

Chapter One

The first time that she saw Vanessa Kavik, Sara Tamirova was on the foredeck of the *King's Ransom*, crouched down to polish the brass rail. She happened to glance toward the harbor and saw the woman walking down the dock, her stride long and confident. Her hips and shoulders swayed as she walked, turning a simple walk into a strut that Sara had no hope of ignoring. The stranger's features were mostly hidden under sunglasses and the brim of a baseball cap, but she had her chin lifted so she could scan the names of the boats she passed. She wore a light sundress that brushed against her tanned thighs like a caress with each step.

Keeping one eye on the woman's approach, Sara continued her work. At the back of her mind, she started running through pick-up lines. *Ahoy, there. Care for a tour of the ship?* The woman obviously had an interest in boats. Maybe she would like to see a real, working salmon seiner. Maybe if she played her cards right, the tour could end at Sara's cot. Stranger things had happened, after all.

Before the fantasy could even fully take shape, a bellow rose from the wheelhouse. Sara turned in time to see Gus Kavik, her fellow deckhand, leap over the railing and land on the dock like an explosion. He bent at the knees and, without breaking stride, propelled himself forward as if he had bounded from a spring-board. He launched toward the woman with his arms spread wide. The woman in the sundress shrieked as Kavik engulfed her, wrapping a beefy arm around her waist and hoisting her into the air.

The woman's shrieks turned into laughter, and she tilted her head to Kavik's. Sara felt a surge of disappointment as they kissed. Their lips parted with a smack and the woman kissed Kavik's wide cheeks and then the furry bridge between his eyebrows. She smiled into his face as she slapped both hands against his shoulders.

"Put me down, you son of a bitch."

He ignored her order and wrapped his other arm around her, pinning her to his chest as he comfortably held her a few inches off the ground. A great smile split his black beard and he said, "Damn, woman. It's damn good to see you again!"

"It'll be nicer when I can breathe, I assure you. Put me *down*." She slapped his shoulders again, and Kavik finally lowered her to the dock. Keeping an arm around her waist, he walked her toward the boat.

Kavik spotted Sara on the deck and said, "Ahoy, Tami! I'd like you to meet my gorgeous, wonderful wife, Vanessa Kavik. She's been hiding herself down South at some fancy art school for the past two years, but now that she's grad-ji-ated, she is here to stay." He whipped off her hat, bent down, and kissed the top of her head.

Vanessa's ash blond hair was caught by the wind, and she cupped one hand above her glasses to block the sun. She smiled brightly, showing her teeth, and nodded. "Hello. It's nice to meet you, Tami."

"It's Sara, actually." She stood up and moved closer to the railing. *Damn, but Mrs. Kavik is a fine looking woman.* The fantasy had only lasted a few seconds, but it was still painful to let it go. She held up a hand in greeting. "Sara Tamirova. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

In Sara's mind, one word kept reverberating. *Wife? Wife? Kavik is married? Kavik, who leaves the bar with a different skank every Saturday, had a wife going to school in the Lower Forty-Eight?*

Kavik reached up, grabbed the railing Sara had just cleaned, and hauled himself up onto the boat. He then turned and stretched out both hands for his wife. Vanessa hesitated and then reached up. She wrapped her hands around his wrists, and he

clasped her forearms. He pulled and bent backward at the same moment, and Vanessa squealed as she was hauled aboard. He lifted her up and over the railing, and then deposited her safely on the deck next to Sara. She swayed, and Sara instinctively reached out to steady her. She ended up with her hand on Vanessa's hip, and Vanessa smiled her thanks. "Kind of got a head rush."

Sara nodded and let her go, all too aware that there was nothing between Vanessa's sundress and her skin. She swallowed, her dashed fantasy now with a disturbing new layer, and let Kavik pull his wife back to him. He looped an arm around her shoulder and tugged her close, bringing to Sara's mind the image of a grizzly bear snuggling with a squirrel. "Promised her a little tour of my new home away from home," he explained. "You'll cover for me while I show her around, yeah?"

"It's a seiner, Kavik. How long could a tour possibly take?" Sara said. Of course, if they were planning to end the tour the way her fantasy would have ended, maybe it was best she didn't know. She smiled and waved him off. "Fine. Go ahead. But you owe me."

Kavik clapped his hand on Vanessa's shoulder and turned her around toward the wheelhouse. Vanessa peered over her shoulder and said, "Nice to meet you, Sara."

"You too, Mrs. Kavik."

"Call me Vanessa," she corrected.

Sara nodded and Vanessa turned her attention back to her husband. Sara knelt back to her work, glancing at the Kaviks as they walked away. Her eyes immediately dipped to Vanessa's ass, the curves neatly teased by the way her dress draped and swayed in the wind. And she's completely commando underneath it, she thought ruefully. Damn my luck. She winced and turned back to her work. Fooling around with a married woman was one thing. She wouldn't claim to be innocent of that in the past, but it wasn't like she sought out affairs. Even if she was that kind of person, the wife of a coworker was absolutely, positively out of bounds. End of story.

She put Vanessa Kavik out of her mind and focused on finishing her work.

Vanessa Kavik had lived so many lives that she didn't feel defined by any of them. It gave her a freedom she wouldn't trade for anything. She had taken care of a dogsled team when she was fifteen and felt the vicarious glory when their owner won the Iditarod. She had worked — extremely briefly — as a driver on an oil field. She had been a farmhand down in Montana, a waitress when she returned to Alaska, and had spent three years as a bartender before she had finally saved up enough to pay tuition to art school.

But throughout all of her careers, she was a painter. She produced large canvases that she sold to friends for the cost of supplies, as well as large murals at the places where she worked, for which she was paid small commissions. She felt it was natural to help pay for art school by selling artwork. She saved for so long that, when she discovered she had enough money to make it happen, she was reluctant. It took Gus assuring her he would be fine and practically forcing her onto the plane before she accepted she was really going.

She tried to stay in touch with Gus through e-mail, but they didn't have internet at home and his treks to the library were few and far between. She didn't begrudge him that. They lived their own separate lives during those two years — married, but not constrained. She had taken a lover or two, and she knew Gus had shared his bed with anyone who was willing. Their marriage was open, always had been. What was the alternative — that she fly back to Alaska every weekend just so they could have sex? Neither was willing to let a little stress relief have any effect on their relationship.

Vanessa was thrilled to discover that their time apart had done nothing to diminish her feelings for the big brute. It was absolutely wonderful to see him again, to

feel his strength as he lifted her into the air. But no matter how joyous their reunion, she found herself distracted as they toured his latest posting. She tried to listen as he identified various thingamajigs and geegaws on the bridge, but her mind kept going back to Gus' fellow deckhand, Sara Tamirova.

As Gus opened a hatch and pointed to something inside, Vanessa looked out the window and saw Sara's strong back, wrapped in a red and black flannel shirt. The woman had a Russian name but the features of an Indian. Probably Aleut. As Sara worked, the wind caught her long black hair and lifted it like a veil. It looked like the Northern Lights cut out of velvet, twisting and curling around itself before settling against Sara's shoulders. She stopped her work and reached back, twisting the hair with practiced ease and working it into a loose ponytail.

"You listening, babe?"

"Mm. Yeah," Vanessa said. She turned away from the bridge window and followed Gus to a map. She leaned against the table and listened as he explained that it was a flow map, and showed her how the skipper figured out the best fishing grounds. But her mind was still on Sara Tamirova. She let her thoughts drift away again during Gus' explanation and saw Sara walking toward the wheelhouse, a bundle of cleaning supplies gathered in her hands. She looked up and met Vanessa's gaze just as she moved out of sight.

"Babe?"

"Uh huh. Sorry. Jet lag." She smiled and pressed against Gus' side, intent on what he was talking about now that Sara was out of sight. But there wasn't a doubt in her mind that Sara Tamirova was definitely going to be a distraction.

The *King's Ransom* set out under the cover of darkness, heading for the nearby fishing grounds. Even though it was the middle of summer, nights on the water were freezing. Sara and Kavik were both wrapped in their protective gear — flannel, fleece, and vinyl from head to toe. Sara's long dark hair was wrapped up and hidden under a knit cap. Sara's typical enthusiasm was dampened by thoughts of Kavik's heretofore completely unmentioned wife.

Sara had still been aboard when Vanessa finished her tour. She tried not to spy, but her attention was drawn to a flash of thigh as Vanessa came up on deck from below. Kavik bade her good-night, and she told him to be safe. Sara watched from the corner of her eye, ready to turn away, when Vanessa turned to her and said, "Good-bye, Sara. It was very nice to meet you."

All Sara had been able to come up with was a feeble, "You, too," and then she watched as Kavik escorted his wife down to the dock. They kissed again before parting, Vanessa rising onto her toes to reach his lips. The sundress kicked up in the wind, and Sara got a very nice idea of just how slender and fit Vanessa Kavik was.

The mental image didn't help her state of mind at all. When Kavik returned from saying good-bye, he clapped Sara on the shoulder and said, "She's something, ain't she?"

"What? She's...I don't know. She seems...nice. It's not like I... really had a chance to get to know her." She looked at the woman's retreating back, blushed, and looked down at the nets.

Kavik laughed and slapped her back again. "You wouldn't be the first to fall for her feminine wiles, trust me, Tami."

Mortified that her infatuation was so immediately apparent, Sara refused to talk to him for the rest of the day. That just amused him more.

They were allowed to go home to get a couple of hours sleep before reporting to work, but Sara wasn't able to sleep. She lay awake in her bed and thought about how, exactly, Kavik was welcoming his wife home. After two years of her being abroad, it

didn't take much of an imagination. Sara covered her face with a pillow and waited for the alarm to signal that it was time to go back to the boat.

With the sun peeking over the horizon to herald the start of a new day, the skipper pulled out the tide book and began to calculate while Sara and Kavik went out to tend the gear. Sara bent over the net and began to untangle the ropes. Across the fo'c'sle, Kavik said, "So, guess you were pretty taken, huh?" Sara glanced at him. "With Nessa. My wife? This afternoon. Well, yesterday."

Sara refused to be drawn into his ribbing. She shrugged and went back to the net. "She's pretty. Hard to see what she's doing with a brute like you."

Kavik laughed. "Hell, yes, she's pretty. And I don't question why she's with me, I just thank my lucky stars. Damn near went crazy the entire time she was gone. We sure made up for it last night, though."

He bellowed again, a deep laugh, and Sara groaned. She knew Gus Kavik well enough to know that he was about to start in with specifics. She held up a hand and said, "Please, Kavik, just this once, could you spare me the details?"

"Sure, sure. Thought you'd wanna, you know, maybe live vicariously. Saw you checking her out. Can't blame you. The ass on that woman..." He shook his head and clucked his tongue. "I sure lucked out the day I snagged her."

Sara clenched her jaw and focused on the netting. "Speaking of which, since when are you married?"

He looked genuinely perplexed. "Couple of years, for sure. Five? I've been married the entire time I've known you. Why?" He realized before she could answer. "Oh. You mean those other women." He sat up and stretched his back. "Well, Nessa and I have an understanding. She knows all about the other women."

Sara resisted the urge to take a swing at him. She didn't know why she was getting so riled up for the honor of a woman she had only met for five minutes. It was their marriage, it was their business. She straightened and pressed a fist into the middle of her back, rubbing a knuckle against a knot of tension. "So this 'understanding' is a two-way street, right? She can screw around on you, too?"

"Can and does," Kavik said without hesitation. He snorted, hawked, and spat over the side of the boat. "I told you she was down in Georgia for two years going to art school. You think a woman like that was celibate? Hell no. Gotta scratch her itch too."

Sara couldn't believe her ears. "So you just...accept that you both have affairs?"

"They're not technically affairs in that case, now are they? Just a little bit of stress relief."

Sara shook her head. "Let me know how the therapy goes."

The skipper, Leon King, came out of the bridge and said, "You guys ready to become millionaires? Well, thousand-aires, at least."

"Hell yes," Kavik said.

Sara was grateful for the change of subject. "There are far too many fish in this sea, skip."

Leon grinned. "That there are, Tami, that there are. Let's catch a few hundred thousand, what do you say?"

Sara and Kavik both laughed and began setting up the net. They still had a little time to kill before they were actually allowed to start fishing — and the Fish and Game Warden would make damn sure they didn't start a moment ahead of time — but they could certainly make sure they were ready to go at a moment's notice.

A backbreaking day later and a couple thousand dollars richer, thanks to the salmon being kind to them, Sara and Kavik stumbled into the local bar. The Ice Floe was a cramped, dark, hot room whose only claims to fame were barrels of ice cold beer and a

working jukebox. That was enough for the drinkers in Shallow, Alaska. Besides, it wasn't like there were a whole lot of other places in town to get drunk.

Sara found a miraculously empty booth at the far end of the room and claimed it for herself and Kavik. She slid across the cracked vinyl, back to the wall and legs stretched out in front of her, and waited until Kavik appeared with their mugs. He plopped one down in front of Sara and kept the other for himself. They both set about draining them at record speed.

As she drank, Sara scanned the crowd. Every man and woman there was a crew member on a competing boat, and several of them had crewed with the *King's Ransom* before moving on to a different ship. Sara had no doubt she and Kavik could outfish any one of them any day of the week.

Kavik smacked his lips, sighed, and put his half-empty mug down on the table. He followed Sara's sightline and grinned. "Damn good day to be on the water," he said. His smile widened and he leaned forward. "And right now is a damn good night to be on land. Darlin'!" He waved his hand toward the front door and then glanced at Sara. "I invited Nessa to join us. I hope that's all right with you."

"It's fine," Sara said. She straightened, suddenly self-conscious of how she must smell. Usually she didn't give a damn; anyone who complained about the smell of sweat had never bothered getting sweaty themselves. But somehow the thought of Vanessa seeing her like this was enough to turn her into a sixteen-year-old girl on her first date. She tucked a long curtain of dark hair behind her ear and surreptitiously tried to smell herself. She wasn't quite ready for the landfill, but still was not going to win any awards.

She looked up and spotted Vanessa coming through the crowd. She had changed into a pair of loose blue jeans and one of Kavik's flannel shirts. The shirt was huge on her small frame, drowning her, and it was unbuttoned to reveal a tight white T-shirt cut low to show off her cleavage. Trying not to stare as Vanessa slid into the booth across from her, Sara toasted with her half-empty mug. "Welcome to the Floe."

"Thanks," Vanessa said. She sounded out of breath, and she eyed Kavik's mug eagerly. "Did you get me anything?"

"Didn't know when you would get here."

"Well I'm here now. Go on, be a damn gentleman."

He sighed, lifted her onto his lap and slid underneath her to exit the booth. Vanessa laughed as she watched him walk away and then leaned her elbows on the table. She kept her eyes on Kavik until the crowd enveloped him, and then her eyes snapped onto Sara. The sudden unwavering gaze was disconcerting. Vanessa smiled and said, "Hello again."

"Hey."

"I think this is the first time we've been alone together."

Sara raised her eyebrows. As if she hadn't already noticed. "I think you're right."

"I don't think women can be properly introduced to one another in the company of men. So, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Vanessa Kavik." She extended a hand.

"Sara Tamirova." She smiled and shook Vanessa's hand.

"You work with Gus, so you're a deckhand like him, right?"

Sara nodded. "That's right."

"Has he ever come on to you?"

Sara tensed slightly, but tried to hide it by reaching for the bowl of nuts. "Nah, you know — he sees me as one of the guys." She glanced toward the bar. What the hell was taking him so long with the beer?

"Oh, I wasn't trying to be the bitchy, territorial wife. I mean, it would have been okay if he had. We have..."

Sara nodded. "An understanding," she said with Vanessa. "Yeah, he told me."

“Ah, so he *has* hit on you.”

“No, not me, but every other woman who walks in front of the boat seems to be fair game. When you showed up, I called him on it and he told me about your arrangement.”

Vanessa laughed. “Now see, if he had lied, I just got you to squeal on your friend.”

“If he was lying, he deserved to be squealed on,” Sara said without hesitation. She lifted an eyebrow and waited until Vanessa smiled back. “But he wasn’t lying?”

“No, no. We made the agreement before we were married. It was my idea, actually. I told him I needed...oops.”

Sara looked up and saw Kavik had returned with three mugs. He placed one in front of his wife and the second in front of Sara. “Milady. Mi-coworker.” The women thanked him and Kavik slid into the booth next to Vanessa with a weary sigh. “So, what were you ladies talking about?”

Vanessa sipped her beer. “I was about to tell Miss Tamirova here that I’m bisexual.”

Sara spluttered on her beer and covered her mouth with one hand. Kavik and Vanessa both laughed, but Vanessa stretched her hand across the table and touched Sara’s forearm. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t resist. Are you all right?”

Sara waved her off and nodded.

“Woman, you are dangerous,” Kavik said with a laugh.

Vanessa said, “Sorry. I’ve learned over the years it’s best to just come right out with it. Are you truly okay?”

Despite the laughter, there was real concern in her voice. Sara knew that Vanessa wasn’t laughing *at* her, which made it all right. Almost. She nodded and finally found her voice, though it was hoarse and raw. “Yeah, fine.”

Vanessa slid her arm around Kavik’s and pulled him close. “When I started dating this lunkhead, I realized that I had some pretty strong feelings for him. Plus, you know — security and benefits and insurance...marriage didn’t seem too scary. But I told him right from the start, no matter how serious we may get, I might still get the urge for an occasional...feminine touch. We agreed we would get what we needed on the side, as long as we always come home to each other in the end.”

Sara raised an eyebrow and said, “Well, good luck to ya both on that. Bisexual or not, I could never be in a relationship that open.”

Kavik shrugged. “I’ve never been a settle-down kind of guy. This little lady came closest to changing me, though. And it’s the best of both worlds. I don’t have to keep it in my pants, and neither does she.”

Vanessa laughed, but her eyes were fixed on Sara. She managed to stifle her laughter and nudged Kavik with her elbow. “We’ve made you uncomfortable. I’m sorry. We’ll shut up.”

“No, it’s fine.” Sara smiled. “I’ll just need some time to stop picturing the two of you out on the town, competing to pick up the same woman.”

Kavik slapped the table and laughed. “Well, we don’t *compete* with each other, Tami. Hell. If we both want the same woman, we just have a threesome with her.”

Sara closed her eyes and forced herself not to spit out the mouthful of beer she had just taken. She finally swallowed it, held up a finger and said, “Now, right there...*that* was too much information.”

“He usually doesn’t just blurt that kind of thing out,” Vanessa said, glaring in her husband’s direction.

Kavik held his hands out palm up, the picture of innocence. “What? We were just now talking about—”

Vanessa elbowed him in the side and turned to face Sara. "Sorry. No more talk of that." She gestured at Sara. "Why don't we talk about you for a bit? Probably less dangerous."

"Oh, I don't know," Sara said. "Depends on your idea of dangerous." Sara leaned back in the booth and focused on the yellowed, framed newspapers hanging on the wall over Vanessa's head. They reported the Klondike gold rush of 1897, past Iditarod winners, and other events of local import. "I was born a few miles from here in another town. Daddy worked on a tender, so I've been in the fishing business a lot longer than I'd like to admit. I was brought up stinking of fish. Moved out here when he died, got a job on a fishing boat..." She held her hands out. "That's about it."

"Oh, that can't be it. What about your name? Russian? But you look..."

"I look Indian," Sara said as Vanessa's voice trailed off. She smiled. "I am, actually. Aleut, from the islands originally, before my time and my mother's time. Lots of Russian blood mixed in over there. The surnames stuck; the genes, not so much."

Vanessa's eyes widened. "Wow! See? That's a nice, interesting, *safe* topic." She nudged Kavik again. "Isn't that interesting?"

"Yep," Kavik said, but he was scanning the rest of the bar.

"Don't mind him," Sara said. "He's heard the story a couple hundred times."

Vanessa smiled. "Well, I look forward to hearing more when I get back." She bumped Kavik and said, "Move. I have to go to the bathroom."

He sighed heavily and heaved himself out of the booth, picking up the bowl of nuts as he stood. "I'm gonna get some more of these. Unless you want pretzels."

"Nuts are fine," Vanessa said. She took the handful that remained in the bowl as if to prove it, and they walked off, leaving Sara alone in the booth.

Sara sagged against the wall and drew one leg up into the seat. It felt as if she had just gone twelve rounds and, now that she was alone, she felt safe to breathe. Just being around Vanessa was enough to take her breath away and knock her off her bearings. It had been a long time since she had been so knocked flat just by a woman's presence.

She watched Vanessa stop at the jukebox in the corner, one hand braced against the curved top as she used the other to pop peanuts into her mouth. She chewed as she went through the offerings on the jukebox, and the golden orange glow made her look like a mirage in the dark of the bar. She moved her hips in time to the music, the curve of her ass undeniable even with the baggy jeans doing their best to conceal her shape.

After a while, she dug a dollar bill out of her pocket and fed it into the machine. She made a selection and then continued to the bathroom.

Sara took a long drink and let the beer sit in her mouth for a while. She slid down in the seat, resting her head against the back of the booth, and closed her eyes. She listened to the music coming from the jukebox, using it to drown out her thoughts, forcing herself not to think about Vanessa's ass, or the fact that Vanessa was bisexual, or the whole "open marriage" thing the Kaviks had going on.

Acting on her urges would bring more trouble than it would be worth. As long as she could continue telling herself that, she would be fine. She finished her beer, looked for Kavik, and then slid out of the booth to get her refill herself.