

Chapter 1

Jo Thompson brushed at her eyes, again. She wasn't the weepy sort. Even a sip of the exceptional champagne that sparkled across her tongue, the taste of spring, only helped a little. She focused on the laughter and bright music of the wedding reception to distract herself.

The setting was so beautiful, a broad white canopy over the vibrant-green lawn. Through its open sides the Mukilteo lighthouse and the large green-and-white Whidbey Island ferry plying the waters of Puget Sound made such an ideal setting. So romantic that even contemplating it choked Jo up all over again. She turned back to the goings-on under the canopy.

Her best friend looked so beautiful and so happy as a bride that it actually made Jo's heart hurt. Cassidy wore a cream-and-ivory lace sheath wedding dress that clung to her shape like a caress. Every time she even breathed, hidden threads of metallic silver glinted and sparkled. On a more provocative woman, or even a lesser one, it would have been indecent. On Cassidy all it did was smolder, which was clearly giving her new husband something to think about.

The first dance hadn't been a tango, but she and Russell had certainly danced it like one, as if they were the only ones present. The reception might be winding down now, but they still moved together, constantly teetering on the edge of a tangle of hot passion.

Jo searched out her other best friend. She was innocently flirting with the father of the groom, who was almost as handsome as his son. And Perrin was doing so despite the wife happily draped on his arm. Julia Morgan took Jo's arrival as an opportunity to get her husband back on the dance floor.

It was clear from their moves that they'd been dancing together for years. Jo had never really learned, but they made it look so intimate and fun that maybe she'd have to find the time. Someday, in her copious spare minutes between lawsuits. Okay, perhaps not. She only really managed to carve out time with Cassidy this week because she was in between cases. A situation that would be ending on Monday morning.

The large tent graced lightly over the lawn, lanterns warmed the scene as the summer evening slowly faded in the background. A live duo were knocking out songs that you couldn't help tapping your foot to. Above them, the Mukilteo lighthouse spun and cast its beam upon the June waters.

"We done good!" Perrin jarred Jo's shoulder with a friendly nudge of her own.

"No, you did. The dress you designed for her is a marvel."

"Does make her look pretty damn marvelous, not that she doesn't normally. Still wish Russell had let me do something with his outfit." They both looked to where he stood with his best man taking a momentary breather from the dance floor.

Jo arched an eyebrow at her, "Do you think you could make him look even better than that?"

Perrin offered her a bit of a grimace. "Probably not. He's sooo damn hunky in that tux, but it would have been fun to try."

"He doesn't just look hunky," Cassidy slammed into them from behind and draped her arms over Perrin and Jo's shoulders, the sweet peas laced into her hair scenting the June-summer air with spring. "He is! I can't wait to rip that tux off him." Then she blushed bright red and grinned at the same time.

Jo pulled her in, "You done good, Cassie. Exactly what you're supposed to be doing, and who with."

Cassidy laughed. A laugh she'd lost since they were college roommates over a decade before, but had rediscovered with Russell Morgan.

"When do you fly out?"

Cassidy grabbed a piece of prosciutto-wrapped shrimp from a passing waiter. She tried to eat it, speak, and chortle all at the same time and nearly choked herself.

Jo handed over her glass of champagne from which Cassidy took several swallows and then released a loud hiccup.

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Welllll,” Perrin drawled out the word. “I’m sure he’ll let you finally sleep on the flight, unless you’re going for an entry in the mile-high club.”

Cassidy’s smile and blush definitely grew. “Russell might have mentioned something about that.”

“Damn,” Perrin stamped her foot. “I am so jealous. I want reports. Perrin wants reports.” She began counting on her fingers. “Is married sex better than single sex? Does high altitude make it, well, better somehow? Pluses and minuses of doing it in four-star hotels, Italian villas, and sailboats on the Mediterranean. Take notes. You’ll be graded afterward.”

“Yes, Perrin. I promise a report. When I get back from three weeks of sailing the Amalfi coast with the man of my dreams, we’ll all go out, get drunk, and I’ll tell you every little sordid detail about my most private sex life.”

“Good.” Perrin nodded emphatically. Her hair, presently dyed as black as Jo’s, swirled about her thin face. As usual, she’d missed the sarcasm in Cassidy’s voice.

Jo also knew from experience that Perrin would indeed be wheedling at least some of the juicier details out of their friend in due time. This allowed Jo to, without parsimony, both share Cassidy’s present amusement at Perrin’s expense and later enjoy the results of Perrin’s somewhat voyeuristic but highly effective curiosity.

Cassidy hugged them both close, “Best friends ever.”

“Best friends ever,” she and Perrin repeated.

While Perrin was both more tipsy and much more emphatic, Jo could feel the truth of it once more bringing tears to her eyes.

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“Damn it! Where’s my goddamn camera?”

“Let it go, mio amico. You’re the best man, Russell. No, wait. You’re the groom, I’m the best man, though with how Cassidy is looking in that dress, the groom really oughta be someone handsome and Italian like me.” Angelo Parrano slapped Russell on the back hard enough that the groom almost snorted his beer.

“But just look at them.” Russell insisted.

There was no question who “them” was.

Angelo took in the scene. Russell had friends from the dock where his sailboat was moored in Seattle at Shilshole Marina. They were mostly dressed for the Northwest in slacks and a clean shirt. They clustered together by the buffet table Angelo had spent most of last night putting together, eating the gourmet food with as much attention as they'd eat a bucket of chicken. He'd bet money they were talking about sailing. It was a topic they never tired of.

A bunch of his and Russell's New York friends had flown out. They were dressed far more fashionably, looking dark, edgy, and wholly out of place at a Northwest wedding reception, outdoors at that, held beside a picturesque lighthouse. Clearly, in their opinions, the wedding of one of America's wealthiest bachelors and an internationally known food-and-wine critic who was starting a cooperative of Pacific Northwest vineyards shouldn't be in a setting more rustic than the ballroom at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan.

Cassidy's friends were a daunting slice of the restaurant world, chefs and food critics. A dozen or so of the Northwest's top vintners from Cassidy's new Northwest Wines venture were also in attendance. It shouldn't be surprising who Cassidy's friends were. Still, it was his restaurant, Angelo's Tuscan Hearth, where they'd held the rehearsal dinner and it was his buffet they were presently tasting and judging. He looked away because he couldn't stand to watch.

No, there was no question which "them" Russell was referring to or why, as a professional photographer, he was desperate for his camera. The three women laughing together made an amazing picture.

Cassidy was right out of a magazine shoot. As a matter of fact, she soon would be. Angelo knew Russell was planning to use her in that dress for the next ad campaign for Perrin's Glorious Garb. Not just edgy clothes, but now astonishing wedding dresses as well.

Actually he'd be an idiot if he didn't use all three of them in exactly those getups. Perrin had also done one of her fashion-design numbers on herself and Jo Thompson. Courtesy of a dye job, Perrin's hair matched Jo's, a straight fall almost as black as night to the middle of their backs. Their dresses were cut from the same cloth, but that's where the similarity ended.

Perrin's pale skin and blue eyes were offset against the light celery-green fabric by severe lines in the dress' tailoring that accented the slender lines of her body and revealed unexpected flashes of that creamy skin. She looked long and dangerous, like a racing sailboat or a really fine chef's knife.

Jo's darker skin, revealing her part-Alaskan heritage, was kissed by the gentle green curves of her dress. Each swoop and swirl accented her generous figure and the fitness he knew she earned through hard sweat at the gym. A man could become lost while navigating among those curves until there was no hope for his return.

The three women had their foreheads together and their arms around each others' waists.

"Beauty, truth, and joy." Josh Harper observed over Angelo's shoulder even as Perrin burst forth with one of her bubbling laughs. The reviewer from *Gourmet Week* had come up between Angelo and Russell. He knew Josh from a couple of good reviews of Angelo's Tuscan Hearth and his habit of eating at Angelo's when he was in town, even when he wasn't researching for a review.

"Guess it wasn't hard to tell what was grabbing our attention." Russell noted. "You're good with words, Josh. Maybe you should write for a living or something."

"Or something." Josh sighed as he watched the three women. "There are moments when being happily married really sucks."

"And moments when it's damn good." Russell took a swallow from his bottle of beer. "So what's your excuse, Angelo?"

He tried to speak, he really did. But Jo Thompson had raised her head and was looking at him from between the other two women. Her dark eyes inspected him as only a top corporate lawyer could, slowly taking him apart like a fine chiffonade, one sliver-thin slice at a time.

Russell's punch on his arm sent him staggering to the side. His wine, thankfully a white Oregon Viognier, spilled down the leg of his gray suit pants, and perfumed him with its warm floral components.

"Shit, Russell!"

"Sorry buddy. I'd feel bad, but I have to go dance with the most beautiful woman here." He finished his beer, handed Angelo the empty before going to fetch his wife. Having his hands full was the only thing that kept him from smacking the groom a good one.

Angelo stood there, empty wine glass in one hand, a drained beer bottle in the other, and a stain down his tuxedo pant that made it look as if he'd just peed himself. Like a lush on display. He shook his leg to try and shake loose the wet pant leg clinging to his skin like cold clam sauce. It didn't work.

Then he looked up and saw that Jo was still watching him. A soft smile, the kind that came the instant before a laugh, lit her face.

Josh clapped Angelo on the shoulder as Russell and Cassidy hit the dance floor, appearing to float several feet above it in their happiness.

“Yep! Happily married has its points.” Josh was watching the newly-married couple sizzle across the dance floor.

But Angelo couldn’t stop watching Jo Thompson.