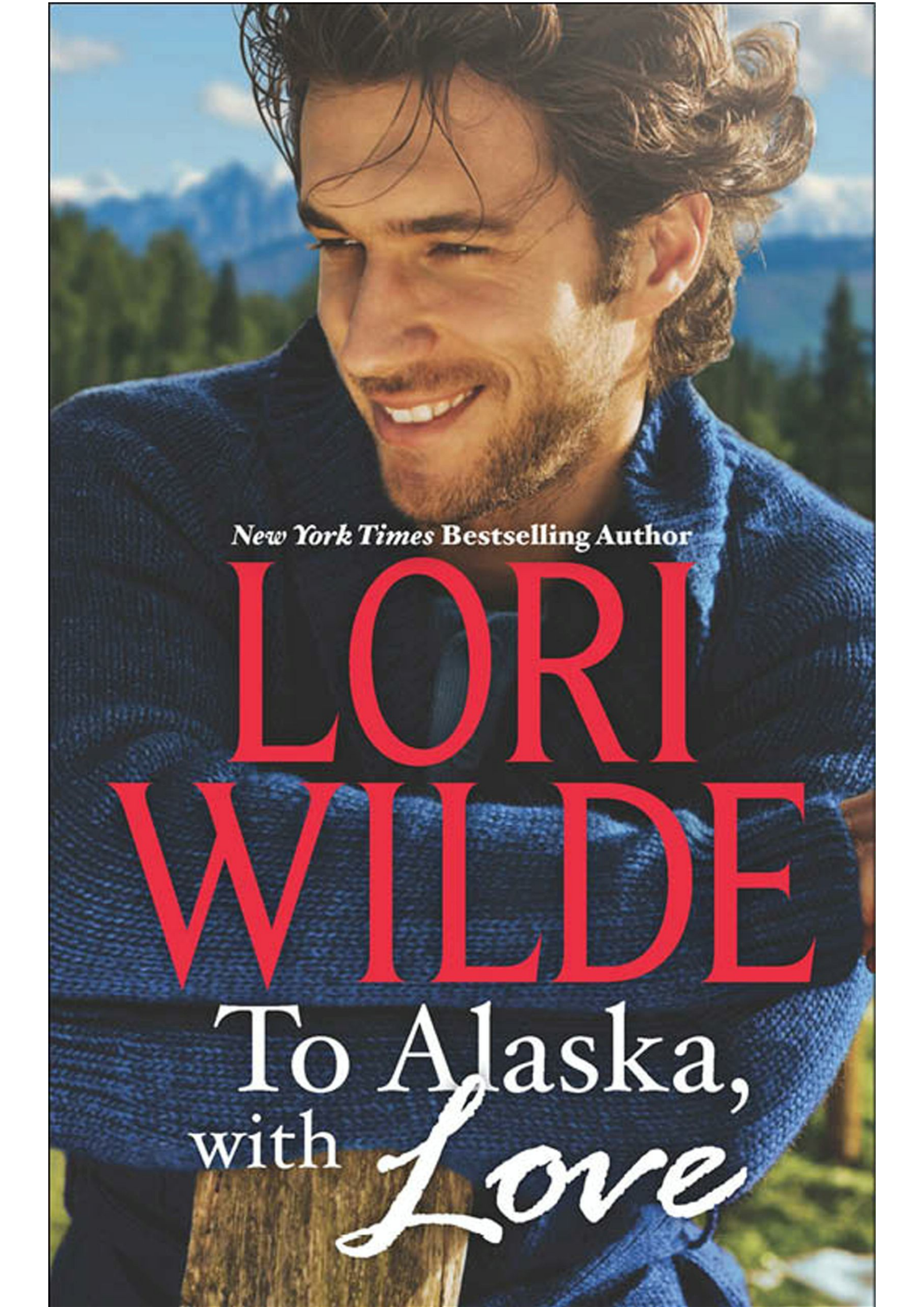




New York Times Bestselling Author

LORI WILDE

To Alaska,
with *Love*

Lori Wilde

**To Alaska, With
Love: A Touch of Silk**

«HarperCollins»

Wilde L.

To Alaska, With Love: A Touch of Silk / L. Wilde —
«HarperCollins»,

A TOUCH OF SILK Manhattan columnist Kay Freemont has made a career out of writing about sex and relationships, yet spends her nights alone. So when sexy Alaskan bachelor Quinn Scofield places an ad in her magazine to find a wife, Kay can't resist the opportunity to finally see what all the hype is about. Though city girl Kay was only looking for a red-hot fling, she's beginning to feel right at home, both in the small town of Bear Creek-and in Quinn's loving arms. A Thrill to Remember Meggie Scofield is ready to rejoin the dating scene after her divorce, and the town's masquerade party seems like the perfect place to start. Delighted when a gorgeous masked man catches her eye, Meggie is later stunned to find out the sexy stranger is actually Caleb Greenleaf, her former brother-in-law! Their chemistry is undeniable, but will one thrilling night turn into the love they've both been looking for?

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To Alaska, With Love

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Lori Wilde

To Birgit Davis-Todd, who gave me the chance to write about my wild, sexy Alaskans.

And to my inspiration—the great state of Alaska.

[Chapter One](#)

THE PANTY HOSE were killing him. Cutting his gut clean in two. Whoever invented the torturous things should be strangled outright. No mercy shown.

Sheer, black, tight. They clung like second skin to the most exquisitely shaped pair of legs he'd ever seen. Narrow ankles, smooth rounded calves, supple knees and firm thighs.

She crossed her legs and the panty hose murmured a soft whisper. Swish.

And what about that dark seam running up the back? Simply sin-sational!

Lord have mercy on an Alaskan man's soul. He'd never witnessed such sights in his hometown of Bear Creek. For a second there Quinn Scofield thought he would have to ask the flight attendant for an oxygen mask.

Boldly he peered over the top of his Wilderness Guide Monthly at the blond, sleek-haired, Charlize Theron look-alike. She sat in first-class seat 1B, one diagonal row up from his position in 2C. She and her dynamite hosiery, presumably on their way to JFK, had boarded the plane during the layover at O'Hare, but not once had she glanced behind her. Instead, she had been studiously typing into her laptop computer for the past thirty minutes.

This one was too cool for school and she knew it. Polished, classy, undeniably an urbanite, she was definitely not the kind of woman he was searching for. But man, did she ever rev his engines. Without the slightest provocation, he could easily imagine those fine, gorgeous limbs wrapped around his midsection or slung over his shoulders in the throes of serious sex.

"Real hottie, isn't she?" his seatmate, a paunchy, middle-aged businessman who'd had one too many whiskey sours, slurred, and nodded at the woman.

"She's very attractive, yes," Quinn agreed, but kept his voice low so she wouldn't overhear.

Unfortunately the other man's volume control had been affected by his alcohol intake. He leaned close in a confidential manner, nudged Quinn in the ribs and winked boldly. "I'd do her in a New York minute. Know what I mean?"

Slowly Charlize turned and pinned them both with an icy glare. Quick, like a little boy chastised, the businessman looked away. But Quinn didn't flinch. He'd been dying for a glimpse of those eyes, and he wasn't going to let his seatmate's bad manners deprive him of the thrill.

Their gazes met.

And he wasn't disappointed. Her eyes were as compelling as the rest of her. Sharp, slightly almond-shaped, the color of dark chocolate.

His heart did a triple axel, then dropped, ker-plunk, into his stomach. He'd always had a weakness for brown-eyed blondes. Quinn smiled, giving her his best George-Clooney-on-the-make imitation.

Charlize didn't return the favor.

"Hi," he greeted her boldly. "How you doin'?"

For a minute there he thought she might speak.

Her lips parted. Her eyes widened. A hint of a smile hovered.

Come on, sweetheart, give it up.

His hopes lodged in his throat. Suddenly his imagination transported him back to the fifth grade. He remembered sneaking off during recess to play spin the bottle with his classmates in the basement of Seward Middle School with the singular hope of kissing Mindy Lou Johnson.

But then Charlize cruelly shattered his dreams. Without a word, she flicked her gaze away, as if he was of no more significance than a pesky fly, and went back to her laptop.

Snubbed! Okay, that's what he got for daring to speak to the Queen of Cool.

Quinn tried to focus on his magazine, but he couldn't concentrate. Eventually, his gaze found its way back to those legs. Eighteen months without the comforts of female companionship was a far stretch to go.

That's how long it had been since his ex-girlfriend Heather had turned down his marriage proposal. She'd told him that no matter how much she might love him, she could never be more than a fair weather Alaskan. The winters were just too harsh.

Heather begged him to move to Cleveland, but Quinn figured he must not have loved her as much as he thought. He had not yet met the woman who could convince him to leave his home. Alaska was in his blood, his heart, his soul. But man alive, sometimes those long, dark winter nights got really lonely.

Some of his friends had told him he was too stubborn, letting his love of Alaska overrule his heart. They said if he didn't learn to compromise, he'd never find true love. But others had congratulated him on sticking to his guns. He was an Alaskan man, and only a woman willing to become an Alaskan wife could make him happy.

At thirty-two Quinn was ready for a family of his own, but he knew it would take a very special lady to make her home in Bear Creek. Elegant thing like Charlize Theron there, with her fancy panty hose and her hundred-dollar haircut, would be crushed by the regal brutality of the Alaskan landscape. Nope, pretty she might be, but he needed someone tough and strong and resilient. Someone like his younger sister, Meggie. Or at least how Meggie used to be before she married Jesse Drummond and moved off to Seattle to fulfill her dream of becoming a city girl. Trouble was, in Bear Creek, men outnumbered women ten to one.

In the meantime he wasn't opposed to studying Charlize for sheer enjoyment. He tried to imagine her in Alaska and had to smile. No Broadway theater. No champagne-and-black-tie charity events for cultural enrichment. In Bear Creek if you wanted to raise money for, say, the volunteer fire department, you threw a salmon bake, got a keg of beer, slapped some hard-driving music on your CD player and let it go at that.

From where he sat, Quinn could only see her profile and those elegant hands tapping away at the keyboard. Her nose was perfectly shaped. Exquisite, in fact. Not too big, not too small. Not too sharp, not too soft.

Her cheekbones—Quinn could see just one, but he knew the other matched—were as high and sculpted as any fashion model's. Her firm but feminine chin was an artist's dream. And that mouth! Full, but not overblown like those Hollywood actresses who had their lips shot full of collagen. Lips currently adorned with lipstick the same russet shade as an Alaskan summer sunset.

Oh, this one was a fascinating combination of fire and ice, all right. Her regal demeanor shouted "You're never gonna get it," but those panty hose and spike-heeled shoes gave totally conflicting messages. Deep down she was a sensual woman aching to shake off that repressed disposition.

She closed her laptop and settled it under her seat. Her pencil dropped to the floor, unnoticed.

Quinn, never one to let good sense hold him back from something he wanted, seized the opportunity. Leaning forward, he tapped her gently on the shoulder.

"Miss?"

She jerked her head around and stabbed him with a hard, what-do-you-want-from-me-wilderness-boy expression. No doubt she was accustomed to strange men making passes at her, and she'd perfected that "hands off" look to quell even the most ardent admirer in his tracks. A necessary skill for a woman who dressed like that.

"You dropped your pencil." He pointed.

Her expression softened when she realized he wasn't hitting on her—even though he was working up to that. The corners of her lips edged upward and she silently mouthed, "Thank you."

Argh! Her simple thank-you struck like an arrow through the heart.

Yo, Mama, I think I'm in big-time lust.

When she leaned down to retrieve the pencil, she shifted her legs and her skirt rode up higher on her thigh. Quinn almost choked.

He spied the hint of something black and lacy. She straightened, pencil in hand, and reached to tug her skirt down.

But it was too late. He already knew her secret.

She turned her head, met his eyes again and sent him a Mona Lisa smile.

Those were no panty hose.

The audacious woman was wearing a garter and stockings!

* * *

KAY FREEMONT CASUALLY TOOK a compact from her purse.

Okay, maybe it wasn't so casually. Maybe she wanted another peek at Paul Bunyon back there without turning around and giving him the satisfaction of knowing she was interested.

Not interested in a serious way, of course. She was trying to untangle herself from an unsatisfactory relationship, not get into a new one. She merely wanted to confirm that the broad-shouldered man clad in flannel and denim was indeed as ruggedly cute as she thought.

Kay might have worried her bottom lip with her teeth, so curious was she about this man, but many years of her mother's nagging stopped her. Mustn't smear one's lipstick. Freemonts had a certain image to maintain.

She feigned using the compact mirror to pat her unmussed hair into place, but she angled it so she could see him. Secretly she'd always been sexually attracted to burly, outdoorsy men. Strong, physical men who played contact sports and repaired their own cars. Men who chopped wood and roasted raw meat over fire pits. Men who'd fight to the death to protect their women.

The fact that her boyfriend Lloyd was a slender, brainy, pacifistic vegetarian who didn't even own a car, much less know how to work on one, did not escape her. But just because she daydreamed about extremely manly men didn't mean she coveted a relationship with one. It was simply a sexual fantasy.

Besides some things were more important than sex. Companionship, for instance.

And Lloyd is such a great companion? He works eighty-hour weeks. And when was the last time he made love to you? Seven, eight weeks ago?

That wasn't fair. She couldn't lay blame solely at his feet. She was as busy as Lloyd.

And is it your fault that Lloyd has never satisfied you in bed?

Maybe it was her fault. Even though she spent a lot of time researching and writing how-to-improve-your-sex-life articles like "How to Achieve Multiple Orgasms" and "Tantric Sex, The New Revolution in Intimacy," for the hottest women's magazine in the country, Kay had yet to experience such lofty sensations herself.

Yes, she read and she read and she read. From classics like *The Hite Report* and *The Story of O* to the most up-to-date literature on the subject, she knew them all by heart. Kay understood the mechanics of sex, and she kept thinking that if she just gathered enough knowledge on the subject, one day she'd be able to scale her way to the stars.

Maybe she should see a counselor, instead.

Or maybe you should just have a wild, uninhibited fling. I bet Paul Bunyon's got what it takes to please a woman. Did you get a load of those hands? If it's true what they say about the size of a man's hands and the size of his...

Kay tilted the mirror to the right to get a better look.

Paul Bunyon's upper arms were as big as her thighs. For some illogical reason, this thought made her shiver. He was so very large and seemed to be constructed of pure steel. He was tall and muscular and solid. She imagined he could toss her over his shoulder more easily than she could pick up a tea bag. He possessed hair the color of aged whiskey and sultry gray eyes that snapped with surprising intelligence.

His shirt was a comforting shade of blue, and he had the sleeves rolled up a quarter turn, giving her a peek of sexy forearms offset by a thick, leather-banded watch. Nice. Very nice. Just the right amount of hair. Kay had a weakness for sexy forearms.

She licked her lips, forgetting all about smearing her lipstick. A weighted feeling settled over her and made her blood flow hot and sluggish as the erotic sensation drifted down to wedge heavily between her legs. She wondered what would happen if she stood up and walked toward him. What would he do if she bent down to his ear and with a seductive whisper invited him to become a member of the mile-high club with her? Tingles dove down her spine.

If she pivoted on her heel and sashayed to the lavatory, would he follow?

She swallowed hard past the lump in her throat. What a tight fit! The two of them crammed into an airplane lavatory. It would require some maneuvering. Kay stared so hard into the mirror of her compact that her vision blurred and she was transported.

He lifts her up on the counter; his eyes fill with heated desire. He takes one of those big hands and, starting at her right ankle, he oh-so-slowly moves it up her leg, past the curve of her calf, to the bend of her knee. She gasps at his touch. His callused fingertips snag her stockings, tearing them until she resembles a lady of the evening after a long night of selling pleasure.

Then his other hand starts its journey up her left leg. He moves closer, and she wraps her legs around his waist. The top of her head is resting against the rest-room mirror, and her back is arched. He stares into her eyes, captivated. Clearly he thinks she is the most exquisite creature on the face of the earth.

His right hand goes farther. Moving up her knee inch by inch. Her skirt hikes high. The sensations are incredible. His rough fingers sliding over her bare skin, the cold sink beneath her bottom, the feel of his hard waist against the inside of her legs. She feels a million things at once, and they are all good.

He's still looking at her, but not saying a single word. He smells delicious, like Christmas trees and woodsmoke and leather. She feels herself moisten with desire. She wants him like a lion wants a lamb.

"Kiss me," she commands him in a bossy voice.

He dips his head. His hands are on her thighs, palms splayed. He's so close, but he doesn't lower his lips to hers. He's teasing. There's a naughty gleam in his eye.

"What will you give me for a kiss?" he asks.

His voice is heart-stoppingly sexy. A resonant sound that fills her ears like the loveliest bass instrument. Her pulse throbs at her throat. She's hot all over. Hot and wet and desperate.

"I'll give you whatever you want," she whimpers.

"I want you to touch me," he says. "Here."

And then he takes her hand and guides it to the bulge straining against the zipper of his blue jeans. She eases down the zipper, slips her hand inside. He's going commando, no underwear. She touches him.

It's so big. So hard. So hot. Scalding. He smells of musky male, and her excitement escalates. He groans and closes his eyes.

At the same time as she's touching him, his hand is busy snaking up her thigh to hook a finger around the waistband of her panties.

She moans. He crushes his mouth to hers.

He tastes too good to be true. Not the finest caviar in her mother's pantry, not even the most expensive bottle of French champagne in her father's cellar can compete with his flavor.

Her palm is pressed hard against his erection, which seems to keep growing and growing and growing. His tongue is a menace, dazzling her with moves she never thought possible.

"I want you inside me."

"No. Not yet. First, I'm going to make you beg."

She whimpers again.

"That's right." He nods. "This has been a long time coming."

Her nipples tighten. She wriggles her hips. Her panties are whisked off.

"What are you doing?"

"Hush, woman," he growls. "Hush and enjoy. You deserve everything I'm going to give you and so much more. You drive me wild."

She glows at his words. Men have told her she's beautiful before, but no one has ever told her she drives him wild. He's telling her exactly what she needs to hear, and she loves him for it. She feels incredibly powerful that she's controlling such a big man with her sexuality.

Then he goes to work with his fingers.

He's stroking her inner thigh, and then he trails his fingertips inward. He's doing something that makes her eyes roll back in her head with sheer ecstasy.

Oh, gawd, what that intoxicating hand is doing at the apex of her womanhood!

She writhes against him, clutches his shoulders with both hands, digs her fingers into his flesh through the soft flannel of his shirt.

His movements are gentle but firm. The pressure builds. No man has ever caressed her in quite this way. It's as if he knows exactly how to make her cry out for more. She's never been this excited, this desperate, this famished for a man's body.

"Don't stop," she pleads.

He grins. For a moment she fears he'll stop simply to taunt her. But to her relief he keeps going. And going. And going.

She feels as if she's riding a roller coaster. Chugging up, up, up. Breath held in anticipation of the rapturous plunge.

She's close. So very close. Teetering on the verge. One more second. Oh, yes. Yes. She's just about to—

"Miss?" The flight attendant's voice slammed her rudely back to earth.

"Yes," Kay gasped, feeling breathless, edgy and achy.

"Would you care for another beverage?"

She shook her head. The flight attendant moved on down the aisle. Then Kay realized she was still holding the compact. She glanced into the mirror one last time and was horrified to see Paul Bunyon staring right at her.

Their eyes met in the mirror's reflection. Her heart raced. Her mouth went dry. He gave her a cocksure smile as if he knew exactly what she'd been thinking.

Flushed and flustered, Kay snapped the compact closed and dropped it into her purse. She burned weak, shaky, her entire body swamped in heat. This wouldn't do. She had to compose herself. Immediately, if not sooner.

Unbuckling her seat belt, she got up, slipped into the lavatory and locked the door. Bad idea. This was the scene of the fictitious crime, and she couldn't escape her own mind.

She wet a paper towel, pressed it first to the back of her neck, then to the hollow of her throat and took several long, slow, deep breaths. For the past few months she'd been plagued by

uncontrollable sexual fantasies. It was quite embarrassing, really. As if she was some kind of X-rated, female Walter Mitty.

Perhaps a fling was in order. Find someone to pop her cork, as it were. Perhaps that would put an end to these persistent flights of sexual fancy.

Kay pinched the bridge of her nose to ward off more blushing. This was simply ridiculous. She had to stop entertaining such unsuitable thoughts about total strangers. She took several more deep breaths, tossed the damp towel into the trash, then ran her fingers through her hair. There. She looked fine. Perfectly normal. Perfectly in control. No one would suspect anything to the contrary.

The plane lurched, jostling her as she unlocked the accordion-style door and tried to shove it open, but the silly thing stuck.

The plane pitched again, throwing Kay forward. She put a hand on the door hinges to brace herself, and the door folded open. She raised her head in alarm.

And found herself tumbling headlong into Paul Bunyon's arms, as if he'd been waiting outside the door just to catch her when she fell.

Chapter Two

"WHY, HELLO." Quinn smiled down into the face of a goddess.

What compelled him to trail her to the lavatory, he couldn't say. Maybe it was that sassy, controlled walk of hers that hypnotized him. Maybe it was her contradictory aura, pushing and pulling him in two different directions. Or maybe it was plain old horniness on his part.

But now he sure was glad he'd followed her. If he hadn't been there to catch her, she would have pitched head first into the bulkhead opposite the lavatory and bruised her pretty face, and that would have been a crying shame.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Fine," she whispered.

Her voice surprised him. One more irreconcilable fact that added to her allure. He'd expected her tone would be more cultured, aloof, cool and reserved. Instead, the sexy sound of her had him remembering all those nights during high school and college that he'd spun records of throaty-voiced female blues singers at his family's tiny radio station in Bear Creek.

Unblinking, the goddess met his gaze and held it. The impact slugged him. Her sultry eyes, dark as coffee and surrounded by lashes as impossibly thick as paintbrushes, snagged something deep inside him and refused to let go.

In the brief, endless moment he held her in his arms, he noticed everything about her.

The tiny mole at the left corner of her mouth. The smooth, expertly penciled arch of her brow. The erratic throbbing of her pulse in the hollow of her neck. The slim curve of her waist. Her rich, fresh scent that made him ache to bury his nose in her hair and breathe deeply.

And the unnerving realization that beneath her ultrasoft silk blouse and bra, her nipples were puckered.

It wasn't cold in the plane's cramped confines. In fact, it was very, very hot.

Had her breasts hardened in response to him? Quinn almost groaned aloud at the thought.

Was he reading too much into this casual encounter? Was his desire for one last fiery sexual adventure before he found a wife and settled down for good feeding into his imagination and causing him to misread her reaction?

Her lips parted, and he could see the pink tip of her tongue pressing against her top teeth. She looked as if she might say something to him, but she didn't.

Oh, Lord, he could feel her stockings rub against the leg of his jeans as she shifted in his arms.

So many thoughts raced through his brain it seemed as if eons had passed. But it couldn't have been more than a few seconds since she'd toppled into his embrace.

She raised a hand to her cheek to brush away a strand of golden hair. He tracked her movement, peered into those compelling brown eyes once more.

And stumbled. Literally lost his balance as the plane hit another pocket of turbulence. He tipped backward, taking Charlize with him.

They ended up in the middle of the aisle, a jumble of arms and legs. The fall hadn't knocked the air from his lungs, but nonetheless, he found it hard to breathe with her lying on his chest.

"Are you okay?" There was that breathy whisper again, uncertain, a bit nervous. And unless he missed his guess, tinged with an acute awareness of him as a man.

"Okay," he replied, hating for this moment to end.

"Please take your seats," a flight attendant said sharply as she rushed over. "And buckle yourselves in."

"Let me help you up," Charlize offered, rising to her feet with amazing agility and grace for a woman wearing three-inch heels and a mean pair of stockings.

He almost laughed at the notion of a slender branch like her helping a tree trunk like himself to his feet. But he liked the idea of touching her again, so he put out his hand, which dwarfed hers, and allowed her to tug him.

Quinn pushed against the floor of the plane, and his own momentum brought him to a standing position. The top of her sleek head only came to his armpit. Her hip was level with his upper thigh. She seemed as perfect and delicate as the first butterfly of spring.

Without a doubt she was the most exquisite woman he'd ever met. Her straight blond hair was cut in a polished style and appeared as finely spun as silk. Her complexion was flawless, except for a small scar below her right earlobe. He had an almost overpowering urge to explore that scar with the tip of his tongue.

How he wanted to say something more to her, to do something more with her, but the frowning flight attendant was clucking her tongue and waving at them to take their seats. Charlize scooted past him, her breasts lightly brushing his upper arm, causing a brushfire to leap up his nerve endings, and made her way to her seat.

Kay was practically panting as she clicked the seat belt in place around her waist. Her heart pounded, blood suffused her skin. She couldn't believe what had just happened and her body's heated response to a stranger. Touching him had been far more electric, far more satisfying than her wildest imaginings.

She didn't look up, because she knew he was still standing there staring at her as if he'd been struck with a bolt from the blue. What was the matter with him? Didn't they have women wherever it was he was from?

"You sure you're all right?" He squatted in the aisle beside Kay, defying the angry flight attendant, who looked as if she wanted to tie him into his seat but was too quelled by his size to approach.

"I'm fine, don't worry about me. Please, for your own safety, sit down."

"If you need me, I'm right behind you." He touched her wrist with his massive paw, and her blood slipped through her veins like quicksilver. Intense. So intense. If she closed her eyes, she could see the two of them in a forest. Walking. Alone. On a bed of soft, mossy ground. The sunlight flitting through the trees.

Stop it, stop it, stop it. Don't you dare go into another sexual fantasy, Kathryn Victoria Freemont!

She raised her hand to her face. The hand that had been wrapped in his. She smelled of him. Robust, masculine. Like pine needles, wilderness and soap. A shiver she could not suppress overtook her body. She could easily imagine him back there in his seat watching her with eagle eyes.

What was it about this man that so stirred her blood? What was it that made her feel giddy and girlish and oh-so-happy to be alive?

Kay was kidding herself, and she knew it. Just because he made her feel desirable didn't mean she was licensed to jump his bones. She didn't even know the guy's name. What he made her feel

was simply a reflection of her wishful thinking. She wanted rescuing from her life, and he was a convenient escapist illusion.

Because lately, nothing in her current experiences seemed to satisfy her. Not her relationship with her parents, who were pressuring her to marry Lloyd and produce an heir. Certainly not her romance with Lloyd, if you could even call what they had a romance.

Lloyd had proposed to her by email two days ago in a manner as romantic as a root canal. His exact message had been “Your father says he’ll make me partner if we’re married by the end of the summer, guess it’s time to do the deed.”

Whoopee! Sweep a girl right off her feet, why don’t you?

She’d ignored Lloyd’s email, pretending she hadn’t yet seen the missive, because she wasn’t ready to deal with it, and surprise, surprise, he hadn’t even called her in Chicago to see why she hadn’t responded.

And even her job as a reporter for Metropolitan magazine no longer fulfilled her as it once had.

“What happened to you?” she whispered to herself, grateful no one was seated next to her. “In college, you dreamed of writing novels and having adventures and taking a lover that was as kind and considerate and understanding as he was good in bed. Where did that girl go?”

It seemed her entire youth had been spent trying to please Mommy and Daddy and striving to be the perfect Freemont. Her one tiny insurrection had been insisting on studying journalism rather than art history, as her mother had wished.

“Lloyd Post comes from blueblood stock, dear, just like you,” her mother had told her when she called the day before to see if Kay had gotten Lloyd’s emailed proposal. Apparently Lloyd had already discussed it with her parents. Would have been nice if he’d talked things over with her first. “Give his proposition some serious thought. You could do worse than marrying him.”

Hmm, what was worse than binding yourself for life to a man who virtually ignored you for weeks on end? What was worse than until death do you part with a man who didn’t even care where your G-spot was located? What was worse than spending the next forty years beside a guy with whom you had absolutely nothing in common other than the fact you were both filthy rich with impeccable pedigrees?

Let’s see, what was worse than marrying Lloyd Post?

Well, owing money to the Mafia had to be a bummer. Being stranded in the desert with no water wasn’t cool. Having oral surgery wasn’t a blast. So yes, Mommy, you’re absolutely right. There are worse things than marrying Lloyd.

But there were so many better things, too.

Like taking that rugged woodsman to bed?

She tried to picture what would happen if she was to walk into her parents house on Paul Bunyon’s arm and announce they were engaged. Laughable! Even she, of the overactive imagination, could not conceive of such an event.

Helplessly she found her head drawn to the right, her eyes peeping surreptitiously over her shoulder.

And there he was, just as she knew he’d be. Staring at her and not a bit ashamed of his unabashed appreciation.

He was pure testosterone in a huge package that proclaimed, “I’ll never let any harm come to you.” It was a heady promise. Between his protective attitude and his raw animal magnetism, the man oozed an essential sexiness that called to something wild within her. Like a wolf to his mate. Something primal and elemental she hadn’t known she possessed until now.

She deserved to be happy. She deserved to be sexually satisfied, and she deserved far better than settling for Lloyd Post. In reality she knew Paul Bunyon did not figure into her future, but regardless, meeting him at this juncture had changed her. It was time she stood up to her parents and started living her own life. It was past time she found out what she’d been missing.

* * *

QUINN PLANNED TO WAYLAY her in the jetway, help her with her luggage, hail her a taxi, get her phone number and ask her out to dinner. In fact, he was so excited about the idea that he'd kept shifting restlessly in his seat, unable to think of anything else.

But when the plane landed at JFK, she leaped from her seat the minute the flight attendants opened the door. Quinn got up to follow her, but an elderly lady sitting across the aisle asked him to retrieve her carry-on bag from the overhead bin. What else could he do? By the time he made his way into the terminal, Charlize had vanished as if she'd never existed.

He looked left, then right, but the crowd had swallowed her. How could she have disappeared so quickly?

Damn!

He hadn't mistaken her interest in him, no matter how cool she liked to play it. The attraction had been instant and physical. No denying her raspy breathing when he'd held her in his arms, no hiding her aroused nipples. She'd wanted him, all right.

So why had she run away?

Maybe she was married, the thought occurred to him, but he didn't recall seeing a ring on that delicate third finger of her left hand.

Ah, well. Quinn wasn't the sort to cry over spilt milk. He took a deep breath and headed for the baggage claim. Nothing to be done about it now. He tried to push her from his thoughts.

But despite his best intentions, he couldn't help feeling he'd lost out on something pretty darn terrific.

* * *

"KAY, COME HERE, you've got to see this." Her editor, Judy Nessler, stood in the doorway of Kay's office on Monday morning, grinning from ear to ear and crooking a bejeweled finger at her.

Kay frowned and glanced up from the piece she was working on about finding love on the internet. She'd gone to Chicago to interview a couple who'd met in an online chat room, and she had her notes spread out on the desk around her. Included in the pile were copies of the spicy messages the couple had posted to each other during their courtship. Reading the sizzling missives had her feeling oddly cranky.

"What is it, Judy?"

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies."

She wasn't in the mood for Judy's guessing games. It had been almost twenty-four hours since her plane ride with Paul Bunyon, but she couldn't seem to stop spinning fantasies about him. How could the thought of one man make her ache so badly?

Nor had she been able to locate Lloyd in order to pin him down for a dinner date to discuss his marriage proposal in person, and he hadn't yet returned the call she had left on his answering machine.

"I'm in the middle of something," Kay said.

"Just come with me."

Sighing, Kay pushed away from her desk and followed Judy down the corridor to the advertising department. As usual, the room was abuzz with activity. But atypically, all the activity seemed concentrated in the middle of room. Centered, in fact, around a skyscraper-size man who had his back to them.

A man clad in red flannel and blue denim. His head was cocked to one side and he was laughing at something one of the blushing assistants had said. Kay's pulse momentarily stuttered to a stop. She raised a hand to her throat.

No. It couldn't be.

Judy leaned in close and whispered, "You don't see guys like him traipsing up Fifth Avenue every day of the week."

Please, don't let it be Paul Bunyon, Kay prayed, but in her heart she knew.

Judy took her by the elbow and dragged her across the room like a reluctant puppy on a leash. “Quinn,” Judy said. “I’d like you to meet Kay Freemont, one of our top writers.”

Slowly he pivoted on one booted heel, an insouciant gleam in his eye. Then recognition hit. His brows sprung up on his forehead and the grin went from free and easy to downright seductive.

It was Paul Bunyon! What an awful coincidence.

Of all the magazine offices in Manhattan, he had to walk into mine.

Why was he here? Was this some kind of a sign, him showing up so unexpectedly? Was the universe trying to tell her something?

“Kay, this is Quinn Scofield from Bear Creek, Alaska.”

She stared at him.

He stared back at her.

Neither of them spoke.

The air around them seemed to vibrate with heat and energy and overpowering awareness.

Quinn. From Alaska. The Mighty Quinn. She should have known he would have a macho moniker. The name fit him like the mackinaw he wore.

Puzzled, Judy watched them watching each other. “Have you two already been introduced?”

“Actually, no.” Quinn didn’t even wait for Kay to offer her hand. He simply took it, and her blood puddled like melted butter in the pit of her stomach. “I’m very honored to make the acquaintance of such a lovely lady.”

Pul-leeze. Enough with the flattery. I just saw you flirting with that assistant.

And yet, a small frisson of pleasure spiraled through her body and lodged with stunning acuity in her most feminine parts. If anything, her attraction to him was even stronger than it had been the day before.

Scary.

When Kay finally tore her gaze from his face, she realized that all the single women—and more than a few of the married ones—in the room were looking at her as if she’d snatched a prized morsel of filet mignon from their mouths.

“Quinn’s come to New York looking for a wife,” Judy said.

A wife? Kay took a step backward.

She jerked a quick glance in Quinn’s direction and saw he was observing her reaction to Judy’s news. Oh, boy, and here she’d been dreaming of having a red-hot fling with him. Well, certainly not now!

She’d just about decided to give old Lloyd the heave-ho and to tell her parents she was tired of living her life to suit them. She was ready to stretch her sexual wings and fly. She was not getting involved with a man who was looking for a commitment. No way. No matter how sexy he might be.

“He wants to place this full-page color ad with us.” Judy took the advertising copy from an assistant and handed it to Kay.

Full-page color-ad space in Metropolitan magazine didn’t come cheap.

“The four of us pitched in,” Quinn said, as if reading Kay’s mind. “The bachelors of Bear Creek.”

“Doesn’t that have a great ring to it?” Judy’s eyes glistened. Clearly she was enamored of Quinn, his buddies and their ad.

Kay stared down at the photograph in her hand and sucked in her breath. Pictured were four of the most gorgeous men she’d ever laid eyes on, one of them Quinn. They looked sexier and far more masculine than anything Madison Avenue could have dreamed up. The men wore blue jeans, devilish grins and nothing else, their hunky, well-muscled bare chests on prominent display.

In the photo Quinn was lounging on one end of a black leather couch. He was bigger than she’d even imagined, with the buffest biceps on the planet. Draped across the other side of the couch was a coal-haired, blue-eyed Adonis with a dreamy, angelic air about him. On the floor, perched atop a

bearskin rug, sat a dishy blond man with more charisma than a movie star, and another dark-eyed man with a lantern jaw and deep-set brown eyes. All four men were looking straight into the camera as if staring into the eyes of a beautiful woman.

Her gaze went from the one-dimensional, bare-chested Quinn to the fully three-dimensional Quinn standing beside her, and she gulped.

"That's Caleb Greenleaf," he said, leaning over her shoulder and pointing to the Adonis. "He's a naturalist for the state of Alaska. And that's Jake Gerard and Mack McCaulley. Jake runs the local bed-and-breakfast, and Mack's a bush pilot."

But Kay wasn't thinking about Caleb or Jake or Mack, no matter how good-looking they were. She was completely and totally distracted by Quinn's warm breath fanning the hairs on the nape of her neck.

Her gut tripped. She inhaled sharply and caught the arresting scent of his subtle aftershave and heated male flesh. That delicious smell sent her senses reeling.

Shaking her head to dispel the sultry cocoon Quinn had woven around her, Kay returned her attention to the glossy paper in her hand. Beneath the photograph of the four very eligible bachelors was the provocative caption: Wild Women Wanted!

"Do you have what it takes to be a wilderness wife?" was the first line of copy.

For absolutely no reason at all, Kay's heart fluttered. That line shouldn't have titillated her. She definitely did not have what it took to be a wilderness wife. She considered eating fast food roughing it. She had a low tolerance for cold weather, and she was scared to death of creatures like wolves and moose and bears.

Of course, if you had a man like Quinn to protect you from the cold and the critters, it might make Alaska a little more palatable. Still, a life without four-star restaurants, Broadway shows and department stores was too dismal to consider.

"I love this whole idea," Judy was chattering to Quinn. "Sexy bachelors forced to advertise in the lower forty-eight states to find wives. It's romantic. It's enchanting. It's a modern-day fairy tale. Our readers will eat it up. In fact, I'd like to run a feature article on the four of you."

"We could hold a contest," Kay volunteered, her marketing instincts kicking in, despite the fact that she really wanted nothing more to do with this particular bachelor and his wife hunt. "In thirty words or less tell us why you'd like to win a free trip to Bear Creek, Alaska. That sort of thing."

"Fabulous!" Judy enthused, and patted Kay's cheek. "You're such a dynamo. I knew you'd have something valuable to say. I love the idea. Simply love it. Then we can do a follow-up story on the contest winner. And who knows, if any of the guys find a wife as a direct result of the ad, we can do follow-up articles all through the year. I'll have to run this by Hal first, but I know he's going to adore it, too."

Kay shrugged, playing it cool as always. Freemonts never acted too eager.

"So what do you say, Kay? Ready to pack your bags and spend a couple of weeks in Alaska?" Judy asked.

"What?" She shook her head, thrown off by Judy's question. "Me go to Alaska?"

"Well," Quinn said, "late February probably isn't the best time of year to visit. When I left home, it was ten below."

"No kidding?" Judy whistled. "That is cold. But if we want the article to run with your ad in our June issue, then there's no time to waste. Kay can do it. She's pretty intrepid, aren't you, darling?"

Ten degrees below zero! Kay shivered at the very idea. "Are you nuts?"

"Come on, where's your spirit of adventure?" Judy goaded her. "Besides, it's perfect for the article. You can tell the readers firsthand that being an Alaskan wife is not for the faint of heart. Marriage-minded, handsome, successful bachelors do not come without some kind of price tag."

Kay shook her head. She was not going to Alaska—it would give Quinn the wrong idea. He might start thinking she was interested in becoming his bride. Besides, she had to settle things with

Lloyd. "I'm sorry, I can't commit to this project right now—I've got too much on my plate. Why don't you ask Carol? I'm sure she'd love to go."

Was it her imagination, or did Quinn look disappointed? The notion that he wanted her to come to Alaska did strange things to Kay's insides.

"Don't give me your answer yet," Judy said. "I still have to talk to Hal. Then you can make up your mind. How's that sound?"

"All right, but don't tell Hal that I've agreed to sign on yet."

"Understood. Now why don't you take Quinn to lunch? In fact, take the rest of the afternoon off. Show him New York. Since you're practically engaged, I know you won't be a threat to his bachelorhood and snatch him off the market before the ad even has a chance to run."

Chapter Three

PRACTICALLY ENGAGED.

So that explained why she'd fled from the airplane before he'd had a chance to ask her name. She'd been as attracted to him as he was to her, and very clearly disturbed by that attraction because she was in a serious, committed relationship.

Damn.

And he'd come to New York in person, rather than handling the details of placing the ad over the phone or through the mail, not only because he was considering purchasing new wilderness gear from a sporting goods outfit run by an old friend, but because he'd secretly hoped to have one last sexual adventure before seriously beginning his wife search.

With all his heart and soul, Quinn believed in monogamy. His parents, who'd had a solid, loving marriage for forty years and still counting, provided him with a blueprint. Once he made a commitment to a woman, he'd be hers for life. But until he found her, well, he was a red-blooded male, after all. He had physical needs. Needs that were growing stronger by the minute.

He'd known from the moment he'd watched Kay Freemont board the plane that he wanted her, and then to find her working in the office of Metropolitan magazine—unbelievable! He'd taken it as a positive sign that she was supposed to be his passionate last fling. But now, to discover that she was practically engaged. Where did that leave him? He wasn't the sort of guy who came between a woman and her almost fiancé.

Then again, what the hell did "practically engaged" mean, anyway? Quinn ran a hand through his hair. Where he came from, either you were engaged or you weren't. Maybe it was a New York thing.

"Well." Kay nodded and looked rather uncomfortable with the assignment of baby-sitting him for the rest of the afternoon. "Well."

Had her boss's edict to wine and dine him left her at a loss for words? Or was it something more? Was it meeting him again?

Dream on, Scofield.

And yet, that was exactly what he wanted to do. Dream on and on and on of taking her to bed. Seeing her in her work environment, amid people who obviously admired and respected her, looking so professional and self-possessed in that short-skirted purple business suit made him crave her even more. Did she have any earthly idea what those magnificent legs of hers did to a man? Women who were practically engaged and possessed legs like Thoroughbreds should not be allowed to wear skirts like that! There oughtta be a law.

Damn, but the woman blew him away! Her cocoa-brown eyes simmered with a suppressed sexuality that begged to be brought to a boil. When he had turned and spied her beside Judy Nessler, adrenaline walloped him in the gut.

Now, simply standing here next to her, inhaling her scent—a fetching combination of vanilla ice cream and sharply scented cinnamon sticks—his body came alive. To the point where he wished for a bucket of ice cubes to chill his throbbing member.

“Your cologne smells nice. What’s it called?”

“White Heat.”

He angled her a glance. “White Heat, huh? It suits you.”

“Pardon?”

He could tell by the way she pursed her lips that he’d unnerved her. “You’re like white heat. You’ve got this cool, outer demeanor, but inside, there’s a deep, smoldering flame.”

She gulped. He watched her struggle to control her features. She hated giving away her thoughts, he realized, and she’d mastered the art of suppressing her emotions.

How he longed to unsuppress her. To teach her how to open up and say exactly what was on her mind.

“Uh, let me get my bag and coat and change my shoes.” She gestured in the direction of what he supposed was her office. “And we can grab some lunch.”

She dashed away, leaving him to rein in his hormones, and returned a few minutes later wearing a black leather coat with an oversize purse thrown over her shoulder and a pair of Nikes on her feet. He almost laughed at the sight of her in that glamorous business suit and shod in running shoes, but once they were out on the street, he noticed a lot of the women similarly dressed. He commented on it.

“Try walking twelve blocks in high heels. You’d carry a spare pair of sneakers in your bag, too.”

“We don’t even have blocks in Bear Creek.” He grinned.

She gave him a strange look as if he was speaking Mandarin. And it struck him then how different their lives were. He could survive alone in the Alaskan wilderness for weeks if necessary, but in New York City, he feared being unable to survive something as simple as crossing the street. He couldn’t understand how people lived here day in and day out. The pollution, the noise, the crowds. Eventually it had to drive you out of your mind.

Kay stepped off the curb and raised her hand. A taxi glided to a stop at their feet.

How’d she do that? he marveled. When he’d tried to get a taxi to carry him to the magazine office, he’d been ignored. Was he so obviously an out-of-towner? Or did she know some taxi-halting secrets? Then again, if he was a cab driver, he would willingly risk whiplash to jam on the brakes for those legs.

Quinn moved to open the taxi door for her. Kay gave him an odd look, then scooted across the backseat of the cab to make room for him.

“You don’t have to do the he-man routine with me.”

“What?” He stared at her, puzzled.

Kay could tell he had no clue what she was talking about. “You know. First the door to the building, now the cab. I can open my own doors, you know.”

“Oh. Sorry. I didn’t mean to offend. It’s just habit. My mother drilled good manners into my head. I’ll try to stop if you want.”

“No. Please forget I mentioned it.”

She immediately felt badly for saying anything. She had to remember he was an Alaskan and obviously rather old-fashioned. He probably carried a clean hankie in his shirt pocket at all times in case some damsel burst into tears. Plus, she was accustomed to Lloyd only opening doors for her when they were around other people. Putting on a show to impress his business associates.

Honestly, she’d never met anyone quite like Quinn.

Kay took him to a Cuban restaurant that served to-die-for mahi-mahi with mango chutney, black beans, rice and fried plantains. And as she suspected, he told her that he’d never tasted anything like this exotic fare as the food disappeared from his plate.

He also told her stories about Alaska. About his loyal friends and loving family. Then he asked her questions about New York. He spoke with such open animation, she was helplessly drawn to his enthusiasm. He didn’t play games, he didn’t pull punches. Her parents would probably have thought him too loud and too eager, but she found his down-to-earth candor refreshing.

“So tell me,” he said after he’d polished off the last crumb of key lime pie. “How long have you been ‘practically’ engaged.”

She could tell by the way he said “practically” that he found the notion ridiculous. “Lloyd and I have been dating four years.”

“Your guy’s commitment-phobic, huh? Hasn’t gotten around to popping the question, but you’re expecting him to?”

“No, that’s not it. I mean, well, actually, he did ask me to marry him a few days ago.”

“So you are engaged.” His tone was flat. She saw disappointment in his eyes.

“No.”

“You turned him down?” Hope flared fresh in his face, and the sight of his renewed optimism confused her.

“No.”

He frowned. “I don’t understand. You told him you’d think about it?”

“It didn’t happen that way. Listen, I really don’t feel comfortable discussing my personal life with you.”

“Okay.” He gave an easy shrug, but she could tell by the look in his eyes that he wanted to dig deeper. What she didn’t know was why, but she certainly wasn’t going to open up and spill her guts to a stranger.

Not even her closest friends knew what was in her heart. She’d been taught by her father, the cutthroat businessman, that the more people knew about you, the more they could use against you. Once, when she was a little girl, her father took her to work with him. When his secretary asked her if she’d rather be playing in the park, instead of touring a stuffy old building, Kay had responded with an enthusiastic yes. Her father then jerked her into his office and lectured her until her ears burned about expressing her true feelings to underlings. She never forgot that lesson.

Quinn cleared his throat. The waiter refilled their coffee cups.

“I’m sorry about what I said,” Kay said. “That sounded bitchy.”

“No need to apologize. You’re right. It’s none of my business. It’s just that if I was dating a woman like you, I wouldn’t have waited four years to ask you to marry me.”

“Which raises the question, if you’re not commitment-phobic yourself, how come you’ve stayed single so long?”

“Not a lot of women to choose from in Bear Creek. And most of the tourists that come to town are looking for a summer fling. And who’s to say I’ve never been married?”

“Have you?” Kay lifted an eyebrow. Although she hated answering personal questions herself, she had no compunction against asking them. Enjoyed it, in fact. Perhaps that’s what attracted her to journalism. The opportunity to discover the intimate details of others’ lives without revealing any information about her own.

“Came close once.”

“What happened?”

“Now I’m the one who’s uncomfortable discussing my private life.”

“Whoever writes the feature article on you is going to want to know the answer to these questions.”

“Then I’ll save the interview for that reporter.”

Silence.

“So in general, what qualities do you look for in a woman?” She spoke lightly, but every cell in her body stood at attention as she waited for his answer.

“I don’t really want a career woman. I know it sounds old-fashioned, but I see myself with a woman who’s mainly interested in making a home. I want kids. And I like the idea of providing for the woman in my life.”

“Oh, I see. The caveman mentality. Keep ’em barefoot and pregnant.”

"I don't mind if she wants to work," he expounded. "But the children and I should be her priority. Just as she and the kids will be my top priority, not work, not a job. Family and friends. That's what counts. Don't look so disapproving. I'm being honest here."

"I'm not disapproving. You're misconstruing my expression. Besides, does it matter what I think?"

The truth was, she'd been thinking that she'd never heard a New York male express such a sentiment or, for that matter, even admit to wanting children. She found it oddly refreshing, even though one side of her wanted to argue that women could have both prosperous careers and happy, well-adjusted children if they learned how to juggle.

His gaze was on her face. He was running his index finger around and around the rim of his coffee mug in a slow, languid motion that made her feel dizzy with desire. "My ideal woman has to be tough. She's got to be hardy enough to brave winters in Alaska."

"What about beauty?"

"Beauty's good, but not really important. I mean, there's got to be sexual chemistry between us, but I'm not looking for perfection. On the contrary, I think a little sass, a little attitude spices things up."

"Really?"

"And even though I'm ready to settle down, I'm not willing to settle. When I get married, it'll be forever. Until then—" he grinned "—I'm up for whatever adventures come my way."

"Oh." At this, Kay took heart. Perhaps he might provide that illicit affair she was yearning for, after all.

"So what do you look for in a man, Kay Freemont?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"You don't know? Then how do you know if Mr. Practically Engaged is the right one for you?"

She winced. "Please, I—"

"Oh, right, no personal questions."

"How long are you in town?" She changed the subject and wondered what she was going to do with the information. Wondered why her heart was pounding.

"I fly out at seven-thirty on Wednesday morning. Tomorrow I've got an all-day thing with my friend from Adventure Gear. I'm thinking of switching over to their climbing harnesses, and he's taking me on a climb upstate."

"Ah." Her hopes plummeted. No time for a wild fling.

He reached across the table and lightly grazed her hand with the tips of his fingers. It shouldn't have been an erotic gesture, but it was.

"You could come to Alaska," he said, reading her thoughts as clearly as if they'd been etched on her face. His habit of expressing exactly what was on her mind was uncanny and, frankly, a little disturbing. "Write that article for your editor. We could have a lot of fun together, you and I. Why not consider it?"

Astounded by the sensations that surged through her at his touch, she slipped her hand away. She never did answer his question.

After lunch he wanted to see the Empire State Building, so off they went. Quinn moved through the crowd like a redwood among matchsticks. On more than one occasion, she noticed women's heads turn as they shot him appreciative glances. She felt oddly jealous.

And strangely aroused.

More aroused, in fact, than she'd ever been.

While Quinn admired the view from the top of the Empire State Building, Kay admired Quinn.

She couldn't seem to draw her gaze from the ripple of muscle in his forearm where he'd rolled back the sleeves of his mackinaw. It was as if he knew how much she loved sexy forearms and was simply taunting her with a view of his.

She studied his strong profile, raked her gaze down his shoulders to his back before stopping to blatantly admire his delectable fanny so prominently displayed in snug-fitting blue jeans.

Raising a hand to her throat, she inhaled deeply, hauling in an unsteady breath. Quinn turned from the railing, a wide, boyish grin on his face. Kay smiled back.

“Wow. So many people. So many buildings. So many yellow-checkered cabs.”

She nodded.

The wind gusted. Shivering, Kay used a pillar as a windbreak. She crossed her arms over her chest and danced from foot to foot.

“You’re cold,” he said, and she found it touching that he’d noticed. He stripped off his mackinaw.

“I can’t take your jacket. It’s freezing up here.”

“Honey,” he said, and she did not take offense at his easy endearment; rather, she found it kind of charming. “Where I’m from this would be considered a heat wave.”

He stepped closer and settled his mackinaw around her shoulders, wrapping her as tenderly as a mother swaddles her baby.

“Thank you.” Her voice emerged as a breathless whisper, and she realized they were the only people still on the observation deck. The cold had forced everyone else back inside.

“You’re welcome.”

Quinn peered down into her face and damned if little Miss Too-Cool-for-School didn’t look nervous. The tip of her tongue darted out to wet her upper lip. Was her gesture an unconscious invitation to kiss her? God, he hoped so, because he wanted to do that more than anything in the world.

“Uh—” she took a step backward “—perhaps we should go now.”

“Why?” His body was so very aware of hers. “Are you frightened?”

She forced a laugh. “Frightened of what? Heights?”

“Of this.”

Then, taking them both by surprise, he caught her upper arms in his hands, raised her to her toes and kissed her the way he’d been longing to kiss her since the moment he’d caught her in his arms on the airplane.

She yielded. Accepted him with ready acquiescence. Complied by parting her lips and letting him slip his tongue in deep to taste the honeyed, warm recesses of her mouth. Languidly his tongue glided against hers.

Lust, swifter, more vehement than anything he’d ever experienced, exploded inside him. And it was just a damned kiss.

His gut clenched hard. He could only imagine how his hardness sliding into her would feel, her slender arms entwined around his neck, her luscious tush cupped in his large palms.

He was not the kind of guy to sit idle on the sidelines. When he saw something he wanted, he went after it. But even he had never moved so fast or wanted anyone so strongly. He had no more control than a moose in rut. That’s what this woman did to him.

Had he shocked her with his boldness? Had he indeed moved too quickly?

But no, she moaned softly and leaned into him. Quinn swallowed the sound, tilting her head back, threading his fingers through her hair. The softness of those silken strands was in sharp contrast to the hardness building inside him.

Incredible. Simply incredible.

He forgot that she was practically engaged. He forgot that he didn’t steal other men’s women. He forgot that she was out of his league. He forgot everything except how wonderful she felt, how good she tasted.

Kay held her breath, dazed and ashamed. Freemonts did not act like this! They didn’t kiss strangers in public. They did not lose control. They did not succumb to wanton lust.

Good. Good. Good. Good.

She was no longer behaving like a Freemont, and it was liberating beyond description.

But what was she getting herself into?

Quinn, the Alaskan man who smelled of wilderness and tasted of mangoes and key lime pie, was giving her the most possessive kiss of her life. Branding her with his tongue, searing her with his passion.

She'd never experienced anything like it, certainly not with Lloyd or with that guy from college. Her heart did a triple backflip before taking on a frantic, galloping rhythm of thrill and response.

Up was down, down was up. Nothing made sense anymore, but it felt so right.

Was she indeed supposed to begin her journey of self-discovery with this man? Or was she kidding herself? Using his willingness as an excuse for acting out her long-hidden desires?

Splaying a hand on Quinn's chest, Kay thought to push him away, but instead, she let her hand rest there, feeling his heartbeat and marveling that it pounded as forcefully as her own.

Even through his flannel shirt, she could feel his muscled flesh. In spite of the cold, he felt blisteringly hot and wonderfully solid against her palm. She realized he was coiled as tense as a snake waiting to strike. The comparison alarmed her. Did she really believe he might be dangerous? What was she doing? She didn't know this man.

But that was rigid Freemont thinking, and more than anything she wanted to break free of the constraints of her old thought patterns. She wanted to stop berating herself, wanted to take some risks, inhale the danger, embrace the challenge, not fear it. She wanted to be fully alive. She wanted to replace fantasies with reality.

And Quinn was serving up huge helpings of reality on a silver platter.

Her knees were weak, her breath faint. How could one simple kiss do so many different things to her? Okay, it wasn't such a simple kiss. It was more like an implosion. His mouth caused her insides to topple and collapse in on themselves.

He tugged her close against his body, bringing her in startling contact with his rock-hard erection. One of his hands slipped underneath the hem of her leather coat to caress her behind.

Oh, my!

Everything she was feeling was so new, so exciting, so unbelievable, and precisely like one of her fantasies.

Quinn pulled his mouth from hers at last, his breath coming in jerky gasps. Her lips felt swollen and wet, her body both tight and liquid at the same time. He rubbed his cheek against hers, setting her on fire. She quivered and he pressed his lips to her ear.

"Woman," he whispered hoarsely, "I'm so turned on by you."

In that moment she experienced a unique and exhilarating power. She, cool, poised Kay Freemont, had made this mountain of a man lose control. She wanted more from him, and that was all there was to it.

What would your parents think? What about Lloyd? the nagging voice that made her do all the right things for all the wrong reasons piped up.

To hell with her parents. To hell with Lloyd. She'd been the dutiful daughter for twenty-seven years, and where had it gotten her?

An orgasmless career woman practically engaged to a man who did not even love her.

Marshaling her courage, Kay took Quinn's chin in her palm and looked him square in the eye. She'd never done anything like what she was about to do, and therein lay the thrill of it. She knew he would be a kind and gentle lover and maybe, just maybe, he would be the one to turn the key of her womanhood and lead her to new levels of physical joy.

His smoky-gray eyes met hers with a sheen of raw desire, and he did not look away. He didn't even blink. He stared into her eyes as if he could peer right into the depths of her soul.

"Yes?" he growled. This talent he had for anticipating her thoughts was downright spooky.

"Would you like to go back to my place?" she asked breathlessly.

Quinn couldn't believe his ears. "What? What did you say?"

She cleared her throat. "My place. You. Me. Now."

He shook his head, unable to comprehend his good fortune. "Are you sure?"

"No. I'm not sure of anything, except that for once in my well-ordered, well-behaved life I need to do something irresponsible and unpredictable and capricious. So let's go before I change my mind."

She grabbed his hand and started pulling him toward the elevators.

"Whoa, wait a minute." He dug in his heels and she couldn't budge him. "I don't want to be your biggest regret."

"Well, you should have thought of that before you kissed me."

"A kiss is one thing, Kay. Sex is something else entirely."

"That's what I'm counting on." Her voice was husky, her eyes heavy-lidded.

He shook his head again. What was the matter with him? This was his fantasy. So why was he putting on the brakes? Was he out of his ever-loving mind?

"Please."

Ah, this was killing him.

"You're a beautiful woman, and I want to make love to you so badly I can taste it. But I don't break up couples. And you're practically engaged."

"No. In fact, I was thinking I might break up with him."

"You don't love the guy?"

"I thought I did once. Or what passed for love. But lately I've come to understand that I don't even know what love is," she said. "My parents like Lloyd. They think we're great together. They're the ones pushing for this marriage."

"You let your parents tell you who to date?"

She took a deep breath, waved a dismissive hand. "Let's not talk about them. Let's not talk at all." She angled him a coy glance that almost brought him to his knees.

She looked so damned appealing standing there with the wind whipping his mackinaw around her shoulders, her golden hair falling across one cheek, her full lips pursed in fervid anticipation of his acquiescence, her hands cocked on her slender hips.

Much as he wanted to say yes, as much as he knew he'd be kicking himself tonight in his lonely hotel room, Quinn knew he had to turn her down.

He heaved in a heavy lungful of chilled air and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Kay, but I've got to say no."

Chapter Four

OH GOD, SHE'D made a fool of herself. What had she been thinking? Freemont women did not throw themselves at perfect strangers, no matter how sexually appealing they were.

She tossed her head, averted her gaze.

"Don't be embarrassed. I'm flattered. Very flattered. You're one hell of a sexy woman."

His comment, meant to soothe, only served to fluster her more. Was she that transparent?

"I'm not embarrassed," she lied, and gave a casual shrug for good measure. "I asked—you weren't interested. I can handle rejection."

"Lady, you're wrong about that. I'm extremely interested. But you've got something to settle with that boyfriend of yours, and hopping into the sack with me won't solve your problems. I'm sorry." He reached out to take her hand, but she stepped back and shook her head.

Don't touch me. Please. If you do I'll crumble into your arms.

She held only the most tenuous control over her libido. These unstoppable, blazing-hot fantasies, combined with her lack of sexual release, had compelled her to do something she normally would never have done in a million years. And she was ashamed of herself. Best to get away from this man ASAP.

Especially since the hot tingling between her legs had not abated one whit since he'd kissed her.

“Look,” she said with her usual crisp efficiency. “You’re right. Maybe we should call it a day.”

“Yeah,” he murmured, and pushed the elevator button. “That’d probably be best.”

Quinn gazed at her with such heated desire, with such greedy longing, Kay almost threw her arms around his neck and begged him to reconsider. But she didn’t, of course. She was at her core a Freemont, after all.

She drew herself up straight. “Yes. Well, it’s been an experience meeting you.”

“Will I see you again? Are you coming to Alaska?”

She shook her head.

“I was afraid of that.” He smiled wistfully. “Another time, another place.”

Her heart hung suspended in her throat, and for some idiotic reason tears hovered behind her eyelids. Kay blinked. The elevator door dinged open.

“Come on,” she said. “I’ll hail you a cab.”

She dropped him off at his hotel in Times Square, but asked the driver to linger a moment at the curb so she could watch him disappear through the revolving glass doors. She was too shaken to return to work. Besides, Judy had given her the rest of the afternoon off, and she’d be irritated to know Kay hadn’t spent it squiring Quinn around town.

And besides, there was another matter that demanded her attention. She couldn’t go forward with her life until she broke up with Lloyd. No more phone calls or emails. No more evading. This had to be face-to-face. She had a key to his place; she would go to his apartment and confront him. And if he wasn’t home, she’d pack up the few things she kept stashed there and wait for him to return.

It was a plan. Taking action made her feel better. She gave the cabby Lloyd’s address and leaned back.

Sighing, she wistfully trailed her fingers over the seat where Quinn had been sitting, the vinyl material warm from the heat of his body. She lowered her head, lifted her collar to her nose and breathed deeply of his scent, still clinging to her blouse.

What a masculine man.

Hair as thick and wavy as a Kansas cornfield. Eyes the color of a cold November sky. Warm, inviting lips that promised so much in that short but sizzling kiss they’d shared. Broad shoulders, honed waist, narrow hips.

Kay moaned under her breath, closed her eyes and pictured him with his shirt off.

He’s splitting logs with an ax, and he’s stripped bare to the waist. It’s summer. Midday. Hot for Alaska.

She’s watching him from a shelter of thick trees. The scent of pine fills her nostrils. Behind him in the distance rises snowcapped mountain peaks. He doesn’t see her. She knows he’s had trouble with hunters poaching his land, and he’s not friendly toward secretive visitors spying on him from the trees.

She shouldn’t be here, but she can’t look away. She can’t even move. Her eyes are transfixed on his exquisite, tanned torso.

His muscular biceps bunch as he swings the ax down in one long, smooth stroke.

Whack!

The ax strikes home with a metallic, hypnotic ring that echoes strangely in the still forest. Shivers of excitement run up her spine.

She licks her lips.

He pauses in his work. Rests one arm against the ax handle, swipes at his forehead with a blue bandanna pulled from the back pocket of his tight, denim jeans.

The sun glints seductively off the sweat beading his chest. A sultry heat settles low in her belly, then fans out like thick fingers, growing, clutching, pressing down on her, until every part of her body pulsates with awareness of his overt maleness.

She shifts her position, lifts her head higher, hoping for a better look. She startles a squirrel, which begins to chatter at her.

The woodsman jerks his head sharply in her direction.

“Who’s there?” he calls out.

Heart racing, she jumps to her feet. She can’t be discovered. No telling what he’ll do to her if he finds her encroaching on his land.

“Show yourself,” he demands.

She whirls around—must get away—and darts through the underbrush.

“Come back here, damn you.”

She hears him crashing through the forest as he thunders after her, but she doesn’t look behind her.

Something snags her blouse. The silky material splits wide open, exposing her bra. Her skirt, too, gets caught on something sharp. She hears the rip. Her clothes hang in tatters, flapping about her skin.

Thud, thud, thud.

He is coming.

Faster, run faster.

She tries, but it’s as if her feet are encased in cement. She’s moving in slow motion. She can hear his breathing as he gets closer.

Her hair streaks out behind her, and her legs churn through the thick carpet of pine needles. She zigzags around trees, leaps over downed logs like a doe fleeing a pursuing rutting buck. She’s heading for the clearing and freedom. Her pulse is pounding, thumping, thrashing madly in her ears.

He’s quick for a big man. So quick. And so very close now. She’s not going to make it.

He tackles her. His arms go around her waist. He pulls her atop him as they fall together.

Then she’s on her back and he’s above her, pinning her arms to the earth with his knees. His breathing is raspy, ragged. There is an angry gleam in his smoldering eyes.

“Who are you?” he commands.

But she can’t answer. She’s so afraid. Her whole body trembles. What’s he going to do to her?

“You were trespassing on my land.”

She nods, fear and a strange feeling she’s never had before pooling in her belly.

“You must be punished.”

She squirms, trying to get free, but his knees hold her fast. She can’t move. Can’t get away. She is captured. His prisoner. Will he require her to be his love slave?

She catches her breath.

He grabs what’s left of her blouse and rips it from her body. Her bra follows, exposing tender breasts. Her chest heaves as she exhales.

His hands, work-roughened and callused, are suddenly gentle as he massages her nipples. “I must teach you a lesson,” he whispers. “You must learn never to spy.”

She whimpers.

He leans over her, takes one nipple into his mouth, and she gasps. He plunders her with his tongue.

The pleasure is beyond description. She writhes beneath him wanting more punishment, more sweet torture....

“Lady—” the cabby’s voice jerked her rudely back to reality “—that’ll be seven-fifty.”

She thrust a ten at him. Dazed and stuffy-headed from her interrupted fantasy, she stumbled out of the taxi.

The doorman greeted her with a smile, and Kay took the elevator to the penthouse and let herself into Lloyd’s apartment. Emotionally exhausted, she dropped her purse on the table in the foyer and kicked off her shoes. This wasn’t going to be easy.

That was when she heard the noises coming from the bedroom. She cocked her head, listening. Giggles. Moans. Oohs. Ahhs. It sounded like someone having sex.

And not just any sex, but wild, uninhibited, swinging-from-the-chandelier monkey sex.

Bed springs squeaked. The headboard banged. Ka-wham, ka-wham, ka-wham.

“Oh, baby, yeah, you hot stud. Give me all you’ve got. That’s it. That’s right.”

Kay froze. Who was in Lloyd’s apartment having sex? His maid and her boyfriend?

She tiptoed down the hallway, her stocking feet gliding over the cool, terrazzo floor. She should be upset or offended on Lloyd’s behalf; instead, she was weirdly curious. It sounded as if they were having a hell of a time.

His bedroom door stood slightly ajar. Kay pressed her body against the opposite wall of the hallway and angled her head around for a peek. She shouldn’t be doing this, she knew, but she wanted to see how other people made love.

Clothing lay strewn across the carpet, a bra—that looked to be nothing short of a D cup—dangled over the shade of a thousand-dollar antique lamp.

“Faster! Harder!” the woman cried.

Kay inched closer, helpless to stop herself from watching. A man, garbed only in black socks, stood with his back to her, his arms supporting the woman bent over in front of him.

She recognized the man at once. No mistaking that bony behind. Shock jolted through her. It took a moment for her to react, but then Kay kicked the door open wide.

Startled, her wannabe-fiancé turned to gape at her, his body still embedded in the flesh of the buxom redhead in his arms.

“Kay!” he cried in a strangled voice. “What on earth are you doing here?”

* * *

TWO HOURS LATER Kay sat morosely in her darkened kitchen, staring at the crystal salt and pepper shakers that sandwiched a crystal napkin holder and slowly shredding a lace paper doily.

She felt empty inside. Empty, hollow and cold. She hugged herself tightly and clenched her jaw to stay the tears that threatened to roll down her cheeks if she dared let them.

It wasn’t so much finding Lloyd with another woman that bothered her. No, what really upset Kay was the cruel words he’d hurled at her as he’d wriggled into his pants.

“I’m glad you caught me, Kay. I’ve hated sneaking around behind your back. But you gave me no choice. Do you have any idea how frustrating it is being with a frigid woman?”

Frigid.

The word reverberated in her head. Was she really frigid? She’d suspected for many years she might be, but to have someone say it to her face caused her more pain than she could have imagined.

He blamed his cheating on her.

A sick sensation flipped over in Kay’s stomach as she recalled the blissful expression on the red-haired woman’s face. She had obviously been having a very good time with Lloyd. If he could satisfy that woman, then apparently his lousy technique wasn’t the reason for Kay’s lack of sexual arousal. It was true. She was frigid.

She dropped her head into her hands and softly began to cry. In that moment she felt so alone. All those years of struggling to be the perfect daughter, the perfect Freemont, had extracted an extravagant toll. Decades of watching her p’s and q’s, worrying about what other people thought and putting on a polished facade had resulted in a repressed personality.

In truth she didn’t know who she was or what she wanted. If only she could activate her sexuality. If she could come alive in that area of her life, might it not be the gateway to freedom?

But how did she go about liberating her libido?

Then she thought of Quinn. With his heated kissing and his bedroom eyes, he’d obviously desired her. If anyone ever made her feel like a woman, it was him.

And she’d let him get away.

She stroked her lips with fingertips gone salty from her tears and wistfully recalled their kiss and the power of their connection. A shiver passed through her. Could Quinn light the fire in her that she feared did not even exist?

You're idealizing him, Kay. He's nothing but wish fulfillment. The inner, sensible voice that had guided her actions throughout her life spoke sternly.

Right.

Sighing, she raised her head and straightened her shoulders. Freemonts did not pine for the impossible.

At that moment her door buzzer went off.

Great. Just what she needed. Company. Kay trudged to the door and pressed the intercom. "Yes?"

"Dearest, it's Mommy. I'm coming up."

Oh, no! "Mother, I'm pretty busy."

"Sweetheart, you don't have to pretend with me. Lloyd has been to see your father. I know what happened between you two."

"Then you know I never want to see his two-timing ass again."

"Is that any way for a Freemont to talk?" her mother chided.

More Freemont guilt. "Come on up." She sighed again.

A few minutes later Honoria Freemont rushed into Kay's apartment with her hair freshly coiffed, smelling of expensive French perfume and wearing an impeccably tailored suit. Immediately she took both of Kay's hands in hers and led her to the couch.

"You look terrible, darling. Your eyes are red and puffy."

"I've been crying."

"Do you have any cucumbers? We could make a cold compress."

"Mother, I don't care if my eyes are swollen. I'm in my own apartment. Don't worry, none of your friends are going to see me."

"Oh, you're in one of those moods."

"Yes, I do believe I am. Not two hours ago I caught my boyfriend in bed with another woman. Under the circumstances I'm entitled to be a little testy, don't you think?"

Her mother shifted, let go of Kay's hands. "You mustn't allow something like this to come between you and Lloyd."

Kay stared at her mother openmouthed. "What?" She wasn't sure she'd heard correctly. Was her mother suggesting she overlook Lloyd's blatant infidelity?

Gently Honoria reached out and pushed Kay's jaw up. "Lloyd is your father's right-hand man. He'd be lost without him."

"What's that got to do with me?"

Her mother would have frowned, but her recent Botox injection ruled that out. Instead, a disapproving look came into her eyes. "It's got everything to do with you, darling. One day Freemont Enterprises will belong to you."

"And I can't inherit without a man at my side?"

"Not just any man. You must have a husband who comes from the right stock. A man who knows how to navigate your world. A man of good breeding."

"Oh, from what I witnessed this afternoon, Lloyd's good at breeding, all right." Kay crossed her arms and glared. How could her own mother side with her father and Lloyd in this matter?

"Don't be crude. It's unbecoming of a Freemont."

If her mother said one more word about being a good Freemont, Kay was going to scream. She rubbed her pounding temples.

"I'm not saying what Lloyd did was right," Honoria went on, "but he's very sorry. He's already apologized to your father, and he desperately wants to apologize to you, but he's afraid you won't speak to him."

"He's right. I never want to see him again."

"You're making a grave mistake. Lloyd comes from a long and illustrious bloodline."

"I'm not a racehorse, Mother."

"You're going to be seeing him at every social function. You know he's got opera-season tickets right next to our box. There's no way to avoid him."

"So I'll stop attending social functions and, news flash, I hate opera."

"You can't avoid him forever."

"Then I'll ignore him."

"Darling, you're old enough to understand this." Her mother patted her knee. "There're certain things a woman must put up with in a marriage. Any marriage. Be it good, bad or indifferent."

"And infidelity is one of those things?"

She simply couldn't believe her mother was saying this to her. Then again, what did she expect? Her mother had chosen to look the other way whenever Kay's father came home with lipstick on his collar or took late-night telephone calls in his den or went on "business" trips several times a month. Well, not her! She'd be damned if she'd live that way. No amount of money or social status was worth that kind of misery.

Kay got to her feet. "Mother, I think it's time for you to go."

Honoria looked startled. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not going to discuss Lloyd Post. I'm not going to marry a man who cheats on me. You might have been willing to settle for a marriage in name only, but not me."

Her mother looked as if she'd been slapped across the face with a broom. "Kathryn Victoria Freemont, I will not allow you to speak that way to me."

"Then if you don't want to hear what I have to say, there's the door."

Flabbergasted, her mother picked up her purse. "I'll talk to you later when you've come to your senses."

"Don't hold your breath," Kay muttered, and locked the door behind Honoria, then collapsed onto the tiled floor and drew her knees to her chest. She rocked back and forth in a vain attempt to comfort herself the way she had as a little girl on Nanny's night off.

Oh, God, she had to get out of the city. Away from Lloyd's humiliating behavior, away from her father's chiding disapproval, away from her mother's terrible advice.

When had her life become such a mess?

From the outside, strangers might be envious of her. She had a plum job at the most successful women's magazine in the country. She had lots of money, got invited to all the right parties. She was thin and young and blond.

But others had no idea what it was like to be Kay Freemont. She was miserable to the core and hadn't a clue how to salvage herself. All her life she'd had this bizarre sensation of being on the inside looking out. While in the midst of prestige, money and privilege, she dreamed of being like other kids, wearing clothes off the rack, cheap sunglasses and colorful, rubber flip-flops.

She'd longed to do simple things like eat cotton candy or ride on a carnival Ferris wheel or lie on her back in the grass and stare up at a canopy of stars.

Instead, she'd been escorted to the planetarium and the museum by bodyguards. She'd been forced to attend boring parties and was kept isolated from ordinary people.

She was sick of it. And she wanted out.

For the longest time she had experienced no passion, no fire, no zest for life. That is, until yesterday when she had met Quinn Scofield.

Something about the man—be it his ruggedly sexy appearance, his independent nature, his engaging smile—stirred dormant emotions deep inside her. For the first time in years she felt excited.

The man was real; he didn't hide behind a facade. He was honest; he spoke what was on his mind, consequences be damned. He had true friends, not leeches who sucked up to him for his power and money. And he had family who loved him for who he was. In other words, he was everything she was not.

Go to Alaska. Write the feature article. Get away. Spend some time with Quinn. Tell him you've broken things off with Lloyd. Find yourself. Find your sexuality. Come home a new woman.

It sounded so good.

Determined, Kay crossed to the telephone in the alcove, picked up the receiver and called Judy to tell her she was taking the assignment. She was going north to Alaska.

Chapter Five

KAY FREEMONT WAS coming to Bear Creek. Quinn still couldn't quite get his head around the notion. To think, in less than an hour, that cool, sleek beauty would be strolling the streets of his hometown.

The notion was enough to give a man the shakes. He wasn't quite prepared for the reality of her visit, and yet he didn't feel as if he could wait another second, much less sixty minutes or more.

She had already arrived in Anchorage, and Mack had flown out to retrieve her. Quinn could scarcely sit still. He had reserved the best room for her at Jake's B&B and arranged for her to borrow his parents' extra vehicle. Since his mother had slipped on ice and broken her right ankle the week before, she wouldn't need the old Wagoneer, anyway. He'd stocked his refrigerator with supplies, planning to cook a few meals for her. Quinn was proud of his culinary abilities and couldn't wait to show off for her.

And he was hoping against hope that his wildest dreams might come true and they could finish what they started in New York City. He had stopped by Leonard Long Bear's sundries store and picked up a box of condoms, a bottle of massage oil and edible body paints. Bear Creek might be small but because of the cruise ship trade, Long Bear's had to be prepared for every kind of request. Especially those of a confidential nature.

Unfortunately Quinn's private business hadn't remained private for long. By lunchtime at least half a dozen townspeople had kidded him about the naughty thoughts running through his mind.

Fine. Let them talk. He wasn't ashamed of his sexuality. Particularly since he hadn't had sex in more than eighteen months.

He hoped he could keep himself under control. He wanted to please Kay as much as he wanted to be pleased. That kiss they'd shared atop the Empire State Building told him she was as hungry for physical love as he.

He couldn't wait to taste those lips again, to caress her soft flesh, to run his fingers through her silky hair. For the past week, ever since Judy Nessler had called and told him Kay was on her way, he'd been unable to consider anything else. Although he couldn't help but wonder if she was still "practically engaged" or if she had broken things off with her boyfriend.

Just thinking about Kay stirred him, and he had to breathe deeply and think of ice hockey in order to calm down.

Finally, finally, he heard the sound of Mack's bush plane glide to a stop in the inlet. Bundled in his parka, he threw open his front door and hurried down the walkway that was already covered with a light dusting of fresh flakes, even though he'd shoveled it earlier.

The first of March was an awful time to visit Bear Creek. They wouldn't be able to do much beyond sit by the fire. Kay certainly didn't seem the type to snowshoe or snowmobile or ice-skate. He couldn't see her sitting in the bleachers wrapped in thermal blankets at his hockey games. Ah, but he could visualize her curled up in his bed.

By the time he reached the dock, Mack had already helped her from the plane. Quinn took one look at her and his heart flipped.

She smiled in that cool, controlled way of hers. "Hello, Quinn."

He'd been nervous, not knowing exactly how to proceed, but in that moment instinct took over. He swung her into his arms, lifted her off her feet and hugged her to his chest.

"Welcome to Bear Creek, Kay," he whispered in her ear. "I'm so glad you decided to come."

"Thank you." She stiffened in his arms and he realized that his easy informality made her uncomfortable.

He sat her gently on the ground, wanting to respect her need for distance, and surveyed her with hungry eyes. She looked good, if somewhat out of place, in her virgin-white ski outfit and snowboots. It was probably the only cold-weather gear she owned.

Feeling self-conscious before Quinn's intense perusal, Kay adjusted the knit cap she wore. She loved the way he'd swung her into his arms but she had a hard time relaxing and enjoying his ebullience.

Mack, the bush pilot, busied himself with tying down the plane and pretending he wasn't eavesdropping on their conversation. She had enjoyed talking to the down-to-earth man on the flight over, and she'd been unable to stop herself from pumping him for information on Quinn. Now she feared Mack knew exactly how much she liked Quinn. For a woman who'd spent her life hiding her feelings from the world, this was a disconcerting prospect.

"Well," she said. "Well."

Her heart was galloping a mile a minute. On the long flight to Alaska she had decided once and for all to use that sexy underwear she had stuffed into her suitcase and seduce this bear of a man. One way or the other, she was bound and determined to prove Lloyd wrong. She was not frigid.

But now that she was here, staring into Quinn's mesmerizing gray eyes, an odd sensation of anticipation, excitement and fear gripped her. Her brain short-circuited, issuing two simultaneous but opposing commands.

Run for your life! Get out while you can!

Strap your arms around him and never let go!

Oh, God, she wanted him so badly. Maybe too much. But did she have the guts to go through with this? Were her expectations of this chemistry between them unrealistic?

He looked impressive in his fur-lined parka and all-weather boots. A rugged man's man who needed no fancy gym to keep in shape. Life in the Alaskan wilderness was his personal trainer.

Another twinge of anticipation. This time low in her anatomy. Heavens above, she was scared and thrilled.

You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, she reminded herself. After all, you're here to write an article. Focus on that. Forget the other for now.

That admonition and a deep breath of frosty winter air calmed her nerves.

Quinn held out his gloved hand to her. Tentatively she accepted it and allowed him to lead her cautiously up the snow-dazzled sidewalk to his rustic log cabin, which was perched on a small hill just above the shoreline.

"Come inside." He ushered her over the threshold, stopping long enough to stomp the snow off his boots on the welcome mat. Kay followed suit.

"Let me hang up your coat."

Kay started to pull down the zipper, but her fingers, even through her leather gloves, were so cold that she fumbled.

"Allow me." He reached for the zipper. Their hands brushed briefly. They both tried to ignore the contact. She glanced at the moose head mounted over the mantel, while he kept his eyes trained to the floor.

Rubbing her palms together, she gazed around the cabin. It was obvious he'd tidied up. The room smelled of pine cleaner and air freshener. The floor was hardwood and covered with a thick, braided rug. Hockey trophies were displayed in a glass case. In one corner sat a massive fireplace, in the other, a big-screen television with satellite hookup. It was definitely a man's place, painted in dark, masculine colors and decorated with large, sturdy furniture. A brown leather couch, a bold scarlet recliner, a hand-carved rocking chair.

She shrugged out of her ski jacket and stripped off her ski pants. He took the garments from her and hung them on a rack by the door. When she felt confident enough to glance his way again, she apprehended his gaze in a leisurely stroll down her body. He took in her red cashmere sweater, her form-fitting black pants, her fluffy white after-ski boots.

Despite the fact that she was bundled up to the teeth, thermal underwear on from neck to ankles, the way he looked at her made Kay feel like Lady Godiva prancing through the town square in the altogether.

"Nice place," Kay said, trying her best to keep her tone upbeat and lighthearted, as if his perusal didn't affect her one bit. But her breathless, whispery voice gave her away.

"Here," he said eagerly, his voice no steadier than her own. "Stand by the fire, get warm. I'll make us some hot chocolate."

Hot chocolate? Had she stepped back in time to a simpler place, a simpler era? It was nice, very nice, but she felt out of place. A stranger in a strange land.

"That'd be great."

Then an appalling thought occurred to her. Was she supposed to lodge here with him? Not that she didn't want to stay with him. She just didn't want it assumed.

"Quinn?" She watched him move around the kitchen, which was separated from the living area by a waist-high counter. She heard the oven door open, saw him bend over and remove a cookie sheet.

The smell of chocolate-chip cookies filled the air. Handsome and he could cook. A deadly combo.

"Uh-huh." He deposited the cookie sheet on a cooling rack and glanced over at her. His hair had flopped boyishly over his forehead. For no good reason whatsoever her stomach did a backflip.

"Did you...am I..." She cleared her throat and tried again. "Where am I supposed to sleep?"

"At Jake's B&B a quarter mile up the road in the center of town. Mack's already hauling your luggage there."

"Er...that's good."

"You didn't think...I mean...did you want to stay here?" He raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Oh, no. No. Of course not." Kay groaned inwardly. This was going horribly. They were both so afraid of making a mistake, they were treading on eggshells.

He returned to the living area, balancing two mugs of hot chocolate and a plate of cookies on a tray.

"I really am glad you changed your mind about coming to Alaska." He handed her a mug.

She took a sip of hot chocolate and nibbled on a cookie. The room was silent except for logs crackling in the fireplace.

"Cookies are good," she said as a way to fill the void.

"You can thank the Pillsbury Doughboy. All I did was slice and heat."

"Still, you sliced them very evenly and heated them to the perfect degree of doneness."

"Are you making fun of me?" His eyes teased.

Feeling suddenly shy, she glanced away. Oh, she was getting in way over her head here. Liking this guy too much, when they had no future together.

But she was in no position to ask for anything more from him than sex, nor did she want to. For one thing he was an Alaskan and she was a New Yorker. For another, she was on the rebound,

still aching from Lloyd's betrayal. She had a lot of things to sort out before she could ever entertain a relationship that extended beyond the physical. With anyone.

Maybe coming here hadn't been such a great idea, after all.

Disconcerted, she moved away from Quinn and turned her attention to the photographs artfully arranged on the paneled wall on the opposite side of the room.

There was Quinn playing hockey. In another he was standing on the summit of Mount McKinley grinning like a happy kid. In a third he was kayaking. In a fourth he was guiding a group of tourists down white-water rapids in a rubber raft.

One picture caught her eye. It featured six muscular, bare-chested teenagers laughing and lobbing fistfuls of blueberries at each other. She recognized four of the boys from the magazine advertisement.

Quinn hadn't changed much. His hair was darker, his shoulders broader, but he still possessed the same insouciant grin and macho stance.

"That was the summer we all worked in Juneau taking tourists down the Mendenhall." He came up behind her and was standing so near she could almost feel his chin touching the top of her head. "We'd been picking blueberries and things got out of hand. My sister Meggie, the camera buff, sneaked up on us and snapped this photo."

"Who's that?" She pointed to a swarthy, dark-haired boy with straight white teeth.

"That's Jesse, Meggie's husband. They weren't married then, of course. In fact, I believe that was the summer Jesse's father married Caleb's mother."

"And this guy?" She pointed to a lanky, string-bean fellow whom Quinn had in a headlock while he smashed berries into his hair.

"That's Kyle."

"You two look like the best of friends."

"We were."

Something in his voice made Kay turn and look at him. "You're not friends anymore?"

Quinn shrugged. "I don't talk to him much. He met some girl who'd come to Alaska for the summer. Kyle fell head over heels. Moved to California for her. Haven't seen him in twelve years."

"You act like he betrayed you by falling in love."

Quinn cracked an uneasy smile. "It wasn't the falling-in-love part, it was the leaving Alaska. That woman put a ring in his nose, and he let her pull him around by it. Guess that's why I'm so determined to find a wilderness wife."

"Because you're not willing to compromise?"

"Not when it comes to leaving Alaska." He thrust his chest out as if he was proud of his stubbornness. "In fact, that's what happened to my last relationship. I asked Heather to marry me, but she refused to move to Bear Creek. I wasn't about to go to Cleveland where she lived. If a woman wants to love me, she's got to love Alaska, too. It's a package deal." He took a sip of his hot chocolate, then said, "You can quote me in your article."

Kay raised her eyebrows. With such an obstinate attitude the man might be hard-pressed to find his perfect mate. So why did she find his stubbornness attractive? Maybe it was the clear-cut, simple way he said what was on his mind and if people didn't like it, well, too bad. "I'll be sure to note that. Getting your story for the article is the reason I'm here."

"The only reason?" His eyes sought hers.

"No. It's not the only reason."

"No?" He gave her a quirky smile, which struck her the wrong way. As if he was feeling pretty cocky about his ability to attract her all the way across the continent.

"I needed to get out of the city after breaking things off with Lloyd."

"Ah." He grinned all the wider. "So you're no longer practically engaged."

"No, I'm not."

He smirked.

“Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Looking so smug. My breaking up with Lloyd had nothing to do with you.”

“I never said it did.”

“Your expression implied it.”

Why was she being so sensitive? What was the matter with her? For the past week, while she packed and made travel arrangements, she had been unable to think of anything but seeing Quinn again, and now that she was here, she was experiencing all kinds of conflicting emotions.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That sounded argumentative.”

“Hey, I can handle it. If you need to get something off your chest, go right ahead.”

Well, that was refreshing. He was ready to let her spew out her emotions. Her mother and her father and Lloyd encouraged her not to express her feelings. To keep things bottled up. Good little girls didn’t let their anger show. She was damned tired of being good, and here was Quinn egging her on.

“You sure you’re up for this?” She looked into his eyes, saw nothing but sincere interest and acceptance. She leaned forward and set her half-empty mug back on the tray.

“FYI for the article. I don’t want a submissive yes-woman for a wife. I want a true partner who speaks her mind, shares her thoughts with me even though I might not agree with her. I’m a firm believer that passionate couples fight. As long as they fight fair. Hell, if you don’t fight sometimes, if you agree about everything, where’s the spark? Where’s the passion?”

Kay gulped. Oh, yes. She had always felt the same way. Just once when her father came home late, she had longed for her mother to confront him, throw a tantrum, demand he stop sleeping with other women. But Honoria had never once expressed her anger or voiced her opinion. Well-bred wives did not behave that way. Civilized-society women simply went shopping, spending extravagantly, consoling themselves with expensive but totally meaningless gewgaws.

And when she had tried to tell Lloyd her feelings or express her displeasure over something, he’d always headed her off, shut her down, closed her out, reminding her she was a Freemont with a certain level of dignity to maintain.

“You got something to tell me, Kay? Blast away, I’m listening.”

Quinn gave her his full attention, his eyes on her face, his palms splayed over his thighs. Kay couldn’t help but feel that the future Mrs. Scofield was going to be a very lucky woman—just as long as she was willing to move to Alaska.

“All right. It hurt my feelings when you turned down my offer at the Empire State Building. I don’t go around inviting men into my bed willy-nilly. I just thought you should know that.”

“I never thought you did.”

“You thought I was terrible, wanting to cheat on my boyfriend.”

“I didn’t.”

“You did.”

He shook a finger. “Now don’t go telling me what I thought.”

“So what did you think about me?”

“I figured there must have been trouble in ‘practically engaged’ paradise for there to be so much attraction between us.”

“And?”

“I thought you were a beautiful, sexy woman who was obviously unhappy with her life and not getting what she needed from her primary relationships.”

Boy, he’d hit the nail on the head. Was she that obvious, or was he that observant?

“I think you’re frustrated and disappointed and searching for something special.”

She ducked her head. This didn't feel very comfortable, having him analyze her and be so accurate.

He reached out and cupped her chin with his palm, raised her face to meet his gaze once more. "I'd like to make you feel special, Kay." His expression was doing her in, causing her to feel hot and cold at the same time.

"Quinn, you're looking for a wife, and the last thing I'm in the market for is a husband."

"Kay, I'm a pretty simple guy. I take life as I find it. I don't put expectations on people."

"Then why did you reject me back in New York?"

"Like I told you then, I don't come between couples. You had to get free from Lloyd first before you could come to me. But you're here now. Officially unattached. Anything can happen."

Anything.

The word reverberated in her head. It was exactly what she wanted to hear. Exactly what she feared most. By coming to Alaska she had set herself on a course of sexual exploration. If a man as virile as Quinn couldn't give her an orgasm, if he couldn't save her from a life of frustrated sexual fantasies, then could anyone?

* * *

QUINN DROVE KAY over to Jake's bed-and-breakfast in his parents' Wagoneer and gave her the keys. He'd started to walk her to the door, not wanting her to slip in the gloom and the snow, but she surprised him by announcing she wanted to walk around and check out the town.

"For the article," she explained.

They walked to the end of the half-mile-long boardwalk, which ended at the pier where the cruise ships docked in the summer. Most of the shops were closed for the winter, except for Long Bear's sundries and MacKenzie's trading post. He took her over to KCRK, his parents' radio station, and they waved to Liam Kilstrom who was in the control booth. They wandered past the community rec center and the nearby church, where the ladies' auxiliary was having a quilting bee. They strolled by the Happy Puffin bar, where half the town was hanging out, because it was trivia night. The other half of the town was either probably in Jake's huge sitting room or at the adjacent restaurant, Paradise Diner.

He was not quite certain what had passed between them at his house. Had she come to Alaska to have an affair with him or not? She wanted him as badly as he wanted her. He saw the desire reflected in her eyes, noticed her passion in the way she held her body, recognized longing in how she got flustered in his presence. But something was holding her back.

It was all he could do to keep from touching her, brushing a wisp of hair from her cheek, taking her hand to guide her over the icy patches on the road. He wanted to caress her and hold her and never let her go.

He had it bad and he knew that wasn't good. He had to be careful. Kay was not a long-term relationship. He knew that. He didn't want either of them to get hurt. But man, how he wanted to make love to her.

His gut somersaulted and he drew in a deep, steadying breath, unable to remember when one woman had tied him so inextricably into knots. He was afraid of screwing up, of making a wrong move, of letting this one slip through his fingers. He wanted her with a power that shook his normal confidence.

Kay stopped on the wooden promenade, inhaled deeply of the cold air and gazed at the mountains surrounding the town.

"It's so incredibly beautiful here," she murmured. "Breathtaking. Overwhelming. Majestic. Totally wild. Honestly, I had no idea."

"It's just home to me." He grinned.

"I can't believe how different it is from New York. Bear Creek is quaint and clean and charming. No noise, no pollution, no panhandlers. I've got to tell you the truth, all this quiet is a shock to my system. How do you stand it?"

"How do you stand Manhattan?"

She gave a little laugh, and the delicate, feminine sound drilled a corkscrew of awareness straight through his groin. "I suppose it's what you're accustomed to. Although I've got to admit it can be a tough place to live. I've been mugged twice in two years."

"That's awful."

She shrugged. "Builds character."

"I hate the thought of someone accosting you," he said vehemently. "Makes me want to do bodily harm."

"Omigosh!" she exclaimed, and latched on to his arm.

"What is it?"

"There's a moose. Trotting right down Main Street. I was reading a book on Alaska on the flight over, and it said moose are often more dangerous than bears. Is that true?"

"Moose have been known to cause a lot of damage."

"Do they bite?"

Quinn struggled not to laugh. Her gloved fingers dug into his forearm. Her lithe body trembled against his. Ah, at last, here was his opportunity to touch her, even if he had to do something a little underhanded to keep her latched on to him.

"Shh. Hang on to me, Kay. We'll tiptoe past him and hopefully he won't notice us."

"Quinn—" her voice warbled and her eyes grew round as hubcaps "—maybe we should turn around and go back to the pier. Give him the whole street."

The moose snorted and trotted closer.

"Oh! Oh!"

"I'll protect you." He thrust her behind him.

Her arms went around his waist and her sweet-smelling head popped out from under the crook of his arm so she could keep her eyes fixed on the moose.

"He's huge," she whispered. "What if he charges?"

"I'll hold him off while you run away."

"Quinn, I'm scared."

He patted her hand. "It's all right, Kay. I won't let any harm come to you. This isn't New York."

The moose snorted and pawed the ground. Then raised his shaggy head and glared at them.

Kay tightened her grip on his waist.

"We'll just ease on by." Quinn took a tentative step forward.

"No, no." She dug in her heels. "Please don't move."

The moose chose that moment to turn and lope off in the opposite direction. Kay sighed and sagged against his body. "Whew. That was a close call."

Reprobate, his conscience accused. Tell her the truth.

"Kay..." he began, but she was no longer next to him. She was sprinting toward Jake's B&B. He had to run to catch up with her.

She wrenched open the door and tumbled headlong into the foyer.

The place was packed with toddy-sipping locals gathered around a roaring fire, playing chess, swapping tall tales, listening to the weather report on the radio. The minute Kay burst through the entryway, every head turned to stare at her, and he hated the way they gawked.

"Wild moose!" Kay gasped. "Walking down Main Street."

The denizens of Bear Creek, mostly men, all Quinn's neighbors and friends, stared at her as if she was some exotic bird who'd migrated too far north. More than a few mouths dropped open, and

even Lulu, Jake's Siberian husky, lifted her head off the rug. A twinge of guilt bit him for having let her believe the moose was dangerous.

"Well," Kay demanded, sinking her hands on her hips and glaring about her, "aren't you guys going to do something about it?"

The room broke into raucous laughter.

Kay blushed and pivoted on her heel to face Quinn. "What's so funny?"

"Quinn got you thinkin' that moose is a killer?" cackled an old fellow seated at a table near the door, a chessboard on the table in front of him.

"Don't let old Gus give you a hard time," soothed a handsome man that Kay recognized from the publicity photo Quinn had shown her in New York. He had sandy hair and a boyish grin that promised lots of fun. "That's just Kong, our resident moose. Caleb bottle-fed him from the time he was a calf. His Momma got hit by an RV during tourist season five years ago. Kong's tamer than a poodle."

"Oh." She felt like fifty different kinds of fool. Why had Quinn let her believe the moose was dangerous? She glared at him, and he had the good sense to look ashamed of himself.

"I get it, ha, ha, ha. Play a trick on the city girl."

"I'm sorry." Quinn jammed his hands in his pockets.

"It's okay. I can take a joke."

"I'm Jake, by the way. You must be Kay." Quinn's buddy held out his hand. "We've heard a lot about you. Welcome to Bear Creek."

"Thank you, Jake." She shook his hand and smiled graciously, determined to regain her dignity.

"Would you like me to show you to your room?" Jake asked.

"That would be lovely."

"This way."

Jake led her up the wide cedar staircase to a room decorated with rustic charm. Quinn started to trail after them, but Kay turned and planted a palm on his chest. "Excuse me, big man, but I don't recall anyone inviting you up to my room."

[Chapter Six](#)

"SHE SURE PUT YOU in your place," Jake teased Quinn when he returned to the B&B three hours after Kay had kicked him out. Lulu lay on the rug at his feet, eyeing Quinn with the same amusement that was evident in her owner's face.

"Oh, shut up."

"Quinn's got a girlfriend."

"Grow up," Quinn growled, and scowled.

He had gone home to give her time to cool off and to prepare a peace offering, and he'd come back to restlessly pace the corridor of the B&B, trying to gather his courage to knock on Kay's door. Since when could one feisty little woman make his knees quake?

He pushed his fingers through his hair and let out a long breath, which did nothing to ease the nervousness and self-reproach squeezing his gut. If he wasn't careful he was going to mess things up royally with Kay.

He had fibbed to her, inadvertently embarrassed her, and that had never been his intent. He had to apologize, get back into her good graces.

Resolutely he knocked on her door.

"Should I go get Meggie?" Jake asked. "Just in case Kay decides to slam-dunk you down the staircase and you need the services of a trained RN?"

"Beat it." Quinn glowered at his friend.

Chuckling to himself, Jake sauntered off, Lulu on his heels.

And Kay answered the door. "Oh. Are you still here?"

"Can we talk?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "So talk."

“In private.” He waved a hand. “Eavesdroppers are rampant around here.”

She shook her head and studied him for a long moment. Should she stay mad? He gave her a sad expression. She opened her door wider. “All right.”

Quinn scooted over the threshold.

Kay shut the door behind him, then turned to face him. “Did you have fun embarrassing me in front of all your friends?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Wasn’t like what? I was terrified of that moose!” She punched him lightly on the shoulder. He arched his eyebrows in surprise. She wasn’t given to admitting feelings of weakness, and the fact that she had done so amazed her. But darn it, she had been scared.

“You told me you’d survived two muggings and it was no big deal. Why would a moose scare you?” Quinn looked genuinely puzzled.

“Because it’s the unknown. Why did you let me make a fool of myself?”

“I had no idea you were going to rush into Jake’s and call everyone to arms against Kong. What can I say? I liked it when you grabbed on to me, when you needed me to protect you.”

“Really?” She slanted him a sideways glance. She was flattered and she probably shouldn’t be, but truthfully it had made her feel very feminine to know this brawny man could protect her from wild creatures.

“Yeah. I am sorry—I acted like a jerk, Kay.”

Her name on his tongue tracked an unstoppable awareness through her. She pressed a hand to her stomach to still the fluttering there. A man who could admit when he was wrong? Unbelievable.

“Forgive me?”

“You’re forgiven,” she said.

“Forgiven enough so that you’ll agree to have dinner with me?”

“All right.” She nodded. “Just let me change.”

“I’ll wait for you in the lobby.”

Grinning, Quinn hurried back downstairs. Thank heavens she’d accepted his dinner invitation. He’d gone all out, preparing his famous salmon chowder, putting Coltrane on the CD player, chilling a bottle of champagne. He hoped he wasn’t going overboard or pushing too hard.

His stomach took a dive at the thought. He’d never felt so out of his element with a woman. He was used to cocking a seductive grin at the ladies and having them tumble right into his bed. Why this one caused him to doubt himself, he had no idea.

Maybe because he wanted her so badly.

A few minutes later Kay floated down the staircase. Once again every eye in the room was trained on her lithe, graceful form. Even Lulu thumped her tail approvingly from her place by the fire.

Quinn gulped. He could only stare, bug-eyed. She wore a black velvet long-sleeved dress and black high-heeled fashion boots. Not exactly Alaskan wear, but damn, those boots did fine things for her legs.

In that moment he flashed back to the first time he’d seen her on the plane. He recalled the way her legs looked encased in silk stockings. A rampant forest fire suddenly blazed through him, and he was at a loss for words.

The bodice of her dress clung snugly to her full breasts. The skirt swished seductively when she moved.

As she descended the last step, he stood up to greet her.

“Are you going to be warm enough in that outfit?” he asked.

She leaned in close, the hair on the top of her head tickling his nose. “Shh, don’t tell anyone. I have on long-handled underwear.”

That secret should have killed his libido-fed fantasies about satin and lace covering her silky skin. Instead he found himself even more aroused by the thought of her in cotton flannel. Perspiration beaded his brow.

He was a sick, sick man.

The sky was inky black as they walked to the SUV. This time of year they got only about five hours of daylight. He carried a flashlight and shone it over the parking lot to light their way, while keeping his arm firmly locked around Kay's waist. He wasn't about to let anything happen to her.

"I can't believe how dark it is," she whispered. "No streetlights. No cars on the road. Quiet as a cemetery."

He tried to see Bear Creek from her point of view and failed. He considered the darkness comforting, the vastness of the landscape inspiring.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"My place."

"Not to a restaurant?" Her voice rose on the question, as if she was nervous about his reply.

"The only restaurant open during the winter months is the Paradise Diner next to the B&B. You'll be sick enough of it by the time you head back to New York."

"Only one restaurant? You've got to be kidding."

"I'm not. Bear Creek's winter population is about fifteen hundred."

"And in the summer?"

"Late May through mid-August the population swells to three, four thousand, double that when the cruise ships are in town."

"Wow."

They arrived at his cabin, and he escorted her inside and took her coat.

"Something smells wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I'm starving."

"Salmon chowder and grilled sourdough bread."

"Sounds delicious."

"Made it myself. The chowder that is, not the bread."

She laughed.

Once in the kitchen, she enthused over the tablecloth, the candles, the champagne just as he'd hoped, and Quinn began to relax. He'd pleased her, which was precisely his intent.

He pulled back her chair for her. She smiled up at him. They ate and talked and ate and talked as if they'd been friends for a thousand years.

Quinn couldn't quit staring at her. Whenever her pink tongue flicked out to take a morsel of food from her spoon, it felt as if she was licking him in a very private place. Several times he had to bite down on his bottom lip to keep from groaning out loud.

Kay was impressed that he'd worked so hard to make such a delicious meal. She admired his impeccable table manners and sent sideways glances at him. The candlelight accented his features. He'd rolled up his sleeves while serving their dinner, exposing those magnificent forearms that drove her wild with desire.

"So, Quinn, for the sake of the readers of Metropolitan magazine, what's your idea of the perfect date?" she asked, desperate to get her mind off his extreme sexiness.

"We're back to the article again."

"Yes."

"We're having it."

"What?"

"The perfect date." He reached across the table, laid a hand on hers. "Good food. Great conversation. A pretty woman."

"Oh." Taken aback by the very bold look in his eyes, Kay removed her hand from underneath his.

“There’s only one thing that would make it better.”

She held her breath.

“Dessert.”

He disappeared into the kitchen for a few minutes and then brought out baked Alaska.

“You made this yourself?” she gasped as he set the flaming dessert in front of her.

“It’s not as hard as it looks.”

“I’m impressed.”

“That was my intent.”

He nailed her with his steady gaze.

She’d never met a man like Quinn. At once extremely masculine, yet oddly enough quite domestic. He possessed a self-confidence that would attract any woman. He had an intense strength underlying his every action, and hey, the guy could even admit when he was wrong. She wagered that mere weeks after his advertisement ran in the magazine, he’d be well on his way to matrimony with the wild woman of his dreams.

She experienced a strange tug in her belly. Was she actually jealous of that as-yet-nonexistent woman?

You don’t have to be jealous. You can have him for now. He’s the tonic to soothe your shattered ego. So what if there’s no happily-ever-after? What about happily-right-now?

They ate the baked Alaska; then Quinn wiped his mouth with his napkin, checked his watch and shoved back his chair. “It’s about time.”

“Time for what?”

“Come with me. There’s something I’d like to show you.” He got to his feet and held out his hand to her. “This way.”

He guided her toward the stairs.

Toward the bedroom?

Kay gulped. Was she really ready for this? She had taken the assignment because she wanted to see Quinn again. And because she couldn’t stop lusting after him, but when push came to shove, could she go through with it?

“Quinn...I...”

He placed a finger to her lips. “Shh.”

His finger tasted slightly salty, the pressure of it against her mouth startlingly arousing. She had the strongest urge to capture that finger with her teeth and suck.

He cocked his head and smiled oh-so-slightly, as if miraculously reading her thoughts. The five-o’clock shading riding his jaw looked rough, exciting, and she wondered what it would feel like rasping against her cheek.

In a split second she was locked in another fantasy. She envisioned him without his clothes on and hiccuped at the image that rose to her mind. He would look gorgeous naked. She just knew it. Golden skin, perfectly defined muscles, firm hiney.

Kay gulped.

“Come,” he urged. “Come.”

Did she dare?

Maybe, Kay realized, maybe she was afraid of finding out that she really was sexually dysfunctional. But how could she be frigid when she felt so hot and wet and achy deep inside? When her entire body begged for a release she’d dreamed about on a daily basis?

He laced his fingers through hers and, walking backward, slowly pulled her up the first step. “I’m not going to bite,” he murmured. “Unless you want me to.”

Her heart punched her rib cage as she placed one booted foot on the first hardwood step.

His gaze snagged hers and held on tight. Kay shivered at the purely masculine gleam in his sultry eyes. Even from arm’s length, she could feel his body heat radiating outward.

She was coming undone. Something uncoiled in her belly. Something soft and warm and messy.

His breathing, husky with desire, echoed loudly in the confines of the staircase. The erotic sound strummed along her nerve endings, escalating her excitement. She struggled to draw in a steady breath of her own, but ended up panting shallowly, her eyes locked to his.

Up another step and then another.

Scalding hot. It must be 110 degrees in here. Quinn tightened his grip on her fingers. She needed to run outside and roll around in the snow.

“Almost there,” he coaxed.

Almost where? His bedroom? At the thought she experienced this incredible, inextricable push-pull. Her nipples tightened in anticipation; she could feel them protruding against the material of her bra. Pressure, sweet, sweet pressure, grew between her legs.

“Here we are,” he said at last, and she mounted the last step.

But where he led her was not a bedroom.

Kay blinked.

It was another spacious living area with rafter ceilings, a second fireplace, leather couch, braided rug. A handmade quilt graced the back of the couch. The far corner housed a desk complete with computer, printer, fax, copier and scanner.

Outdoor and rescue equipment hung from pegs mounted along the paneling or were in organized rows on built-in shelves. Harnesses, ropes, pulleys and crampons for mountain climbing. Life vests, oars and wading boots for river rafting. There were fire extinguishers and first-aid kits, a citizens band radio and a huge stash of flashlights. Obviously this was his office.

But what grabbed her attention and held her transfixed was the plate-glass window running along one wall overlooking the bay and the incredible display on view.

Kay’s hand rose to her throat as she stared at the brilliant curtain of shimmering green, red and white that fluttered ghostlike across the sky. She had never seen anything so awe-inspiring as those radiant spectral waves.

The shimmers danced and twirled, gauzy curtains of brilliant brightness changing shapes, billowing out like a green genie from a bottle in those old cartoons she had been banned from watching as a child.

“The northern lights,” she whispered.

“Yeah.” His voice was as husky with awe and respect as her own.

“It’s incredible. Resplendent. Superlative. Words can’t begin to describe it.”

“Nature’s light show. We see the aurora up to two hundred times a year from early spring to late fall. This year promises to be particularly vibrant because of increased sunspot activity.”

“What causes this spectacle?”

“Scientifically speaking,” Quinn said, “the northern lights are electrical discharges resulting from the interaction between wind and the earth’s magnetic field.”

“Oh.”

“But the Native Alaskans believe the lights were torches carried by old souls to guide the new souls into the next world.”

A carpet of gooseflesh covered her arms, despite her long-handled underwear. She felt shivery inside and not just from the eerie legend, but from her closeness to Quinn.

He’d brought her up here to see this breathtaking display, not to make love to her. She was simultaneously relieved and disappointed.

Kiss me, she thought. Kiss me now, kiss me hard, kiss me long.

But she didn’t say those things. Instead, she turned to him and smiled softly, belying the inner turmoil raging through her mind. “Thank you, Quinn, for showing this to me.”

"You're welcome. Hang on, I'll get us some champagne and we'll toast your arrival and the appearance of the sometimes temperamental aurora. I'd hoped she would come out to play tonight, but you never know for certain."

"She?"

"The aurora is most definitely a feminine force," he said. "Watch the sky. See how the lights flicker and tease? She's fickle. Coming on hot, then shying away. Coyly fading one minute, flaring boldly the next. Cool yet strangely hot. Oh, Aurora is a woman all right. She's got many moods."

"You're quite the romantic," Kay said.

"So I've been told."

"I still don't understand why you're not married." She shook her head.

"Hopefully your article and our ad will help rectify that."

But I don't want you to get married, a selfish little voice inside her cried. If you get married, you can't be my boy-toy.

She watched him amble to the champagne bucket positioned next to the stereo system. He turned on the radio, and the sound of Wilson Pickett's "Midnight Hour" spun out into the room.

"Oh," she said, "I love this song."

"That's KCRK," Quinn told her. "I put together the play list for tonight."

He wrangled with the champagne bottle. She heard the cork pop, watched him fill two flutes with fizzy champagne.

"You went to a lot of trouble for me."

His eyes met hers as he handed her a flute. "You're worth it."

Blinking up at his handsome face, Kay noticed things she hadn't paid attention to before—the way his brown hair, shot through with golden strands, curled slightly over his forehead, the way his eyes went soft and seemed to caress her, the tiny mole an inch above the left side of his mouth.

He raised his glass. "To the moment," he murmured.

She clinked the lip of hers against the lip of his. "To the moment."

They sipped their champagne, eyed each other over the rim of their glasses. Kay felt at once heavy and yet extremely light, like a helium balloon tied to a child's wrist. Weighted but yearning to fly.

Suddenly she burped.

"Oh, my goodness!" she exclaimed, and slapped a hand over her mouth. In her family burping aloud was a sin akin to indecent exposure. "I'm so embarrassed. Please forgive me."

"Lighten up, sweetheart. What's to forgive? So you burped. Actually it makes me feel better. I was beginning to think you were too perfect."

"I'm not perfect. Not by a long shot."

"Well, if burping on champagne is your biggest fault, I won't kick you out of my bed."

Their eyes met, held for a long moment.

"Come sit." He eased down on the couch, patted the cushion next to him.

She sat down beside him. He stretched his arm out over the back of the couch. She was acutely aware of it resting there. She imagined his fingers tangling in her hair, his mouth devouring hers. Briefly she closed her eyes and when she opened them again, she focused on the dancing lights beyond the window.

Quinn studied Kay as she watched the northern lights. Her profile mesmerized him. Her nose was refined, her cheekbones sculpted. Just looking at her made his heart feel crooked, as if it had slipped in his chest.

Her scent teased his nostrils. Warm and rich and compelling, it smelled of something foreign and exotic. Was that what attracted him to her? She was like no other woman of his acquaintance.

Her hair brushed lightly across his skin. He noticed her perfectly manicured fingernails, the delicate shape of her hands, her narrow wrist decorated with a gold tennis bracelet. Even though she

was right beside him, she still seemed detached somehow. Her detachment intrigued him just as it had on the airplane.

Her aloofness roused him, made him want to do something drastic to bring her into the fold. She had lived in New York too long, spent too much time disconnected from people, too often kept her feelings to herself. Her two-week stay in Bear Creek would do her a world of good. Help her open up to herself and the world around her. He wondered if he should tell her about his urge to rattle her cage, ruffle her feathers, crack her facade. He ached to tell her exactly how he hoped to liberate her. But Quinn feared that if he spoke these words, it would be a mistake from which he could never recover.

And yet he felt driven, nervous. His heart began a fretful pounding. There were no words for what he wanted to say, and his tongue lay paralyzed on the floor of his mouth. A knot of pressure built inside him. Pressure that urged him to haul her into his arms and show her everything he simply could not say.

He wasn't good with flowery sentiment. He was a man of action, and only action could quiet his restlessness. His body tensed and he leaned in close.

She looked at him then, her pale hair gleaming in the firelight, rivaling the natural phenomena flickering outside the window. Her breathing was shallow, and her brown eyes shone with a fevered effervescence. He'd never seen anything so lovely.

Kay felt his body shift toward her, pressing her deeper into the plush leather couch. His left side was crushed against her right, and he placed a hand on her thigh. Then his mouth was on hers—oh, how she had dreamed of kissing him again—urgent and insistent. She was concurrently both hot and cold. His body was tense, hard, but his lips were soft, inviting.

And his tongue.

Dear Lord, it ought to be illegal to possess such a tongue!

From there everything went wild, flailed totally out of control. He dropped his arm from the back of the couch, wrapped it around her waist and hauled her against his body, forcing her to spread her knees.

She felt his erection through his pants. It throbbed against her belly with a provocative rhythm. They were fused. Lips to lips. Chest to chest. Thigh to thigh. And yet it wasn't nearly close enough. Too much clothing in the way.

Twining her fingers into the warm, thick, whiskey-colored hair at the nape of his neck, she arched her body against his. She opened her mouth wider, encouraging that roving tongue to pepper her with wet, sexual thrusts.

He mimicked her moves, one hand cupping the back of her neck. The fingers of his other hand stroked her jaw, her throat and skimmed lower until he was caressing her breasts through the velvety bodice of her dress. He kneaded the pliant flesh, searing her with triple-digit heat. Oh, she couldn't wait until his hands were on her bare skin.

His thumb flicked across the pebble-hard nipple straining tight against her restrictive clothing. Damn, but she wanted to be naked. She threw back her head and a needy moan escaped her lips.

Putty. She was nothing but putty in his hands. The notion both frightened and exhilarated her.

Feverish desire clawed through her, pulling her down, drawing her under the power of Quinn's spell. With the aurora borealis whipping gracefully in her peripheral vision, the fireplace embers glowing and Quinn's tongue on its restless pursuit, she felt swept away by some unstoppable, forbidden fantasy.

Except this reality was more titillating than her most taboo dreams.

Too much torture. She simply could not stand this any longer. She wanted him. Now. Crazy, illogically, this very minute. She refused to stub out her urges. Passion pushed all her fears aside. Desire evaporated any shred of common sense she might have possessed. She wrenched her mouth from his.

“Quinn,” she gasped. “Before we go any further, there’s something I must tell you.”

He looked dazed, muzzy with craving. Their breathing mingled in rapid spurts.

“What is it?”

“I’m not...” She paused, not quite certain how to put this. “I’m not like other women.”

“You got that right, sweetheart.” He couldn’t seem to resist dropping a kiss on her jaw. That achingly light pressure threw her completely off-kilter.

She splayed a hand on his chest and pushed him back. She needed a moment to regroup. “No. I don’t mean it like that.”

He rearranged himself on the couch, shoved a hand through his hair and gave her his complete attention. “I’m listening.”

“I’ve never...” She squirmed uncomfortably. She hated admitting her deficiencies. She’d been raised on the myth that Freemonts never revealed their flaws. So why was she going to tell him her darkest secret? Because she felt as if he was the only one who could help her. “Well...you know...”

“What? Had sex?” He stared at her in disbelief.

“I’m twenty-seven, Quinn. I was almost engaged. Of course I’ve had sex.”

“Oh. What then?” He frowned.

This was so hard. She squirmed, she fidgeted. She tried the words out mentally first, but nothing seemed right. Finally she blurted, “I’ve never...” Then paused again.

“Never what?”

She dropped her voice to a whisper. “...had an orgasm.”

“You’re kidding. For real?”

She nodded. “Lloyd says I’m frigid. That it’s my fault he had to turn to other women.”

“Bullshit!” Quinn spoke with such vehemence, Kay jumped. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. But that ex-boyfriend of yours is a jerk.”

His anger at Lloyd flattered her. She knew then that she had done the right thing by coming to Alaska, by revealing to Quinn her hidden shame.

“How he could fool around on such a beautiful, exciting, interesting woman is beyond me. He must have sawdust for brains.”

“You think I’m interesting?” She smiled shyly, not meaning to be coy. She wasn’t milking him for more compliments, but she was touched beyond measure that he found her interesting, as she’d always thought herself rather dull.

“Interesting, hell.” Quinn snorted. “You’re downright mysterious. You keep yourself so contained. I ache to know what you’re thinking when you get those Mona Lisa smiles on your face. And you’re anything but frigid. If you’ve never been able to come, it’s through no fault of your own. You’ve just been with the wrong men.”

Kay gulped. This next part was hard, but she had to say it. “I want to ask a favor of you.”

“What is it?” His eyes never left her face.

“Do you think that maybe you could help me...er...achieve sexual fulfillment?”

“Say the word, sweetheart,” he encouraged her, lifting a hand to capture a strand of her hair and rub it between his fingers. “Put aside that aristocratic breeding of yours and tell me that you want to come bigger than the state of Alaska.”

Pressing her teeth into her bottom lip, she stared straight into his eyes.

And almost lost it completely.

“I want you to make me come,” she begged him. “More than anything in the world.”

[Chapter Seven](#)

HOW HAD HE GOTTEN so lucky?

Kay Freemont, rich, successful, cultured and beautiful, wanted to entrust him, a simple Alaskan man, with her sexual awakening.

Stunned, delighted, touched, flattered and horny beyond comprehension. How had he gotten so lucky?

He sent a brief prayer of thanks to the heavens and added a pleading postscript: Don't let me lose control. Help me to be strong so I can give her what she needs.

It was going to be hard—pun definitely intended—to rein in his own ravenous desires. He hadn't been with a woman since he and Heather had broken up. He was hanging by a thread.

But he had to dig deep, find a way to put his own needs on hold. Because Kay was giving him the opportunity of a lifetime. She was granting him the privilege of bringing her to the heights of her sexuality.

He was a fortunate SOB and he would not let her down.

She took a long swallow of champagne, then sat her glass on the floor at her feet and shifted her body into his. "I'm ready, Quinn. Make love to me."

Shaking his head, he reached out and tenderly traced her lips with his thumb. She shivered beneath his caress, and the shot of adrenaline that jumped into his gut floored him.

Control, Scofield. Control.

"Oh, no, my sweet, not so fast," Quinn said, when what he wanted to do more than anything in the world was strip that velvet dress over her head, rip off those long johns and make messy, wet, hot love to her.

"What do you mean?" she whispered, her eyes growing wide.

"A proper seduction takes time."

"Oh, yes? How much time?" She seemed alarmed.

"Depends."

"On what?"

He grinned wickedly. "When you're ready."

"I'm ready tonight," she said a bit peevishly. She narrowed her eyes at him and he understood her frustration. If she thought she was frustrated now, she was in for a big shock.

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"Listen, sweetheart, we're doing this my way or not at all. Got that?"

She glared at him, crossed her arms over her chest, flipped one knee over the other. "I'm not sure I like this."

"Before I make love to you, you'll have to eject that uptight demeanor."

"I'm not uptight."

"Arms crossed, legs crossed. Babe, you're closed up tighter than Glacier Bay in January."

"So you do think I'm frigid."

"No! Okay, that was a bad analogy. I do not think you're frigid. But in order for you to get the full sexual experience, you're going to have to relax. And before you can do that, you're going to have to trust me completely."

"And how long will this take?" she asked, purposely uncrossing both her arms and her legs to show she was ready, willing and able to start trusting and relaxing right now.

He lowered his head, his mouth almost on hers. He smelled the fruity scent of champagne on her lips. Right then and there he almost caved. He barely resisted the urge to capture that sassy mouth with his once more.

"Don't worry," he whispered huskily. "You'll know."

* * *

EXHAUSTION CLAIMED HER MIND, haunted her body. Kay had spent the rest of the night in her lonely bed at Jake Gerard's B&B pining for a man who was bent on serving up sweet torture.

And in between the tossing and turning, she had been consumed with rampant fantasies about Quinn. In one scenario he was a wild-eyed pirate who kidnapped and savaged her repeatedly in the

hold of his ship. In another fantasy she was a domineering amazon who kept him chained in the basement for her pleasure. In yet another vision he was a wounded soldier fighting for the other side, and she was a caring nursemaid who hid him in her father's barn.

Ack!

She was slowly losing her ever-loving mind. She had to stop thinking about Quinn. She had work to do. An article to write. She was going to get dressed, go out on the town and explore Bear Creek. She refused to dwell on the fact that he wouldn't make love to her yet and put her out of her misery.

Groaning, she threw back the covers and crept out of bed, stripping off her nightgown and heading straight for the shower. Standing under the stream of hot water, she kept thinking about what Quinn had said.

You're not ready.

Well, how the hell did he know what she was ready for? He barely knew her. But in a way that was what made this whole venture so exciting. Knowing she would never see him again after her trip to Alaska, having this fabulous memory of her sexual adventure and possessing a wistful fondness for the man who showed her that she was all woman. This knowledge was the only thing that had given her the courage to express her true desires to him. To ask him to become her mentor in love.

So here she was, with her fanny on the line, ready, willing and able for action. And Quinn had been the one to put the brakes on.

She soaped her hair but in an instant she was fantasizing again. She saw Quinn in the shower, massaging the shampoo into her scalp, then rinsing her hair.

Her belly clenched with heated desire as she envisioned his hard body brushing hers, his manhood standing at attention. He would press her against the cool tile while hot water sluiced over their fevered skin. He would claim her mouth with his. Roughly, insistently, pillaging her territory. Then he would change tempo and the kisses would turn long and soft and lazy.

She arches her body into his. Desperate for release. She begs him to enter her. She needs to feel him inside her. Needs to experience the fullness only his large shaft will bring.

His fingers curl into the most private part of her. He rubs her cleft gently at first, then with more pressure.

Her sensitive breasts tighten and swell in response, and he gloats over her hardened nipples, taking credit for her arousal. He dips his head to those perky mounds, taking first one into his mouth and then turning his attention to the other. He flicks his tongue over the pink peak. It's as if there is a string connecting her nipples to her groin. With each seductive lick she feels a deepening ache at her very center.

She bites her bottom lip to keep from crying out, but he urges her to let go.

"Scream if you want," he insists, his mouth against her ear. "Let the world know we're making love."

Then he's nibbling her earlobe, running his silky tongue along the outside of her ear. The shudder that crawls through her rocks her to her core. She wraps her arms around his neck, clings to him....

The hot water gone cold forced her back to reality.

Kay opened her eyes, found her lips were pressed against the wall tile. Chagrined, she hopped backward, slipped and would have crashed to the floor of the tub if she hadn't grasped the soap rack.

Oh, she was pathetic. If Quinn didn't make love to her soon, she would explode into a million pieces. That would go over big on the New York social register—and with her mother!

Shaking her head, Kay turned off the water, eased out of the shower and wrapped a towel around herself.

Okay. No more nonsense. She was going to stop thinking about Quinn. She had work to do.

Twenty minutes later she was in the Paradise Diner enjoying blueberry pancakes and surrounded by a curious contingency of Bear Creek's entertaining citizens.

Kay knew she was a novelty, and they were asking her more questions than she was asking them. Jake Gerard introduced her to Caleb Greenleaf, the only wife-hunting bachelor she hadn't yet met.

Caleb turned out to be a serious man with almost unbelievable good looks. It took a lot of coaxing, but after a while he told her about his job as a naturalist for the state of Alaska. He was quite different from his buddies. Introverted, where the other three were clearly extroverts.

Everyone in Bear Creek was friendly, open, welcoming, so very unlike some of the New Yorkers she knew, who had a tendency to be curt, suspicious and unimpressed. They enthusiastically told her many things about their lives. They were so trusting. Too trusting, to her way of thinking. But that's what she liked most about them.

Her New York life seemed very far away, and she couldn't think of anything she missed.

Later, after she'd already compiled copious notes and recorded more than three hours worth of conversations, an attractive, middle-aged couple, holding hands and grinning at each other as if they shared the secret to long-term romance, came in for lunch.

The woman stepped carefully, slowed by a booted walking cast on her right foot. Her husband solicitously helped her up to the counter. They sat on Kay's left, the man taking the stool Caleb had vacated.

He held out his hand to her and gave her a friendly smile. "Jim Scofield. We just had to come over to meet the reporter our son coaxed to come here all the way from New York City."

"You're Quinn's parents? Thanks so much for letting me use your extra car." Kay ran a hand self-consciously through her hair. She hadn't bothered to blow-dry and style it that morning since she knew she would be wearing a woolen cap much of the day, but now she wished she had. Skimping on her grooming was not normal for her, and she felt exposed and at a disadvantage, even though she had already discovered most of the women in Bear Creek didn't wear makeup or style their hair. Everything from their chunky Gore-Tex boots to their sensible parkas was geared for warmth and comfort. You'd never find a fashion show in Bear Creek.

"Yep." Jim slung his arm over the woman's shoulder. "This is my wife, Linda."

"You did a fine job raising your son," Kay told them as she shook their hands.

"We're pretty proud of him." When Linda smiled, her gray eyes softened into welcoming crinkles, just like Quinn's. "And our daughter, Meggie. She's an emergency-room nurse at a children's hospital in Seattle. She's visiting for a couple of weeks to help me while I'm out of commission." Linda gestured at her cast. "You and Meggie ought to get together. She's a city girl just like you, and I do believe you two are the only single women in town under thirty and over eighteen."

"I'd love to meet her."

Kay felt a tug of sadness in her heart, and she couldn't really say why. Maybe because this couple were so different from her own parents. They wore woolen pants, nylon and flannel, where Honoria and Charles Freemont were never seen in public without being impeccably dressed.

Linda and Jim sent each other private signals with their eyes. Kay's parents rarely even looked each other in the face. The Scofields touched frequently with simple, loving gestures. Her mother and father were rarely even in the same room together.

Without any encouragement, Quinn's parents extolled his virtues.

"Did you know Quinn's on the volunteer fire department?" Linda asked.

"No, I didn't." Kay scribbled on her notepad, Bet he looks good in fire boots and suspenders and nothing else.

"He's captain of the local hockey team," Jim bragged.

"Quinn has a bachelor's degree in sports physiology," Linda said.

"He's owned his own business for ten years and each year he turns a bigger profit." Jim nodded.

“And he still finds time to help us out at the radio station. You couldn’t ask for a better son.” Linda took a sip of her coffee. “Or better husband material. Write that down.” She waved a hand at Kay’s notebook. “I’m hoping this advertisement thing pays off for Quinn. I’m ready for grandchildren, and Meggie doesn’t seem to be in any hurry to accommodate me.”

Jim eyed Kay. “You wouldn’t be interested in our boy yourself, would you? You’re a beautiful young lady. You two would have the handsomest kids.”

“Oh, no.” Kay struggled to tamp down the telltale blush she knew was spreading up her neck. “I mean, I like Quinn very much, but I’m a New Yorker. And I just got out of a relationship. I’m not ready for anything serious. Quinn and I are at two different places in our lives.”

Immediately she realized she’d given too much information too quickly. Why had she said so much? That certainly wasn’t like her, spilling her guts to strangers. Probably she’d spouted off because she didn’t want them getting the wrong idea about Quinn and her.

But oddly enough, her nervous revelation seemed to endear her to Quinn’s parents. The Scofields smiled at her sweetly and Jim patted her on the shoulder. “No explanation necessary.”

“But you do like him,” Linda said.

Oh, great. How had she gotten herself into this conversation?

“Mom, Dad,” Quinn boomed from the door of the restaurant, “stop bending Kay’s ear.”

Relieved, Kay looked up to see him stalk toward them. Her heart gave this strange little thump and she suddenly felt all loose and melty inside. He was even better-looking than she remembered in that hard-edged, masculine way of his.

He stopped beside her stool. “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself.” Inwardly she cringed. That sounded too flirty.

“Sleep well?” He grinned as if he knew she hadn’t slept a wink.

“Considering the circumstances.”

“Strange bed and all that.”

“And all that,” she echoed.

“We better be heading out.” Jim Scofield got to his feet, left some money on the counter, then turned to help his wife from her stool. “Linda’s got a doctor’s appointment in Anchorage at two-thirty, and Mack’s waiting to fly us over, so we better get a move on. Nice meeting you, Kay.”

“Nice to meet you, too.” She wriggled her fingers at them.

“Quinn, you must bring Kay to dinner on Saturday night,” Linda insisted. “We’re having a little get-together.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Scofield. I’d love to come.”

Linda whispered something in Quinn’s ear and nudged him in the ribs.

“All right, Mom. We’ll be there.”

“What’d she say?” Kay asked after his parents had left the restaurant. Quinn perched on the stool beside her.

“She said I was supposed to be nice to you.”

“Oh, really?”

“She likes you.”

“How can you tell?”

“I just know.”

“I like her, too. I like both your folks.”

Kay couldn’t help but think about her own parents again. Honoria and Charles would be as rejecting of Quinn as his parents were accepting of her. The vast differences between them yawned before her. Good thing her relationship with Quinn was purely sexual. They wouldn’t have to deal with sticky things like disappointed in-laws. Best leave that to the bachelorettes who would come pouring into Bear Creek with marriage on their minds.

“I dropped by to see if you’d like to come over tomorrow night,” Quinn said.

“Tomorrow? Not tonight?”

He smirked at the disappointment in her voice. “I’m playing hockey tonight, but I’d love to have you in the stands rooting for me, if you’d like to come.”

“And after the hockey game...?” She let her sentence trail off.

His grin widened. “I’ll take you to the B&B.”

“Couldn’t we go back to your place afterward?”

“No way.” He shook his head.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m clearing my calendar on Wednesday night for you. What I’ve got in mind, sweetheart, is going to take hours and hours and hours.” And with that, he winked, chuckled her under the chin, pivoted on his heel and strode out of the restaurant.

* * *

THE TEN PLAYERS whizzed over the ice in a blur. Hockey sticks clashed loudly in the still night air. Bright stadium lights lit the perimeter of the frozen lake turned outdoor hockey rink. In the bleachers, Kay sat huddled under a blanket with Jim and Linda Scofield, her notebook and pen clutched in her gloved fingers. She had yet to write a word, so caught up was she in watching the game.

The players zipped by them again heading for the opposite team’s goal. If Quinn wasn’t so tall, Kay would have had trouble following him. He moved with a graceful power, pushing across the ice with smooth, long-limbed strokes. The expression on his face showed fierce concentration. He manned his stick like a gladiator doing battle.

Wow. Did he bring that kind of concentration to the bedroom? Kay shivered at the thought, grateful she had the cold as an excuse for her quivers.

She was so busy eyeing Quinn’s amazing bod, she never even noticed when he slammed the puck home until the crowd roared and jumped to their collective feet. Kay followed suit, dropping her notepad and pen into her seat so she could applaud without hindrance. “We Will Rock You” blared from the outdoor speakers mounted on the lampposts.

Because of his goal, the Bear Creek Grizzlies had taken a 2 to 1 lead.

“Quinn, Quinn, Quinn,” the crowd chanted.

He turned then and caught Kay’s eye.

A chill of excitement shuddered through her.

He put his hand to his mouth and blew her a kiss.

Kay’s heart fluttered and her belly went warm against the sudden adrenaline rush. Quinn skated down the middle of the ice alone, his stick raised over his head in victory, accepting his accolades, relishing his accomplishment with unabashed glee.

The man was truly magnificent.

A warrior, self-reliant and strong. He was brave and passionate and not the least bit hesitant about expressing what was going on in his head.

Oh! To be like that, instead of a repressed rich woman so alienated from her emotions she didn’t know if she would ever find the approval she needed to release herself from her societal prison.

“Kay, dear, you’re shivering, get back under the blanket.” Quinn’s mother smiled and held up the thick thermal cover, welcoming her beneath it.

Kay sat beside Linda, squashing her notebook and pen beneath her, but she didn’t care. Quinn’s mom tucked the blanket around her and snuggled close. It felt nice to be wrapped in this warm cocoon, to share body heat with Quinn’s family.

In that sweet moment she experienced an amiable sense of kinship she had never felt with her own mother. Linda Scofield, she knew with sudden certainty, would never advise her to marry a man who cheated on her.

Why can’t my mother be like this?

But Kay knew it was a ridiculous wish. Wishing her mother was different was like wishing that she was five inches taller or had been born in Bear Creek.

"Here comes Meggie," Linda said. "Let's scoot down."

Kay looked up to see a woman about her own age picking her way through the stands. Unlike everyone else, who were clad in mackinaws, boots and woolen pants, Meggie wore an outfit more like Kay's own stylish attire.

Meggie possessed an open, honest face and an understated but totally natural prettiness that would serve her well into middle age and beyond. Her eyelashes were enhanced with mascara, her cheeks heightened with rouge. Flame-red lipstick adorned her mouth. Her jet-black hair was tucked up under a bright red and orange cap.

Just like Kay, she looked out of place among the locals. City girls in the Arctic wilderness. Kay felt an instant kinship with her.

Meggie greeted her parents, then plunked down beside Kay. "Hi." She slipped off a glove to shake Kay's hand, revealing slender hands with short-trimmed but well-manicured nails. "I'm Meggie Drummond." Her lively green eyes twinkled. "And you must be Kay."

Kay nodded. "Nice to meet you," she said.

"I hear you're from New York City."

"Yes, I am."

"Wow, I've always wanted to go to New York. They practice some of the most cutting-edge medicine in the country."

"That's right, you're in the medical profession."

"Head nurse of the emergency department at Seattle Children's Hospital."

"Aren't you awfully young to be head nurse?"

Meggie grinned. "I live and breathe pediatric medicine."

"How are they managing without you?" Kay asked.

"Probably very happily since I'm not there to keep them in line." Meggie laughed. "I'm known as something of a taskmaster among my crew. I strive to be fair, but I've got high standards when it comes to patient care."

"I can see that about you."

Meggie's eyes sparkled at the compliment. Obviously, she loved her work. "I had lots of vacation time accumulated—in fact my boss was threatening to lock me out of the hospital if I didn't take off—then when Mom broke her ankle and needed help around the house, I figured now was as good as any time to get away."

The woman was so easy to talk to. Friendly, frank, uninhibited, with definite opinions about the world. Just like Quinn.

"I'm going for hot chocolate," Quinn's dad announced, getting to his feet and taking his wife's hand. "You ladies want anything?"

Meggie, Kay and Linda all said they wanted one, and Jim climbed down the bleachers. When he was gone, Meggie turned back to Kay. "Quinn's been unable to talk about anything but you since he came back from New York."

"Really?"

"You've impressed the hell out of him."

"He's a special guy," Kay replied, surprised at the sudden pressure pushing at her heart like champagne bubbles against a bottle cork.

"Yeah," Meggie murmured, "real special. Can't say I'm too keen on this modern-day mail-order-bride concept he's instigated."

"No?"

"Oh, Meggie," her mother said, "give it a chance. You never know what might happen."

Meggie shook her head. "He's just going to get hurt."

“You think so?” Kay asked.

“Uh-huh. You wouldn’t believe it by looking at him, but Quinn’s pretty tenderhearted. When he loves, he loves deeply.”

“That’s true,” Linda added.

Don’t worry, Kay longed to tell them but couldn’t. This thing between us is purely physical. He won’t fall in love with me.

“He needs an Alaskan wife,” Meggie said. “Someone who understands him and his love for this land. I’m afraid that all he’s going to get for his advertising dollars is a gaggle of giggling bimbos who’ll take him for a ride, then skedaddle out of here at the first sign of winter. Just like Heather did.”

“His ex-girlfriend.”

“He told you about her?”

“Now, honey, don’t judge Heather,” Linda interjected. “She just couldn’t get used to the quiet of Bear Creek. Besides, isn’t criticizing Heather’s reluctance to live in Alaska a little bit of the pot calling the kettle black?”

“Hey,” Meggie said, “I never pretended to want to stay in Alaska. Even though I happened to be born here, I’m a city girl through and through. I gotta have action.”

“Isn’t that the truth.” Linda rolled her eyes. “I swear you kicked like a mule to get out the entire last trimester of my pregnancy.”

“I love the city, too,” Kay said, happy to have found a kindred spirit in this land of ice and snow.

“Honey, you are the city.”

“I don’t understand what’s so fascinating about people being crammed on top of each other and driving like maniacs. What’s the attraction?” Linda shook her head.

“Stimulating conversation,” Meggie said.

“Great parties,” Kay added.

“Museums,” Meggie popped off.

“Shopping!” Kay grinned.

“Symphonies.”

“The theater.”

“Terrific Chinese takeout delivered right to your door!” they cried in unison, stared in awe at each other, then burst out laughing.

Kay felt instant camaraderie with Meggie, and the feeling astonished her. She didn’t make friends this readily. Ever. But they’d forged a connection. She knew by the merry gleam shining in Meggie’s blue-green eyes. She possessed the same irresistible magnetic personality as her older brother.

“My daughter, the cosmopolitan gourmand.” Linda smiled indulgently. “Who’d have thought it when she was spitting peas in my face at ten months?”

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