

Love At Your Own Risk



Blair Bancroft

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Vicki stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. Surely she couldn't, absolutely couldn't, look that bad. Puffy eyes, a nose that rivaled Rudolph. Hair that would have made Medusa recoil in horror. Even if she wanted to—which of course she didn't—she couldn't go upstairs to supper.

She'd just stay right here and starve.

There was movement in the mirror. Horrified, Vicki stared at the image of John Paolillo standing just behind her in the tiny bathroom.

He'd come for her.

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Against a backdrop of 12th century life, a young heiress, ward of King Henry II, tries to find a way to wed a penniless squire.

Wings

Love At Your Own Risk

by

Blair Bancroft

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Wings ePress, Inc.

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Dedication

In memory of my son, Stephen Elliott Kone,
who let me ride on his purple suede bench seat.

Steve, we all miss you.

One

The weight of the world began to lift as Vicki crossed the Sagamore Bridge. The graceful curves of the spot-lit steel webbing above her were a lifeline to sanity. *Cape Cod*. The land of soft-spoken people who lived life at their own deliberate pace. Sand and wind-stunted scrub pine, soft salt breezes that could transform into violent nor'easters within the turn of an hourglass. Booming surf that could be heard from one side of the Cape to the other. Bayberries, cranberries, blueberries, beach plums. Wild roses, cattails, marsh mallow, goldenrod...

Vicki's eyes pricked with tears, the dark road before her misted. Fortunately, at two in the morning the Mid-Cape Highway was nearly deserted. On a Friday night during the Season it would still be bumper to bumper with cars coming on-Cape for the weekend, but it was Wednesday—no, Thursday—of the second week in September. She could stretch for the box of tissues on the floor in front of the passenger seat and not worry about her Saab drifting into other traffic.

There! That was better. After blowing her nose and wiping her eyes, Vicki drew in a lungful of Cape Cod air.

She was quite certain no spa in Colorado, Arizona, or Switzerland could possibly compete. When it came to therapy for the soul, this sixty-plus miles of peninsula stretching out into the Atlantic Ocean was the place to be. Shaped like a well-muscled arm shaking its fist at a distant Boston, Cape Cod had a character all its own. With a silent prayer that the highway patrol had other fish to fry tonight, Vicki pressed her foot to the gas, rocketing down the road, her goal a town so far out on the cape that only eight miles of sandy soil separated the Atlantic Ocean from Cape Cod Bay. The signs rolled by—Sandwich, Barnstable, Hyannis, Yarmouth, Dennis, Harwich, Brewster, Chatham.

Orleans. Refuge. Vicki exited the Mid-Cape onto Route 6A, drove through the dark and lifeless center of the town, hung a right and kept on going. As she approached the ocean, the three-quarter moon illuminated the landscape, revealing shadowed silhouettes of homes in the classic squares and rectangles of Cape Cod “salt box” architecture. Trees became sparse, diminished in size. The slightly rolling terrain flattened into the top of a long, towering bluff. Nauset Heights. The last bit of land between the United States and Portugal. The ocean wasn’t visible, but the roar of the surf filled the car. Once again, Vicki had to reach for the tissue box. She was almost there. And never had she been in so much need of a safe haven. Of sanctuary for a wounded spirit.

She turned left onto the road that ran along the top of the great sand cliff above Nauset Beach. The houses, clustered nearly wall to wall on both sides of the narrow road, were mostly cottages never intended for year-round

living. Her destination was one of the exceptions. Overlooking the gentle bay that was the town's boating access to the Atlantic, the house had a basement with oil furnace, four bedrooms and an attic. As Vicki pulled into the sand and shell driveway, the weathered gray shingles shimmered silver in the moonlight. Deliverance. She'd done it. She'd escaped.

Vicki switched off the ignition and took a deep breath. The tang of salt was much stronger here. Fishing her keys out of her purse, she climbed the steps to the porch, put her back to the screen door to keep it open and inserted the key in the Yale lock. As with most waterfront homes, the door on the street side was the back of the house. She would be entering through a small entry hall. To the left was the kitchen; to the right, the staircases up and down; straight ahead, a hallway running the width of the house. Once inside, Vicki flipped on the porch light, leaving the entry hall in darkness, and went back to the car for her suitcase. Suddenly, the thought of crawling into bed, pulling the comforter up to her chin, was heavenly. Tonight, at last, she was going to be able to sleep. And tomorrow she would wake to the clean brilliance of Cape Cod sunshine, the twitter of birds, the piercing cries of seagulls, the smell of wood smoke...

Vicki dragged her suitcase up the steps, juggled the screen door again, thunked her case onto the braided rug just inside the door. Why had she packed so much stuff? She only planned to be here for a few days. Just long enough to get her head together.

The hall light came on. Like a deer frozen in a hunter's spotlight, Vicki couldn't move. There was something, a

large dark something at the far end of the hallway. Moving toward her... becoming a man. Her brain would only function in clichés, silently screaming *robber, rapist, murderer. Tall, dark, and menacing*. As was the big black gun that was pointing straight at her.

“So who the hell are you?” the man with the gun demanded as he came to a halt about five feet short of her quivering form.

“Who am I?” Vicki echoed, anger overwhelming shock. “Who are *you*? What are you doing in my house?”

“*Your* house?”

“Well... my parent’s house,” Vicki conceded.

The gun disappeared. Into the back of his waistband, Vicki thought, swallowing hard as she realized that’s all he was wearing. Faded jeans and nothing else. Except the big black gun.

“Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo,” he snapped as if on the parade ground. “New Haven Police Department. Sorry, but I left my badge on the dresser. I can get it if you’d like. There seems to have been some mix up about the rental.”

Vicki regretted the old house was so sturdily built that there was no hope of the floor opening up to swallow her. “I’m sorry,” she gasped. “I never thought... My parents don’t usually rent past Labor Day. It never occurred to me that someone was here.” Across the width of the living room she gaped at him, suddenly speechless. Two-thirty in the morning and she’d intruded on a renter. Even if she weren’t a member in good standing with the Massachusetts bar, she had been raised to know the legal rights of a renter. It was she who was trespassing. If she

hadn't been so determined on running away to the Cape, she would have had sense enough to call the rental agency. But, then, she hadn't decided to come until close to midnight tonight.

"I beg your pardon," Vicki murmured. "I'll leave immediately... find a motel." She reached for her suitcase, began to back toward the door.

"Don't be silly," the man snapped. "Isn't there an apartment downstairs? Marge Snow, the rental agent, mentioned it, said no one would be there."

"An efficiency," Vicki nodded. One room and bath. We only rent it at the height of the season." What had he said his name was? Her mind was numb.

"Better than a motel," the alleged detective pointed out with inescapable, if annoying, logic. "Wait just a minute," he ordered, turning and plunging through the door leading to the largest bedroom. He was back in less than half a minute, striding across the wooden floor to thrust a badge under Vicki's nose. "See," he declared, "I really am a cop. Not exactly harmless but, believe me, I'm not about to screw up my career attacking my landlord's daughter while vacationing on the Cape."

Vicki stared blindly at the badge. As a criminal trial lawyer, she'd seen her share of badges. This one definitely didn't look as if he'd picked it up at the local toy shop. "Okay," she sighed, "I'm tired. I'll try downstairs tonight and figure the rest out in the morning."

There was a brief struggle as he reached for the suitcase. Their hands touched, and Vicki jumped back as if scalded. "Don't be silly," he growled as he tightened his grip on the heavy case. "You look like you'll be lucky to

get yourself down the stairs, let alone the suitcase.” He flashed her an exaggerated grimace as he hefted the case. “What’d you pack, bricks?”

Vicki ignored his sarcasm. His earlier remark was bad enough. That’s all she needed—to hear she looked as awful as she felt.

With a sweep of his hand, he motioned her ahead of him. She shot back the bolt at the top of the cellar stairs, flipped the light switch and started down, nearly recoiling at the blast of cool damp air sweeping up from below. Obviously, Mr. Macho had not turned on the heat. Five feet of the basement’s eight-foot clearance were above ground, tucked into the slope of the bluff above Nauset Harbor, and the wind off the Atlantic had no difficulty penetrating the windows and separate entrance door set into the seaward wall. Which was why the efficiency; intended only for summer use, came with a space heater. Vicki heard what sounded like a soft but heartfelt curse as the renter’s bare feet hit the basement’s cement floor.

This half of the lower level was the furnace room and workshop. Vicki hastened to open the door to the enclosed right side of the basement. She flipped a switch, revealing a cozy room that was mostly queen size bed. For some unaccountable reason she could feel a blush suffusing her face. Her body, as well as her mind, was overwhelmingly conscious of being alone with a strange man in a bedroom in the wee hours of the night.

She needed to apologize for her intrusion. She needed to thank him for allowing her to stay, but her usually glib tongue seemed frozen to her mouth. Also, she didn’t know quite where to look. The cold air had pebbled his nipples,

which were protruding from a ruffled pool of black hair. And the jeans... well, the jeans, too, seemed to have a distinct bulge. Vicki gulped. She was thirty-one years old, for heaven's sake. A successful attorney. She could handle this. "Thank you very much, I'll be fine now," she told him as he straightened from laying her suitcase on the luggage rack. "I'm—uh—very sorry to have disturbed your sleep. The whole thing is entirely my fault." For the sake of good manners, she had to look up.

Bad move. He was everyone's idea of what a tough cop should be. Dirty Harry with straight black hair, hard brown eyes and a slash of a mouth that looked as if he didn't know the meaning of the word smile.

"No problem." He gave her a curt nod and headed for the door.

The gun was gone, Vicki noted. Only the badge now flopped over the back of his low-slung jeans. Dear God, why was it men who got born with no hips?

"Wait a minute!" With sudden panic Vicki realized she'd missed something. Possibly something vital. The kind of detail a good defense attorney was never supposed to miss. "Where's your car?" Vicki demanded. "If I'd seen a car, I would have known someone was here."

He stopped, turned, crossed his arms over his bare chest. Lazily, he leaned a shoulder against the door jamb; his chiseled features rearranging themselves into what Vicki could only call a leer. Appalled, she realized she much preferred the expressionless cop to whatever was standing before her now. Her heart began to race.

"Fuel pump died yesterday as I pulled off the Mid-Cape," he pronounced in a fair imitation of a laconic Cape

Cod drawl. "Tow truck dropped me at the real estate office. Marge Snow took me for groceries, drove me out here. Said she'd pick me up when the car was ready. Nice lady," he added. "Your parents are well represented."

"Oh." He was enjoying this, Vicki realized. The beast. Waving the name of their rental agent in front of her like a red flag. Tomorrow she'd be out of here. But she didn't want to be anywhere else. This was refuge. A motel just wouldn't do. "You cook?" she heard herself ask. An uninspired taunt, but she needed to demonstrate skepticism, control. The man had shaken her badly.

"Yeah, I cook." He did a quick survey of the room. "You got a kitchen down here?"

"Pullman. It's enough," Vicki replied stiffly.

The rise of a thin black brow said he doubted it. He straightened up, gave her a look that might have been an attempt at appearing friendly. "Maybe you can save Marge a trip, give me ride into town when the car's ready."

Marge. He was already on a first-name basis with the real estate agent. Who was only a year older than Vicki and actively hunting husband number three. "Sure," Vicki replied through clenched teeth. "Be glad to."

"Well, goodnight then." He sketched her a salute. The door closed behind him.

Her knees turned to water; Vicki sank down onto the bed. The quiet, peaceful sanctuary she had longed for had become the home of the Minotaur. And she strongly suspected she was the sacrificial maiden destined for the great beast's pleasure.

~ * ~

After Ellie's death, he'd embraced celibacy with something closer to enthusiasm than resignation. He'd had a good marriage, which had ended too soon. But that was it. He didn't want another. His job was his life. Guilt over neglecting another good woman wasn't part of John Paolillo's plans. His nose to the old grindstone, he'd set his sights on his job and where it was taking him. Okay, so it was tunnel vision at its most intense. In two and a half years he'd fallen from celibacy only a handful of times. And now he was paying for it. He'd seen the woman's eyes fixed on the bulge in his jeans. He hadn't been that embarrassed since he was a sophomore in high school. Though damned if he'd let her know it. Just because he'd been alone with a drop-dead blond in the middle of the night... in a room that was mostly bed...

John slammed his badge down onto the dresser, tucked the gun he'd discarded earlier back into the drawer of the small table beside the bed. Without slipping off his jeans, he sank down onto the bed and dropped his head into his hands. The fool woman wasn't even his type. She was the kind he and Ellie had either scorned or laughed about when they'd had to show up at a charity event or been forced into the political correctness of attending some function at Yale. Town-gown relations, that's what the Chief called it and anyone bucking for his job, had to prove he could tread the hallowed halls of ivy without tripping over his big Sicilian feet.

He'd done it, but he hadn't liked it. And then there'd been that slew of bleeding-heart liberal defense counsels who kept popping up in the marbled halls of the

courthouse. She reminded him of those, too. Only better-looking.

Jeez! John raised his head, staring blindly toward the drapery-covered window. *You don't suppose... she couldn't be... a defense counsel?* No way. Too much of a coincidence. The bane of his existence right here in the same house? He thought of the flowing lines of the black silk pantsuit, the sparkling white silk blouse, the diamonds winking in her ears. City clothes. She'd been dressed for a night out on the town and ended up on the sandy reaches of Nauset Heights. Now why? He was intrigued, all the instincts of his fourteen years as a detective coming into play.

Swearing softly, John realized he didn't even know her name. She was strikingly beautiful, he'd got that much. But in a cold, antiseptic way. Blond hair swept into a chignon, pale lipstick, ice blue eyes, features so aristocratic they practically screamed Ivy League. Skin so white he hadn't thought it could get any paler. Until she'd seen the gun. Ellie had been a girl from the neighborhood, a woman of warmth a cop could depend on, no matter what. This slim and trim ice princess probably didn't know the meaning of neighborhood except to figure which ones were places she never went at night.

But the image of the woman downstairs wouldn't go away. About now she'd be peeling out of the black silk, the virginal white blouse, lacy bra and panties (oh, yeah!), standing in the chill basement room in nothing but the diamonds in her ears. And the perfume that was as exotic as it was expensive. Her soft white skin would be

goosebumped, her nipples taut and pouting in the cold... John's jeans weren't just bulging, they were painful.

He swore once more, with feeling. If he needed to add a little spice to his enforced vacation, well... he'd seen the gleam in the Realtor's eye. Marge Snow wouldn't need a jumpstart to bring his lonely bed to life. She was his kind of woman. Lushly rounded, warm... ready, willing, and able.

So in the morning he'd hit up his landlord's daughter for a ride to the garage, and that would be that. The apartment had a separate entrance; they wouldn't even have to see each other. Maybe she was only down for a long weekend anyway. He was aware of a niggling sense of disappointment. Hormones, Paolillo. Just hormones. But her suitcase had weighed enough to contain nearly all her worldly possessions.

Hmmm. He was not going to sleep well. And it was all the fault of the Miss Ice who was everything he didn't want in a woman. Except that she was here, and he was itchy. Spoiling for a fight as much as for sex.

Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo slipped off his jeans and crawled under the covers. He may have been banished to Cape Cod for a vacation he didn't want, but things were definitely looking up. A good brawl was just what he needed.

Of course, that's what had gotten him here in the first place.

~ * ~

Vicki slept like the proverbial log and woke to the vague awareness that something good had happened. Certainly, she was glad she'd made the decision to run to

the Cape, but no miracle had occurred to make her problems go away. There was no reason to feel this rush of well-being, optimism... almost an enthusiasm for the future. It must be the Cape Cod air. Nothing unusual had happened.

Vicki was suddenly fully awake. John Whatever had happened. John the cop with the grim face of the Angel of Death and the sensitivity of a block of granite. John, the man with the gun, who mocked her sensible caution while his jeans practically ripped at the zip. Vicki groaned and rolled over, pounding her pillow as if it were her housemate. *Housemate. Dear God!*

Thrusting her feet into her slippers and hastily donning her robe, Vicki padded across the floor and threw open the outside entrance door, climbing the four shallow steps up to the sandy dune outside. Heaven. Surely this must be what heaven looked like. Even with the tide out, Nauset Harbor was beautiful. There was a sparkling clarity to the air, a delightful tang of salt. Small fluffy clouds scudded on the sea breeze, just enough to punctuate the clear blue of the sky where, in the distance, it met the horizon of the white-capped blue-gray Atlantic. Just in front of her stretched golden sand, the deep brown of mud flats, the yellow green of marsh grass. Seaweed, broken shells, seagulls and sandpipers dotted the edge of the harbor. She thought she caught a glimpse of the inevitable fiddler crabs scurrying about their business in the damp sand. There was also a whiff of wood smoke; someone without a furnace had found the nip of a mid-September morning a bit too chilly. And maybe just a touch of gasoline was also on the wind. Escaping from the crazily canted small boats

lying on muddy beds beside their mooring buoys, marooned and ungraceful until freed by the incoming tide.

It was completely, utterly glorious. Macho Cop or no Macho Cop, she'd been right to come. The old cliché stood true. This was the first day of the rest of her life.

There was a pounding on her other door, the one opening into the furnace room.

"Thought you might like some coffee," said the Macho Cop, standing there in the doorway with a Boston Red Sox mug in his hand.

It smelled almost as good as the harbor looked. "Uh, thanks," Vicki intoned, reaching for the mug.

He didn't let go. "There's breakfast too," he said, showing no sign that he was wrestling her for the hot mug. "You can come up in your robe if you want. I'm housebroken. Just think of me as your granddaddy."

"I don't eat breakfast." *How dare he, a perfect stranger, be so casual?*

He eyed her flowered silk robe with insulting disinterest. "No wonder you're so slim," he murmured, "but I made enough bacon, eggs, and toast for two. "You don't want me to get any fatter, do you?"

Fatter? She'd swear he didn't have an ounce of fat from head to toe. Well... maybe between the ears. Vicki took a deep breath to tell Mr. New Haven Cop what she thought of his offer... and smelled the bacon. She felt like that stupid dog on the TV commercial who just wanted BACON, BACON, BACON. "Sounds good," she heard herself say. "I'll be up in a minute."

He nodded, and relinquished the coffee mug.

Two

It was five minutes. That's all it took for Vicki to slap on a little pressed powder, a dash of nearly nude lipstick, jeans and a button-front shirt that hung down to her hipline. For years now she'd avoided T-shirts, which tended to reveal far too much of the oversize bust tacked onto her trim size eight figure. In the courtroom she went so far as to wear concealer bras. Here on the Cape, particularly in the presence of her new housemate, she was simply going to fall back on disguise, however sloppy she might appear.

A long slow look was what she got for her efforts. A piercing assessment that made her feel as if this annoying New Haven cop had X-ray vision, seeing straight through shirt and bra to the more-than-ample mounds of flesh beneath. He knew, and he was laughing at her, she was sure of it. Which was totally ridiculous. He'd turned back to the stove, to the pan where he was frying eggs in the bacon drippings. Cholesterol City. But she hadn't smelled anything that good in ages.

"Help yourself to the coffee." Casual, impersonal. As if he'd never X-rayed her outfit or leered at her from her

doorway last night. But the leer had been deliberate, she understood that. She'd suspected him of being a Bad Guy, and he'd risen to the challenge.

The coffee tasted as good as the bacon smelled. That's when Vicki saw the mini-sized bean grinder sitting on the counter next to the coffeemaker. It was definitely not part of the kitchen equipment provided for renters. "You travel with your own bean grinder?" she asked, incredulous.

"Sure, doesn't everyone?"

A cop who was a gourmet cook. It just didn't figure. "I have to admit, I've never tasted better coffee," Vicki conceded, ignoring his sass.

"My parents own a restaurant on Wooster Street in New Haven," John said, scooping the eggs onto the plates next to the waiting bacon. "According to legend, that's where my great-grandfather—practically fresh off the boat from Sicily—invented pizza, but my parents feature a full Italian cuisine, northern as well as Sicilian. When I was growing up, it was learn about food or be disowned." He put the plates onto the table and slid into a seat across from her.

"You must have real trouble with station-house coffee," Vicki murmured appreciatively after savoring another sip.

"Believe me, I make my own," he returned, granite lips actually creaking into a slight curl. Just for a moment Vicki thought she caught a flash of humor in his liquid chocolate eyes. Oh-oh. Not good. This was not the time to sit across from a man at a breakfast table and turn the hardest, coldest pair of eyes she'd ever seen into

something as romantic as liquid chocolate. Even Ed Turner had more friendly eyes...

No! She wasn't about to go there either. She'd come to the Cape to get away from it all, and that's exactly what she was going to do, New Haven cop or no New Haven cop.

"You realize I don't even know your name?"

He was right, Vicki realized with a start. He'd introduced himself last night, and she'd panicked and kept on running all the way to the basement without thought of social conventions or civilized manners. "Vicki," she said, after swallowing a mouthful of egg almost whole. "Victoria Kent."

"John Paolillo." He held out his hand. It was large, powerful, twice the size of hers. Even before Vicki grasped the extended hand in what she determined must be her most professional manner, she knew she was making a mistake. Touching him was not a good idea. She had never been a negligible personality, but this man dominated everything and everyone. She was most definitely in trouble. But she could hardly ignore the hand outstretched toward her.

The shock waves were so strong Vicki could feel the coffee in her stomach warring with the bacon and eggs. Not to mention some decidedly strong sensations to the south. Her head spun, and in classic tradition the earth stood still. He must have felt it too because he dropped her hand as if it had suddenly become a snake. She found herself gaping at her plate, so shaken that for a moment she felt unsure where she was or what she was doing there.

Calling on her attorney's reserves of ruthlessness, Vicki quickly recovered her cool. Her ready wit—so much admired in court—was more elusive. “I don't imagine anyone ever calls you Johnny,” was the best she could manage.

“No.” Bald, uncompromising. Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo continued to eat, crunching toast, not looking up.

Never an early morning person, Vicki allowed the silence to lengthen. Maybe with a second cup of coffee she'd be able to summon up some sensible conversation.

When his plate was so clean it looked as if it had never held food, Vicki's breakfast companion lifted his head. “I'm afraid I have a bigger problem than I thought,” John admitted. “When I called the garage this morning, they said it would take another day to get the new fuel pump for my car. I'm—um—sort of stuck out here.”

Mr. Macho Cop was sounding humble? Vicki felt a surge of satisfaction. His dark eyes were actually gleaming with what might have been a plea for clemency. “I take it you're not the beach type,” she inquired smoothly.

“Five minutes and I'd be nuts.”

The Great Stone Face seemed to be trying to rearrange itself into a configuration that projected vulnerability, an appeal for understanding. *It must be tough*, Vicki thought. Assuming the identity of a friendly next-door neighbor was obviously such an effort, she almost felt sorry for him.

“Look, Vicki, I've got a proposition for you.” John stopped, scowling at his unfortunate choice of words.

“What I mean is,” he amended, “I was thinking maybe if I volunteered to cook, buy dinner, or whatever, over the next couple of days, you might be willing to let me tag along with you. You seem to know the Cape, and I sure don’t want to be left staring at four walls ‘til the car’s fixed. So what do you say?”

Vicki stared at the remains of her second once-over-lightly egg. She was a defense counsel, for heaven’s sake. She ought to be able to defend herself from an overload of sensory perception. From a man who sent her nerves and other parts of her anatomy into a tailspin. She was good, very good, at thinking on her feet, coping with surprises...

She drew a deep breath, willed her heart not to make an adrenaline-fueled jump out of her chest. “Well...” she ventured, “I suppose I’m some kind of surrogate landlord. I feel a sense of responsibility. We can’t let our tenants have a miserable time.”

This time there was no doubt about the spark of life that lit those dark brown eyes. “Then it’s a deal?” John asked.

“Sure, it’s a deal.” The simple words had a fatal ring. The police were the enemy. Vicki’s constant adversaries. In agreeing to spend time with Lieutenant John Paolillo, she was either making the most disastrous mistake of what had been a successful and promising career as a defense attorney or she was walking heads up into the rest of her life.

Maybe both.

~ * ~

One hand on the handle of the plastic reel, the other grasping the kite’s string, Vicki ran across the damp sands

of Skaket Beach, the length of the red nylon dragon kite flopping behind her like a newly beached fish. It rose a foot, three feet, five, ten. Her heart soared with the kite—a twelfth-birthday gift—then plunged as the rounded red head of the dragon dove back to earth, settling with a soft whoosh into one of the shallow rivulets of water left in the vast expanse of sand exposed by dead low tide.

Vicki could feel That Man watching every move she made, blast his stone-cold Sicilian hide. Okay, so it was years since she'd tried to get the kite into the air. She seemed to have lost the knack. At least he'd refrained from rushing over and saying, "Here, let me." Funny! The great detective flying a kite? Aw, come on. In fact, she would treasure forever the look on his face when, near the end of their eggs and bacon, he'd asked what she planned to do that morning and she'd replied, straight-faced, "Go fly a kite."

Except that the darn thing wouldn't fly. Her great red dragon with its long fluttering tails remained earthbound, getting wetter and heavier with every aborted attempt to get it into the air. Obviously, desk time and courtroom time didn't qualify as exercise of anything but the mind, yet her leisure hours were almost non-existent, and what few there were she'd usually spent with Lowell. Which, in ten seconds, neatly summed up everything she was running away from. Certainly, if she were so good at running, she ought to be able to cross Skaket Beach fast enough to launch a kite.

Vicki shook excess moisture off the head of the kite, carefully arranged its full length over the sand which, though damp, was not pockmarked with tide pools. This

time she was going to do it. No way was that man going to sit over there, high and dry above the tide line, and laugh at her puny efforts. Vicki took a good hold on the red plastic reel, grasped the thick nylon string, gritted her teeth, and started her run. This was one dragon that was going to fly!

Her bare feet bit into the damp sand as she looked back over her shoulder, willing the kite into the air. The feel of dragging and bumping gradually transformed into a steady tension on the line. The kite was airborne. But not by much. Vicki surged forward. This time, for sure! Up, up... twenty feet... higher. Her feet encountered water, ankle deep. She had long since let go of the line. Both hands now grasped the handles on each side of the reel. Higher... still higher. She unrolled more line.

Thunk! Vicki found herself—bass akwards, as her father would have said—in the tall green sea grass that ran along the outside edge of Skaket Beach. The kite was still up, but she was down. Her dignity in shreds, attention drawn to her humiliation by the great red dragon flying overhead. The black and white eyes on the underside of its head seemed to mock her downfall. As another pair of eyes, almost as dark, were undoubtedly doing.

A large hand wrested the reel from her grasp. Another stretched down to pull her to her feet. Victoria Kent was not accustomed to being on the losing end of anything. She couldn't even summon a smile or a simple thank you. For a moment she thought she caught a grin before his features coalesced once again into ridges of granite. But who could blame him for laughing? She, who had been struggling to maintain some dignity, to keep this macho

Sicilian cop at arm's length, had plopped herself, bottom down, into a sea of marsh grass. Once again, she owed him thanks. Being unable to voice it turned her behavior into that of a six-year-old. Vicki was appalled, even as her jaws refused to open.

"Here." John returned the kite reel. "I'll get a towel," he volunteered and headed back toward the dry sand at a jog.

Towel. Why was he being so darn nice? It was aggravating. But she was soaked, she had to admit. She'd changed into shorts before they left the house, but nearly everything up to several inches above her waist was now dripping wet, and she was developing goosebumps from the stiff September breeze. The same breeze that allowed the red dragon to continue to soar above her, swooping on the currents, its long tails flying free. Vicki's frozen features unfurled into a smile. So her dignity had taken a hit. The kite was up, her spirit soaring with it. She'd done it. Life just might have some possibilities, after all.

By the time John got back with the towel, Vicki had made her way back onto the expanse of damp sand, which at low tide stretched at least a half mile into Cape Cod Bay. She would make darn certain there were no more pratfalls.

"Stand still," John ordered. "You keep the kite up, I'll dry."

She opened her mouth to tell him no. Her brain ordered her hand to give him the kite and take the towel, but he'd already bent down, was drying her legs. Her common sense dissolved, her eyes fogged. The cries of the gulls, the shrieks of happy children playing on the beach faded.

The world went away. There were just the two of them. And a towel. And a pair of ultra-large hands.

Vicki could feel those hands wringing water from the back of her blue cotton shorts. Her senses went from numb to overload as his fingers flicked the backs of her legs. Red suffused her face, she was quite sure she wasn't breathing. As if he realized he'd gone about as far as he could go, John suddenly grabbed the kite reel and thrust the towel at her. His scowl was formidable. With an audible sniff of relief, and an inward disappointment that shocked her, Vicki finished the drying job.

"Thanks," she mumbled, holding out the towel, aware she sounded like a child being forced into good manners by her mother.

Solemnly, John exchanged the kite for the towel. His dark eyes were fathomless as he looked down at her. "Nice shade," he commented. "You're about the color of the lobster I was going to suggest we have for supper tonight."

Humor she didn't need. Vicki's eyes followed his broad shoulders as he walked away. He'd had the sense to change into a bathing suit, drat him, while she had avoided exposing herself in so little covering. There was nothing about John Paolillo that wasn't well made. His body was as hard as his face. He looked as if he could come up a winner, even in a contest with a gorilla or an alligator. As for herself... it was obvious the Victoria Kents of this world were little morsels he snapped up while keeping his vision tightly fixed on more important matters. And there was no way she was going to be one of Detective Paolillo's casual snacks.

“John.” The single word carried across the sand, stopped him in his tracks. “Uh—I was thinking maybe you could get this thing up higher. There’s lots of string left.”

He thought about it just long enough that Vicki knew he was weighing his options. To how much was he saying yes? Was friendliness part of their pragmatic arrangement? Was her request an apology for her boorishness, or an invitation to something more?

John slung the towel around his neck with no sign of discomfort at its damp chill and started back, jogging effortlessly across the sand where the rivulets were beginning to flow with the incoming tide. “Okay,” he said easily, and took the red plastic reel into his large competent hands.

The dragon soared, the nylon line spinning off the reel like a fish line that had just hooked a whale. The kite’s mocking eyes grew smaller, disappearing into the glare far above them. “I take it you’re not a novice to kite flying,” Vicki ventured.

“I’m uncle to a whole brood of kids, seven at last count. Connecticut’s got a few too many trees for good kiting, but every once in a while we find a ball park that isn’t being used. Yeah, I guess you could say I’ve had some experience. Way back to when I was a kid, actually.”

“You were a kid?”

“Believe it or not.”

“Uh, John... thanks for picking me up. My dignity took a hit; I just couldn’t get the words out earlier.”

“No problem. I could see that, you know.”

John stared up at the kite, now so far above them its color had faded into shadow. "Guess I'd better reel in a bit. It's no fun flying a blob."

Fun. He actually admitted kite flying was fun, Vicki mused. Was there a real person somewhere under the cop's hardened facade?

"Let's take her out a ways," John suggested as he manipulated the reel. "I'd like to say I've walked on the bottom of Cape Cod Bay. We don't have any place on the Connecticut shore where the tide goes out this far."

They strolled away from the beach pavilion and parking lot, moving straight out toward the pale shimmering water visible at the end of the long expanse of sand. John kept a tight rein on the kite, allowing it to dip and swirl over their heads, its black eyes chaperoning their every move. "Hey!" he exclaimed, "I just got squirted."

"Clam," Vicki laughed. "They do that. See," she added as they paused. "See those little drops in the sand. That's how you find clams. You look for the droplets and then dig."

"What kind of clams?"

"Well... with amateurs like me, there's no way of telling until you dig it out. "Maybe soft-shell, maybe a quahog, maybe a razorback." She frowned lightly. "I don't think they have the big sea clams at this beach, but I could be wrong."

"Here." John handed her the kite, and fell to his knees on the sand.

"You don't have a clam hook."

He wagged his huge hands at her. "Don't need one." In a matter of minutes he'd proved himself prophetic, a

rounded purple and white quahog in his hands. “Clams instead of lobster tonight?” he quipped. “Shall I keep going?”

“Put the poor thing back,” Vicki said. “If you’re really serious about gathering your own, I know a nice mud flat where you can get oysters.”

The quahog poised in his hands, John looked up. An eyebrow waggled. “You think I need them?” he inquired.

Vicki almost took her hands off the kite reel. The urge to bury her scarlet face somewhere, anywhere, was strong.

John tucked the firmly closed quahog back into the hole he had made, patted the sand down over it. “Okay, guy, you can live to squirt some other unsuspecting tourist.”

“Maybe it’s a girl.”

“No way. No girl ever kept her mouth closed that tight.”

They walked in silence after that. Until the incoming tide drove them back toward shore, the warm, shallow rivulets rapidly turning into calf-deep streams. They kept the dragon flying, taking turns, until a knee-deep dip fifty feet from shore forced them to retire the red banner that marked their passage. If not, Vicki pointed out—breaking a silence which bordered on a sulk—it would have been John’s turn to end up in what her father called “the drink.”

While John changed into his street clothes, Vicki stowed the now limp and forlorn red dragon into the trunk of her car. She was arranging a dry towel over the driver’s seat in an effort to protect her Saab from her own damp and sandy condition when an ebullient “Vicki!” boomed over her shoulder. A blue-uniformed figure—tall, lean to

the point of skinny, and not much older than Vicki—was loping across the parking lot, practically bouncing off the maze of cars in his eagerness to close the distance between his patrol car and the Saab. A broad smile lit Vicki's face as she stood and held out her arms for the enthusiastic embrace that followed.

A mutually enjoyable reunion, John noted sourly as he approached the Saab, his male territorial instincts waving danger flags even though it was perfectly obvious Tall, Blond and Skinny was an old friend of Vicki's. But the timing was bad. Competition he didn't need. Not just after discovering that Victoria Kent in soggy shorts, soaking shirt and bare feet was far more interesting than the blond ice princess in black silk. (And even that image had been enough to give him a restless sleep of erotic dreams and fantasies.) But, today, the sight of Vicki cavorting around out there on the sand trying to launch that stupid kite had raised his blood pressure by about a zillion degrees. Rescuing her had been a real rush. And then he'd blown it, suffering an aggravated case of foot-in-mouth disease. And now—just when he was looking for a way to apologize—along comes some old pal hick cop.

"What a coincidence!" Tall, Blond and Skinny was saying. "I was just reading about you in *The Globe*, and there you were. Right here under my nose." As Vicki's eyes widened, the officer thrust a newspaper under her nose. "See, there you are coming out of the courthouse with Turner, right on the front page."

Courthouse. Turner. Even *The New Haven Register* had printed stories about the case. John eyed Vicki with something close to horror. No way. It wasn't possible.

This disheveled blond dressed only in wet clothes and sand couldn't possibly be involved in the Ed Turner case.

"You can have the paper, Vic," Tall and Lean was saying.

Vicki, eyes fixed on the newspaper, murmured her thanks. Suddenly, she looked up, belatedly remembering her companion. "Nate, I'd like you to meet John Paolillo. John, Nate Eldredge." As Vicki, her poise seemingly restored, hastened to explain his presence, John's scowl deepened. He resented the fact that she felt an explanation necessary, even as he appreciated the ease with which she did it. "John's renting the house, but his car conked out, so we're sort of sharing rides at the moment. You two have something in common," she added, speaking to both men at once. "John's a detective in New Haven, and Nate is Deputy Chief here in Orleans." Vicki stopped, shot Nate an accusing look. "So what are you doing in a patrol car, Nate? I thought you'd graduated to a desk."

Nathaniel Eldredge flashed her an engaging grin. "I like to keep an eye on things. This morning I was sort of out enjoying the fact there are less people on the beaches. And there you were with that old red dragon. Figured it couldn't be anybody else. Doubt they make kites like that anymore."

"Yeah, I bet," John growled to himself. Eldredge probably heard she was in town and was out prowling around to see if he could find her. They appeared to be good friends. Too good of friends.

~ * ~

"So what was that about your picture in the paper?" John asked cautiously as Vicki threw the newspaper on

the back seat of the car. They'd joined Nate Eldredge in a hot dog at the Skaket Beach vending stand and were, at last, alone.

"Just a case," Vicki replied vaguely, heading the car out of the half-filled lot past the toll booth, which, thankfully, had closed as of Labor Day.

"The Turner case?"

"Yes."

"What did you have to do with the Turner case?" John asked, though he suspected he didn't want to know the answer.

For more than a minute Vicki drove in silence, eyes fixed determinedly on the road. "I was lead defense counsel," she finally returned, adding softly, "I'd rather not talk about it."

"That was you on last night's news."

"Yes."

He felt sick. Allegedly, Ed Turner raped a high school student, and Vicki had gotten him off. An acquittal based on reasonable doubt because his attorney had so confused and disconcerted the victim that not even the girl's best friend, let alone the jury, could be sure she was telling the truth. The defense was masterful, but almost no one believed that the man going free was truly innocent. John wondered if Vicki did. He suspected not, or she'd be out celebrating instead of hiding away in a basement room on Nauset Heights.

Well, that was that. He'd been attracted to her. There'd been something there from the moment they'd met over seven inches of cold steel. But this was as far as it went. There was absolutely no room for a defense counsel in his

life. The idea was absurd. Nauseating. They'd get through this car problem on the manners their mommas taught them, and then it was *Ciao*, baby. *Addio*. With no mention of 'til we meet again.

But she looked so lost. So solemn and sad. John forced his eyes back to the road in front of them. The center of town was coming up fast. "I'd like to check on my car, maybe wander around a bit. What's a good time for us to meet? Or would you rather I got a cab back to the house? They do have cabs, don't they?" he added, suddenly doubtful. Compared to New Haven, Orleans was a real small town.

"Of course they have cabs," Vicki snapped, "but I'll pick you up. "The hardware store at four? There's good parking there."

"Thanks." For some unaccountable reason he felt a nasty wave of guilt, letting her go off so obviously upset and uncomfortable, his disapproval hanging around her like a dark cloud. Even Nate Eldredge had refrained from making a judgment. But Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo... now there was a hanging judge if he'd ever known one.

"Uh—Vicki, remember dinner's on me. I meant it about the lobster. You probably know a good place?"

"Sure." As she pulled into the curb to let him off, she didn't turn her head.

"See you at four." Distinctly, if not warmly.

There was no reply.

Three

“A-a-ah!” As the shop door opened with the ding of an old-fashioned customer bell, Vicki breathed in the air of The Fabric Nook and was swamped by a wave of nostalgia. In the days before she was expected to appear in classically severe courtroom suits or dine out in clothes that loudly proclaimed their origin in exclusive boutiques, she had enjoyed the creativity, the pure and simple satisfaction, of constructing a garment from scratch. And now, once again, she was surrounded by the tantalizing sights and smells of a fabric shop. The air was redolent with the indefinable odor of sizing, of wool and fake fur, denim, heavy corduroy, quilting cottons, and artificial fleeces. Along the wall, rolls of satin in a cascade of colors were waiting for the just the right party or prom. Pale batistes lurked on shelves, ready to be transformed by doting grandmothers into Christening gowns, delicate dresses and lingerie. How Vicki loved it! If only she had the time...

Classic excuse. She didn't really have to devote twelve or sixteen hours a day to her job, now did she? Was success really that important?

Wasn't that what she was doing here on the Cape? Coming to grips with a life which was everything she had ever wanted? Only to find herself lost and miserable?

No, Vicki sighed, that wasn't true either. She wasn't coping, analyzing, reassessing, or any other positive word she could think of. She was running. At a minute before midnight, she'd panicked and run away. From triumph. Success. Love.

Or what had passed for love.

Maybe Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo wasn't such a disaster after all. If she could feel even the slightest attraction for a stone cold block of granite who looked at her as if she had just crawled out from under a rock, then what she felt for Lowell Manchester surely wasn't love.

In fact... Lowell had never aroused a fraction of the sensations she'd felt when John had been rubbing her legs with a towel, there on the damp sands of Skaket Beach. She had worked with Lowell for four years now, dated him, off and on, for nearly two. With Lowell, she was comfortable. Secure in a relationship that was headed slowly, steadily, toward the appropriate, expected conclusion of marriage. Yet with John, she'd gone incandescent. Her world went nova, and she almost stopped breathing. Even over bacon and eggs, sexual tension had loomed like some kind of super bowl of temptation.

Resistance is futile.

Resistance is sensible. The right thing to do.

Resistance is foolish. Finding out if she could melt The Great Stone Face was an almost irresistible challenge.

Drat the man! How dare that big Sicilian cop play holier-than-thou with her? Just wait...

"Vicki!" Betty Nickerson charged out from behind the counter where she had just finished ringing up a sale. Propelling herself around the tightly packed fabric displays, she enveloped her old friend in a bear hug even more enthusiastic than Vicki had received from Nate Eldredge. Betty's short dark brown curls quivered as she allowed her naturally ebullient personality free rein. "I was hoping you'd be down as soon as the Season was over, but you've been keeping yourself pretty scarce these last few years, girl. Not good."

"I was here in June," Vicki protested, chagrined because Betty's accusation was all too true.

"One weekend." Betty's eyes, a shade lighter than her hair, revealed a reproach that wasn't quite negated by the smile on her round down-home-style face.

Vicki shook her head. "I know," she admitted, "I've been working too hard. That's why I'm planning to stay a while this time." Once again, Vicki let her eyes drift around the shop, her mind gulping in this one small portion of the world she'd been missing. "I guess I got caught in a super case of tunnel vision," she admitted. "The job, the job, and nothing but the job."

"It was that Turner thing, wasn't it?" Betty's tone was contrite, full of sympathy.

"Among other things," Vicki conceded, running her fingers down the nap of a heavy wide-wale navy corduroy.

Betty pounced on the vague reply. "Man trouble!" she declared. "You come on to the backroom, I'll make some

tea, and you can tell Mama Betty all about it.” With the determination of The Little Engine That Could, Betty Nickerson herded Vicki through the maze of fabrics to a small room at the rear of the store where there was a tiny table with two chairs, an ancient hotplate, and a microwave set in and among standing bolts of fabric and boxes of sewing notions which hadn’t yet been squeezed into the front of the store. “Now don’t worry, I’ll hear the bell,” Betty added as she put water on to boil, “You sit right down and tell me *all*.”

“I saw Nate Eldredge this morning.”

The teapot Betty was holding froze in midair. “So, how is he?” she asked, all too casually. “The Season kept him so busy, I’ve hardly seen him.”

“I thought you two were an item.” How much easier it was to pursue Betty’s problems rather than her own.

“He really has been swamped,” Betty mumbled as she returned to preparing the tea.

“Betty, you two have been dating for nearly as long as I can remember.”

“A movie here, a dinner there. Fifteen years. And here we are, still single.” A disclaimer, tinged with sorrow.

“Betty...” Vicki snapped her mouth shut on her demanding tone. Why was she using courtroom interrogation techniques on someone who had been her childhood playmate? “Betty, I’m sorry,” she apologized. “It’s just that you two make such a great couple. I mean, I thought you’d be—uh—well, I guess I didn’t expect you two to have any rough spots.”

“It’s more than a rough spot, Vick.” The kettle whistled. Swiftly, Betty poured the boiling water into the

teapot. She sank down onto the old ice cream chair across from Vicki and lowered her head into her hands. "There was a waitress at the Captain Linnell house this summer. From Philadelphia. One of the monied college kids playing at a summer job." Betty looked up, her suddenly misted eyes fixed on a huge bolt of drapery fabric leaning haphazardly into a corner. "He was drooling, Vic," she burst out, "positively drooling. I doubt she was a day over nineteen or twenty. But, oh, did she know what she was doing! Flicked her tail at him every time he was within half a mile of her. The poor booby was positively dazzled."

As a defense counsel, Vicki knew she should be beyond shock, but last spring she'd gotten the impression Nate and Betty were finally on the verge of announcing their engagement. Maybe they'd known each other too long, been so close the spark was smothered. And now here was Victoria Kent, the silver-tongued attorney, not knowing what to say, murmuring her sympathy even as she inwardly grimaced at her inability to help.

It seemed to be Betty's turn to recall that attack was the best defense. She found a tissue, blew her nose with vigor, then returned to the table. "Okay, Vic, so you've run to the Cape with your tail between your legs. Tell me about it," she commanded.

Vicki sipped her cinnamon tea and thought about it. How could she explain something to Betty that she couldn't explain to herself? In the space of a few hours her life had blown up in her face. And the only person she could blame was herself. Outwardly, everything was perfect. She was a success in her career; she had money in

the bank. She had Lowell Manchester, the Fourth. And then from some unexpected depth Vicki hadn't known she had, that ugly scene had erupted.

The hot fragrant tea warmed and revived the memories that Vicki had put on hold since the night before at her brownstone apartment in the elegant Beacon Hill section of Boston. Every appalling word of her quarrel with Lowell came back. It wasn't as if he didn't have an inkling, she told herself. For weeks she'd been trying to communicate her growing doubts... but the trial had taken so much of her time and energy. She'd tried to make him see—surely she had—but it was as if Lowell, his ego towering as high as the Empire State Building, never heard her. Their final moments clanged loudly inside her head.

~ * ~

“Out!”

“Really... Victoria.” Lowell's smile was smug. Disbelieving. Cajoling.

“I asked you to leave, Lowell. Now please go.”

“Don't be absurd, Vicki!” Smugness tinged by dawning anger.

Feeling like a character in a Victorian melodrama, Vicki flung out her arm, pointing at the door of her apartment. “The door is that way, Lowell.”

She could almost see Lowell examining his dented ego, deciding the problem was entirely hers—she must be having one of those days. He, of course, couldn't possibly be at fault. His ego nicely reinflated, he straightened his broad shoulders and managed a benign smile. It was to be expected, of course, Vicki groaned to herself. Nothing

mented that Boston Brahmin superiority for more than a moment.

“You won the case, Vicki. I can’t imagine why you’re being...”

“Out. Now.” Holding her dramatic pose, Vicki clenched her teeth and willed this scion of New England nobility on his way.

With a long-suffering sigh, Lowell Manchester IV looked down at his colleague from Manchester, Lowell and Manchester. “Very well, Victoria. But please remember that we’re dining with the parents tomorrow at the Newtonian Club. I trust you will be feeling better by then. Goodnight.” Very much on his dignity, Lowell turned his back and stalked out of the apartment.

For a moment Vicki remained in the middle of the living room, blindly wondering what she had done. Somehow her feet found their way to the door. The deadbolt thudded into place. The chain rattled as her hands shook getting it into its slot. There. It was done. She’d just thrown her supervisor, son of the senior partner of Manchester, Lowell and Manchester, her lover, out of her apartment.

Why? She’d worked so hard to have it all. Good grades, good schools, prestigious law firm, nice apartment, and upscale car. And now... just because she’d wanted to say no this one particular night and Lowell hadn’t wanted to take no for an answer...

She cared for him, she really did. But how much was her own ego preening because the boss’s son had chosen her when he could have had his pick of the office’s female attorneys, legal assistants and strikingly nubile secretarial

staff? Not to mention the cream of Boston society. And Lowell Manchester IV had singled out Victoria Kent. They were an accepted item. In that stage of a relationship where an engagement was expected by one and all. And yet... if she loved Lowell as she thought she did, surely she could have turned to him for comfort after the Ed Turner verdict. And he would have understood why she felt such anguish over winning this particular case. But she couldn't. And he didn't.

Vicki leaned back against the door, closed her eyes. What to do?

The parents. The parents were Lowell's parents. Her boss and his wife. Her prospective in-laws.

She couldn't face them.

Since the end of the trial that afternoon Vicki had been frozen in limbo, unable to think, to rationalize, to accept that this was just another case she would have to put behind her. To acknowledge that she had a good life. That it was time to move forward, take the next step up the ladder...

The steel jaws of Manchester, Lowell and Manchester were clamping shut around her, and her reaction was panic. The great gray umbrella of comfortable conservatism was rising up, enveloping her... casting a shadow over her life. She wasn't ready. She couldn't go through with it.

As if the curtain had just been raised at the theater, Vicki's mind suddenly filled with a picture of tranquility. Weathered silver-gray shingles, grass clinging to sandy soil, short wind-swept scrub pines, whitecaps edging the great swells of sea on the backshore at Nauset. She'd

rocketed across her living room, plunged into the bedroom closet, dragged out her suitcase, and begun to pack.

~ * ~

“I’ve blown it all,” Vicki admitted to Betty Nickerson. “They shoved me into the Turner case as their token female lawyer. ‘Look, look, a woman who believes Ed Turner didn’t rape that poor girl.’ I was the perfect picture of the crusading attorney who was going to prove her client innocent. Ha!” Vicki clanked her mug back onto the table. “The only thing I proved,” she added bitterly, “was that I could out-charm and out-bitch my opponent, if you’ll pardon my language.”

“Oh, honey.” Betty patted Vicki’s hand. “So you think Turner was guilty.”

“Probably. He certainly made my skin crawl, but *probably* is what it’s all about, isn’t it? If there’s a doubt...” Vicki shrugged. The truth was; she thought he was guilty and she’d see that poor girl’s ravaged face for the rest of her life. Not to mention the fact that she may have turned a rapist loose to do it again.

“It’s your job, Vic,” Betty pointed out, her round face suffused with sympathy. “There are bound to be times when it’s going to make you sick. You just have to get past it. So how did all this cause trouble with the boyfriend?”

“He just couldn’t understand why I was upset. I was a triumph. I’d upheld the honor of the firm. The partners were so proud. He’d arranged a dinner with his parents. For tonight. I got the impression it was to be a final audition of Victoria Kent for the role of wife to Lowell Manchester, the Fourth. And I suddenly realized I wasn’t

ready. For any of it. The job or marriage. I'd spent my life working for exactly this lifestyle, only to discover at the last moment that it was possible I didn't really want it."

"Scary," Betty breathed.

"Tell me about it!"

"So what are you going to do? Obviously, you're not having supper with the parents."

"I left a message on Lowell's machine at home," Vicki confessed. "Not very brave, I know, but I'm really not up to talking to him. I truly haven't the faintest idea what I'm going to do. A week or ten days here, and I may be ready to go back as if nothing had ever happened, or..." Vicki's voice trailed away to nearly nothing. "Or I may decide to chuck it all. New city, new job..."

"New man."

"Maybe." Instead of the vague blank that should have been there, Vicki's mind was suddenly filled with chiseled features punctuated by black hair and dark brown eyes. A scowl that seemed to go on forever. Broad shoulders, lean hips. All with the powerful, inexorable presence of an earthmover sweeping every obstacle out of its way. Vicki made a face and poured herself another cup of tea. "So I'm going to take a rest—I'm due vacation time, so there's no problem. I spoke with the office manager half an hour ago."

The jingle of the customer bell cut short Betty's reply. "A couple of weeks on the Cape ought to do it," she said with an encouraging smile as she stood up. "Karen takes the store on Mondays. How about lunch?"

"It's a date." Vicki scribbled a note with her cell phone number and left it on the table. As she walked back to the

front of the shop, she was smiling. Friends were good. And yet, not a peep about her unexpected housemate had passed her lips.

Chicken, she mocked. And, besides, there was absolutely nothing to tell about John Paolillo. Why get Betty all excited over a passing acquaintance.

Liar. Passing acquaintances didn't make a strong woman think of skyrockets on the Fourth of July. Didn't keep her up at night thinking just how much she'd like to strip off the hard-assed detective armor and practice a little personal meltdown on what lay inside.

Vicki sat for a moment in the store's small parking area, analyzing her scant twelve hours on Cape Cod. The trip had been a good idea; already, she was feeling better. She'd been buoyed up by talking with two old friends. And then there was John. John, who was impervious to her fantasies. John, who had made his opinion of defense counsels abundantly clear. John, the giant electromagnet who made her feel like some infinitesimal metal shaving, powerless to defend herself from his attraction.

And they would be living together for the next week or so.

A week. Ten days. Time didn't matter. They couldn't be together two minutes without striking sparks off each other. Most of their sniping, Vicki acknowledged, was purely defensive. What other reaction was possible when confronted by a stranger whose mere presence, let alone touch, was enough to cause the earth to spin and every little hormone to jump up and shout hooray? And no matter how perfect John's poker face, Vicki strongly suspected he was experiencing similar reactions. Not

good. She'd come to the Cape to make serious, well-considered decisions about her future. John Paolillo's presence was going to do nothing but muddle her mind.

Face it, girl. You've jumped out of the frying pan into the fire.

~ * ~

For her afternoon in town Vicki had changed into classic resort wear—beige linen slacks and coordinated long-sleeved shirt, both with designer labels. But for her promised lobster dinner with John, she put on jeans and an old plaid shirt with rolled-up sleeves. Her blond hair was swept out of the way into an amber-colored hairclip at the back of her neck. She and John were sitting side by side with other lobster lovers at an oversized picnic table covered in a classic red-checked vinyl cloth. For the second week after Labor Day there was a good crowd, and the room was full of happy chatter. Although suitably grateful to John for taking her out for her favorite food, Vicki was glad she was sitting beside him so it wouldn't be so obvious she was avoiding looking at him. Though he was still in full Stone Face mode, her body jolted every time she was near him, sparks of electricity scattering through every nerve end, warming her belly and parts below, causing her heart to surge to somewhere around warp eight. Any more intimate encounter than a dining room full of people seemed more than she could survive.

She had it bad.

She had to be suffering from rebound. Definitely rebound. Her powerful reactions to John Paolillo had to be a psychological aberration due to her confused state of mind.

A small shriek, followed by a smothered gasp, punctuated the background noise. One of two lathesome twenty-somethings seated across from John was holding her hand over her mouth, wide eyes fixed on the lobster which had just been delivered to her place. Color as red as the lobster was creeping up from her neck to her cheeks. Obviously embarrassed, the young woman lowered her hand from her mouth and apologized to the table in general. "I'm from California," she babbled, "I never expected... I never dreamed... I'm used to just a tail. When I ordered, I had no idea I'd get the *whole thing*," she ended on a wail.

"I'll take it back," the waitress offered with a grin. "How about picked-out lobster in lemon butter?"

The girl from California murmured her thanks, and the large red lobster was whisked back to the kitchen. "I wish I'd had a picture of her face," Vicki whispered in John's ear, forgetting her vow not to get too close.

He turned to whisper a reply, and his lips brushed close to hers. Each of them darted back, as if stung. *Dear God*, Vicki thought, *there was no way the two of them could live in the same house without some kind of chemical explosion*. She saw the muscles in John's jaw tense as he clamped his teeth over whatever he'd been going to say. She'd been right. He was far from immune to whatever was happening between them.

Instead of turning away, however, John reached for the large white plastic bib sitting in front of Vicki's place. Silently, he fastened it around her neck. Prickles rose as his fingers brushed her skin just below her hairline. Vicki was certain the goosebumps, the ones inside as well as the

ones without, were plainly visible. And as if that weren't bad enough, one of John's hands suddenly flowed down her front, smoothing the bib in place. Vicki's stomach cartwheeled, the room dimmed. It was all she could do to focus on the bib he was handing her, obviously inviting her to return the favor. As she fastened the white plastic ties into a bow, she was infinitely grateful that her quivering hands were hidden behind his back.

When their own lobsters arrived, Vicki couldn't resist a peek at the Californian. Sure enough, the woman was giving John's plate surreptitious flicks from under her long lashes, evidently both horrified and fascinated by the process of consuming a whole lobster from giant front claws to skinny spider legs and great meaty tail. John's face wasn't exempt from her examination, Vicki noted with annoyance as, ignoring the pliers provided, he cracked open the front claws with his long powerful fingers and began to pull out the juicy meat. He dipped the red-skinned white meat into his bowl of lemon butter, popped the juicy morsel into his mouth, chewing with every evidence of blissful satisfaction. For a moment, Vicki had to admit, Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo looked almost human.

"You're not eating," he suddenly accused, looking down at Vicki's plate. "Don't tell me *you've* never eaten a whole lobster before."

"Hardly," Vicki snapped. "I was just sort of savoring the sight... deciding where to begin." *And enjoying watching you eat. Butter glistening on your lips.* But not the interest gleaming in the eyes of the girl from California who was beginning to look as if she wished she

could have ordered John served up for her delectation instead of lobster.

As if to prove she and John had nothing in common, Vicki started at the lobster's tail, pulling apart the soft undershell, which had been split down the middle in the kitchen, and cutting the meat inside into bite-size pieces. *See*, she wanted to say to the pert outdoor type from California, *this is how it's done. And, see, John Paolillo and I have nothing in common. We eat our lobsters from the opposite ends.* But the Californian wasn't interested in Victoria Kent. She had eyes only for John. Vicki couldn't tell how much of the attraction was John himself and how much was his demonstration of how to eat a lobster. What if she weren't here? Would the girl from sunny California have struck up a conversation?

Of course she would.

Vicki finished the tail meat and reached for her pliers. A large hand settled over hers. Two swift crunches and John had successfully cracked the claws of her lobster. Vicki murmured her thanks. No one had cracked lobster claws for her since she was a child. It should not have been an intimate gesture, but somehow it was. Vicki kept a tight grip on her fork, concentrating on removing the claw meat from the large curved shell. Across from them the squeamish Californian was managing to lift picked-out lobster meat into her mouth while scarcely taking her eyes off John who was crunching his way down a skinny lobster leg, sucking out the juice, strong white teeth flashing against the tan granite of his face. Vicki caught herself on the verge of an annihilating glare. Since when was she John Paolillo's keeper? She had no right. She was

his chauffeur, for heaven's sake. He despised her role as Ed Turner's defense counsel. He was, in fact, a natural mortal enemy of defense counsels. There was no middle ground on which they could meet. Well... the Cape, maybe. A Shangri-la which would evaporate into the mists when their idyll was over.

They were in a no-hope situation. It was better not to begin what could not go on. Therefore...

Vicki's purse rang. She muttered imprecations under her breath while her cell phone continued to ring. It had to be Lowell. Murmuring her excuses, Vicki managed to extricate herself from her place at the crowded picnic table and find a quiet spot in the hallway leading to the restrooms. "Victoria Kent here," she intoned, automatically snapping back to professional mode.

Evidently, Lowell Manchester's proper Bostonian facade had been breached. "Victoria, what the hell are you doing on the Cape?"

Vicki sighed, elaborately enough to carry over the miles to Boston. "I explained all that, Lowell. Just call it burnout. I need a break, time to think. Reevaluate."

"Reevaluate?" Lowell echoed loud enough that Vicki had to move the cell phone away from her ear. "Vicki, we're supposed to be having dinner with the parents. They're expecting us. This was supposed to be... I mean, I thought... you and I..." Lowell's customarily confident tone faded into an outraged mumble.

"Lowell, I'm sorry. I have to stay here a while." And she *was* sorry. He was a bit too pampered, too conservative, but basically, Lowell Manchester was a nice guy. He couldn't help being born into the expectation of

the best of everything, a classic life of privilege laid out in the prescribed pattern, his only deviation from the social norm contemplating marriage to a woman who had won her place in life instead of being born into it. And she could scarcely fault him for that.

“So when are you coming back?” he demanded.

Lowell was taking it better than she had any right to expect, Vicki thought. Then recalled his insufferable superiority last night at her apartment. His insensitivity. “Not for a week or so,” she told him firmly. “I’ve got to go, Lowell, my food is getting cold. Bye.”

Not the way to treat an almost fiancé. The significance was frightening. She was sorry if she’d hurt Lowell’s feelings, but Vicki suspected there was more damage to his ego than to his heart. The worst thing was; she felt relief. As if she’d been reprieved from a fate worse than death. And yet, that fate was the goal she had worked for, struggled for, for the last twenty or so of her thirty-one years. She had just brushed off Lowell Manchester IV and her boss, Lowell Manchester III.

And she was glad.

Four

She'd actually let him drive home. John was astonished. The popsicle from Boston handed the keys into his outstretched hand without a murmur, almost as if they were on an actual date. He'd been prepared for an argument. Maybe the Sam Adams they'd consumed along with the lobster had mellowed her out. No, not really. She'd looked pretty grim after that telephone call. About as far from mellow as a steel-edged blade. Ms. Defense Attorney was not a happy camper.

About half way back to Nauset Heights John made a stab at being Mr. Nice. "Want to talk about it?" he tossed across the front seat in what came out closer to a growl than the calm and casual he intended.

"No."

"Sorry." Silence.

She had taken the whole thing about the house rental very well, John had to admit. Plus sharing the car. He owed her. Unclenching his jaw, he forced words past rigid lips. "Job trouble or man trouble?" he inquired.

“Both.” Clipped. Final. Keep Out with an exclamation point.

“But you don’t want to talk about it?”

“Not now. Not yet. I know I should,” Vicki added more slowly. “Talking might help, but I can’t just yet. Maybe... in a day or two.”

“Sure.” He was glad to hear they had a day or two. Maybe he should tell her about Ellie. Show her that other people had sorrows, burdens, wounds that never quite went away. Perhaps... if he’d met Victoria Kent a few months ago, she might not have understood his personal anguish. Now he suspected that she would. Whatever happened to send her running to the Cape in the middle of the night must have been pretty strong stuff.

Guilt over the Turner case?

Maybe. She didn’t seem a bad sort. Just on the wrong side of the law. According to the code of Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo.

John winced. Okay, so he was a bit hard-nosed.

A bit? He could almost hear his co-workers’ mocking laughter. John Paolillo, the Italian Dirty Harry, that’s what they called him. And, secretly, he liked it.

When they pulled into the driveway, Vicki was out of the car as soon as John handed over the keys, heading down the sandy path at the side of the house as if she were being pursued by one of Stephen King’s most monstrous visions. As she disappeared around the corner, John sighed. The Ice Princess was going to be a hard nut to crack. He shouldn’t want to, of course, but the challenge

was irresistible. He'd seen the deadly looks she shot at that silly twit from California. The attorney from Boston had been ready to do battle. And there was no denying his own hormones had been raging since the moment he saw her. The whole thing would have been ludicrous if it hadn't verged on the tragic. Here they were, two wounded souls in search of peace, and all they'd found was enforced incarceration with each other.

Peaceful, it wasn't.

John settled to reading *The Boston Globe* he had picked up in town. Yes, there she was, posing on the courthouse steps with Ed Turner and Turner's mother. Vicki's smile was blinding. False? John wondered. The accompanying article was not so triumphant. According to the reporter, the teenager who had accused Turner of rape had been pale and silent, her mother in tears, while the father spilled out his rage, his pain and bitterness at the legal system that had allowed his daughter's attacker to go free.

The reading lamp spotlighted John's grim chiseled features. His anger was almost as strong as the father's. How could Vicki do it? How could she justify making a living by defending the scum of the earth? Turner had a rap sheet dating back ten years. If he hadn't done this crime, he was certainly overdue for jail time on something.

Which was the kind of thinking that got him beached high and dry on Cape Cod instead of running homicide investigations in New Haven.

The neighbor's dog began to bark. A blond Labrador, she was on a chain fastened to a long line so she had plenty of room to run on the sheltered street side of the house next door. John had already fallen into the habit of speaking to the Lab when he passed by. After a couple of times of wildly wagging tail and lolling tongue, the dog had allowed him to rub behind her ears, amply rewarding him by an enthusiastic, drooling response. But tonight's barking bore no relation to the eager yips the Lab used in greeting. The sound was rising from warning level to frantic. Trouble? Here in this quiet, out-of-the-way place? Not likely. And yet... John thought about the nine millimeter in the bedside drawer, shook his head. Look what had happened last night. He snapped off the living room light, peered out the window into the darkness. Nothing but sea grass on the bluff swaying in the breeze, the moon sparkling on Nauset Harbor. On this side of the house all was quiet.

The dog continued to bark. Frenzy was the word that came to mind. The Lab was having a fit about something. The neighbors must be out. Again. The least he could do, John thought, was find out what was going on. If it was only a couple of stray cats, he could calm the dog, rub her ears, tell her it was okay, her owners would be back soon.

It was nippy outside, a September night with a definite promise of fall. John moved down the steps on the driveway side of the house with almost as much caution as a street cop entering a dark alleyway. He was having second thoughts about the gun. The barking never ceased.

It was as if the blond Lab didn't even pause for breath. There were pine trees on this side of the house. Shadows where the moonlight never penetrated. John could see the moving blob that was the dog, jumping on the end of her chain, but little else. He moved closer, wondering why he was being so cautious. It had to be a stray cat, an unfriendly dog, maybe a raccoon. He swore at himself. With feeling. He was turning a barking dog into a major crisis. Because he was bored. Because he was a cop. Because there was a woman to protect.

Protect and serve.

Service?

And then, just when he'd let his hormones distract him from common sense, he saw what the fuss was all about. Five or six black and white creatures were ambling around the neighbor's front lawn, seemingly perfectly aware of the limited length of the Lab's chain. A regular occurrence, John realized with horror, as he began to back away. Slowly, carefully. Inch by inch. The blasted things were deliberately taunting the poor dog. And, idiot that he was, he'd stumbled into the middle of it.

Two of the skunks turned. Were hoisting their tails. John had dodged speeding bullets, grappled with many a perp. But this was something else again. Did he hold very still and hope nothing happened? Or run like hell?

Too late. It was more than a stench. It was an oily miasma of pungent odor that attacked his eyes and mouth as well as his clothes. His exposed skin stung. It got worse. Even though he could no longer see, John could

sense that the other skunks, not to be outdone, had added to the barrage. He stumbled backward, bounced off a prickly cedar. He must be back in his own yard because the neighbors didn't have a cedar. Something large and unyielding dug into his back. The porch. John turned, put his hands out, trying to find the railing along the steps.

"Strip!"

He stood still, unable to do more than mumble.

"Strip," Vicki repeated firmly. "Undo your shirt. I'll get your shoes."

"Go away," he managed.

"Don't be ridiculous." He felt fingers unlacing his sneakers. "Lift your foot," Vicki commanded. He did as he was told. "Now the other one," she said a moment later.

Her face wrinkled in a grimace against the stench, Vicki pulled off John's second sock and threw it aside. "Jo-o-hn," she sighed, as she looked up to discover he hadn't gotten past the first button of his shirt. Resignedly, Vicki began to undo the reeking clothing. Eyes watering, she had to go more by feel than by sight. After peeling him out of the shirt and throwing it to the ground, she reached for his belt buckle. For a moment her hand hesitated. Stripping the Great Stone Face—even under emergency conditions—was not exactly what her already tempted emotions needed right now.

Too bad. She was the rescuer. Impersonal. Like a doctor or nurse.

Courage!

Vicki tugged at the buckle, wiggled the belt through the narrow loops, and tossed it after the shirt. "Would you mind uh—unzipping?" she drawled, feeling she had gone about as far as she could go.

"Buttons," John countered.

"Then unbutton," Vicki snapped.

He was in too much agony to argue, as much as he might have liked to tease her. When his fly was gaping open, however, he made no effort to slip off his jeans. He leaned his head back against the side of the porch steps and made like the man who has just expended his last ounce of strength on undoing a few buttons.

"John, pull down your pants."

He stood there, unmoving.

"Your pants, John," Vicki commanded more sharply.

"Pull them down."

Okay, so she wasn't going to do it for him. So much for thinking he might shake up the Ice Princess if she messed up and took his briefs down along with his jeans. With a sigh of resignation, John levered himself off the side of the porch steps and shimmied out of his jeans. Vicki grabbed them and tossed them onto the pile. John's eyes had improved to the point where he could see the poor girl didn't know quite where to look. Only a very small portion of him was covered by his black bikini briefs.

"Now get inside and shower," she told him. "I'll put these through a couple of laundries." Vicki hesitated. "I guess I'd better leave them outside until you finish

showering. You're going to need all the hot water you can get. Now go... before you freeze."

Her words were practical enough, but... John paused half way up the porch steps, looking down to where Vicki had just picked up his clothes in two fingers, and was heading toward the bay side of the house, holding the items at arm's length. "Vicki," he called. "Thanks."

She looked up, moonlight illuminating her pale face, the waves of unbound blond hair. "Anytime," she said, unsmiling. "Anytime at all." She disappeared around the corner of the house.

~ * ~

He might as well have been naked. Vicki dropped the clothes by the steps leading down to the basement entrance, zipped inside her room, and sat down hard on her bed as her knees gave way. For a man pushing forty, John Paolillo was gorgeous. The black bikini, straining at the seams, had left little to the imagination. Vicki plunged her chin into her cupped hands and made a serious effort to study the multi-colored braid rug on the floor beside the bed. She tried to focus on Lowell, on Ed Turner, the courtroom, her office at Manchester, Lowell and Manchester. Nothing filled her mind but Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo in the buff. Silvered by moonlight. One look and she hadn't even noticed the stench. Her eyes may have been watering, her nose running, but it was only now she was becoming aware of it.

Silly twit! She'd seen him in a bathing suit. What was so different about his skivvies?

You know perfectly well what was different! Not to mention the moonlight. And being alone in the house with such an obviously virile male, skunked or not.

She should move to a motel. It wasn't as if she couldn't afford it.

But she wasn't going to do so. Come hell or high water, as her father used to say, this was where she stayed. This was destiny.

Fool! You thought Lowell Manchester was your destiny.

Water gurgling through the pipes penetrated Vicki's argument with herself. John was in the shower. Naked. She swallowed hard, told the butterflies in her stomach to go fly a kite, and pried herself off the bed. Determinedly, she found the romance novel she'd picked up at the store that afternoon and settled down to read. When water stopped running to the shower upstairs, she'd be able to put John's clothes to soak.

She'd made a mistake with the book, Vicki discovered. It was one of those novels that called itself a romance but consisted mainly of sex scenes in graphic clinical detail. Definitely not what she needed at the moment. There was sex, and there was romance, and all too frequently the twain didn't meet. Romance was... John flying a dragon kite... John in a black bikini under a harvest moon... in the shower, the water chugging up the pipes in the wall

behind her ear. Knowing he was so close. So naked. Vulnerable in his distress.

Vicki slammed the book shut, tossed it into the round file. Who needed to read about sex when it was already enveloping her life? Suffocating her sanity? Quietly, she sat on the bed, waiting for the sound of running water to cease. Waiting for visions of John Paolillo the way God made him to cease dancing through her head.

~ * ~

John toweled his short black hair with vigor, determined to eradicate the last trace of skunk. He paused for a cautious sniff of the bathroom. Hopefully, the faint odor was from before he stepped into the shower and not from the current state of his bare skin. He was scrubbed raw, skin and scalp red and tingling. Humiliation rolled over him. It was like being a rookie cop again and getting surprised by a gang of hoods in some back alley. Something which simply shouldn't have happened to Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo. He swore softly but feelingly as he slipped into his black silk robe. Ellie had given it to him for a fifth anniversary gift. After that, he'd dutifully worn it on birthdays, anniversaries and their few vacations. That time in Bermuda... yeah, he'd taken it to Bermuda. And Jamaica. This time, mad as he was about being exiled to the Cape, he'd almost left it hanging in the closet. He hadn't had it on since Ellie died, but he was going on vacation and somehow the robe looked as if it expected to come along. So he'd packed it.

And it was a damn good thing. Because sharing a house with a strange female, it looked like he was going to need it.

John belted the robe tightly around him, opened the bathroom door. Another cautious sniff. The air was still redolent of skunk, but it was no longer painful. By morning, he supposed the smell would be gone. When he opened the door above the cellar steps, the light was on in the furnace room below. He started down.

Vicki was setting the controls on the washing machine. He heard the whoosh of the water as the washer began to fill. “A cold soak is better than nothing,” she said as she heard him on the stairs. “I’ll run them through a couple of times tomorrow, but at least the water will keep the smell down for the moment.”

The woman could definitely give lessons in cool. John had always thought the same of himself, but here he was, standing halfway down the stairs hoping his robe was full enough to hide the betrayal of his body. A week or two? He wasn’t going to live through it. She already had him on the ropes, and he didn’t even like her. Not really. She was a defense attorney, wasn’t she?

Well, wasn’t she?

“Look, Vicki, I want to repeat my thanks,” John said, keeping his tone as neutral as was possible under the circumstances. “I wouldn’t have blamed you if you’d stayed in your room and not come near me ‘til morning.”

Her lips quivered. John figured she was trying to resist a smile—at his expense—but couldn’t quite manage it.

“You needed help,” she said. “I’m glad I was around. And John... from now on, just let the dog bark.”

“Yeah.” His voice dropped to a husky growl.

Vicki shoved in the washer control, stopping the swishing of the machine. The room fell silent. “Goodnight,” she said.

“Goodnight.” He was letting her get away.

What else could he do?

Vicki crossed the cellar, entered her room and closed the door. John heard the distinct snick of the deadbolt as she shoved it home.

Inside her room, Vicki was once again frozen to her bed. It was hopeless. She was going to have visions of John Paolillo stark naked under that black silk robe for the rest of her life. And if she didn’t stop running and do something about this situation, she was also going to have regrets for the rest of her life.

~ * ~

Breakfast was blueberry pancakes made with a heavy handful of fresh Cape Cod berries John had picked up at the local produce market the day before. Vicki couldn’t remember the last time she’d eaten pancakes. Ten years, maybe. She sighed as she poured pure undiluted Vermont maple syrup over the stack of pancakes that was oozing bubbly blue juice. At the rate they were going she’d probably go back to Boston ten pounds heavier. But what were vacations for, if not to indulge oneself?

And not just in pancakes. Vicki ordered her mind to cease and desist. To think food, not... anything else.

The wind had changed with the tide, sweeping away the miasma of the night. Only a faint lingering odor of skunk clung to the air, as if to remind them that it hadn't all been a dream. John swallowed a fluffy three-high bite of pancakes, wracked his brain for the right words. He wasn't going to be able to parlay a new fan belt into a major crisis for very much longer. Christ, not even the allegedly busted fuel pump would take this long. And, besides... now he owed her big time.

"I was thinking... well, I've intruded on your life long enough," John pronounced humbly, somehow managing a look that was close to forlorn. "If you want to do your own thing today, I can hang around here; get Marge Snow to pick me up if the garage calls." Yeah, and if she went for it, what was he going to do, sit around here and watch the sand blow?

Vicki used her mouthful of pancakes as an excuse to avoid an answer. What was he actually saying? Did he want to get rid of her? Want to be alone? She recalled the look on his face last night when he'd stood on the cellar stairs, wrapped in black silk, the naked bulb illuminating every line, every nuance. What she'd seen was hunger, pure and simple. A man who was using every ounce of willpower to keep from coming down those last few steps, taking her into his arms, propelling them both into her bedroom...

It was the first time the Great Stone Face had completely cracked. Vicki knew what she'd seen last night. The humble routine John was currently pulling was

exactly that. An act. And yet, she had to face it—as hopeless as a relationship between them might be, she was inclined to be flattered. John Paolillo was a dynamic character, a man worthy of respect. After all, it wasn't just anyone who could maintain his dignity after being skunked. Vicki's lips sneaked up in a private grin. And, yes, she had to admit the Cape took on an extra added glow when viewed with John Paolillo at her side.

"I was thinking of doing the tourist bit today," Vicki replied as casually as she could. "Penniman House, the Seashore Visitor Center, the lighthouse. It's real; you know—the lighthouse—not just put there for the tourists to photograph. And there are some nice nature trails around there, too. You know how it is," she added with a deprecating wave of her fork, "having lived here so long, I never go where the tourists go. I haven't been near the Visitor Center since I was a kid." Deliberately, she let her voice trail away, leaving the unspoken invitation hanging in the crisp morning air.

John hid his sigh of relief behind his cop's poker face. "Sounds good," he muttered, radiating indifference. "Would you mind company for another day? I'll make a real effort to keep away from skunks."

~ * ~

The headquarters of the Cape Cod National Seashore was only a hop, skip and jump away, barely over the line between Orleans and Eastham, the next town up on the narrow outer arm of the Cape. John and Vicki dutifully admired the great jawbone of a whale that marked the

entrance to Penniman House. The two curved bones arched high over John's head. Vicki, as always, found it was almost impossible to visualize the giant creature to whom the bones had once belonged. Later, when they wandered through the Visitor Center, Vicki stood back and allowed John to read the informative descriptions about things she'd known all her life.

"You've never been to the Cape before?" she asked as they browsed through the souvenir and book shop.

John picked up a book on Cape Cod birds, idly leafed through it. "My parents had five kids and a restaurant. A day trip to Hammonasset was as close to a vacation as we ever got."

"Hammonasset?"

"Big state park on Long Island Sound. We had beaches around New Haven too, of course, but Hammonasset was a special treat. That and Mystic Seaport or the sub base at Groton. And there were woodsy state parks too, and some great hiking trails. We're not exactly underprivileged in Connecticut, you know. Later, Ellie... I managed to get to Newport a time or two, but never as far as the Cape."

Vicki couldn't resist. "Do you have skunks in Connecticut?"

"Yeah, I guess," he conceded, "but I'd never actually seen one before." John snapped the bird book closed, jammed it back on the rack. "What about those nature trails you mentioned? Where do we find one?"

Vicki felt like a raw recruit dismissed by the drill sergeant. And who was Ellie?

They hiked through scrub pine and stunted cedar, along wind-swept dunes of sand marked only by tall, swaying sea grass. Past marshes and salt ponds with gulls screaming overhead and sandpipers pecking at the damp sand not far from their feet. The breeze was stiff today. Vicki had long since zipped up her lightweight jacket. As they approached the great dune, which was all that separated them from the Atlantic Ocean, she was grateful when John called a halt, pulling her down next to him on the lea side of the dune. Out of the wind, the temperature seemed to rise ten degrees. Or was that because John had pulled her into his side, offering warmth. Unintentionally starting a fire.

No, not unintentionally. Except for the skunks, Vicki doubted John Paolillo ever did anything unintentionally. The sea breeze had been just nippy enough to make it easy to follow the insidious urging of her hormones. She leaned into his side, savoring the warmth, the feeling of security. John's arm tightened around her shoulders, offering far more than shelter from the wind off the Atlantic. Vicki's mind shut down, rejecting everything that was the smart, slick defense counsel from Boston, admitting only the sensations of being female. Of being alone with a virile, attractive male. The primitive emotion of feeling protected. Safe...

Vicki shuddered, pulling away. Wrapping her arms around her knees, she tried to tell herself independence was for the best. There was no future here. No matter how

strong the attraction. Good old common-sensical,
pragmatic Victoria Kent wins again.

“So who’s Ellie?” she asked.

Five

John eyed the backpack he'd tossed onto the sand beside him with something close to panic. Lunch. Think lunch. Ignore the question. Start laying out the food. Ham and Swiss cheese on rye, with Grey Poupon. Seedless red grapes, macadamia nut cookies. A couple of those mini bottles of white zin. They'd sit and fill their mouths with food and Vicki would back off, recognizing that he didn't want to talk about Ellie.

He stretched a hand toward the backpack, let it fall back toward his lap, empty. "She was my wife," John said. "We'd known each other all our lives, never planned on marrying anyone else. Even then—" he'd better make that not-so-little problem clear from the start "—even then it wasn't easy being the wife of a cop, but Ellie took it better than most." John stuck his index finger through the strap of the forest green backpack, pulled it an inch or two closer. He played with one of the buckles as he added, "It might have been easier if we'd had kids, but she couldn't. We were talking about adoption when she got sick. Cancer. A year and half of hell. And now... over two years since I lost her."

John acknowledged Vicki's swift murmur of sympathy with an abrupt nod, his face more set in shadowed New England gray granite than she'd ever seen. "I've pretty much avoided women since," he said, abandoning the buckle to stare out over the sparkling blue water of the salt pond. "Why ruin another woman's life, being married to a cop?"

"You didn't give her cancer," Vicki pointed out gently, ignoring his last remark.

"No, but I've retained just enough Catholic conscience to feed a major guilt trip. Like Ellie's suffering was for my sins. Stupid, illogical, irrational. Call it anything you want, but it was either blame myself or blame God. And I could see all the sisters from parochial school lined up, rulers in hand, glaring at me, damning me to eternal hell for even thinking of blaming God."

"And you've been living with this for more than two years?"

"Yeah."

"And you probably didn't even take a vacation?"

"Right." John shifted his attention back to loosening the buckles on the backpack. "As a matter-of-fact... I sort of had to take this one," he mumbled. Giving up on his half-hearted fumbling, he focused on producing lunch. That's what he'd promised, wasn't it? A simple bargain. He'd provide food if she provided the car.

No mention had been made of food for the soul, and yet...

"Oh?" Vicki injected into the pregnant silence. John's last words had sparked a myriad images. Just what had he done to be banished to Cape Cod?

Vicki shivered. The sun was warm, but the world had taken on a chill. Why had she panicked, rejecting the warmth and comfort of the arm so casually flung about her shoulders? John Paolillo wasn't the type to sneak an arm around just anyone. He wasn't the type to sneak anything. He did things straight out and straight up. Though probably not always by the book. Which was probably what got him into trouble.

"Vacation or suspension," John growled, slapping a plastic-baggied sandwich into her hand. "Not much of a choice."

Throughout his grudging talk of Ellie, John had deliberately avoided Vicki's eyes, which he knew would be full of lethal feminine sympathy. Now, however, he couldn't resist sneaking a peak to see how she was taking that last remark. Her blue eyes were wide, alive with curiosity.

John laid out the grapes on a paper plate, loosened the top of a mini bottle of white zinfandel and leaned over to screw it down into the sand near Vicki's right hand. "I guess you've noticed I'm not fond of defense counsels," John ventured as he straightened up, and was answered by something that might have been a snort if it had come from anyone but Victoria Kent. "There was a trial in New Haven, Murder Two. No way the guy should have gotten off, but he had enough money to lawyer up with a local Johnny Cochran wannabee. The victim was a Yale graduate student, lovely girl, only twenty-two."

Even here, in the amazing innocence and clarity of Cape Cod, John could still see the girl's face. Pale in death, framed in long strands of golden brown hair. Ugly

dark bruises on her neck. The sterling promise of quick intelligence, youth, and beauty cut off without hope of a brilliant future.

“The attorney pulled every slimy trick in the book and invented a few new ones while he was at it. When the perp got off, I lost it. Confronted the sleazeball lawyer in a conference room, ended up slugging him.”

“John, you didn’t!” Vicki’s shock echoed through his vivid recollection of the scene.

“I lucked out,” John continued. “The attorney wasn’t the vindictive type—he probably figured his client was just as guilty as I thought he was. Anyway, I picked him up off the floor, dusted him off, apologized, and that might have been that except, of course, somebody was passing by in the hall, heard the ruckus, a crowd gathered...”

“And you got banished,” Vicki murmured from somewhere just behind his ear. Her hand reached out and touched his knee.

John’s mind went blank. Everything vanished. Job. Wife. Disgrace. He was alone with a beautiful woman. A desirable woman. He didn’t even give a damn if she was a defense counsel...

It was high noon on a public trail in a national park.

Appalled by his sudden rush of hormones, John unscrewed the cap of his wine with a vicious twist and downed half the bottle in one swig. “Yeah, I was banished,” he ground out.

“You didn’t get an official reprimand?” Vicki asked as John flaunted his indifference by reaching for a sandwich.

“No. I’d known the attorney since we both used to wrestle in a vacant lot in the old neighborhood. He refused to press charges, so I was told to get lost and stay lost for a week or two and come back with my head on straight. The Captain and his family had rented down here through Marge Snow’s agency, so he made the arrangements.” John took a hefty bite of his ham and cheese, strong white teeth reflecting the brilliant sunlight. “So here I am,” he ended.

Vicki wondered what it was about the September sun turning the lea side of the dune into a cozy shelter, the graceful swooping of the gulls overhead, the stimulation of the clear Cape air. There had to be some reason why it was so easy to be lulled into the warmth of close companionship, to feel the strong empathy of knowing that other people had problem’s as bad, or worse, than her own.

Her lips curled. Or was it simply the camaraderie of being skunked?

Perhaps she could talk to John now, tell him how she, too, had lost it. It would be a relief. Though her own problems now seemed minor compared to his. John had lost his wife and come within a hair’s-breadth of chucking his career. Surely she wasn’t running as close to the wind. Though rejecting Lowell—if she did—and agonizing over a major courtroom victory were certainly not likely to advance her career at Manchester, Lowell and Manchester.

Suddenly, with Vicki’s mind frozen on a tableau of grim and disapproving faces back in Boston, John handed her a cookie. And smiled. Astonished at the glow that

suffused her body—a glow which had nothing to do with noonday sun—Vicki stared at the empty plastic bag that had held her sandwich. She had no recollection of eating it. Confession, she concluded, searching frantically for some semblance of the savvy Boston attorney she had thought she was, was not only good for the soul but seemed to be a stimulant for a few other emotions as well. Emotions that were running amok here in the shelter of the dune with the Atlantic surf pounding in rhythm with the thudding of her heart.

Their eyes met. A fatal error. Brown to blue, ice chips of isolation dissolving in a cauldron of awareness. It was true, Vicki thought in wonder. The earth really did stand still. Even their breathing paused, suspended...

The distinctive ring of a cell phone cut through the sexual haze that enveloped them. Automatically, they both reached for their phones.

“Marge!” John exclaimed with far more cordiality that Vicki thought warranted, “good of you to call. No, I’m doing fine. Vicki’s been kind enough to let me ride with her. They tell me the old buggy’ll be ready this afternoon, but I really appreciate the offer. The Kents are fortunate in their real estate agent.”

Trust Marge Snow, Vicki thought sourly. *No service too large for a good-looking single man*. And he was good-looking, she had to admit. Rugged, but stunningly attractive. How could he possibly have been celibate since his wife...? No way. The women where he worked must have drawn straws, played poker, or simply taken turns following him home. His aloofness was sex appeal on the hoof.

But what had they found when they backed him into a corner. A smugly purring tomcat or a raging tiger?

"I guess we should go."

Vicki looked up to discover John's phone back on his belt. He was starting to pack up the trash left over from lunch. *Gee, thanks*, Vicki growled to herself. She had thought cell phones the greatest invention since electricity. Today, she had her doubts. They'd come *this* close. Or was it all in her head? Was John Paolillo as married to his Ellie now as on his wedding day?

~ * ~

John's car turned out to be a well-worn black Blazer with a front bench seat. Vicki examined the expanse of purple suede with considerable interest. It was not at all what she'd expected from Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo.

"I got it from an ex-cop in Oklahoma," he mumbled gruffly. "He was down on his luck when he hit New Haven and needed someone to take it off his hands."

"Um-m-m," Vicki murmured; turning away to hide her twitching lips. Somewhere under that granite exterior was an adventurer with a kind heart, possibly even a romantic. No, that was going a bit far. But John was exhibiting more possibilities by the moment.

"Why don't I pick up something for supper tonight?" Vicki offered without thinking. Her jaws snapped shut, then flew into babble mode. "Um—I'm sorry. You probably have plans now you've got your wheels back. I'd just gotten used to..." Horribly embarrassed, she trailed to a stop. For heaven's sake, she was as bad as Marge Snow! She should be glad to be rid of him. He was dangerous.

Not because he was a threat to her body—that she could handle—but because she suspected he might be far more—a threat to her hard-won way of life.

~ * ~

“Vicki!” The wrinkled face of the woman behind the counter at the take-out restaurant broke into a broad smile of welcome. Carolyn Holbrook’s skin had been tanned into a weathered map by her many years running a roadside jam and jelly stand in the same location where she now sold everything from country fried chicken to gourmet delicacies to the Cape’s burgeoning band of discriminating visitors and residents. “Wondered if you were going to get down this year,” she boomed. “Read about that trial. Must have been hard on you.”

Tears misted Vicki’s eyes. Of all the unexpected places to find sympathy. “Yes, thanks, Caro,” she gulped. “I needed to get down to the Cape.”

“Cape air, that’s what you need, and plenty of it,” Carolyn Holbrook nodded sagely. “So how are your parents?”

“Looking forward to retirement,” Vicki smiled. “Two more years and they can take the rent money they’ve been saving and make that trip to Europe. They’re counting the days.”

“Good for them!” Caro commended. “Now what can I do for you?”

“How about eggplant parmesan?” came a voice over Vicki’s shoulder. “And asparagus hollandaise,” John added. “And...”—he examined the offerings laid out on the counters—“the blueberry cobbler. That okay with you, Vic? I picked up some more white zin in town.”

Carolyn Holbrook examined John Paolillo with far more intensity than he had turned on the food offerings. Her thick gray brows arched as surprise turned to blatant approval. With a knowing grin disturbing the crinkled leather of her face, Caro shot Vicki a quick wink of approval and proceeded to put together John's order without further question. Vicki didn't know whether to be annoyed or absurdly pleased.

The garage mechanic had interrupted their earlier conversation, and she had slunk away while John was hauling out his credit card. She had not really expected him to follow her. That he had, almost precipitated the mist in her eyes into a full-fledged bawl.

Pride, Vicki. Pride!

Pride goeth before a fall.

And she feared she was falling hard.

Rebound, she reminded herself. A hard court case, followed by guilt. Nerves, sheer nerves. Your good sense is out to lunch, my girl.

Allowing John to pay for the food, Vicki got into her Saab and drove on toward Nauset Heights.

~ * ~

The food was every bit as good as it looked. They shared it in the formal dining area rather than the kitchen, with Vicki fighting off visions of sitting across from John in other places and times stretching into the future.

It was all wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

And how were they to get through another night alone together in this house?

"Ever try surf casting?" Vicki burbled in desperation.

"Surf casting?"

“Fishing—usually at night—with a supersize pole. You stand on the sand and cast out beyond the surf. My father loves it. Goes out every night the tide is right.”

“I’m not much of a fisherman,” John mumbled around the blueberry cobbler. “No time.”

“It’s very relaxing,” Vicki countered, willing him to pay attention. “You could use my father’s pole if you’d like to try it. Carolyn Holbrook is still open, and she usually keeps a bit of bait in her freezer.” An evening at a public beach with John occupied learning the rudiments of surf casting seemed infinitely less dangerous than a long seductive evening trying to keep the walls of the house from closing in until there was nothing left but John and Vicki and a bed. Or the rug in front of a blazing fire...

The piercing look she was getting from those bottomless brown eyes indicated that John Paolillo had not become a detective for nothing. Vicki had no doubt he was reading her mind. “What the hell... why not?” he shrugged. “It’ll give me an A for effort in Vacation 101 that I can haul in front of the captain when I get home.”

~ * ~

“Damn it, Vic, you can’t put squid in the microwave!”

“You can’t use it frozen.” Vicki continued to slit open the package she had just brought back from Carolyn Holbrook’s, dumping the contents into a Pyrex casserole dish.

“Victoria,” John said with slow, near deadly menace, “we cook the food we *eat* in the microwave. That stuff is... gross.”

“Didn’t your parents ever serve calamari?”

“Yeah, but it never looked like that,” John countered stubbornly.

“These,” Vicki pronounced with care, “are nothing but frozen squid, all squished together in a package. I doubt your parents got squid out of Long Island Sound, so they probably bought it frozen, too. And I bet the restaurant kind doesn’t look much different from this.” Vicki topped the contents of the dish with a sheet of waxed paper, set the power level to thaw, and pushed the button, struggling to keep her nose from wrinkling. John was right, of course. Short of a murder scene, the stack of frozen squid was about as gross as it gets.

“I may never eat calamari again,” John groaned. “And remind me not to cook anything in that dish.”

“John,” Vicki groaned, “haven’t you ever heard of soap and water?” She’d never admit she’d already made a mental note of which Pyrex casserole she was using for the squid. After a trip through the dishwasher, maybe she’d just retire it to the back of the cupboard. Let some unsuspecting renter next summer have the honor of using it to prepare supper.

~ * ~

First Encounter beach was as broad and beautiful as Vicki recalled from the times she had accompanied her father. On the bay side, where the flexed arm of the Cape swung to the north as if pointing its fist toward Boston, the surf was gentle, the breeze mild, lapping at the shore like a peaceful lullaby. The great harvest moon had not yet risen behind them on the Atlantic side of the Cape, so the beach was lit only by starlight, each star overhead

seemingly vying with the next to see which could best illuminate the sky.

“So what do I do?” John hissed as he gingerly retrieved the long surf casting rod which had been threaded through the open window of the Blazer.

Vicki scanned the beach. There were at least five or six dark silhouettes lined up at fifty to a hundred-foot intervals along the edge of the low breaking waves. “Why don’t you just watch the men who are already out there?” she suggested, also whispering. To have spoken out loud would have been an intrusion on the perfection of the night, let alone the efforts of the fishermen. Vicki had learned the admonition, ‘Don’t Scare the Fish!’ at a very early age.

“So what am I supposed to do with this thing while I watch?” John demanded a bit plaintively, waving the stout pole in one hand. His other held a pail with the now soggy squid.

“Magic,” Vicki intoned with a broad wave of her hand. She was enjoying knowing something the Great Stone Face didn’t. On the trip up to Eastham she had kept her father’s old metal rod holder in her hand. Now, bypassing the spreadout lineup of surf casters, she found a suitably vacant spot toward the right side of the beach. Moving down to the hardpacked damp sand not far from water’s edge, she jammed the hollow metal cylinder into the sand. “Now stick your rod in it,” she commanded.

Rendered speechless by this guileless remark, John simply stood and gaped at her.

“The pole, John. Put the big end—you know, the one with the reel—into the holder.”

Yeah. Right.

He was glad it was dark. Never in his life had he felt less poker-faced. In daylight Vicki would have caught the outrageous drift of his thoughts in a heartbeat. Surf casting be damned. His quarry was right here beside him on the beach.

Obediently, grateful for an excuse to keep his face away from the starlight, John settled the surf casting rod into the metal cylinder. "Now what?" he prodded. The words came out as a growl.

"Now you go watch and see how the other men are doing it. It's pretty much a man thing," she added, so I'll just stay here so it won't look like an inspection tour. They'll be happy to talk to you, but I might be a bit much. Fishing... well, fishing's kind of a private thing," Vicki added. "It's not exactly a team sport. Or even a spectator sport."

"Oh, great," John groaned. "You want me to strike up a conversation with a bunch of guys who came out here to be alone?"

"You don't have to talk to them unless they look like they want to," Vicki responded with exaggerated patience. "You can just watch." But do go away and stop looking so ridiculously solid and macho and so totally appealing she could only be glad the beach wasn't deserted.

Mumbling under his breath, John set off down the beach toward the dark silhouettes who were patiently casting their lines or standing quietly in their hip waders, evidently feeling nothing more rewarding than the tug of surf on their nylon leaders. A half hour later he was back, feeling not quite so ignorant or incompetent in the art of

surf casting. He had watched the baiting of the large barbed hook, critically examined the casting techniques of five different fishermen, and been invited to plunge into the surf to help land a twelve-pound sea bass. A beauty. With all the confidence of a little information, John plunged his hand into the squid pail and proceeded to bait his hook.

Vicki, after a cheerfully casual greeting on his return, sat back on her blanket and watched in silence. This was not the moment for female advice. On John's first cast, the squid only made it as far as the wet sand at the edge of the bay. Vicki shut her ears to his colorful language. He reeled in, glaring at the sand-covered squid at the tip of the rod. John gathered himself, then gripping the rod in both hands, swung his arms back over his shoulder—without looking—and gave a mighty heave. The squid suddenly zipped by Vicki's cheek, scattering sand and saltwater in an indiscriminate shower.

"Yuck!" Vicki's sharp groan of disgust was almost totally ignored by the grimly exultant fisherman who had just discovered his line had actually made it into the water. "John," Vicki snapped, "you nearly hooked me."

"Uh, sorry," came the distracted apology as the novice fisherman concentrated on getting the feel of the reel. Winding, pausing, winding again.

With a soft shake of her head, Vicki fished a tissue out of her jeans pocket and wiped the muck off the side of her face. It was her own fault. She knew better than to get within thirty feet of a surf caster. So why had she put the blanket down just above the high water mark? Did she really feel the need to be so close?

Yes. The whispered reply from her inner self was embarrassing. How had two people with nothing in common except being on different sides of the legal process end up—in forty-eight hours—as if they were joined at the hip? Two days... and it was almost as if they'd known each other all their lives. As if she were part of John's old neighborhood, or he of hers. The truth was, they still had a lot to learn about each other, but somehow they were friends. Like two castaways alone on a island. Or lost hikers banded together to find their way back to civilization. Each was wrapped in a battle of conscience, of job burnout. Of emotions run amok beneath a brittle coat of "hang tough."

That was the commonality they recognized in each other, Vicki told herself firmly. And that was all it was. The wounded flocking together, back to back against the world. What was that old line from *Jane Eyre*? Something about a string going from his heart to hers? Vicki was glad her sudden grin went unseen as John concentrated on a third cast out into Cape Cod Bay. She doubted that a smelly squid on a fishline was quite what Mr. Rochester had in mind.

Six

First Encounter Beach. She was so accustomed to the name, Vicki thought as she sat watching John's surf-casting efforts, that she hadn't stopped to think about its origin. The sand she was sitting on was the site where the Pilgrims first met the Indians. Where outcast Europeans met the citizens of a primeval world and changed the history of mankind. It probably hadn't seemed significant at the time. A bit of panic, some flying arrows, raised muskets. But, all in all, not disastrous. Neither side could possibly have envisioned the outcome of the Pilgrim's arrival in a land as threatening as it was full of promise.

By the light of the great orange moon now rising behind them, the nearly four hundred-year-old sweep of time that had led Victoria Kent and John Paolillo to this place seemed as full of miracle and mystery as it did of tragedy and bloodshed. In the shadows of the fishermen, now more clearly outlined by a rising moon which was beginning to cast a broad streak of sparkles out over the bay, Vicki could almost see the Indians lying in wait as the Pilgrim's shallop put in to the beach...

She shook her head to clear the mists of time. The world moved on, constantly changing. Whether for better or for worse was best left to the philosophers.

The peacefulness of the night was broken by a sharp grunt from John. His line was whirring off the reel, losing itself in the deep darkness beyond the low-lying white caps. "The brake, John, hit the brake!" Vicki shouted. He stopped his instinctive backing up, fumbled with the reel. The whirring stopped, the heavy rod bent as John took the full weight of whatever denizen of the deep had been unwary enough to try squid for supper.

It was a short-lived battle. As inexperienced as he was, after those first few moments John managed to get the hang of reeling in, playing the fish, reeling some more without letting the creature run with the line. When his catch finally came flopping up out of the surf, Vicki was up to her ankles in salt water, tugging on the line. Her heart plunged. John had hooked a skate. The flat ugly creature eyed her balefully as she pulled it up onto the damp sand. "I'm sorry, John," she panted. "At least a skate doesn't have sharp teeth. You ought to be able to get the hook out without much trouble."

"Oh, I can, can I?" John growled, thrusting the rod down into its holder. "I thought you were the surf casting expert."

"No way," Vicki protested. "It's my father who's the fisherman, not me. I've never taken a hook out in my life." She stood up and backed away. John would manage. After all, any supposedly hard-boiled detective who'd buy a Blazer with purple suede bench seats from an ex-cop in

Oklahoma had to have a soft spot somewhere. John wouldn't kill the skate just to get his hook back.

"Get the flashlight," John commanded, very much back in charge. With Vicki acting as surgical assistant, he had the hook out in less than a minute. After a several gentle nudges of John's foot, the large flat creature disappeared with what appeared to be a flip of elation into the shallow surf. John stood for moment, looking out over the bay, then walked back to the rod, lifted it, and began to reel in what little remained of the line.

After setting the rod back in its holder, he lowered himself onto the blanket next to Vicki. "It was a good idea, Vic," he commented quietly, "but I don't think it's going to work. I spend my life hooking criminals, and all too often they get thrown back into the system, just like that poor fish I landed. And, believe me, if there's one thing I don't need, it's to feel sorry for the bad guy."

"But the skate wasn't a bad guy. He was just looking for a decent meal," Vicki protested.

"Sorry, Vic, but the analogy holds. To me, he was the adversary, the hunted. Which makes him the bad guy. To you, he was just a poor fish having a bad day. Your typical defense counsel's attitude, I might point out."

"Talk about obsessing about your job!"

"So I'm a basket case."

"There's an expression I haven't heard in a while."

"Ready for the booby hatch, the funny farm, nut house," John obligingly supplied. "Or maybe just one brick short of a load," he added. "The euphemisms are endless, the meanings pretty much the same. Anywhere from full-blown paranoia to just plain weird."

“You’re not!”

John leaned back on his elbows, peered up at her from under a thick set of black lashes. “Really?” He wiggled his brows, deliberately suggestive as he lowered himself full length, hands clasped behind his head.

Vicki stared down at him, determined to maintain her cool, most professional façade even when all she wanted to do was to cast herself on his chest and wallow in an overload of sensation. “You’re just overworked,” she declared firmly. “By the time you go back, all will be forgiven, and you’ll be raring to go.”

“Ha!” John’s snort was derisive. “The hell of it is, you’re right. I’m a cop, will always be a cop. It’s like some disease without a cure. I can’t get rid of it. Come mandatory retirement age, I’ll probably be blind and toothless, but they’ll still have to pry off my badge and gun.”

That’s what she thought. Feared. Understood, but found repellant.

“I don’t think I feel the same way about...” Vicki hesitated, not sure she was ready to go this route.

“I showed you mine. You stuck on showing me yours?” Under the dim light of early moonrise, John’s eyes were black holes, brimming with a detective’s endless depths of questions.

Vicki shifted her body, excavating a slightly different dent in the soft dry sand beneath the blanket. She was now nestled in the hollow of his waist, feeling the bulge of his cell phone against her hip, all too conscious of what lay just beyond. Of the tense coil of his body that belied the relaxed image he seemed to be trying to project. Whether

she thought of him as an animal hunting his prey or a time bomb ticking toward an inevitable explosion, John Paolillo was dangerous to her health—body, mind, and soul.

So she had to play it cool. She'd tell him about Lowell... that she was almost engaged. That she had her feet firmly planted on the ladder of success in one of Boston's most prestigious law firms. That she had the life she'd always wanted. After the Saab came a Lexus. Pre-owned maybe, but a Lexus, nonetheless.

Somehow... that wasn't what came out at all.

"My father's a high school principal and Mother's a social worker," Vicki said. "It wasn't easy for them to send me to college and then law school. I helped out with summer jobs, of course, and got some government loans, but it was tough. They were great parents. I can't remember a time I ever doubted that the road they'd mapped out for me was the right one." She shook her head, aware that the black holes never wavered from her face. "I guess that's pretty strange, but it all seemed so right. They'd sacrificed a lot for me, and I wanted to pay them back by being the best at what they wanted me to be.

"I know," Vicki added with a wry twist of her lip, "they loved me and were already proud of me. I really didn't have to push quite so hard. But I did."

A large hand came up and wrapped itself around the fist she'd made in her lap. "And now, nearly ten years later," Vicki admitted, urged on by the warmth of skin to skin, "I've come to the burnout point myself. It's oh-so-easy for me to understand what you're feeling, John. I've got a job which sometimes appalls me and an almost-

fiancé I thought I loved. And, suddenly, the prospect of spending the rest of my life circumscribed by the dictates of conservative Bostonia is terrifying. You'll go back to New Haven. Paolillo the cop. There's no real doubt about who and what you are. But me, I'm beginning to think I'm a fraud, some stranger made up out of other people's hopes and dreams. Not a real person at all."

Vicki stopped, gulped for air. "I'm running scared, John," she whispered, just short of a wail. "I don't know what to do."

A tug of his hand, and her head was pillowed on his chest, his other hand cupped comfortingly against the back of her head. "Well, we're a hell of pair, aren't we?" he murmured. "A couple of cripples. I guess," John added judiciously, "between the two of us we probably make one whole person. What d'you think?"

Vicki burrowed further into his denim jacket; her head moving up until it was on John's shoulder, her hair tucked up under his chin. "Well, short of running home to our mothers, I guess this will have to do," she conceded, making a supreme effort to appear composed even as her heart rate accelerated to the point of suffocation. *What am I doing?* her conscience screamed. Cuddling on a beach with a man I've just met.

"Sometimes, Victoria," John pronounced, the words rumbling beneath her as well as into her ear, "you can be the most difficult, contentious, downright impossible female I've ever met." Vicki went very still. "Our mothers," John mocked. "You'd rather run home to your mother? And me to mine? Are you nuts, woman?" His

huge hand tightened on her hair, a tug stopped just short of being painful.

"I lied." A sibilant, reluctant whisper.

"Yeah. Defense counsels are good at that."

Vicki stiffened, attorney's reflexes instantly ready for a good fight. *But it's true*, whispered her insidious inner voice. *Isn't that what you're doing here on the Cape? You couldn't take it anymore.*

The fight drained out of her. Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea culpa. The world and its myriad problems were all her fault.

"So this guy, this almost-fiancé... how serious is it?"

The specific question was almost a relief. "John," Vicki sighed, "look where we are... what we're doing."

"Oh? This isn't just being friends? Innocence glimmered in every word.

Vicki stifled a groan. If she thought his air of detachment genuine, she'd roll over and die. Dissolve into the sand like an abandoned popsicle. At the moment he'd become her anchor, her lifeline. No matter how unstable that anchor might be, John Paolillo was solid comfort in the midst of turmoil. He was warmth. Light.

Love?

The jury was still out on that one. All Vicki knew was that she needed him. Needed his solid presence here on the beach... in her life. Whatever he was offering, she'd make every effort to return the gesture in kind. Even if they had only these few short days. She'd send him back to New Haven with his head up, eyes sharp, and an attitude his captain couldn't fault.

As for herself... Vicki suspected she already knew the answer to that one. She might, or might not, remain a defense attorney, but she would never be Mrs. Lowell Manchester, the Fourth.

In time-honored tradition, her silence seemed to have been interpreted as acceptance of something more. Possibly even encouragement. Vicki's body clenched, breath hissing between her teeth as John's arm snaked around her lower back, a hand splaying down toward the soft mounds of her *derrière*.

"Chilly?" John inquired, all too casually. "Maybe we should call it a night."

Call it a night! Vicki couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this good, and he wanted to go home? Roaming hands and he still felt nothing?

Thoroughly quashed, Vicki opened her eyes, intent on getting up and stalking off into the night. She blinked. The moon was fully up, lighting the broad strip of beach with all the effectiveness of a wide-angle spotlight. They might as well have been on stage. The nearest fisherman, head turned back over his shoulder, was paused in mid-cast, a fascinated spectator.

"I guess you're right," Vicki mumbled, popping to her feet as if she hadn't just found the resting place of a lifetime. John barely had time to follow her up before she was shaking sand from the blanket, gathering up the thermos of hot coffee, the evening's supply of doughnuts.

Feeling a bit like a squaw out of the Cape's history, Vicki clutched the folded blanket and the food, following behind John who was carrying the rod and pail as they climbed the shallow incline to the parking lot. After

loading her burdens into the back, Vicki moved into the passenger seat to help John maneuver the long rod catty-corner from the back seat out through the open side front window. That chore accomplished to his evident satisfaction, John got into the Blazer, slamming the door behind him, hands coming to rest, white knuckled, against the wheel.

It occurred to Vicki that she was trapped. The tension, hovering there above the purple suede seat, was like some giant beast waiting to pounce. She couldn't tell if John was angry, fishing for words to brush her off... or what. Certainly something was going on behind the granite. He was like a volcano before an eruption, the outside deceptively still, the inside a roaring cauldron of... something close to frightening. There was no way out short of destroying her father's surf casting rod. The back of the bench seat was solid, no escape to the rear. The old expression, between the devil and the deep blue sea, flitted through her mind. Vicki swallowed, slid sideways until she was hugging the door, one of the rod's large metal line guides poking into her arm.

John lowered his forehead to the wheel, fighting his instincts. Hormones, Paolillo. Dammit, it's just hormones. Think Ellie. Think Defense Attorney. Don't do it, don't do it, don't do it! Vicki's cowering over there, ready to run, face pale, blond hair lit by moonlight. She doesn't want you, you bastard. It's all in your head. You can't trust your instincts anymore. That's what you're doing here, isn't it? You're a burnout, a basket case... a failure.

He'd known her what? Not quite forty-eight hours. *Dumb, stupid Sicilian. Who do you think you are?* But he

couldn't help himself. There was no way he could simply put the Blazer in gear and drive home. Long before they reached Nauset Heights, he'd shatter into a million pieces. He needed. He wanted. Had to have...

If he hadn't already accepted that he needed a vacation, he knew it now.

John drew a ragged breath, stretched out his hand. "Vicki?" He was careful not to touch her. "Whatever's happening here"—he was breathing hard—"I've got to tell you I'm not sure I'm going to be able to keep my hands off you. You're going to have to help me, tell me what I should do. Do you want me to move out?"

Dear God, Vicki wondered, why did he have to be so straight? Why couldn't he just take her in his arms...? So she could blame whatever was about to happen on him. *Sure, Kent, just dump it all on John.*

They had both grown up a long time ago. Now that she knew their feelings were marching to the same drummer—a loud, demanding, pulse-pounding drummer. Now that she had faced the fact that she'd run away more to escape Lowell than her job...

She was free. To take a risk. To explore new possibilities. However fleeting or dangerous they might be.

She was free to search for love.

Vicki raised her head and looked across the expanse of purple suede. It wouldn't be easy to love a block of New England granite. The man was hiding behind an icon, a beloved martyr of a wife. And a job that demanded a hundred and ten percent of his time.

She had to be crazy. Stark, raving mad. What was she doing?

~ * ~

John sat ramrod straight, determined to accept rejection like a gentleman, when he felt the warm clasp of feminine fingers. Her hand was fitted into his; there was a faint but discernible tug. With no conscious awareness of his slide across the purple suede, John was astounded to find his arms full of warm, willing woman. She smelled of salt and sea, and tasted of coffee. Her body was boneless, pliable, melting into his. Yet behind the willingness he sensed the faint reserve that told him she was aware this was too much, too soon, but somehow she, too, had no choice.

He hadn't thought it possible to be harder than he already was, but it was happening. There was no way he could hide it, not plastered, lip to lip and hip to hip, as tight as if they were laminated. John was old-fashioned enough to wonder if Vicki was appalled by his lack of control.

Possibly even frightened?

The thought was fleeting, rejected as it was born. Victoria Kent was a tough defense counsel, long past the age of consent. If she was letting him into her life, she knew exactly what she was doing. John shifted his grip, fumbled under her windbreaker, under her shirt, finding bare skin at last. His fingers wandered upward. She made a sound low in her throat; he didn't think it was protest. Oh, hell! He wished they'd bring back the days of no bras. He'd never objected to that particular aspect of the feminist movement.

Being more than slightly out of practice, John drew back from the kiss in which he was drowning, intent on concentrating on bra hooks that seemed to have done a disappearing act. Vicki grabbed him around the neck, pulling him back, her lips brushing provocatively across his. “The front,” she murmured softly. “In the front.” And began to scatter kisses over his cheeks, his eyes, his forehead, his ears, until his fingers turned to thumbs and he didn’t know if he was in the Blazer or on the beach or home in his own bed having an erotic dream.

By the time when, purely by luck and lover’s radar, he found the bra hooks, John was sure he was about to disgrace himself. He was going to explode like some teenage Romeo for whom sex was as uncontrollable as it was a shiny new experience. He was so entwined with Vicki, it was as if they were already one person. Octopus. Isn’t that what girls used to call their dates? He focused on the gooey mass of tentacled squid in the bait pail and felt himself deflate. A little. Just enough to keep from making a fool of himself.

John took a deep breath and concentrated on kissing. Just kissing.

Just kissing. Joke. His hands were doing such a dance that even he began to think he had eight arms. He exulted in the warmth of mounded flesh, nipples peaking under his exploration. One hand found its way to her zipper, under the elastic of her panties, down until the world went away and breathing turned ragged, fogging the windows. Good, was John’s only coherent thought, we can die right here, and our problems will all be solved.

Tap, tap, tap. A distorted face peered through the fogged driver's window.

Oh, shit!

John untangled himself, desperately hoping his bulging fly wasn't visible in the dim light. He slid behind the wheel, opened the driver's side window. All he saw was the uniform as he wondered what sins he had committed to deserve this purgatory.

"Yes, officer?" he managed, blandly.

"Oh, hi!" said Nate Eldredge, peering past John's shoulder. Even by moonlight John could see the officer's chagrin as he recognized Vicki who, fortunately, had had time to rearrange her clothing. "Sorry to bother you," Nate mumbled. "We—uh—we try to keep an eye on the kids, you know. Don't mean to hassle the adults. Sorry about that. I hope you understand."

John noticed how careful Nate Eldredge was not to speak to Vicki, as if not acknowledging her presence made things easier. "Sure," he replied. "Appreciate your position, Eldredge. I've been there a time or two myself. And don't worry, we'll be leaving now."

"I didn't mean to chase you away," the officer countered hastily, looking more and more distressed.

"It's okay. We were leaving anyway. Goodnight."

A flick of a salute toward Vicki, and Nate Eldredge slunk away, obviously almost as embarrassed as the couple he left frozen to the purple suede bench seat.

As John started to put the Blazer in gear, he could feel waves of mortification drifting in his direction. Victoria Kent, of Manchester, Lowell and Manchester, had been caught necking in the front seat of a car like some kid

from high school, not only by the police but by a personal friend. John gritted his teeth against a sexual frustration, which was not as successfully wilted as its physical manifestation. He strongly suspected Nate Eldredge had just put paid to his plans for the evening.

Maybe for the whole damned vacation.

“Look, Vicki, these things happen.” John was pleased by the sound of his cool, calm detachment, when what he was feeling was anything but.

“Not to me they don’t.” It sounded suspiciously as if the attorney from Boston was sulking.

“Not even when you were a kid?” John was patently incredulous.

“I didn’t date much,” came the soft response. “I was considered a bookworm.”

Not to mention being the high school principal’s daughter, John supplied. It was hard to picture this gorgeous creature dateless but, yeah, Vicki was the serious, studious type, or she couldn’t have made it through law school. She’d been eager to fulfill the family dreams, her eyes on the main chance. Yeah... he could believe men had been only a peripheral part of her life.

As women had been to him since Ellie died. So, okay, he could understand that. But now that they’d each been forced to slow down, reassess their lives... embers, long tamped down, had burst into a conflagration. A firestorm neither of them could trust. How much was genuine? How much just basic hunger? A need for the long-denied ultimate closeness?

No matter what the cost.

John grimaced, his hand still on the gear shift. Vicki was sitting over there, leaning against the door, suffering, and he hadn't even given her a reply. Fine date... friend... lover he was. "Vicki," John said, choosing his words with care, "Eldredge was as embarrassed as you are. All he saw was that you're human. And me, too. There's absolutely nothing wrong with a little necking in a dark parking lot. In fact, it's almost obligatory when there's a harvest moon shining down on umpteen miles of bay."

No luck. His attempt at humor did nothing more than plunge her head even farther toward her lap. Almost as if she expected another face to materialize through the fog of the window beside her. The fiancé, maybe?

"Okay," John grumbled, beginning to be annoyed, "maybe what we were doing was too much, too soon. I didn't think so... you can't deny there's something between us. Call it by any name you like, there's only one way this is going to end."

"Yes," Vicki snapped back with the suddenness of a bullet. "I'm going to move to a motel."

"Vic! Use the brains God gave you." *Stupid, idiot female.*

"I'm fighting for survival here, John. "It's my brains I'm trying to use, not... not something—uh—lower."

"Vicki." John laid a light hand on her shoulder. She twitched but didn't edge away. There was, after all, no where to go. "Can we try again? Be friends, not lovers. Spend time together, explore the Cape? We'll take it easy, play it by ear... give us both a chance to see where this is going."

"If it's going."

“Hey, girl, what’s happened to the brave woman who washed skunk off my clothes?”

The answer was soft, seeming to come through clenched teeth, and very much against her better judgment. “All right. To exploring the Cape,” Vicki added firmly, obviously determined to make the terms of her agreement perfectly clear.

He could live with that. Though he could feel a groan of protest from his nether regions. He’d been celibate so long, what were a few more days? Hell, it couldn’t take longer than that, could it? He was Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo. He’d been fighting off women since he was fourteen. What could be so tough about an attorney from Boston?

“Okay,” John agreed with what he hoped sounded like cheerful indifference. “Any suggestions for tomorrow?” he asked as he put the Blazer in gear, turning toward Route 6.

Seven

With great care Vicki maneuvered the Saab over the carpet of brown pine needles that passed for the neighbor's lawn. The blond Labrador, who still occasionally pawed at his nose as if to rid it of a lingering stench, strained at the end of his tether, eyeing Vicki's car with taut suspicion.

There! She'd made it. Vicki bumped back into the sandy ruts of the driveway and eyed the obstruction she had been forced to get around in order to drive into town. Her eyes widened.

Somehow, yesterday, she had missed the large lettering on the Blazer's rear window: BAD ASS BOYS DRIVE BAD ASS TOYS. It was so out-and-out redneck, her mouth hung open. John never... John wouldn't... Surely the slogan had come with the car.

The attorney from Boston was shocked.

All right, so she didn't have much experience south of the Mason Dixon line, but she suspected the slogan went hand in hand with the purple suede seat. A product of another, totally alien, culture. She couldn't picture John driving the Blazer in New Haven. It was a sophisticated

college town, for heaven's sake, in a state that boasted of some of the best educated and wealthiest citizens in the country.

Did he save the Blazer for personal use? Or did he actually drive it on the job?

Vicki's mind boggled. She sat with her hands on the wheel, engine humming, brain scrambling to make sense of what was happening in her life. She hadn't expected to sleep last night, but the Cape's salt air must have gotten to her, because she hadn't replayed every nuance of her day with John more than twice before she'd fallen deeply, dreamlessly, asleep. Her turmoil overcome by a deep-down sense of well-being. Excitement. Hope. But now... she was sneaking out before breakfast, determined not to meet John Paolillo until she had her feet firmly fixed on solid, conservative ground. For the only clarity brought by the morning sun was the certainty that she had a problem. Her emotions were running riot while her head was screaming, "Brake!" as loudly as she had when the skate was running with John's line. The insidious domesticity of sharing another round of blueberry pancakes was out of the question. She had to get away.

And now that she'd caught a glimpse of yet another—some might call it oddball—aspect of John Paolillo's character, she was doubly certain she was right to run.

Sneak.

Do a cowardly flit.

Her cell phone chirped. Vicki fumbled in her deep black leather bag, scattering the contents out onto the seat when her quarry remained elusive, ringing its silly head off. "Yes?" she finally wheezed into the tiny phone.

“Vicki!” Betty Nickerson exclaimed, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” Genuinely puzzled, Vicki waited for a reply.

“About the hunk, silly. Nate says he’s a detective. How could you not mention him?” Betty’s voice rose on a wail of accusation. A girlfriend scorned.

Vicki shuddered. Dear God, what else had Nate told her? “He’s just renting the house, Betty. We’ve done a little sight-seeing together. That’s all there is to it, believe me.”

“Yeah, sure.” Patent disbelief. “Well, whatever,” Betty shrugged off Vicki’s denial, “Nate just called and invited me to dinner tonight and suggested I arrange for you and the hunk to join us.”

Vicki opened her mouth to make automatic excuses. How could she possibly dine with Nate Eldredge after being caught next thing to in flagrante delicto? Her jaws snapped shut as another set of warning alarms sounded. Betty and Nate were having problems. For all Betty’s attempts to be casual, Nate’s invitation had put a note of joy back into her friend’s voice. The dinner date was important, and if Nate felt the need to make it a foursome... if he needed the buffer of another couple’s presence, then Vicki was going to see that he got it. Betty deserved better than to wait years and years for a man who never came to the point.

“Okay,” Vicki agreed. “I can’t answer for John, but I suspect he’ll be glad to go along. I’ll call you as soon as I’ve talked to him.”

“He’s not right there?” Betty sounded disappointed, as if she’d expected to find the two of them glued at the hip. As they’d been the night before. Vicki felt a blush rising to warm the nip of the early morning air.

“No,” she replied shortly. “Actually, I was on my way into town to talk to you.”

“Sorry, Vic, bad timing,” Betty returned. “I’ve already got a lineup outside the door. All the mothers are sewing for school, and the grammas are starting their Christmas gifts. I’m going to be swamped. Maybe we can hide out in the ladies’ room for a while tonight.”

“Sure,” Vicki sighed, head sagging toward the wheel. “I’ll get back to you as soon as I’ve talked to John. Bye.”

Once again, Vicki eyed the slogan on the Blazer’s rear window with loathing. The entire world was conspiring against her. She was falling off a cliff onto jagged rocks and there wasn’t a soul to provide a safety net. Betty had been her only refuge. Once upon a time, Nate might have been able to help... but not after last night. In fact, now that she thought about it, the problem with Nate still loomed. How was she going to be able to hold up her head while sharing dinner with him?

Or was this Nate’s way of making amends? His attempt to solve two problems with one double date?

Hm-m-m. Maybe Nate’s idea wasn’t so crazy. A double date in a public place was certainly preferable to sharing another intimate dinner with Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo.

And, let’s face it, it gave her a good excuse for not running away. A reminder that she had agreed to their

exploring the Cape together. To each taking the edge off the other's loneliness.

Though they'd left that last bit unsaid.

With a sigh that was close to a groan, Vicki turned off the Saab's ignition. She looked up to find John leaning against the pillar at the top of the porch steps, regarding her with such a penetrating stare that she felt like a specimen pinned under a microscope. Her emotions did a purely primitive quake. He was the hunter; she, the hunted. There was no way she was going to escape.

And with every moment that passed, she was less and less certain that she wanted to.

~ * ~

"Steamers!" Nate Eldredge chortled, rubbing his hands together in eager anticipation as Vicki caught the look of horror flickering behind John's granite facade as he gazed at the heaped-high platter of smoky white little-neck clams. Though the look was swiftly quashed, it was so close to that of the girl from California on her first sight of a whole red lobster that Vicki had to choke back a laugh. John had been urged on by Nate's and Betty's assurance that he would love the clams, but the mountain of mollusks in front of him looked enough to choke a horse. It was also apparent that he had anticipated something closer to the modest platter of six raw oysters on the half-shell that Nate had also ordered. Instead, John was facing an eight-inch-high mound of clam shells, steamed just enough to make it possible to snap the shells apart in order to reach the body of the clam whose long rubbery-looking neck was all that protruded outside the shell.

Helpfully, Vicki leaned toward John's ear. "You pull them out, dip them in the bowl of broth, then into the bowl of butter," she hissed.

As he turned toward her, dark eyes gleamed with a hint of danger. "Why the broth?" John hissed.

"Cleans out the sand."

Lightning flashed from two pools of brown gone ominously black. Vicki could sense John gathering his determination to eat the darn things and possibly flatten Nate later. Obviously, Mama and Papa Paolillo had never served steamed clams. But there was no way the detective from New Haven was going to be outgunned by a deputy chief from Orleans. John had already been the victim of Nate's one-upmanship, Vicki recalled, when, on their arrival at the restaurant, he discovered the local cop had arranged a cop-to-cop surprise. The Old Jailhouse Tavern was the former home of an Orleans constable; the stone room they were dining in had once been an actual jail cell. John made all the appropriate noises, acknowledging Nate's wry joke with amused appreciation, but now, Vicki could see, there was absolutely no way he was going to be faked out of eating those clams. Even if he choked on them.

Deliberately, Vicki drew the conversation toward herself. "My grandfather would go out to the mud flats almost every morning," she said, "and come back with six or eight oysters in an old galvanized pail. He'd sit on the back step, swish them around in the water in the pail to rinse them off, then pry them open with his big knife, and slide the whole slimy mess down his throat."

“And put you off shellfish for life,” John commented as he wiped a glistening coat of butter off his mouth.

Vicki grinned. “Right. Well, almost,” she amended as she started to peel yet another of her dozen shrimp boiled in beer. “Shrimp don’t count.”

“Sure they don’t.”

After the first two or three clams, John almost looked as if he were enjoying himself. It wasn’t so bad, Vicki mused, this double date. There had been a minute or so of tension when the two couples met in the lobby, the men radiating those invisible messages known only to the male of the species. Silent questions asked and answered. Warnings sent. And then Betty had imparted the history of the restaurant, and Vicki had seen John mentally throw up his hands in defeat, conceding this round to Nate Eldredge. She gave him points for being a good sport.

Much later, not having quite made it through all of their French bread covered with bacon, onion, shrimp, scallops, crabmeat, Parmesan and hollandaise sauce, Vicki and Betty staggered off for their promised visit to the ladies’ room. The door had barely closed behind them when Betty burst out, “I don’t care where you got him, girl, this one’s a keeper. Don’t let him get away!”

“Betty,” Vicki groaned, “I told you, I’m almost engaged.”

“Forget almost,” Betty snapped back. “This one’s for you.”

“He’s still in love with his wife. She died,” Vicki added on a gulp, surprised by the near wail of a truth she hadn’t really acknowledged until now.

“How long?”

“Over two years.”

Betty gave a vigorous nod. “Long enough. So get off your duff and do something about it. There’s hot Italian blood there somewhere, girl. You’re nuts if you don’t stir it up a bit.”

“That’s not the problem,” Vicki muttered, suddenly tongue-tied.

“Oh-h-h?” The simple word held a myriad questions.

“We have nothing in common,” Vicki muttered, turning her head to hide a startling rush of tears.

“Duh!” Betty snorted. “Nate and I have everything in common, and look at us. A zillion years of nothing.”

The door swung open, and a mother with young daughter entered the room. Vicki’s mouth snapped shut on the expression of commiseration she had been about to offer. A fine pair they were, she thought a few minutes later as she washed her hands and inspected her face for a telltale trace of tears. For herself, the timing was too fast; for Betty, much too slow. But that was life. Things seldom went the way they were expected. Coping with what life dished out was what made it interesting.

If only she could believe that. If only she could convince herself that meeting John Paolillo had been something other than a disastrous glitch in the mapping of her life.

~ * ~

Nate Eldredge’s blue eyes were alight with amusement as he tossed a deliberate challenge at John. “I thought you were going to choke on that first clam.”

“Yeah, well, you just come down to New Haven and my folks will fix you up with a nice helping of calamari,”

John countered, allowing a quirk of his lip to reveal that he understood the sparring was all in fun. Well... mostly.

“Cala-what?”

“Calamari. Squid.”

“Shit!”

“Yeah, well, some people think so,” John deadpanned.

“So now you know how I felt about the clams, though I admit the darn things weren’t so bad once I got going.”

“Swallowed them whole, did you?” Nate’s expression was a shade too close to a taunt.

John raised a noncommittal black brow. That did it. He’d had enough. The hick cop was asking for it. Time to turn the screw from the other side. John sat back in his chair, regarded Nate Eldredge with the “good cop” version of his Great Stone Face. Vicki had given him a quick background on the couple from Orleans. He didn’t think Nate Eldredge had any right to his air of smug superiority. Though he had to concede the Orleans cop a few points for refraining from any mention of that little incident at First Encounter Beach.

John’s opening salvo was deliberately casual. “I understand you and Betty have known each other for a long time,” he said.

“All our lives.” Nate’s tone was calm, but John could sense his shoulders squaring for battle.

“Seems like a real nice girl,” John nudged.

“Sure,” Nate agreed, shifting in his chair as he began to suspect where the conversation was headed.

“Like maybe the kind of girl you shouldn’t let fade away into an old maid.”

“Vicki put you up to this, didn’t she?” Nate demanded.

“No,” John snapped back. “Admittedly, Vicki told me that you two had been an item for years, but I’m just commenting on what I see. And, sure, it takes a hell of a lot of nerve to poke my nose into your business, but I had a good marriage once, and I hate to see a man passing up something as fine as Betty Nickerson. The girl’s in love with you, anybody can see that. If you don’t want her, you ought to let her off the hook. Even if it hurts like hell, it’s better than dangling the bait in front of her nose forever. Don’t you think it’s time to fish or cut line?”

Nate’s fingers whitened around his beer mug as he fixed his gaze on the stone wall behind John’s head. “My father was a charter boat captain,” he said in a voice John had to strain to hear. “I was the youngest of six kids. Mom and dad married right out of high school, and I can’t remember a moment of my life when they weren’t fighting. Money, kids, the in-laws, what’s for dinner. You name it, they fought over it. I swore I’d never let that happen. The idea of marriage scares the hell out of me.” Embarrassed by his revelation, Nate took a long pull on his beer.

“As explanations go,” John conceded, “that’s a pretty good one. But since you’ve got such a good idea of what you don’t want, you ought to be able to make sure your marriage doesn’t turn out that way. I married young and never regretted it, but in your case I’d say you were right to wait until you were mature enough to handle it. And you are, aren’t you?” John challenged, focusing his most lethal “pin the perp to the chair” look on the Deputy Chief from Orleans.

John thought he heard a faint mumble of agreement just before Nate shot to his feet to pull out Betty's chair. The women were back. Looking bland and innocent. John strongly suspected they too had managed a few significant moments of private conversation. Would any of it matter? Or were they all four crying on the wind, fantasizing neat happy endings where none existed? More drunk on Cape Cod air than on beer?

Were they seeing what they wanted to see and not what life was going to allow them to have?

And since when had he been such a wimp? Life dealt blows, but it was also what you made it. What you beat out of it by sheer willpower, crafted by cold determination. John Paolillo had found something he wanted and, by God, he was going to have it.

~ * ~

Vicki sipped at her coffee, watching the men dig into matching mountainous helpings of Boston cream pie. She and Betty, at that stage of the meal where the thought of anything more than coffee made them slightly nauseous, had passed on dessert.

Vicki sighed as she eyed John from behind her coffee cup. If only the simple sight of him didn't make her toes curl...

They'd managed the day quite well, she thought. Strictly in companion mode the whole time. They'd driven up Cape to Barnstable, then Sandwich. Taken a look at the home of the Cape's largest fishing and charter fleet, then spent the remainder of the day at Heritage Plantation and the various museums in the town named after its English counterpart on the coast of Kent. A name

made forever famous by an eighteenth century Earl of Sandwich who, while in a twenty-four-hour fit of gambling fever, ordered meat to be put between two slices of bread, thus creating the first sandwich.

Vicki had been amazed at how well John fitted in among Sandwich's charming antiques, even its famous glass museum. She would have sworn he'd be like the proverbial bull in a china shop. Instead, the varied colors in the museum's stained glass windows had twinkled down on a dark head bent in appreciation over the cranberry glass, milk glass and the other treasures from around the world. If Vicki thought she occasionally caught John's lips turned up in amused tolerance, she could scarcely blame him. She could only hope she would behave as well if he dragged her to a boxing match.

Whoa! Appalled at her fall into gender stereotypes, Vicki bit her lip, reaching once again for her coffee cup. She needed something to hide behind. Would the day ever come when people could avoid the conditioning of Girl—Doll, Boy—Baseball Bat? She could only hope so.

Meanwhile, no need to feel guilt. If there weren't a difference between the sexes, what a dull place the world would be. If she was basking in the glow of sitting next to Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo, so be it. If a woman couldn't enjoy having dinner with a hunk, even a hidebound hunk with a dead wife complex...

"Well, here you all are!" Marge Snow sailed up to their table like a yacht going into the turn around the last racing buoy. Her words encompassed them all, but her eyes were only for John, Vicki noticed sourly. "Are you enjoying the

Cape?” she cooed, draping herself over the back of his chair.

“Very much.” A wealth of meaning seemed to be hidden in John’s polite response. Vicki thought she heard a choking sound from Betty. Nate Eldredge suddenly seemed to have developed as much of a stone face as the walls lining the old jail in which they were sitting.

“Well, if there’s anything I can do for you, anything at all, you just let me know.” Marge’s hand squeezed John’s shoulder. With a jaunty wave of her other hand to indicate she hadn’t completely ignored the other three at the table, she moved off, leaving Vicki to analyze her own sudden surge of rage.

She couldn’t be jealous. It wasn’t possible. She’d met John Paolillo in the wee hours of Thursday morning. This was Saturday night. And, besides, he’d shown absolutely no interest in Marge Snow. And yet... if she looked in a mirror, Vicki bet she’d see green. Marge Snow was a menace. Worse than the girl from California and her stupid lobster. John was hers. Only hers.

And Ellie’s.

When he wasn’t wholly married to the New Haven Police Department.

She was a sad case, Vicki acknowledged. Three days, and she was as possessive as the proverbial dog with a bone. And yet, they were wrong, completely wrong, for each other.

But how could she possibly ignore him? She was living with him, for heaven’s sake!

Well, sort of.

All she had to do was make the slightest move of encouragement...

Vicki missed the fact that the bill had been paid, chairs scraped back. John had her by the arm, guiding her through the maze of diners. Friendly farewells in the parking lot. As Vicki watched Nate open the car door for Betty, she could only hope that her friends were headed for some kind of reconciliation... possibly, at long last, something more. As for herself... she and John seemed to be the ultimate contrast to Nate and Betty's snail-paced romance. Three days shouldn't produce such turbulent emotions. Everything was too fast, too intense. John might want her, but he couldn't possibly be feeling what she was feeling or he wouldn't be able to keep his hands off her.

As Vicki turned the Saab toward Beach Road, she was grateful she was driving. Otherwise... otherwise the attorney from Boston might have been brought up on a charge of wandering hands. Automatically, she kept the car moving toward the waiting house on the edge of the salt pond. Beside her, John loomed, a rugged, silent silhouette. Waiting.

Think of something else, stupid! Think conflict. Think oil and water.

They'd had a confrontation that morning over who was going to drive. John had caught her stunned expression when she'd seen the words on the Blazer's rear window. That redneck slogan with the three-inch high letters. He'd glared at her over scrambled eggs and bacon, accused her outright of being a snob when she had insisted on taking the Saab on the day's excursion. It wasn't quite true, Vicki insisted to herself. Okay, so she needed control. Needed to

hold the steering wheel in her own competent hands. But... truthfully... well, John was probably right. She just hadn't been able to picture herself arriving at the world-famous Sandwich Glass Museum in an SUV proclaiming, BAD ASS BOYS DRIVE BAD ASS TOYS.

Obviously, she had been a proper Bostonian too long. Too much of Manchester, Lowell and Manchester had rubbed off. Tomorrow, Vicki promised herself. Tomorrow she'd let John drive.

If there was going to be a tomorrow.

She pulled into the driveway behind the Blazer, cut the engine, hastened to gather her belongings, open the car door.

"How about some B&B while we discuss what we're doing tomorrow?" John suggested with what Vicki identified as all the smoothness of a practiced Don Juan. Never mind that he had proclaimed himself close to celibate.

"Better not," she mumbled, sliding toward her escape into the cool night air.

"Scared?" John taunted. "I'm just a harmless old pussycat. Overworked, but not oversexed."

"Hah!" Vicki's feet hit the sandy rut of the driveway. As she started down the path at the side of the house on the verge of running, she heard John's door slam.

"French toast. Nine o'clock," he called after her. "Let's be lazy tomorrow, maybe stick around town."

Vicki stopped but didn't dare turn around. She had to get away before her knees caved in. Before the sizzling waves sweeping between them fried her brain, and her heart overwhelmed her head. "Sure," she said in a voice

just loud enough to carry the ten feet back to the car. “See you in the morning.”

The moon rising over Nauset Beach was so gorgeous it hurt to look at it. It loomed so large, it appeared to be rising from behind the high dunes a quarter mile away. No one should have to look at a moon like that alone, Vicki whispered to herself. It was a lover’s moon. A moon that urged people to risks they shouldn’t take. Risks that could only end in pain and heartbreak. The death of deep-down hopes and dreams.

But what was life without risks? Vicki thought of the successful risks she’d taken in the courtroom. The lack of risk in her relationship with Lowell Manchester. Risks did not always result in disaster. Important gains demanded risk. The better things in life didn’t just walk up and plop themselves into a person’s lap. If she wanted to explore the possibilities of a relationship with John Paolillo, she was going to have to go out on a limb, throw herself open to hurt. Take a chance. She was thirty years old; he was probably pushing forty. It wasn’t as if they were hurting anyone but themselves.

Lowell.

Vicki lowered herself onto her bed, propped her head in her hands. Would Lowell care? Frankly, she doubted he would feel anything worse than momentary outrage that she had been unable to appreciate the great honor being paid her by Lowell Manchester IV. He’d sulk for perhaps a week, then move on to the next suitable candidate for acquisition by the House of Manchester.

At least she hoped so.

With wry resignation Vicki shot the bolt on the efficiency apartment's door. What had she expected? That John would break his word and pursue her to her basement lair? No, she had to give him credit. John Paolillo wasn't that kind of man. Without some sign from her, some indication that she'd changed her mind, he'd hold the volcano trapped behind cold granite. Forever, if necessary.

Was there a volcano?

Oh, yeah.

The soft sigh on the wind through the pines, the faint lap of the waves in the salt pond at the foot of the low dune outside her door... nothing could lull her to sleep tonight. John was up there, just above her, going through the same motions. Preparing for bed. Thinking what? The same erotic thoughts?

Very likely.

Vicki ground her teeth, dragged the pillow over her head. There was no respite from the waves of desire that seemed to vibrate straight through the floor.

She was cracking up. She should call Marge Snow and say, "Come and get him. He's driving me nuts."

But it wasn't going to happen. John Paolillo was hers. All hers.

Eight

If he weren't so damnably aware of the woman stretched out beside him, he might almost be enjoying himself, John thought as he felt the warmth of a bright September sun on his bare back. Under the right conditions relaxation wasn't so bad. Exposure on the great expanse of Nauset Beach wasn't to his taste, but a small sandy beach sheltered by a stand of gnarled, wind-swept pines had its attractions. Particularly, the steel-willed wisp of a blond lying so close his pulse rate was in a race with the wildly erotic images pounding through his brain.

Too bad they weren't alone. Even here, in this hidden place, he'd had to squeeze the Blazer into the last possible space in the minuscule parking area. But they'd managed to find a place for their blanket on a bed of pine needles not ten feet from the glassy calm waters of the small fresh water pond. Nice spot, he had to admit. Score one more for Vicki's knowledge of the region. A couple of towels, a Carolyn Holbrook picnic, and they were set for a peaceful Sunday afternoon. The only problem being that keeping busy, like their unrelenting round of touristy stuff the day before, was all that was preventing him from breaking his

vow to be a cool companion. A celibate idiot. John drew a deep breath and forced himself to consider the alternate possibilities.

Truthfully, he didn't give a damn about any other woman. He was right where he wanted to be. Side by side with Victoria Kent. The only drawback being that her stunning figure—marvelously displayed in a turquoise one-piece suit which matched her eyes—might as well have been encased in a suit of medieval armor. Her face was just as unrevealing, as if it too were concealed behind a gleaming metal helm. Hell, let's face it, he wasn't getting anywhere with this woman. After years of disinterest, punctuated by minimal moments of purely medicinal libido, he was suffering arousal to the point of both discomfort and embarrassment. The girl was killing him! What kind of a masochistic nut was he anyway?

It was a good thing the pine needles presented a soft cushion. John was ready for a dip in the pond, but he didn't dare stand up.

"Cape Cod ponds are very deep," Vicki offered, her mouth so close to his ear, his whole body jerked in response. The pine needles were taking a beating.

"Umm?"

"They say they're the holes left when the glaciers melted, sort of the last gasp of the Ice Age. Up in Truro you can see smaller holes where the water evaporated, leaving giant pockets gouged into the soil. But in this area the glacier holes were deep enough that the water stayed, forming ponds. They're sort of like giant kettles sunk into the ground. Really deep."

“Isn’t that dangerous?” John the cop queried, discomfort momentarily forgotten. “How come there’s no lifeguard?”

“There is during the height of the Season.” He caught the shrug of Vicki’s fine, very fine, shoulders. The woman was definitely a piece of work. If he didn’t get her into bed... soon... *Put it in neutral, Paolillo. Think safe. Innocuous. Think... parents. Yeah, that was it. Parents.*

“Do your parents live in Massachusetts, Vic?” John was proud of his casual tone.

“Oh, yes. They’d never go far from the Cape. We’re not just summer people. I was raised in Orleans. My father was principal of the high school until I was in eighth grade. Then he had a chance for a better-paying job in Springfield and decided he should take it. And Mom could make more money there, too. I remember feeling guilty because I knew they were only doing it because of my college tuition. My mother’s family is something like tenth-generation Cape Codders. Lots of history, no money. We had a house so small I had to sleep upstairs in an open attic, and there was just one big hot air grate for the whole house. But it was a wrench to leave—even for the promise of my very own bedroom with pretty wallpaper.”

Vicki sighed, her warm breath once again sending an explosion of electricity to all John’s overeager extremities. He was sure his ears must be bright red. “We moved,” Vicki added, “but left our hearts behind. Fortunately, six years ago, Marge Snow was able to find the house of Nauset Heights for us. And Springfield’s close enough so my parents can get here for a lot of weekends off season.”

Six years, John thought. Yes, the timing was right. Only after Vicki finished law school had her parents finally been able to find their way back to the Cape. Salt of the earth people, the Kents. He was afraid he'd like them. Just as Vicki was worming her way into his heart and mind as well as his libido. He had to face it. The more he knew about Victoria Kent, the more he liked her. She wasn't the spoiled rich girl he'd thought her, playing at defending the masses. She'd worked hard, her parents had worked hard. She'd earned her place in the world. But was it a worthwhile place? A justifiable place?

Hell, no!

He might like her, but he couldn't condone what she did for a living. No way.

Run, John run! Get out now.

John grimaced as he shifted his position on the blanket. His body was paying no attention to logic. It seemed he was stuck with Victoria Kent, the classic example of the All-American Untouchable, because she made him feel like a kid again. Made him feel things he'd forgotten existed.

Made him aware that he was a man and not just a cop.

A high-pitched scream cut through the peaceful Sunday afternoon. In full cop mode, John was on his feet, running across the small strip of sandy beach before he even had time to think about what he was doing.

"My son," a woman sobbed, standing hip deep in the pond. "He's gone."

"Are you sure he's in the water?" John snapped. "Maybe he's in the woods."

“No, no! He was playing right here,” the young woman vowed. “I only took my eyes off him for a second. I was diapering the baby... and now he’s gone. I can’t find him anywhere!” Her voice rose on a wail of near hysteria. On the shore, an answering wail rose from a baby lying tucked into his carrier on a blanket in the sand.

Inwardly, John winced. The situation had all the makings of a tragedy. Diapering took more than a second. The kid could be anywhere. But if he was in the woods, they’d find him. In the water, and it could already be too late.

“Call 911,” he called to Vicki. For a moment their eyes met, and then, even as she did as she was told, she watched, fascinated, as John turned all cop, scattering sharp orders in every direction. In no time at all three older men had set off to scour the woods, while their wives gathered around the frantic mother and baby. Everyone else, except other mothers with small children to watch, had splashed into the water to a depth nearly neck level on the shortest, then formed a long line across the beach, with John at the center. Slowly, step by step, they moved back toward the beach, heads down, feet shuffling side to side, searching... searching.

Splashing ashore, empty handed. Nothing, absolutely nothing.

“Kid’s in the woods,” someone grumped.

“Best swimmers only,” John barked. “Those who can dive.” With a jerk of his head, he ran through the shallow water at the edge of the pond, dove in, and headed out toward deep water. Vicki and four men followed him out.

But she'd spent too long at a desk. The water was nearly pitch black and surprisingly cold, as if the glacier had melted only yesterday instead of eons ago. Three times groping the bottom ten or more feet down and she knew she had to give up. John didn't need to have a second rescue on his hands.

Vicki dropped down on the small strip of tree-ringed sandy beach and watched the other would-be rescuers drop out one by one, sloshing back to shore, gloomy and defeated. Finally, only John and a young twenty-something were left, each demonstrating a remarkable ability to stay under water for long periods. Each time, her heart was in her mouth before John's dark head rose up for a few gasping breaths before plunging once again beneath the surface. Vicki thought of every tale she'd ever heard about a would-be rescuer losing his life. Oh, God, dear God!

Minutes passed like hours. The younger man surfaced, looked hopefully around, took in the group of solemn faces clustered on shore. It was too late, the faces said. Too much time had passed. The wail of the approaching ambulance made his decision for him. Shaking his head, he walked wearily, dejectedly, toward shore.

How long could John keep it up? Vicki wondered. This time it seemed as if he'd been down forever. Would the emergency crew arrive to find they had two victims to search for?

There was a roiling of the dark waters. A tangle of something that might have been a creature from the deep, materializing into John the cop clutching the body of a small boy in his arms. A cry of triumph went up from the

shore. Followed by sudden silence as everyone realized just how long the child had been in the water. John's face was grim as he struggled to shore, laying the small limp form on a blanket next to the baby.

As John wondered if he had the strength left for CPR, he heard the dying scream of a siren and raised his head to see the EMS crew racing across the beach.

There was a God. He handed over the boy, then collapsed on the sand next to Vicki, his head between his knees. He'd never felt so over the hill in his whole damn life. If the kid died...

Warm arms enveloped his dripping shoulders. "You were great," Vicki whispered. "I was so scared. I thought we'd lost you both."

John was too exhausted to be macho. "So did I," he gasped.

The drama beside them continued. The boy—a child of about eight. The emergency medical crew in their practiced rhythm. The horrified mother, the baby, the anxious ring of spectators. Time was passing with no sign of life from the small body.

John was beginning to shiver. Vicki wanted to get him a shirt, but they were all frozen in place, unable to move, everyone willing the EMS on the success, willing the child to survive.

An excited shout from someone on the EMS crew. A slight movement, a cough, from the small figure on the blanket. Followed by a shriek from the mother, cries of joy, even sobs, from the crowd. John closed his eyes, saying prayers he had refused to mouth since the early days of Ellie's illness when he had still believed in such

things. He became aware that people were slapping his back, shaking his hand. His shirt had miraculously appeared. But all he felt was Vicki's arms, one around his shoulder, the other hugging his chest. He ought to get up and get out of here, but his legs had turned to water. John Paolillo, who could chase a perp for blocks at a full run, had all the strength of a marshmallow man. Was this what pushing forty meant? Maybe he had some low-level version of the bends.

He'd be damned if Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo was going to be seen leaning on a woman's arm while she helped him into the Blazer.

So he wasn't the iron man he used to be. John began a series of slow deep breaths. Just having Vicki's arms around him ought to be all the resuscitation he needed. But it wasn't just physical exhaustion that had him pinned to the sand. It was fear. Fear he was going to lose the kid the way he lost Ellie. Fear that all his efforts, his prayers, just weren't going to be enough. A reminder that life was frequently far from beautiful, and he was a fool to think he could have a second chance at the brass ring.

Someone was asking questions. He could hear Vicki answering for him. Which was quite enough to bring Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo scrambling to his feet. If there was one thing he didn't need, it was some city slicker defense counsel speaking for him, or finding himself plastered all over some hick town newspaper. "Come on," he growled, grabbing Vicki under the elbow. "Let's go. Show's over."

He scowled as Vicki smiled at the white-haired woman who had been asking questions. He nearly went ballistic

when she added a Men!-what-can-you-do-with-'em shrug. John grabbed Vicki by the elbow and propelled her to the car. He paused just long enough to grab their picnic and the blanket, which he tossed into the back seat with little regard for the full bottles of Sam Adams.

“John!” Vicki breathed in warning as he threw the Blazer into reverse.

He paused, foot on the brake, and looked around. There had been a wealth of meaning in that one soft word. The expletive which exploded through his thin blue lips raised his companion's brows. John shoved the Blazer into park, switched off the ignition, and allowed his head to sag onto the arms he'd crossed over the steering wheel.

Until the ambulance which was blocking the narrow road left, they were all here to stay.

John sunk his teeth into the pad of his thumb. At least he was no longer suffering from a hard-on.

Life was hell.

~ * ~

They emptied the picnic basket while seated at the handcrafted cherrywood dining room table. Conversation was sparse, nearly monosyllabic. After lunch, they made an attempt to watch the Red Sox, who seemed, once again, to be blowing a winning streak by giving away a game to the Yankees. John sat on one side of the living room sofa, his feet propped up on the marble-topped coffee table. Vicki was on the opposite end, her feet curled under her as if to make as little target as possible for the sensual onslaught of the sizzling need that arced from one side of the couch to the other.

Except... more and more, Vicki was beginning to feel that the seething emotions were all on her side. In the course of the baseball game she learned about John's brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, parents and grandparents, interspersed with a few cop stories. She learned, however, absolutely nothing about John Paolillo, past, present or future. His mouth spoke; there was even an occasional touch of wry humor. But the man who'd given off waves of desire while lying next to her at the pond, the man who'd begun to make love to her in the Blazer last night, was gone. Retreated so far behind layers of protective coating that she might have been talking to a stranger, someone she'd just met at a cocktail party.

Was he worried about the child? Vicki doubted it. They'd called the Cape Cod Hospital and discovered that the little boy was going to make a full recovery. So what had happened?

Maybe this frozen-man syndrome was John's way of dealing with the intimacy of their situation. His way of acknowledging their agreement to be nothing more than tourist companions. His deliberate rejection of the undeniable sexual attraction that charged the air between them, that surge of pure chemistry which was absolutely the only thing they had in common.

Which made complete sense.

Except that she no longer wanted to be just friends.

The detective and the defense attorney. Mortal enemies. But Vicki had never wanted anything more in her whole life than she wanted John in her arms, in her bed.

In her life?

That last was questionable. There was no way Detective Lieutenant John Paolillo fit into her life. Or he in hers.

But as for here and now...

In the here and now, she was being a fool. Practicing caution where none was needed. They were strongly attracted to each other... living under the same roof. Far, far over the age of consent.

So now she was ready—a bit frightened, but ready—and John had retreated behind some Iron Curtain of his own making.

Maybe he just needed a sign...

A surge of hope brought Vicki up off the couch, returning a short time later with a generous helping of scotch for each of them. “Feeling better?” she asked with a soft smile as she handed him his drink.

“No problem.” John took a hefty swallow, fixed his gaze on the blank television screen across the room. The Red Sox had lost. “Look, Vic, stop fussing,” he added on a growl, “I do rescues for a living. It’s no big deal.”

“Yes, I know... but something seems to be bothering you.”

“I’m fine!” The words snapped across the couch like a sling shot.

Vicki decided to brave it out. Having made her decision—at last—she wasn’t going to let a little growl scare her away. “I—I was going to offer to massage your neck—I should have thought of it earlier, but...” Her voice trailed away as she was caught in piercing brown beams

that seemed to reflect some odd mix of speculation and agony.

“Mmm.”

“Is that a yes or a no?”

Slowly, as if projecting resignation, a noble effort to humor her, John shifted his feet onto the floor, turning to present his back to Vicki’s end of the couch. She was tempted to get up and stalk down the stairs, not forgetting to slam the door on her way back to the safety of her room. Except her room wasn’t really safe anymore. No where within a wide radius of John Paolillo was safe. She was well and truly hooked. Though Vicki strongly suspected he didn’t give a damn. Why should he care about the feelings of a defense counsel from Boston, however feminine the packaging? She was no more than a port in a storm. A convenience he was nobly trying to ignore.

And she was egging him on.

Vicki scooted across the couch, stared for a moment at the rugged shoulders presented for her inspection. She had to be out of her mind. This was that slightest sign of encouragement she hadn’t been going to give. Vicki swallowed hard, raised her hands.

She might as well have chosen to give a massage to one of the statues in the Gardner Museum. John’s muscles were so tight it would take a rollover from a tank tread to loosen them up.

But she kept at it, her hands gradually moving up from his shirt-clad shoulders to the bare neck showing beneath the slight wave of his short black hair. John never made a

sound. Not an um or ah or appreciative groan. Disconcerting. Way disconcerting.

But not as bad as finding John's shirt slipping down his back to fall in a rumpled heap in the tiny space between them. He'd unbuttoned it. And she hadn't even noticed.

She was thirty years old, her virginity gone in a burst of curiosity some ten years earlier. Vicki freely acknowledged that she'd started this, feeling—among other things—challenged by John's indifference.

And now he was escalating...

He probably just wanted a proper massage.

Yes, that was it. Bare skin to bare skin was best for a massage. After all, there were years of tension in those shoulders. By helping John she was helping herself, Vicki rationalized. A little platonic give and take, that's all it was. They each needed to be needed. John had had a child to rescue. She had John. In the end they'd both feel better.

Except Vicki wasn't quite sure what the end was. They were both emotionally exhausted by the incident at the pond. There was no romantic moonlight; the sun was still glinting off the calm waters of the bay just outside the window. A massage was only a small step toward first base.

What was she doing? her senses screamed, warning her off.

Her hands kept on attempting to knead the hard flesh beneath her fingers. The bare hard flesh.

Vicki's fingers crept to the front of John's shoulders, bringing the fullness of her breasts against his back. She thought she felt a tremor ripple through him.

Progress. Infinitesimal as it was.

Vicki attacked John's neck and spinal column with renewed vigor, then gradually softened her touch, running her fingers down the indent of his spine, lingering over the few soft hairs at the base. She bent forward, placing a kiss at the base of his neck. Her hands moved around his chest, tangling in the curly black hair, fingers questing for his nipples. Her mouth, blowing gently, moved up to his hairline.

"Out!" John shot to his feet so fast Vicki's teeth were as jarred as her psyche. "Out now!" John the cop ordering a perp to spread 'em.

Vicki, still kneeling on the couch, mouth agape, stared at him. "What do you mean, out?"

"Get lost. Go away. Go to your room. Go back to Boston. Just get out of my life."

He was standing, legs braced, his back to wall, as if ready to defend himself from a street gang or marauding tigers.

Vicki's mind was as numb as the night he'd met her in the hall, gun in hand. Her heart, however, was in far worse shape. Pride dictated a run for the stairwell. But her legs refused to unfold. John was just going to have to go about his business around her while she remained glued to the couch.

Oh, God! And she'd thought she'd been mortified when Nate Eldredge caught them necking at First Encounter.

"Look, Vic," John said, still in defense mode, "You and me, it just doesn't work. There's no point in starting something we can't finish."

And then she got it. Ellie. The boy's close call had reminded him of Ellie.

Vicki winced. John was right. There was no future with a man whose love life was still governed by his dead wife.

Not even when she'd lost a tough case had Victoria Kent ever found it so hard to make a graceful exit. But somehow she pried herself off the sofa. Then nearly fell on her face. A foot had gone to sleep. After a few moments of embarrassed stomping, Vicki limped across the room and out into the hallway. She could feel John watching her every step of the way.

It wasn't supposed to end like this. She was going to be the gracious lady, offer him the opportunity to ease their personal pain in each other. The attorney from Boston granting surcease to the detective from New Haven. And vice versa.

Guess she'd gotten that one wrong.

If she'd really been thinking that way, maybe John was right to throw her out.

Vicki slunk down the stairs, tears beginning to well up in her eyes. So she'd become hard and cynical. Worse than the tough cop. So what?

The so what was that she couldn't find love without a soul. And right now her soul was in pretty ragged shape. So battered by Ed Turner and his myriad assorted criminal counterparts that she no longer knew who or what she was. She'd played coy with John, blown hot and cold, then opted for a quick fix.

And he'd called her bluff.

She was a shallow, fickle opportunist. A top-of-the-line call girl—maybe that was the right analogy. Immaculate

and expensive, whoring for Manchester, Lowell and Manchester. No... she'd fallen past Eve, all the way to the snake.

John. She wanted him, needed him so badly. There on the couch, everything had suddenly become clear. In his arms was safe haven. Home. Comfort. Joy.

Maybe even love.

Hopefully, she could provide the same for him.

So what was wrong with that? Even if the comfort was fleeting?

Nothing.

So why had John sent her away? Leaving her to feel lower than the reptile banished from the Garden of Eden?

Nine

Eyes squeezed shut; John leaned back against the wall and called himself every name in an extensive repertory of bilingual epithets acquired during his years on the streets of New Haven. When he calmed down enough to focus, the word bastard lingered on his tongue. Yeah, that's what he was. Running scared because reality of what he wanted was so much more than what was actually possible. He didn't want sex to the accompaniment of the Lonely Hearts Club Band. A quick roll in the hay for soul food. And he sure as hell didn't need some starry-eyed cop groupie serving herself up on a silver platter because she thought he was a hero.

Come off it, Paolillo. Don't be an ass. The two of you have been twanging each other's strings since Day One. You're just terrified you're in over your head—that the cute little attorney from Boston just wants to use you and lose you. That all you're going to be left with is a permanent ache in the privates and a double-dip freeze

somewhere up there in that region where you used to have a heart.

John came off the wall. He stood in the middle of the living room; fists clenched at his sides, and put his brains to work. He hadn't won his rank for nothing. There had to be a way out of this mess.

Like complete capitulation?

With the grim bravery of a prisoner on his way to the hangman, John turned toward the kitchen. He poured a stiff scotch, slammed his way through the cupboards, the refrigerator. Slapped a frying pan onto the stove. Lined up hamburger, potatoes, onions, vegetable oil.

After a deep shuddering breath and another swift questioning of his sanity, John crossed the hall to the stairwell, using his best silent stalker technique. Equally quietly—some might say stealthily—he opened the door to the basement.

God, he was such a fool! A triple A masochist.

~ * ~

Vicki sniffed, sniffed again. Drew a deep, satisfying breath into her lungs. John had obviously decided on torture. There was no smell on earth more enticing than fried potatoes and onions. The tantalizing odor was so strong, it must be drifting through the floor. Unless... unless he'd opened the upstairs door, the monster. On a surge of anger, Vicki sat up, reaching automatically for another tissue. The box was empty.

The miserable rat. He was trying to torture her.

If John thought she was going to come out for supper after what he'd said... and with her eyes all red, a dripping nose, and puffy cheeks. Vicki took another sniff and dragged herself off the bed. She'd gone through all the tissue she had. Toilet paper would have to do.

John stared at the nicely browning one-dish meal frying in the skillet. Nearly ready, and no sign of Vicki. He supposed it was too much to hope that his peace offering would do the trick. So what now? If he went after her...

If he turned the food off now, supper would likely be a mushy mess instead of manna to the mouth. Which hardly mattered, because if he went to her now... supper would be forgotten. There was no way he was going down there and keep his hands off her.

And there it was again. Pure insanity. He had so little to offer. John Paolillo, a used-up hulk with an attitude. Married to his job. While Vicki was tied to defending the dregs of the earth, not to mention her being cozied up with that guy back in Boston.

So sit down and eat the whole thing, Paolillo.

He'd seen a lot of death and broken lives, but the boy today... that had been personal. Too close. He'd cared too much. It had brought everything back. The nightmare of losing Ellie. The certainty that he couldn't go through that again, couldn't open himself to that kind of hurt.

So here he was, cooking supper for two. He was bucking for a straitjacket. Two cases short of a load. Nutty as a fruitcake. The old clichés wafted through the kitchen,

taunting him right along with the sublime odor of fried potatoes and onions.

John snapped the burner off, shoved the skillet to the back of the stove.

~ * ~

Vicki stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. Surely she couldn't, absolutely couldn't, look that bad. She rolled out a long swath of toilet tissue, blew her nose with vigor. Wiped at her cheeks. Puffy eyes, a nose that rivaled Rudolph. Hair that would have made Medusa recoil in horror. Even if she wanted to—which of course she didn't—she couldn't go upstairs to supper.

She'd just stay right here and starve.

There was movement in the mirror. Horrified, Vicki stared at the image of John Paolillo standing in the middle of the small room behind her.

He'd come for her.

Oh, dear God, she couldn't turn around. Couldn't let him see her like this.

Vicki hung her head and stood still. He was directly behind her, filling the tiny bathroom. Overwhelming her senses. She stopped breathing.

"Vic, I'm sorry," John rumbled. "I was running scared. So damned afraid of getting hurt I turned my back on the best thing to come into my life in years. I was wrong. I'd like... I was hoping you'd be willing to explore what's going on between us. Vic...?"

He didn't touch her. Just stood there, inches away, blotting out the world. Vicki swayed, gasped for breath.

John's arms shot out to steady her. Stayed to enfold her from behind, his chin coming to rest on the top of her head. They stood that way for a long time, bodies not quite meshed, each making one last effort to find an excuse to break away. Each failing.

"Is it okay?"

John's baritone was so husky Vicki barely recognized it. Or was that because the world had gone hazy around her?

"Am I forgiven?"

Vicki straightened her shoulders, opened her eyes. There they were in the bathroom mirror; she, bedraggled with red-rimmed eyes, John towering above her. The intimidating detective turned suppliant. She didn't think his mood would last for long. Now was definitely the time for her to play cool, calm, and collected, no matter what was going on inside. Truth to tell, she was numb. Gratified, but numb. She'd taken one too many blows lately. If John cared, great. If he didn't, so what?

"How can I blame you," Vicki managed without a quiver, "when I'm so confused myself?"

They stared at each other in the mirror. Vicki thought John looked as if he might switch to interrogator mode at any moment. Loverly was not a word that fit his agenda. Admittedly, his hair looked like he'd tried to pull it out by the roots, but, otherwise, he was immaculate. Ruggedly gorgeous. Cold as an ice storm. What would it take to make him look haggard, Vicki wondered with an inward sigh.

“What about the guy in Boston?” he inquired through thin lips, the movement of his chin barely rippling her hair.

Low blow. Vicki was not thrilled to discover she’d been right about John’s fall into interrogator mode.

“It’s not going to happen,” Vicki told him. “We’re over.” And it probably meant her job as well. Which wasn’t as horrifying as it had seemed four days ago when she’d run to the Cape as if the devil were on her heels.

“Have you told him?”

“I tried.” Or had she put him off? Evaded the issue? As clever attorneys did when they weren’t quite ready to burn their bridges.

“Okay, so what about you?” John persisted. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” Just not about losing her job. But Lowell? Oh, yes, she was nearly sure when she left Boston. And then she’d been overcome by a deep wave of astonished conviction, stemming from the moment John Paolillo, gun in hand, had excited considerably more than her sense of fear.

“And what about you?” Vicki challenged. “I... I don’t want to be a substitute... for a ghost.” She shouldn’t have said that. She really shouldn’t. No matter how much it needed to be said.

Somehow she found herself turned around, her face pressed into John’s chest, her cheek being caressed by the faded blue-gray of his much-washed chambray shirt. “Some ghosts don’t go away,” he told her, “but the

sensible ones back off and let people get on with their lives. I've known that for quite a while now but was just too wrapped up in the job to admit it. Believe me, Vic, I know where I am and what I'm doing. And I know damn well who I'm doing it with." The low husky growl of his last words was muffled as he placed a soft kiss on the side of her forehead.

She was holding her breath again. Vicki let it out in a whoosh. "But we're not doing anything," she pointed out, deliberately provocative.

This time they melted together, like butter and chocolate in a simmering pan. Leaning into each other, they clung together as if to a last anchor in a tempestuous sea. "Oh, God, Vic, I need you," John groaned. "Are you sure? Absolutely sure?"

"Look, detective, if you don't kiss me, I think I'm going to scream."

"I think I'd like that," John murmured, inching his hands down toward the firm mounds of her derriere. "I'd love to hear Miss Icy Bostonian lose it," he breathed in her ear.

Sensation flared in Vicki's innermost parts. Pure passion she had kept ruthlessly tamped down her entire adult life. "You, too!" she shot back while she could still think.

"Definitely me, too." He'd reached that conclusion while frying potatoes and onions.

The bathroom was too damn small for him to sweep her up in his arms, but John had a lot of experience

propelling people where he wanted them to go. They were out the door and standing beside Vicki's bed before either of them had time to form the thought. He wanted her so bad he thought he'd die of it. He could see the headlines: Detective John Paolillo dead on Cape Cod. Would she weep for him? Or figure him for the idiot he was? Too celibate, too horny. Too fast on the trigger.

John bit his lip and commanded his heart rate to slow down, his most eager body part to stop acting like a pointer at a pheasant hunt. Slow and tender, that's what Vicki deserved. He wasn't going to attack her like some sex-starved crazy. Even if he was.

Vicki wished she could understand the Time Out. No matter what John said, was he still struggling with ghosts? She could make the first move, of course... but she wanted him to be absolutely certain he was ready for another woman in his life. Because they both knew this was more than a casual affair.

Didn't they?

"Look at me, Vicki."

The face that looked down at her was serious, almost grim, fires—if there were any—banked behind shards of ice. She was wrong about what was troubling him.

"I want you to see me, Vic. Me. The aging cop who got his degree from UConn and will be damn lucky to make Chief of Police. Not the hotshot Ivy League lawyer from Boston who'll probably make it all the way to governor or Senator or President. This is me, John Paolillo. What you see is what you get."

Men. Vicki wound both arms around his neck, tried to force the granite statue to bend forward. “Shut up and kiss me, John.”

No reaction but a slight stiffening of his rock hard resistance.

Vicki dropped her arms, started to pull back. Until John’s hands tightened and she found herself fixed in place, immovable, six inches from his chest. The sudden rush of air between them was dank and cold. And lonely. She could still feel the indentation where his erection had dug into her stomach. “Excuses, John,” she hissed. “It’s you who’s not sure. You’re just trying to blame it on me. Take a good look. Be sure you know what you’re getting into. We lawyers are a tricky bunch. I’m probably Ellie’s opposite in every way there is. Are you ready for that? Can you take it, detective?”

Hot tears of frustration pricked her eyelids. He was too big to throw out, planted there by her bed as if he’d never move. Resisting commitment as if he were required to sell his soul. The only thing Vicki wanted now was for him to go away. Leave her to cry her eyes out. To wallow in this fiasco which was undoubtedly her punishment for running away from Lowell.

Rejected. She hung her head.

“Yeah, I know who you are. And, yeah, I can take it.” The voice was a harsh rasp. The room had gone dim. Vicki wasn’t sure if it was dusk or just the failing of her senses. There was a rushing in her ears, and then she was flat on her back on the bed with John beside her, nibbling

at her ear. “All day and all night,” he added, hot breath melting what little remained of her common sense.

She’d known passion, desire, even a healthy dose of lust. Or so she thought. But nothing had prepared her for the overwhelming surge of need that gripped every inch of her. Her skin, hypersensitive, cried out for the feel of him while her insides went up in flames. She needed to be loved. Needed to give love. Needed to touch and be touched. Her body was screaming now, now, *now!*

Vicki turned her head—their mouths, hungry, found each other. Joined. Tongues instantly twining in age-old rhythm. All day, all night. All day, all night. Which didn’t distract him from the buttons on her shirt. Nor the front bra clasp. John was a fast learner. Vicki grinned to herself as she explored the taste of him. The strong masculine flavor of him, spiced with scotch. She fumbled with his shirt, but he was far ahead of her in their reciprocal strip. More experienced, she granted hazily, without malice, as his hand began to pulse against her breast. His mouth left her, liquid brown eyes focused down. A groan.

“God, woman, I had no idea. You cover yourself like a nun. Even that bathing suit didn’t do you justice.”

“Uh... runs in the family,” Vicki murmured. “We tend toward big thighs too,” she added in all fairness to the less well endowed women of the world.

John returned to his exploration with all the enthusiasm of an adventurer who has just been presented with a unknown continent. Vicki wanted to touch him, hold him, explore him as he was exploring her, but what he was

doing was so perfectly, blissfully, wonderful that she couldn't move, except to fist a hand in his hair and urge him on.

While John was driving her mad with the wicked tongue venturing over her breasts, Vicki felt a large hand snake down, tug at the ties of her drawstring slacks. And suddenly she was cold again. He was on his knees, tossing her shoes to the floor, pulling at her slacks as if they were the legs of a perp he had to capture. If she hadn't been so pleased by the impatience of his lust, Vicki would have laughed. "My turn," she declared, holding up a hand to fend him off as she was revealed in the all the glory of white sport socks and skimpy French cut panties.

Vicki drew herself up, kneeling in front of him. With the bed sagging more under his weight than hers, she tilted forward, almost falling into his arms. And that wasn't at all what she wanted. John had given. Generously. Now it was his turn to receive.

As Vicki's eyes drifted from the bulge of his jeans up to the now blazing brown eyes, John seemed to get the message. He dropped his hands to his sides and stared right back. Vicki overcame a dizzy burst of pure lust and reached for his shirt buttons. If she concentrated very hard, she ought to be able to manage this simple task in, say, only three or four times the length it should have taken her. She started at the top, feeling his eyes on her every agonizing step of the way. When it was time to tug his shirt up out of the waistband, she closed her eyes, breathing hard. How could anything so absolutely

mundane be such a turn-on? Her breath rushed out on a sigh as the last button gave way.

Vicki splayed her fingers at John's waist, moving ever so slowly up to the dark hair curling over his chest. Not a lot of hair. Just enough to entice her interest. To give her something to grasp. She laid her cheek against his chest, then nuzzled for his nipples, sucking, licking, teasing, as he had done to her. She was rewarded by a tremor that shook him from head to foot.

Her mouth continued its quest, up—ever so slowly up—from John's chest to his neck, his chin. His mouth. That firm, so frequently uncompromising, mouth. Vicki wasn't sure what happened next. One moment they were kneeling face to face; the next, John's jeans were on the floor and he was flat on his back with Vicki sitting on his legs, his black bikini doing very little to cover his eagerness. If she so much as laid a finger on him, Vicki thought, he'd go off like a firecracker. She'd found the volcano behind the granite, and the lava was beginning to flow. Just how fast and how far was suddenly of great interest to her.

This time when she started at John's waist, Vicki moved her hands downward. Tantalizingly slow, deliberating prolonging the moment, enjoying the certain knowledge that she was driving him wild. Her fingertips butterfly-kissed his torso, palms skimmed over his groin, caressed, inching closer to their goal. John, eyes shut tight, moaned.

Oh, yes, this is the way she wanted him. This was power. Vicki eased the black bikini down, releasing the startling fullness of his manhood. Her eyes widened. She wasn't the only one unusually well endowed. For a moment her fingers hesitated as she simply admired the view. For all his years, John Paolillo was something to see. Scarred here and there, both in and out, she realized. Beautifully sculpted, iron hard, but now showing signs of imminent meltdown. For the first time Vicki had real hope of turning John's growl into a purr.

She wrapped her fingers around his erection, gently rubbing, teasing the rounded tip, feeling the evidence of his readiness spill over her fingertips. His whole body echoed a sympathetic quiver. Oh, yes. Power, it was hers. Power to make a strong man weak. Vicki was bending her head for the ultimate kiss when John erupted from the bed, scrambling around on the floor like a demented hound in search of a bone. Vicki, dumped unceremoniously onto the bed, simply stared, wondering blindly if he'd discovered he couldn't go through with it. Ellie had won.

"Sorry," John mumbled, his face suspiciously red. "Left it in my jeans."

Vicki glanced at the foil packet in his hand, relief flooding through her. Power indeed. She was so smart she hadn't given protection a thought. Her mind had shut down, ceased to function the moment she'd seen John in the bathroom mirror.

It was her last coherent thought for quite some time. They were both so ready they convulsed to the same drumbeat, the loud roar of passion pulsing unchecked, drowning them in emotions strong enough to frighten them both.

Mirror thoughts: What had they done?

Formed an addiction neither could escape.

Somehow, as their heartbeats slowed and a waning moon peeked through the window, casting silver over the collapsed figures on the bed, the crime seemed less heinous. They were adults. Experienced. They could handle it.

John forced his head up, away from the pillow of Vicki's shoulder, where it had fallen with such spent finality. He struggled to his elbows, then rolled off, granting her room to breathe.

Was she? Breathing? Vicki hadn't moved or opened her eyes. Panicked, John thrust a hand to the pulse point beneath her ear. A warm, comforting beat. Air whooshed out of his lungs as lips turned, brushing the inside of his wrist.

Oh, God, he groaned. And reached for another condom.

It was nearly midnight when John came out of a light doze and glanced at Vicki's alarm clock. "I'm afraid supper's going to be mush," he mumbled in her ear.

"S'okay," Vicki murmured, even as her stomach rumbled. "I can live on love."

"Wanna bet?"

“Can we eat nude?”

As his feet left the braided rug and encountered the cold vinyl floor, John was jarred back to reality. Stoically refraining from hopping up and down, he hunted in the closet, tossed Vicki a robe. “Put it on,” he ordered. “You’ll need it.”

Grumbling, Vicki swung her feet off the bed, pulled on the robe while John settled for shirt and briefs. She should have resented his orders, she thought vaguely, but at this point John could order her to the moon and she would merely ask the way to the rocket. Then again, they’d already had rockets. Skyrockets, clanging bells and whistles. The works. Scary. Very scary. Nothing should feel that good.

John was right about the food. The concoction that had smelled so marvelous was little more than mush. But as their eyes met over their plates, they saw only each other. Tasted only each other. Forks lifted, teeth chewed. Heads tilted forward, leaning toward the other half of a new whole. Bodies rekindled, glowing with a fire that lit the night.

They rose as one. In a matter of moments John was shoving aside the gun in his bedside table, fumbling for the remainder of the packet of condoms.

When he reached into the drawer a second time later that night, he was smiling. There was life in the old man yet.

~ * ~

“I’ve always known why Nate was afraid of marriage,” Betty burst out as soon as the waitress had taken the two women’s order. “I mean, the whole town knew about his parents fighting. You could hear them all the way out in the street, though they were always sweetness and light when they thought someone was watching.”

Vicki and Betty were seated in a booth at one of the down-home restaurants preferred by the locals, having their promised Monday lunch. After a pause for breath, Betty continued her tale. “Anyway, Nate’s never talked about it before. Like it was some deep dark secret. And then Saturday night... well, I just don’t know.” Betty shook her head. “He says he and John got into it. You remember how they were—two cops feeling each other out like they were enemies or something?” Betty ripped open two packets of sugar, dumped them in her iced tea.

Vicki felt swift heat rise. There had been quite a bit of ripping open packets last night. She still couldn’t believe it.

“Didn’t you notice how they were sort of poking at each other all night?” Betty asked. Well, it seems that when we went to the ladies’ room, John had had enough. I guess you must have told him about Nate and me ‘cuz he started in on Nate, telling him he was nuts to pass up a nice girl like me. He even told him he should fish or cut line. I swear,” Betty intoned, raising her hand, “I swear that’s what Nate told me. So then—you’ll never believe this!—Nate actually tells him about his parents. Perfect stranger and he spills it all out. And you know what?”

Vicki, fascinated, shook her head.

“He told Nate he’d had a good marriage, and Nate shouldn’t be afraid. His marriage didn’t have to be like his parents. Marriage is what you make it.”

“Really?” Vicki breathed. Nate Eldredge revealing all to John was about as believable as Detective Paolillo as a sentimental romantic. Good marriage. What was wrong with her? She was glad John had had some happiness. Sure she was. Fleeting, with a sharp flash of guilt, Vicki wished Ellie had never been born.

Betty leaned even closer, seriously endangering the stability of her tall glass of iced tea. “And we—um—we didn’t just talk,” Betty confided, eyes gleaming. “I think, maybe... maybe we’ve opened the door to...” Her voice trailed away as she fumbled in her purse for a tissue. “He actually told me he loves me, has loved me all these years,” Betty sniffed. “We didn’t actually talk marriage, but this time”—Betty pulled her damp cheeks into a brave smile—“this time I think we’re going to stick.”

Somehow, Vicki mused, it wasn’t right that a rock-hard macho cop from New Haven should be the one to play cupid to her old friends. So what was her problem? Was there a hint of the green-eyed monster here? For Betty and Nate there was light at the end of the tunnel. For Vicki and John there was nothing beyond next Sunday.

Less than a week.

Did it matter, since they had nothing in common beyond great sex? And overwork. In the here and now

they were perfectly attuned to each other's needs. That should be all that mattered.

Who needed dreams of tomorrow? Rice, rose petals, and iridescent bubbles blowing on the wind? Victoria Kent was financially independent, sailing into a brilliant future, head up, eyes wide open.

Vicki heard herself say all the right words to Betty. Then, grateful for the arrival of their order, she turned her attention to her crab salad.

Ten

“Hose time,” John announced late Tuesday afternoon as he slid out from behind the Blazer’s wheel.

Vicki frowned down at the caked-on mud, the gray-brown grime covering her bare legs and clinging to sneakers that would never be the same again, even though she and John had already ruined a beach towel trying to scrub themselves clean. A hose job seemed an eminently sensible suggestion before tromping on her mother’s gleaming wooden floors.

But Vicki shrieked when the first blast of water hit her feet. “It can’t be cold,” John mocked. “It’s been sitting out here in the sun all day.”

“In the shade. In September,” Vicki countered through gritted teeth.

“Turn around.”

“Do I have to?” she wailed.

John did a fast circle around, hit her with another blast. “It’s the showers for you,” he ordered. “Nice and warm. I’ll be right along,” he added as he turned the stream of cold water on himself.

A warning or a promise? Vicki scooted for the house.

They'd gone oystering in mud flats up in Wellfleet, slogging through dark ooze that rose to their ankles, their calves, and finally their knees. All for six oysters which, though sparse, provided no end of amusement to the afternoon. As each ugly sharp-edged mollusk was found and plopped into the pail, Vicki eyed John with dancing eyes. John growled, threatening to demonstrate right there in the mud in broad daylight that he really didn't need them.

And now... Vicki suspected he just might be planning to make good on his threat.

She'd left her sneakers outside and there wasn't much else to shed, just shirt, shorts, bra and panties. Vicki adjusted the water temperature of the tub-shower, stepped in and pulled the curtain. Heaven. But not just the shower. Since Sunday she'd been living in some glowing iridescent bubble. Aware of its fragility, but basking in the incredible, soul-strengthening warmth while it lasted.

On Monday afternoon, after her lunch with Betty, John had acquired a permit to take the Blazer to the far deserted reaches of Nauset Beach. A deliciously private world where it was easy to imagine they were the last two people on earth. Where Vicki's bare skin had blushed fiery red all over at the possibility that another vehicle might come along. And John had laughed at her. A new, younger John who actually smiled and said he hoped it was Nate himself who caught them because the slowtop definitely needed some pointers from an expert.

At sometime during that afternoon they'd gathered shells and sea-polished pebbles for John to take home to his nieces and nephews. It was slow work as they both had

a tendency to lose track of what they were doing, hands gravitating toward each other, then mouths, while the gulls screamed and swirled overhead and bore witness to the foolishness of humans.

As Vicki scrubbed at the mud, she told herself she should have doubts. She should be cautious. But all that would have to come later. Right now she could only feel. Feel with an intensity she'd never known before. An intensity almost as terrifying as it was beautiful.

Vicki gasped when the shower curtain parted and John, as nature made him, stepped in beside her. An automatic protest died on her lips as a shiver shook her and all her two thousand body parts threatened to melt down the drain. "Too bad you're ahead of me," John drawled, deadpan, as he examined every pink and white inch of her. "Here, let me give you a little of my mud." He drew his finger down the arm that had reached deep into the mud for the oysters and marked a dark streak from Vicki's forehead to the tip of her nose. "There, that looks pretty good." As he smiled, his brown eyes were sparkling with life.

And quite a bit more.

"John," Vicki warned, backing away until her head hit the showerhead and water thundered onto her back. "No way. I don't... we can't. Not here," she ended on a wail as John plunged under the waterfall with her, hands reaching for her. For every one of those two thousand parts.

And then, as the streaming water turned to steam, he dragged her out of the spray, shaking his head like a dog just out of a lake. "Vicki," John pronounced as he cupped

her bottom and pulled her tight against the hardness of him, “you’ve lived in Boston too long.”

Aroused she might be, Vicki thought, but not crazy. “John, this is not a shower, it’s a bathtub. Ergo, it’s dangerous. Most accidents at home happen in the bathroom. I refuse to be a statistic.”

John squeezed his eyes tight, then opened them to a more level-headed survey of the area. One end of the tub, a shower. Other end, rounded, no footage. Backed against the side wall? With Vicki’s head banging the side of the tub? Aw, hell. John’s shoulders slumped, but not his manly parts. He threw back the plastic curtain with a vicious yank, lifted Vicki out onto the fluffy yellow bath rug with seemingly no effort at all.

“Okay,” he grumbled, “how about I dry you and you dry me and then we settle this in bed.”

“Before the oysters?” Vicki inquired sweetly.

“Yeah, damn it, before the oysters.”

Vicki moved in close, put her arms around his neck. “Well, big boy,” she breathed, “by the time I’m through with you, you’re going to need them.”

~ * ~

It might be love. It was certainly lust. Each waited for the other shoe to drop.

John figured that one of these days Vicki was going to wake up and see him as he was. And then it would be thanks and so long, it was great. And back to Boston. Who the hell was he to set his sights on an Ivy League Golden Girl who probably made three times his salary?

Vicki was trying not to think at all. She wouldn’t allow that ugly gnome of doubt out of his cave somewhere deep

down inside her. She'd never had such great sex. Never felt so warm and protected and just plain wonderful. So what could possibly go wrong?

Bad question. Never ask for trouble. *Go away!* she hissed at the nasty gnome. *I'm not listening.*

But the insidious little Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't be muzzled. *Nice move, Vicki*, the ugly old elf muttered like a cancer from deep inside. *You let a rapist back out on the street, so you punish yourself by switching from Mr. Right to a Sicilian cop. Nice going, kid.*

No, no, no! Vicki cried. *That's not the way it is at all.*

The lady doth protest too much, mocked the inner elf.

You're crazy, you old coot. Compared to John, Lowell is a shadow man.

Are you sure, sure, sure? Ready to give up your career? Because, dear child, the cop surely won't give up his.

I told you to go away!

Of course, my dear. But not far. The gnome glided away, his hissed warnings still lingering in her ear.

Wednesday. Tick tock. Four more days.

John had known he was in serious trouble when he followed Vicki to art galleries and boutiques that morning, and heard himself making polite, mild-mannered noises over paintings and sculpture and resort wear. Not that he didn't notice she spent hundreds of dollars as if she were buying nothing more than groceries at the local supermarket. He shoved the thought aside. The day of reckoning might be coming, but not now. Not yet. He wasn't ready.

All his bells and whistles screamed in unison—he would never be ready.

John settled on blaming a more tangible problem for his nagging discomfort. Just why did they have to go to that damned clambake on Friday? Too bad Eldredge wasn't as reluctant to pass out invitations as he was to pursue his love life. Hell, he had to do all the politically correct things in New Haven, but why here? The Annual Eldredge Clambake had no appeal when all he wanted was to have Vicki to himself, only to himself. Preferably naked and in bed.

Oh yeah, he liked having her in his bed. In his life. He'd never believed in tales of lovers being enveloped in a golden haze of their own making, but it seemed to be true. He and Vicki saw the world, interacted with it, but only on some simplistic level that didn't touch them. The whole thing was absurd, John grumbled. He couldn't have been like this with Ellie. They'd known each other forever. Marriage was a given. Surely... no, he'd remember if he'd ever let himself get caught up in such a ridiculous, distracting... *soap opera* before. Emasculating, that's what it was. He was John Paolillo, the cop. The tough guy.

Then he'd look at Vicki and go as mushy as the fried potatoes and onions. He had it bad. Four more days and he'd be gone. Vacation terminated. He couldn't imagine going back to life as it had been. Leaving Vicki would be like tearing off his skin.

Oh, yeah, he had it bad.

~ * ~

Late that afternoon, the bubble burst.

John and Vicki were cuddled up on the couch, relaxing after a visit to Carolyn Holbrook's to pick up a roast chicken dinner with all the fixings. They'd also indulged in a quarter hour of conversation, in which the older lady kept sneaking them sly looks and nodding her head in satisfaction as if to say she perfectly understood that they were buying supper in order to save their strength for more important matters. Vicki was embarrassed. John grinned all the way home.

The doorbell rang.

They looked at each other, shrugged. Not a clue. Lazily, John set down his bottle of Sam Adams and went down the hallway to the door.

"So who the hell are you?"

The words roared down the hall into the living room. Vicki cringed. She knew that voice. Knew it well. Jumping up, she rushed toward the door, stopping short in the shadows as she heard John's bristling reply: "I live here. Who the hell are you?"

There was a slight pause before Lowell Manchester the Fourth said, less belligerently, "I thought this was the Kent's place. I'm looking for Victoria."

"It is. I'm renting it. Through Sunday."

"I beg your pardon," Lowell replied stiffly. "But do you have any idea where I can find Victoria? I'm her fiancé. I've driven down from Boston."

Vicki came charging out of the shadows. "You are not," she countered. "We're not engaged, Lowell, and you know it."

He stood there in the doorway, the Golden God from Boston. As tall as John. As well built. Blond and far more

classically handsome. Physically, the two men were evenly matched. And about as opposite as two people could possibly be.

“Perhaps we’d better talk inside,” Lowell said, keeping his cool with a dignity John could only envy.

Vicki’s spurt of anger rapidly deteriorated to guilt. This was the worst-case scenario she had told herself wouldn’t happen. It was her fault. Her fault. She was a worm. Lower than a worm.

Both men were looking at her. Expectantly. What on earth could she say?

John took pity on her and filled the breach. “Vicki came down to use the house and discovered it had been rented, so she’s been staying in the apartment in the basement. We were just having a drink together when you arrived. Can I get you a Sam Adams, some scotch?”

“Scotch, just ice, would be fine, thank you.”

Lowell Manchester, the perfect gentleman under all circumstances, John noted sourly as he stepped into the kitchen, leaving Vicki to show her colleague into the living room. Well... Manchester had slipped a little when a man had answered Vicki’s door. Which only proved the guy was human.

“Nice,” Lowell conceded as he took in the view of the bay through the broad picture window. “These streets are such a maze I had no idea this house was on the water.”

Civilized. So civilized, Vicki thought. Lowell and his family always made her feel gauche, as if their perfect manners were so inbred they had never had to learn them at all. They were simply born being able to say the right thing at the right time.

She was not so gifted.

John returned with Lowell's drink, then excused himself with a calm, "I guess you two have things to talk about." As he disappeared out the door, Vicki almost screamed for him to stop. Wasn't he the macho Italian male who was supposed to stand firm and protect her?

No. He was the Detective Lieutenant with his eye on Chief of Police. The man who could juggle politician with policeman. Except for that one, possibly fatal, error that had landed him in a mandatory two-week vacation on Cape Cod.

And he was right. This was her mess to straighten out.

Lowell saved her the trouble. "I take it the wind has changed," he commented dryly.

"I'm sorry," Vicki burst out. And was. "When I discovered I was genuinely attracted to him, I realized you and I... that we were just playing at love. We liked each other, we were suited to each other, but somehow... somehow it just didn't work." Determined to be brave, to see this thing through, Vicki raised her eyes to his. "I've been hoping that you'd understand, that you felt the same way." Her voice trailed away, choking on her guilt.

Butterflies cartwheeled through Vicki's stomach as Lowell turned his scotch around in his fingers, gazed at the blue of the bay outside, at the late afternoon sun sparkling on the water. Never mind that they'd parted in anger, never mind that she'd made her doubts about their relationship clear. She hadn't made the break as cleanly as she should have.

"I apologize for my moment of possessiveness," Lowell pronounced with cool grace. "Actually, father sent

me. Your phone's been off, and he was concerned about when you were coming back. A case has come up that he wants you to handle."

Incredulously, Vicki stared at him. "A case?" she echoed.

He nodded. "And, oh yes, mother was wondering about you, too. You promised to help her with the charity auction, if you recall. That's coming up the first week of October."

A Manchester to the core, Vicki thought. A man who knew how not to display emotion, how to avoid unpleasantness whenever possible.

"I invited Liz Henley to that dinner with the parents last Saturday. Shall I invite her to the charity ball as well?"

"A good choice," Vicki affirmed on a whisper.

Lowell tossed off his drink, stood up. "And shall I tell father you'll be back soon or..." He left the sentence hanging.

"Yes, soon." Vicki felt breathless. The reality of the commitment struck her like a blow to the stomach. "I'll be back by the beginning of the week," she assured Lowell in a stronger voice. "I just needed some time to think, that's all."

Solemnly, he nodded. "Good. I'll tell the office." He held out his hand. "Until next week then."

Face crumpling, Vicki took the proffered hand. Suddenly, she stood on tiptoes, planted a kiss on Lowell's cheek. "Until next week," she murmured, and watched him stride down the hallway, out the front door. Out of her life.

Until next week. Did he really understand?

Yes, of course he did.

But somehow she was committed to going back to Manchester, Lowell and Manchester.

So what else was she supposed to do? That's where she worked, for heaven's sake. Six long years. That's where she'd built her career, was beginning to earn big money. The firm where she'd invested her time and energy and all her talent.

A sound disturbed her anguish. John leaning against the doorway, a Sam Adams in his hand. "So?" he repeated, face revealing absolutely nothing.

"It's done. Really done," Vicki assured him. "He swears he only came because the office couldn't get me on the phone, and his father wanted him to check up on me, find out when I was coming back."

"Yeah, right." John's sarcasm was palpable. "So what did you tell him?"

"That I'd be back on Monday."

"Right." Silence.

"John," Vicki babbled, "you have to go back yourself. You know you do."

"Right." He couldn't let it go. "Vic, you know damn well he didn't come all this way to find out when you were coming back to work. He came for you. For himself."

"I think," Vicki said carefully, "it was more a case of pride. Lowell doesn't take rejection well. I was a... convenience. I went to the right schools, dressed well, spoke well, stroked all the right egos. Never complained. Well... not much. I was a team player who had no trouble

starring in the courtroom. The firm's shining symbol of adjustment to women's rights; i.e., I was a verifiable asset, a perfect match for the future senior partner. I had every qualification but old family money." Vicki managed a wry smile. "And there were always a dozen women with that asset just waiting in the wings. Women who were wealthier, wittier, more glamorous, all waiting for me to stumble so they could trample me in the dirt in an effort to get to Lowell first."

"Society types," John nodded. "The kind who wouldn't be caught dead with a bad ass cop from New Haven."

"Believe me, Lowell is about to become the object of a feeding frenzy. And love every minute of it."

"So what about us?"

Smile fading, Vicki went very still. "We go back to work on Monday," she said, pleased that her voice revealed no emotion at all.

"And that's it?"

"I don't know, John. I guess we play it by ear?"

The time had come for a serious talk, but the words stuck in their throats. Silently, John held out his arms, and Vicki went into them. The rosy haze, which had been torn apart, settled back around them, shutting out the world.

~ * ~

In the aftermath of Lowell's visit, Vicki was forced to consider her options. They were few. Possibly nonexistent. It was very early Thursday morning. She'd taken a long, heart-stopping look at John before crawling out of bed and escaping to the downstairs apartment she hadn't used since Sunday. Ruthlessly, she put on her analytical attorney's hat, shutting out the vision of John

sprawled catty-corner across the bed, vulnerable in sleep as he never was awake. Dark hair mussed, dark lashes resting on tanned cheeks, short dark hair curling...

Enough!

Options.

One. Sunday was goodbye. The cop from New Haven and the defense counsel from Boston had had a great time. Saved each other's butts. But it was time for Hi and Goodbye. So long, it's been good to know ya.

Two. They could explore this thing between them. See where it went. Vicki's lip curled up in a sneer. Long distance romances sucked. And John hadn't mentioned Word One about life after Sunday.

Three. Move to New Haven. In spite of what she'd told Lowell, she should probably change law firms. And if she was moving, why not all the way to the New Haven?

Something called Connecticut laws, logic countered. The Connecticut Bar Exam. Not to mention the serious glitch in her career. Changing firms, changing states, changing her specialty. Because a New Haven detective couldn't have a significant other who was defending the criminals he and his buddies brought in off the streets.

And besides... she hadn't been asked. And no way was she going to let John Paolillo think she was chasing him.

But if she caught him? If they caught each other, she corrected judiciously.

Vicki moaned. If that happened, their problems would just be beginning.

They were opposites. Living, breathing tinder and match.

Opposites attract.

Which didn't mean they belonged together.

Vicki drew a deep breath. Option Four. She changed law firms and kissed everything but her career goodbye.

Almost as unacceptable as Number One. Except she didn't have to smile sweetly at Lowell Manchester the Fourth every day.

Frustrated, Vicki pounded her fist into the bed. Why had John said nothing? Why? Did he really believe they couldn't work out their differences? Or was it Ellie? Always Ellie?

Or... was it possible? Was John the Bad Ass Cop too proud to speak to a girl who made three times his salary? The girl who would have to give up her career as there was, of course, no possibility of John giving up his. He had let enough slip for Vicki to understand that until his attack on his old friend, the defense attorney, he'd definitely been on the fast track to Chief of Police. His vacation on Cape Cod was penance as well as rehabilitation. When he got back he'd be doing everything he could to gain back the ground he'd lost. New Haven was his town, bred in his bones. No woman with an ounce of sensitivity would ask him to give it up.

Which left Victoria Kent right back where she started.

Vicki ran her bare toe over the bumpy ridges of the braided rug beside the bed. Had she missed the whole point? Was she simply fantasizing that she and John had something special going here? Maybe their relationship was destined to go the way of other vacation romances. A few phone calls, a couple of hot e-mails. Maybe a long drive ending in a night of frantic sex. The long drive back. A sporadic call or two, petering into silence. Even love,

let alone lust, could disappear over distance. Devoured by their jobs, their fears, their ghosts. Their lack of commitment. Wannabes just didn't make it in this world. Obstacles could be overcome only by sheer, gut-wrenching determination.

And, except in bed, she and John were beginning to pussyfoot around each other like two grannies in a powder puff derby. Terrified of exploring further, of unearthing the potential pain, the doubts... the impossibilities.

Vicki groaned as the smell of frying bacon drifted down the stairs. Blast John! How could she look askance at a man who cooked bacon for breakfast? At a man who cooked. Period.

Okay, Option Five. She'd grit her teeth and hang on. Sunday was coming up fast. She wouldn't grovel, she might not even hint. She'd leave the decision up to John.

But what if his decision was based on all the wrong reasons?

So scratch all five options. She was back to playing it by ear. Vicki dragged herself off the bed and started the long climb back up the stairs. To bacon. And to John.

Eleven

For the remainder of the day Vicki tucked all options firmly away. She and John spent a lovely, lazy day prowling the bay shore in front of the house, adding to John's collection for the nieces and nephews. They walked the sandy trails between the tightly packed houses on Nauset Heights, found their way down to the beach where they sat and gazed at the pounding surf of the Atlantic. Unfortunately, Vicki discovered, the rhythm of the ceaseless, seemingly mindless, waves made her think of the futility of her relationship with John. Each crash of the surf cried "No hope." And as each sheet of water rolled back toward the ocean, she could hear the hissing echo: No-o ho-o-pe.

Think positive, Vicki scolded herself. Love was the great healer, exactly what their lives needed. They were being transformed from walking wounded to bright-eyed human beings. No one could argue with that.

And then, somehow, John was towing her back up the hill, the sun strong on their heads, the wind hard on their backs. Vicki had trouble keeping up as they pounded down the road, up the front walk, into the house. John

gave her no chance to catch her breath as he dragged her into the bedroom. A long time later, Vicki opened her eyes and drew her first deep breath in an hour. A motionless arm was draped across her waist. Otherwise, John showed no signs of life.

Vicki smiled. For a day that had begun in such doubt, they weren't doing so badly at all. Later, she would recall her blissful afternoon with yearning for the ease and simplicity of it. The uncomplicated rightness of it. A final moment of sweetness, tinged by a burgeoning glow of optimism. A foolish instant when she allowed herself to think there might be a way out of the tangle they were making of their lives.

~ * ~

Thursday night. Tick tock. Vicki shifted forward on the Blazer's purple suede bench seat, peering at the scene around them in the parking lot at Rock Harbor. The sun was low, just beginning to hint of the glorious display that brought people to this spot each evening. To their right, the sports fishing boats of the charter fleet lay alongside sturdy rows of bollards, rocking gently at their moorings. To the left, well-dressed couples entered the historic Captain Linnell house for an evening of fine dining. Around them... Vicki craned her neck, an indulgent smile twitching at her lips. A young family in a pickup, the children kneeling in the bed of the truck peering over the cab, a dog which could claim no more than a dash of German Shepherd sitting beside them. Two cars over, a teenage couple in a Mustang; behind them, two middle-aged men in an old utility van. There were couples of retirement age and working age—basically, a cross-

section of Orleans. All with faces turned toward the west, waiting for the grand display. There was even a pair of bikers, helmets off to reveal hair long enough to suggest a reincarnation from the 'sixties, their black cycle with matching sidecar glinting in the sun's waning light.

Vicki suspected that, except for John, the bikers might be the only tourists in the parking lot. Sunset at Rock Harbor was a local phenomenon, a best-kept secret. Let the tourists know about it, and there wouldn't be enough parking for the natives. She settled back into John's shoulder. "We had an event here in Rock Harbor," she confided. "Way back in 1814."

"Mmm?" John nuzzled his way toward her ear, brushed his lips over her lobe.

Vicki shivered, forced herself back to her train of thought. They were in the midst of thirty parked vehicles, for heaven's sake! "A British landing party came ashore here from the *HMS Newcastle*," she continued doggedly. "Rock Harbor was an important port, and the British planned to burn the local ships and the village of Orleans as well. As incredible as it seems, the Orleans militia was ready for them and beat them back."

"Score one for militias."

"John!"

"Yeah, I know," he growled. "You're anti-militia, a gun control freak. If you'd been around in 1814, Orleans would have been burned to the ground."

"Those were different times," Vicki replied stiffly.

"Sure," John huffed.

Vicki sighed and settled back into John's embrace. They were not going to argue over this. It was merely one

more thing to be ignored, to be firmly tucked away, hoping it would not rear its ugly head again. She had to face it. There were certain things she and John were never going to agree on.

The sun dropped close to the horizon, touching off the nightly event they had all come to see. The rose and pink, coral and gold, with just a hint of lavender seemed to Vicki to be the very essence of the cocoon that engulfed them, sheltering them from reality. Unfortunately, she mused, the cocoon could be breached, shattered as quickly as the glories of the sunset faded to gray and then into the charcoal of night. It had taken—what?—only a few lines of history to set them at each other's throats. *No hope, no hope...*

"Let's look at the boats," John suggested as the parking lot began to empty. "There's a bit of daylight left."

"Do you want a boat?" Vicki asked as they walked the length of the Orleans charter fleet, each bow precisely pointed in toward the wooden seawall that bordered the parking lot.

"Maybe someday," John replied, "but mostly I just like to look. A guy thing, I guess."

There he went again. As if girls didn't like to look at boats, too. *Ignore it, Vic. It's nothing. Don't let him get you riled.* "There used to be a target ship out there," Vicki said, pointing out past the row of tall stakes which marked the channel. "An old hulk left over from World War II bombing practice runs. It was part of the scenery here for as long as I can remember. I miss it."

"Is it still out there?"

"I imagine," Vicki murmured idly, then added, "You're right. It must still be there. But a worse navigational hazard now that no one can see it."

"Have you seen the new *Star Wars* movie?"

"Huh?" Vicki was still wondering how they kept unsuspecting boats from crashing into the old hulk.

"*Star Wars*," John repeated. "The last one. Maybe you don't like that kind of thing, but I haven't seen it yet and if we've got that damned clambake tomorrow and Provincetown on Saturday, this may be our..."

"John," Vicki interrupted, "I probably saw the first one ten times. I grew up on *Star Wars*. If I hadn't been at trial, I would have seen this one the week it came out, but as it is..." She shrugged, flashed a grin. "Yes, I'd love to see it."

"You know what," John commented deadpan, "I do believe we've actually found something in common besides great sex."

"How about food?" Vicki inquired; all innocence. "I like to eat your cooking."

"Okay, two things," John agreed.

"How about picking up shells, watching the sunset, flying a kite, eating lobster...?"

John laughed. A genuinely carefree roll of sound which Vicki had heard on a precious few occasions. "Okay, okay, you win. We have a few things in common. As long as you're not getting off some perp who's guilty as sin."

Vicki's stomach churned. Why, why, why did he have to be so hard-nosed? Well and truly a Bad Ass Cop? He was never, ever, going to let her forget what she did for a living.

“What do you want from me, John?” she cried, turning to face him. “Wills, Trusts, Divorces? Or maybe civil suits? Is that it? You’d like to see me reduced to ambulance chasing? Is that what you want, detective? Just cut my brain out, my arm off, turn me into a cipher. A nothing adjunct to the system.”

“Vicki!” John grabbed her, lifting her off the ground when she struggled, pinning her arms to her sides. “Shut up, Vic,” he barked, adding on a murmur, “It’s all right, be quiet. I’m a fool, and you’re touchy as all hell. I won’t ask you to give up your life. I promise. I wouldn’t do that to you. I may be an arrogant bastard, but I’d never hurt you that way.”

“You can put me down now.”

Shocked to find he was still holding her off the ground, John lowered Vicki to the sandy ground but didn’t let her go. He could thank his lucky stars the parking lot was now deserted. If Nate Eldredge was around, he’d have him up on charges. Instead... in the twinkling of an eye, when he was totally unprepared, they’d come to the heart of the problem. They had a relationship neither wanted to let go, but the chances of working out a compromise between two people whose careers were so diametrically opposed to each other seemed slimmer than ever. But, hell he’d hoped Vicki might...

John tightened his arms around her. She was stiff, unyielding. But she’d come round. Later. And wasn’t he an arrogant bastard? Was this all there was then? These next few days? For a man who had been dodging women for years, the idea held surprisingly little appeal.

John shoved his emotions back under tight rein. He thumped his fist, gently, on Vicki's shoulder. "Movie starts in half an hour. We'd better get going."

Sure, Vicki thought as they drove back to town. For two hours the homicide detective and the defense attorney could lose themselves in whatever action George Lucas was providing this time around. If only she could shut out the image of an ostrich that rose up before her, sneering, just before it stuck its head into the sand.

~ * ~

Vicki adjusted her broad-brimmed straw hat, settled her sunglasses more firmly on her nose, and leaned back into the lawn chair she had set at the edge of the beach grass only a few feet from the bay behind the house. Okay, so she was sulking. The movie, which was great, had been followed by sex with what she could only term a tinge of desperation. All action, few words. Fleeting warmth, scant moments of mindless indulgence. And now, this morning, when she'd offered to help John make up the individual packets of sea treasures they'd gathered for his nieces and nephews, he'd told her he'd rather do it himself.

It hadn't been quite that abrupt, Vicki had to admit. John had very kindly explained that only he knew what would appeal to each of the children. But logic played no part. She'd been hurt. So here she was, spending the morning alone with the gulls, the sandpipers, and the fiddler crabs, the tang of the mud flats filling her nose.

She'd reacted badly. Obviously, the tension was getting to her. To them both, she suspected. Vicki tried to picture Lowell carefully sorting shells, making sure each child

had the same number, a similar variety. Frankly, she couldn't even imagine Lowell Manchester the Fourth picking up shells, let alone going to the trouble of sorting them. Just the thought of him with sand on his four hundred dollar shoes was enough...

"Hi." A tentative, ultracasual greeting, as if John expected an explosion in return.

Vicki turned, managed a serene smile. "All done?" she inquired.

"Yeah, I think that ought to keep the little monsters happy. I appreciate your helping pick up all that stuff." Vicki recognized the awkward, backhanded apology for what it was.

"It was fun," she bubbled, even as her insides roiled in disgust at her puppy-like eagerness to make up. "I haven't done anything like that in years. Did you use the pebbles and the sea glass?"

"Every last thing. Even the horseshoe crab eggs we got out here." He nodded toward the edge of the bay.

"Yuck."

"Just for the boys," John qualified.

All right, she'd been sitting there thinking of all those nieces and nephews, and she was going to be stupid and say it. And bite her tongue later. "John... you really should be a father yourself. You do it very well."

"Yeah... well..."

Vicki thought he was going to let it go at that. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why hadn't she kept her teeth clamped hard on her tongue?

“I always wanted kids,” John conceded. “Not a good idea with my job, but other cops manage it.” He paused. “And I like kids.”

“I’m an only child,” Vicki ventured. “When I was little, I always thought it would be nice to have at least three kids, but I got caught up in my career and lately I’ve only thought about children as belonging to someone else. While I was watching you make up those packages, I realized what a mistake I’d made. I really do want children of my own.”

“There’s time.”

Not much. But Vicki said nothing. She couldn’t have made her feelings more plain if she’d hired an airplane to tow a banner over the bay proclaiming Vicki is ready and waiting. She was such a fool.

~ * ~

The home belonging to the titular head of the Eldredge family—a distant cousin, Nate explained—was a sprawling building of weathered gray shingles spiced by Yale blue shutters. The main structure had been built around the turn of the century and added on to several times, each renovation taking over a bit more of the short stubby Cape pine forest in which it was set. Fifty yards from the house’s sheltered spot, woods gave way to sea grass, a low dune, and the expanse of Cape Cod Bay. The privacy of the beach, not to mention the ample parking, made it ideal for the Eldredge family’s annual clambake.

On Friday night the slight curve of the cove was littered with people stretched out on blankets, sitting in beach chairs. Children splashed in the water or ran shrieking in glee over the game of the moment. Near one

end of the beach was the huge clam pit, dug the day before by a team of the most vigorous Eldredges. Another group had been assigned the task of procuring the many needed bags of seaweed. At the opposite end of the cove a volleyball game was in full swing, the shouts and groans carrying back to where John was sitting, glumly, on the blanket Vicki had brought along.

Nate Eldredge had explained the construction of the clam pit with just enough of a patronizing glint in his eye to set John's teeth on edge. Did the Cape Cod cop actually think someone who lived on Long Island Sound didn't know anything about clambakes? You'd think he was from some farm in Nebraska the way Eldredge treated him. Then again, clambakes might have some merit, John conceded a short time later as he munched his way around an ear of corn that tasted more like some mythical ambrosia than a plain old ear of corn. With all the other clambake ingredients, it had been roasting in its husks all day in the deep pit, which had been filled with layers of seaweed between lobsters, clams, potatoes, and clay pots of beans. John laid down his cleaned cob with a sigh and reached for Vicki's lobster. Eating, even the potatoes, was fingers only, and those delicate little hands were never going to manage the lobster alone. With one sharp motion, John broke the tail open, then cracked each front claw between his gleaming white teeth. He handed the lobster back with all the satisfaction of a hunter offering food to his mate.

And was horrified, as his mind—as analytical as Vicki's—recognized his sudden surge of Me-Tarzan-You-Jane for what it was. He gave his potato a vicious pinch to

pop it open to cool, then reached for his mound of clams, swearing silently. He'd had a mate. He didn't want another. Besides, with this one, there'd never be a moment's peace. Unless they kept their teeth firmly fixed on their tongues. Hell, they couldn't say two words to each other without brewing up a storm. John left his plate of food lying on the blanket and stalked off to the keg to pull down his third draft of Sam Adams.

Betty Nickerson moved in as John walked off. "The more I see him," she breathed to Vicki, wiggling her eyebrows, "the more I pant. Want to make an exchange?"

"You wish!" Vicki grinned.

"Girl, you've got to hang on. Don't do what Nate and I have done. You haven't got fifteen years to waste." Betty looked past Vicki to where Nate was still digging down into the pit with a clam rake, searching for goodies that might have been left lying among the seaweed. "Tonight's the night," she confided, turning back to Vicki with a slow, conscious smile. "We're actually doing it. We're announcing our engagement."

"Oh, Betty, I'm so happy for you!" Mist filled Vicki's eyes. Darn! She wasn't even going to be able to find the lobster John had cracked with those gorgeous white teeth, let alone eat it. She was so very happy for Betty, but for the first time in her life a marriage announcement by a friend hurt. Her customary reaction had always been, "Thank God it's not me." But this time...

It was that bugaboo of the working woman, the biological clock that was turning on the waterworks, Vicki assured herself. That's all. An insidious urge toward starting a family of her own. Wedding bells. Motherhood.

In that order, she affirmed sternly. And John Paolillo seemed about as interested in marriage as he was in swimming from Rock Harbor to Boston. He'd even been difficult about coming to the clambake, projecting a surliness that seemed to linger from their squabbles last night. Vicki interpreted his attitude as an interest in sex and only sex. Enjoying her company in a social situation, mixing with her friends—being a friend as well as lover—was not on John's agenda.

Not that he wasn't being gracious. He was a political animal as well as a cop. He knew better than to be rude to a crowd. But, nonetheless, he stood apart, aloof, in a hard-shelled cocoon for one. The excuse for his attitude, he'd said, was that he wanted to spend the evening alone with her, but Vicki had her doubts. He was leaving Sunday, but it was as if he'd already withdrawn. As if he were deliberately putting distance between them. Deliberately searching for reasons to quarrel.

Hardly an indication that their relationship had a future.

~ * ~

With careful good manners John opened the passenger door of the Blazer and stood back, waiting for Vicki to get in. She paused, not hearing the murmur of the last hangers-on at the clambake, not seeing the night sky salted with stars, the dark sweep of the bay. In the flickering light of the bonfire that had been lit as darkness enclosed the beach she saw only John, steadying himself by hanging onto the door of the Blazer. She saw a rough shell of the man she knew, his gentler nature, and other less definable emotions, drowned in Sam Adams.

Seething emotions were bubbling up through his outward cool. He was, she discovered, just a little bit frightening.

Vicki held out her hand. "Give me the keys, John."

"Get in." An offended bark.

"The keys, John," she countered quietly.

"Scared?" he taunted.

"Look, John," Vicki explained patiently, "I'm sure you'd have no trouble getting me home in one piece, but I'm not so sure you could pass the test if we get stopped. A DUI would definitely not help your career."

"Eldredge's cops stake out the clambake?" John scoffed. "You've got to be kidding. They wouldn't dare. Cops don't do that to other cops. So get in," he added on a sharper note.

"No way." Vicki stood her ground.

"It's a long walk home."

"John!" Their eyes, reflecting a nearly equal mix of anger and stubborn determination, clashed.

"Aw, what the hell," John muttered. He placed the Blazer's keys in the palm of her hand, carefully folded her fingers over them. Without a word, Vicki walked around to the driver's seat while John climbed through the open passenger door. "Believe me; babe," he assured her as she started the engine, "I've been a lot drunker than I am tonight."

"That's nothing to brag about," Vicki snapped back.

"And I'm nobody's babe."

"Wanna bet?"

She was sleeping downstairs tonight. Definitely. Which shouldn't be a problem. John was probably beyond any amorous inclinations at this point. Funny, she wouldn't

have thought he was a drinker. He was too strong, too controlled, too careful. Maybe... maybe even the beer was part of his rehab, she speculated. He needed to let down, indulge himself, be different.

Well, so did she. And she hadn't made umpteen trips to the keg.

Men.

"Vicki?"

"Um?"

"I'm really not that drunk."

"Sure."

"And when we get home, I'm going to prove it."

She came close to swerving into the treacherous sand at the side of the road. "A good night's sleep is what you need," she assured him when she had the Blazer back under control. "We're going to Provincetown tomorrow, remember?"

"I'm more interested in what we're doing tonight," he countered stubbornly.

"Tonight we're going to sleep off all that food we ate," was Vicki's conciliating reply.

John began to whistle through his teeth. Random notes and trills that insinuated themselves around her, taunting, promising, tantalizing. Mocking. He kept up the strange serenade all the way back to Nauset Heights, then relapsed into stark silence as he exited the Blazer, accepted the return of his keys, even going so far as to stand back and allow Vicki to open the front door. But when she scooted forward, heading for the guest bedroom to get her things, a hand shot out and grabbed her with the force of the jolt

at the end of a bungee cord. “Oh, no, you don’t,” John said.

Vicki opened her mouth for a sensible, reasoned explanation of why she was going to sleep alone and discovered she was already caught up in John’s arms, halfway to the master bedroom. There was no sign of a stagger in his step. Well... perhaps she had overreacted...

Coherent thought died an unmourned death as John dropped her onto the bed and proceeded to shed his clothes at the speed of light. “What, no cooperation?” he jeered as his briefs followed the rest of his clothes onto the scattered pile of clothing. “You’re wearing too much, woman.”

Vicki stared. She’d thought he’d fall onto the bed, fully clothed, and pass out. And here he was in all his male glory, obviously not the least incapacitated by his trips to the keg. In fact... he was absolutely gorgeous. He was...

She was supposed to be doing something, but she couldn’t think what. Every atom of her ached for him, longed to be touched. Quivered as desire glimmered and burst into flame. She was his, for better or worse.

“I see I’m going to have to do it for you,” John murmured menacingly.

Still frozen to the bed by primitive passions she had never experienced before, Vicki shivered. The bed—or was it herself?—groaned as John sat down beside her, his naked body radiating the scent of wood smoke, seaweed, and male arousal. Vicki thought she might die of it.

Her sneakers hit the floor with a thud. T-shirt and bra disappeared in a blur of movement. She had to bite her tongue to keep from crying out when John’s hands found

her waist, pulled at the drawstring, skimmed off her shorts. What was the matter with her? It wasn't as if they hadn't done this before. The room began to shimmer with a kaleidoscope of colors as those large hands moved under her, removing her blue bikini panties as if he did this to women every day. At that point Vicki didn't care if he did. She was beyond jealousy, beyond pain. Beyond doubt. This was where she belonged. This, the only thing she wanted to do. And John Paolillo was the only man she wanted to do it with.

They came together in a blind rush of passion. A single thrust for which she was so ready she almost climaxed on the spot. This was John, her man, for all his flaws. As she was his. It was right. And good.

And the future could go hang.

For the first time in her life Vicki screamed as crashing waves of pleasure rolled over her. Then she wrapped her arms and legs even more tightly around John as he found his own release.

As her heartbeat gradually slowed and some semblance of thought returned, Vicki knew that if they had nothing else, this was a moment she would treasure for the rest of her life. They'd each let go, forgotten the emotional baggage and pragmatic problems that haunted their lives. For a few minutes they had been real lovers, complete in themselves, and to hell with the rest of the world.

Vicki sighed. If only...

They each slept like the dead.

Twelve

“Slow down,” Vicki ordered. “The road should be around here somewhere.”

John applied the brakes to a speed that was already little more than a lazy stroll along the narrow picturesque road that wound and twisted above the bay in Truro. He had to admit Vicki knew her way around. Anyone who drove straight down Route 6 from the canal to Provincetown and thought they’d seen Cape Cod was sorely mistaken. Vicki seemed to know every obscure and winding back road in existence. And so far today they’d been on every one of them, at least the ones from Orleans to Truro. Mile after mile of wilderness, almost all of it protected by the Cape Cod National Seashore. Wild roses and cat tails were the only plants John recognized, but he knew natural beauty when he saw it. Vicki pointed out blueberry bushes, beach plums, and marsh mallow. She even claimed her grandfather had once found mayflowers under a covering of leaves only a few feet off the road.

In spite of the too-long-delayed talk he planned to have with Vicki—the question that nagged him constantly like a deep ache which wouldn’t go away—John was enjoying

their morning drive. The peace, the gentle beauty of this back road so far from the whizzing traffic on Route 6, was soothing to the soul. And peace was something he very much needed. Peace to gather his courage to bring up the subject they'd both been avoiding. Courage against perps was one thing; courage with Vicki Kent was another. Hell, no one like to be slapped down. For the umpteenth time John considered Vicki's cavalier handling of the lawyer from Boston. She's on the rebound, Paolillo, that's all it is. She needed you for comfort. There's no way in hell...

"Here!" Vicki cried. "To the right."

John braked hard, swung into the ruts of a narrow sandy trail, bumping the Blazer up a slow rise. They were into a pine woods almost immediately, or what passed for pines on windswept Cape Cod. The bay, the scattering of homes, the world itself disappeared. "Are you sure you know where you're going?" John demanded.

"Well... it's been a while," Vicki conceded. "If we end up in someone's front yard, we'll just have to apologize and take our red faces back to the road."

But when the sandy trail abruptly ended, there was no one to protest their arrival. John brought the Blazer to a halt and simply stared. A cemetery. Vicki had brought him to a cemetery? Great chunks of rough-cut gray granite acted as posts for the fence that surrounded the expanse of gravestones, many very old and covered with lichens.

"My grandparents are buried here," Vicki explained, "and my mother always used to come here to pick blueberries, too. It's so peaceful," she added as John shut off the motor and the only sounds to be heard were the faint chirp of tiny insects and the soft calls of an

occasional bird. “Do you mind?” she asked. “I’ll only be a moment.”

Vicki reached into the back seat and picked up a small bouquet John hadn’t even noticed she’d brought along. He was supposed to be a detective, for God’s sake. She had him so bedazzled, the world could explode around them and he wouldn’t even know it. “Sure, go ahead,” he muttered. Couldn’t she have told him where they were going? He got out of the Blazer and followed her.

“It’s so sad,” Vicki said as they wound their way through the gravestones. “The cemetery is on the highest point around. There used to be a view out over the bay all the way to Provincetown. It was as if the graves were on the top of the world. It may have been the Park Service that decided to add the trees, or maybe the town fathers wanted to protect their own, but planting pines around the cemetery destroyed the view.” Vicki stopped and looked up at him with an embarrassed smile. “It’s silly, I know. The souls have all gone on long since, but I always feel it was an awful thing to deprive the dead of their view of the Cape they so loved.”

“Hey, girl,” John replied gently, “you’ve got to tell yourself they’ve got a clear view from heaven.”

Vicki managed a lop-sided grin. “If they all made it,” she qualified dryly.

“There’s that,” John agreed, “but they would have been denied the view in any case.”

“Okay, you win,” Vicki conceded with a sharp nod, and moved on the final few feet to her grandparent’s graves, side by side, sharing one large granite marker.

As she knelt to place her bouquet in front of the gray granite, John was jolted by a very unwanted thought. He'd expected to be buried next to Ellie. What happened when—if—a man married a second time? He swore, strictly to himself, and clamped a hold on his errant thoughts. It didn't matter one bit more than the view Vicki was so concerned about. He'd work it out.

"My grandmother had an odd experience here," Vicki said as she stood up. "She and my grandfather and my mother had come here to pick blueberries. But this particular day my grandmother got this terrible feeling. She told grampa to turn right around and take them home. Later, they found out that a man had murdered a woman and buried her body in the sand just outside the cemetery. Not far from where we're parked, actually."

"You believe in that psychic stuff?" John scoffed. And could have bit his tongue. How could he be so stupid? She was talking about her grandmother.

"It happened," Vicki snapped. And stalked off, her back still unbending when she reached the car. She put her hand on the handle, paused, shoulders slumping in resignation.

"Okay," she announced, "I told myself I was going to show you the pits up here before we left, and I'm going to do it even if you are a hard-headed, skeptical so-and-so."

John followed, feeling rather like Prince Philip pacing in the Queen's wake. She really was one stiff-necked, independent female. Not his type at all. Except he couldn't seem to convince his hormones of that fact. Didn't even want to.

They plunged on through the relatively young trees until, suddenly, they were in the open, the view Vicki had talked about stretching out before them. The low, rolling hills of Truro, the sparkling waters of the bay, the fist of the Cape that ended at Provincetown, its monument to the founding Pilgrims penciling into the sky, clearly visible from a distance of twelve miles. "I see what you mean about the view," John admitted.

"Now look down," Vicki commanded.

John gaped. Less than six inches from the tip of his toes was a steep drop-off into a bowl-shaped pit perhaps thirty feet deep.

"Now you know what that pond in Orleans looked like beneath all that water."

"If it looked like that," John said, examining the steep sides of the pit, "I don't know how I ever found the kid."

"They're nasty, these leftovers from the ice age. I guess they must be the points where the subsoil was softer, where there was a place for the water to drain away, taking the sand with it."

"What's that stuff covering the sides? And under our feet?" John asked.

"Hog cranberry."

John was annoyed by Vicki's smirk. She really enjoyed knowing something he didn't. "Okay, I'll bite. What's hog cranberry?"

"Well, I think it's simply cranberry that doesn't have water. Or maybe the original wild cranberry that was cultivated by the Indians into something edible. Anyway, the plants have to grow in a bog in order to make cranberries. Out here, there're simply groundcover. I

suppose the name comes from the fact that they're fit only for hogs to eat."

"Just a walking little travelogue, aren't you?" John murmured, aware that he was being difficult again. Just wait 'til he got her to New Haven...

"Uh, Vicki?"

"What?"

"Could we talk?"

She wasn't expecting this. Not here. Not now. But she shouldn't have been surprised. They were leaving tomorrow, returning home. There was almost no time left. That is, if they were going to talk at all. And it suddenly seemed they were.

"Can we sit on this stuff?" John inquired.

"It's prickly, but sure, we can manage," Vicki told him, sinking onto the tightly packed dark green of the wild cranberry.

John sat down beside her, thinking that in this incredibly beautiful spot he ought to be able to find the right words. But it wasn't easy.

"Look, Vic," he began somewhat harshly. "I'm not sure how you feel, but in spite of all the strikes against us, I think you'll agree we've got something going here." John took a deep breath, flicked a glance at the distant silhouette of the Pilgrim Monument. He had about as much chance of flying to the monument as he did of cementing his relationship with Victoria Kent.

Even if he was certain he wanted to.

"What I'm trying to say," John continued, "is that I think we should find a way to keep seeing each other. Give ourselves a chance to explore what's going on. Am I

making any sense here?" So why was she sitting there with her arms around her knees, head bowed, not even looking at the view she claimed to love so much?

"I think we ought to give it a try." Vicki's words were so faint John almost missed them. A little more enthusiasm might have been nice.

His frown turned to a scowl. "You sound pretty doubtful."

She wished she could react the way John undoubtedly wanted her to, but her elation was overwhelmed by fear. The necessary sacrifices were all hers and she wasn't certain she was willing to make them. Even if they lived in the same city, it just wasn't going to work. They would both be hurt. Then again, as she'd thought so often before, perhaps it would be worth the pain. Everyone was entitled to a few moments of great passion. Even if they had nothing but a memory to live on.

"I have reservations," the lawyer from Boston conceded carefully, "but there's no question that I want to see you again. I'm afraid you've become quite a habit, detective." So cool. So cautious. Such a ridiculous contrast to the fire that burned in the night, threatening to incinerate the old house on Nauset Heights as well as the inhabitants within.

"I could arrest you for possession," John whispered into her ear as he tumbled her backward onto the short stiff spikes of cranberry. "Of my heart."

Silence. Obviously, she had to think that one over. But, damn, her response, when it came was all he could ask for.

"I don't have handcuffs, detective," his woman warned, "but I'm definitely possessive. You'd better keep your eyes off those girls in New Haven."

"What girls?" John taunted as his lips brushed hers, sending shivers through them both. "And what about Mr. Ivy League Lowell?" he added, his gleaming teeth nipping at her lower lip.

"John," Vicki hissed, "get off! We're out here on top of a hill in plain sight of God knows who."

"We're not even in plain sight of the cemetery. And even if we were, they don't care. In fact, they'd probably enjoy it." The cranberry snapped and crunched as he flattened Vicki beneath him.

She pounded on his back. "What about the hotshot Bostonian?" John demanded.

"He's over, done with, kaput, fini. Okay? Now let me up, the cranberry's killing me!"

John laughed and rolled off, rapidly unfolding to his full height. He was still smiling broadly as he reached down, offering Vicki a hand up. The weight of the world was off his shoulders. She'd agreed. Maybe not in so many words, but she'd agreed. When tomorrow came, they wouldn't be walking away from each other—they'd be moving on into the possibility of new lives, happier lives. A future glowing with love? Yes, even that.

Oh, yeah, it had been a good morning. Like Vicki, for John the small hidden cemetery in Truro had become a special place.

~ * ~

The narrow main street of Provincetown was almost as crowded on the last Saturday in September as in the

summer season. The temperature, however, Vicki informed John, was considerably more comfortable. They ate lunch on an outdoor deck overlooking the giant wharf that thrust out into the harbor, tour boats lining its sides, a huge empty space waiting for the imminent arrival of the ferry from Boston. Signs along the dock advertised speed cruises of the harbor, whale tours, sports fishing.

“Want to go whale hunting?” John asked as he polished off his third crabcake glowing red under a layer of cocktail sauce.

“That would take most of the afternoon,” Vicki replied, “and I love looking at all the shops.” Her face fell. “I suppose you’d rather look at whales.”

John produced a slow grin that penetrated to her toes. “The whales can wait. At least I think they’re not quite extinct yet. So show me the town, Ms. Tour Guide. I’m putty in your hands.”

“You know,” Vicki confided as they joined the crowds thronging the sidewalks and spilling over into the one-way street along the water, “I was probably only five or six, but I can still remember when you could walk along here and see women wearing fishnet tops. Only fishnet. Believe me, my childish eyes popped. This crowd is pretty staid.”

“Tourists,” John nodded. “Think the Park Service had anything to do with it?”

Vicki paused in mid-step, was almost run down by a well-padded couple in matching Cape Cod T-shirts. “I always thought it was just changing times,” she said, “but you could be right.” Provincetown is sort of like Key West, the home to a lot of people who pride themselves on

being different, and the streets used to reflect that. Now all you see is tourist types.”

“Like us.”

Vicki laughed. “Like us,” she agreed. “But I miss the colorful characters. I hope they all come out at night when the tourists go home.”

“Okay, what do we see first?” John asked.

Paintings, sculpture, handcrafted jewelry, scrimshaw, wood carvings ranging from seagulls to totems and coffee tables—they investigated nearly every shop running along the waterfront. John succumbed to a store full of exotic seashells, planning to add to the packets already prepared for the nieces and nephews. Vicki bought a malachite necklace and earrings. They paused to eat ice cream at a sidewalk café, then wandered into a store specializing in saltwater taffy. John said the large bag he purchased was to take home to his mother, but Vicki claimed to be skeptical. After all, she said, poking him in the ribs, she’d discovered he wasn’t as tough as he looked.

John glowered, looking pointedly at the bag of candy she had bought for herself, then let his gaze wander over her, head to toe. He raised one brow. “My sweet tooth is for something much more enticing,” he informed her, perfectly straight-faced.

Vicki blushed. Right there in the middle of the sidewalk by the old town hall with throngs of people charging by on every side. Oh, yes, this man could make the world go away. She gulped for air. Suddenly, she needed space. Otherwise she was going to turn into a clinging vine, transform into John’s woman, rather than John’s friend and companion. As much as she cared for

him, she couldn't let him swallow her up, devour her life. She could never be an Ellie, who probably hung on his every word and never did anything but be a wife to John Paolillo.

"Look, John," Vicki said in a rush, "I'd like to take a peek at some of the boutiques, and I know you'd be bored stiff. Would you mind wandering around on your own? I'll meet you back here in an hour. Is that all right?"

"Sure," he replied readily, confirming Vicki's thought that he'd be vastly relieved to escape the Provincetown dress boutiques. "Right here, in an hour."

~ * ~

Conscious of the time—Vicki was never late for an appointment—she popped in and out of the boutiques with alacrity, admiring but not buying, until she finally couldn't resist a linen big shirt handpainted with brilliant flowers in a shades of pink and rose and lavender. Perfect to dress up a multitude of her casual clothes. She was juggling the bags with shirt, saltwater taffy, the malachite jewelry, and her large black purse when she started back down the street toward the benches lining the grass in front of the old town hall. Since it was late in the afternoon and the ferry had loaded up its daytrippers for the return to Boston, the sidewalk was less crowded. She could see John standing with his back to the fence, eyes wandering over the lessening crowd, obviously looking for her.

He stood out like a beacon, she thought. Like the Pilgrim Monument towering above them a block away. He no more fit in with the tourist crowd than the proverbial elephant in a tea cup. He was simply...

wonderful. They were both intelligent people. Somehow they'd make it work. Where there was love...

There was a jolt. Vicki hit the sidewalk hard. Her purse. Someone had snatched her purse! She scrambled to her feet, heedless of the packages scattered around her, the colorful saltwater taffy spilling over the sidewalk and into the street, and started to run. Anger exploded, adrenaline flowed. She was going to catch that miserable whoever if it was the last thing she ever did.

But she needn't have bothered. John was way out in front of her, only a few feet behind the man clutching her purse. Around her, everything had come to a halt. Tourists gaped, cars slowed to a stop. Every eye followed John as he tackled the man, applied a highly professional arm lock and wrestled him back up to his feet. Vicki stood, panting, half a block away.

A middle-aged couple walked up to her, held out her packages. "Here, dear," the woman said, "I think I got all the candy. It was so well-wrapped, it should be fine."

Vicki poured out her thanks, promising herself that she'd remember this act of kindness any time she was tempted to think the world had been taken over by the bad guys. As her mind began to function again, she supposed she should dial 911, then recalled her purse was just now making its way back to her. But the running figure of a patrolman and a single warning wail from an approaching patrol car demonstrated that someone had already done it for her. It would seem she was useless at her own disaster.

Anger gave way to dismay when Vicki got a good look at the young man John was propelling toward her. He was gaunt, hollow-eyed, probably a drug addict. Surely only

desperation would have made him try to rob someone in broad daylight in the center of town. He needed help, not jail time.

“No way!” John roared twenty minutes later. “Look at you. You’re dripping blood, and you want to let him go?”

“John,” Vicki replied patiently, well aware of the interested spectators around them in the Provincetown Police Station, “he’s an addict. He’s not responsible. As long as he agrees to rehab, I’m not going to press charges. I can’t see the point.”

“He knocked you down, stole your purse. Your ID, Vic. Your credit cards, your cash,” John enunciated carefully. “I don’t care if he’s on coke or heroin or what damned thing. He’s a thief. He’s over eighteen. He does jail time.”

“No.”

“Vicki”—a deep breath—“you’re bleeding.”

“Not much.”

“Two scraped knees, a binged elbow. Dammit, Vic, he hurt you.”

“I’ll live,” she asserted stubbornly, turning away to speak to the arresting officer. Ignoring John, she repeated her refusal to press charges as long as the young man accepted rehab.

“Go wash up,” John growled when she was finished. “I worked a little professional courtesy here for a box of Band-Aids.”

“Fine,” Vicki huffed as she headed for the ladies’ room, “I was afraid you were going to insist on the ER.”

They had a nearly silent trip home, an equally silent meal at a restaurant in Eastham. Vicki’s scrapes were

minor, but they were beginning to hurt, a constant reminder of the gulf that had risen between herself and John. The final proof that what each feared had been right all along. Their worlds were too far apart.

When they got home to the house on Nauset Heights, the house that had been so full of love for the past week, Vicki walked blindly through to the living room and collapsed onto the couch. John followed, standing with one shoulder against the doorway as if bracing himself for the blow to come.

"It's never going to work it, is it?" Vicki asked, her quiet voice filling the glum silence.

John studied his sneakers. "I don't know," he mumbled. "You just can't seem to understand..."

"Oh, John," she interrupted, "don't you see? That's the problem. You can't understand my point of view either. I thought we'd be able to agree to disagree, but it's always going to be this way. John, the hard-nosed cop vs. Vicki the bleeding-hearts liberal."

"If you loved me..."

"Stop it!" Vicki shouted. "Don't talk love when you won't give an inch yourself. You're a hard-headed, uncompromising nut case. I don't know why I let myself in for this. I'm going back to Boston tonight, John," she declared, rising to her feet.

"Running again?" he taunted.

Vicki paused, swallowing hard. "Yes," she admitted through gritted teeth. "I'm running. I should have run from you and your blasted gun the night I got here. It would have saved us both a lot of... trouble," she finished lamely. Never would she admit to pain or heartache, or

imply that he might be suffering the same. “Now kindly move, so I can pack.”

For a long moment John didn’t budge. He stood like the Rock of Gibraltar in the doorway, daring her to try to get past him. His dark eyes were pools of fury and frustration, but he said nothing. Finally, he stepped aside, shoulders stiff, every ounce of his body language proclaiming his anger and disapproval.

In half an hour Vicki was packed, maneuvering the Saab around the Blazer, out the driveway, turning toward Route 6 and the long road back to Boston.

Just when she’d thought... Vicki sniffed; reached for the tissue box she’d had the forethought to place on the passenger seat beside her. Why, why, why did she have to fall for an unbending macho cop who could see no side but his own?

She’d come to the Cape to get her head together. And was returning in worse turmoil than the confused emotions that had sent her scurrying to the Cape in the first place. Life was unfair. Even cruel. She turned onto the Mid-Cape Highway, accelerating toward Boston.

And the nothingness which awaited her.

Thirteen

“Giovanni!”

John, his age instantly reduced by thirty years, raised blank eyes to his mother’s face. Followed by a quick flick at the other interested and amused faces gathered around the huge cherrywood table for his father’s seventieth birthday party.

“Your brother,” his mother explained with all the dignity of matriarch of the family, “wishes to know why you are glowering when the occasion is a happy one.”

“Yeah, bro’,” confirmed the youngest and only unmarried member of the Paolillo clan, “you’ve been a grouch ever since you got back from the Cape. They still giving you the cold shoulder at the station?”

“I’m always grouchy,” John shot back. “And, no, Mama,” he added hastily as he caught her look of quick concern, “I seem to be forgiven. Things are back on track. The streets are mean, but the captain loves me.”

Then it’s a woman, his mother decided. Not since Ellie’s death had he looked so bad. Marie Paolillo was not pleased when her heedless, youngest son came to the same conclusion.

“So it’s gotta be a woman,” Anthony announced around a mouthful of stuffed manicotti.

“Tony!” The cry of warning hissed in chorus from nearly a dozen family throats.

“Enough!” roared Vincent Paolillo from the head of the table. “It is my party and I say we all smile.” He arranged his fine white teeth, which John had inherited, into a demonstration of the required position. Eleven sets of lips curled dutifully in response. Including John’s. Satisfied, Vincent returned to his meal. After supper, he vowed, he would have a talk with his second son, the one who would someday be Chief of Police.

~ * ~

Vincent lowered himself into his favorite recliner, waving John to the burgundy leather sofa beside him. The den was Vincent’s private place, where he knew he could close the door and no one dared disturb them. “So, talk,” Vincent barked. “Your brother is right. You look as if the world has come to an end. It is either the job or a woman. And if you are telling the truth about the job...” Vincent shrugged, turning inquiring eyes on his son, sharp dark eyes that were a mirror of John’s own.

John leaned forward, elbows propped on his upper legs, hands clasped between his knees. “Okay, so it’s a woman,” he said. “There’s nothing in it. I met her, I liked her. She’s part of another world. A no hope situation. I’ll get over it.”

“Ah-h,” Vincent breathed. “And what makes this situation no hope?”

“She’s a defense attorney. In Boston.”

Vincent grunted. "The Boston is not so bad," he conceded after several moments of pregnant silence.

"Yeah, right." John's sarcasm over his father's obvious omission filled the room. "She's also part of the Boston establishment," he added. "New Haven is a pretty far comedown."

"New Haven is also a college town, with a great university almost as old as Harvard," his father reminded him stiffly.

"Uh-huh," John muttered.

"And trains go every hour to the city," Vincent pointed out. To a New Havener "the city" was New York.

"There's that," John conceded.

"She does not wish to practice any other kind of law?" Vincent inquired hopefully.

"Actually... we didn't discuss it," John said. "Well, not much. We sort of got into fights—uh, disagreements—without ever really getting down to the heart of it all."

"So you don't know if she is willing to make this concession for you?"

"I promised her, and myself, that I'd never ask her to."

"Ah." In the distance they could hear the rattle of pans in the kitchen, the cheerful voices of those who had volunteered to clean up. "That may have been a mistake," Vincent offered carefully.

"I thought I could make the sacrifice, that I could get along without her, leave her free to do what she wanted to do. I told myself that if we were together, it'd just be one big hassle. We were better off apart." John slumped still further, his hands parting to ball into fists. "But it's not working. Just when I really need to prove I'm back on

track, that I can do my job, I've got a woman on my mind day and night." John thrust both hands through his hair, threw himself back against the burgundy leather. "Hell, I can't live without her. I'm ready to chuck everything and move to Boston. It's like some damn teenage infatuation. I keep telling myself it'll pass, but it doesn't."

Another pause. So what was a father to do for a child who has already known great loss? A child, however adult, who was hurting? All alone in a sea of relatives who wanted to help but didn't know how.

"It never hurts to have a lawyer in the family," said Vincent, pronouncing his judgment. After that, he decided, it was time to be quiet. The boy had already said it all. He was in love and he was going to have to find a way to deal with it. All they could do was let him know the family was behind him, that they would welcome this young woman from Boston into their midst. The rest John would have to manage for himself.

~ * ~

"Where would you like these, Mrs. Manchester?" Vicki asked struggling with a large cardboard box of items donated for the charity auction.

"On this end of the table, dear. And I've told you to call me Milly." Millicent Manchester had given her son his blue eyes, but her sunny disposition was uniquely her own. Vicki had frequently wondered how Lowell could have become such a stuffed shirt when his mother was not only gracious but outgoing and genuinely kindhearted.

"Yes, of course, Milly," Vicki said as she plopped the box onto the table and began to unload the items.

After several more trips to empty their cars, the two women stood back and surveyed the jumble of goods that ranged from a curling iron to a laptop, from hanging baskets with real flowers to gift certificates. The prospect of arranging it into an appealing display was daunting, Vicki thought glumly. Though she quickly realized that if she were in a better mood, she would find the task a pleasant challenge.

The two women worked in silence for a while, exchanging no more than questions about which items should be featured at the center of the exhibit. And then, as Millicent Manchester stood back to survey their progress, she said, quite casually, "Lowell tells me you two aren't seeing each other anymore."

"That's right." Vicki was nearly whispering. "We... we decided we weren't right for each other."

"Is it another man?" Milly asked. "Lowell seemed to think so."

Oh, darn, Vicki groaned. She didn't need this. She really didn't. "I met someone on the Cape, yes," Vicki admitted, "but Lowell and I... well, we'd come to a parting of the ways before that. In fact," Vicki added, glad to seize on the truth, "that's why I rushed off to the Cape like that. I'd begun to have doubts." So there, she'd said it. And the sky hadn't fallen in. Not yet, anyway.

"I have to confess I was disappointed," Milly said thoughtfully, "but I believe you've done the right thing. Lowell's so like his father." She sighed. "Not that that's bad, mind you, but you've got such life in you, Vicki. The passion that shines through in the courtroom. Lowell would have tried to stuff you into a niche labeled Proper

Boston Lady, and it simply wouldn't have worked. Or else, it would, and you'd be utterly miserable. Either way, I can't help but think it's for the best."

Millicent Manchester walked briskly toward the table, grabbed a handcrafted doll from the pile and sat it carefully next to the items that had already been arranged. "So tell me about the man from the Cape," she said. "Is he someone special?"

Someone special. Dear God, Vicki cried, was John Paolillo something special? Yes, oh yes, *oh yes!* And what was she going to do about it? Other than sit at her desk and moon all day and lie in her bed crying all night.

"He's a homicide detective in New Haven."

"Oh, dear," Milly murmured.

They went back to work, once again discussing nothing beyond the auction display. "You know, Vicki," Milly said after a while, "you're not getting any younger. I presume you want children—most women do?"

"Yes, I do," Vicki admitted.

"Well, then," Milly said briskly, "you might have to adjust your career choice anyway. It would be very difficult to be a defense attorney on high-profile cases and raise a family. Some women do it, but they do it with a great sacrifice of quality time with their husbands and children. Somehow I don't think you'd care to do that."

Idly, Vicki reached out and fingered a bright silk flower in an arrangement donated by a flower shop. She should have thought of that. And, besides, wasn't she having serious doubts about being a defense counsel since the Ed Turner case?

“You could take on juvenile cases, elderly rights,” Milly suggested. “Things that are satisfying but won’t step on your detective’s toes. Or you might consider the D.A.’s office, maybe later when your children are in school. You wouldn’t make as much money as in private practice—and, yes, sometimes you’ll find yourself prosecuting someone you believe is innocent. No one ever said lawyering was a bed of roses.”

Blankly, Vicki reached into one of the boxes and drew out a decorator pillow. “Milly,” she said in wonder, unaware that she was crushing the pillow in her hands, “I can’t believe you’re doing this. I’ve been feeling so sorry for myself, so downright lovesick, that I couldn’t see any hope at all. It’s... well, it’s embarrassing to see I’ve been so blind.”

Milly patted her on the arm. “Love is like that. You can’t see the forest for the trees. Go back to your detective, Vicki. Talk to him. See what you can work out.”

“I’m not sure... to tell the truth, Milly, I don’t know if he feels the same way. He may have forgotten me the minute he hit the road.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

But Vicki knew she couldn’t call him. She absolutely couldn’t. Now that he’d gotten past the worst of his grief for Ellie, he’d probably had a different woman every night. Victoria Kent was just a pleasant vacation memory. He’d be polite, say all the right things. But he’d know she was pining. She’d die of embarrassment. Milly was trying to help, but...

Vicki tucked Millicent Manchester's advice into the niche marked "For Further Thought" and went back to setting up for the evening's auction.

~ * ~

"Vicki," cried the voice on the phone the next night. "We've set a date," Betty Nickerson bubbled. "The last Saturday in October. Please, please say you can come."

"Of course," Vicki laughed, "I wouldn't miss it." But she was going to cry buckets, she knew it.

"The Congregational Church, two o'clock," Betty said, "reception in the meeting hall right after."

"Great. I'll—"

"Vic? There's—uh—something I need to ask you." Betty's bouncy tones dwindled almost to a mumble. "Nate and I were wondering... well, Nate thought we ought to invite John. I mean, after all, he really nudged us in the right direction. But... well, we didn't want to if you—um—didn't want us to."

This was it then. The decision she'd been afraid to make. "Invite him," she told Betty firmly.

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure." And she was.

Whether they had a future together was still up in the air, but it was high time they talked as reasonable adult people whose mutual silence and stiff-necked pride just might be ruining their lives.

If John was even half as miserable as she was...

Vicki was smiling as she made her goodbyes and hung up the phone. Far in the back of her brilliant blue eyes a glint of hope was shining.

~ * ~

Vicki laid her small suitcase on the bed in the master bedroom of the house on Nauset Heights. She'd flipped the thermostat, gotten the furnace running, and was now ready to hang up the few items of clothing she brought with her. Hang them in the closet where John's clothes had hung. In the house where every inch screamed of his presence. Where the sight of the neighbor's Labrador had sent a spike of memory through her heart. John humbled by skunks. Real ones, not the two-legged variety. John—reeking, blinded. Needing her.

Vicki wasn't at all sure she was going to get through this. She needed to look bright and cheerful for the wedding tomorrow, and she strongly suspected she wasn't going to sleep. Her eyes were going to be red and swollen. And she still had no idea if John was coming or not. Betty had not let her know, and she was too proud to ask. If he did come, would they nod to each other across the aisle? Maybe share a dance at the reception? Or was there room for dancing in the church's meeting hall? Vicki couldn't remember.

Her suitcase emptied quickly. She'd brought a nightgown, robe, and slippers, her toiletries, a good dress and high heels for the wedding. Casual clothes to wear on Sunday if sorrow didn't chase her back to Boston on Saturday night. What a coward she was. Running, running, always running.

It was nearly midnight. So much like her last arrival. Only this time she had the master bedroom. And John was... where?

There was a knock on the front door. No doorbell, just a short rap, as if whoever was outside was unsure if he wanted to come in or not.

Vicki stood quite still, the room blurring around her. There was only one person who would come to her door at midnight.

No, it was Betty, having second thoughts. The police, an emergency. A wayward skunk.

The short sharp rap was a bit louder this time. Still, Vicki didn't move.

The doorbell shrilled. Thunder shook the old oak door. "Vicki, I know you're there," John boomed. "Open up!"

So much for a joyous reunion.

Vicki unlocked the door, backed away until she almost hit the wall of the small foyer. John stood in the doorway, suitcase forgotten behind him on the porch. "Got your gun, detective?" she inquired.

"Oh, yeah," he breathed. "I never travel without it. A guy never knows when he'll have to defend himself against some woman."

Memories flooded them both. "Look, Vic," John blurted, "I took a chance you'd be here. I hope I'm not intruding, but I thought... well, we were both pretty short-tempered when we were... together. I've been doing some thinking, and it seemed like we ought to talk." John shuffled his feet like a small boy unsure of his punishment. "Do you think maybe I could come in? I mean, I could always go to a motel, but..." His tongue tangled in a knot, John wound to a halt.

"Sure, come on in." Vicki's voice was about as welcoming as an iceberg.

John started through the door, stopped, returned to the porch for his suitcase. Then, appalled, wondered if he was assuming too much. He should have left the case on the porch until... well, until he found out what the hell was going on.

He followed Vicki down the hall, watched as she snapped on the lights in the living room. Gingerly, they sat on opposite ends of the sofa. "So talk," Vicki said, wishing she could bite her tongue, wishing she could break down and say how she felt, how much she wanted him, how much she needed him. How miserable she was without him.

"I've been thinking," John declared, "I could get a job in private security here in Boston, no problem. It pays better than being a cop, and that way—well, that way you could keep on doing what you do and there'd be no problem between us." John glanced away, suddenly fearful. "That is, if you and Manchester haven't gotten back together... or something like that."

She had to get the words out before she burst into tears. "You love being a cop, John. It's what you are."

"Yeah... but I love you more."

She wouldn't throw herself on his chest just yet. In thirty seconds, yes, but not until she finished this much-needed conversation. "It's okay, John," she smiled shyly. "I've decided that advice in the Bible wasn't so far off. The whither thou goest and all that. You're a New Haven cop, that's what you are, and I would never ask you to change. I can practice law anywhere. That is, if you're saying you want us to be togeth..."

They came together in the middle of the sofa in a tangle of arms and legs, lips hungering, eyes devouring. Touching, touching, touching to make sure each was real and not part of the nightly fantasies that had been haunting them. Much, much later, as the old clock on the mantel chimed three, all doubts had vanished. Not even the gloom of the wee hours of a dark October night could dim their joy.

They were reaching out, taking a risk.

And it was going to work.

Meet Blair Bancroft

Blair Bancroft recalls receiving odd looks from adults as she walked home from school at age six, her lips moving as she told herself stories. And there was never a night she didn't entertain herself with her own bedtime stories. But it was only after a variety of other careers that she turned to serious writing. Blair has been a music teacher, professional singer, non-fiction editor, costume designer, and real estate agent. She has traveled from Bratsk, Siberia, to Machu Picchu, Peru, and has been on numerous trips to Britain and Ireland. She is now attempting to incorporate all these varied experiences into her writing.

Blair's first book, *Tarleton's Wife*, won RWA's Golden Heart for Long Historical in 1999 and First in Romance at the 2002 Florida Writers' Association Awards. Her contemporary suspense novel, *Shadowed Paradise*, was a finalist for an EPPIE, the "Oscar" of the e-book industry. Blair's Signet Regency, *The Indifferent Earl* was chosen as Best Regency of 2003 by *Romantic Times* magazine and was a finalist for RWA's RITA award. Five more Regencies followed in quick succession. *Roses in the Mist*, a medieval young adult, was published by Wings e-Press in January 2004. For *Love At Your Own Risk* (Wings, August 2005) Blair drew on her family's long association with Cape Cod

and her experiences living in both Boston and New Haven.

While researching a new mystery series in the summer of 2002, Blair began driving a tram at The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida, and is still at it. There's also a new historical series in the works, tentatively dubbed, The League of Outcasts.

Now a long-time resident of Florida's Gulf Coast, Blair fondly recalls growing up in Connecticut which still has a piece of her heart. Blair may be contacted at:

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