
Chapter 1

It all happened so smoothly, as if by nature and not by design. They met one Sunday morning at an outdoor café. Jo was reading the newspaper and enjoying a light breakfast. She noticed him immediately when he chose the table directly across from her. How could she not? His stature alone was enough to draw attention, but there was something else about him that made her look again, her eyes taking in every detail. She judged him to be in his mid to late thirties. Tall and well built, he had brown hair with gold highlights. If she had to guess, she would say they were natural. He didn't seem the kind of man who was the least bit insecure in his appearance. His voice as he gave the waitress his order was rich and smooth and made the dark chocolate cocoa she was drinking seem weak in comparison. Self-consciously, she turned her eyes back to her paper.

Jo often made up stories in her head about total strangers. She was detail oriented; she had to be in her profession. Lives often depended on her making sure even the tiniest problem was addressed and dealt with quickly. There were times, like today, when she felt as if the weight of the world was on her shoulders.

She tried not to take her work home, but she spent most weekends worrying. Jo didn't know why she accepted the Director of Senior Services position. She had been perfectly happy dealing with her own caseload of clients and very good at her job. As a rule, she hadn't worried overly about her seniors, knowing everything was in place, as it should be. Since taking the promotion, she now had many caseworkers under her. One mistake could mean life or death for an at-risk elderly or disabled client. Now she seemed to be constantly stressed, trying not to micromanage her employees, but wondering all the same if she would get a call that someone had slipped through the cracks, with disastrous results. It would be her fault, and that was the bottom line.

Her eyes strayed to the man's hands as he picked up his coffee. They were large, with neatly trimmed nails. The watch on his wrist looked expensive, as did his loafers. His jeans were faded, probably bought that way as he was obviously well-heeled. Jo blushed when he met her eyes and smiled. Dropping her gaze, she went back to her paper, embarrassed to be caught staring. I'll bet he's a CEO, or a lawyer, she thought, not hearing him push his chair back on the stone terrace. Although he could be in law enforcement, he looks tough enough. A shadow fell across her, blocking out the sunlight, and she looked up in surprise.

"Mind if I join you?" he inquired. "I hope I'm not being too forward. I'm new in town and yours looked like a friendly face. I'm Sam, Sam Barringer," he told her, reaching out to shake her hand.

"Johanna Maxwell, Jo," she told him, sliding her slim hand into his. His grip was warm and firm, and she prayed he wouldn't feel the perspiration on her palm. "Please," she told him withdrawing her hand from his and motioning toward the other seat.

Sam sat down, setting his coffee on the table and watching as she neatly folded her paper and set it aside. The slight tremble in her hands would be imperceptible to anyone else, but

not to him. Sam noticed everything, from her long mahogany hair to the delicate gold ankle bracelet. Her eyes were indigo with the faintest of shadows under them, and he wondered why the beautiful woman before him wasn't sleeping well. There were little diamond studs in her shell-like ears and an amethyst ring on her right ring finger. The skirt she wore was a wispy little blue flowered thing, not short, but showing off lovely legs, and her tank top was a pristine white. Glancing at her plate, he saw most of a croissant left untouched. Her cocoa left the tiniest bit of froth on her pink lips before she dabbed it away with her napkin.

"So, Sam, what brings you to our fair city?" she asked, folding her hands on the table and trying not to sound annoyed. Great, she thought, a lonely, needy man, just what she wasn't looking for. Granted, he appeared self-confident and was extremely well put together, but the last thing Jo needed was another demand on her time. Jo took care of everyone. If you were moving and needed an extra hand, Jo was your girl. Hous-sitting, baby-sitting, pet sitting? No problem. Need a loan, a last minute date? call Jo. In fact, the only person Jo didn't take care of in her large circle of friends, family and co-workers, was Jo.

"I'm in town looking at real estate, thinking about relocating one of my offices here," Sam told her, watching as she fiddled with her spoon.

"What kind of business are you in?" she asked, looking at her watch. The little slice of time she had carved out for herself this morning was evaporating quickly.

Sam's breakfast arrived before he answered her. Looking at the enormous amount of food, Jo grimaced. It looked good. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten a real breakfast. Usually she didn't eat breakfast at all, opting for a coffee or a glass of juice when she found time to shop for it. Her mouth watered, and she picked off a piece of her flaky croissant and nibbled it.

“Would you like some of my omelet?” Sam offered, noticing her watchful eyes. “I have plenty here, just let me...”

“No, no thank you,” Jo replied quickly, her face flushing. “I’m fine. Now what was it you said you did?”

“I didn’t actually,” Sam answered, tucking into his meal with apparent enjoyment. “I guess you could say that I’m a treasure hunter of sorts. I procure priceless treasures for a select group of clients. We have offices in several major cities in the U.S. and a few overseas.”

“No kidding?” she replied, surprised. “I would never have guessed. So you chase down valuable objects for a bunch of millionaires who are too busy to do it themselves? I doubt you’ll find many treasures around here. This isn’t an exceptionally wealthy community. Apart from the museum and a few antique stores, I’d say the chance of finding priceless items here are limited. Do you have a card?”

“I do,” he drawled out, “but I don’t think I’ll give it to you just yet. It’s a very exclusive service and not something I advertise lightly. Maybe when we know each other better.”

He said it as if he had already decided that would be the case.

“Strictly speaking, I don’t offer my services exclusively to the very rich,” he continued. “Although a client would need to have the wherewithal to provide excellent care for their ...acquisition, if I’m lucky enough to locate exactly what they are looking for. As far as there not being priceless things in the area, you’d be surprised. After all, one man’s trash is another’s treasure.”

“Oh, mysterious,” she laughed. “What makes you think we will ever know each other well enough for you to give me your card?” she asked, tucking her hair behind her ear.

“Well, I’d like to know you better, Jo,” he said simply, his dark eyes staring into hers.

Jo was nervous. This man was calm and determined. He boldly asked for what he wanted, no pussyfooting around. It

wasn't something she was used to. Most of the men she dated fell into two categories. Either they were blatantly full of their own sexual prowess, assuming that any woman would love to fall into bed with them, or they were so respectful and timid that she felt as though she were out with her brother, not that she had one. Jo never met anyone quite as confident as Sam appeared to be, and it made her a little flustered.

Changing the subject, Sam asked Jo about the community she lived in, the local attractions, the economic atmosphere as she saw it, and picked her brain for anything that might be of use to him professionally. Was there a problem with crime, the homeless, unemployment? In reality he had already done his homework on the area, but the sound of her voice appealed to him as no other had in a long time. She was a small woman, exquisitely formed, and he marveled that there was no ring on her ring finger. Apparently the local yahoos didn't know a prize when they saw one.

Jo drew him in like a moth to a flame as she quietly answered his questions and told him a little about herself. She spoke casually about her job, her family and friends. Clearly she was a caregiver, and it was as transparent as glass to Sam that while Jo was taking care of everyone, no one was taking care of Jo, hence the dark circles under her eyes and the frail appearance. Oh, he didn't doubt she was a strong woman. She'd have to be to keep up the schedule she set for herself, but Sam knew people, especially women, and he could sense it wouldn't be long before she burned herself out. What a shame it would be if this beautiful, vibrant woman lost herself in endless work and responsibility.

Jo realized she'd been rambling and had probably revealed far more than she intended. He was so easy to talk to. He hadn't interrupted her except to ask a few pertinent questions as he finished his breakfast. Leaning back in his chair, he studied her.

"When can I see you again?" he asked. In his mind, it was imperative that she say yes.

“Sam, it’s been really nice talking to you, but I don’t think I have time for...”

“Then make time...please. Surely you can spare a few hours for a quiet dinner. I’m harmless really. You can Google me,” he told her with a grin.

Jo laughed, but she would Google him, just as soon as she got home. “Alright, I guess we could have dinner. When did you have in mind?”

“Can you make it tonight?”

“No, I can’t tonight, I have a prior commitment,” Jo told him, picking up her cell and looking at her calendar.

“How about tomorrow then? I’m flexible.”

Somehow Jo didn’t quite believe that. Her curiosity had always been a problem, and apparently she hadn’t outgrown it. One way or another she intended to find out exactly what kind of services he provided.

“How long will you be in town?” she asked absently, as she checked her planner.

“As long as I want,” he answered truthfully, his voice deep and firm.

Jo raised her eyebrow and looked at him inquiringly.

“I can pretty much be anywhere I want. I don’t mean to sound arrogant. I have worked extremely hard to get where I am today, and this freedom didn’t come cheaply. I choose to be here, at least for a while. Now is tomorrow good for you?” he asked as he reached across the table and took her small hand in his.

It was comforting, the feel of her hand in his. His dark eyes held hers, and she found herself agreeing without even making sure she could. If there was something else on her calendar, she would cancel it. This man was sexy and bold, without making her feel overpowered. For some reason, she felt she could trust him. She would have dinner with him.

“Yes, tomorrow’s fine,” she answered, enjoying the tingle she

got from his thumb rubbing gently across the back of her hand.

“Where do you want to meet?”

“Give me your address and I’ll pick you up.”

“No,” Jo hedged, “I’ll meet you.”

“Good girl,” Sam said approvingly. “I’m glad to see there’s a brain in that beautiful head of yours. Make sure you tell someone where you’ll be and with whom,” he ordered smoothly.

“I’ll meet you at Delaney’s at seven-thirty. Here’s my number if you need to reach me before that,” he told her as he let go of her hand and scribbled on a corner of his napkin. He rose when she stood, and, with his hand on her elbow, walked her to the iron rail that separated the terrace from the sidewalk.

“Don’t be late,” he told her, tipping her chin up and gazing into her eyes.

“I’ll try, Mr. Bossy,” Jo answered and grinned.

“Try hard,” he replied, bending and placing a gentle kiss on her cheek.

Johanna smiled and walked away. It surprised her how natural the kiss felt, as if she had known him for years instead of a couple of hours. He was certainly not a man one could ignore, that was for sure. In a relatively short period, she had revealed more about herself and her life than many of her friends knew. There was something about him that not only intrigued her, but soothed her fears, a potent combination.