded red sweatshirt, pressed against his desk. Then, without any warning, he pulled out a handgun and shot it through the open window.

Valerie screamed and dove for cover underneath the nearest desk, the one belonging to the receptionist. She grabbed the girl's arm. "Get down! Get down!" She tried to haul the receptionist with her.

The girl jerked away. "Christ Almighty, Fisher, control your woman, will you?"

"She's not one of my women," Fisher said mildly. "And don't be rude to the new station manager. The RadioWorks people sent Valerie, here, out."

Hearing the guy at the mic go to a commercial break, Valerie peeked out from under the desk. The gun was no longer in sight, so she could relax a trifle.

The old man punched a button. Without another word, he took his book of poetry, waddled to a door marked *HEAD* and slammed it behind him.

"It's all right." Fisher reached for her hand. "That was a pop gun. Archie always fires it off at the climax of *Dan McGrew*."

Could she look any dumber? Could the day get any worse? With Fisher's help, Valerie crept from her hidey-hole. She gave his hand a quick squeeze as a thank-you before reluctantly releasing his firm grasp. Damn, his hand felt good, reminding her she hadn't gotten laid for a couple of weeks. Just hadn't had the time, what with packing and leaving L.A.

Well, that would change, and soon. Twenty to one. She tried not to salivate at the thought, but it was hard, especially with Fisher's strong, sexy hand holding hers. She tried not to squirm with lust as she stood.

The receptionist gave Valerie a superior smirk and returned to her magazine.

"I'm Valerie Percy." Releasing Fisher's hand, she extended it toward the receptionist, who ignored her.

Fisher flipped the magazine closed. The receptionist glowered, but he appeared unaffected. "This is Nina Exley. She works here half-time, answering the phone, handling the mail and the filing."

Nina picked up a stained coffee mug. "Pleased to meetcha." Her bored expression and voice said that the experience really didn't please her. When she stood, Valerie figured out why. Nina was clearly pregnant, though she didn't resemble a blimp...yet. And she didn't wear a ring.

Young, pregnant and unmarried. Valerie forgave Nina's rudeness. She followed Nina to the coffee pot. "How's the coffee around here?" Valerie asked, making conversation.

"It'll put hair on your chest." Nina flicked a glance at Fisher. "Unless you're Fisher."

Why would Nina know how Fisher's chest looked? Valerie's jealousy flared. Knowing she had no right, she tried to stamp it out. Was he the father of Nina's baby? He treated the younger woman with distant courtesy rather than affection. Maybe they were estranged.

He was still soooooo sexy. Valerie hoped he wasn't shallow or, worse, taken. Staring at Fisher's T-shirt, she wanted to envision the naked chest beneath. Despite a little hole in the region of his heart, she couldn't. Instead, she envisioned sticking a finger in that hole and ripping the shirt right off his chest. That way, she'd get to the bottom of the hair mystery, but for now, she restrained herself. Not in public, she thought regretfully. Rather than embarrass both of them in front of Nina, Valerie simply asked, "Why not?"

"I'm a Tlingit." Fisher pronounced the word "Clink-it". "We're not a hairy tribe."

"Tribe. Are Tlingits Indians?" Valerie asked.

"Yes, you could say that." He poured coffee for them both. "We're an Asiatic people who migrated to Alaska at the end of the last Ice Age."

"Wow. A real...what? Native American. Wow. Where I come from, not many people are real at all, not their hair color, their nails, their breasts or their...anything."

"You're in Alaska now, *cheechako* girl. Get rid of those fake nails. You won't need them. Everything here is the real deal." Fisher handed her a mug of coffee and looked into her eyes.

Ooh baby. A frisson of desire snaked down her spine to coil around her pussy. He had the most amazing eyes, deep and dark like the ocean at night. She fought to recover her poise. “The, uh, only Indians I’ve ever met are the wooden, cigar-store variety.”

He produced only the merest twitch of a smile. “I’ll try to exceed your expectations.”

“But don’t count on it.” Nina laughed. “He’s the original Great Stone Face. He doesn’t get out much, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t need to,” Fisher said coolly.

Her coworkers seemed ready to scrap like junkyard dogs, so Valerie decided to change the subject. She said, “You make a great cup of coffee, Nina. Thanks.” She believed in positive relationships with her coworkers and hoped to bond with the younger woman. But she wasn’t lying. The coffee was just the way she liked her brew—dark and bitter, strong enough to take the rest of the peeling paint off the station’s crumbling cinderblocks.

“You’re welcome.” Nina returned to her desk and her magazine, gracing Valerie with a thin smile.

The elderly man emerged from the restroom. Valerie could hear the toilet flushing before he closed the door behind him. He advanced toward her, hand extended.

Hoping he’d washed, she shot him her most confident smile, along with a firm handshake. “Valerie Percy.”

“I know who you are. I’m Archie Miller. I sold the station to you guys. Hey, that was the Robert Service Hour. You don’t interrupt the Robert Service Hour, see?”

Her mouth dropped open yet again, and her jaw clicked. If she didn’t watch it, she’d get TMJ or sprain her jaw. Could jaws get sprains? She hoped not. She collected her frayed composure and said, “Uh, no, I guess I don’t see.”

“You ever been to Alaska before?” Archie pulled out a pack of Camels and lit up. She grimaced, thinking of the effect the smoke would have on the radio components.

Fisher frowned. “Archie, if I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times—”

“I know, I know.” Archie waved a hand in the air. “Look, I’m an old coot. I got cataracts and a hearing aid. My taste buds don’t work so good. I haven’t had sex in decades. I just wanna have a smoke in peace, see?”

“If you say so,” Fisher grumbled. “I don’t have to like it.”

“Listen up, greenhorn.” Addressing Valerie, Archie blew smoke rings and watched them waft toward the ceiling of the station with an expression of satisfaction. “Here’s the deal.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Like I told your boss in L.A., I’ll be helping you out for a year. Now, I don’t sleep much no more, so I’m on air from four a.m. to noon. When I nap, you work until eight p.m. Then we give ‘em canned music until midnight, and we’re off the air until four, when I start again with the news and weather for the fishermen and bush pilots. Your day off is Sunday when we broadcast Weekend Edition. Any questions?”

“Uh, yeah. What kind of programming do you think I should plan?”

Archie shrugged. “I don’t much care. Take a look around the island, get to know people, do whatever you want. Chugatt, take her around.”

“Me?” Fisher seemed at a loss for words for the first time that Valerie had seen.

“Yeah, you. Anyone else here named Chugatt? Sheesh.” The old man huffed. “I’m surrounded by idiots. What did I do to deserve this? And Valerie here knows from nothing. Am I right?” he asked Valerie.

“Uh, I know how to run a radio station, but I don’t know anything about the kind of programming people here might want.”

“There ya go. Chugatt, make sure she gets to know the island. He’s lived here all his life, see.”

“Except for my stint in the Air Force.” Tension seemed to underlie Fisher’s words. Valerie looked at him, but his calm expression hadn’t changed.

Perhaps she’d imagined something that wasn’t there.

“And while you’re out and about, make sure you sell commercial time,” Archie said.

She blinked.

“Didn’t RadioWorks tell you? Part of your job is sales.” The old man gave her a sly look from under his bushy white brows. “No sales, no salary.”

She gasped.

Both Fisher and Archie guffawed. “Gotcha goin’, didn’t I?” Archie asked her. “Don’t worry about your pay. Your company has you covered. Chugatt, show her upstairs.”

“Upstairs?” She was completely mystified.

“Yeah, you got the apartment above thrown in. It comes with the station manager’s job. Take her up there, Chugatt, I gotta get back to work.”

Fisher held out his hand. “I guess I’m your Takinsha Island tour guide.”

Chapter Two

“What else do you do?” Valerie figured Fisher hadn’t developed his awesome physique tinkering with radio equipment. Heck, the man didn’t have enough body fat to grease an omelet pan.

“A little of this, a little of that.” With an awkward smile, Fisher led her to a narrow staircase next to the restroom then began to climb it. “Steady jobs in Alaska are scarce. I have a pilot’s license, but bush pilots are a dime a dozen.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Small planes outnumber cars around here. This is a big state without many roads.” Now at the landing, he took a key from a nail by the door and unlocked it. He walked into the room, gesturing. “If anything goes wrong, call me. I’m also the station handyman.”

She looked around the studio apartment with a grimace. The worn, cracked linoleum was speckled in particularly ugly shades of avocado and brown. She’d have to strip and replace the peeling wallpaper.

She sneezed then sniffed through rapidly clogging nasal passages, discovering that the brown couch emitted the foul odor of stale cat urine. She peered closer to see the sofa’s bumpy weave obscured by long, feline hairs.

“The previous station manager left when an eagle took her Persian,” he said.

“Well, kitty’s legacy lives on.” She sneezed and scrabbled in her pocket for a tissue.

“You don’t have pets, do you?”

“No, and I can’t keep that couch. I’m allergic to cats.”

“I can get rid of it for you, but what will you sleep on?”

“Oh my God.” She checked but found no bed. She examined the walls, searching for a Murphy, her hopes gradually dying.

“Can I offer you a bed?” His slow, sexy smile could persuade a nun to do a striptease.

Ooh baby! Her heart rate tripled. "Uh, sure."

His knowing grin broadened. "Do you want to borrow a sleeping bag or an air mattress?"

"Umm, the air mattress, I guess. Thanks." She tried to hide her disappointment, deciding that Fisher, who didn't have to be so helpful, seemed to really like her.

When he opened one of the windows, the old sash shrieked in protest. Valerie grimaced, but Fisher ignored it. Picking up a couple of the stinky sofa's cushions, he walked to the window and tossed them out.

She gasped and sneezed. "You can't do that!"

"Why not? It's making you sick."

"What if someone's down below?"

He pointed outside. "Not a soul. Just the bed of my pickup." He grinned at her. "My poor, battered, abused pickup."

"Oh." Her face heated. "I'm really sorry about that. Can I help you with this?" She waved at the sofa.

"You're allergic." He went back to the couch and picked up more pillows. "I don't want you to touch this at all, but I'll need your help with the frame."

"Will it fit through the window?" She eyed the couch then the opening.

"I hope so or we'll have to carry it down the stairs." He tossed out the rest of the cushions.

"You're pretty rough-and-ready people here in Alaska, aren't you?"

"Yeah, we are." He pulled the leather strip from his hair and slipped it into his pocket. "Listen, L.A. Woman, I think you better go back to where you came from."

Now at the kitchen door, Valerie turned. "Trying to get rid of me already?" Damn. She really thought Fisher was one hot dude and that maybe he'd go for her. Now he sounded as if he was trying to get rid of her.

He leaned against the window frame, with its cracked, peeling paint, and crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't know what a girl like you is doing in a place like this. You don't belong here. It's clear you're used to better than flea-infested sofa beds and linoleum older than you are."

She raised her chin defiantly. "I can make do."

"A woman like you shouldn't have to make do." His dark scrutiny traveled her body.

The intensity of his gaze robbed her of her usual poise. Her mind blank, she couldn't think of a clever, flirtatious response.

He continued. "You're feathers and lace, not fur, ice and rawhide. This is Alaska, Ms. Percy, not a shopping spree in the mall."

"I know where I am."

"People die here. Of cold, of exposure...some of loneliness."

"Of loneliness?" For the first time, Valerie was put off. She hadn't come to Alaska to be alone. She liked people, especially men, and didn't plan to be alone. And weren't the odds in her favor?

He shrugged. "Alaska has high rates of alcoholism and suicide, especially in the winter. I call that dying of loneliness."

A shiver prickled the skin on her arms, so she edged closer to Fisher's warmth. She wanted to know more, even though he seemed to be deliberately discouraging. Why? She wasn't about to leave because of a few vague warnings. And if he wasn't interested in a "friends with benefits" arrangement, she was sure someone else on this island would come her way.

"What about you?" she asked.

Fisher scented her perfume, an exotic, spicy fragrance unavailable on the island. He flared his nostrils to inhale more of the rich aroma. She stood barely six inches away, but he wanted her closer.

The realization dismayed him.

When she tilted her head to look him in the face, he realized that she didn't stand much taller than five feet. He towered above her, but she didn't appear intimidated. Instead, she radiated a feminine confidence that excited him.

He wanted to strip off her flamboyant clothes to explore the woman underneath. His awareness of her staggered him, caught him off guard. Sure, he had a girl or two around, but only to satisfy fleeting physical lust. They sought him for brief trysts, knowing he'd never offer more.

For the first time, true need ignited Fisher's blood.

But he held himself back. Females came to him. He never chased. And this one would be no different, he told himself. He'd sensed her interest when she'd arrived on the ferry, felt her electric sizzle across the yards of water separating them.

They'd come together, but he wouldn't press. It would be good, and then she'd be gone, like all the others.

He turned and walked away from her into the tiny, primitive kitchen. "What about me?" He swallowed against his suddenly raw throat. "I don't feel loneliness, if that's what you're asking."

She followed. "Do you live with someone?"

Ah. She did, indeed, want to know. She was interested.

He caught and held her candid blue gaze. "No, I don't. In fact, I live at the other end of this island."

"Why?"

Valerie saw that Fisher's slight smile, again, didn't reach his eyes, which remained quiet and a little melancholy.

He hesitated before he spoke, appearing to choose his words with care. "It has a lot of...charm. Ms. Percy, really, I want to know. What are you doing here?"

She looked around the kitchen, which didn't deserve the label. It consisted of a stained sink set into a grubby Formica counter. A microwave sat on the counter and a small, square fridge was tucked below. "You know why I'm here. RadioWorks sent me."

He eyed her with obvious suspicion. "You're not here because of the odds?"

Her face flamed. She pressed one hand to her burning cheek, silently cursing her thin skin, which showed everything she was thinking. "I didn't come here because of the odds, but I have to admit that they're intriguing."

"Oh Lord!" He rolled his eyes. "I shoulda known. Another *cheechako* girl looking for a husband."

"*Cheechako*. That's the second time you've called me that."

"That's a local lingo for newcomer. People will probably call you that for the next thirty years, if you last that long."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Why the big rush to the altar?"

"There is no big rush to the altar," she snapped. "Right now, I'm dating, and very happy to be single, thank you very much. Eventually, yeah, I want kids. Since when is that a crime?" Her married sister had two daughters, and Valerie had always enjoyed playing with her nieces.

"It's not a crime at all. It's perfectly natural, but..." Again, his gaze swept her from head to toe. "You can't be any older than twenty-eight. I've read about women having babies as late as age fifty."

She tried not to preen, but felt herself glow with pleasure. "I'm thirty-four, and who wants to be a fifty-year-old freak? That's not, umm, perfectly natural, as you might put it. Now that you bring up the subject, I guess that if I have kids, maybe I should have them soon, while I'm young enough to enjoy them." Hmm. Interesting line of reasoning, one she hadn't thought about. Maybe the male-female odds here were a good thing. A very good thing. She could screw around, sample the local talent, then get hitched and have a baby or two.

Or not. Either way would be fine, she figured.

"Listen, *cheechako* girl. The odds may be good, but as the local women say, the goods are odd." He ruffled a dark hand through his long hair, settling it over his nape. "Let me tell you about the guys you're likely to meet."

"O-kay!" Sure, she was interested in men. What was she supposed to be interested in, chimpanzees? Not in this climate.

"The men who live here aren't your average joes. A lot of them are already married, some several times. Plus, we get quite a few survivalists out here. Do you know how to make cheese, smoke moose meat or fix a float plane with duct tape?"

"N-no."

"Well, you're not wife material for a survivalist. And we have a lot of stoners in this state because of the loose marijuana laws. A lot of burned-out vets live in Alaska, victims of post-traumatic stress disorder." His voice had darkened.

"Hmm. Are you saying there are no single, normal males?" If not, dating, let alone mating, would be hell.

"Not a one. You have to be slightly off-kilter to live in a place like Takinsha Island." He grinned at her. "You just might fit in."

"Gee, thanks." What was it about her that drove this man to tease her mercilessly? Hmm. Maybe he was flirting.

"Tell you what. I have to show you around the island anyhow. I'll introduce you to some guys around here. I'm not available for anything long term, but one of them might be right for you."

She wanted to ask *Why aren't you available?* but didn't want to pry. The cool reserve in Fisher's eyes stopped her from invading his privacy.

"Look, don't worry about it," she said. "If I meet someone special, then I do. If not, then not."

He laughed. "Yeah, right, *cheechako* girl."

She ignored that. "But first things first. Let's see the bathroom."

"It's pretty basic, but there's lots of hot water." He opened a door next to the kitchen.

A plastic stall shower, a toilet, a cracked sink. Her college apartment, a tenement at best, was a mansion compared to this dump. Using the spotted mirror, Valerie stared at her dismayed reflection. "Well, I've sure looked better."

He loomed in the doorway. "Yeah, after only an hour in Alaska, you've ruined your manicure."

"I'm not afraid to break a nail or two." Lifting her chin, she met the reflection of his eyes in the mirror.

He winked. "Or ten."

* * * * *

After throwing the old couch out of Valerie Percy's window, Fisher took it to the Tlingit teen clubhouse and dropped it off. The younger kids got a kick out of anything different, even a smelly, used sofa. He returned to the station later in the evening to find the shabby apartment transformed into a warm, fragrant cave.

From the open doorway, Fisher could see that Valerie had unpacked, but he didn't understand how she'd stuffed so much into her little VW. She'd spread several Oriental-style carpets over the cracked, cold linoleum. Swaths of printed fabric—bedsheets?—billowed over the windows, dimming the long August twilight. Her bower glowed from the light of a dozen perfumed candles.

She reclined on a thick, white fur spread over an unzipped sleeping bag. Pillows, patterned in zebra stripes and leopard spots, lay in a tumbled pile at one end of her exotic bed.

She'd taken off her sweater and boots, leaving her slender form clad in a snug T-shirt and tight jeans. And, of course, her silly fur-trimmed socks. Dark and sinuous against the white pelt, Valerie reminded Fisher of a resting mink. Slim and touchable, the lines and curves of her body begged for a man's stroking hand.

His hand.

Nevertheless, he stepped into the ultrafeminine room on hesitant feet, feeling like an awkward, shambling giant. He bent to touch the pelt. The soft, silky fur caressed his fingers. "I brought you the air mattress." His voice sounded as if it had struggled over broken glass to exit his throat.

She watched him, blue eyes glimmering in the shadowed room.

He straightened. "Do you—do you want it?"

Setting a glass of wine onto a coaster with a soft click, Valerie uncurled and stretched, as though exhibiting her hourglass body. As she arched her back, her breasts lifted, pressing against her flimsy top. Her blonde, flyaway hair had a just-bedded look.

Fisher began to sweat. This woman was dangerous. Not because she was more sophisticated than any other girl on the island, and he'd met plenty of exotic, interesting females when he'd served in the military. No, there was something about her that he couldn't identify.

She was all woman, no question about it. He clenched his fists behind his back. He would not touch her.

Now only a foot away from him, she looked him boldly in the eyes. "Yeah, I want it." Her gaze, laden with feminine desire, dropped to his mouth.

Both of them knew she wasn't talking about the air mattress. He had to say something, anything before he jumped her bones like the love-starved, pathetic fool he was.

"Did you, uh, know you have your own washer-dryer?" *Suave, Fisher, really suave.* Jerking his gaze away from her, he reached for the knob of a small closet on his left. Opening it, he showed her the apartment-sized setup.

"Oh, that's nice." The sexy timbre of Valerie's voice altered into innocent delight.

He breathed easier. "Works great too. If you ever have a problem, just let me know."

Valerie looked into Fisher's eyes and smiled. "Yes." Coupled with the female heat in her smile, the implications weighing that one word tied his tongue into twenty knots, sucked every molecule of air from his lungs and forced all the blood in his body southward.

She was temptation incarnate. Though he knew it was wrong, he couldn't help wanting her, and if he didn't get out of her orbit soon, he'd kiss her. He'd be a goner. If he kissed her, everything would change. *He* would change, and he couldn't handle that.

"Th-that is, a problem with anything in the apartment."

She reached down and took a phallus-shaped device from amidst the pelts. "I'm having trouble recharging my massager."

A laugh broke free. "Your massager? Is that what they're calling them in L.A.?"

Straightening, she looked him in the eyes. "Think you can help?"

He threw caution to the wind, telling himself that his tangled thoughts about Valerie Percy were nonsense. She was no more compelling than any other woman and wouldn't have a mysterious hold over him no matter what happened. He grinned at her. "Oh yeah, I'm sure I can help."

Reaching for her, he slid a hand through her tousled hair, sifting the soft, blonde strands through his fingers. Her fragrance rose along with a husky moan from deep in her throat. Sensing that the moment was right, he let his palm rest against her nape and drew her close.

Valerie saw the unmistakable signs of male need. A flaring of the nostrils. A heated narrowing of Fisher's eyes. She smelled his masculine aroma, an intriguing mixture of sky and forest, with the biting tang of the sea caught in his long, sexy hair.

Yes. The first touch of his firm lips against hers ignited her blood. She turned on as if he'd flicked a switch, and suddenly she felt alive, the way she always felt when she made love. This was the feeling she craved. This was what she lived for. When she touched a beautiful man, it was as though her world morphed from black-and-white into color. God, she needed this, needed him.

She opened her mouth to let him in. His lips trembled ever so slightly against hers and she thought, *Hmmm...* But whatever conclusions she could have reached became lost when Fisher thrust his tongue into her mouth. One, two, three, four times, deep and hard, the way she liked it, communicating clearly what he wanted—a long, deep, hard fuck. He pulled her tight against him, and their hips met with a sudden, sharp bang that presaged what she hoped would happen. His cock was a lengthy, thick ridge against her mound, and he ground his pelvis from side to side, rubbing that heavenly bulge against her. She bent one knee and raised it high, wrapping her leg around his waist, opening herself so he'd hit the sweetest spot. Each push of his rod against her clit took her higher, made her hotter.

She tore her mouth away from his and panted for breath, seeking control of herself. She didn't know him well enough to let herself completely lose her head, and it wasn't smart to fall into lust with the first man she'd laid eyes on in her new home.

"Isn't this the kind of help you had in mind?" Fisher's eyes were languorous, his beautifully sculpted mouth half open, wet, seductive.

She splayed her palms across his chest and found it rock-solid, as hard as his cock against her pussy. One of her remaining fingernails found the hole in his aged T-shirt, and she tore it open to caress the warm muscles beneath. Another rip and she'd exposed both his pecs. She bent her head to kiss his left nipple with an open mouth, licking until it rose erect and sharp in her mouth. His slight, salt tang tingled on her tongue, and she wanted more.

He groaned and clenched a fist in her hair, tugging her head back for another of his scalding kisses. His other hand slid between her jeans and her belly, heading straight for her pussy. "Too tight," he muttered, and released her so he could unbutton her pants. He dragged them down over her hips then easily lifted her into his arms.

Carrying her to the makeshift bed, he said, "Here's the story, *cheechako* girl. No commitments, just sex. Get the picture?"

Valerie tried not to be offended. "I told you, I'm not in the market for a husband."

"It's okay if you are, but you need to know that person won't be me." Setting her down on the pillows, he knelt with one knee on either side of her now-naked pelvis and drilled her with a dark, serious gaze. "Think of me as Mr. Fun-and-games."

Fun and games wasn't what she thought about when she looked into his somber eyes. She laughed. "Yeah, right. A fuck buddy. Perfect."

"That's right. Just a good sport fuck whenever you need it."

"Cool." She wound one arm behind his head, pulled him close and thrust her tongue into his mouth. God, he tasted good, like the sea and the sky and the wildness of nature. She wanted that wildness, craved it, and then reached for it, fumbling at the waistband of his shorts until button and zipper parted for her eager fingers. Fisher had gone commando, and she had no trouble finding his thick, erect cock.

She freed it from the worn khaki and, after it sprang out, ran her fingers up and down the rigid shaft, delighting in the smooth, satiny skin. Soft over hard, the nature of a man's erection always pleased her, turned her on. She wanted to look as well as touch, and pushed his chest. "Roll over."

With a chuckle, he complied, and she stripped him, happily shredding what was left of his T-shirt.

"Good thing this isn't my Grateful Dead tee," he said. "That might have upset me."

"Are you one of Jerry's kids?"

"You bet."

She smiled. "How about a Phish T-shirt? I can get you a dozen."

"Works for me." Fisher reclined on her pelt, his naked body dark against the white fur. She lay beside him and looked her fill. Valerie had seen a lot of good-looking men naked. The entertainment business was full of great chests and handsome faces with awesome equipment attached.

Fisher made them all forgettable.

Dark golden skin overlaid a lean body laden with rippling muscle. He radiated power and potency, especially his long, dark cock, rising thick and proud from a nest of midnight-black curly hair. The rest of his body was, as Nina had suggested, smooth and hairless. All the better, thought Valerie. No hair to interrupt the smoothness of his solid pecs or his gorgeous six-pack.

And his face...high cheekbones defined a chiseled visage with compelling dark eyes and a mouth that she now knew was thoroughly kissable.

Yes, Fisher was the most fuckable man she'd ever laid eyes on—or laid.

He scanned her as blatantly as she'd scoped him out, his gaze finally coming to rest on her pussy a moment before he reached out to take hold of her muff. He tugged gently and she moaned, her clit twitching with want. He pushed a finger between her labia, moving it with ease between her slick folds.

He licked his fingertip. "Yeah," he said, his voice rich with male appreciation. "Now take off your top."

Sitting up, she pulled the stretchy black cotton over her head and tossed it away, smiling at Fisher, whose attention was firmly fixed on her chest. Though they weren't huge, she knew that men liked her breasts. Shapely and high, Valerie's girls didn't need a bra. She cupped them, flicking the nipples. His eyes heated, and he leaned forward to clamp his mouth around one while squeezing the other.

He sucked hard, shoving her to the border between pleasure and pain. She relished that, her pussy moistening in response, and slid her hands around Fisher's head to bring him in closer. She wanted all of him... Everything he could give, she'd take. She spread her legs and wrapped them around his torso to tug him in tighter. She shifted to get his hips against hers, pelvis against pelvis, cock against cunt.

His rod's rounded head, slick with pre-come, rubbed her clit and she trembled, on the verge yet forcing herself away from the brink. She wanted to make it last. She wanted this first time with him to go on and on. Unforgettable, she thought. *I want this to be unforgettable for both of us.*

The notion astounded her. Sure, she had a healthy ego, but who needed a clinging man?

Fisher lifted her on top of him and, taking his cock in one hand, slid it inside her. Gravity forced her to take him in all at once. The invasion was so stunning that she screamed, an earthquake of sensation overwhelming her. Eyes closed tight to focus, she grabbed on to his shoulders and rocked, moaning from sheer delight as he pierced her to the core. She shifted from side to side to press her clit against his pubic bone, each move taking her even higher.

Waves of pleasure slammed through her and she began to come. With her knees bent, she rose up and down on his big, slick, hard cock, discovering the exact point where the ridge of his cock head rubbed her G-spot.

A finger nudged her clitoris. She opened her eyes to watch Fisher play with her, caressing the nubbin of flesh. She groaned and flung back her head, feeling tendrils of hair stroke her neck. Again she cupped her breasts to pinch the nipples, once more closing her eyes to better feel the sensations slashing through her body.

Hands slid along her sides... Fisher's fingertips glided over her flesh, leaving sensual shivers in their wake. Then he gripped her and rolled on top of her, pinning her with his weight. His cock punched deeper into her channel, and he began to fuck her good, giving her long, slow strokes that penetrated to her womb.

Valerie wrapped her legs and arms around him and let her mind go blank, just enjoying the slow, smooth slide of his rod in and out of her pussy. He kissed her, with his tongue again imitating the movements of his cock in her cunt, long strokes that intensified the great fuck.

He swelled, pushing against the walls of her vagina. He was close, and she wanted to shove him over the edge so hard he'd never forget it. She licked her finger and reached around his hip, searching for his ass. She caressed his butt, delighting in the clench and bunch of his muscles as he worked her. Then she found his crack, slipping her finger through moisture and sweat until she reached her target. The tiny hole was tight, and she wondered if any other woman had taken Fisher in this way. *How cool if I'm the first*, she thought.

She took a deep breath laden with the heady fragrance of great sex. Her perfume mingled with the smell of pussy juices. Fisher's sweat, with his natural aroma of forest, wind, sea and sky thickened by richly male musk.

She eased her wet finger into him. The ring of taut flesh closed around her and she wiggled the tip. "Aw, shit, Valerie..." Fisher groaned and banged her harder as he came with great, shuddering gasps. Sweat glistened on his skin as he reared back, grabbing her hips, drilling into her with fierce thrusts.

On the verge of soreness from the mind-blowing fuck, she sought her clit with her free hand to come one more time.

* * * * *

He never spent the entire night with a woman, no matter how hot the sex had been, so Fisher left Valerie as soon as he politely could. Leaving his truck at the station, he walked to the dock. Because his home wasn't accessible by motor vehicle, he'd take one of his boats.

He inhaled the cool early morning air, letting it clear his mind while he ordered his tumbled thoughts. He knew that change was the law of the universe. Everything changed, always. The snow-covered volcanoes that formed Takinsha Island once had belched fire and smoke into the sky. The Earth had quaked and shifted. The ocean had boiled. Land and sea merely appeared unchanging.

Could he also change? Perhaps. But slowly, as with water eroding rock, and not with the sudden, cataclysmic force of a volcano.

Despite the great sex, he was sure he didn't want Valerie Percy or any other woman in his life. And no matter what she said or did, city-slick Valerie couldn't possibly be ready for him. He wasn't easy

to live with or to love. Whether Valerie admitted it or not, she had expectations he couldn't meet. Every woman did.

He couldn't burden her. After all, he still had those nightmares.

* * * * *

Fisher had implied he wasn't the man for her, but after his visit the previous night, Valerie didn't know whether to believe him or not.

With recklessness born from a glass of California chardonnay, she'd blatantly come on to him. When she'd said, "Yeah, I want it," he'd understood the double entendre. She hadn't been talking about the mattress but what they could do together on top of it.

He'd jumped at the bait she'd offered, but why had he left so soon? They should have gotten it on all night.

She hesitantly stuck a toe out of her sleeping bag, which now covered the inflated mattress. The air wasn't too cold, so she jumped out of her makeshift bed, sprinted to the shower and turned the hot water on full blast. In just a few seconds, clouds of warm steam billowed from the narrow stall.

Her intuition told her that any involvement with Fisher, even as a fuck buddy, was likely to be very intense, way over the top. Valerie frowned as she squeezed a dollop of herbal shampoo into her hair. Was she ready for that?

Remembering the way he'd rushed out the door, she doubted the issue would arise. He hadn't been rude but had practically fallen down the stairs in his haste after they'd done it. But oh had it been great or what? Leaning against the cool, metal shower stall, Valerie let her thoughts stray back to last night's encounter. The way he'd tasted the pussy juices coating his finger had told her that Fisher, for all his pretended reluctance, was a very sensuous man. He was an e-ticket thrill ride, all the way.

She pushed a finger between her labia and found herself wet with more than water, with the distinctive thickness of her sex juices slicking her hand. She rubbed the wetness over her clitoris, seeking another release, just to start the day off right.

The entire encounter had happened fast, she reflected. Usually she preferred a little more foreplay, but with Fisher, she'd been eager, rocketing from one orgasm to the next with unbelievable speed.

She moaned, caressing her clit as she remembered how easily Fisher's powerful arms had lifted her before impaling her body on his cock. Would two fingers be enough to duplicate that feeling?

She eased them inside her wet, ready channel. No, not nearly enough. She scissored them apart and thrust, murmuring, "Fisher..."

Oh God, the way his big cock had opened her all the way to her center... She caressed her clit with her free hand while finger-fucking her vagina. She shifted to let the hot water pound her nipples, igniting twin fires in her breasts' tips. The fire raged through her and she came, groaning, bucking her hips the way she'd ground into him.

She slumped against the cool shower wall, breathing hard, knees weak. She could have ridden him all night long. Why had he run?

Though he was attractive, she better look for companions who were more open. Fisher, who preferred to live at the other end of a remote island, far from others, couldn't be the friend with benefits she sought. She had a pretty healthy libido and she knew she'd want to fuck more than Fisher did. She generally left lovers in the dust. Then they'd get all possessive, even though she'd never pretended she'd be faithful.

On top of that, if she married—a big fat if, regardless of what Fisher thought—she had a clear idea of her mate—someone who shared her goals. Someone who wanted to laugh with her, live with her, love her. And maybe...maybe her ideal man enjoyed family life. Remembering her own upbringing, as well as her sister and nieces, Valerie thought she also might want a couple of kids. Maybe.

Fisher Chugatt, with his somber eyes and reclusive ways, wasn't that person and would never be.

Chapter Three

At eight in the morning, Valerie wandered downstairs, expecting to pour a cup of coffee and familiarize herself with the equipment before she was due to start work at noon. Fisher, already present, stood nonchalantly next to Nina's desk, fiddling with the plug to the telephone.

"Ready to go?" He wore a light windbreaker, speckled with raindrops, over jeans and hiking boots.

She eyed him. "We're going to tour the island in the rain?"

"Yep." He clicked the plug back into the phone. "It rains here most of the time. That is, when it's not snowing. We can't let a little rain stop us." He plucked her parka from its hook to help her put it on over her blue jeans and fisherman's sweater. "Let's get some breakfast."

Again, she was struck by his almost old-fashioned manners but didn't want to remark on them. The comment would be too personal, and Fisher, despite the great lay, didn't want to talk about himself. He'd had the opportunity to talk after sex last night but instead had raced out of her new home as though chased by wasps.

He opened the station door for her and escorted her along the street toward what passed for the town center of Takinsha. At the top of a rise, the street split. The left fork ran down to the harbor, which boasted a few T-shirt and souvenir shops that catered to the island's meager tourist trade.

To the right, the road led to the heart of town, a community that looked comfortably like any other in small-town America. The major difference was the steep, forested ridge rising at the edge of the town, just a couple of blocks away. Behind that, wreathed in mist, loomed the two mountains that formed the spine of Takinsha Island. Even in August, snow dusted their heights.

A hoarse cry rent the chill, pure air. Tilting her head, she saw a pair of oversized ravens perched on a nearby roof. Higher in the sky, eagles soared.

The air whooshed out of Valerie's lungs. Quite abruptly and unexpectedly, she fell in love. Not with the man walking beside her, though he was gorgeous enough, but with the place. Takinsha was so beautiful it literally took her breath away.

She glanced at Fisher, who continued ambling along the street, unaware of her breakthrough moment. Neither said anything about the previous evening. Valerie, too embarrassed to bring up the subject, wondered why he seemed so eager to begin her Takinsha Island education. Though their boss had commanded Fisher to show her around, Archie hadn't specified when, where and how.

Breakfast hadn't been included, but still, Fisher led Valerie to the Yellow Snow Café, the kind of down-home diner she avoided.

"Everyone eats here," he explained as he opened the door for her. The place smelled deliciously of coffee, eggs and bacon, three of her favorite aromas. She'd never tasted a food she disliked and worked hard to control her appetite.

Just inside the doorway, she stopped short. The crowded room fell silent as three dozen heads swiveled her way.

Three dozen masculine heads.

The diner was jammed with men. Tall men, short men. Fat and thin men. Men with graying beards. Young bucks in sweatshirts and tight jeans, lounging with phony nonchalance against the counter. Men of all races and colors, including several men who looked so much like Fisher that she bet they were also Tlingit.

Three dozen pairs of eyes assessed her, followed by three dozen broad, welcoming smiles. She gasped then blushed, feeling the weight of their combined attention as if they'd touched her.

Fisher, his face impassive, took her parka and led her to a stool at the crowded counter. As though nothing had happened, he continued talking. "If you ever have to report local news, this is the place to find it. Hannah, the owner, knows everything and everybody." He gestured at the silver-haired Asian woman behind the cash register.

"Shame on you, Fisher Chugatt." Hannah advanced, coffeepot in hand to pour for both of them. "You saying I'm a gossip and a snoop?"

Fisher nodded. "Yep."

"You're a bad boy," Hannah said without malice. "But you're right. How are you enjoying Takinsha Island, Valerie?"

Valerie started.

"Don't bother asking how she knows your name." He sipped his coffee, dark eyes gleaming at Valerie over the rim of his cup. "Like I said, she knows everything."

"I read tea leaves and tarot cards." Hannah slid a menu in front of Valerie. "You ask me anything, I tell you. When are you and Valerie getting married, Fisher?"

Her voice rang out in the sudden silence that greeted the word "married".

Fisher choked on his coffee.

Valerie spilled hers. "What?"

"I know what Fisher say, that he never marry. Bah." Hannah grabbed a rag to mop up the coffee Valerie had dumped on the counter.

"We only just met." Valerie tugged several paper napkins out of the dispenser and wiped her fingers. "And who says he's my type?"

"Type, shmype. Fisher, you eat your usual. I bring you the bagel and cream cheese, Valerie." Hannah bustled away.

Valerie stared after her, open-mouthed.

"Please don't tell me that you usually eat a bagel and cream cheese for breakfast," he said.

"I'm sorry, b-but she's right. And if it comes toasted with tomatoes on the side, we're, uh, toast."

"Valerie, no offense, but I don't want to get married. It's not you, okay? I'm never going to get married. To anyone."

She waved her hands in the air. "I hear you. I understand. Look, if I decide to get married, I doubt I'll be interested in a guy who lives like a hermit at the other end of the island, away from civilization."

His lips twisted into an awkward grin. "Not much civilization on Takinsha Island."

"So far, I like this place." Why did he continually act as though she'd hate it here? She loved it. Okay, it was damp, and maybe some of the people might be a little offbeat. But most folks were nice enough, and the spectacular scenery minimized all her other concerns.

"Let me see your nails today, *cheechako* girl." He reached for her hand and rubbed a finger over her short, unpolished nails. "What happened?"

She shrugged, hoping she looked unaffected. The reality was that her heart had leapt at the first clasp of his hand on hers. She liked his touch, possibly too much, considering that she wasn't going to marry him, regardless of the great sex, her heart jumping around, and Hannah's opinion. "I took off the polish and the phony nails this morning. It's okay. Less upkeep. I told you, I can adjust and make do."

The excuse Fisher had made for holding her hand had run out, but he didn't want to let go. Even without her jazzy fake nails, Valerie's hands remained feminine, appealing. He guessed that lotion turned her skin soft and fragrant.

The memory of her finger inside him strayed through his mind. His pulse jumped, and he shoved the memory away, firmly. Very firmly.

The food arrived, with Valerie's bagel split and toasted to a golden brown. Hannah had garnished the plate with a couple of tomato slices on a lettuce leaf.

Fisher dropped Valerie's hand.

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry," she said.

"Gee, thanks." He turned his attention to his spinach and cheese omelet. Hannah had remembered the side of country fried potatoes he loved.

"This has to be a coincidence." Valerie spread cream cheese over half the bagel.

"I dunno." Fisher salted his potatoes. "Every spring, there's a contest to predict when ice will break on one of the rivers near Fairbanks. The winner gets a big pot. Hannah's won it so many times she's prohibited from entering."

"Uh-oh." Having made a sandwich with bagel, cream cheese and tomato, Valerie bit into her breakfast. "Ummm."

"Don't tell me," he said, sounding morose. "Your food is just the way you like it."

"Um-hmm." She nodded and chewed.

"I'm never coming in here again." He glared at Hannah.

She cackled. "Make no difference, you bad boy. I dance at your wedding."

Valerie swallowed a bite of bagel then chased it with coffee. "Fisher, I believe you. Hey, this place is jammed. I didn't think so many people lived here."

"Not in the winter. A lot of men come here for summer jobs. Most of the guys are taking tourists around or fishing, though a few of the guys here might have just finished the night shift at the cannery. Some might be messing with their boats or planes. Do you want to go up today?"

"Up where?"

"In my float plane. Archie said to show you around, and the best way to see Alaska is to fly. So how about it?"

* * * * *

At one end of Takinsha's harbor, Fisher's float plane bobbed on the water along with several others, though boats dominated the wharf. Many of the slips were empty. If Fisher was correct, fishing and tour boats were out for the day.

The plane's floats were metal, with rough pads for traction. She crawled over them and into the interior of Fisher's four-seater plane with his help. Was it her imagination, or did his hand linger on her bottom a few moments after she'd ceased needing his guidance? Her pulse, which had already quickened at the prospect of the flight, now sped.

His hand clenched around her ass. "Nice."

Okay, so no question about that. She turned and gave him a come-hither grin and a wink. A smile flitted over his usually somber face.

He eased her into the front passenger chair, which was small but comfortable. While showing her how to strap herself in, he copped a feel of her breast then palmed her with an open-handed caress. "I had fun last night," he murmured.

Her heart leapt. "Me too. Hey, why'd you leave so soon?"

"Valerie, do me a favor, okay? No questions and no commitments." He handed her headphones against the engine noise. They sat heavy on her head.

"Hey, I know the score. But we could have had fun all night long."

He raised his brows. "That kind of extended fun leads to more commitment than I want."

Why'd he have to be so crabby about it? "Okay, fine." Her mood deflated, and she looked around. The plane was rough and ready, like everything Alaskan. Screws and rivets ridged the exposed metal floor. Between the front seats, a printed checklist of tasks was stuck with a strip of tape to an empty spot on the control panel. She read preflight, takeoff, cruise and landing.

Fisher strapped himself in. Twisting knobs and pulling levers, he took off with no apparent communication with air traffic control.

She immediately pushed any worries out of her mind. He obviously knew what he was doing, and besides, there was so much to see. The clouds had broken, and the sea beneath the plane glittered silver floating on Prussian blue.

The town spread inland from Takinsha's shore like a multicolored fan. She could see boats gliding on the ocean's surface, avoiding brightly colored navigation buoys. A two-masted sailing ship, old-fashioned and incongruous, skimmed on the gently riffled surface, tiny and toylike so far below.

He flew south. At the far end of the island's rim, trees grew down to the narrow, rocky shoreline. Farther along, a thin beach wore a necklace of ochre seaweed. Patches of kelp floated between Takinsha and the neighboring islands. She noticed that this part of the sea had innumerable bits of land thrusting above the ocean, some tiny, isolated fingers of rock while others were larger, inhabited isles.

Below, she saw a sharp flash as two giant bodies broke the surface. She nudged Fisher's arm. "What are those?" she yelled, hoping he could hear her over the plane's engines. She lifted one side of her headphones.

"Probably whales," he yelled back. "The humpbacks are about to migrate. They're smart. They head for Hawaii in the winter."

"Wow." She craned her head to watch the massive creatures for as long as possible. Rippled glass in the side window distorted her view as the whales passed out of her sight.

Fisher turned the plane. Here, the ocean's surface looked wavier, and Valerie tried to imagine the level of turbulence below. Hundreds of feet of elevation robbed her of perspective.

Buffeted by wind, the plane lurched, and her stomach fell away. An updraft bumped the plane around a little more. She looked around. Not a barf bag in sight. She swallowed and resolved just to deal with it.

Strong and sure on the controls, Fisher's hands steadied their course. He whistled tunelessly through his teeth as though nothing was wrong. Gradually, her heartbeat calmed and she stopped sweating.

She leaned back into her seat and just enjoyed being with Fisher. His natural aroma seemed to be concentrated, intensified by the enclosed space. His worn, faded jeans weren't skintight but fit closely enough to show off brawny thighs and outlined his awesome package.

She wanted to touch him but wasn't sure if he'd welcome or reject her caress. Better not, she told herself. He needed to concentrate on piloting the plane.

Turning inland, he flew past tide flats covered with mud and algae. Then she saw a series of massive forested mountains interspersed with numerous lakes and inlets. Torrents, rippling white and gray, plunged down exposed rock faces. A hanging valley full of water spilled silver down a cliff, a spectacular drop into the narrow bay below. The angle of the sun in relation to their plane allowed her to see their shadow, the shape of an X, in the slick surface of the fjord.

"I'm gonna take us down now," Fisher yelled. The plane glided down to the glassy smoothness. As they dropped, the reflections in the water changed, with mountains, snow and forest mirrored in its perfection.

They skimmed along the water's surface, gradually slowing to a stop. Valerie pulled off her headphones, enjoying the sudden silence. After unsnapping his harness, Fisher opened the door. The sounds of waterfall and birdsong met her ears, and she scrambled to get out of the plane.

"Not so fast." He steadied her then reached down to take off his hiking boots and socks.

She stared at him as he rolled up the cuffs of his pants. "Are you going swimming?"

"Wading. The water's less than knee-deep here. Don't you want to go to shore?" He stepped out onto the float, balancing easily.

"What's on shore?"

"Come on out and see."

After taking off her shoes and socks, she scrambled out of the plane. A small, wood-framed cabin sat at the edge of beach and forest. Smoke curled out of its chimney. A blond giant of a man came into her view from around the side of the cabin. Bearded and naked to the waist, he held a knife as long as her arm.

Fisher smiled at Valerie. "I know you've said you're not sure about marriage, but just in case, meet marital candidate number one, Brent Saronov."

Chapter Four

The chilly water sent cold little arrows stabbing through Valerie's body. Nevertheless, she splashed along in Fisher's wake. She should have been checking out the fellow on shore since normally she'd be very interested in any topless male. Instead, she couldn't seem to tear her gaze from Fisher's ass. And when she wasn't watching him, she made sure she didn't step on sharp rocks or twigs on the bottom of the cove.

Fisher reached the shore.

"Yo." Brent greeted Fisher.

"Yo, yourself," Fisher said amiably. "Brent, this is Valerie Percy. She's the new radio station manager over on Takinsha."

Padding onto the sandy shore, Valerie wiggled her bluish toes in the thin sunshine. "Hi." She smiled at Brent.

"Hiya, Valerie." Brent wiped his hand on his furry chest then extended it to Valerie, who took it.

At closer range, Brent turned out to be a combination of Thor the Nordic Thunder God and a couch potato, complete with beer belly. He emitted a miasma of fish, dog and unwashed male. The knife he held was spangled with fish scales. So was his beard. The waders he wore, his sole "clothing", bore fish innards as well.

Valerie released his hand, thinking, *I can wash in the lake. Soon.* Her stomach roiled. She found herself taking short, panting breaths through her mouth so the aromas couldn't enter her nose. Fisher turned to glance at her. He didn't speak, though his lips twitched.

Remembering that he'd enjoyed teasing her, suspicion crept into her mind. He knew she wasn't interested in befriending reclusive weirdos. So what were they doing with bizarre Brent, the smelly Saronov?

He struck her as an interesting local character and was part of getting to know her potential fan base. But...

Maybe Fisher had decided that he'd be amused by her reaction to Brent. Hadn't he labeled her "entertaining" when they'd met?

Well, two could play games. Fisher wasn't the only one who could pull a prank. She didn't know when and how, but she'd get him good.

Brent led them around the cabin. On the side, A-framed racks of fish, each close to two feet long, hung drying.

"Chum salmon," Fisher said to her. "Also called dog salmon. It's toward the end of their run. Brent'll feed them to his dogs through the winter."

Valerie followed Brent behind the house. The canine stench intensified. Fortunately, she wasn't allergic to dogs because behind the cabin stood Brent's kennel, enclosed in an enormous pen full of medium-sized pooches. Every one of the critters immediately started to bark when she and Fisher came into their view.

Beside her, Brent stuck his knife into a loop on the front of his rubber waders then thrust two fingers into his mouth. His whistle blasted through her eardrums, but the dogs shut up.

Near the kennel, not one but three dogsleds lay. She'd heard about mushers, the breed of Alaskan whose winter hobby was to dogsled over hundreds, even thousands of miles. Evidently Brent was a musher, and he seemed obsessed by his pastime.

Two of the sleds looked fairly new, but the other was a rickety machine built of branches lashed together with leather strips.

Fisher walked over to it then stroked one of the makeshift sled's runners. "Nice work, man." His voice exuded admiration.

"I built it myself," Brent said, proud as a new daddy. "I even made a traditional Athabaskan wood-scraping tool."

Valerie saw her chance. She edged closer, holding her breath. "Yeah, that's gorgeous," she gushed, fluttering her eyelashes at Brent. Actually, the sled did exhibit some fine workmanship. "Are Athabaskans another tribe?"

"Yep," Fisher said, sounding irritated. "They live up north, in the interior."

She desperately wanted to get away from the maelstrom of noxious smells swirling around Brent while continuing to taunt Fisher. "Can I see the scraper?" she asked, hoping they'd end up somewhere else, anywhere else, away from the dogs, the fish guts and the drying salmon.

Brent flushed and looked at Valerie as though she'd just offered him a million bucks and a BJ. "S-sure," he said, stumbling over the word. "Come on inside." He led them through the back door into his dark cabin.

Valerie scurried to an open front window, sucking in the fresh breeze coming off the water.

"Be right with you." Brent climbed up a thick, knotted rope dangling from the cabin's upper loft. A moment later, the waders crashed down, landing with a thump on the cabin floor near a pile of junk consisting of empty beer cans, hardware and a dog bed.

She watched open-mouthed.

Fisher said blandly, "If he had stairs, the dogs could get up there. And the wolverines."

Finding her voice, she said, "Wolverines?"

"Wolverines, raccoons and so forth. You get the picture."

* * * * *

Now dressed in a camouflage T-shirt and an ancient pair of Army fatigues, Brent proudly showed off his handmade Athabaskan-style scraping tool. Staring at Brent's chest, Valerie *oohed* and *aahed*. It didn't take long for Fisher to push up his left sleeve to check the time on his watch, pointing out that she was due at the station by noon.

Back in the plane, she asked him, "Is Brent a typical Alaska man?" She tugged hiking socks over her chilled toes.

Fisher chuckled. "I don't know what that is." He laced up his boots.

"Are many Alaskan men mushers and into the fish-drying thing?" She'd enjoyed teasing Fisher with Brent but didn't want to hang out with someone who smelled. She was a liberal person, but smelly was out.

"Oh no. Not around here. Mushers are more common in the interior, near Fairbanks."

She couldn't restrain a sigh of relief.

Helping Valerie with her harness, he buckled her safely in. "You didn't like Brent?" She caught the undertone of laughter in his voice.

She sighed. Apparently Fisher was still in full tease mode when it came to her. She'd hoped he was over that. She had as good a sense of humor as the next person, but her quest was important. She said, "Oh, I thought he was just fine. Loved the machete."

"I figured you would want to play with Brent's machete." He turned the key to start the plane's engines.

Finally, she'd gotten to Fisher. "You jealous?" She grinned as she adjusted her headphones.

"No, not me. Sex, yes, involvement, no. Remember?" He spoke in a raised voice, she assumed, since she could hear him despite her headphones.

"Of course I remember," she said loudly. "You won't let me forget."

"Did you think about the effect your flirting had on Brent?" The plane lifted off the water's surface.

She shrugged. "It was just a little banter."

"He's probably your love slave for life."

"Oh, come now." She peered out the window, refusing to fall for Fisher's guilt trip.

"Not too many women show interest in Brent."

"Gee, I wonder why."

"Seriously, Brent's a nice guy. Believe it or not, he's very wealthy. His family was one of the original Russian explorers of these parts."

She stuck her nose in the air. "I don't care about money. I do fine myself. I don't need Mr. Moneybags Dog Musher."

Fisher laughed. "Well, don't say I didn't try to help you out." He skimmed the waves as he approached the more inhabited parts of Takinsha Island. "We have time for one more stop."

"Where?"

"The end of the road."

"Your place?"

"Nope. No roads to my house. I fly or boat. We're going to the village where I grew up."

* * * * *

Fisher flew several times every week and didn't understand how this everyday act could take on such intimacy just because Valerie Percy was in his plane. Was it the closeness of the space, which condensed the feminine vibes she radiated? And her fragrance seemed concentrated, intensified.

Whatever it was, he wanted her badly. When he'd noticed her scoping out his body, he'd nearly asked, "Like what you see?" He hadn't, though he didn't think she'd rudely say no. He was afraid she'd stop.

As she stared raptly out the window, her mouth opened just a fraction, allowing him to see the delicate inner lining of her lips, that special flesh that was so sensitive to a man's kisses. And he'd learned last night just how sensitive Valerie's willing flesh was. He knew that when he brushed his tongue along that tempting line, she'd tremble and moan, and then open her lips for more.

He shouldn't have fucked her because now he really wanted her. He couldn't tell himself that she wasn't more special or sexier than any other women. Now he knew that they were great together. His growing want for Valerie made it harder to do what he had to do—get rid of her ASAP. RadioWorks would have to send someone else. In the meantime, Archie could manage the station.

Introducing her to Brent Saronov had been a brainstorm. Valerie needed to be graphically shown that Alaska simply wasn't the right place for a woman like her.

Fisher's jealousy had surprised him, but he told himself that he'd get over it. He had to. He had no choice.

He didn't understand why he wanted to return to his roots, but today, the old homestead exerted a pull on him he couldn't ignore. Was it Valerie? Maybe, since he hadn't neglected his people, having stopped by the kids' clubhouse just the evening before.

He landed the plane in a broad, curved bay and taxied in to the long wharf running along the shore, with the passenger's side inland. He realized he'd have to climb over Valerie to get out and tie up, unless she was competent enough to do it without falling into the water. Remembering the catastrophe with her VW Bug, he doubted it.

He eyed her breasts, hoping he wouldn't spring a rod when he eased his body over hers to get to the door of the plane. On top of that, she'd think he'd done it on purpose, so he could cop a feel. She'd be right, but no way did he want to look so needy.

Luckily for Fisher, a group of kids from the village came out. Gaston, Bradley, Jane and Sherry had probably recognized his plane. Gaston and Sherry each grabbed a rope and tied it to the dock.

"Open the door, Valerie," he said, relieved.

She pushed then tugged at the door in vain.

He unfastened his harness. "Let me help you." Leaning across her, he touched the body he'd been dreaming about, with his side brushing against her breasts. Was it his imagination or could he feel her nipples through her clothing?

Stop it, he told himself.

"You're squashing me." She sounded grumpy.

"Sorry." He shoved the door outward then clicked open her harness. "After you."

Valerie clambered out. He heard her say, "Hello, I'm Valerie Percy."

A chatter of clear, high voices answered. "Hi. You're the new deejay, aren't you? Where's Fisher?"

"Right here." He scooted out of the plane to greet the kids.

Valerie smiled when she saw Fisher's friends, who looked as though they ranged in age from five to fifteen. All superficially resembled him, with straight, shiny black hair, amber skin and dark eyes.

Though Fisher might tease her, he'd never shed his underlying sadness, which seemed always present as a slight droop of his eyes. But here, with these kids, he appeared lighter, as though a weight he always carried had dropped.

Was it the children? If so, why did he firmly state he'd never marry? Did he want children without committing to their mother?

Valerie mulled over these questions while she walked with the group through the woods. Fisher chatted with the kids, asking about their grades in summer school, their part-time jobs, the welfare of their families. He seemed to know everything about their lives.

The forest thinned then opened into a clearing crowded with modern dwellings, with the beat-up air everything Alaskan seemed to carry. Must be the severe winters, she speculated. She knew oil had made Alaska a wealthy state. Only one street ran through the heart of the village toward the north in the direction of Takinsha. She guessed that just one was necessary.

At the very end of the road—just as Fisher had said—was a cozy-looking cottage surrounded by a trampled lawn. A sign proclaimed it the Takinsha Tlingit Teen Center.

At the bottom of the sign was an elaborately carved and painted raven. Valerie strolled forward to examine it more closely. She ran her fingers over its beautifully sculpted lines and forms, painted in bold strokes of black and red. "Wow," she said to Fisher, who'd followed her.

He shrugged modestly. "Thanks."

"You did this?"

"Yep. The raven is a Tlingit emblem, the symbol of what the whites call my moiety."

She raised her eyebrows. "Moiety? Do people actually use that word?"

"No one I know does. That's the kind of word you sometimes read but never hear."

"Ummm. Like kudos."

"Tout."

"Ersatz."

"That's a good one," he said appreciatively. "How about eschew?"

"Gesundheit." They both laughed.

"You like words?" she asked.

"Love 'em. You too?"

"Sure. I'm a deejay, remember? My job is to communicate." She was surprised to find such an obscure bond with Fisher. "So your...moiety lives at the end of the road?"

"Not all of us. We're a pretty far-flung people. For example, my parents run a fishing guide service out of Kenai. But this is where I was raised." He pointed at the cottage.

"It's cute. How come you don't live here anymore?"

"I still sleep here sometimes. But when I built my home, I gave this one to the kids. A lot of them were getting into trouble. They needed a place to hang out."

She stared at him. Valerie came from an upper-middle-class background, and her family donated generously to various charities. But she'd never heard of anyone who'd given away a house to a bunch of teenagers. "Fisher, that's...that's wonderful."

Looking embarrassed, he said, "Now, Valerie, don't start."

Despite the chilly air, she flushed hotly. "I know I'm not supposed to fall for you, but can't I respect you?"

He smiled. "I'm honored."

Feeling dangerously emotional, Valerie decided she needed a little distance from Fisher. She stepped away to check out the front yard of the Teen Center. A motley assortment of objects lay haphazardly on the grass—a jungle gym, denim jackets and sports equipment, including soccer balls and hockey sticks.

And one unwelcome reminder of the past—a ragged brown couch.

“Oh my God,” she wheezed. It was back, like a recurring nightmare. She sneezed. “At least someone’s getting use out of this thing.”

A bunch of kids lounged on it in various positions. One boy sat upside down, with knees over the back of the sofa and his head drooping over the seat. A couple perched on the arms while two girls snuggled in the corners, books in hand. Valerie braved the feline allergens to peer closer. She discovered that Harry Potter had penetrated to this remote Alaskan island.

“Oh, was this sofa yours?” Jane asked. A little different from the other Tlingit kids, she had storm-gray eyes and paler skin.

“Yeah.” Valerie fumbled for a tissue and rubbed her nose. “It was nice meeting you. Gotta go!”

“Are you going to do your show now?” Gaston asked.

“Yeah, it’s gotta be close to noon.”

“Bye!” the kids chorused. “Thanks for the couch,” Gaston said with a wink and a grin.

As they left, Valerie ached to question Fisher about his past and his relationship to his people. Clearly his connection to this village was deep, powerful and affectionate. However, he’d reassumed his impenetrable cloak of distance, friendly yet with an unyielding air she dared not attempt to pierce.

Did the Tlingit avoid intermarriage with whites? She doubted that. She’d noticed Jane’s gray eyes and another kid’s red hair.

Instead of flying the rest of the way, Fisher led her down the road through the woods to Takinsha. “It’s not a long way,” he said, “and it’s a pleasant walk.”

“Okay.” She followed him through the drippy, moist rain forest.

As they walked, Fisher wondered what a sophisticated L.A. woman like Valerie had thought of the tiny village where he’d grown up. He’d never brought a *cheechako* there. She’d gotten along fine with everyone and everything, he thought with approval, until she’d encountered that damn couch.

He hadn’t noticed any of the arrogance folks from the lower forty-eight sometimes exhibited about conditions in Alaska. The kids seemed to accept her also, and they were quick to spot any hint of phoniness.

So, his judgment wasn’t impaired. Valerie was okay. But he cautioned himself that it didn’t mean he ought to get involved with her. No doubt she wanted a conventional life, with a husband and two-point-five kiddies.

Romancing Valerie would be a dead-end street for both of them. A total waste of time, which could lead to a couple of broken hearts and a lot of unhappiness.

No, he had no right to Valerie. Occasional sex only.

He glanced down at her blonde head. She walked quietly but with an alert air, as if she didn't want to miss anything. Occasionally she'd sniff the breeze, bend down to examine a plant or ask a question about the local wildlife. She'd reflected the same interested attitude in the plane. A bit touristy, but that was understandable.

Valerie Percy was like a bright-eyed puppy. He sighed, hating to disillusion her. But the sooner she realized her mistake, the sooner she'd head back to the lower forty-eight and get on with her life.

Chapter Five

After a mellow, quiet walk through the woods, Fisher left Valerie at the station door and continued into Takinsha, returning in a half-hour with bags of Chinese takeout. Slipping into the station, he sat at Nina's desk to covertly watch Valerie on the air.

Archie had told him that the new station manager was a "rock and roll gal from L.A...probably a burnout case". Valerie was as far from a burnout case as Alaska was from Saudi. She had a charming, cheerful way about her that reminded him of his second cousin. Amy always took her annual oil dividend and splurged it on vacations, wild clothes and family gifts.

'Course, he'd never reacted to cousin Amy the way he turned on in Valerie's presence. The air seemed to crackle and spark when she was around. He was surprised that he hadn't flared up like an oiled torch when he'd been inside her.

Both Amy and Valerie reminded him of sunshine sparkling on a wild stream.

Water was life, but lately it seemed to Fisher that he resembled an ice cube, dull and static. He wished he could drink in some of that lovely light Valerie radiated as easily as he could sip plain water.

More to the point, he could see that she knew exactly how to do her job. She had presence and a great radio voice, like ripped velvet and warm brandy at midnight.

"Here's something special for a new friend. Brent, this one's for you." After Valerie put on *Who Let the Dogs Out*, she turned her head and winked at Fisher.

She'd caught him watching her. He went as hot as a twelve-year-old purchasing a skin mag. Worse, he thought, was the possibility she'd get the wrong idea about his feelings for her.

Nina Exley stepped out of the restroom and barreled toward Fisher. She plucked at the bags on her desk. "Did you bring me my spicy eggplant?"

"You brought lunch?" Valerie left her seat. "You angel. I think I'm in love."

He grimaced. "Don't say that, okay?"

"That was a joke, Fisher. Let me stack up some tunes and I'll join you."

After a few seconds, Valerie returned to hear Nina gasp and clutch at her belly. “Fisher! He’s kicking!” She grabbed his hand and pressed it to her stomach.

He jerked, scuttling away a few steps. “Nina, please.”

Valerie frowned. Fisher was usually so polite. She didn’t understand his reaction to Nina but decided it wasn’t her business. She advanced into the room to examine the white paper bags with bright-red lettering. “What’s the name of this place? An’ How? What kind of name is that?”

“It’s a great name.” Fisher grinned, his previous upbeat mood apparently returned. “Their motto is ‘We feed you good, an’ how’.”

Valerie winced. “Who made that up?”

“Yours truly. They held a contest, and I won free wonton soup for the rest of my life.”

“Not a bad deal. Did you bring soup?”

“An’ How.”

“I could get used to this,” Valerie said. “The soup, not the puns.”

“You’re one to talk.” He tore open a bag full of foil-wrapped chicken. “Halibut? Who let the dogs out? Ersatz? You like words and wordplays as much as I do.”

“No one likes wordplay as much as you do,” Nina said, swallowing a bite of eggplant. She glanced at Valerie. “He also wrote the motto for the Wild Salmon, the seafood restaurant at the wharf. ‘Great fish, and we make no bones about it.’”

“That’s so corny it’s good.” Valerie reached for the soup. “Should I get some bowls from my place?”

“Sure.”

Valerie picked up the carton. In her haste to help, she tripped on her way to the stairs. A quart of hot soup—along with wonton, shrimp, bits of ham, chicken and vegetable—splashed all over Fisher.

He jumped at least two feet into the air. “Jeez, Valerie! You really oughta slow down.”

“Oh Fisher.” Grabbing some napkins, she swabbed ineffectively at the mess. “And I’d been doing so well today.” What was it about this guy that turned her into Goofy? She never klutzed around anyone else. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, but I’ll wear an asbestos suit and body armor next time I see you. Can I use your apartment to rinse my clothes?”

“Oh sure. Go on up. I left the door unlocked.”

"You're turning into a real Alaskan." He gave her a slow smile that turned her insides into warm honey. *Ooh baby!*

At least he wasn't mad, Valerie thought as she headed up the stairs later. She'd put on a prerecorded news report, so for about fifteen minutes she was free to check on her unexpected guest. Fisher hadn't sounded angry, more...resigned, as though he'd expected something to happen.

That wasn't good, but he'd given her his *ooh baby* smile, the one that promised more hot sex on cold nights with her handsome Alaska man. *Oops!* She admonished herself. *He's not your man, honey.*

Valerie entered her apartment, nearly falling over again at the sight of Fisher lounging on her fur rug, naked. No, not naked, but he might as well be. He wore only a towel slung low over his hips, a smile on his face and a magazine in his hand.

She decided that whoever said turnabout's fair play was an idiot.

Okay, so she'd taunted Fisher last night, sprawling all over her fur rug like a cat in heat and then fucking his brains out. Then this morning she'd deliberately teased him by flirting outrageously with Brent.

But turnabout wasn't fair play in this case. Oh no. Not given the way Fisher looked. Valerie knew she was no match for him.

She didn't overestimate her charms. She had a nice body and an okay face, no more. Fisher had a perfect body, muscular and sleek. With his natural bronze glow burnished a little by the sun but without a tan line in sight, he could have posed for Robert Mapplethorpe. She'd met a lot of good-looking men in L.A., a place that attracted handsome wannabes the way a sponge sucked in water. Not a single one of them held a fraction of Fisher's allure.

He smiled at her. Valerie's temper flared. She wasn't angry at Fisher but at herself. At the age of thirty-four, had she actually fallen for a handsome face attached to a fit body? Great sex and a solid cock?

No. No way. She was far too smart for that. Wasn't she?

So what was it? What did Fisher have that no one else did?

Okay, he was intelligent. He liked words, could fly a plane and fix radio equipment.

He was considerate of others. He'd brought Nina the eggplant dish she craved, helped Valerie on and off with her coat, even gave the Tlingit kids a clubhouse.

But he was a loner who clearly and vehemently said he didn't want a relationship. They'd had sex but not intimacy. She didn't expect words of love, but an indication that he liked her would have been nice.

And now he was nearly naked in her room. Well, she could handle that. Could handle him. She'd proved that last night.

Did they have time for a quickie?

Sure, why not? She set a hand on her hip and smiled at him. "What's up, Fisher?"

He stretched then rose. With the towel knotted around his hips, he sauntered toward her. There was a slight but definite tent in the fabric. He might pretend nonchalance, but he was as turned-on as she.

Her mouth went dry. She fixed her gaze on his throat, the only part of his anatomy that didn't arouse her to a fever. He had a nice-looking neck, but it didn't turn her on the way his dark eyes, his sexy long hair, his seductive lips, his buffed, taut chest—

Stop it, Valerie! And don't look at that towel! She breathed in and out, seeking calmness, praying she wasn't panting as he approached her. She had to play the game, which she normally disliked, but dammit, she'd bring him to his knees. She'd make him beg.

Only inches away, Fisher radiated a brilliant heat. He held a copy of *Cosmopolitan* in his hand. Oh, God help her. He'd found her stash of women's magazines.

At the penultimate moment, he veered to the left and opened the small closet containing the washer-dryer. Inside the closet, the tiny dryer hummed. "I'm waiting for my clothes to dry. These are old machines. They work but they're slow. Now I understand why you seemed so happy when I told you about the washer-dryer." According to this magazine, certain appliances are a girl's best friend." He waved the copy of *Cosmo*.

Valerie squinted at the cover of the magazine, seeing that it advertised an article on vibrators. She decided to brazen this out. "You already know what I like. What do you like, Fisher?" She tugged at the towel around his waist and it fell away, exposing his big, dark cock. She fondled, finding him already half hard. Perfect and straight, he filled her hand. She squeezed.

He gasped. "We don't have much time, do we? You little tease." Dropping the magazine, he caressed her face then threaded his fingers through her hair.

"I never tease. I'm for real, one hundred percent."

"Yeah? Prove it."

"Tell me what you want." She looked him straight in the eyes. "And say please."

Another gasp. His hand clenched around her head. "I want you to make me come. Please, Valerie."

"Okay, fine. I bet we have time for...something." She stroked his cheek then slid her hand around his neck and pulled him close for a kiss.

“Mmmm...” He had the best kisses. Her mind switched off but her body went into instant turn-on mode. His mobile, well-cut lips quivered against hers, and he used them to nip and pull gently on hers before running his tongue around the sensitive inner lining of her lips. When she moaned, he sucked, drawing her tongue into his mouth and tasting it as though it were the most delicious gourmet dish.

Then he went deeper, a long, firm thrust while he ran his hands down to her hips and pressed his hard-on against the seam of her jeans. God, she could feel the heat of it even through the heavy denim. Fisher was hot, damn hot, and she’d have one hell of a time keeping her emotions out of their relationship. He’d been very clear though, and whatever happened, she couldn’t fault him.

She shoved the distracting thoughts out of her mind and reached for him, stroking his rod until he groaned.

“Oh baby, baby, baby...”

“What, Fisher?” she whispered.

“Do me, baby. Do me good.”

She contemplated his cock. Long and hard, it was the color of a ripe purple plum. She’d never seen a cock quite like Fisher’s, probably because she’d never fucked a Tlingit before. She wondered if there were any other guys like him around on Takinsha Island, maybe someone who wasn’t such a hermit.

She reached toward her bed and found, just within reach, a small bottle of lube. She squeezed some into her palm and rubbed it up and down his length. When he was slick and ready, she lightened her touch, made it featherlight, tippity-tapping her fingers up and down then around the ridge at the base of the head. Most of the nerve endings were clustered there, she knew.

She teased him with delicate, gentle caresses until his groans increased in volume and he thrust his hips back and forth in imitation of fucking. He was ready, so she tightened her grip and pumped him almost savagely.

Knees sagging, he came with a howl so loud she bet all of Takinsha knew that Fisher had had an orgasm.

* * * * *

Fisher, reclining on her bed, pried an eye open. “Hey, what’s in this bag?”

"I brought you some food since you didn't have the opportunity to eat anything." Valerie sat next to him and grinned with satisfaction. She loved bringing him to his knees and planned to do it often.

"Thanks. Whatcha got?" His voice matter-of-fact, he reached for the bag she held.

"Not much. A few pieces of paper-wrapped chicken, and I managed to rescue some eggplant from Nina."

He chuckled. "Did you have to use an Uzi?"

She smiled. "She was pretty determined. Is spicy eggplant one of her pregnancy-induced cravings?"

"Sure is."

"I didn't have the nerve to ask her...who's the father?"

"One of the purse-seiners—a fisherman—around here. You'll probably meet Del sometime."

She leaned back on her elbows. "How come they're not married? Doesn't he like kids?"

"Sure, he likes kids. He's already got three or four."

She looked at him, eyebrows raised.

He shrugged. "I've lost count. Anyway, Nina's kind of a confused girl. I don't think she knows what she wants. She headed for Juneau half a dozen times for an abortion and each time came back, saying she wanted a baby to love but terrified of the responsibility."

She nodded. "I can understand that. She's pretty young."

"Everyone on Takinsha told her that they'd pitch in and help. Nina and her baby won't want for anything."

Her heart expanded to fill her chest with some unnamed emotion. Tears prickled behind her lids. "I know you've tried to discourage me from staying. Frankly, I wish you'd stop."

"Just giving you advice for your own good." He seemed impassive, emotionless. Darn him. Couldn't he feel anything, not even after that handjob?

"I know what's good for me, Fisher, not you." She looked him square in his calm eyes. "I'm glad I'm here. Do you think that South Hollywood or Covina or Melrose would tell a young, unwed mother that she and her baby will never want for anything?"

He blinked. "I dunno. I guess not. But we've known Nina all her life."

"I like that, and I like it here."

“Yeah, well, let’s talk again in February—if you’re still around.”

* * * * *

parasomnias, pa-ra-som-ni-as: (n): sleep disorders, including night terrors,

sleepwalking, dream anxiety disorder

Gasping, Fisher awakened, trapped in sweat-soaked pajamas and twisted sheets. Horrific images sped through his mind.

The road again, the bombed-out one in the mountains.

Orphaned kids missing limbs because they’d stepped on a land mine.

Hollow-eyed teenaged girls, gang-rape victims, flinching at the approach of any male.

Entire families, staggering with the weight of all the possessions they could carry, stumbling away from their looted and burned homes toward dubious safety at the end of the road.

Fisher blew out a resigned breath. Banishing the frightful memories to the past where they belonged, he disentangled himself from the mangled bedclothes and padded to the bathroom. He discarded his damp pajamas, ran a cold shower then stepped in to sluice away the stinking detritus of his military career.

After drying himself, he took another of his dozen pairs of washable cotton PJs from a drawer, noting that he had four sets left for the rest of the week. He donned only the drawstring bottoms before opening a window. The sound of the ocean waves flowed in, nearby and comforting. The cool, crisp night air spilled over his flesh.

His tingling body reminded him of Valerie Percy, and the way he felt about her.

He'd known she was going to be trouble the moment she drove off the ferry. She was too cute, too charming, and too all-out sexy, even when she smashed into his truck or drenched him with soup. She had a directness about her, an honesty that made every silly thing she did forgivable. She'd slipped under his skin way too fast.

Archie had made avoiding her impossible. Fisher had tried to discourage her from staying in Alaska, and that tactic had also failed.

What was he going to do about Valerie Percy? Beautiful and bright, she lit up every room she entered. And the sex... If he knew what was good for him, he'd quit doing her. She was hotter than any woman between Alaska and Iraq. She was everything any sane man would want in a woman.

But Fisher wasn't sure he was quite sane. What sane man was tortured by ghosts from the past, night after night, for years?

He sighed, surveying his wrecked bed, the pillow clammy with sweat. While changing the pillowcase, he again decided that he couldn't subject Valerie or any other woman to his life.

Chapter Six

When Valerie didn't hear from Fisher for a couple of days, she swallowed her disappointment. Resolving to get over her infatuation with him, she decided to accept dates from other men.

A fisherman named Clyde Harvey asked Valerie out. He'd been in the Yellow Snow Café during Valerie's breakfast but claimed he didn't believe in Hannah's predictions. He took her to the Wild Salmon but insisted upon rejecting dish after dish. Clyde seemed to think that his job made him an authority on seafood. If he hadn't caught dinner personally and could vouch for its freshness, it wasn't good enough for his date.

Valerie simply wanted to eat. She ended up with a chicken salad, casting covetous glances at the baked, barbecued and poached salmon dishes on which other diners were feasting. Clyde offered to take her to his place for a "topnotch fish dinner", but Valerie guessed that she'd be on the menu when he suggestively stroked his hiking boot up and down her shin.

Someone needed to tell Clyde that the muddy, waffled sole of his Red Wings wasn't sexy.

Then she went out with Ron Sanger. Ron was interesting, a real old sourdough...with emphasis on the word "sour". Fisher at his quietest was a ray of sunshine compared to Ron. Plus, the man didn't appear to have a source of income.

Perhaps she was too critical. But try as she might, so far, the only man she'd met in Alaska who'd rung her chimes was Fisher Chugatt. Fisher, who'd actively discouraged her, even telling her to leave. Fisher, who was so reclusive that a person couldn't get to his remote home without a plane or a boat.

Maybe she just needed a little patience. She understood that when the summer was over the tourists would leave and the fishing season would quiet down. The local males would have more time to devote to matters other than survival, like dating and mating.

* * * * *

Four days later, Fisher stopped by the station at eight a.m. to take Valerie on another Takinsha Island excursion. He told himself he was there only because Archie had asked him to show Valerie around. It had nothing to do with the rumors about her social life.

Apparently she'd been dating losers like Clyde Harvey and Ron Sanger. Though she was thirty-four, Fisher concluded that she didn't know squat about men, at least not about the locals. Clyde, a fisherman, had probably told her he was a trawlerman or a purse-seiner, which meant a lot of money. Clyde actually was a deckhand, working for a small share of a boat's seasonal profits. He couldn't support Valerie or the passel of rug rats she'd surely want when she settled down.

And Ron... Fisher blew out his breath in an exasperated sigh. The man was nothing more than one of the many bums Alaska spawned. He hunted and fished when he could, and hadn't held a job for decades. What money he did have came from the annual oil dividend paid by the State of Alaska to residents.

Neither of those men was good enough for Valerie. Even if he couldn't have her, Fisher felt he had an obligation to make sure she'd be all right. Maybe she and Brent wouldn't have worked out, but there were other men around.

Somewhere.

And in the meantime, he'd occupy her time so she wouldn't go astray with the wrong kind of guy. His gut clenched when he envisioned losers like Clyde and Ron touching Valerie's perfect skin or kissing her tasty nipples. No way was that gonna happen.

Fisher poured himself a cup of coffee and watched Valerie descend the stairs. Damn, but she was fine. No way did lowlifes like Clyde or Ron deserve her. Today she wore her snazzy, zebra-print jeans and a sweater decorated with multicolored sequins.

Ms. Flamboyant was back.

"Been wondering where you were, Chugatt," Archie said, beetling his brows.

Wrenching his gaze from Valerie, Fisher gave his boss a bland stare. "Anything wrong with the radio equipment?"

"No, but Valerie here's been eager to see more of Alaska. Take her over to Valdez or Juneau or maybe to see a glacier."

"Hmm. I'll have to go back home for the plane. I took one of my boats this morning."

"That's fine with me," Valerie put in. "I'll go with you. I like boats."

"Okay," Fisher said with reluctance. "Just don't touch the engine, all right?"

He escorted her toward the harbor, mind churning at the prospect of Valerie in his house. Women didn't come to his home. Fisher's brief, infrequent encounters with the opposite sex never took place in his bed. Avoiding entanglements, he always used protection and wouldn't stay an entire night. The only females who'd ever been to his house were his mother and sisters.

Valerie in his home...not a healthy prospect. Seeing her there might make him want to keep her there. He refused to dream about a future he couldn't have.

* * * * *

Praying she wouldn't fall off the dock into the freezing water, Valerie clambered down from the wharf into Fisher's boat, a fifteen-foot craft with a substantial-looking outboard on the back. A header into the harbor would solidify his opinion of her as a hopeless ditz. Though she kept reminding herself that he wasn't a marital prospect, Valerie nevertheless wanted him to think well of her. She wanted to resume the "friends with benefits" arrangement they'd had going.

Maneuver completed, she sat on the forward bench of the boat while Fisher cast off and jumped in. After zipping his parka and donning gloves, he knelt by the engine and yanked its starter cord. It roared to life. Hand on the tiller, he piloted the boat out of the calm harbor into the channel between Takinsha Island and the Alaska mainland, a waterway several miles wide.

Valerie pulled her knitted hat over her ears and huddled into her down jacket. The sharp wind and salt spray off the pewter-colored sea whipped her cheeks.

Fisher dug a tube of lip protectant from his pocket and offered it to her. Reaching for it, she realized that if she used it, she'd be sharing something with Fisher that had—*ooh baby!*—touched his lips.

She looked into his face to see if he was affected by the intimacy of sharing, but his narrowed eyes were trained on the water in front of the boat.

Valerie sighed and stroked some of the stuff onto her mouth, telling herself that every casual act didn't have an inner significance. Fisher was just being Fisher, an ordinary, nice guy who didn't want her lips to get chapped.

She handed the tube to Fisher. He applied it before putting it in his pocket. He slowed the boat. Pulling off a glove, Valerie trailed her fingers in the icy water. He pointed. About fifty feet away, several shining, black-and-white backs broke the surface.

She jerked her hand out of the sea. "Oh my God. Are they—"

"Yep. Orcas." He smiled. "They probably fed at dawn and now they're just playing around for a while."

"They play?" She dried her fingers on her pants.

"Sure. They're like other dolphins."

"I thought they were killer whales."

"They're called that, but they're actually large dolphins. They have an undeserved vicious reputation."

Putting her glove back on, Valerie shivered inside her parka. "I saw a video of a killer whale attacking a white shark and winning."

"Yeah, I saw the same film. That put to rest the question of who's the baddest predator in the ocean. Don't worry, we're not on their menu."

An orca surfaced close to the boat, its open, curved jaws revealing a row of conical teeth.

"I'm glad I'm not a salmon."

"Or a seal. But they're really kinda cute. Look at that little one over there."

Valerie looked, and saw a baby orca flipping over on its back. She giggled. "A little orca gymnast. But this water is so cold. It's hard to imagine living in it, even enjoying it."

"They're superbly adapted creatures. Unlike humans. We really don't belong here."

She held up a hand. "Please, Fisher. If you're going to lecture me again on why I should go back to L.A., please know you're wasting your breath."

He shrugged. "Whatever you say, *cheechako* girl."

She gritted her teeth. She'd show him. She wouldn't merely survive in Alaska but enjoy her life here.

The boat rounded a spit of black rocks jutting into the sea then sped into a sheltered cove with a southern exposure. Fisher throttled down as they approached a small dock.

Tucked in the lee of a forested knoll, about a hundred yards from the shoreline, sat a stone hut with a sod roof and solar panels. A small, high-tech windmill sprouted from one side of the cottage's

roof. A flowering vine that looked from afar like a thorny rockrose curled around one of the rock pilings supporting the porch. Fisher's home, with its combination of traditional and new technology, looked as though a clan of imaginative, modern dwarves had created it.

"What a cool place. It blends into the forest, like it grew here naturally." Valerie was entranced.

"I built it into the hillside. Stays warmer that way."

"It's by far the most unique house I've ever seen."

Looking proud, Fisher cut the engine. The boat drifted toward the dock, gently bumping the float plane.

Grabbing the boat's bowline, Valerie jumped onto the dock. She looped the rope around a handy piling.

He began to step from the boat to the dock, his weight swaying the small craft. Her knot slipped, and she realized she hadn't correctly tied up the boat. The skiff lurched away from the small pier.

Fisher lost his balance. He fell with a splash and a shouted curse into the chilly water.

"Oh my God!" Valerie screamed, grabbing the rope. She knew that the deep, cold salt water off the dock, just above freezing level, could injure or kill within a few moments. Drowning wasn't likely, but the cold could incapacitate him so quickly that his fingers and toes could freeze before he could struggle to the shore.

Chilled to the bones, Fisher swam and staggered out of the achingly cold water toward the shoreline as fast as his waterlogged clothing and boots would allow. Charm, his retriever mutt, barked in greeting as he dashed to the porch.

Ignoring Valerie, who'd stuck to his side like an anxious, talkative suckerfish, he stripped to the skin, yanked open the front door and ran inside his house.

His blessedly warm house.

Sprinting to the shower, he turned it on and jumped in. He figured that Charm and Valerie could work out their relationship for themselves. He trusted that Charm, whose name described her personality, wouldn't hurt Valerie. But given the VW, soup and boat incidents, he wasn't sure that his dog would survive Valerie.

Damn that woman anyhow. She was a great fuck and he liked her, but she was going to be the death of him.

* * * * *

Driven beyond embarrassment by her latest blunder, Valerie invaded Fisher's small kitchen to heat a can of soup. Fixing something hot for him was the least she could do.

She felt even guiltier about the incident because she'd taken the opportunity to check out his body when he was naked and freezing from the cold. Despite the chilly water, his cock held an allure she couldn't deny. *You have no shame*, she said to herself.

While the soup was warming, Valerie snapped her fingers at Fisher's dog. "Hey there, sweetheart."

The dog came willingly, tail thumping, rubbing a big, wedge-shaped head against her arm.

Valerie slid her hand around the dog's leather collar to locate the tags. A heart-shaped tag read *Charm*.

"Hello, Charm." She snapped her fingers again. The dog capered and barked. Charm, a rangy animal with glossy black fur and brown eyes, was living proof that dogs often resemble their owners or vice versa.

Valerie frowned and said aloud, "Charm." What had Fisher said the day they'd met? He lived here because the place had charm. She winced. Yet another pun. The man was obsessed.

"Well, at least he's thinking," she said to the dog.

Stepping into the living room while the soup heated, Valerie used the matches on the mantel to light a pile of kindling and dry branches already arranged in the potbellied stove. While they caught fire, she gave in to impulse and snooped around Fisher's house.

Her first impression was of neatness and a sense of peace.

The wood mantel was carved with a variety of Tlingit symbols. Photographs on the mantel showed a large, cheerful-looking family with lots of kids. Fisher had been a cute little boy, but the only one among several girls.

A leather love seat, comfy for one but big enough for two, was set near the stove for warmth. One reading lamp and table, not two, sat at the end of the small sofa. A red and black quilt bearing the raven symbol was tossed over the back.

This was Fisher's private, cozy nest. She could picture him hunkered down in the sofa, covered by a quilt with Charm at his feet, snuggled in on a cold winter night.

The walls were lined with books. She added a couple of split logs to the blaze growing in the stove before examining the titles. She saw quite a few she enjoyed. Classics including *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *A Raisin in the Sun* jostled paperback thrillers along with some nonfiction like *The Power of Myth* and glossy art books featuring Tlingit sculpture.

Charm's paws pattered softly on the rugs as she followed Valerie around the house. Fisher's study, an alcove off the main room, featured a small desk with the *New York Times* crossword puzzle placed in the middle of the blotter. Peering closer, Valerie could see that Fisher had confidently begun solving the puzzle in ink.

Nearby, an open dictionary rested on a stand. It was open to the Cs.

"Like what you see?"

Valerie jumped then turned.

Fisher loomed in the alcove's doorway, clad in a quilted red robe that displayed a V of muscular male chest. His bared flesh was the appealing shade of dark wildflower honey. In addition, he wore fur slippers and a slight smile.

Fixing her gaze on his throat, Valerie said, "Anyone who can do the *Times* puzzle in ink impresses the hell out of me." She flipped through the dictionary toward the front. "Nice. How old is it?"

"It was my grandfather's. 1945, I think."

"Wow."

He laughed. "I smell food cooking. Have you blown up my kitchen yet?"

Chapter Seven

calamity, cal-am-ih-tee: (n) disaster, mishap

As far as Fisher was concerned, the definition of calamity in his Webster's needed exactly seven letters—V-A-L-E-R-I-E. First the car then the soup, and now a dunk into the icy drink off his dock.

He didn't understand it. He knew his boat was a stable, safe craft. Not even Charm had ever tipped the boat.

"I know you're not going to believe this," Valerie said, walking ahead of him to the kitchen. "But this never happens with other men."

"You're right. I don't believe it."

"I'm not a klutz, really."

"So, you didn't spill water over Clyde during your dinner? Crash your Bug into Ron's truck?"

A twinkle appeared in her blue eyes. "I strongly suspect that Ron doesn't have a truck."

Hmmm. Maybe Valerie was more savvy about men than she appeared. "Sure he does. It's up on blocks in his living room."

"He has a living room?"

"What you would call a front yard." He leaned against the counter.

"And Clyde's life has more than enough water. Seawater. With fish. Lots of them, or so he tells me."

He raised his brows. "Uh-huh. Did he offer to show you his boat?"

"No, and I was quite surprised."

Fisher opened a drawer and took out a spoon. "That's because he doesn't have one."

"Aha. So there was a little exaggeration in Clyde's tales of heroism on the sea?"

"Just a little." He stirred the soup. She'd picked a can of tomato rice, one of his favorites. "This looks like it needs a few more minutes."

"Oh, I'll take care of it."

The thought of Valerie in his kitchen terrified him. "Just don't dump it all over me, okay? I like this robe."

"So do I." She stared at his chest.

He grinned then walked to the living room with Valerie again stuck to his side as though superglued. He felt a combination of male satisfaction and mild alarm. Ms. Hap was in his home, and he was afraid his place would never be the same.

When they entered the room, Charm, now comfortably curled on a rug near the sofa, thumped her tail in greeting. He opened the door of the stove to check the fire, which looked as though it had caught satisfactorily.

He stood then turned to face Valerie. "Are you mad at me?" he asked.

"Mad? At you?" She stared at him as though he'd sprouted horns and a tail. "Why should you think I'm mad at you?"

"The VW, the soup and now the impromptu swim." He shrugged. "I guess introducing you to Brent, knowing he's not your type, was wrong—"

"Aha! So you admit it!"

"But you don't have to drown me or freeze my behind to make your point."

Valerie drew in a deep breath, visibly struggling for calm. Good. Fisher was glad he'd thrown her a curve ball she couldn't hit out of the park. She'd been pitching strikeouts at his head since they'd met.

"No," she finally said. "I'm not mad at you. First of all, we hadn't even met when I lost control of the Bug, remember?"

"But the soup and now the dump in the drink?" He raised his eyebrows at her.

"I am not mad." She enunciated every word clearly. She took another breath then appeared to arrive at a decision. "Let me prove it."

She sucked in more oxygen, grabbed him by the lapels of his robe and kissed him.

Pleasure exploded, igniting his body in a glorious myriad of snaps and sparks. Closing his eyes, Fisher kissed her back with a desperation borne of pure need, wrapping his arms around her to haul her in tight. His arms full of warm, curvy woman, he again surrendered to the desire that had possessed him since the first moment he'd seen Valerie Percy.

With her body molded tightly to his, she felt even better than he remembered. Her mouth looked so soft and gentle, but Valerie kissed like a Jezebel, the embodiment of female lust, devouring and demanding, all teeth and tongue and blatant greed. He shoved a hand into her hair, cradling her head, turning and moving her so he could kiss her the way he liked. Cracking open an eyelid, he eased her out of the kitchen and into the living room then tumbled her onto the couch.

She opened her eyes and gave a startled gasp.

"Prove it some more," he said roughly.

She kissed him again, gripping the lapels of his robe and tugging them apart to expose more of his chest. One cool hand slid over his skin. With his flesh warmed by the hot shower, the contrast was maddening, inflaming his desire for her to a feverish pitch. She reached down and wrapped her fingers around his hard-on. Both his pulse and his dick jumped.

When she scraped a fingernail over his chest while squeezing him tight, he thought he'd come right there. He pulled his mouth away from hers. "Sweet Lord in heaven, woman, what are you doing to me?"

"I'm doing what you want," she whispered, her voice low and husky. "What we both want."

Contact with Valerie Percy was incendiary, lighting a fire in his blood he'd never be able to quench except inside her. Without loosening her grip, she ran her tongue down his body, digressing briefly to scrape her tongue across one of his nipples. It hardened, and she smiled. She treated the other one to a tongue bath, licking around it in concentric circles before nipping the tip.

He groaned. She let go of his rod, then squirmed off the couch and dropped to her knees. She parted his legs and buried her face in his crotch.

Valerie inhaled. "Aaah..." His unique tang tickled her senses. *I could get addicted to this man*, she thought. Dismissing that insane notion, she nuzzled his balls with nose and mouth then opened her lips to take his perfect cock into her mouth, all the way to the root.

She swallowed, allowing her throat to rub the sensitive edge of the cap of flesh that domed his penis. A husky groan told her that she was making Fisher a very happy guy. Pulling away, she smiled up at him. "Still think I'm mad?"

He managed a chuckle. "Maybe a little."

She stifled her grin so she could run her tongue along his length, measuring him with little flicks that turned into bolder strokes. She ran her tongue around his cock head, teasing and tormenting the tender ridge.

He reached for her shoulders. "I want to eat your pussy." His voice was a low, sexy growl.

She didn't need to be invited twice and stood to rip off her jeans. Naked from the waist down, with the warmth from the stove bathing her bare buttocks, she positioned herself on the love seat so his mouth was level with her cunt, hoping that they'd treat each other to a nice bout of sixty-nine. He spread her legs, setting one on each shoulder, and lowered his head to her muff. He found her clit with a sure and steady tongue and gave her a long, firm lap.

Her clit tingled, awakening, and her body heated. "Yesssss..." Valerie moaned, wondering how she'd manage to finish the blowjob while he kissed her so sweetly and so well. And Fisher was very thorough, using his lips and tongue to explore every fold and dip. His long, damp hair brushed against her thighs, heightening her pleasure. She felt her cunt swell with need, and he used his thumbs to spread open her lower lips so he could tease her clit with flicks of his tongue.

"You have the most gorgeous pussy." He tweaked one of her labia. "Nice full lips that say fuck me. Fuck me good."

She took his cock into her mouth again, quickly, all the way to the root, then pulled away just as fast. He groaned. "Please..." She couldn't help grinning around his rod. She loved to hear him beg, evidence of his need and desire for her. Perhaps it was because Fisher so steadfastly denied wanting a relationship.

She cupped his balls, fondling him with a tender caress, then licked a glistening drop of pre-come from the tip. Thick, it coated her tongue. She licked him as though he was an ice-cream cone, and he imitated her moves, swirling his tongue around her clit in circles that altered to a figure eight pattern as he included her vagina.

She cried out, enticingly close to coming, and sucked him in again. His shaft throbbed inside her mouth. Fisher was also on the verge, and she wanted to push him over the edge so hard he'd never forget it. She wrapped her fingers around the base of his cock, squeezing, and jerked her head back and forth, mouth-fucking his cock as his hips moved in rhythm with her, his rod surging in and out.

He filled her mouth, almost too big, too deep. She pulled away, breathed on him, and nipped the very tip. Fisher shouted, "Oh God, Valerie, I'm gonna come..." She wanted every drop of his come, so she popped him back into her mouth, swallowing as fast as she could as his cock shuddered and spurted a torrent of seed.

He leaned back against the love seat, apparently spent, before thrusting two fingers inside her wet and ready slit. Though he'd come, he hadn't forgotten her, she realized. He set his lips around her clit, suckling her the same way he did her nipples. Pleasure flooded her with increased delight, heightening with every throb and pulse of his lips against her clit. She pushed her pussy hard against his

mouth, his probing hand deep in her channel. One fingertip found her G-spot, and she moaned, "There, yes, there..."

He rubbed inside her again and she came, panting, with a hot rush of crackles and sparks seeming to envelop her body with an unforgettable sensual heat.

Fisher wanted to regret what they'd just done, but it had been too good. He had to remind himself of the many reasons that he couldn't get close to Valerie Percy. Yeah, he wanted her, but this was wrong. Wrong for both of them.

But he couldn't pull away from her completely. Instead, he eased back into the couch's cushions, taking her with him, tucked into the curve of his arm. He glanced down at Valerie's blonde head. The firelight flickered red onto the gold of her hair.

A hot breath from her open mouth sighed onto his chest. He massaged the back of her head, encouraging her sensual explorations. She laid a tender trail of kisses to his throat. His arm tightened involuntarily around her slender frame, holding her close.

Valerie kissed Fisher again, this time with less intensity but more true emotion. Her blood now danced at a slower pace through her veins, gliding in a slow waltz rather than a frantic tarantella. Every touch, every loving caress of his hand on her body made her ever more certain of her desire and her need for him.

Just for Fisher. No one else would do.

He murmured, "I wanted this from the moment I saw you, with those crazy fingernails and that silly pom-pom on your hat."

Her heart warmed. "Me too. Even though you don't have a cool hat like mine."

Fisher chuckled then stroked his lips along hers. "I can still taste that lip balm I lent you. I thought I'd go crazy watching you put it on the mouth I wanted to kiss so much."

"Liar." She snuggled closer to take the sting out of her words. "You weren't watching me. You were steering the boat."

"Oh, I was watching you, all right. Every sexy move you made." Still cuddling her, he settled into the couch with a grumbling sigh that embodied male happiness. She sensed tension reenter his body just before he said, "I think I smell the soup burning."

"Oh my God." Valerie jumped up and went into the kitchen.

Smiling, Fisher watched Valerie's naked rump sway back and forth as she sashayed into the kitchen. He'd been right. Everything had changed when Valerie Percy had come into his life. He felt as though he'd been asleep and she'd awakened him. Staring into the fire, visible through the glass plate on the front of the stove, he wondered if he should tell her the truth. How would she take the news that the man she wanted was tormented by a psychological disorder?

Sick, she'd say. Then she'd walk out, correctly concluding she couldn't love someone who was mentally ill.

Wasn't that what he wanted?

The flames danced.

On the other hand, they'd agreed that their relationship wasn't anything serious. Why worry? Why say anything to her at all?

Their romance couldn't go anywhere. It would stop right here. He'd see to that.

But they'd made some great memories. Closing his eyes, Fisher stretched out on the love seat, pulled the quilt off the back and onto his legs, and relived Valerie's excellent BJ and the incredible sixty-nine that had followed.

* * * * *

When Valerie returned from the kitchen, carrying two mugs filled with soup, she found Fisher slumbering on the couch.

Totally relaxed and temptingly available, Fisher's very kissable lips were parted slightly, an open invitation. One brawny leg had flopped off the sofa onto the floor. Neither the carelessly draped quilt nor his half-open robe hid his relaxed cock.

She smiled. But before she stole another kiss, possibly awakening him, she noticed dark circles under his eyes. Maybe he hadn't slept well lately, she thought, and decided to let him snooze.

Setting down the soup onto the nearby table, she picked a book from the shelf then settled down to read by firelight.

But her mind wandered. At age thirty-four, Valerie had enjoyed a fair number of liaisons with men. In her line of work, she'd met musicians as well as other radio personnel. She'd interviewed a few actors, even dated one or two. The plastic-fantastic people in show business seemed obsessed by their

appearances and their careers. They were secondarily interested in Hollywood gossip—who was sleeping with whom and how much they'd earned in their last contract or movie.

Her parents, two prosperous, successful Beverly Hills doctors, had pampered and spoiled their family with every material possession possible in the apparent belief that “He who dies with the most toys wins”. Valerie loved them dearly while realizing their limitations. They'd been astonished then appalled by her decision to move to Alaska.

Valerie had never experienced anyone remotely like Fisher Chugatt. Perhaps that accounted for his mystique, she mused, gazing into the flickering flames behind the stove's glass door. He was different.

He didn't care about appearances. His banged-up truck showed that. Fisher was a strictly utilitarian kind of guy. But he maintained standards. His home was immaculate but comfortable, reflecting who he was without artifice. She couldn't picture Fisher living the way Brent did.

Despite the odds, he didn't seem bent on impressing her, unlike Clyde and Ron. Self-contained and independent, he was as close to a hermit as anyone she'd met.

Did she want him because he was unattainable and unavailable? Valerie frowned. The thrill of the chase couldn't compel her. But she was experienced enough to know the difference between lust and love. Fisher fascinated her in a way no other man ever had.

On the other hand, could she share the kind of life he led?

Deep inside, something shifted in her heart, and she realized...she wanted it all.

Marriage and children.

Family and home.

She sat back into her chair, momentarily stunned.

She had a new vision of her future. A future with Fisher, for the vision had Fisher happily cuddling a dark-haired child on the same couch on which he now slumbered.

Was that possible? It would be ironic indeed if the man who'd awakened her dormant nesting instinct was someone with whom she could never share her new dreams.

Their romance would provide some fleeting pleasure. Okay, a lot of fleeting pleasure. Over-the-top ecstasy but ultimately her infatuation with him would steal time away from a serious pursuit of someone interested in the lifestyle she now knew she craved.

Men were possessive and territorial creatures by nature, and Takinsha Island was a small community. If others believed that she belonged to Fisher, she could kiss her chances with any other man on Takinsha goodbye, despite the amazing odds.

She couldn't have anything more than a strictly professional relationship with Fisher.

She had to give him up.

Tomorrow.

* * * * *

Fisher stirred when a warm, soft mouth pressed to his. "Ummm."

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty," Valerie murmured.

He slid a limp, relaxed arm around her shoulder then kissed back before he remembered he wasn't supposed to lead her on anymore. "Uh, what time is it?"

She glanced at her watch, a slender, elegant band in gold and silver that probably cost more than he earned in a year. "Eleven. Time to head back to the station."

"Oh no." He sat up and rubbed his eyes.

Valerie scooted away, allowing him space. "I wanted to let you rest for as long as possible. I figured you needed it."

"Yeah, I didn't sleep much last night." He stood, stretched, and walked in the direction of his bedroom.

"Why not?"

He turned. Valerie sat on the couch, arms spread over the back, with a smug expression on her face. "Were you worrying about my social life?" she asked.

"Huh?" His mind, still fuzzy from sleep, had gone blank.

"You sure seemed to know a lot about my dates with Clyde and Ron."

A reluctant chuckle slipped out before he could stop it. "Trust me, Valerie, I'm not worried about Clyde and Ron. I'm worried about you."

"That's very sweet." Rising, she sauntered over to him, standing way too close for comfort. She slipped her arms around his neck. "How worried?"

He brushed his lips over hers, a brief touch of rapture. "Not very. I know you're a grown woman in charge of her own destiny."

All woman, as a matter of fact, Fisher reflected as he dressed in clean, dry clothes. But she wasn't for him. Surveying his messy bed, with the sheets twisted from last night's bad dreams, he realized that although she was all woman, she'd have to be somebody else's girl.

Chapter Eight

Valerie glared at Fisher and her boss. “You want me to do *what*?” She crossed her arms in front of her chest and perched one hip on Nina’s desk at K-AKA.

Archie explained, “Look, Valerie, the Takinsha Labor Day Festival is one of the last big blowouts this town sees before going into hibernation for the winter.”

“Yep,” Fisher said. “And the Bush Babe Competition is the best part of the festival.”

“Sure is.” Nina leaned back in her chair.

“The Bush Babe Competition?” Valerie couldn’t believe her ears. “You expect me to participate in something called the Bush Babe Competition?”

“Sure, why not?” Fisher grinned at her.

She narrowed her eyes at him. Since the sweet *soixante-neuf* in his home, he’d retreated behind his impenetrable Great Stone Face, as Nina Exley called it. But now, a week later, he’d again entered full tease mode. That was an improvement, she supposed. “Let me guess. All the eligible women on Takinsha wear bathing suits and compete for the title of Miss Congeniality, right?”

Both men laughed. “This is Alaska, Valerie,” Archie said. “A Bush Babe doesn’t need to twirl a baton or strut down a catwalk.”

“I can set up a mobile unit so you can broadcast a play-by-play from the competition site,” Fisher said to Archie.

“Good thinking, Chugatt.” Archie clapped Fisher on the shoulder. “That’ll be a great promo.”

“Why can’t Nina do it?” Valerie asked.

“Fat chance, *cheechako* girl,” Nina said.

“She’s pregnant. It’s a physically strenuous competition. You wouldn’t want her to hurt the baby, would you?” Fisher asked.

“Of course not. I like babies.” Damn him, he knew exactly how to get to her.

He raised his brows, an “I told you so” expression on his face. That was okay with her. It was time he knew her true intentions.

“Come on, Valerie,” Archie said heartily. “It’ll be a great way to meet people and get to know them.”

“Think of it as an extension of your Takinsha Island education,” Fisher added.

* * * * *

Two weeks later, Valerie struggled to light a fire and catch a fish while Fisher Chugatt, Clyde Harvey, Brent Saronov and a host of other Takinsha Island bachelors hooted and hollered from the opposite side of the icy Tagook River. Nearby, her boss broadcast every move she made to the entire island.

The first round of the Bush Babe competition required participants to catch a fish measuring at least eighteen inches long, clean it, cook it then deliver the meal to the contest judges—several local males—for their enjoyment.

Fortunately, Valerie knew how to fish. Her father, who Valerie suspected of wishing she’d been born a boy, had taken her on countless fishing expeditions. She’d learned to fish off the Santa Monica pier, had reeled in trout out of high Sierra lakes, had even angled for marlin with her parents in Hawaii.

Little of that had prepared her for the Bush Babe competition, where she’d been presented with a pile of junk with which to prepare a meal for the panel of Alaska men who’d judge her.

Sorting everything out, she’d found a fishing pole but no bait, a frying pan but no butter or lard with which to cook the fish, a knife and an axe.

“She’s struggling, folks,” Archie said into his microphone. A speaker on a nearby stand blared the play-by-play to onlookers. “Newcomer Valerie Percy, the K-AKA contestant, can’t find enough kindling for her fire. That’ll erase the lead she won by getting her rod in the water first.”

The small river—a creek, really—ran through a kind of land called “muskeg”, and Valerie couldn’t see any trees or firewood anywhere. The brownish-green muskeg looked like a peaty bog. The land was lush, though not timbered, and she smelled sage and saw berries of an unknown species. The water in a nearby pond appeared sepia brown and muddy. She’d have to search for any dry branches with which to make a fire, and that would be no small task.

Glancing at the bank of the stream, she saw the tip of her rod bobbing. She didn't want to lose her catch, so she grabbed all the dry plant material she could find before bringing it back to her makeshift fire ring.

"And it looks like Valerie will land the first fish," Archie said. "No, wait! Amy Katlian is also bringing in her catch."

"Good going, Amy! Right on!" Fisher yelled.

Valerie ground her back teeth, knowing she had no right whatsoever to feel envious of any relationship Fisher might have with Amy. *He's not right for you, remember?* she admonished herself.

Archie continued. "The other three contestants still wait anxiously by their rods. Bring 'em over to be measured, gals."

Valerie was pleased to note that her fish was several inches bigger than Amy's. Amy, a round, cheerful woman with Tlingit-dark hair and eyes, smiled at Valerie. "Good luck," she said.

Despite her jealousy, Valerie smiled back. She speculated that Amy was probably another woman whom Fisher the loner would reject, if his reputation as a marriage hater held true.

"After cleaning their fish, all contestants have a stiff wind to fight to get that fire lit." Archie's voice boomed.

Valerie put building a fire out of her mind while she tackled her immediate problem. Her father had always cleaned the fish she'd caught, and she didn't know quite what to do or how to do it.

To her right, about ten yards away, Amy competently stuck her knife into her fish, slit it up the belly and jerked out its innards.

Valerie wanted to throw up. The men on the opposite bank hooted and catcalled. "What's wrong, *cheechako* girl, can't cut the mustard?" one of them taunted.

She gritted her teeth and whacked the fish's head off. "Go, Valerie!" Fisher yelled. "Woo-hoo!"

She shot him a grim smile. Lifting the knife, she let the thin sunshine flash along the blade before she sliced off the fish's tail and fins then gutted it neatly. She flung the entrails in the direction of the men.

They landed in the stream. She went to the bank and, ducking her head so the men wouldn't see her retch, rinsed the fish and her hands. She used the knife to scrape out the inside of the fish. Using a clean, flat rock as her kitchen counter, she split it down the middle. She'd pull off the skin after she poached it in water from the Tagook.

Valerie found herself astonished at how well she was doing in comparison to the other four entrants. Three other women still had their lines in the water. Amy was gathering twigs and sticks with which to start her fire.

Knowing she had to scramble, Valerie lit her kindling, watched it catch then walked away from the others to find firewood. Deeper in the bog, she located treasure trove. A withered old tree, twisted and dry, had fallen on its side. Perfect.

She dashed back to fetch her axe, wondering at herself. Never in her life had she guessed she'd become a fisherman-lumberjack. Well, that's an Alaska woman, she told herself.

* * * * *

Fisher had thought that a city slicker like Valerie would come in dead last in the Bush Babe competition. Once again she'd proved him wrong. She wasn't stupid or soft. She was strong as the mountains looming over Takinsha. Even though she'd almost tossed her cookies while cleaning her fish, she'd won the fishing section of the competition. And she'd looked great while doing it, in a green sequined sweater and tight black jeans.

Between the two rounds of the contest, she strolled by his face-painting booth and gave him a wink. Despite his determination to remain unaffected by her, he couldn't help responding to her flirtation, at least inside. Outwardly he struggled to stay calm while his libido lost the fight. But he promised himself he wouldn't show it.

Since the amazing sixty-nine on his love seat, both had stayed away from each other. Fisher, knowing he was wrong for Valerie, had consciously avoided her. Archie hadn't demanded that Fisher take her around anymore, and he wondered if she'd said something to their boss to make him lay off.

He'd heard she'd been dating frequently, and it had taken an effort not to interfere or intervene. She was an adult and well able to take care of herself. She could make her own decisions throughout her life.

Too bad he couldn't be a part of that life.

He'd heard that a lot of people on Takinsha liked Valerie. Her innovative programming appealed to everyone. She played big-hair rock and rap for the twenty-something males and bubble-gum pop for preteen girls. She created a show called "Dancin' to the Oldies" that had become an island favorite. People now danced through their chores.

She played the Grateful Dead at midnight and *Here Comes the Rain Again* on gloomy days. The retired military men loved the canned Martha Stewart shows she aired. Fisher felt it appealed to their need for an orderly hearth and home after the tumult of war.

That was probably why Fisher never missed the Martha Stewart hour.

Now, using black eyebrow pencil and red lip liner, he drew the outlines of a Tlingit-style orca on Jonah Felton's cheek. Fisher knew that Jonah, the nine-year-old son of one of the trawlermen, was distantly related to the orca clan through his mother.

"That fish tasted great," Fisher told Valerie as he carefully filled in the orca. "They're gonna be all over you."

"Who are?" Jonah asked.

"The men at the festival. That's why Valerie came to Takinsha. She wants to get married, right?" He gave her a big, know-it-all wink.

"As if." Valerie saucily batted her eyes at him.

Jonah crinkled his nose. "I wouldn't stick around here and get married. That's boring. I'm gonna go to college in Juneau or Seattle and have a career."

"I bet you will, dude." Fisher patted the boy's shoulder. "Okay, you're done. Wanna see?"

Jonah picked up the mirror Fisher offered. "Whoa, cool! I'm gonna go show my mom. Thanks, Fisher." Before Jonah left, he dropped some coins into the box by Fisher's side.

"What's that for?" Valerie asked.

"This face-painting booth will raise money for the Tlingit Teen Center."

"Your pet project for the kids. Fisher, you really love kids. So how come you don't have any?"

Why didn't she take her knife and shove it into his gut? Disembowel him the way she did the fish? It would feel better than the question she'd asked. "I can't really answer that. Excuse me."

Valerie stared after Fisher as he walked off, his face bleak and hard.

What in heaven's name had she said that was so wrong? Okay, so Fisher had made it clear that he wanted only sex from her, and she respected his decision. Even agreed with it. After all, he didn't want to marry and now, she did.

But what was wrong with asking a simple and obvious question? Why didn't Fisher have kids? He was crazy about them. He went out of his way to help out folks younger than him, from the Tlingit kids all the way to Nina Exley.

A little girl crowded up to her side. "Are you doing the face painting now?" she asked.

Valerie snapped out of her thoughts. Fisher had stomped off and basically left her in charge of his booth. Great. Valerie, who didn't think she had a shred of artistic talent, now had to draw on kids' faces or disappoint a group of children who'd wandered over to the face-painting booth.

“Well, I can’t promise to do this as well as Fisher, but I’ll try.” She smiled at the child, who looked as though she was about six.

Fisher had used only red and black makeup pencils, colors frequently used in traditional Tlingit art. “Uh, how about a ladybug?” Valerie asked.

The girl’s face lit with a smile. “Yeah, that’d be great.”

* * * * *

While strolling around the festival booths, Fisher consciously emptied his mind of all painful reminders of his inability to live a normal life. As he admired the crafts on display, he gradually became aware of children with painted faces that didn’t resemble his drawings. Instead of orcas, salmon and ravens, they sported ladybugs, robins and butterflies.

The realization that Valerie had taken over his booth finally penetrated his emotional fog. “Lord in heaven,” he muttered. What if Ms. Hap broke a pencil on a kid’s face or, heaven forbid, hurt a child’s eye? He could never forgive himself.

He headed back to the booth at a run, ignoring the stares and gibes he drew.

A crowd of kids surrounded the booth. Valerie sat behind it busily drawing yet another ladybug. She looked up at his approach. “At last.” She stood and stretched. Her breasts thrust against her green sweater. Its sequins glittered in the thin sunlight.

He swallowed against a dry throat. “I’m, um, sorry I ran off so abruptly.”

She nodded. “I won’t bother asking why.” Her tone was dry, sardonic.

Fisher was startled because he considered Valerie a friend. Was he such a lousy companion that his friends couldn’t talk to him?

He tried to give to others to the extent of his ability. Apparently, this was another area in which he fell short, emotionally speaking.

“I, uh, I...” He stumbled, trying in vain to find the right words to fix his blunder.

She cut him off. “It’s okay. Listen, I have to get to round two. See ya later.”

Valerie stalked off without a backward glance. Her abrupt exit was as angry and graceless as his had been.

He writhed inwardly. He knew it took a long time to make a friend, but a moment to lose one. He didn't want to lose her.

"Gotta close up shop for a while, gang," he said to the crowd of interested onlookers.

"Yeah, I bet you do," Jane said with a giggle.

Gaston punched him lightly on the arm. "Go get your girl, sport."

"She's not my girl," Fisher snapped.

"Yeah, right." All the kids laughed. "We heard about what Hannah said," Jane added.

"Yeah, better go get fitted for a tux," Gaston said.

"That'll be the day," Fisher muttered as he went to watch round two. The kids trailed behind him.

He caught up with Valerie at the banks of the Tagook, starting the second task, which required the participants to butcher a moose haunch and cook it into jerky. Fisher watched Valerie stare in dismay at the bloody bag full of moose meat.

"It used to be worse," his cousin Amy told Valerie. "We used to have to clean and butcher the entire moose."

Flies buzzed around the dripping sack. "Why'd they change?" Valerie asked.

"It was too expensive to bring in whole moose carcasses for every entrant."

"Well, thank heaven for small favors." Valerie averted her eyes from the moose. Returning to her fire ring, she again built up the fire and laid a flat, clean rock on it to heat. Fisher guessed that she'd decided to cut the moose into strips and lay them on the rock to cook and dry.

She took the bag with the moose haunch to the side of the Tagook. She'd probably use the Tagook, a clean, snow-fed stream, to wash the haunch before attacking it with the knife.

As Fisher saw Valerie pluck at the plastic and brown paper wrapping with tentative fingers, he became aware that she'd attracted the glances of dozens of interested male onlookers who were scrutinizing her performance.

"Don't be nervous, honey," one of them yelled to her.

"Yeah, the way you look, I'll butcher the whole damn moose for you," another called out. "Just keep my bed warm through the winter, okay?"

Fisher turned his head and glared at the speaker.

“Hey, what’s your problem, bud?” The man teasing Valerie held a beer in one beefy hand. “She’s fair game, ain’t she?”

“Not necessarily.” Fisher balanced on the balls of his feet then dropped into a fighter’s stance.

The drunk shrank back. “Hey, I don’t want any trouble. If she’s your woman, why’s she in the contest?”

Archie’s voice blared from the speakers, “K-AKA’s contestant, Valerie Percy, looks as though she’s losing it!”

Fisher said, “She’s doing it as a promo for her radio station.”

Archie continued. “After a triumphant showing in round one, the task of butchering the moose haunch has defeated this newcomer to our fair island.”

Fisher turned his attention back to Valerie. She’d opened the packet of moose meat to find the flesh gray, smelly and rotting. Flinging it aside, she bent over the stream, retching. His cousin Amy dashed to Valerie’s side, helped her up and started to walk with her in the direction of the station.

“Too bad,” one of the men near Fisher commented. “Threw away a perfectly good moose haunch.”

“Yeah,” said another. “Alls she had to do was cut the bad part away. There’s at least a pound or two of good jerky she coulda made from that moose.”

“She’ll never make it here.”

“Nope.”

“No way.”

Fisher had to agree.

Chapter Nine

Valerie may have lost her lunch, but maybe she'd found a new friend. Amy Katlian had a great sense of humor and, except for vacations, had lived on Takinsha all her life.

With Amy's help, Valerie rinsed her mouth in the stream and stumbled shakily back to the station, heading for her shower. "I have to work at the party tonight at the Wild Salmon," she told Amy. "I can't be a mess."

"We'll get you cleaned up. Get undressed while I run the shower for you." Amy went into the bathroom.

While Valerie took off her soiled clothes and put on a robe, she heard water begin to flow.

Amy poked her head out of the bathroom. "Valerie, how long does it take for your shower to heat up?"

"Usually it's real fast. This isn't a big building, and the water heater's right here."

"Well, it's still cold."

Valerie sighed with exasperation. "Of all times for the hot water to go out." She hesitated. After her earlier scrap with Fisher, she really didn't want to ask him for anything. But what choice did she have? "Amy, could you do me a big favor?"

"Sure."

"Do you know Fisher Chugatt? He's supposed to be the handyman here. He told me to tell him if anything goes wrong."

"Sure, I know Fisher. He's one of my cousins. Second cousin actually."

"Oh, I didn't know you were related." Her pulse leaped. She tried to resist the impulse to pump Amy for information, but failed. "Um, are you close?"

"Oh, as close as anyone ever gets to Fisher. You know how he is."

"Yeah, I sure do." She couldn't help the rueful note in her voice.

Amy fixed Valerie with an intent gaze. "He's quite a guy but, Valerie, don't set your heart on him. A lot of women in the wolf moiety have, and they've all been disappointed."

"The wolf moiety?"

"Yes. We're ravens, you see. In our culture, ravens can't intermarry. It's like marrying your sister or brother. I can only marry someone from the other moiety, the wolves or a non-Tlingit."

"Oh. That's interesting." She concluded the friendliness she'd seen between Amy and Fisher was the affection of relatives, not the devotion of lovers. And Valerie realized that, being a non-Tlingit, she was eligible to become his mate.

"Like I said," Amy continued, "Fisher's disappointed a lot of women. They all think they can change him. That's a big mistake." Her brown eyes, formerly merry, had turned somber. "I've learned the hard way myself that you have to accept a man, you can't change him."

"Umm." Valerie nodded. "You're right. I'll try to keep that in mind when dealing with Fisher. It's tough though. He's been really nice, even took me around when I said I wanted to meet men." She didn't want to go into detail about her fuck-buddy relationship with Fisher. If that info got around, she could wave goodbye to her chances with other men.

"Did you meet anyone I know?"

"No one worthwhile. Brent Saronov." Valerie couldn't repress a shudder.

"Brent's a great guy. You didn't like him?" Amy sounded surprised.

"Ick." She shook her head. "I don't see how anyone can live the way he does."

Amy's eyes rounded and her mouth fell open. "Don't tell me Fisher took you to Brent's summer fish camp."

"Is that what it was? It had fish drying and dogs howling and a smell I can't begin to describe."

Amy's laugh came from deep in her chest. "This is great. Valerie, maybe Fisher has a thing for you."

"Why would you say that?"

"Brent doesn't live at his fish camp. He just hangs out there for a few weeks in the summer during the chum salmon run. When enough snow falls, he'll mush his dogs to the harbor and take them to the mainland to compete all winter long. He has beautiful homes in Talkeetna and Fairbanks."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. Honey, you've been had."

"I sure have." Valerie sat, trying like crazy to figure out Fisher's motivations. "But why? Why would Fisher deliberately mislead me about Brent?"

"Brent Saronov is one of the most eligible bachelors around." Amy's voice took on a sly note. "By introducing Brent to you at his fish camp, Fisher made sure his competition looked real bad."

"Huh. But he says he doesn't want to get married, so why would he care?"

Amy huffed derisively. "Since when have men been rational about women?"

* * * * *

Valerie met Fisher at her door. His eyes nearly fell out of his head when he saw the outfit she wore—a pink satin robe extravagantly trimmed with feathers. She'd slipped feathery open-toed slippers onto her bare feet. Her toes were painted a tender, feminine shade of rose.

Once more he was reminded that she was all woman, one-hundred-percent, unabashedly female. He'd never met such a girly girl. He wasn't surprised she'd lost it over the moose meat, but he'd been shocked at her outstanding performance in round one. He decided that there was more to Valerie Percy than met the eye at first glance.

Snapping at her then walking off had been highly discourteous, even mean, especially since they were fuck buddies. How could he make amends for his rudeness? He'd tried to apologize, but she'd rebuffed him.

Because he didn't know what to do or say about the emotions roiling between them, he figured he'd just ignore the situation.

"Uh, you look like a star of the silver screen. Where'd you get those clothes?" he asked her while inspecting her hot water system, which was tucked into the back of the small bathroom. He carefully avoided looking at her breasts, even though they lifted the satin robe in a most interesting way.

She shrugged. "Hand-me-downs from my mother."

"Your mom's an actress?" So interesting, in fact, that he could barely keep his hands off her.

"No, she's a plastic surgeon."

"A plastic surgeon? No wonder you look so good." His hot jacket was getting in the way, so he pulled it off and tossed it onto the tiny counter.

She flushed. "Thank you, but neither of my parents have ever done any surgeries on me."

He smiled at her. "You do have a nice, natural beauty." His heart stopped. What the hell had he just said? He'd never in his life told a woman that she had a nice, natural beauty. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he'd complimented a woman.

He'd better get away from Valerie Percy before he completely lost his sense of self.

"Thanks again," she said primly. "Mom got the robe as a gift from a grateful patient. *She* was a star of the silver screen. The patient, I mean."

"What did your mom do for her?"

She giggled. "Apparently my parents did everything for her, from top to toe."

Using a wrench, he tightened a leaky fitting, which had doused the pilot light. "So both mom and dad are plastic surgeons?"

"Yeah."

He swabbed the area dry of moisture. "How did two Hollywood plastic surgeons react when their baby daughter decided to rough it in the wilds of Alaska?" How come he couldn't quit wanting to boink Valerie Percy?

She laughed. "They're in Beverly Hills, actually, not Hollywood. And of course they were appalled then resigned. I'm sure they expect me back in, say, February or so. You have a lot in common with them."

"Yep. A belief that California girls should stay in the sunshine. Hey, are the men so bad there?" Taking matches out of his pocket, he relit the pilot.

"They're phonies," she said simply. "Especially the types my parents mix with. Like I told you when I came, nothing about them is for real."

"Real?" He chuckled, closing the cabinet that housed the water heater. "Huh. Real. Say, what perfume are you wearing? I'm pretty sure it's not available on this island." He wondered if she'd get the point. Real Alaskans didn't wear expensive perfume to compete in the Bush Babe contest.

"I'm not wearing anything." She shrugged, her breasts stirring beneath the satin. "I bet I smell like fish guts or rotten moose."

He stepped closer, inhaling her spicy, exotic scent. "Maybe it's on the robe."

She pulled the collar to her nose and sniffed, shifting the robe around her breasts. One lifted, and he could clearly see its rosy areola down the open front of her robe. Sweating in the small, close room, he averted his gaze. He turned on the shower's hot water tap, keeping his eyes fixed upon it.

"Nope," she said. "Guess whatever you're smelling is just me."

"Are you sure? I smell perfume."

"Everyone has a scent. You do, and you don't wear perfume, right?"

"Absolutely not." He frowned at her.

Nevertheless, she came closer, pressed her cheek to his shoulder, and inhaled. "But you smell like the sea and the sky and the forest."

His head swam. "I am *not* going to kiss you." He hoped he sounded convincing.

"Of course not." She smiled. "Why would you do that?"

"It would be the wrong thing to do."

"If you say so."

"Because you've decided you want to get married and I don't. We really shouldn't be fuck buddies anymore. We're getting too close."

She tipped her head back to look him in the face. Her blue eyes were deep, dark, unfathomably female. The tip of her tongue darted out to wet her lips. "That's right."

He groaned and reached for her, roping her in with one arm around her shoulders, one hand on her breast and his mouth on hers.

Time stopped.

The world quit turning.

Fisher was kissing Valerie in a place outside the ordinary reality of Takinsha Island, Alaska, in September. By some mysterious, sensual magic, she'd created a tender space that existed for them alone.

She pressed her small, shapely body against his. Little separated her softness from his chest, just his cotton shirt and her sultry satin wrapper. Her robe slid against him, sumptuous and slick under his fingers. He encircled one straining breast with his hand, feeling the beat of her heart through the satin. Her pulse increased, matching his need. Her whispery sigh flowed into his open mouth like the sweet breath of spring flowers. With the shower's steam rising around her, crinkling her blonde hair into a wild woman's mane, she looked like a love goddess emerging from an enchanted mist.

She was irresistible. So how could he resist? And why?

He kissed her again, letting his hands roam her torso. The lushness of her body drove him right out of his head. He didn't break away from her until he absolutely had to come up for air, and then he dove in just a moment later. This time he opened the front of her robe, peeling the now-damp satin

away from her body. Taking one breast in each palm, he squeezed her peachy globes while probing the depths of her mouth.

She responded, caressing his tongue with hers and unbuttoning his shirt, pulling aside its halves. She ran her short fingernails down his chest with delicate greed. He couldn't stop a groan from deep in his chest.

He tugged the knot at her waist, loosening the robe's sash, then slipping the smooth satin down her shoulders. Off it came in a slithery slide, pooling at her feet. She stepped away from the tumbled fabric and reached for his belt buckle. When they were both naked, he eased her into the shower.

Hot water cascaded around them, plastering her blonde hair to her head, streaming along her curves in shining sheets. Grabbing the soap, he ran it along her flesh, liking the way her nipples tightened even more as he rubbed the bar against them. Kneeling, he gave special attention to her sweet pussy and ass, running the bar up and down the crescent curve that separated her buttocks.

Her moans increased in pitch. Could she be...? Oh my God. Was Valerie an ass chick? Could he do her up the butt?

The thought of sliding his cock up Valerie's luscious rear made him harder. He couldn't resist trying. "Turn around, baby," he ordered, his voice husky.

She obeyed, leaning her forearms against the shower wall. The position thrust her behind toward him, an invitation he'd take.

Her crack was well-lubed with the foamy soap, and he hoped he wouldn't hurt her. One pained yelp and he'd stop. Hurting her was out of the question despite the pleasure he knew he'd have if she allowed him to take her in her most intimate channel.

He moved one of her feet outward so she was spread open for him, and with his finger, he slipped it along her already engorged clit. She cried out, and one finger inside her told him that she was close to coming.

She was almost ready...he moved one finger to her ass, tentatively rimming it.

"Oh yes, please, yes..."

That was all he needed to hear. Mindless with lust, he thrust inside the tight ring of muscle guarding her, pressing in his finger to the big knuckle. She cried out with pleasure, a cry that resolved into a low moan as he slowly moved his finger in and out.

Knees weak, Valerie scrabbled for the shower's built-in ledge where she kept soaps, baby oil and shampoos, clinging to it as Fisher added another finger to the one that was already caressing her inside her ass. God, his touch was magic, tenderly opening her narrow back door.

She hoped she'd be ready for him. Fisher was big, but she wanted this, wanted him in every way possible.

He continued to stretch open her backside, his fingers becoming more insistent, more intent, and she let go of the shelf to stroke her clit, heightening the pleasure. His fingers left her rump, and she moaned, "Noooooo...."

He stood behind her, and she could feel his male heat through the cascading water. "Are you okay? Is what I'm doing okay for you?"

"Oh yes, God, please, please don't stop. Why did you stop?"

He pushed the wet hair away from her nape and kissed her, moving his lips in a sensual line to her earlobe, which he nipped. "I want to take us higher, go further and deeper. Is that all right with you?"

She knew what he meant and said, "Yes." Reaching for her baby oil, she handed it to him, another sign of acquiescence.

He slicked it over her behind. Her breath short and fast in anticipation, she thrust her ass toward him, bending over at the waist to afford him better access. She bent her elbows and leaned them against the shower wall for support. An unbearable coiling tension gripped her every muscle. Fisher was going to fuck her ass. He was going to put his big, smooth, gorgeous cock in her ass, and she could hardly wait. She guessed it could hurt, but she also bet that it would be unforgettable.

But he didn't push his rod into her, not yet. Instead he rubbed oil against her ass then followed it with his fingers, opening her again, massaging the muscles. She breathed deeply, consciously slowing herself down, calming her tension. Three fingers, and a hand on her clit... "Oh God, I'm gonna come..."

The fingers left and she felt his penis's blunt head press against her anus. She pushed back against him, and his knob popped inside. A searing combination of pain and pleasure ripped through her body like a tornado. She gasped and jerked, taking him deeper.

He held on to her hips. "Easy, baby girl. Not too fast."

Slow, slower, slowest. He'd stopped completely, just resting inside the taut circle of flesh, allowing it to loosen and accept his fullness. He stroked her ass cheeks with gentle hands. A tingling heat radiated from her ass, overwhelming her, and she moaned in response. Using his palms, he pressed the halves apart to open her wider.

"Touch your button, baby." His voice was low and intimate, and she obeyed, taking her swollen clit between two fingers.

He went in deeper, his cock like a fiery torch igniting her insides. He took his time, rocking slowly in and out, but each inward thrust took him deeper. She felt the thickness of his rod at its base flaring

open her ass and let out a low keening wail. She increased the speed of her fingers over her clit, desperate to come, the pleasure-pain driving her crazy...her wail increased to a scream of release.

She flung up her head and encountered Fisher, his body flush up against hers in the tiny stall. Leaving her hips, his hands grasped her breasts. He kissed her neck, her face, and she turned her head so their lips met.

His cock twitched and swelled inside her ass as he came.

* * * * *

They stood together, intimately joined, for a long time. Gradually Fisher became aware of his surroundings again—the cooling shower flowing over them, the animal heat of the woman in his arms, his slackening cock softening in her rear. The intense rapture that had consumed his body eased into a mellower bliss.

Then she said, “We sure steamed up this place, didn’t we?” Her voice was husky, seductive.

Rationality returned, along with guilt. “I can’t believe we did that.”

“Why not? It was great, and so are you.”

“But we’re so wrong for each other.” Releasing her, he grabbed a towel from the rail and went toward door of the bathroom. “Valerie, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

She huffed. “I wanted you to, and we both loved it. So what’s the problem?”

He couldn’t answer and instead gathered his clothes.

“See you later, at the Wild Salmon?” she asked.

He gritted his back teeth. If he went to the dance, he’d moon over her all night like a pathetic, lovesick adolescent. “No. Um, with things the way they are, it...wouldn’t be smart. At all.”

“Bummer.” She smiled at his retreating back. Her grin widened as he snatched his clothes from the floor and made it out of her apartment in seconds flat. She heard the door of her apartment slam...surely Fisher making his getaway.

After rinsing her now-tender ass, she dressed in fresh clothing and mulled over the Fisher Chugatt situation. She’d set him up, yes, but she figured he deserved it given the way he’d conned her about Brent Saronov. Plus, she just plain had wanted Fisher again. After the encounter in his house,

she'd longed for him every waking moment. He'd haunted her dreams also, which had taken a pornographic turn.

She laughed out loud at the irony. Her image of the perfect mate had evolved and become clear—a big, happy guy who shared her values, a man who was eager to marry and start a family. With the odds in Alaska so good, why wasn't her dream man waiting for her to show up?

Fisher, that was why. She'd fallen for the exact opposite of her mental image of the ideal husband. Fisher Chugatt was so virulently anti-marriage that he had a deserved reputation as a heartbreaker. Fisher, who walked away from a friend rather than discuss the reasons for his choices in life.

But what he said was so at odds with what he did. He said he didn't want marriage, family or kids, but he came from a happy family background. He was embedded in the life of Takinsha Island and of the Raven clan, with close relationships with the Tlingit teens.

The bottom line was that Valerie longed to understand this mysterious, enigmatic man with whom she'd fallen in love.

And she had to admit to herself that Fisher Chugatt was the one. Although two or three good prospects had emerged—including Brent Saronov, she supposed—she couldn't stop thinking about Fisher. Fisher, the loner, who'd told her time and again that he wouldn't get married and that he was totally wrong for her.

So why did he feel so right? Why did the thought of sex with any other man make her skin crawl? She'd thrown herself at Fisher, and he'd caught her. Caught her but good. Then he'd left with the usual explanation—*we're wrong for each other*.

Valerie sighed. *Why* she felt the way she did didn't matter. It mattered only that she loved Fisher.

Chapter Ten

smitten, smit'n: (past participle; archaic)...

infatuated, fascinated

Fisher couldn't conceal the truth from himself. He was smitten with Valerie Percy.

As evening fell over the ocean, Fisher piloted his little boat down the sea lane toward home, allowing his thoughts to wander. Again and again, they returned to Valerie.

How she smelled. How she looked. Her eager tongue thrusting into his mouth, devouring him as though she were starving and he the finest dinner. The warm weight of her breast cupped in his hand, a foretaste of heaven. Her tight, hot channel clamping on his cock as though she never wanted to let him go. The intensity of her orgasm as he'd penetrated her sweet ass.

Had she set him up? She'd known he was going to come by to fix her shower. She had no reason to put on such a blatantly seductive outfit.

Why did she have to poke all the sore spots and weaknesses in his psyche?

Marriage.

Kids.

Stability.

Fisher liked the idea of stability and tried to create it for himself. He just didn't believe in it. A confidence in stability was one of the casualties of his tour of duty. No doubt all the lost souls he'd seen

on the road to nowhere had believed in the stability of their lives and the security of their futures. War had changed all that.

No, nothing was stable. Not even love and family. Especially not love and family.

Now he was smitten with Valerie Percy, a woman who wanted everything Fisher couldn't believe in and couldn't have in his life. What should he do?

Should he smite her back? Fisher frowned. Smiting wasn't on his agenda. Worse, nothing Valerie wanted was on his agenda.

* * * * *

Fisher managed to stay away from Valerie for a little while, but the day came when a couple of late-in-the-year tourists hired him to shuttle them to Juneau where they planned to fly to Seattle. They blabbed to Archie Miller while eating in the Yellow Snow, so later at the station, Archie said that he wanted Fisher to drag Valerie along.

"But she's from Los Angeles. By comparison, Juneau's just another town." Fisher dumped fake powdered cream in his coffee mug, frowning when it failed to dissolve. Probably old, cold brew. He put it on Nina's desk.

"It's another town she didn't have the opportunity to see." Archie eyed him as Valerie came down the stairs at eight o'clock in the morning.

"Of course she did. She came up on the ferry." Fisher didn't want Valerie in his plane again. Going to Juneau would be okay, with his passengers there, but coming back... No. He'd be alone with her, and that was dangerous.

Being alone with Valerie made Fisher want to do bad, naughty, sinful things.

"What are you talking about?" Valerie wanted to know.

"Do you want to fly to Juneau this morning with me?" Fisher asked. Maybe she'd say no.

Her eyes sparkled with interest. "Sure!"

He sighed. "Then grab your parka and let's get going."

* * * * *

Fisher hadn't exactly been jumping up and down with glee at the prospect of taking her to Juneau, Valerie reflected as she tucked herself into one of the back seats of Fisher's four-seater float plane. Rather, the invitation had slipped grudgingly from his mouth as though Archie had dragged it out.

She grinned while she buckled her harness. Fisher was kicking and screaming at the prospect of her company, but she knew better. He wanted her. Bad.

Since that scene in her shower, Fisher had avoided her, a sure sign that he felt he was too involved. But Fisher was a man. A very manly man, she thought as her smile stretched wider. She figured it wouldn't be long until his masculine urges would get the better of him.

But what of a shared future? She bit her lower lip. She knew what she wanted, and didn't think she could give up her plans, not even for a man as compelling and attractive as Fisher Chugatt.

She'd continued dating others, but was certain she wouldn't find contentment with any of them, for the simple reason that none of them was Fisher.

Fisher's passengers climbed aboard. Valerie thought she recognized them from the dance at the Wild Salmon just a few days before. As everyone prepared for takeoff, Cheri and Norman Vincent told Valerie that they were retired and, since their kids were grown, were taking time to see the world before they became too old to enjoy themselves.

"Sounds like fun," Valerie said cheerfully as she picked up her headphones. "Doesn't that sound great, Fisher?"

"Yep." Fisher's eyes were flat and black, showing no emotion whatsoever.

"Have you ever left Alaska, Mr. Chugatt?" Cheri Vincent asked in a pleasant Southern drawl.

"Sure. When I was in the military." The corners of Fisher's mouth turned down. With a finger tapping down the items on his checklist, he continued his preflight routine without any further comment.

Valerie's interest was piqued. She remembered the first day she'd met him. Fisher had mentioned his stint in the military, and he'd tensed up.

Something had happened during his tour of duty that had deeply affected Fisher. But what could it be? He was too young to have served in Vietnam. He'd have been a teenager during Desert Storm and hadn't, as far as she knew, served in Afghanistan or Iraq. She would have heard about that from someone, wouldn't she?

She put her concerns out of her mind. Fisher was a very private person. He would tell her when he was ready. Hopefully that would be before she was old and gray.

“Didn’t I see you at the dance?” Cheri Vincent asked Valerie.

“Yeah. I was the deejay.”

Norman turned around from the front seat to give her a wink. “You were getting awfully tight with one of the fellas there.”

Valerie felt her face flush. She met Fisher’s gaze in a mirror. He raised his eyebrows.

“I, uh, I...” Darn. She’d danced with Brent Saronov, hoping a spark of attraction would ignite between them. He’d been handsomely turned out, in khakis and a pressed shirt. Even with his hair neatly trimmed and aftershave scenting his cheeks, she hadn’t felt a thing when he held her in his arms.

And now Fisher had to find out. Great. Really great.

“Preparing for takeoff.” Fisher’s voice was clear and crisp, without a shred of emotion.

The plane lifted off. Valerie shoved her worries out of her mind, allowing herself to become entranced by the ocean vista spread before her.

In Alaska, September was nature’s last burst of energy before shifting into winter dormancy. Few days were sunny, and today, wisps of cloud covered half the sky, often obscuring the sun. The temperature was low, the chill intensified by the plane flight. Valerie was glad to get out of the noisy, cold plane and stretch her legs in Juneau.

Fisher collected the fares from his passengers, with only half his mind on the conversation. The other part of his brain was rattling around about Valerie.

His gut churned when he realized that she’d gone from their erotic interlude in her shower to “getting awfully tight with one of the fellas” at the dance. How could she? Didn’t she have a heart? Or morality?

On the other hand, *he* had insisted that they were wrong for each other and abruptly left her home after banging her blind.

Then she’d allowed another man to—

Stop it, he sternly told himself. He shook the Vincents’ hands, bade them farewell, and then stood alone with Valerie on the empty dock.

“Brrr!” Valerie rubbed her gloved palms together and pulled her knitted hat down over her ears. Today she wore her fuchsia parka, hat and gloves, along with jeans and a sweater. “Can we go someplace warmer? The wind’s getting awfully brisk.”

“Uh, sure.” He led her away from the wharf toward the town. Though Juneau was the state capital, it didn’t differ much from the average southeast Alaska tourist town. Near the port, it boasted a few blocks of shops devoted to the tourist trade, including some very nice jewelry stores and art galleries. The rest of Juneau was more Alaskan, with an occasional museum or Russian-inspired church.

He led her in the direction of a diner that was the local version of the Yellow Snow, though blessedly free of psychic owners. He didn’t need any more predictions of his marital fate to send his heart into tumult. Tumult, in the form of Valerie Percy, walked by his side.

What was he going to do? He couldn’t have her, but the thought of her with anyone else made him crazy. His dog-in-the-manger attitude bothered him. He hoped he wasn’t a mean or jealous person, but contact with her seemed to bring out a hurricane of irrational emotions.

“Ooh! Let’s go into here!” Valerie’s small but strong hand seized his arm to drag him into one of Juneau’s many tourist traps. This store was jammed to the windowsills with “local” crafts. He suspected most of the items for sale hadn’t been made in Alaska. The tourist junk generally came from Indonesia, China or the Philippines.

“What for?” He let her haul him along, enjoying her possessiveness. She really seemed to like his company, he thought, bemused. This was a new concept for him. He was accustomed to being appreciated for his usefulness but not for pure companionship.

“I want to get a souvenir for my mother. Help me pick something out.” She peered at a tray of pins modeled in Tlingit-style clan emblems.

“I don’t know what your mother would like.”

“Anything to make her think I’m doing okay up here.”

He raised his brows. “A brooch won’t make her change her opinion of Alaska or you in it. She’d have to come here herself.”

Valerie snorted. “She’d rather have a long, slow nose job without anesthesia. My parents own a house in Maui. Alaska is the exact opposite of a place they’d find attractive. No golf and no tennis, dahling.”

“But we have dogsledding and snowshoeing.”

She gave him a sweet smile. “Does that mean you’ll take me snowshoeing?”

“Does your question mean you’ve already asked Brent to take you dogsledding?”

“How did you know...” Her face flamed. “Oh, you’re unbelievable!”

He grinned at her, relieved. Valerie would never go for Brent Saronov, even if he had cleaned up for the Bush Babe contest and its related festivities. "So it was Brent you were snuggling with at the dance?"

"I wasn't snuggling." She sounded indignant.

"Hey, you don't have to justify what you do to me."

He kept his mocking grin, maybe even exaggerated it a little. His on-again, off-again, teasing flirtation with Valerie was the most entertaining relationship he'd ever had with a woman.

A relationship. Oh Lord in heaven. He hadn't meant to have a relationship with her or anyone.

"This is too high school for me." She turned her back in feigned disgust, examining a display of carved whales.

High school. That gave him an idea. It was pretty sneaky, even adolescent. But for his own peace of mind, he had to do something.

When he found what he wanted, he tapped her on the shoulder and said, "I don't know what your mother would enjoy, but I'd like to get this for you." He dropped a Tlingit raven pin into her hand. A large piece in onyx and silver, it covered most of her palm.

She gasped, turning pink and pleased and oh so pretty. "For me?"

"Yes, for you." He took the brooch from her, detached its price tag then pinned it to the collar of her parka.

Valerie didn't know what to say. She'd thought that Fisher was bothered because she'd hung around with someone else at the dance. He told her he didn't want to be with her, but again, his acts were different from his words.

Now he was giving her a lovely gift, his clan emblem, no less. This was very special. "It's beautiful. Thank you." She lifted her face toward his, wondering if he'd be receptive to a thank-you kiss.

He allowed the kiss but kept it short, a brief caress of their lips that left her hollow, as though she needed to be filled by more affection than he was willing to give. "Now, Valerie, don't make too much of this, okay? It means we're friends and I like you. Not that I love you." Looking into her eyes, he brushed his knuckles along her cheekbone.

A tremor ran through her body. He was as perplexing as an Agatha Christie mystery, and their growing involvement scared her. *One step forward, two steps back*, she thought. "Okay." *I guess.*

Squeezing her arm, he said, "Perhaps your mom would like one of the whale pins. The humpbacks visit Hawaii too, you know."

“Yeah, I’ve seen them there.” She was glad he’d changed the subject. After he’d put her off her stride with his sweet but confusing gesture, she needed a few minutes to regain her poise.

“A funny thought, that the same animal you see in Hawaii in January was just out here the previous summer.” He smiled at her, causing a warmth that penetrated all the way through her and raced straight to her pussy. The strange feeling didn’t bypass her heart, but instead wrapped it in a tingly, joyous feeling that made her feel as though she could fly...or at least dance.

“I’ll pay for this pin while you look around.” Fisher took the price tag to the register.

Pushing aside her roiling emotions, Valerie found a gift she thought her mother would like and arranged for the shop to send it directly to California. “So that’s done,” she said to Fisher, shoving her credit card back into her wallet. “Let’s go get some coffee.”

She couldn’t stop an extra bounce and spring from lightening her step. Despite the mixed messages, this gesture from Fisher meant a lot. She’d seen that he was a giving person, but the Tlingit Teen Center was the focus of his time and energy. She suspected that he didn’t frequently give women gifts.

Maybe he would come around to her way of thinking. Maybe, in contrast to what Amy had said, he’d change.

Maybe.

Chapter Eleven

"I haven't seen you much lately," Valerie said to Fisher. Her jacket still sported his raven pin, but the gift meant less and less to her, more like a broken promise than a sign of commitment. The giver had again retreated, seldom coming to town. This Tuesday was the first time she'd seen him in a week.

He glanced out the front window of the station. "It's October. The days are shorter and the weather's worse. I spend a lot of time during the winter holed up at my place while you have your job here."

"That's true." She bit her lip. Instead of flaring into a blaze, her romance with Fisher had chilled into something resembling the cold, wet rain drenching Takinsha Island.

"You goin' to the Halloween dance?"

She perked up. Fisher sounded as though he was actually making a date with her, which would be a first. "I haven't heard anything about it."

Leaning against the counter, he crossed his arms over his chest. "The Sons of Scandia hold an annual Halloween dance in their social hall. I'm surprised no one else has mentioned it."

"No, no one's asked me out for a while." Not since before their trip to Juneau had any of the local males invited her on a date.

Did her imagination create the faintly pleased, even smug expression that crossed Fisher's face?

"Consider yourself asked." He smiled at her.

"Costumes?"

"You bet."

* * * * *

Fisher didn't have too many opportunities to wear traditional Tlingit dress without feeling he was on parade, so he always enjoyed the Halloween dance. Clad in a fringed, blanketlike cloak in red and black, with a raven headdress, he went to pick up Valerie at her place at nine p.m. He drove his truck from the Tlingit Teen Center where he'd dressed. That was where he planned to spend the night.

He wondered what costume Valerie would choose. A sexy witch or vampire? That would be great. He wouldn't mind seeing Valerie in a low-cut black dress, preferably something tight and slinky. Maybe she'd select a costume that was more in tune with her southern California roots, like a surfer girl. Valerie in a bikini would be outstanding. Whatever getup she picked, he knew it would be fun.

Fun was only one of the many facets of Valerie, and an aspect he felt comfortable contemplating. He deliberately refrained from pondering their personal situation. He refused to use the words "romance" or "relationship" when thinking about her.

He knew full well why no one had dated her lately. With his raven brooch pinned to her parka, she might as well wear a sign. The local custom of pinning girls with clan emblems had started many years before in the island's high school. The few students of tiny Takinsha High couldn't afford class rings. All the males, not only the Tlingit, had taken to pinning their girlfriends with clan symbols. If the kid wasn't Tlingit and part of a clan, he selected an animal he admired.

On Takinsha Island, a woman wearing a Tlingit animal pin was openly declaring herself as attached and unavailable. Valerie didn't know the local custom, so pinning her had been a devious, underhanded method of ensuring she'd see only him.

As he parked the truck in the back lot of the station, Fisher tried to convince himself to take back the brooch but couldn't. Thinking about her with another man twisted his insides with jealousy.

His reaction astounded him. He'd never before felt so possessive about a woman. A previously unknown part of his soul had flamed to violent life because of Valerie.

But he could never give her what she wanted, and he wasn't in love with her. Was he?

Nah. He liked her though. Was it unfair or wrong for him to see what would develop between them? Though Valerie had stated forthrightly that she wanted a conventional marriage with children, maybe she'd change her mind.

But...she'd want to hear the reasons why. He grimaced. He'd never confided in anyone. Other soldiers had served without suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, and Fisher couldn't understand why he'd been so affected.

And he didn't want therapy. What for? Shouldn't he snap out of it on his own? He sure didn't want his head shrunk or to take pills.

He couldn't bear to think about what Valerie would say if he told her his whole story. Better to let things meander along rather than upset the apple cart, he told himself.

Fisher entered the station. Above him, at the top of the stairs, Valerie's door opened. She stood framed by the mellow light behind her, wearing a diaphanous something-or-other that outlined her lithe body. As she moved, gliding down the steps, the fabric shimmered, green and gold.

She descended with care, balancing two wineglasses in her hands. A slight trembling shook the straw-colored liquid. White wine, Fisher noted with relief. His clothing could take a white. A cabernet or pinot noir would be another question.

He watched warily, pivoting so only one shoulder was presented to her. Though the pale wine wouldn't stain, he still didn't want two glasses of it down his front. He could handle wine down one side.

When she stood before him, he could see green glitter in her golden hair, on her cheeks and eyelids. Full makeup accentuated her delicate beauty, disguising the hard-nosed, determined woman underneath.

"Wow," he managed to say.

"Wow yourself." Smiling, she handed him a glass of wine. "Tell me about your costume."

"First, let's toast the evening. Thank you for this." He waved his glass, narrowly missing her hair.

"Now who's the klutz?" Her grin teased.

He laughed. "I guess that makes up for the soup incident. No, half of the soup since I didn't actually get you."

"Aw, who's counting?" She clinked her glass against his then sipped her wine. "Come on up and sit for a while."

Fisher hesitated, remembering the fragrant, feminine boudoir she'd created. If he went there, all his resolutions about Valerie would disappear, along with their costumes. "Better not. We don't want to be late, do we?"

"Are we on a timetable tonight? I'm not working."

He swirled the goblet, sniffed the contents then took a drink of the tart, cold wine. A very nice chardonnay. She must have brought it from California. "No, but we're expected at the dance before too long."

"Okay." She sounded a little sad.

“Valerie, don’t get your hopes up about me, all right? I like you, but that’s all. And that may be all that we ever have together.” He sipped some more to avoid looking at her. He didn’t want to see her disappointment.

Valerie’s heart thumped. For the first time, Fisher had left the door open, admitting that their tentative relationship might develop into something more. Did he realize what he’d said? Probably not, and she wouldn’t clue him in. She wanted to avoid the “one step forward, two steps back” pattern their relationship seemed to follow.

She decided to take refuge in chatting about the commonplace. “So tell me about your costume. Traditional Tlingit, right?”

“Yes, ceremonial dress. But what about you? Whatever you’re supposed to be, I sure like it.” The warmth in his brown eyes told her the compliment wasn’t an empty one.

“I’m the northern lights.”

“The northern lights?” He regarded her with an amazed smile.

“Yeah. I racked my brains to come up with an outfit that would be warm enough in this climate.” She pulled up a filmy drapery covering her arm to expose a long, green sleeve. “This is a green bodysuit covered with see-through green and gold mesh.”

“Very clever.” The long-sleeved bodysuit covered her from neck to ankles, and she’d put on her black short boots with gold-trimmed socks. “Are those boots waffle soled? I don’t want you to slip.”

“Yeah, sure are.”

“Have you ever seen the northern lights?”

“No, but I’m looking forward to them.”

“Soon, maybe tonight, if the clouds break.” After finishing his wine, he set down the glass.

“Oh, I’ll put these away.” Balancing both goblets, she skipped up the staircase.

“Don’t trip!” Fisher called after her.

* * * * *

“Who are the Sons of Scandia? They seem to be a big deal around here.” On their way to the social hall, Valerie tightened her gloved hand around Fisher’s arm as they approached a slick spot on the street.

“They’re a club, similar to the Sons of Norway. This part of Alaska is home to lots of seafaring fishing peoples, like the Tlingit, Aleut, Russians and Scandinavians. There are entire towns, Petersburg for example, that are dominated by Scandinavians. I like Takinsha because it’s more of a mix.”

The Sons of Scandia social hall was a square, white building. Its dull exterior hid inner warmth, thought Valerie, as she stood in the vestibule while Fisher stored her coat and gloves in a closet that served as a cloakroom. The interior of the hall was all wood, warm and polished by generations of caring hands. Display cases housed memorabilia and trophies. Photographs on the wall showed the history of Takinsha Island since the invention of photography.

The place was jammed, and Valerie saw that all the locals were there, including teenagers. She thought she even recognized Hannah, the proprietor of the Yellow Snow, in an elaborate geisha costume.

Earlier, in the afternoon, Fisher had set up the deejay equipment on the stage at one end of the hall. Now, Archie manned the makeshift broadcast booth, playing oldies dance music and drinking scotch on the rocks. Clad in a pinstriped baseball uniform, he looked like a Yankee Tommy Lasorda.

“So why aren’t you working tonight?” Fisher asked Valerie.

She shrugged, giving him her innocent wide-eyed look. “Apparently a few people didn’t like my choices at the Bush Babe dance.”

He grinned. “I heard about midnight rap hour. I guess you made sure you wouldn’t have to work dances again, huh?”

So much for her pseudo-ingenuous routine. It never fooled Fisher, anyhow. She said, “I decided I deserved a little fun.”

“True enough.” Taking her into his arms, he swung her into the throng of dancers. The lively Chuck Berry tune had scarcely ended when Clyde, dressed as a pirate, tapped Fisher on the shoulder and asked for Valerie’s next dance.

“Sure,” he said. Without a look back, Fisher strolled off and promptly cut in on another couple. Out of the corner of her eye, Valerie saw that the woman he’d selected wore the low-cut costume of a Victorian dance-hall hostess. Her red dress was hitched up to her thigh, revealing black lace garters.

Pressing exasperated lips together, Valerie scarcely noticed when someone cut in on Clyde. Fisher danced into her view. He was gawking at the dance hall wench’s bosom, amply exposed by her gown.

Cursing herself for rudeness, Valerie jerked her gaze away and focused her attention on the newcomer who'd claimed her. Del, clad in a ninja costume, owned a purse-seiner. She'd been on Takinsha long enough to have learned that a purse-seiner netted a good income. With chestnut hair, vivid blue eyes and an outdoorsman's build, Del was someone Valerie knew she ought to encourage.

Why hadn't she met him before? At first glance, he appeared to be eligible. No wedding ring. A couple of questions and she'd discovered his age, thirty-five. Better and better.

Fisher was now clasping a small woman dressed as a striped tiger cat to his chest. His free hand was playing with the tail of the woman's costume, tickling her with it under the chin. He was laughing.

Her pulse jumped. A slow number started, and Del pulled her in tight. This man had possibilities. And, unlike Fisher, he didn't seem to want to keep her at arm's length.

She gulped. Why then did she feel disloyal to Fisher? He had no claim on her and, in fact, continually dampened any hope of permanence.

"So where have you been lately?" she asked Del, making conversation.

"Out on the ocean, killing fish and making money." He smiled at her. "So where have you been all my life?"

Despite the clichéd line, Valerie dredged up a smile.

About to answer, her words were cut off when a hand decorated with long, black claws seized her shoulder and jerked her away.

"How could you?" Nina Exley hissed. Her black witch's gown stretched across her pregnancy, which had reached its eighth month. In full goth regalia, she was dressed to kill. Valerie hoped she wouldn't be Nina's victim.

Confused, she couldn't utter a single word. While she and Nina would never be close, Valerie thought she'd established a working relationship with the girl. They didn't like each other, but there was mutual respect. Or so Valerie had thought.

She rubbed her shoulder. Her costume hadn't protected her from Nina's long, fake nails. Then she noticed that Nina's blazing eyes weren't fixed on her but stabbed into Del like twin green lasers.

Del shrugged, affecting nonchalance. "How could I what?"

"Coming on to Valerie when I'm about to have your kid!" Nina spat. "I work with her, you creep!"

Valerie gasped. "Nina, I didn't know. I'm sorry." Where was Fisher? Nina was causing a nasty scene, which Valerie was sure he could defuse.

"It's not *your* fault." Nina's voice was dark, her eyes unusually shiny.

"It's not my fault either," Del said in a hard tone. "Nina, you decided to have this baby, not me."

Valerie's jaw tightened. She'd never heard anything so callous. Poor Nina seemed on the verge of hysteria.

"Excuse me," Valerie said. It wasn't her business, but she felt she needed to protect Nina. Del, much older, had verbal weapons a twenty-year-old lacked. Valerie cleared her throat. "Del, did you have sex with Nina?"

A derisive smile curled his lips. "That's the usual way it happens."

"Then Nina's baby is your responsibility. Your responsibility, but not your fault. It's a baby, not a fault. Why don't you do the right thing and marry her?"

Nina's mouth dropped open. Del laughed. "Why should I?"

"I wouldn't have the rat," Nina snapped.

"Nobody asked you."

That was just plain nasty. Valerie was about to light into him when Fisher materialized from nowhere, giving Del a hearty thump on the back that sent him sprawling. "Del, good to see ya."

"Yeah, Del, how's it goin'?" Brent Saronov grabbed Del's arm. "And how are your wife and kids in Haines?"

Chapter Twelve

"Four kids?" Valerie demanded. "Are you sure?"

Fisher, holding her arm, guided her around a puddle. "Well, there's the two in Haines, one in Wrangell and now Nina's."

"How do you know all this?" Valerie, feeling she'd had enough of local society for the night, had asked Fisher to walk her home shortly after the confrontation between Del and Nina.

"After Nina got pregnant and Del abandoned her, someone checked up on him."

She glanced at him. The Great Stone Face had returned, meaning he had something to hide. "That someone was you, wasn't it?"

"It was no big deal." He shrugged. "His boat, the *De/Ray*, is out of Haines. Says so right on the stern. All I did was check in the phone book and make a couple of calls."

"He dumped Nina?"

"Gave her some money for an abortion and walked. That was last spring. He used fishing as an excuse."

"Four kids." She puffed out her breath in a sigh, watching it condense in the chilly midnight air. "Aren't there any nice, normal single men around here?"

"No one you haven't met." He chuckled. "I told you when you came here that this place is a little off-kilter."

"Yeah, and that I'd fit right in."

"Maybe. Listen, people aren't here to meet your expectations. They're just...here."

"Huh." Interesting thought. Was he trying to send her a subtle message?

"Our lives don't always turn out as we'd planned."

"Can't argue with that." What on earth was he hinting at?

"But sometimes they're better."

"Umm, are you gonna lecture me all the way home?" She slipped her arm around his waist.

He hugged back. "Okay, I'll shut up. I do better with women when I don't say anything."

She winced and pulled away from him. "The last thing I want to know about is how you do with other women."

There was silence for a moment before he said, "There aren't others. Not right now."

"Hmm." A pleasurable heat flooded her body. She hoped she didn't look as smug as she felt.

"But don't get weird on me, okay?"

One step forward and two steps back. "Do I make you nervous?"

"Well, kinda."

She couldn't help grinning. "Good. Serves you right." She could shake up the Great Stone Face. That went a long way toward reconciling her to their rocky romance.

"What? Do you mean that I make you nervous?"

"Why do you think I get the clumsies when you're around? I keep telling you that I'm not normally a klutz."

"But we hadn't even talked when you drove the Bug into my truck."

"Yeah, but I'd seen you and been drawn into your mysterious masculine aura." She faked a shiver.

"Oh man, you're bad."

"Yeah, like the song says, I've got it bad and that ain't good."

"Well, maybe we can take a sad song and make it better."

Laughing, they walked hand in hand to the station. Fisher opened the door and ushered Valerie inside.

"Nighty-night, bush babe." He brushed his lips across hers then turned away.

She felt bereft. Why didn't he want to come in and stay for a while? "I'm not a bush babe. I lost, remember?"

Now at his truck, he opened its door with a screech of ancient hinges. "You're *my* bush babe. Uh, are you going to be around at the end of the month?"

She didn't even try to hold back her irritation. She glared at him. "Yes, I'm going to be around at the end of the month. And at the end of the year. And at the end of the year after that. I'm going to be around for a very long time. Can't you get that through your head?"

"Come on, Valerie, cool down. I just wanted to know if you'd planned to go to Los Angeles for Thanksgiving with your family."

"I'm sorry." She laughed shakily. "I really overreacted, didn't I?"

"Perhaps you had a reason. I've given you a pretty hard time. Umm, what about Thanksgiving?"

"My parents asked me to come home, but I don't even know if I have the time off."

"Ask Archie about that. If you decide to stay, eat Thanksgiving dinner with us."

"Us?"

"At the village." He gestured southward, down the road.

* * * * *

Over the next couple of weeks, Valerie didn't see Fisher often, but that was all right with her. He'd given her a lot to think about. As she tidied her apartment, she let her mind drift, musing on the subjects of Fisher and her life. Could the two possibly merge?

His mini-lecture on expectations had hit its target. Most aspects of her life had fallen neatly into place. After she'd completed college, majoring in communications and running the university radio station, her parents' connections had helped her land her first professional radio job. She'd risen quickly, earning the prestigious rush-hour deejay time slots within a few years then becoming a station manager. She'd drawn the attention of the RadioWorks bigwigs, which had landed her the Alaska gig.

But her personal life had never worked, and now, because of what Fisher had said, Valerie wondered if her expectations were at fault. She had a sense of entitlement that just didn't sit well with men, she supposed, and given his reserve...the situation was a recipe for frustration.

She blew out a breath. Why couldn't her life be simple?

Scrubbing out the shower, she wondered if she'd set her sights on unattainable goals. She didn't think so. Marriage and children were normal dreams, even though the man she'd fallen for didn't share her plans. In other respects, he was pretty darn fantastic. Though he didn't want a conventional relationship with marriage and children, he held to numerous traditional values she respected.

She put her clothes away, including her parka. Fingering her raven pin, she sighed. Loving Fisher would force her to give up what her female soul craved.

Could she do that? If not, could she turn her back and walk away from him?

Maybe she was jumping ahead, imbuing their relationship with an intensity that didn't exist. He'd never told her that he loved her, and until he did, worrying about where their relationship would end up was building castles in the sky.

* * * * *

Fisher had spent the weeks following Halloween winterizing his home in preparation for the cold, dark months ahead. Maintaining his house was a constant process which he generally enjoyed, but this year, he found himself impatient to finish his chores so he could fly to Takinsha town during decent weather and spend more time with Valerie.

As he chopped wood, he ruminated upon the situation. After she'd learned of the messy relationship between Del and Nina, Valerie had seemed more exasperated than disappointed with the available males on Takinsha Island.

He was glad she hadn't decided to pack up and leave in order to pursue her dreams elsewhere. With a university and the state capital, Juneau, a city of a quarter million residents, would surely yield the man she wanted. He hadn't mentioned the possibility of her moving there to her because, selfishly, he wanted to keep her close by.

But why? Why couldn't he stop thinking about her, fantasizing about her, wanting her in his bed and, worst of all, in his life? What did Valerie Percy have that no other woman could match?

She was witty and clever, but he wasn't drawn by her big-city sophistication. It couldn't be her skills as a wilderness woman, though he admired her way with a fishing pole.

Though she didn't have a warm relationship with Nina, Valerie had promptly taken the younger woman's part when she'd confronted Del. She'd been smart enough to see through Del's games and compassionate enough to feel for Nina in her predicament.

Sex with Valerie...ahhh. A lifetime with her would be heaven on earth. But so what? He'd had great sex with hot women before.

But he'd never wanted anyone in his bed and in his home the way he wanted Valerie. He fantasized about spending long winter evenings cuddling with her on his couch. He wondered if she'd enjoy old-time movies and board games the way he did.

She made him dream about more than great blowjobs and deep fucking. Hot chocolate and sweet kisses, about walking through Takinsha town on Halloween night, holding hands with a woman dressed as the northern lights. No one he'd ever met would have the imagination to create such a costume.

"Perhaps it's the combination of everything she is," he murmured, while stacking stove-sized chunks of wood under the porch. "What do you think, Charm?"

His retriever thumped her tail on the porch.

"You're a big help," he told his dog.

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On Thanksgiving Day, Archie allowed Valerie to play canned holiday music starting at five in the afternoon so she could attend the celebration in the Tlingit village. After the huge turkey dinner, held at Amy Katlian's house, Fisher and Valerie left amidst a chorus of goodbyes.

Standing on Amy's porch, Fisher helped Valerie on with her parka. "Did you have a good time?" he asked.

"Oh yes!" She wondered if her happiness radiated off her in waves. "I love my parents, but they're soooo formal. Mom hasn't cooked in years. She has Thanksgiving catered. And she brings out all her china and crystal—"

"I guess our meal was pretty shabby by comparison." He walked her to the VW Bug.

"Oh no. Amy has a lovely home. The food was great and the company even better. Everyone made me feel so welcome." She squeezed his hand. "Like I said, I love my parents but dressing up in formalwear just isn't my idea of a good time. And can you imagine me with fine china?"

He raised his eyebrows. "There's a scary thought."

"I was real happy to find that Amy's Fiestaware hardly ever chips."

"Hmm. Perhaps I should get some, um, what did you call it? Fiestaware." He leaned against the door of the car.

She raised her brows back at him. "Are you planning to invite me to your place more often?"

"I might be tempted to take the risk." He glanced up the road toward Takinsha town. "Speaking of risks, the temperature's been below freezing all day. I want you to get home before the road gets more icy, okay?"

"Ooh. Do you think we'll get snow?"

"Not tonight. No clouds. But later this winter, sure." Pulling her into his arms, he said, "Here's something to keep you warm."

He bent his head and kissed her. The heat of his mouth formed a sensual contrast with the chilly tip of his nose, which brushed across her cheek as she swayed against him, glorying in the power of his embrace. She'd never felt so cherished. They'd shared a wonderful holiday together. She'd had a great time with the clan, and he'd allowed her closer to him than ever before.

Soon—too soon—he broke off the interlude. "Your face is getting all chilly, baby. Go on home before you catch frostbite."

"Not much chance of that when you're around," she murmured.

He grinned and opened her car's door for her then helped her in. She watched him in her rearview mirror as she drove with care into the pitch-dark woods. At this time of year, southern Alaska enjoyed only about six hours of sunlight. She'd noticed most days were rainy, the sky leaden. Today had been clear but ice-cold. She didn't doubt his assessment of the weather.

Her headlights cutting through the gloom, she drove through the forest to a place where the trees thinned, gradually disappearing as the land transformed into meadow. An eerie green light above her filled the open field. The night sky wasn't dark but filled with curtains of unearthly, pulsating color. The air hummed with electricity she could feel through her parka.

This was her first glimpse of the aurora borealis, the dazzling northern lights. Entranced, she pulled her Bug to the side of the road and cut the engine so she could take a better look. She tugged her parka more snugly around her then zipped it to the top and secured her hood to keep her ears warm. After she exited the car, she leaned against its side, tipping her head back to watch the show.

Ignoring the knifing cold, she rapidly became absorbed in nature's display. She didn't resist when her spirit seemed to rise into the night sky, dancing with the light. She felt close to God, in harmony with heaven's angels.

The rattle of a truck's engine broke the sacred silence. Fisher arrived, halting his truck behind her car. His boots crunched on the gravelly verge as he approached. He joined her, slipping his gloved hand into hers. "It's great, isn't it?"

"Awesome. Completely beyond anything I've ever seen."

He squeezed her hand. "We get blasé about the beauty of this place. Watching you appreciate it helps me see it anew. I'm glad I followed you."

"You followed me? Why?"

"This road can be treacherous. I wanted to make sure you got back safely."

That was a sweet thing to do, typical of him. She twisted her neck to look at him and the sky at the same time.

"You're gonna hurt yourself. Come here." He led her to his truck. Opening a metal storage box, he took out a couple of blankets and spread them out on the bed of his truck. He helped her in then followed her.

She lay beside him, pillowing her head on his shoulder. They cuddled together, with Valerie again allowing a sense of peace to surround her. Gone was the frenetic desire to reach her goals. She simply enjoyed the moment.

Fisher moved, his dark silhouette blocking the glimmering lights above her face. He touched his lips to hers in the gentlest of caresses.

The flickering light of desire shimmered through her body. She nibbled on his lower lip then sucked, drawing him in. The Alaska night had captured her with its enchantment, and she wanted to lure him into the magic. She wanted him to feel what she felt, an almost mystical oneness with him and with the night.

Despite their thick, enveloping clothes, their bodies merged. His long, dark hair mingled with hers and her fingers intertwined with his. Their mouths melded together.

He unsnapped the collar of her parka. The slight rush of cool air teased her skin beneath her sweater. She rubbed her chest against his. Even through their jackets, she sensed the hardness of his body against hers and the urgency of his need. He lowered the zipper of her jacket. Its rasp sounded in counterpoint with the wild beat of her heart, blending with her moans as he began to make love to her beneath the stars.

After he opened her parka, he slid a gloved hand beneath her sweater to caress her breasts. Her body involuntarily jerked. The gloves were chilly and a little rough, and had surprised her. After a moment, she let herself relax into the different feel of Fisher's leather gloves caressing and plucking her nipples.

Heat gathered deep in her pussy, and she pressed against him, chasing her growing arousal. She tore his jacket open then reached for his belt buckle.

He rose above her, kneeling within the cradle of her legs, and leisurely tugged off one glove then the other. "I want to love you, baby. All night long."

His husky murmur sent the blood shivering through her veins. Her pulse hammered, beating a vibrant tattoo in her ears. She quivered with passion, yearning for him. Her quivering fingers couldn't pull the thick leather belt out of its loops, couldn't unsnap his jeans. Smiling, he helped, unbuttoning so his erect rod thrust out of the opened fly. Otherwise he remained clothed and reached for her pants, unzipping and easing them down so he could reach her cunt.

She chuckled. "I bet you did a lot of this in high school."

"Yeah, we became experts at clothes-on screwing." She could hear the smile in his voice. "It gets mighty cold around here, but no one wanted to go without sex through the winter."

He bent toward her again to kiss her wantonly, with total sensual abandon. She closed her eyes, letting each thrust of his tongue drive her higher and higher. He settled his long, whipcord body against hers, and she reveled in his masculine solidity. She slid her hands along his body then wrapped her hand around his hard, ready cock.

She gave him a few pumps, spreading his pre-come along his shaft, moaning in anticipation. Soon his thick, slick rod would be in her happy pussy, and she could hardly wait. But her jeans, tangled around her knees, got in the way.

"Turn around," he said. "Rest your arms on the side of the truck. Doggy style usually works best with clothes-on sex."

He didn't need to ask twice. Valerie obeyed, her breath shortening with anticipation. He pulled her pants down as far as they could go and pushed her knees apart with his then drew her hips back, sliding his cock into her pussy.

He caressed her bare bottom. "Every time I see your ass, I think about how great it felt to be inside it."

When he squeezed the globes, she moaned, the erotic memory of him fucking her rear melding with the reality of his rod in her pussy, taking her higher, making her hotter, wetter, more needy. He bucked in and out, starting slow and increasing the pace in time with her sighs. She clenched on his cock, and his groan of pleasure gratified her like nothing else. She loved feeling him inside her, pleasuring her, but she loved his reactions even more.

"I want to come, baby. I want to fuck you hard."

"Yes." She shoved her hips back against him, wantonly banging him back, hard, harder, hardest.

Suddenly, he jerked away. Freezing air rushed in where the fire of his passion had heated her. Stunned, she jerked upright and turned around.

He pulled up her pants and closed her parka. "What am I doing? I can't do this! Oh God, what a mess. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

“What’s wrong?” Robbed of Fisher’s warm embrace, a chill swept through Valerie. She reached for him, but he tugged away. His withdrawal struck her like a blow to her heart.

“I can’t make love to you anymore. I’m sorry. I should never have led you on. We should never have started this. Any of it. It was wrong.”

“I don’t understand. Everything’s fine, isn’t it?” She tried to make sense of what was happening.

“Valerie, I love you. I do. I want you in my life so much. But I—I just can’t do this anymore. I can’t be what you want.”

Chapter Thirteen

Valerie stiffened with shock. She'd longed to hear *I love you*, but Fisher didn't sound happy when he said those wonderful words.

Perhaps he needed reassurance. Though scared to expose her feelings so bluntly, she had to tell him. "I love you too, Fisher. I fell for you...oh, maybe the moment we met." Reaching to him, she stroked his cheek.

She touched wetness. Tears? Startled, she jerked her hand away.

Something was very wrong, something so big that a few passionate words wouldn't fix it.

His somber gaze had always concealed secrets. He'd held back from her for so long. She'd never dared to pry. She'd been taught that intruding into the personal business of others was rude.

But now, everything had changed. She'd fallen in love with Fisher, and he loved her back.

Opening her arms, she hugged him, big, bulky jacket and all, trying to warm him with her love. "Fisher. Talk to me. Tell me." Her voice broke. "Whatever it is, we can work it out."

He laughed, a raw, grating sound that was more like a sob.

"Please." She was crying now too, which didn't help. "Damn it! Talk to me. After what we've said, what we've done together, I have a right to know."

His sigh seemed to emanate from the depths of his being. Leaning his back against the side of the truck, he pulled her into his lap. She again cuddled her head against his shoulder and waited.

His body tensed against hers as he prepared to speak. "You know that I served in the military."

She stirred. "You've mentioned it once or twice."

"I went to Afghanistan and worked as a medic."

"There weren't many casualties in that war, were there?"

“Very few Americans were hurt. So in my spare time, I volunteered in the local hospitals and, later, in an orphanage.”

She caressed his chest. “That’s just like you. I know you love kids. So why—”

“If you weren’t there, it’s hard to understand what it was like. It’s hard to explain how bad it was. The news clips showed the smallest part of what went on.”

“I know whole villages disappeared.”

“Yeah. If people were lucky, they fled, leaving their homes with nothing more than they could fit into a cart. The poorer families had what they could carry and no more. Their suffering was...is...unbelievable.”

His head drooped forward, his dark hair hiding his expression. “And they were the lucky ones. In some towns, every person was killed—or worse. Valerie, I worked with little girls, kids as young as age nine and eleven, who’d been attacked by the Taliban because they’d learned to read. Or who’d been gang-raped by the local warlord.”

She gasped.

“I took care of children who’d lost arms or legs...or both.”

More tears stung her eyes. She sniffled then fumbled in her pocket for a tissue. Shame overtook her. In the face of the torment Fisher had seen, her troubles were nothing.

“I can’t forget, Valerie. Any of it. My military career was the first and last time I left Alaska.” Sighing, he pushed a shaky hand through his hair, shoving it off his forehead. “When we met, I told you that this place attracts a lot of burned-out vets with post-traumatic stress disorder. You’ve fallen in love with one.”

She sucked in a breath. “Isn’t— isn’t there a cure?”

“Sometimes. I won’t use drugs, and there aren’t any counselors on Takinsha qualified to help me. For a while, I tried living in Anchorage to get treatment, but nothing went right for me there. I need to be here. Home helps.”

“I like it here also,” she said timidly. Maybe if she could convince him that she wouldn’t want to leave...

“That’s not what I mean. This place is as necessary to me as water or oxygen. I fell apart in Anchorage. I had a breakdown. It won’t work out between us. I can’t ask you to give up your dreams. You’d become bitter and angry and sad. I love you. I couldn’t bear to do that to you.”

“I still don’t understand. Why can’t it work out? Are you telling me that every person who has this—this disorder can’t marry or have kids?”

"Of course not. But sharing my life—" He shook his head. "Every night, without fail, for years, I've awakened with nightmares. It's better than it used to be," he said with a melancholy smile. "I used to wake up screaming when I was in Afghanistan. The military did all they could. I'm not blaming them. They switched me to a different job, fixing communications equipment, but the damage was done."

"I can't ask you to share my life, Valerie. I know you'll say you're willing, but it's not fair to you. I'm not a normal man, and our lives will never be what you've planned."

"I can't have children."

Despair sank bitter claws into Valerie's soul. She'd thought she could give up her decision to have a baby so she could be with Fisher, but deep inside, she knew she'd lied to herself. She hadn't known it before she'd come to Takinsha, but her love for Fisher, along with watching Nina grow big with her child, had changed Valerie. The desire to bear a child was a need that arose from the core of her womanhood. Now, even with the reality of his condition so starkly stated, she couldn't endure the thought of remaining childless.

But what was the problem? "Are you sterile?"

A rueful chuckle escaped his lips. "As you know, I'm physically whole, and I love kids. But babies...babies are different. I can't even *look* at a baby. I—I just can't plan to start a family. It would be such a travesty to bring another child into this world. All it would do is create more suffering."

"How can you say that? Children are about new life, new hope. Every baby is a miracle. Every new life is another chance. Another chance to make the world better."

"There are already too many people and too much pain in this world. Each new child adds to that burden."

"No! Don't you understand? Our kids could be—our kid could be the next Einstein. The next Mother Teresa or Florence Nightingale. You gotta keep the faith, Fisher."

"I have no faith." His voice was cold, his face hard.

She grabbed his sleeve and shook him. "Then have faith in me. You say you love me. But what does that mean to you? I can't believe that it just means you want to fuck me. That's not like you. You're not shallow."

"All I've ever used women for is sex." He pushed off her hand.

"We've been doing it since the night we met, and you've always come back. We've hung out together, dated and gone to parties together... Our relationship isn't just about sex. Admit it."

"Okay, I admit it. I meant it when I said that I love you. All of you." He flung his hands wide. "Even the part of you that likes puns, squashes my truck and dumps soup on me. You're a beautiful woman and I do want to be with you. But I won't."

“Why not?” she taunted. “Afraid you’d feel something?”

“Yes! I’m afraid I’ll get in too deep. I’m afraid I’ll feel too much. Hell, I already feel too much!” he shouted. “Don’t you get it? I have too many feelings already, feelings I don’t understand and can’t control. I’m a mess, and loving you just makes my life messier.”

“Life is messy! You can’t retreat to a little corner of an obscure island and expect that everything will be simple and perfect. It just doesn’t work that way.”

“I can’t stand for it to work any other way.” He dropped his face into his hands. “I’m not normal. Do you want your children raised by a dysfunctional emotional cripple?”

Her anger fled, replaced by compassion...and resignation. Something bright and hopeful inside Fisher had died in Afghanistan, and she couldn’t see how it would ever be revived.

He raised his head. Reaching out, he removed the raven pin from her jacket. It glittered green and pink, reflecting the aurora.

“Why are you taking that? I like my raven.”

Though his eyes were reddened and swollen, he managed a smile. “What I did wasn’t right. I’ve been unfair to you ever since we met.”

“I don’t understand,” she wailed. “I don’t understand anything!”

“When I pinned you with my clan emblem, you became off-limits to every other man on this island. I marked you as mine.”

“That’s okay.” More tears dripped down her cheeks. “I want to be yours.”

“No, Valerie. I’m sorry. I feel as though I can never finish apologizing to you. I’ve been despicable.” He climbed out of the truck with slow, leaden movements.

“You’ve been...you’ve been human.”

One corner of his mouth jerked. “You should date Brent before he goes off-island for the winter. Don’t judge him by his fish camp. He’s really a nice guy and he can give you the life you want.”

“But I want you!”

“I’m sorry.” Lifting her out of the truck, he led her to her car. After she was seat belted in, he said, “I’m going to follow you to the station and see you safely inside. After that, I’m not going to see you for a long time.

“I think you know why.”

Chapter Fourteen

epiphany: eh-pih-fah-nee (n):

a sudden, intuitive perception of essential meaning

Sheer bad luck and Valerie's lack of savvy about Alaska weather, led to frozen, burst pipes in the lower floor of the station. When she went downstairs one morning for her coffee, she found the place awash with water, threatening to destroy K-AKA's already rickety radio equipment.

"Guess we'd better get Fisher in here." Nina, perched atop her desk, looked as though she was about to give birth at any time. "I'll get in touch with him."

The sound of Fisher's name slashed razor sharp across Valerie's heart. True to his word, he hadn't appeared at the station for weeks. During the scanty December daylight, she wandered the few streets of Takinsha when she had the time but never saw him. Like a wounded animal, he'd apparently retreated to his hermit hut at the far end of the island.

She didn't know if she should be glad or sorry about his absence. "I guess you should call him," she said reluctantly. Seeing him would hurt, but would it hurt more than missing him?

She couldn't drive his image from her mind. His tale had seared her. His pain had scarred her to the soul. She yearned to comfort him every waking moment. At night, she'd awaken with her pillow wet from tears.

She'd eaten dinner with Brent Saronov, following Fisher's suggestion, and she'd found he was right. Brent was a nice guy. But he wasn't Fisher.

"Nina, why don't you go home? You'll catch cold, with all of this wet." The water rose above the soles of Valerie's boots.

Nina shook her head. "I want to finish all of the station's end-of-the-year paperwork before I have my baby." She caressed her belly, setting off a new wave of longing in Valerie's heart.

She fought to repress her jealousy while Nina continued. "If I get it all done, Archie said I don't have to come back for a month or two."

Seeing Nina close to bearing her child stabbed Valerie to the core, but she couldn't remain upset with the receptionist. Nina was just a kid. Valerie said, "How are you feeling? Are you still having those contractions?"

"Yeah, but the midwife told me not to worry about it. They're called Braxtons or something and they don't mean the baby's coming real soon."

Despite herself, Valerie frowned. Nina had refused the help of the only doctor on the island. Explaining that she didn't trust the male doctor and wanted a woman by her side, she'd consulted with a local midwife. Even after Nina's experiences with Del, Valerie felt that Nina took the man-hating a little too far. What if complications developed that the midwife couldn't handle? Valerie asked, "When did the midwife say to call her?"

"When the pain gets too bad or the water breaks. She said she can get to where I am anytime, as long as I don't leave town."

Valerie turned her mind away from Nina's concerns. After all, Nina and her baby weren't her business. She focused on her own situation.

Fisher was coming. The news threw her conflicting emotions, already in tumult, into total chaos. They hadn't seen each other since that agonizing night under the aurora. She'd loved the northern lights. Now she couldn't see them without misery.

Everything reminded her of him. They'd spent time together all over Takinsha, up in her room, in the station, in every restaurant and café. The smell of Chinese food made her ill with regrets.

Breakfast at the Yellow Snow was impossible. Hannah, ever the sharp-eyed one, had immediately noticed Fisher's raven pin gone from Valerie's jacket and had insisted upon giving Valerie a tarot reading.

Reluctantly, and with more than a little desperation, Valerie had agreed. She didn't understand the elaborate pattern of cards Hannah threw, but she explained that the Page of Cups and The Lovers had trumped The Hermit. Hannah insisted that all wasn't lost and that Fisher would return to Valerie. With tears in her eyes, she'd begged Hannah to please stop.

Deep in her heart, Valerie knew it was over. It wasn't a question of Fisher's willingness. She understood that now. He couldn't change. He couldn't grow out of his pain. He didn't know how, and she didn't know how to help him. Until he struggled out of that stuck place, anything real and lasting between them wasn't possible.

How could she face him? She didn't want to humiliate herself or make him uncomfortable.

She decided to borrow his approach and just...avoid.

A few hours later, Fisher came in and greeted Valerie with cool friendliness. She responded in kind, even though she ached inside. He refused to meet her eyes and kept their interactions to a minimum.

She longed to hold him but instead busied herself with her work, allowing herself only the briefest of glances. That tiny glimpse was enough to renew the pain in her heart. Though he'd always be beautiful to her, his sorrow emanated from every cell.

She couldn't bear to see such grief and couldn't endure her own, so she kept her head down and stared at the mic an awful lot.

Evening fell early in December, and when the sky darkened, he was still puttering around the station. He'd stopped the flow of water then used a push broom to shove the standing water out the door. "There's a natural slope," he said to Nina and Valerie. "It would eventually drain out the back door and into the parking lot. I'm just helping it along."

Nina frowned. "What if it freezes solid?"

"It might," he said. "We're okay as long as we're careful, and if there's no blizzard."

"Where's the burst pipe?" Valerie asked.

"I don't know," he told her. "I turned off the water to the entire building, but at some point, I have to switch it back on or else I probably won't be able to tell which pipe burst. When's the best time for doing that?"

She grimaced. "How can there be a good time to flood the place some more?"

"There isn't." He looked outside. "It's snowing."

"Oh wow." She went to the window. Illuminated by the station's exterior lights, fat flakes drifted down. "It's beautiful, but will it prevent you from fixing the water system?"

"It shouldn't."

Fisher couldn't look at Valerie. Even a short peek at her face brought a flood of memories. Valerie dancing in her floaty, feminine Halloween costume... Valerie cuddling with him in front of the fire... A laughing Valerie, flirting with Brent just to tease. The feel of her breasts in his hand, her nipples in his mouth...his cock nestling inside her welcoming body.

Though she was standing in the same room, he missed her like the dickens. Knowing their relationship was broken forever hurt, hurt bad. Their romance was dead, and he was sure they'd never recover their friendship, which he'd enjoyed.

He decided to check out the plumbing in her room. She was still working her shift, so he could deal with the upstairs pipes without her presence disturbing him.

Just thinking about her was disturbing enough.

For Fisher, loving Valerie had changed everything. He still awakened at night, but he wasn't haunted by Afghanistan. Instead, a lingering dream of Valerie in his arms tore him apart inside. Recalling the glorious moments they'd spent under the aurora, when they'd confessed their love, made him want to scream and beat his head against the nearest wall.

She was so near and yet so far. Valerie seemed to twirl and spin beyond his reach, living across the emotional divide that separated him from everyone else. On the far side of the abyss, he knew he merely existed while she truly lived, in touch with what made people fully human.

She wanted a complete life as a woman, and he couldn't fault her or turn her from her track. She'll meet someone, he told himself, and she'll be happy again.

But her pale, wan appearance didn't square with this hope. Though still very pretty, she'd lost weight. Hollows had appeared beneath her cheekbones. He didn't dare touch her, but he guessed that her slender form had declined into thinness.

It's just the winter. If she lasts 'til the spring, she'll be fine. He hoped that their shared sadness wouldn't forever chill Valerie's warm heart. He'd never forgive himself if he'd killed her joy in life or diminished her capacity for affection. He truly wished her happiness, even though the thought of her loving someone else turned him inside out with jealousy.

After checking the pipes in her bathroom, he couldn't resist the temptation to snoop around her living area. He'd noticed on his prior visits that she'd transformed the place. She hadn't stopped nesting, so the apartment was even more comfortable.

She'd unpacked a TV-DVD setup and a laptop computer. Stacks of DVDs revealed her eclectic tastes. *Casablanca* and *The Thin Man* sat next to a complete set of *Harry Potter* DVDs. She liked books by someone named Janet Evanovich, because a couple of paperbacks were stacked next to Valerie's bed. He smiled when he saw *Ballads of a Cheechako*, a book of poetry by Robert W. Service.

But she's not perfect, he said to himself. There aren't any board games.

He looked out the window. The temperature had been fluctuating, and as night fell, freezing rain replaced the snow. Then sleet covered the snow with a layer of ice.

Later, Valerie came in while he was checking under her sink. She stood in the kitchen doorway.

The fluorescent light haloed her blonde hair. She smiled tremulously at him, and in that moment, it seemed to Fisher that everything he was, his heart, his soul and his spirit, poured out of him and flowed into her.

He should have been scared, but he wasn't. He knew he was safe in her keeping.

He belonged to her forever and, with a gentle smile, she accepted the gift. Suddenly, they were in each other's arms, with Valerie peppering his face with tiny, quick kisses. Each touch of her lips sent little stabs of love and pain through him, like the barbed pricks of Cupid's arrows.

"Valerie." He buried his face in her hair then lowered himself to a stool. She stood in the intimate space created by his spread legs. He tugged up her sweater to rub his face against the soft skin of her midriff. He inhaled her scent, letting the essence of everything that was Valerie envelop him.

"I love you." His shoulders heaved and he fought for control. He became aware of an overwhelming, crushing weight crowding his chest. He couldn't breathe. How long had it been there? He didn't know.

Sobs choked his throat as he fought to throw off the burden of his past.

He would not go back. He couldn't. "I love you, Valerie."

Valerie slid down his body until she knelt before him. Her upturned face was streaked with shiny tears. "I love you too." Her voice broke. "Don't you understand? I'd give up ten kids, ten thousand for you."

He shook his head then gathered her in, holding her close. "Let's not go there. Let's just...be together, and see what happens."

Slowly, naturally, Valerie's healing caress became more intense. She focused on his chest and he on hers. While she tweaked his nipples into hardness, he pushed up her sweater so he could rub his face in her soft breasts, so warm, so welcoming, so replete with the womanly comfort she offered.

Then his sense of comfort shifted, heated into lust. He laved her nipples with his tongue. They tautened, and he suckled, drawing them out until they became stiff and long in his mouth. With a strangled moan of need, she reached for his zipper and took out his cock.

Sensation zinged through him. He was harder for her than he'd ever been, but she pulled away so she could strip off her jeans. Naked from the waist down, she straddled him and took him inside her with a sigh that seemed part lust, part relief and all love. Pleasure snapped through him, her channel, tight from weeks of sexual deprivation, made him come within seconds.

"Oh shit, Valerie, I'm sorry—"

"It's okay, baby, it's okay. I just need to feel you inside me, all right? I just need you to do exactly what you're doing."

He sighed, held her, and leaned his head forward into her body. His face cuddled against her nubby red sweater.

He'd finally come home.

Without moving, they held each other for a long time. The tattered shreds of his soul began to knit, and finally Fisher raised his head. "What time is it?"

Valerie pushed back the sleeve of her sweater to check her watch. "Eight. When are we gonna be able to use my shower? I'm kinda sticky." She slowly stood as though her legs were stiff then untangled herself from around him.

We. He smiled at the prospect of showering with her. "I'm not sure. I'm afraid of turning the water back on. It's so cold that more pipes might burst."

"Did you insulate them?"

"Yeah, so maybe it'll be okay. Umm, I don't think I'll be going anywhere tonight."

"That's okay with me, but why not?"

"Let's look outside." He picked up a clean-looking towel, wet it and used it to stroke and clean her pussy. She hummed with pleasure, pressing his hand more firmly onto her clit.

"Nice?" he asked.

"Ooh, very nice. More than nice."

He knelt and wrapped his hands around her hips to anchor himself so he could bury his face in her bush. He found her clit with his tongue and licked the sweetest spot until she moaned and shuddered with her release. Better, he thought. That made up for him so rudely coming the second his cock had jammed inside her pussy. Despite Valerie saying it was okay, it was definitely not okay with him. Her pleasure made his worthwhile. He lived to satisfy her.

After they'd dressed, she followed him downstairs. He switched on an outside light then opened the door a crack. The December wind shrieked and snow swirled inside.

The light glittered off a sheet of ice, slick as a used-car salesman and deadly as a blade in the belly. It covered a two-foot-thick layer of snow. More floated in before he closed the door.

"I can't drive on that. It's not safe. Valerie, I'll stay here tonight and hope that the weather warms up enough in the morning so we can get out." He smiled at her, hoping he wasn't pushing their newfound togetherness too hard.

She grinned. *Whew.*

"What about me?" Nina demanded.

He hesitated. "Nina, you're a free person and I can't stop you from doing anything, but I don't want you to try to go home."

Her eyes rounded. "But I'm having contractions!"

"What?" He turned and glared at her. "How frequent are they?"

"Don't get mad at me! The midwife said they were no big deal!"

"How frequent are the contractions?"

"I dunno! Five minutes or so, I guess. I haven't counted."

"Damn. Damn. Damn." He sat on the lowest stair, his head dropped into his hands.

Valerie stared. Fisher sounded...frightened. She'd rarely seen him upset, except when she'd mistakenly dumped him into the freezing water off his dock. And when she'd asked him why he didn't want to have chil—

Perhaps his obvious distress was due to something relating to his condition.

"It's not my fault!" Nina's panicky mood seemed to feed off Fisher's anxiety.

"Nina, come with me." Valerie grabbed her arm. "Let's go up to my place, if you're gonna have your baby."

"Okay." Nina moved toward the stairs then doubled over in pain, howling.

Valerie wrapped her arm around Nina's shoulders, darting a frantic glance in Fisher's direction. "Do something! Didn't you used to be a medic?"

He lifted his head. "Get her upstairs." A line of sweat trickled down from his temple and his face was taut and tense. "Now."

Valerie skedaddled, wondering what on earth was causing Fisher's reaction. She found the air mattress, which he'd lent her all those months ago, and blew it up then covered it with a couple of towels and a sheet. While persuading Nina to lie down, she heard a string of imaginative expletives from the lower floor.

"Wow," Valerie said to Nina. "He knows a few I never heard before."

Listening, Nina's brow wrinkled. "I think some of them are Tlingit."

Valerie went to the top of the stairs. "What's going on?"

She heard a swishing noise then Fisher's voice. "I turned the water back on. It's gushing all over the place. But I think I found the leak. It's in the downstairs bathroom."

One step forward and two steps back. "What do I do now? About Nina?" Valerie called.

There was silence from downstairs.

"Stay here." She covered Nina with a blanket.

Valerie found Fisher in the downstairs bathroom, wrench in hand, tightening a pipe fitting under the sink. Again, the room was drenched, with water dripping off the walls and collecting on the floor. "I hope it holds." He stepped back from his work, frowning.

"Hey, Nina needs your help. What are you doing down here?" She tugged on his sleeve. "You're the only person who can help her have this baby. I sure can't!"

He leaned against the wall, the muscles in his face contorting under a film of moisture. "I can't either." The words came out in a tortured whisper.

She went cold, though the heat in the station was working fine. "Why? What do you mean?"

"It's part of my illness. Sweet Lord in Heaven, of all the lousy breaks for Nina—"

She grabbed him by one wet sleeve and shook him fiercely, her sympathy for his plight burned away by the intensity of Nina's need. "Deal with it! I don't care what your problem is, you're gonna deal with it right now!"

"It's not that easy! Don't you think I want this to go away?"

"Push it away. Damn it, she could die!"

He scrubbed his face with his knuckles. "I can't! It's too much like the other one."

She stopped short. She remembered what he'd said, that night under the aurora. *I can't even look at a baby.* Though she dreaded his answer, she asked, "What other one?"

He sucked in a deep breath. His jaw knotted. His mouth moved but no words came out.

He was trying, but...could they exorcise this ghost?

"Tell me, Fisher," she whispered. "Please. You have to tell me why you won't save that girl's life, and that of her baby."

He reached for her as if she was his only hope of salvation, hauling her in close. His body wrenched and quivered against hers. "When I was in Afghanistan. There was this girl, a fifteen-year-old, and this baby. She—the girl—had been raped. I helped with the delivery. In the clinic where I worked."

"So you know what to do for Nina, right?" She ignored the clamminess seeping through her clothes.

"She—" He choked then appeared to regain his composure. "I don't know if you understand the Afghan culture. She thought what had happened to her was her fault. Every man in her life—her father, her brothers—rejected her. She had a son, a beautiful little boy. She tried to kill him." Tears came into his eyes. "We didn't let her, of course, but she tried to hurt him. Then she grabbed a scalpel and cut her wrist."

"Dear God in heaven." Valerie closed her eyes. "Did you save her life?"

"Yes, but it was horrific. Arterial blood all over the place, all over us, dripping off the baby. I'll never forget that sight. I can't."

She searched her mind for words that could conceivably comfort him and found none. Still, she had to try. "Fisher, what happened to that girl and her baby was not your fault."

"I know that. But since then, I can't even look at a baby without getting the shakes. And the thought of assisting at a birth—" He shook his head violently. His wet hair flung drops of water everywhere. "I can't do it. I just don't know if I can do it."

She stroked his face. "Fisher, my darling. When was the last time you saw a baby?"

He shuddered. "Not for a year or two. I make a point of staying away from them."

"So you don't know if you'll have the same reaction, do you?"

"N-no. I guess not. Umm, and I haven't assisted at a birth either."

"Look, I don't see that we have any choice." She took his wet, cold hands in hers, rubbing to chafe some warmth into them. "I can't help get this baby born. I don't know how. Nina can't either. We can phone, but we don't know if the midwife or the doctor will get here before the baby does. You have to do this."

He gulped then straightened, pushing away from the wall. "You're right. I have to do this."

She nodded. "You sure do."

He drew himself to his full height, appearing to come to a decision. "Okay, I'll call 9-1-1 while you go upstairs and get every clean towel and sheet you own. When I say clean, I mean *clean*. Heat a couple in your dryer to wrap Nina and the baby in. They have to stay warm. Has her water broken yet?"

"Let's go check."

"Okay. Do you have, umm, a turkey baster?"

She gave him a startled look.

* * * * *

After phoning the emergency number to learn that no one could come out for hours, Fisher rooted through Nina's desk and found a pair of scissors and a couple of binder clips. Then he headed upstairs. He didn't know if he could get through this experience without falling apart. He knew how to assist a mother, but he wasn't a doctor and didn't remember a lot about helping a baby into the world.

Combine that with the way his hands were shaking and, well, Nina's baby is in trouble, he said to himself. But he knew that Valerie was right. Neither he nor Nina had any choice other than to do their best. Despite his illness, his conscience wouldn't let him walk away from her.

He just hoped he wouldn't make anything worse.

Upstairs, he found Valerie, sweet thing that she was, fluttering around Nina like a mama bird around her nest. "You should lie down." Valerie attempted to tug Nina to a makeshift bed. He recognized his air mattress under a layer of blankets and sheets. A pile of towels sat on a nearby chair. Good.

"No, she doesn't." He advanced into the room. "If it helps you, Nina, keep walking around. Some mothers prefer it. Has your water broken yet?"

"It just did, I think. I'm soakin'."

"Valerie, help her get out of her wet clothes. Do you have a warm, washable robe? That would be best for right now." Fisher buzzed into Valerie's tiny kitchen, hoping to distract himself with a few mundane but necessary tasks.

He found a turkey baster in a drawer. It had to be sterile if he was going to use it to suction out the baby's mouth, so he put it into a bowl of water and detergent then microwaved it. When the water had boiled, he took the bowl out of the microwave. He added the metal binder clips and the scissors to the soapy water before rinsing his makeshift tools. He'd use the scissors and clips to cut and tie off the baby's umbilical cord.

He stripped off his damp sweater then used one of Valerie's towels to dry his hair. Fortunately his T-shirt was clean. He washed his hands very, very thoroughly in the hottest water he could stand, using lots of soap.

With Valerie leading her, Nina staggered back into the room, clad in a cozy-looking plaid flannel robe. She screamed a pungent curse and bent, clutching her middle. "If I ever get hold of that rat Del—" She shrieked again.

"She's in a lot of pain. Should I give her some ibuprofen?" Valerie asked.

"Ibuprofen! Are you nuts? I'd have to eat the whole freakin' bottle!" But after a few seconds, Nina appeared to calm.

"Is the contraction over? Aren't you supposed to breathe funny now?" Valerie helped Nina ease her swollen body down to the air mattress.

"Oh yeah." Nina began to huff and puff then yelled as another contraction hit her.

"Push, Nina! This baby's gonna come fast." Fisher knelt beside her. "He wants out and he wants out now."

Nina shrieked then puffed then shrieked and puffed some more. Fisher and Valerie murmured words of encouragement while holding Nina's hands and feet so she would have something to push against.

"He's crowning! Just a few more seconds, honey, you're doin' fine. Valerie, gimme a little towel, okay?" Using a washcloth for traction on the baby's slippery skin, Fisher reached, and Valerie could see him guiding the baby into the world.

"First the head and now the shoulders," he muttered. "Valerie, gimme a bigger towel, one you put in the dryer."

She ran to the dryer and pulled out a bundle of warmed linens. She handed him a medium-sized towel.

"Perfect."

The baby plopped out onto the makeshift receiving blanket Fisher held. He closed his eyes, his body trembling.

Valerie touched him on the shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Though he looked pale and ill, he nodded. "I just need to pull myself together. I had a little flashback," he said to her in an undertone, so Nina, spent and gasping, wouldn't hear.

Valerie rubbed his nape. "Hang in there, slugger. Just shove that old stuff out of your mind."

He nodded again, breathed deeply, and she could see the tension ease out of his face. He brought the baby close, gently rubbing the small, slippery body with the towel. "Nina, you have a little boy."

"Oh thank God!" Nina started to cry.

So did Valerie.

So did Fisher.

So did the baby.

“What’s wrong with him?” Nina reached for the baby. “Why’s he crying?”

Fisher smiled through his tears. “It’s okay. He’s supposed to cry. We want the baby to cry. That means he’s healthy, honey.” He handed the baby to Valerie.

“Why can’t I hold my baby?”

“We’re not quite done yet. Let me tidy the baby a bit then we’ll get your afterbirth out. When you have contractions, push real hard.”

Valerie watched while Fisher clamped the cord, cut it, cleaned the baby with hand towels and, of all things, a turkey baster then helped Nina with the afterbirth.

“You’re incredible,” Valerie murmured. She knew what this effort had cost Fisher. Regardless of his personal pain, he’d done what he needed to do.

She was more in love with him than ever.

She looked down at the baby in her arms. Red and squally, he had a slightly misshapen head. He was lovely.

But still, Valerie’s commitment to Fisher had strengthened into unbreakable granite. She could give up her dream of children for him without any regrets at all.

No, Fisher wasn’t a baby, but he was truly a special man. His healing was as much of a miracle as the new life she held.

After removing the soiled sheets from beneath Nina, Fisher replaced them with fresh ones warm from the dryer. Turning, he smiled at Valerie. “I think our new mom is ready for her baby now.”

Bending, Valerie gave the small bundle to Nina. “Uh, what do I do?” Nina asked.

“Nurse him,” Fisher said. “He’s taken the longest journey any of us ever make. He’s probably hungry.”

“O—kay.” Nina opened the robe then awkwardly pressed the baby’s face to her breast.

“Try it this way, honey.” Fisher adjusted mother and child so her son’s back rested along the curve of Nina’s arm. After a moment of hesitation, the baby took the nipple and began to feed.

“Ahhh.” Nina appeared to relax.

After stacking pillows behind Nina’s back, Valerie went to stand next to Fisher, who stood staring at mother and baby with a broody look on his face. She entwined his fingers with hers. “How are you feeling?”

He heaved a great sigh. "Tired. Good."

She nudged him with her elbow. "How does that baby look to you?"

"Like...a baby."

"Is, umm, that other baby gone forever?"

He hesitated. "Maybe not forever, but right now he's pretty far away." He turned and smiled at her. "Maybe he'll never come back."

"That would be wonderful."

"Fisher, I want you to be the godfather." Nina awkwardly switched the baby from one breast to the other.

"You do?" Fisher looked alarmed.

She peered up at him through her goth-dark bangs. "Well, yeah. Del sure isn't gonna do anything."

"Brent might." Fisher managed to wink at Nina.

She turned red. "Maybe, but for now—"

"A godfather?" He blew out his breath. "Sounds like an offer I can't refuse," he said, in a mock-Jersey accent.

Epilogue

Six years later

To celebrate Fisher and Valerie's fifth anniversary, her parents decided to travel to Alaska once again. They'd come for the wedding and, to Valerie's surprise, they'd enjoyed themselves. Takinsha's Sons of Scandia Hall wasn't her parents' usual haunt, but they and everyone else had a great time. True to her prediction, Hannah had danced at the wedding.

The Percys had been nonplussed by the Chugatts while the Chugatts were highly amused by Valerie's parents, echoing Fisher's initial attitude toward his wife. Remembering the families' reactions to one another, Valerie chuckled as she boarded the ferry to Seward.

"What's so funny?" Fisher tightened his grip on the baby's carrier, in which Caroline, their daughter, traveled.

"Your parents and my parents." Valerie dragged a wheeled suitcase behind her. Caroline's diaper bag dangled from a long strap hung over her shoulder.

He frowned. "I thought they got along fine. Think they'll go fishing again?"

"So they need to?" Valerie asked wryly. Both sets of parents, experienced fishermen all, had caught trophy salmon and halibut during the honeymoon, which everyone had spent at the Chugatts' fishing lodge on the Kenai Peninsula. She'd been sure she was going to grow fins and scales from the amount of fish she'd politely consumed.

"Seafood is good for you, especially salmon. Helps the baby grow." He patted her stomach, where a new life flourished.

Valerie grinned. After a period of indecision, she and Fisher had embarked on a meandering course toward parenthood. Nina's son—named Fisher—had helped. Proudly paternal, Fisher doted on his godson, whom everyone called Baby Fish.

But Valerie hadn't been able to conceive for two painful years after their wedding, during which time they thought they'd go nuts. Fisher told her that the irony was too much to bear. "Like a bad TV soap opera," he'd said.

Then Caroline, their miracle baby, was conceived. After nine tense months, she was born in a hospital in Seward at Valerie's insistence. She hadn't wanted Fisher to go through any birth-related stress. When he finally held their baby for the first time, he'd cried from sheer relief. In fact, he teared up every time he saw a baby, especially his.

Far from fearing parenthood, Fisher had turned out to be a model dad. Caroline adored him, and he was Play-doh in their daughter's tiny hands.

"You liked fish during your last pregnancy. What's the difference? Pregnant is pregnant." He set Caroline down by his feet so he could adjust his backpack's straps.

Valerie gave him a playful jab with her elbow. "You know better than that."

He sighed. "I do, but I keep hoping you'll grow out of your craving for chocolate cherry ice cream."

"And burgers."

"And burgers. I suppose I should be grateful that you want some protein before dessert."

"Let's go below and find some food. I'm hungry."

"Again?"

"Breakfast was hours ago."

Caroline squealed. Valerie nudged Fisher once more. "See? Carrie thinks it's time for a snack too."

"Well, don't unbutton here, okay?" He sounded nervous. "You have a tendency to, to—"

"Oh nobody cares, Fisher." Still, Valerie allowed her husband to lead her belowdecks and find their room so she could nurse her daughter in privacy. He then went to find ice cream and burgers.

Valerie adjusted the pillows on her bunk then took her baby out of her carrier. Resting Caroline on her pregnancy-swollen belly, Valerie began to nurse her. Eyes closed as she sucked, with an absurdly blissful look on her face, Caroline fed.

"You've always liked your meals, haven't you, sweetheart?" Valerie murmured to her daughter. "You're just like Mommy and Daddy."

Caroline released the nipple with a popping noise. She must have liked the sound because she tried it again.

“Uh-uh. No, honey.” Valerie guided the baby to her other breast.

She leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes. This pregnancy differed from her first, perhaps because she was older. She became more tired more easily, had become big quickly.

She breathed deeply and let her mind drift. Maybe this one was a boy. He certainly seemed to bump around inside her a lot.

* * * * *

Fisher came to the door with a tray of burgers and milkshakes in hand, hoping that a chocolate milkshake with syrup and cherries would satisfy his wife’s out-of-control sweet tooth.

He probably shouldn’t indulge her so much, but he could deny Valerie nothing. She’d saved his life as surely as if she’d pulled him out of a flaming house or flung him a raft while drowning.

Ironic, the turns and twists life took. The woman who’d dumped him into the freezing water off his dock had turned out to be his salvation.

He opened the door to see that the two girls who owned his heart had both fallen asleep. Moving quietly so he wouldn’t wake either, he put down the food onto a table then carefully eased Caroline away from her mother’s breast.

His daughter stirred in his arms, stretched and yawned. She smiled at him.

He tried not to get weepy but lost the battle. She was so sweet, so adorable, so indescribably wonderful. Not a day went by that he didn’t bless heaven for bringing him his Caroline.

But Valerie...Valerie was the core and the heart of everything that mattered to Fisher.

“Who woulda thunk it?” he asked his daughter then looked at his sleeping wife. Valerie hadn’t changed much from the saucy siren who’d shot him a come-hither look from the ferry years before. As beautiful as ever, she still enjoyed working part-time at the radio station. She liked crossword puzzles too, and he’d discovered she was amazing at board games.

She’d lost her clumsiness and learned to cope with the vagaries of life in Alaska, even to love Takinsha as much as he did.

His Valerie had lit every corner of his life with joy and hope, infusing each day with meaning. His nightmares of warfare had long ago ceased, replaced by other dreams. His daughter’s first steps. Her high school graduation.

And best of all, a vision of growing old with his wife, together watching the aurora ignite the glorious winter sky.

About the Author

An award-winning, best-selling traditional romance novelist, Suz deMello uses a pseudonym to protect her privacy. But if you're a romance fan, you've probably read her books or have heard of her. She's known for layered, compelling novels charged with humor as well as emotion.

Of her journey to the steamier side of writing, Suz says, "I love writing traditional romances, but after several years in the same mode, I felt that I really needed to cut loose as a creative artist and write hot, sexy books that reflect the wilder side of being human."

Suz's books are fast-paced with seductive situations, complicated characters and a whole lot of kink!

Suz welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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