

BETWEEN THE SHEETS

by

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Dedication

To Louise, Nancy, and all the generous folks at
Whiskey Creek Press

Chapter 1

In the cramped office of hotshot new producer for La Fiesta Music, Roy Emberling, two men sat in silence. One appeared tentatively pleased; the other looked around for a quick means of escape. Very much in the foreground, the dying strains of the latest CD Roy was producing faded away.

“So what do you think?” Roy asked his friend Dylan McLean.

Dylan fervently wished he hadn’t let Roy coerce him into giving an opinion he felt unqualified to give. Dylan considered himself highly qualified to express his opinion about movies, which he did several times weekly as the new film critic for the *San Francisco Trib*. But when it came to music, especially the songs of a pop icon like Courtney Clayton, Dylan’s thoughts had no more value than any other guy off the street. Which he tried to tell Roy.

“But that’s exactly what I’m after,” Roy protested. “Courtney’s fan base is entirely made up of guys off the street.”

“More like their mothers, aunts, and sisters for her singing,” Dylan pointed out. “The guys were more interested in her on that TV show.”

Roy nodded his head in agreement. “That was true before Courtney took a four year hiatus to go to Harvard. Now that

she's graduated, she wants to restart her career in a whole new direction. Our girl's grown up."

"Doesn't sound like she has," Dylan muttered. "Grown up, that is."

Roy reached into a bowl of M&Ms—his substitute for the cigarettes California had all but outlawed. "What do you mean?" He inhaled a handful of the candies and crunched them.

There was no getting around telling Roy the truth, so Dylan carefully chose his words. "Roy, she sounds like a little girl trying to play grown-up. You know, like she's tripping around in her mother's high heels. Her voice doesn't have the, I don't know, the battered quality or maybe it's the maturity to sing ballads of love and loss. *Send in the Clowns*, *The Way We Were*, *A Certain Smile*. Someone gave her really bad advice. She has a great voice, and she'll probably do a wonderful job on those songs when she's had some...some experience with living."

Roy furrowed his brow. "Courtney personally picked each song on this CD to enhance her new career strategy. She's put a lot of heart and soul into it. But now, if I get your drift, you're saying she sounds too young to sing the songs on this CD?"

Dylan nodded vigorously. "Exactly. She takes sophisticated lyrics and makes them sound like Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm. Makes me want to tell her to go out and get a life. Come back and sing these songs when she's grown up enough to know what the words mean. Say, five to ten years. In the meantime, there's nothing wrong with being America's prom queen." He started to rise to leave but Roy motioned him to stay where he was while he wrote some notes.

Just then the door to Roy's office flew open, and the subject of Dylan's tirade flounced in, glaring at both men. "Who are you?" she barked at Dylan. "And what gives you the right to pronounce judgment on my work?"

Dylan sprang to his feet. "I'm Dylan McLean." He extended his hand to the shapely blonde with ocean-blue eyes. She was even more gorgeous in person than on TV, if that was possible. She looked down at his hand with contempt, and he lowered it to his side.

"The movie critic for the *San Francisco Trib*, right?" she asked.

He was impressed. He was new in the city and didn't think many people knew his name yet.

"You're a movie critic. What gives you the right to mouth off about my song selections on the CD?"

Dylan looked at Roy with an I-told-you-so expression. "Exactly, I'm a movie critic. That's what I told Roy, an old buddy who guilt-tripped me into coming to listen and give my, as you say, worthless opinion." He frowned at Roy and added, "We're even now, bud. I don't owe you anything more for that favor."

"Yeah, we're even." Roy came over to the two of them and put up his hands. "Uncomfortable as it is to hear, Courtney, we've gotta listen to Dylan. His opinion is probably typical of most of your fans."

She crossed her arms. "Oh, and what is it Mr. Typical Fan wants to hear?" She narrowed her eyes.

"If you made another Christmas album, I and probably every other guy out there would buy it for his mom this year." Dylan referred to the last CD she released before heading off to Harvard. The CD continued to smash sales records each

holiday season, and music company executives hounded her for more of the same.

She shook her head. "Everyone thinks I'm still the kid who made the Christmas album. I'm a grown-up now, a new person. I want to open a new phase of my career, one that shows where I am now, not where I was."

Dylan couldn't see what all the fuss was about. She could have done worse than continue to produce mega hits. "Come on. Is it that bad having a blueprint for success? A lot of people still love that CD. Heck, I bought copies for my mother, my grandmother, and my Aunt Louise."

Her face crumpled. "How would you feel if someone made posters of your baby pictures and plastered every building you went into with them?"

He tried to look sympathetic. "I guess it doesn't help that you were head cheerleader and Howie's dream date on *High School Days*." Courtney Clayton's intermittent appearances on the popular sitcom while she was in high school had deepened her aura of being sweet and unreachable though amazingly beautiful.

She rolled her eyes. "I hated that show. And I never was that person, but that stupid image still haunts me." She stood up and began pacing, giving him a view of her shapely butt that helped convince him she had indeed grown up. She whirled back to face him, waving her well-toned arms. "That's why I chose to sing these romantic songs for my new CD. I chose. Not some adviser who wants me to stay fifteen years old till I'm collecting Social Security, but me." She folded her arms in front of her pert breasts and jutted out her bottom lip. "I stand behind my choices."

This tirade was way more than he'd bargained for. Heck, after today, Roy would owe him. Dylan looked at his watch. He really needed to go. "Pleasant as it is to chat with you, I do have another appointment I need to get to. With my editor." Dylan left before either Roy or Courtney could do anything else to detain him.

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Her fists balled at her side, Courtney watched Dylan rush out. She then whirled to Roy. "Why were you talking to that guy about my CD? He's nobody."

Roy pursed his lips. "Like I said, he's the man on the street. Courtney, look, something bothers me about this CD. Much as you don't want to hear it, I think Dylan put his finger on the something. But we can fix it before we release the CD, which is the good news."

"What?" Courtney seethed. "You're going to hold up the release of the CD based on what that nobody said? After all the hard work we've put into it? Roy, you know we timed the release of the CD to coincide with when my tour begins."

Roy held up his hands. "I know we'd prefer to have the CD out to coincide with the tour, but that just may not happen. I want to make sure we get it right before we release—not find out what needs to be fixed after."

She thumped her chest. "I feel the CD is good to go as it is. What can I do to make you see things my way?"

"Get McLean to change his mind. That guy's one stubborn cowboy. But if you can convince him, I'll give the go ahead for releasing the CD. Otherwise, it's back to the drawing board."

Courtney was on her way before he'd popped any more M&Ms into his mouth.

* * * *

“Ms. Clayton, to what do I owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit?” Dylan asked when she tracked him down in his office later that day. He lounged back in his chair in the *Trib*’s conference room, steepling his fingers. Giving her a more careful scrutiny than he had earlier in Roy’s office, he really registered the curves she’d developed in all the right places—how surprisingly voluptuous she was for a tall, slim woman. Blonde, blue-eyed, pert nose, full lips. *Yep, very nice indeed.*

She threw herself down in a chair then looked over at him, tears of anger threatening to spill. He had to restrain himself from smiling, and also from brushing those tears away with his fingertips. Judging by the look in her eye, she’d probably welcome his touch about as eagerly as a vaccination with bubonic plague.

Too bad. It might have been damn pleasant meeting under other circumstances. “Ms. Clayton. I’m not a music critic. But I figure when Roy asks my opinion—pesters me for it, in fact—same as with the movies, I call ’em as I see ’em. Or, in this case, hear ’em.”

She sprang up. “You make me sound like some brat child star. I’m twenty-two years old! I’ve graduated from college, changed my whole look. How dare you say I still sing like some high school kid!”

He had to strain not to burst into laughter, which he knew would fan the flames of her fury into a major blow out. But man, she looked about sixteen, even with her expensive short haircut. On her, the navy blue suit and jacket and dress-for-success pumps looked like the failed attempt of a sexy cheerleader to pass for class valedictorian.

“It wasn’t meant as an insult,” he said, impressed by the heat she was generating. She sure didn’t sound like any Christmas album angel now.

She furrowed her brows together. “I’ve had lots of experience with life.”

His eyes widened and his groin sprang to full attention under the table. He wiggled as unobtrusively as he could to try to relieve the pressure. “You have?” he asked skeptically.

She gave him a sultry look. “Of course.”

He cleared his throat. “Well, that’s nice for you.” He looked at his watch. He really needed to go, but he didn’t want to get up in front of her sporting an erection. “Pleasant as it is to chat with you, I have a screening I need to get to. For my regular gig.”

She released her arms and moved closer, bending over him. He could feel her warm breath, scented with strawberries, and the vanilla fragrance of her hair. She frowned at him. “Not so fast. I want a chance to get you to rethink your opinion. And then I want you to tell Roy you’ve changed your mind. Because right now, he’s planning to hold up the release of my CD.”

He took a deep breath, feeling his erection relax a tad. “You want what?”

“I want you to listen to my CD with an open mind. And then I want you to tell Roy you’ve changed your opinion.” Looking smug, she stood up and crossed her arms again.

Now he did laugh, as the blood began to circulate from his cock back to his brain. “No way. I listened with an open mind already, and I gave Roy my opinion, for what it’s worth. You haven’t said one thing that changes my opinion an iota. In fact, now I think I’d be less able to listen with an open mind

than I did before. Now really, I have to go. I wish you good luck." He rose.

"You haven't heard me out," she objected.

He thought he had and said so. When she protested again, he looked at his watch and shrugged. "Three more minutes."

"You challenged me," she said, her eyes shooting fire.

"I did what?"

"You challenged me. You told Roy I need to grow up, get a life."

"Yes. I just meant..." He felt a twitching again and chose to shut up and think about...think about anything but how near she stood and how soft she looked despite her angry words.

"What? What did you mean?"

He took a relaxing breath and carefully chose his words. "There's an innocence in your voice that doesn't belong in the songs you sang on this CD." He hoped she'd just take that and leave. Get on with her life. Let him get on with his.

She stamped her foot. "Well you owe me a chance to fix what you say is broken."

"I really need to leave." The conversation was veering in a dangerous direction.

She jabbed him in the chest with her finger, which he wanted to trap in his hand and put to better use. "You're accusing me of being innocent. Well, Dylan McLean, you'd better show me how to fix that."

"How to fix being innocent?" His voice nearly cracked. He was moments away from meltdown. "Courtney Clayton, do you have a boyfriend?"

"Not at the moment. I don't have time." She blushed.

Dylan reached for his black leather portfolio and positioned it strategically to hide his revived erection. “Well, I’d advise you to get one—one who knows his way around better than that Howie from *High School Days*.” He swallowed hard. “Have you ever done more than neck in the front seat of a car?”

“You mean like this?” She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him to her for a full, lip-smacking, open-mouthed kiss.

After his first moment of shock, Dylan’s arms came unfrozen and drew Courtney closer to him. Lip-to-lip exploration soon led to mutual penetration by tongues in a quest that left them both gasping for air. Dylan groaned as he pressed himself against her, feeling her press back against the whole length of his throbbing erection. Breaking the kiss, he held her to him. “What the hell was that?” he asked when his breath had returned.

“A kiss.” Courtney squeezed herself against him. “I thought you were the expert on those,” she added breathily, pulling back from him and licking her lips.

He held up his hands. “I never said that.”

“You know what, Dylan McLean? I know about kissing and I know what comes next. In a backseat or in a bed or swinging from a chandelier.” She leered at him. “Now, do you still think I’m some innocent who doesn’t know what life is about?”

Warning bells told him to resist. He ignored them. “Let’s try that again,” he said. “Now that I know what to expect, I’ll be better able to answer your question.”

Their second kiss started where the first had left off. Dylan registered everywhere Courtney touched, her fingers leav-

ing a trail of fire. He explored her back, stroking downward to pull her closer, nearly sobbing as he heard her soft moan. His fingers were cupping her left breast when they both came up for air.

“How about two kisses and a boob grope?” she gasped.

He shook his head, willing himself to come back to earth. “You really don’t know, do you? Have you ever made love?”

She waved her hands dismissively. “Of course. You don’t think I went through four years of college without lots of sex...oh!” She stared at him. “You think I sound like a virgin?”

He nearly choked. “Courtney, there’s sex and then there’s making love.” He had to end this. He also had to get to his screening. “Delightful as I find our conversation, I really must go.”

“We’re not done, McLean.” Amazing how her eyes changed color, ranging from the lightest blue to a deep turquoise, like right now.

“Oh, I think we are.” He had to get out of here.

“We’re not,” she insisted. “You say sex isn’t enough. If I have to make love for my music to work, for me to convince you to talk to Roy, then you have to be my partner.”

He shook his head. *Why her, why here, why now?* “Courtney, what do you expect me to do?” His voice shook. “Take you here on one of the conference tables?”

She held her head up. “I’m willing to suffer for my work.”

He recoiled. “Excuse me. I’m not bragging here or anything, but the ladies I make love to do not consider it suffering.”

“Even better. I’d prefer not to suffer, but I’m willing to.” She took her shoes off, sat down on a table, and swung her legs up. “So, Dylan, let’s get to it.”

His erection voted yes. *But, damn, this is all wrong.* It was straight sex, which was exactly what he’d just counseled her against. “Whoa. We’re talking making love not just sex, aren’t we, Courtney Clayton?”

She nodded and stretched out.

He swallowed hard. “Well, honey, you deserve a lot better than a hard table in a conference room. Not to mention a lover who’s due somewhere else in ten minutes.” He held out his hands and helped her sit up.

A tear welled in her eye. She reached up to grab him, but he backed off too fast for her to catch. “You’re rejecting me.”

He covered his eyes and shook his head. “No, Courtney. I’m saying no to the situation. Look, sex is real easy. But the operative word in making love is love. You know, with someone you’ve known for more than ten minutes and two terrific kisses.”

She pouted. Christ, she had a great mouth to go with that pout and he really had to get out of here. “Tell you what. Meet me tonight at the Cafe Mexico at six-thirty, and we’ll talk.”

“If you really have to go.” She put her shoes back on her adorable feet, covering toenails polished pearly pink. He thought about sucking each one.

Using whatever fortitude he had, he said, “Tonight. We’ll talk.”

She moved to the door, then turned back and leered at him. “Don’t stand me up.” With a toss of her head, she left.

Wondering what he'd just committed himself to, Dylan raced off to his screening. Though he knew the crew would hold off starting until he got there, he hated being the one who threw everyone else's schedule off. But wow, he was still reeling from shock. Courtney Clayton. America's singing angel all grown up. And then those kisses—the way she felt molded against him.

And to think, San Francisco was supposed to be duller than L.A.

* * * *

Courtney's head was swimming when she went back to the studio. This afternoon, she'd planned to rehearse for her tour to promote the CD. She rehearsed every day, never allowing a gap in keeping her skills at peak.

But first she played her CD, trying to hear what Dylan McLean had. *Darn the man*. Why'd he have to be so good-looking? He was kind of cute, though she normally preferred her men smoother and blonder. No, he wasn't her usual type with his black hair, gray eyes, and Marlboro man machismo. Sun squints put wrinkles around his eyes. He acted like the voice of experience, though she'd read he was only twenty-eight. He talked like he was forty.

She'd never have given the go-ahead for the release of her CD if she hadn't believed it was up to her usual crazy-making standards—everyone in the industry knew that. She wouldn't excuse Dylan McLean from knowing just because he wasn't a music critic. And Roy should definitely have known better than to base a major decision on some random outsider's uninformed opinion. Courtney had picked each song because she loved the lyrics and the music, the message and the emotions. Now she felt a twinge, remembering her long-time manager's

hesitations. Had he tried to tell her the same thing Dylan McLean did, that she wasn't woman enough yet to sing those songs?

Well, she'd prove to Dylan McLean—to them all—that she was more than woman enough to sing any song. Okay, so she hadn't had many boyfriends while she was at Harvard. Actually only two. But she'd had sex. Several times. What if she couldn't remember the last time? So none of the times had been memorable. Dylan McLean talked about making love—as if that made the difference. Remembering how she'd felt in his arms, Courtney experienced a flicker of doubt, one she couldn't allow to pierce her confidence.

Her traitorous thoughts continued to gravitate to the critic. She shivered as she used her fingers to retrace the places he'd touched. She almost allowed herself to smile at the shiver, which she nipped in the bud. This was serious business. Okay, so she wouldn't mind if she enjoyed herself a bit along the way to finding out what he meant. As she'd told him, she was willing to suffer for her art, but didn't consider it mandatory.

Yes, Dylan McLean was about to learn how wrong he'd been. And then he'd admit she was a total woman—and take back every hateful word he'd said to Roy this morning.

Happy to have resolved what to do next, Courtney turned on the instrumental tracks and began to rehearse.

* * * *

Dylan's mind seriously wandered as he watched the latest sci-fi flick by the Waverly Brothers. Movies seemed to be evolving—or maybe deteriorating into—a competition between special effects and computer animation tricks. As he watched a seven-headed man give head to seven women and

have them each orgasm simultaneously, his mind wandered to Courtney. He'd just bet she tasted as delicious as she looked. Too bad he'd never find out.

He refocused on the movie, as all seven women began impaling themselves on the creature's seven amazingly thick, long cocks. Who paid money to watch this dreck? Certainly no one who paid attention to his reviews.

Though he liked being a critic, he really regretted the end of his gig as a movie stuntman. Being raised on a ranch in Wyoming, he'd specialized in stunts involving horses. He'd quickly developed expertise in climbing, diving, and anything risky performed at high altitudes. But just one moment's inattention—stemming from his getting hung up on the wrong woman—had ended that career.

He tried to refocus on the film, succeeding for about sixty seconds. The seven-headed green man came different colors from each cock. Dylan lost interest after the third or fourth come and thought again about stunts. A year's recovery and rehab had left his leg almost good as before. But he soon learned any insurance policy to cover him for future stunt work would cost more than travel to Mars. The movie studios had put him on their permanent black list for performing stunts.

So he started advising on stunts, helping to stage them—to build a new career that way. But he found it too frustrating being that close to the action and forced to sit on the side. So he'd combined his movie expertise with a natural flair for writing and turned critic. Soon, especially with his eye for how effectively action was presented, Dylan's reviews landed him a regular column. L.A. led to San Francisco, and here he was.

Of course, even if he couldn't perform stunts anymore, Dylan kept buff with trips back home to Wyoming twice a year, daily runs, sessions three times a week at the gym. He shuddered remembering how out of it he'd felt during the nightmare year of rehab.

He once again forced himself to concentrate on the action unrolling before him. Still inept and anatomically unconvincing. He stifled a yawn. Much easier to focus on Courtney Clayton—the "little girl with the big voice." He'd never been much of a fan. Still, on reflection, he'd been totally honest with Roy. He'd also been ignorant of how much was riding on his opinion. If Roy had told him, Dylan might have kept his mouth shut. Now he felt almost sorry for Courtney, knowing how difficult it was for child stars to make the transition to successful adult careers.

And then he simultaneously chuckled and groaned, as thoughts of her once again got his penis springing to life. He really needed to get a social life. He shifted in his seat, glad for the darkened screening room. She'd been so big-eyed and serious when she told him he was responsible for fixing her innocence. He snorted.

His mother and grandmother and aunt, the ones he'd bought her CD for, had seen to it he wasn't some slam bam thank you ma'am type. It wasn't that he was looking for commitment with every woman he dated—or even went to bed with. No, at twenty-eight, commitment wasn't high on his to-do list. Maybe in another decade.

When he'd first arrived in L.A. from Wyoming, fresh out of college, Dylan had been like a kid in a well-stocked candy store. But hopping into the sack with every woman who battered her eyelashes got real old real fast, especially when his

movie career heated up. Randy as he was, he'd gotten bored with one-night stands after his first week. Well, maybe month. After that, he'd broken a heart or two and had his broken once or twice. The last time led to his leg injury.

And here he was, with a great condo in San Francisco overlooking the bay. Heck, whenever the fog lifted, he could see clear to Sausalito. He was happy writing for this new paper, where he could shape his column the way he wanted. He was even able to get out to Wyoming twice a year or so to touch base. Life was good.

He didn't need any complications now, thank you very much. And his gut was telling him Courtney Clayton, on the verge of becoming a woman, could be a very serious complication.

He focused back on the screen.

* * * *

Sporting a huge straw hat and sunglasses, Courtney entered the Cafe Mexico two minutes after Dylan. He'd snagged a booth, which wasn't hard on such a pleasant evening when most people opted for the umbrella-topped tables on the sidewalk.

Dylan smiled and rose when Courtney crossed to him. "Why the incognito?"

"Habit," she whispered, slipping into the booth like a spy with atomic secrets tucked in her bra. "I really want our conversation tonight to be private." Her voice raised goose bumps along the back of his neck.

He snapped his fingers. "Darn. I guess that means I should turn off the tape recorder."

Her face grew pale.

He reached out and put his hand on her arm, producing an instant warmth he was sure she couldn't help feeling. "Sorry. That was a joke. A bad one."

She looked relieved. "I'm really sensitive about privacy issues. Of course, once I go out on tour..."

"Ah, the price of fame," he said, half sarcastically.

She studied his face, looking like she was trying to understand where he was coming from. "Thank you for meeting me."

Dylan cleared his throat. She'd been there for thirty seconds and already his groin felt tight and his fingers ached to touch her, the same as before. "I have to tell you that I really didn't know where Roy was coming from, asking my opinion. If I'd known he was going to use it to influence decisions about releasing your CD, I'd have kept my mouth shut."

"Dylan," she said quietly—and there was something in her voice that made everything inside him burn to reach an itch he knew he shouldn't scratch. "I suppose I should apologize for stalking you at your office today. I don't usually act without thinking—but I was just so furious. If you only knew how much work and effort went into that CD."

He shrugged. "I'm sure. Much as I hate to say it, Roy may have a point in wanting to hold up its release, though. The way it is now, it probably wouldn't sell nearly as many..."

She frowned, causing an earnest, if all-too-young crease to appear between her eyebrows. "This isn't just about sales, not for me." Stretching across the table, she reached for his hands, deliberately, or not, offering him a view of her cleavage, but apparently unaware of the effect she had on him. "Oh, I'm happy for the musicians and the company if the CD makes money. But for me..." A pretty shrug. "I have a trust

fund from all my work as a child. Even if I never make another dime, my mother and I can live more than comfortably. But Dylan..." Real passion now—the kind only teenagers and untried early-twenty-somethings were still capable of...before they went out and learned the big bad ways of the real, cynical world Dylan had learned to understand too well. "I'm an artist. My work is all about my music. When you attack my music, you attack me."

He was about to answer when their server came over with chips and salsa and asked, "Are you ready to order?"

Dylan smiled at Courtney. "I guess we've been so busy talking, we haven't even looked."

They studied their menus in silence, choosing just before the server returned. Dylan ordered the mole chicken special and beer, Courtney vegetarian burritos and a strawberry margarita. Her eyes shot heavenward and she blushed seven shades of red when the server politely asked for ID.

"I'm twenty-two," she protested.

The server insisted. Courtney flashed her driver's license. The server looked back and forth between it and Courtney, then left to get their food. Dylan couldn't bite his lip hard enough to keep from laughing.

She glared at him. "It's not funny."

"But it is. Courtney, I think everyone's trying to deliver a message you just don't want to hear. You're still very young, and that's okay."

She looked like she wanted to stamp her foot. "I am not," she enunciated carefully. "I'm a twenty-two year old college graduate who's been working since age eight. I'm an artist and a serious professional. I'm also determined to get beyond and

through any obstacles that arise to prevent me from reaching my goals.”

Talk about arising, Dylan thought, giving serious consideration to dumping his glass of ice water in his lap as he strained to distract himself from his raging erection. The more indignant Courtney got, the more his blood pounded and streamed away from his logical brain and straight to...well...his southern brain with the mind of its own where she was concerned, apparently.

“Courtney, I admire what you’re trying to do.” Why, when all she did was pout her lower lip at him, was it so damned hard to keep his voice from cracking? “It’s hard to change your image when the public adores who you were.” A sudden thought allowed him to curb his lust momentarily. “At least, I assume that’s your goal. Right?”

“Partly.” She rested her chin on a palm and moued her mouth. *Damn*, Dylan thought, wishing he could taste it; she had the sexiest mouth... “I guess you could put it that way.”

“How would you put it?”

“I expect to continue singing as my life’s work. Singing and eventually also writing songs, for myself and other artists. I want to be taken very seriously as an artist. I want my music to move people because they hear their lives, their world, reflected back to them in my words.” She dipped a chip into a white ceramic bowl of salsa, her pink tongue darting out to lick some of the green sauce slowly dripping down her lips.

Dylan, biting his tongue to keep it in place, wanted to help her lick. He reached for a chip instead.

“Dylan, in what you said to Roy, you accused me of singing those songs all wrong.” She shook her head. “I believe you’re mistaken. After all, you’re not really a music critic.”

He bristled, almost relieved to have somewhere else to focus than on what she was doing to his hormones. "I may not really be a restaurant critic either, but I sure as heck can tell if the chef's using last week's fish."

She winced. "Hold on. I wasn't finished. Though you're not really a trained music critic, you probably do represent a good portion of the public I'm trying to reach."

He motioned for her to continue with that thought.

"And whatever you sensed as a problem might get in the way of people responding to my music the way I want."

"That's what Roy said and you objected to it," Dylan agreed, confused now by what felt like her change of tactic.

"Right," she said triumphantly. "So that's where I want you to help me."

Just then their food and drinks arrived. Dylan took a long, grateful swallow of his beer. He turned his attention to the excellent chicken, savoring the rich mole taste. He noticed that Courtney was only picking at her brightly colored food and drink. He frowned. Something did not bode well, and he had the horrible feeling...

"How's your food?"

"Oh, fine," she said.

"You're not eating much."

She smiled. "Other things on my mind."

"Right." He put down his fork. No man ever got anywhere with a woman, no matter how young, by beating around the bush. If he wanted to be sure he knew what was going on, he had to ask her flat-out. "Let me be sure I understand you. What exactly are you asking me?"

She furrowed her delicious brow. "To help me project the image I want in my music. Or else to recognize that I've

already done it and you were wrong in your initial assessment.”

Dylan nearly choked on his beer. Did this woman really know what she was saying—and how she was impacting him?

“You’re asking me to help you grow up?” He spoke softly so as not to squeak.

“I don’t know if I’d put it exactly that way,” she said, looking enigmatic.

Dylan’s eyes nearly crossed as Courtney’s bare right foot began to climb up his right leg.

“Well, how would you put it?” He hoped no one was looking at the under the table action.

She pouted as her foot began the walk from his kneecap up his inner thigh. Dylan resisted the impulse to wipe away the sweat trickling down the back of his neck.

“You said I’m not woman enough to sing love ballads,” she said huskily.

He internally debated pouring the rest of his beer over his head.

“Allow me to show you I am woman enough.” Her foot now approached the erection that would not go away.

“Courtney,” he gasped. “You, um, put me in a precarious position. I don’t think I can continue...”

She grinned at him as her foot hit pay dirt. Despite himself, Dylan pressed his erection against her questing foot. He nearly groaned when she wiggled her toes, massaging his aching balls. Damn, she had agile toes.

“Do you really think I’m not woman enough?”

He did groan, wanting more than anything to release his raging cock from the zipper holding it prisoner. Her foot was just an appetizer. He wanted to get her on the table, right

there, with all the mole sauce and chicken and veggies and thrust himself into her till neither of them could see straight.

If she kept up that thing she was doing with the ball of her foot and his balls, he'd die. Just when he thought he'd explode, she removed her foot and he came back from the edge of the precipice.

Courtney retraced the journey down his leg. She grinned at him and took a sip of her margarita. He signaled the server for another beer.

When he'd taken a long swallow, he scowled, disgusted with himself and wary about her. He decided it would be smartest not to mention what had just happened between them. "Courtney, this is too important for you to mess around with."

She put down her margarita and licked her lips. He imagined her tongue on him and shifted in his seat.

"I thought messing around was the point," she said.

"Come on, Courtney. I'm serious here."

She leaned forward. He pulled back. "So am I, Dylan McLean," she breathed. "I'm very serious about my career. You accused me of being inadequate to perform the way I want to. So I want you to tell me how I can get you to eat those words. Are you going to deny me the possibility of proving you're wrong?"

"This is getting all twisted around." He never should have come.

"I'll say. It sounds to me like you're not willing to be my lover because it might force you to admit you were wrong."

Dylan sat for a moment trying to gather what passed for his thoughts. Here he was, being pursued by a beautiful blonde singer who turned him on. His body was telling him

not to run so fast. But his mind, or what was left of it, was tripping him up. Had someone put something weird in his beer?

“Courtney, things are going a little fast for me here.” He needed to get back to Wyoming for some reality check time. Pronto.

“Life in the fast lane.” Courtney twirled the stem of her margarita glass with fingers Dylan could all too easily picture on his raging cock. “That’s what you said I need to be able to sing my songs the way I want to. Well, where I come from, if you’re going to create a problem, you’d darn well better be willing to create a solution to go along with it.”

Dylan grimaced. “Life in the fast lane?” he asked. “No.” He shook his head. “That’s not what I said.” He made an attempt to adjust himself so his pants fit around his balls more comfortably. “Look, I like you, Courtney. I’m attracted to you. But career-building and sex—just not good bedfellows.” The words sounded hollow and prissy even to him.

“Are you rejecting me again, Dylan McLean?” She looked at him from beneath lowered lids.

“I wouldn’t put it like that.” Boy did he wish they’d met any other way.

“I’m asking you to let me prove I’m woman enough to sing anything, and you’re telling me no.”

This scene was more science fiction than the stupid film he’d screened earlier. “Believe me, Courtney, this hurts me more than it does you.” He was picturing the very cold shower he’d have to take right before the sleepless night looming ahead of him.

“Oh, it has not yet begun to hurt.” She rose to leave.

He wanted to rise, too, but needed to wait till his cock went back to normal. “Courtney, please. Don’t leave angry.”

She whirled to face him. “Are you going to take me somewhere and let me prove I’m a love ballad singer?”

“No, Courtney, but I’ll be willing to discuss...”

She narrowed her eyes and looked at him. “Where and when?”

“Sit down. Let’s finish this discussion here now.”

“This place is wrong for me.”

She hadn’t seemed to be having any problems, but he’d accommodate her. “Okay. Where and when works for you?”

“My house—tomorrow night. Be there.” She wrote her address and phone number on a napkin then walked out.

Dylan watched her go. Attractive as she was, Courtney Clayton was too complex for him to get involved with. He was basically a cowboy who’d learned how to do stunts and write. By a fluke, he’d influenced a decision about her CD. Though wary about going to her house tomorrow, he’d be on his guard. He’d say his piece and then leave cleanly. Maybe he’d be able to forget her—should take only a decade or so.

Chapter 2

Dylan was coming tonight. In more ways than one.

She grinned to herself, remembering her foot trick in the restaurant the night before. *Oh yes, Dylan McLean, prepare to have your mind blown. And not just your mind.*

To prepare for the main event, she took a rare day off from work.

She'd been in show biz since she was eight, fourteen years now with a four year hiatus for Harvard. She'd been around, so it surprised her that most people underestimated her—even now. When Courtney made up her mind, things happened. If that weren't the case, she and her mother would still be living in a crummy trailer in Oakland. It was winning a talent contest right before her eighth birthday that pulled them out of the mire. Now Mom was set up in a great house in Atherton. Courtney herself had the huge "cottage" in Sausalito and a condo in New York.

People had told her to stick to her singing, but she'd gone out for TV—and gotten the most fan mail of any actor on the show. They'd told her she couldn't put her career on the back burner and go to college for four years. But she'd managed to make enough money and see to its management—Mom turned out surprisingly helpful there, once she got out of her funk—to "retire" at age eighteen. Her fans made do with her

old CDs and TV reruns while she was at Harvard. Now that she was out, she wanted to resume her career as an adult.

Sticking to her principles had never caused a problem before. And then along came Dylan McLean and challenged her. Well, she wasn't one to let a challenge go unmet. Her brief, admittedly unsatisfactory, relationships at Harvard had taught her what men wanted. She had to admit Dylan was far more attractive than the guys she'd been with at Harvard. But she couldn't afford to let him get to her any more than any of her previous boyfriends had. She wasn't about to be trapped into wanting or needing a man the way her mother had. Courtney knew she'd never end up like her mother, whose dreams had crumbled when she became a single mother at nineteen. But it was her mother's emotional reliance on the man who dumped her that scared Courtney most. She'd never let anyone get to her like that.

Still, most of the sex at Harvard was either in the back seats of cars or people's dorm rooms. Courtney figured she needed something more impressive to get Dylan to change his opinion. She'd checked the Internet for how-tos on seduction. As she sipped her passion fruit and rose iced tea, she reread her notes on setting up her bedroom. In the end, she grabbed her favorite romance novel and turned to the pages she'd highlighted.

Candles. She had loads of them, just in case of power outages. *Music.* *Hmmm.* It would probably be counterproductive to play her own songs. She bit back a grin. What kind of music did Dylan like? She pursed her lips. Obviously not hers. And she certainly wasn't going to play Celine Dion or any other women. Probably better off with either jazz or classical.

She'd guess that nice mellow jazz—her CDs of sexy saxophones—would work.

Champagne. Mmmm. Chilling already. Flowers. Probably more for her than him, but hey, her needs counted too. *The bed.* She frowned. Her practical blue and beige striped cotton sheets wouldn't do.

Sheets. Why hadn't she bought those silk sheets the last time she'd gone boutique hopping with Gabriella Duncan, her best friend? Gabi had said, "You never know. Like a Girl Scout, it pays to be prepared."

Courtney had brushed her off. Now she wished she hadn't. Maybe she'd have a chance to slip into San Francisco for a quick shopping trip. *Ivory silk sheets. Or would black be more, well, seductive?*

So many decisions. And what should she be wearing? Usually, just around the house, she'd be in jeans and a T-shirt or sweats. But neither would do for tonight. So should she be wearing a great dress or lingerie when Dylan arrived? Let's say she wore her black sequined number, the one where the hem and the top almost met at her belly button. Gabriella said it would be perfect for an awards show. Under that she could wear her black silk thong, the lacy black garter belt, and those black silk stockings with the seam up the back. No bra.

She grinned, picturing Dylan's reaction. Nothing wrong with his equipment. He seemed to get hard if she just said hello. But maybe the dress would be too much.

Her black silk teddy meant no underwear. Not very subtle.

Maybe she should call Gabriella for advice. Which might be difficult because Gabriella was off on a trek in Nepal. On the other hand, maybe that was just as well. Courtney wasn't

up to hearing her friend's I-told-you-this-day-would-come voice. And Gabriella would probably want to come over and stage-manage the whole affair.

Affair. Courtney almost giggled. She wasn't envisioning that they'd have an affair. Just that he'd walk away from tonight convinced she was more than woman enough to sing whatever she wanted. And tell Roy the same.

So what to wear? She'd need to read more. But first, off to San Francisco for some very quick, focused shopping.

* * * *

Dylan prepared for his evening with Courtney by pulling up every bit of information he could find. Twenty-two years old. Graduated from Harvard with a respectable 3.6 GPA. Majored in philosophy, minored in music. *Surprising.* First that she went to Harvard, second her choices in studies. She'd evidently risen from nowhere, winning a small local talent show and parlaying it into a highly successful, lucrative career singing—with the foray into TV.

Reading between the lines, Dylan could see Courtney was driven. Well, he knew that. She'd avoided the usual child star traps—poor money management being tops. It looked real that she'd decided to start phase two. He'd gotten in her way.

He frowned. Her outrageous demands aside, he liked Courtney. Certainly respected the way she'd built her career and gotten through Harvard. All that and a great package. But he resented the way she was trying to get him to change his opinion. As if that were so important.

* * * *

Courtney smiled to herself as she smoothed the new midnight blue silk sheets on her mattress. She ran her fingers

across their cool softness. Cinnamon spicy potpourri, Dom Perignon, the ripest, fullest red roses overflowing her Waterford vase... She chewed her bottom lip. Still needed to decide what to wear. She'd read the seduction scenes in four books and found the advice on wardrobe—or lack of it—mixed.

As Gabi was out of communication range in Nepal, Courtney decided to call Glenys, her business manager, instead. Glenys knew everything. Unfortunately Glenys, whose name should have been Yenta, couldn't keep her mouth shut. Would she be fooled by a hypothetical type inquiry?

"Glenys Harrity."

"Glenys, it's Courtney."

"So you're finally calling back. I need to go over some changes to your portfolio."

"We'll schedule an appointment, but that's not why I'm calling."

"It's not? You're sure this is Courtney Clayton I'm talking to? The Courtney Clayton who committed every last piece of print in her financial plan to memory at age nine?"

"Don't exaggerate. I didn't do that till I was at least ten and a half. Glenys, right now I'm in the throes of some serious song writing. I need information. Trying to get a visual image to work from."

"Okay, I'll do what I can. But we do need to schedule time to talk."

"Right. If a woman has a man that she wants to, um, seduce, coming to her door, what should she wear?" Courtney was blushing so hard, she was grateful Glenys couldn't see her face.

She thought she heard Glenys chuckling. "You say this is for a song you're writing?"

Courtney growled, “Yes, and get your mind out of the gutter.”

“But that’s where the minds of all my friends are,” Glenys retorted, now openly chuckling. “Come clean, girl. Is this really for a song?”

“What else?”

“Right. I forgot who I’m speaking to. Music is the only thing that takes precedence over knowing where your money is. Give me some more background on this... woman and the man.”

In for a penny, in for a pound. Maybe she really would be able to get a song out of this whole situation. “The man thinks the woman is too young, not enough of a woman to be a woman.”

“Not enough of a woman to be a woman,” Glenys echoed.

“And she wants to prove he’s wrong.”

“Why? Is she in love with him?”

“Let’s not delve too deeply into motives here. She just wants to prove he’s wrong—and that she’s more than enough woman. He’s coming to her house. What should she be wearing when she opens the door?”

“There’s always plastic wrap.”

“Too trite. No, the choices are a dress and great underwear—or lingerie and no underwear.”

Glenys thought for a moment. “You’re going to put all that into a song?”

“I’m just developing a visual to work from. Come on, Glenys, you’re supposed to be an expert at this.”

“You’re full of compliments today. Okay, based on this expertise I didn’t know I had, I’d say our girl should go for the

dress and the great underwear. Lingerie, well, that just wouldn't be subtle—and I think the scenario calls for a hint of subtle.”

Her first instinct had been right. “Glenys, you're a genius.”

“So when can you fit me into your schedule? Not only do we need to talk business, I'm dying to hear your new song.”

“My new song?”

“The one this advice is for?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Before they said good-bye, they set a date. *Now I'll definitely need to write a song about this.*

* * * *

By the time Dylan got to Courtney's cottage in Sausalito, fifteen minutes late due to traffic, he was angry. What was she going to do? Sue him because he refused to have sex with her? He'd love to see how that would look on a court docket. He was about to tell her exactly what he thought when Courtney opened the door and smiled at him.

Dylan's breath caught. It took conscious effort for him to remember he had a large vocabulary. All he wanted to do was take her in his arms, carry her off to his cave, and mate—several hundred times. Despite all his time in movies with gorgeous women, Dylan had never before been hit in the gut this way. Courtney was an angel from the neck up and total vamp the rest of the way. Dylan's resolve and the long cold shower he'd taken before leaving home melted before he stepped over her threshold.

“Thank you for coming,” Courtney exhaled in his direction. “Please, sit down and make yourself...comfortable.”

As if he'd ever be comfortable again.

“May I get you something to drink?”

Yes, a gallon of ice water. He struggled to find his voice. “Um, yeah, a drink.” The words sounded strange to his ears. He was probably staring at her like some horny high school junior. Every millimeter of his body stood hard, at full attention.

She smiled. “I have some lovely champagne. Why don’t you come to the kitchen and help me pop the cork?”

Gulping, walking as if he were bouncing on eggshells, Dylan followed her. Her perfume, a spicy vanilla mixture, communicated to every cell streaming through his bloodstream—gone mad. Only because he’d had so much practice could Dylan get the cork from the bottle. He envied the champagne as the popped cork liberated it from the pressure holding it prisoner.

Smiling, she took the bottle from him. As her fingertips brushed his hand, he was sure he’d spontaneously combust. She poured champagne into two flutes and handed him one. “To us.”

He clinked glasses with her and stammered his agreement. He resisted gulping the champagne down and thought he was sipping slowly. But within seconds, he’d drained his flute. He’d finished his second drink before she was halfway through her first.

She giggled huskily. “Champagne always makes me so happy. I love the bubbles.”

“Bubbles,” he repeated.

“Shall we take the champagne with us to the living room? I have an ice bucket so we can keep it chilled.”

Dylan tried to remember what the sensation of chilled was. He’d been hot forever, and he’d be hot forever. He

longed to hold the icy flute against his sweating brow to calm the raging fever. He followed her back to the living room, where she invited him to join her on the blue love seat. She put the ice bucket on the glass coffee table in front of the love seat.

"Dylan," she breathed. "Please kiss me." She puckered her lips and put her arms out.

He took a deep breath. All his objections to being there with her evaporated in face of the pulsing desire now threatening to take over the world. Inhaling her scent and the feel of her, longing to get the imprint of her on every surface of his body, he took her in his arms. Her lips resonated with the vanilla and spice swirling about him. He tasted her with his tongue and his lips, as her mouth opened to him. He groaned her name. "Courtney."

When they broke their kiss, they drew apart and gazed at each other for a moment. *She's so beautiful, and she feels perfect in my arms.* His disordered thoughts jumbled over each other, impelling him to take her in his arms once more.

But he didn't want to devote a whole lot of energy to thinking. Rather he drew her to him, nuzzling her cheek, her neck. They kissed again, sharing their breaths and sighs. She touched the back of his neck, caressing the spot where his hair and flesh met.

Drawing away from the kiss, Dylan used his lips to begin an exploration of her face. Little nibbles on her cheeks, her chin, to her neck. Her eyes closed, and Courtney wove her fingers through his hair and pulled his head to her. It felt only natural that he moved down her neck to her breasts, which he kissed and stroked, first through her dress, and then, quickly, under.

She thrust those breasts to him, as if to tell him to focus his attention there, with his hands and his mouth. When he stroked his cheek across them, her nipples were instantly as hard as he was.

“Dylan, let’s go to the bedroom,” she whispered. Those breasts, which he so longed to see as well as touch, tempted him from under the skimpy fabric of the dress.

He sprang to attention. This was what he wanted, with every sensation, every nerve ending, and every drop of fluid. The little section of his brain that still had some capacity for thought put up a red flag. The rest of him quickly overruled that feeble protest.

Floating on pure sensation, he followed her. Rattled, he was still able to register the amazing setting of her bedroom. Music, scent, and, oh yes, touch, all combined to bring his level of desire to a fevered pitch.

They both sat down on the bed and embraced. Within moments, they slid down, reclining, bodies pressed together from toe to head.

He felt a fire inside, a yearning unlike any sensation he’d ever experienced before to be close to her. He was drawn to her like a lead weight to gravity, and just as sunk.

“Too many clothes,” he gasped. “We’re wearing too many clothes.”

“Well what are we going to do about that?” Her voice, husky and low, caressed him.

He practically tore the buttons from his blue cotton shirt. Unsnap, unzip, and his pants came off in one movement with his briefs. Socks, T-shirt, and he stood, his erection almost painfully straining toward her.

His eyes devoured her. “And now it’s your turn.”

This is too easy. It feels too right. I need to keep alert here, know what's going on. But it sure feels amazing. It sure does.

He was as beautiful as a statue. But far from static. Did other men have such large erections? None of her other lovers... Wrong focus. Remembering scenes of sexy stripping from movies and books, she put herself into the appropriate frame of mind. She wriggled out of the dress and stood before him in brand new black crotchless panties, a black garter belt, and the hose. She smiled to herself as she saw him take her in.

Swaying to an internal rhythm, she slowly began to unroll one black silk stocking from a garter with a little red rose on the fastening. With infinite slowness, she eased the silky stocking down her leg, licking her bottom lip. When she'd pulled it off her toes, she tossed it to him. He moved toward her, but she held up a hand to signal him to stop.

Then she started on the other garter, moving with even more deliberation than on the first. He was eating her up with his eyes. She reveled in her power over him. She was sure, at this moment, he'd do anything for her.

She swayed toward him, then back, willing him to come deeper into her sphere of power. She could see his erection throbbing with each move of her hands down her leg. After the second stocking came off, she slid it down her rear, then threaded it through her open legs, back to front.

As the silk glided through her pink folds, nudging her clit, she bit back her own groan of pleasure. Her eyelids half lowered, she passed the stocking over to him. When he'd snatched an end, she pulled him to her. He sank to his knees and began to kiss her, starting at her navel, pressing hard against her belly, moving down to her core.

She felt his tongue on her folds, where the stocking had been. Her legs clamped around his head. Oh, she wanted him to keep on. She was melting into his mouth.

She had to stop this, now. Or he'd be the one in control, which was not what she wanted tonight.

Drawing on every drop of will power, she pushed him away, back to the bed.

He started to say something, but she put a finger over her lips to signal him to be quiet. When he'd sunk back to the bed, she began to work the garter belt off. Then she stood before him, more exposed than covered, with the crotchless panties marking the spot.

"Let me take those off you," he moaned, reaching out for her.

She gave him a half smile and shook her head. Sultry, she was thinking, sultry. "Not so fast."

He licked his lips, his hands remaining where they'd been. "Please..."

Grinding her hips, she danced over to him. "Only if you make it worth my while," she challenged, thrusting her flat belly at him.

His fingers brushed her folds and clit so she had to bite her tongue not to howl. "I will, baby, oh I will." Now as he drew the panties from her, his lips covered each bit of skin exposed.

Holding his head to her, grinding herself against him, she let herself moan. She flung away thoughts of control as his lips and tongue drove her to new heights of sensation. He drew her to him and stretched her out on the blue silk sheets. She writhed, sandwiched between the coolness of the silk and the heat of his kisses and his touch.

He stretched out on his side next to her and they held each other. She could feel his erection beckoning her, rock hard against her as they kissed and explored each other with fingers, tongues, and combinations of body parts she'd never before imagined.

She gasped as his hands found the entrance to her core. His fingers caressed her folds, playing with her swollen clit, and in the wetness she'd never before released. He slid in one finger, and she felt herself grasp him. Her muscles tightened around him. As he stroked her, she moved against his finger, wanting, needing more.

She called out his name. Now a second finger moved in her and she pressed herself more determinedly against him. She nearly jumped out of the bed when he once again began to tongue her folds, her nub—this time with his fingers stroking her. She writhed against him, pulling him into her, climbing, climbing. And then she reached the top and screamed his name. “Dylan, Dylan!” And for a moment, she was bouncing among the stars in a very dark, clear night in space.

He had his head on her belly, his erection nudging her. “Courtney, you’re so beautiful,” he moaned.

What had just happened? Nothing like this had ever been part of the sex at Harvard. She shuddered, aware of how completely she'd lost control. For a moment, she was not at all sure she ever wanted to be in control again.

Dylan, his eyes dreamy, was whispering. “I want to love you right now. Please, let me love you.”

She took a deep breath. This was what she'd wanted all along. She nibbled on his ear and whispered right back, “Yes, Dylan. Now.”

“I don’t have anything...”

She reached out to her night table where the needed foil packets waited. "I do." She handed one to him.

"Are you sure you're ready?" He looked up from tearing open the packet with his teeth.

Was she ever.

"Tell me now, is it your first time?"

She repeated her earlier challenge. "I guess you'll find out." She put her fingers on the condom and helped him extend it over his impressive shaft.

He swallowed hard. "Courtney, I don't want to hurt you. In any way. Promise you'll tell me if I am?"

"You won't hurt me, Dylan. It's really not my first time."

He hesitated for a quick moment. Giving her a big hug, he ran his lips down to her core and began to kiss her again, driving his tongue now where his fingers had been.

"Dylan," she gasped, bucking her hips against his mouth and holding his head.

About one nanosecond before she thought she'd go out of her mind, he looked up and smiled. Then he covered her with his feverish body.

She felt the tip of his penis move to her opening and slowly, slowly, he began to fill her.

It was like new to her—as different from what she'd experienced before as champagne from diet cola. She sighed.

Groaning, he instantly withdrew and ate her up with his eyes. "Did I hurt you?"

"Oh, no," she murmured, clutching him tighter.

"Should I stop?"

"Never!" she commanded. And then he was full in her. Oh, she never wanted to let him go, never wanted to be empty again. Not if this was what it felt like to be filled. Al-

most as if they had minds of their own, her legs entwined his waist and she began to move against Dylan, to urge him deep and deeper, with a rhythm welling up from somewhere intimate and primitive.

“Courtney,” he whispered, gritting his teeth as he paused. “Am I going too fast, too hard?”

“Too many words,” she complained.

He grinned before burying his face in the hollow between her neck and her chest. “This really isn’t your first time?” he panted.

“Any complaints?”

“No, oh God, no.”

Courtney rose higher and higher up the mountain peak she’d scaled only moments before with his fingers and his tongue leading her. She thought she couldn’t bear to climb more, but she did, until she reached the top and heard herself scream his name again like some crazed animal. With her nails, she dug into his back so she’d never have to leave this glorious mountaintop. She gushed, surrounding him with her soaking release. Filling her now, Dylan gasped her name as he reached his climax and poured himself into her.

She gazed in wonder at this man. He’d shown her a whole new world and proceeded to collapse on her.

Courtney realized she felt tender toward him, wanting nothing more than to hold him and set up permanent residence in the heightened sensitivity he’d just introduced her to. It took all her discipline and will to remember she’d had a reason for this grand seduction. She couldn’t let the overwhelming nature of Phase One blind her to what needed to come next. As soon as her brain was working again, she’d begin to try to plan what that should be. She didn’t get too far, however, because her brain kept flaking out.

Dylan nuzzled her, tickling the side of her neck with tender kisses, then raised up on one hand, pulling slightly away, and looked at her. "Wow, lady."

"Wow, yourself."

Even though he'd come abundantly, he was still hard enough to remain inside her. Dylan started to roll off Courtney very carefully, when she clutched his rear and demanded with her hands that he stay exactly where he was.

"I'm not too heavy for you?" he asked tenderly.

She lowered her eyelids. "Let's just stay this way for a few more moments," she said, though she wished they could be like this for the entire night.

He chuckled. "I'm afraid that would be anatomically impossible. The spirit's willing, but all too soon, my flesh is going to demand a break." He looked at her. "A short one." He smiled. "It wasn't your first time. But you don't know much yet about men this way, do you?"

The way he was looking at her, she had to be honest.

"No, but I'm a very fast learner. Harvard grad and all that." She thrust her hips at him.

"Well, honey, you just joined the Ivy League of lovemaking."

She smiled.

"Sorry to say, I've got to roll off now." He moved carefully, lay on his side, and hugged her to him. "You're a very beautiful lover," he murmured softly.

"And so are you," she whispered back. "Is it always this wonderful?"

He ran his fingers lightly from her chin to her triangle of blond hair. "It only gets better and better."

She shivered against his fingers. "I can't imagine it can feel any better than it just did."

“Blows your mind, doesn’t it? Courtney, I have to tell you, for our first time together, this has been earth shaking. My teeth are chattering just imagining what making love with you again and again would be like. Because much as I’d love to believe this is not a one-night stand, I don’t want to take anything for granted.”

She murmured soft nothings to him.

“I’d love to spend the night with you,” he said, “but I can’t. I have to go to a midnight screening of a new horror film. Supposedly, to write an authentic review, I need to get the feel of the film the way the fans experience it.” He shrugged. “If I’d known how tonight was going to turn out, I’d have gotten someone else to cover the screening.” He lifted himself up from the bed.

She started to sit up so she could be on the same level as he was. “Don’t get up.” He dropped a light kiss on her lips. “I want to think of you here in this bed, lying cozy and warm under the blanket while I go out into the cold, cruel world.”

“It’s September in San Francisco, not January at the North Pole,” she said, sitting up.

“Without you, it feels like the North Pole.”

She resisted the impulse to throw a pillow at him and snuggled back down, watching as he gathered up his clothes. She’d never before watched a man dress, so she took advantage of this opportunity, though she regretted his need to cover his beautiful body.

Courtney was naked under the blanket, feeling vulnerable, while he was dressed. When he’d finished buttoning every button that had survived his strip and zipping and buckling, Dylan sat down next to her. “I’d love to touch you, give you the kiss good night I want to,” he sighed. “But if I do, I’ll never be able to make myself leave.”

He took her face in his hands. Smiling, he said, "You were right. From the way we made love tonight, I have to admit I was wrong. You are every bit a woman who knows her way around a love song and had every right to sing the songs you did on your CD. Tomorrow, first thing, I'll phone Roy." He kissed her nose, her lips.

Courtney burst into tears.

Dylan's mouth fell open in shock. "What's wrong? Oh, Courtney, why are you crying?"

Sniffling, she grabbed a tissue and blew her nose. When she could speak, she shook her head. "You weren't wrong, Dylan. Don't you dare call Roy."

"What do you mean? I thought that was what you wanted."

She sighed. "It was. But now I know better. Dylan, now that I've made love with you once, I'm beginning to understand what you meant. I realize I had no idea what I was singing in those love songs. No idea what they meant. Now I've had a glimpse of everything I didn't know and still don't. I should apologize to you."

"No need for that," he said. He gave a dry laugh. "I can say it was my pleasure, but it's so much more than that."

"I shouldn't hold you up," she said, "when you have a place to go. But, Dylan, may I ask you one thing."

"Ask hundreds," he said, holding his hands at his sides.

"Just one." She took a deep breath. "Dylan, oh, Dylan, make love to me again and again—make me the woman who can sing those songs from her gut."

Chapter 3

Damn, Dylan thought as he drove away from Courtney's house to the screening of a film he'd have little interest in at any time.

Talk about cognitive dissonance. He could not believe he'd left Courtney like that. Not quite slam bam thank you, ma'am, but enough like it to feel uncomfortable.

Of course he'd never expected tonight to turn out like it had. Courtney was amazing.

On second thought, maybe he was better off being distracted from her by having to review this silly film. Ethan Wake, of all people, whose films he had to sit through and pretend to take seriously enough to review. Everyone in the industry knew what a flake Wake was. Hmm, maybe he could use that in his review. *Wake the Flake*. Naah, that sounded too childish and vindictive—not at all the image he wanted to imprint his career with.

Speaking of career images, he'd been ready to take back what he said to Roy. Heck, he'd have eaten his words on the stage of Davies Symphony Hall if that was what Courtney wanted. She'd really gotten to him, proven her point.

And then, to come right back to him and tell him he was right. She was quite a woman after all, unlike anyone else he'd known before. And that scared the hell out of him.

* * * *

After Dylan left, Courtney lay in bed for a while, just floating on a tide of sensation and emotion. Her senses heightened, she savored his scent on the sheets, on her, touching her face and breasts in the places where his fingers had been. She'd never before let herself do anything like that. With a sigh and then a slight return of normalcy, she got up from the bed, smoothed the sheets, and threw on sweats. Picking up her delicate silk hose, she remembered her impromptu strip tease—Dylan's expression as he caught the tossed stockings, the way he'd licked her and sucked her into ecstasy. Her senses stirred. She sighed. Her dress lay rumpled at a weird angle. She picked it up and carefully hung it away on a padded hanger. The panties and stockings went into her lingerie wash.

She went to the kitchen and made herself hot chocolate. Her night had begun with champagne and was ending with hot chocolate.

He'd gotten to her. For Courtney, having Dylan come over that night had been all part of a game, a game not unlike ones she'd played before. She set a goal and made sure she'd meet it, using every means at her disposal. But tonight, she'd been reduced to a simpering idiot, panting to keep him with her. And then, when he offered her exactly what she wanted in the first place, she'd turned him down.

Though she was angry with herself for undercutting her own triumph, Courtney knew in the deepest core of her being that every word she'd said to him tonight after they'd made love, was truth—a more profound level of truth than she'd ever before experienced.

No wonder she was crying!

It had all been so simple when she'd thought it out, but the aftermath was terribly complicated.

In a word, she wanted him. She closed her eyes, reliving the sensations of feeling him inside her. Now she could understand all those ridiculous women, like her mother, who gave up their identities and dignity for some creep of a man. Oh yeah, she knew where they were coming from—if those men made them feel like Dylan made her feel.

So there she was, all of a sudden no longer single-minded about her work, about her goals. How could she maintain her level of drive if her energy was so divided?

How could she ever continue functioning if Dylan did not come back to her bed?

How had her life gotten so complicated? Was this really necessary before she could sing love songs the way they were meant to be sung? Every instinct told her, sadly, yes.

She took a sip of the hot chocolate, letting its sweetness comfort her. The “L” word kept coming up. Making love. Love songs. She trembled. She did not even want to entertain the possibility of love playing a role in her life.

Love made women unsafe. She didn't know a single woman who escaped unscathed from love. Look what it had done to her mother—chaining her to a child before she'd had any chance to develop her talents and find a place in the world. Her mother had fallen in love with her father and married him, leaving college after one year to follow him as he developed his career. He hadn't been agreeable to early fatherhood—and had taken a hike when her mother was three months' pregnant. Even though her mother always claimed she'd gotten the best of the deal by having Courtney as her daughter, Courtney remained skeptical. She wanted to pro-

tect herself from love's ravages, if that's what they looked like. But she also wanted to sing love songs.

And God knew, she wanted Dylan in her life.

Courtney had the terrifying sensation of everything in her life falling out of balance. She felt like she'd created a Frankenstein, who was now turning on her with venomous fangs.

She could regain control, she knew she could. It wasn't too late, was it?

* * * *

Dylan could barely keep his eyelids open for the whole screening. Wake couldn't expect to keep his viewers awake—let alone entertained—with this boring stretching out of previously rehashed material. Wake's fans dressed in costume for installment four of his series of horror movies based on a family of mixed marriage parents—a vampire and a werewolf. From the grunts of approval Wake's fans were making, Dylan expected they'd once again disagree with his review. He hoped they didn't take a leaf from Courtney's book and...

He stifled a yawn as he tried to frame the review in his mind—and keep Courtney from nibbling her way from the edge to the center. How could he concentrate on those monsters when he had Courtney to think about? Dylan wished he had a script for his life, even a deficient one such as Wake wrote, telling him what to do next.

Standing up as "The End" finally flashed, Dylan mumbled words he hoped were appropriate to Wake and his entourage. Two a.m. The fans were cheering. Wake, looking flushed and happy with success, accepted their accolades. He eyed Dylan as if to challenge him to write a less-than-glowing review.

Dylan stumbled out into the cool, quiet night. *Return to her*, his libidinous voice demanded. *She's waiting for you, all sweet and warm, in those nice silk sheets.*

Let her sleep. Go home and get some rest. See if you can engage your brain into taking part in directing your life, the voice of reason responded.

Reason was tougher to ignore tonight. Lost in thoughts of Courtney, Dylan drove home. He'd call Roy in the morning, though she'd told him not to. You could have knocked him over with a feather when she backed off on her demand. Heck, as soon as she admitted he was right, he was sure he was wrong.

Contacting Courtney after he spoke with Roy would give him a justification for calling her in the morning.

* * * *

The phone's insistent ring woke Courtney.

"So how'd your, uh, song-writing go last night?" Glenys chirped.

Courtney burst into tears.

"Courtney, what's wrong, girl? What happened?"

"It was wonderful and beautiful," Courtney sobbed.

"Sure doesn't sound like any song-writing. It was a guy, right? Are you alone? Can you talk?"

"Yes." She sniffed. "I am alone."

"The brute. He just left you."

"No, not exactly. He wanted to stay, but he couldn't. And, Glenys, I wanted him to stay."

"Of course you did."

"Glenys, why didn't anyone ever tell me I didn't know how to sing love songs?"

Glenys chuckled. "Courtney, my girl, talk about changing the subject. As far as your singing goes, you're not exactly amenable to hearing what you don't want to. You know—a tendency to shoot the messenger?"

"Oh, so that means other people thought I wasn't doing it right either?"

"Why do I feel like I walked into the middle of a movie? You're talking about the new CD, aren't you?"

"Yes." Courtney sighed. "Now I know Dylan was right when he said I couldn't sing the songs the way they deserve to be sung. I didn't know. But now I do—at least a little. And I can't say the knowledge makes me happy." She sniffled.

"Look, darling, you're a magnificent singer. You're worried about how you sound on the CD for your tour?"

"Yes."

"Well, the way you sang those love songs, it's a fresh and, um, different approach."

"I sang them like a virgin."

"I suppose you could say that."

Courtney burst into fresh tears.

"Honey, there's no reason to torture yourself over this. You're a magnificent artist—one who can evolve in her work. Won't your fans have a treat when you're on tour—and have a whole new take on the songs?"

"That still leaves the CD. I didn't want to admit I need to redo it. But now I know we can't release it as is."

"Let's not get hasty here. Redoing the CD is a big deal. And you need to talk to people who know more about that than I do before you come to any final decision."

Courtney sighed. "Thank you, Glenys."

"Promise me you won't do anything hasty."

“I promise, Glenys.”

Next Courtney called Michael Bartholomew, her arranger, and made an appointment to meet him at her studio. Starting today, she’d get to work on those songs and do her damndest to sing them the way they demanded.

* * * *

Dylan woke with an insufficient-sleep hangover. Groaning, he fell into the shower and got himself to the office. He was on deadline to deliver his review of the Wake film to his editor, so he’d have to write that before he called Roy. He needed to come up with five hundred words on the Wake film, and all he could think of was one: Trash.

Working on the principle that it was better to start from something than from nothing, he typed his heading for the review and then the word Trash. There, he only needed four hundred ninety-nine more words.

Dylan got up and paced. For several hundred reasons, he should have had someone else go to the Wake screening last night. After his review of Wake’s previous effort, Wake had confronted Dylan, accused him of creative jealousy, of misusing the power of the pen to exercise a personal vendetta. Dylan scowled. The fact that just the year before, Wake had cruelly dumped Dylan’s fellow stuntwoman and friend, Lynette Hawkins, had little influence on what he said. He bent over backwards to be fair and objective.

After all, Dylan winced, he himself was hardly the poster boy for commitment. He’d been known to break a heart or two, though he always tried to be honest and fair with women. But he knew that honest and fair were very much in the eye of the beholder. And Ethan Wake had left Lynette so

broken, she'd given up her movie work and returned to Montana.

Dylan convinced himself he'd give the work thumbs up if that were appropriate. But, luckily, Wake's filmmaking was strictly third-rate, derivative, adolescent garbage and deserved Dylan's negative reviews. Besides, Dylan wasn't alone in his opinions.

Maybe he could just write *Trash* five hundred times. Dylan grinned. Cathartic as that would be, his editor would never go for it. So next to *Trash* he wrote "adolescent." "Exploitative" came to mind also. Now that he was no longer facing a blank page, Dylan was on a roll. Before he knew it, he had his five hundred words, which he promptly emailed to his editor. Resisting the temptation to purge and cleanse his computer of any Ethan Wake contamination, Dylan dialed Roy and told him he'd changed his mind about Courtney's CD.

Afterwards, he phoned Courtney and left a voice mail telling her what he'd done.

* * * *

Courtney met Michael Bartholomew at her studio at ten. He hugged her, gave her a peck on the cheek, and asked, "So what's up? I thought we were all set on these songs for your tour."

Courtney smiled. Michael, a forty year old elf of a man who always dressed in black, looked mystified. She'd been pleased he was available to work with her after college. Michael's standards were almost as high as hers, and, like her, he was willing to keep working till he'd gotten close to perfection.

"Michael, be honest. On these songs, do I come across as a woman—or as a big little girl playing make-believe?"

Michael furrowed his brows and ran his hands against his closely cropped brown hair. "I think sounding like a big little girl playing make-believe has some really interesting nuances and potential."

Courtney sucked in her cheeks. "I see. Michael, do you know how old I am?"

He bit his lip. "Gee, Courtney, what was it on your last birthday? Sixty-five? Seventy?"

She scowled and nearly stamped her foot. "Don't patronize me. I'm twenty-two, not some babe lost in the woods. I want my music to sound like who I am now—a woman. Not a kid. A woman. I thought that was clear to everyone when I got this CD going."

Michael pursed his lips. "What is it you want from me, Courtney?"

"I want this music arranged so the woman I am comes across, not the little girl I used to be."

"You're asking a lot from an arrangement," he said softly.

"Michael, I know what magic you can do. And I'm determined to sing these songs with a woman's voice and heart. Now let's make it happen."

"Okay." He sat down at the piano. "Let's start with *Send in the Clowns*."

As she sang, Michael looked at her. Afterward, he said, "You know, Courtney, you're right. You are singing this song differently than on the CD. Okay, let's get to work."

Because of a previous engagement, Michael had only four hours to work with Courtney that first day. Both focused intensely during that time, accomplishing a lot. He promised to free up as much time as he could to continue rehearsing with

Courtney for the three weeks she had before leaving for her tour.

"Thanks for everything today," she said as he packed up his music to leave for the day.

"Girlfriend, you keep amazing me," he responded. "I'm glad to be able to be part of your new direction."

* * * *

Courtney was exhausted when she got home. Exhausted and energized. All her instincts told her she was on the right track. That track felt derailed when she got Dylan's voice mail. He'd phoned Roy to tell him he'd changed his opinion. She called and got his voice mail, which included a pager number. She dialed that, then went and fixed herself a sandwich for a late lunch.

He called fifteen minutes later. "Courtney, are you free tonight? We could meet for dinner."

"Oh, Dylan, yes for dinner. But I told you I didn't want you to tell Roy you've changed your mind," she said, noticing he was not making any arrangements to be alone with her. They'd meet in a public place. Well, maybe that was all to the good. He brought out too many scary feelings in her when they were alone together.

They arranged to meet at Luigi and Pietro's for pizza.

Now feeling ashamed of the way she'd vamped the night before, Courtney dressed conservatively in a blue button-down cotton shirt and black slacks. No makeup and a blue baseball cap. She found wearing headgear of any kind helped disguise her. She was hoping for a very incognito evening.

* * * *

They met at seven. Dylan was nervous. He felt like some novice peddling his first efforts at poetry to a committee of gray-suited accountants.

He got to the restaurant before her and sipped Chianti while he waited. What should he expect now? What did she expect? Now that he'd had some time and distance from her, all he could think was, *run for your life*. He knew too much about what it was like for civilians to be involved with show business types to let himself just glide into a relationship with her.

All those thoughts evaporated the moment she walked up to him. He'd asked the host to seat him in a booth pretty much hidden from the stream of traffic, and told him to direct the pretty young lady there when she arrived. Courtney had done her best to hide her glamour and identity in a very ordinary outfit. Dylan smiled at the blindness of the host and the other diners. To him, her charisma shone loud and clear and hormone shaking.

He rose when he saw her, and she motioned him to remain seated. She did not come over to him for a kiss or hug. She didn't even extend her hand in greeting. Dylan would have believed this dinner was all about business if he didn't read the emotion in her eyes and feel the tightening of his groin.

He hoped his eyes didn't tell her as much as hers told him. "Want something to drink?" he asked, indicating his Chianti. "I've gotten a head start on you."

"Just iced tea."

"Okay." He motioned for the server, who promptly brought the iced tea and a basket of breads and breadsticks.

"Are you ready to order?"

Dylan looked at Courtney, who shook her head slightly. "Give us a minute or two."

They exchanged small talk about the menu, settling on a medium thin crust pizza, half pepperoni (for him), half mushrooms and extra cheese (for her). After the server left, Dylan said, "I didn't actually get to talk to Roy today, but I left him a voice mail. I very explicitly told him I'd changed my opinion about your CD."

Courtney said, "I wish you hadn't."

He scoffed. "No, I was being harsh and ornery before. And I'm not afraid to admit that."

"You know what I spent the morning doing?"

"No." He practically had to sit on his hands to keep from reaching out to her. She looked so delectable there, so close, just across the table from him, yet so far. He wondered if she'd once again reach out to him with her talented toes. He wriggled to the edge of his seat.

"I was working with my arranger. And you know what he said? In addition to basically confirming your opinion of the CD, he said I sounded different today." She looked at him, her eyes very large.

He shook his head. "It was just beginner's luck that I said anything a music professional would agree with. I was blowing smoke."

She took his hands in hers. "Dylan, I'm trying to say thank you for last night," she said softly. "Why are you resisting me on this?"

He swallowed hard, feeling warmth course through him as her hands came in contact with his. He closed his eyes. "You're very hard to resist," he murmured. Talk about hard. His whole body felt like a rock sitting on a geyser.

Just then their pizza arrived, forcing them to break their connection. Dylan reminded himself he was just going to eat the pizza—not her, not now. That meant bite and chew the pizza—taking care not to dribble sauce on his chin or choke. But much as he loved pizza, he knew there was something else he'd much rather be biting and chewing.

And he'd be dribbling all over the place...

* * * *

Unbeknownst to both Dylan and Courtney, Clark Hammer, ace reporter for the *National Feeding Frenzy*, the country's second best-selling tabloid, was seated at a table where he had full view of them. From years of experience, Clark had no difficulty seeing through Courtney's disguise. But he had learned the value of discretion, so rather than having his sidekick and photographer, Sid Zigmund, jump up and shove a camera in her face, he'd chosen to bide his time.

"Sid, do you have the invisible camera with you? You know, the one that looks like you're making notes in your Palm Pilot?"

Sid chortled. "You told me never to leave home without it." He held it up for Clark's approval.

"Good. I have a feeling we can put it to good use. See those people over there?"

"You mean the old broad with the blue hair and the bald geezer?"

Clark resisted the urge to smack Sid. "No, the ones in the corner."

"Yeah, the young blonde babe and the Marlboro man."

"Yeah, them. You know who they are?"

"Sorry, chief, can't say I do."

“Stop calling me chief,” Clark Hammer hissed. He shook his head. “Oh, it’s a good thing they don’t let you out alone anymore. You’d have missed this one.”

Sid pouted. “I get plenty of good ones.”

“Shut up. I want to watch them. Too bad we can’t record their conversation, but watch how they’re looking at each other.”

Sid directed his gaze accordingly. “They look like they should get a room.”

“Exactly. Take a shot of them holding hands.”

Sid complied. “So who are they?”

Clark grinned. “She’s Courtney Clayton. Remember, the hotshot singer who went to Harvard? Now she’s trying to make a comeback.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember her from that TV show. She was a cheerleader. What was it called? You know, the one where Howie drooled over her?”

“*High School Dreams*. Howie wasn’t the only one drooling.”

“He sure wasn’t,” Sid said. His eyes were gleaming. “So who’s the lucky guy?”

Clark pursed his lips. “Dylan McLean. Used to be a stuntman. Had an accident and switched over to reviewing movies. Was working out of L.A., now switched to the new *San Francisco Tribune*.”

“Sounds like you don’t like the guy.”

“Ran into him at a convention. One of those who thinks their work is journalism and ours is dreck.”

“Oh, one of those.”

Clark steeped his fingers in front of him. He hadn’t been happy about the assignment to cover the national criminal at-

torneys' convention in San Francisco, but now it looked as if being here would pay off. Those two were looking very cozy. There was rumor that Courtney Clayton was targeting the movies as part of her career comeback. He'd have bet his last paycheck there was a story in the two of them being together.

"Can you get some shots of them?" Clark asked.

"It would really be better if I got closer."

"Well do it, man. Try to be subtle."

Sid didn't have to try too hard to keep the twosome from noticing him. They were so lost on whatever cloud they were floating on, they never had a clue. Two waiters and a busboy almost collided with Sid as he snapped away, but Courtney and Dylan remained oblivious.

"I got some great shots," Sid boasted when he returned to his table.

"Great," Clark said, taking a sip of his beer. "Now let's see what happens. I have a strong feeling we've just stumbled onto dynamite."

"Ka boom!" Sid exclaimed softly.

"Exactly," Clark chuckled.

* * * *

Dylan managed to eat two slices of pizza, Courtney barely one. The server kept hovering. Finally, he asked, "You want me to wrap the rest of the pizza to take home?"

Courtney smiled as if he'd just offered her a Grammy and an Oscar rolled up in one. "What a great idea!"

As soon as the server cleared away the pizza, Dylan's hands sped to Courtney's like heat-seeking missiles.

He cleared his throat. "We haven't come to a decision regarding my phone call to Roy," he murmured.

"You're right," she whispered. "We'll have to discuss that." She looked down as if thinking for a moment. "Why don't you come to my place, where we can talk in private?"

"Sounds great. I don't have any other plans tonight, no screenings to go to."

"Good," she said. "We have a lot to discuss."

He paid the check, they took their packaged pizza, and, arm in arm, left.

* * * *

After Courtney had put the pizza in the fridge, she and Dylan sat down on her couch. Today, the house wasn't set up for a seduction. Heck, she was dressed in her most ordinary clothes. Yesterday's flowers were a little less full. The pot-pourri still scented the air, but there was no music, no champagne chilling.

It didn't matter. As soon as she got near Dylan, all thoughts but how hot he looked, how strong and warm and welcoming his arms were, evaporated like yesterday's day-dreams.

As he held her, she could feel the beat of his heart. He looked her full in the eyes and whispered he'd missed her all day. Then he kissed her, his lips gentle on hers for a brief moment before they became more demanding, pressing her to open to him.

She was more demanding than he. The night before had not been some impossible dream. Her desire for him sprang to life from the moment of his first fluttery touch. "Dylan," she moaned. "It was real."

"Very," his breath whispered the message into her.

She held him as his kiss deepened, telling her so much as tongues danced and teeth nipped.

With her eyes and her fingers, her lips and her tongue, she wanted to memorize his face, its planes and angles. *What a wonder his chin is*—she had to lick it to see if the taste matched the look and the scent. And then there was his neck, where she could feel his pulse speed up as she pressed herself to him.

As she explored him, he did the same to her. They were two adventurers locked together in the same glorious quest. She just had to stretch herself out on the couch, feeling him on top of her. He was so hard, she could feel him press his erection against her through his slacks and hers. Ooh, with his erection he promised her a wild ride of pleasure and connection—and she wanted to get on that ride.

“You remember where my bedroom is?” she asked huskily.

He was breathing hard. “Better than my own name.”

She gave him that special smile reserved for him only. “Take me there.”

He scooped her up in his arms and raced for the bedroom as if he were in the final sprint of an Olympics run. Gently laying her on the bed, he rushed to take his clothes off.

She watched him. When he stood naked before her, his erection practically calling her name, he said, “You’re still dressed.”

“Not for long,” she muttered. In record time, she was as naked as he was.

And then they were both stretched out on the bed, grabbing for each other like two parched desert nomads falling upon water.

He stroked her breasts, kissing them, loving the nipples into stiff peaks. She did the same for him, marveling to see how the nipples of his flat chest rose to her mouth. She could

feel his penis pressed against her leg, her belly, and she tried to maneuver so he would once again fill her.

“Are you all right today?” he asked. “Not stiff or sore?”

“Not the slightest. Just empty and waiting for you,” she murmured.

He touched her gently where he’d opened her world the day before. She groaned his name, grinding herself against his fingers. She could feel her wetness saturate those fingers with warm invitation.

“Courtney, you’re so hard to resist,” he whispered.

“So hard.” She laughed wickedly, taking his erection into her hot hand and stroking.

“You vixen!” he exclaimed, pulling away from her.

She looked at him, for a moment chastened. “Did I hurt you?”

“Hurt?” His laugh tickled her ear. “If you made me feel any better, I’d crash through the ceiling.”

She smiled her wicked smile again. “I’d like to see that happen.” She chuckled, making a grab for him.

Arching away at first, he changed his mind. He kissed her fingers, licking each one, then guided her right hand back to his cock. Closing his eyes, he said, “Go ahead and play. I can take about half a second.” He paused before whispering, “The time limit is not because it hurts.” She tentatively stroked him, then took the entire shaft in the circle of her fingers and rubbed more firmly. Too close to the edge to prolong this pleasure, he stopped her. Guiding her hand away for a moment, he reached to her pile of condoms and bit the end off a foil packet. He drew one out and asked, “Want to put it on?”

She was more than willing. She bent to tongue the head of his cock, nearly jolting him out of the bed before she

sheathed his throbbing erection. He sucked in his breath as she made contact with every possible nerve ending. He put his fingers over hers to unfurl the last ring, then rolled onto his back and pulled her on top of him, wriggling his hips as she straddled him with her long legs. "This will put you more in control," he rasped as she quickly evaluated the situation and got them both in exactly the position she wanted them.

Surrounding him with her pulsing warmth and desire, she quickly guided his aching cock inside her and pressed to mold herself all around him. Ever conscious of her needs, he thrust himself deeper into her grasping smoothness. She began to move back and forth in the rhythm she remembered from the night before—and maybe from several previous lives. It felt so right.

Dylan was biting his lip. He put his hands on her hips and held her so she stopped. She took a deep breath, longing to push against him, to have him stroke that one spot... "Let's just stay like this for a breath or two," he said, "or things will happen too quickly."

Some inner tease she usually kept bottled up heard a challenge in his words and was going to speed up her delightful dance. But oh, it felt so awesome having him buried deep inside her with his arms around her and her legs around him. He was her prisoner now. He'd never be able to move away unless she let him. His being trapped beneath her felt almost as good as his cock in her pussy.

Maybe they really could stay like that for a while...indefinitely...till tomorrow or the next day. Not. After two breaths, Dylan moved a fraction, and then Courtney moved a fraction more. She was just about to begin her wild ride when he called out her name, cupping the cheeks of her

butt as he started to pump into her. She knew he was close. She maneuvered so each tiny surface of her inner core could meet and love each drop of his. He knew just where the spot that had her nearly through the ceiling was—and with his cock, he caressed her again and again till she was screaming and gasping.

“Dylan!” she called, as a hair-curling orgasm ripped through her.

He buried his face in her breasts and gave himself up to his release.

They lay together shuddering, not needing a quake to make the earth move.

When their heartbeats once again resumed an almost normal rate, Dylan nuzzled her and asked, “Was that good for you?”

“No.” She clamped her legs around his and found the pressure so delicious that she pressed harder.

He stroked her hair and played with her love lips, asking hoarsely, “What can I do to make it good for you?”

She laughed and bit his lower lip. “Dylan,” she murmured. “That was so far beyond good, I don’t know how to tell you.”

He relaxed, but continued his delicious stroking and pressing.

“I can’t tell you how good it was, but maybe I can sing it,” she said. “Has anyone ever sung to you in bed?”

Dylan, looking amused, pulled back a bit. “Can’t say anyone ever has.”

“Then I’ll be the first,” she said, looking smug.

“And probably the only,” he added.

“What should I sing, Dylan? We need to have an ‘our’ song.”

Now he looked smug. “I don’t know about having an ‘our’ song, but what’s jumpin’ out at me right now is the oldie *When I Fall in Love, It Will Be Forever*.”

She playfully smacked him on the shoulder. “That corny old thing?”

“It won’t sound corny when you sing it.”

And it didn’t. As Courtney’s voice, warm from the loving, sang each of the words of the old standard, she etched the moment deep into Dylan’s heart—and hers.

* * * *

Since the days were still warm with early autumn mildness, and Courtney valued fresh air and sunlight, she’d left her bedroom windows open. Just enough.

“Did you hear that?” Clark Hammer rubbed his hands and cackled to Sid Zigmund, whose eyes were nearly rattling in his head like two wayward marbles. The two had hightailed it to Sausalito close behind Dylan and Courtney.

“Oh, geez, chief. She’s singin’ to him. In bed with him, and she’s singin’ to him.” Sid drooled. “Lucky bastard.”

Clark’s lips pressed into a tight line. “Well, we’ll see about that. Did you get the shots of them going at it?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t have my tape going,” Sid whined.

“Buy the friggin’ CD. You did get the shots, didn’t you, you moron?”

Sid flushed slightly and nodded. “You think we’ll be able to publish them?”

“Of course not,” Clark said, scowling. “We’re a family paper, not a porn site. But we’ve got a story we can run with. And if those two try to deny it, we’ll let them know we have

the pictures to back us up. Even show 'em copies. You know, when they threaten to sue us from here to kingdom come."

Sid sighed. "I kind of like Courtney."

"So keep a set of prints." He looked in the window and saw the couple snuggling. "Come on. We have enough for tonight. Develop what you have. I'm going to start writing. And then, let's see where this all goes tomorrow."

On tiptoes, they slunk to their car and drove back to San Francisco.

* * * *

As their uninvited observers noted, Courtney and Dylan shared the afterglow of their lovemaking snuggled in each other's arms, murmuring sweet nothings to each other after Courtney finished her song. "That was really great," Dylan said.

"Are you referring to the song or the sex?" Courtney asked.

"Both. The lovemaking and the song."

She raised up on her elbow and looked at him.

"So that was lovemaking?" she asked.

He stroked her cheek with his hand. "Do you need to ask?" he growled. "It's clear to me." He sat up. "Courtney, I know we may not have started in a good place, but..."

She cut off his words by taking his hand and thrusting it into the triangle of blond hair at the apex of her legs. "Talk about a good place."

He laughed. "You're a wanton."

"You're right," she said. "I'm a wantin' more of you. Right now."

He nudged her leg with his now rock-hard erection. "Same back at you," he said, lying down next to her and mov-

ing so they were extended against each other. He kissed her, his lips and tongue plundering her eager mouth as his right hand covered her left breast.

She moaned as her nipple beaded into his hand, wondering at its hardness in response to his.

He broke the kiss to trail his lips to her right breast, as she ran her fingers through his hair and held him to her.

While he paid homage to each breast with lips and tongue and nips with his teeth, she wound her legs around his and pressed her damp pink folds onto his thigh. He deepened his kisses and she began to ride his thigh, first tentatively, then with greater hunger. She moaned his name, riding faster and faster till she climaxed, soaking his thigh with a great gush of love fluid. He barely held on to his own erection as she quaked against him. But he wanted to hold back.

She relaxed her legs for a brief moment, then began to press herself against him again. "Dylan, now. I want you now. In me. You on top."

With a grunt, he took the position she demanded, deep inside her in two thrusts of his pulsing cock.

"Courtney," he exhaled. "Courtney."

She grabbed his ass with both hands and pressed him to her like she'd never let go. She couldn't believe she was so hot just moments after her last orgasm, but with him in her so deep, she was seeing stars and planets whirling before her as if this time was all new.

She ran her right foot over the calf of his left leg as he thrust his tongue deep, deep into her mouth.

They were so close. As he pleased her, she felt his cock grow ever bigger and tighter. She wanted to kiss him, suck him off, but that was for the next time...or the next. Because

right now, she couldn't imagine ever letting him go from the wonderful place he was. Everywhere he touched, he breathed, burned with a fire she'd never put out.

As Dylan thrust into her, he also used his fingers wisely and well to stroke the entrance to her core, adding sensation to sensation, boosting her somewhere into the solar system.

She was building, building up, turning her head as he kissed her, writhing under him, with him. And then her release came, shattering her like strobe lights piercing darkness. She gasped and called his name, needing him there in the wonder of the tornado of sensations swirling her about.

His own release followed immediately. He called out her name as he came and came and came.

They collapsed together into a wet, sweaty heap on her well-used silk sheets.

Afterwards, Courtney nuzzled him. "You were right," she sighed.

"Your words are music to my ears," he said, his words sounding as if they came from somewhere deep within him. He kissed the tip of her nose. "I like to believe I'm always right, but in what specific way do you mean?"

She grinned at him. "It does keep getting better and better. I'd never have believed that was possible, but it does."

He hugged her and kissed her eyelids.

"Dylan, can you spend the night with me?"

"Nothing would please me more. Are we actually going to get some sleep?"

She pouted. "We can sleep any time."

"And we can make love any time. I promise. But I'm really afraid you'll be too sore to ever want to do it again if we don't pace ourselves."

She sighed. “You’re the expert.”

He introduced her to the joy of spooning. With her nestled against him, they both fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 4

They woke, still spooned together, just before eight the next morning. “Mmm,” Courtney murmured as wakefulness returned.

Dylan looked at the clock and sat up. “I’ve got to get going.” Then he bent down and nuzzled her, letting her know that leaving was not among his top three choices for how to start the morning.

“Can’t you have breakfast?” she asked in a soft, husky voice.

He smiled sadly. “Need to take a rain check on that. Just enough time for a shower.” He sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed. Before putting his feet to the floor, he added, “We never came to a decision about how to handle what I said to Roy.”

She hugged herself. “As far as I’m concerned, we did. You proved to me you were right. I’m already singing those songs differently than on the CD.”

“But that would be true any time. A CD captures a particular moment, not what you’ll sound like through your entire career. And you proved to me you are woman enough to sing any song any time you want.”

She got out of bed, now conscious of her nudity. But she couldn’t let him leave thinking she was still demanding what

she had before... There was so much more she wanted from him. Ignoring her lack of clothes, she went to him. "You helped with changing my delivery of those songs. Dylan, you don't need to talk to Roy. I will."

Laugh lines crinkled around his eyes. "I know I don't. That's why I'm free to go ahead and do it."

She felt her resolve shift a bit. "Do what feels right." She nibbled her bottom lip as her formerly firm opinion began to wobble. Maybe she could have it all...

"If I did that, I'd never get to my appointment this morning." He kissed her lightly.

"Works for me." She kissed him right back. *No ambiguity there.*

He growled. "I really have to get to work. But, Courtney, I'll call you. See you soon."

* * * *

Next morning, Clark Hammer and Sid Zigmund stopped at a popular drive-through. Clark's editor insisted he continue trying to drum up a story at the lawyers' convention. Clark didn't want to spill the details of his hot news about Courtney Clayton till he'd milked the story to the last drop.

The two men picked up their breakfasts and headed off. Sid was driving a battered Kia Reo, the only car left in their price range when they arrived at the airport rental office. Clark grimaced to himself. After he delivered his scoop, he'd be getting decent rental cars, maybe even flying first class...or business. And he'd get one of the sharp photographers, not a pathetic has-been like Sid Zigmund.

Clark had landed in the tabloid's doghouse when his story about a presidential candidate having simultaneous affairs with triplets was revealed to be totally fictitious. On that story,

he'd started off with a career maker. But then he slightly overstepped the bounds of tabloid journalism by transforming non-simultaneous affairs with twins into the more spectacular, but nonexistent, trysts. After the discovery of his bit of, what had they called it?—*distortion*—his editor nearly fired him. Clark managed, by the skin of his teeth, to defuse that. But now, a year later, he was still getting bottom-of-the-barrel assignments, accommodations, and assistants. The Courtney Clayton story could end all that. At last something worthy of his talents had fallen into his lap.

Clark sipped his black coffee and distractedly ate his egg on English muffin. The sight of Sid Zigmund driving one-handed while he inhaled hash browns and sausage on a croissant, extra greasy style, almost put him off his food. But work like Clark's was not for those with weak stomachs.

"Will we follow Courtney again?" Sid's beady little eyes lit up.

"Stop drooling," Clark muttered. "At this point, we're just going to sit tight with what we have and wait for Chapter Two. Because believe me, there will be a Chapter Two."

As it turned out, Hammer didn't have to wait long. Later that morning, when he saw Dylan's review of the latest release from Colossal Studios, Clark Hammer read it three times to make sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. His heart was thudding with joy and he felt the energy and elation of a far younger man. "Bingo!" he shouted, drawing Sid Zigmund's attention from his photos of Courtney Clayton.

"What's up, chief?"

Clark's lips began to curl. But today he wouldn't even let that dolt of a photographer get to him. "It's here in black and

white,” Clark chortled, successfully fighting back his urge to hug Sid and jump up and down with him in a victory dance.

“What’s that?”

“McLean has just given a great review to the latest release from Colossal Studios, *The Peoria Predator*. All the other reviewers are calling it a mega stink bomb. Do you know what that means?”

“That he makes up his own mind?”

Clark glared at him. “You moron. It’s undue influence. Courtney Clayton records for Gigantic Music, a subsidiary of Colossal. And word is, she’s looking to make a movie at Colossal. He was probably going to pan the movie too, like everyone else. She talked him into changing his mind.”

“Yeah, okay. I wish she’d change my mind.”

“She can’t. You don’t have one.”

Sid pouted.

“You know what? Even you can’t get to me today.” Clark sprang up and raced to the phone, dialing his editor’s hot line number. When someone picked up at the other end, he hollered, “Hold the presses! Details to follow!” Then he slammed down the phone, gleefully rubbing his hands together. “I’ve always wanted to do that.”

One minute later, his phone rang. “That’s right, Courtney Clayton and the *San Francisco Trib*’s movie critic, Dylan McLean.”

Talk from the other end of the phone. Clark Hammer held the receiver away from his ear.

“Heh, heh, heh, I’m sure this time. And I have photos to back me up. Caught them *in flagrante*.”

More chatter from the other hand.

“Right,” Clark barked before hanging up. He looked at Sid. “We’ve got work to do. They’re going to run our story in tomorrow’s edition.” Rubbing his hands with glee, Clark sat down at his computer and began to type.

* * * *

Because of previous commitments on both their parts, Dylan and Courtney had no chance to get together till Sunday. They met for brunch at a popular Sausalito restaurant. This morning she was a brunette, sporting a Cleopatra wig. “You make a very sexy queen of the Nile.” They toasted each other with mimosas.

She blushed. “You’d probably say I look sexy if I showed up with green hair.”

“Probably, but I’d just as soon you didn’t.”

“Promise.” They clinked their glasses together.

As soon as brunch was over, he followed her home. The minute she got in the door, she pulled off her wig and ran her fingers through her short blonde hair. “Now I can breathe,” she sighed. Then she took him into her mini-studio, sat him down, put on the accompaniment tape for *Send in the Clowns* and began to sing.

He listened with his eyes closed. When she’d run through the song once, he whispered, “Encore!” After bowing slightly, she rewound the tape and sang again.

At the end of the song, he couldn’t stay away from her any longer. Awed by her sound, yet in need of her touch, he let the need take over. He picked her up and whirled her around in celebration. “Wow! The way you sang just now gave me goose bumps.”

“Is that good?” She kept looking at him as he put her down and hugged her.

“Good? No, more like fabulous. Oh, yeah. I think every man in the audience is going to want to follow you home. No, they probably wanted to do that before. Now they’ll be desperate.”

“I’ve got you to thank for the changes.” Her voice, raised high in song moments ago, was now barely more than a whisper.

“Well, shucks, ma’am.” Dylan’s mind whirled at the thought of all she was giving him credit for. And then his mind switched off and his need for her took over. “I’ve got an idea. Let’s work on seeing if we can make more changes.” He lowered his lips to hers.

“I thought you’d never ask.” She melted into his arms.

He brushed her lips gently with his. But his desire for her, intensified through several days and nights apart, could not be contained. As his lips tasted her, communicating his longing, his need, she responded with a story of equal hunger. He couldn’t believe she’d been as wonderful as every sense remembered, but now their renewed contact confirmed his memory—and promised so much more.

“I’ve missed you,” he moaned when they took a break in their questing kisses. His fingers traced her hairline. When she brought her hand to his cheek, he placed his hand on hers, then brought her fingers to his mouth and sucked each one.

She stiffened. “Dylan, my empty bed is waiting.”

One looked at the other, then both raced through the house, each whipping off clothes and flinging them wherever. Once under silk sheets, they fell into each other’s arms.

“Hurry,” Courtney demanded, breathing into Dylan’s ear as he embraced her and bent to greet her breasts.

He groaned.

* * * *

“Kiss my breasts later,” she moaned, arching herself against him so he’d feel the enormity and urgency of her need for him. She’d grown so wet seeing him in the restaurant, she’d nearly slid all the way home. “Come into me now.”

“Are you sure you’re ready?”

“If I were any more ready, I’d be hanging from the ceiling.” To prove her point, Courtney climbed on top of Dylan, straddled him, and eased herself onto his bulging erection. She immediately began to grind herself against him, riding him like he was headed for the Triple Crown.

“Courtney, Courtney, if we keep this up, I’m going to lose control. Let’s slow it down.”

“I want it fast and hard, Dylan. Give it to me. We have time for slower. Right now, give it to me so fast and hard.”

He did. She matched him stroke for stroke, crowing with the pleasure of feeling him fill her, caressing her most intimate spots with the hard velvet of his penis. She cried out his name in release half a moment before he joined her in the same mind-numbing joy.

Both spent, they collapsed together. She fitted herself to him as if to ensure no millimeter of air wedged between them. They hugged and exchanged little kisses, nonsense whisperings, and snuggles.

She was still atop Dylan when she asked, “So what are your plans for the day?”

He grinned at her. Realizing she’d never get a coherent response while they lay so intimately bonded, she rolled off him—but not too far.

He looked at her from behind half-lowered eyelids. “Plans? Well, I was going to go home and write an explanation

for Einstein's Theory of Relativity. But after the way we just made love, I think my IQ's down to about three. So I've abandoned that and am your willing love slave. What do you have in mind?"

She smiled wickedly and ran her foot along his leg. "I don't know if my mind has anything to do with it, but I want us to spend the day in bed. The whole day. You'll be my prisoner here. You think you could go for that?"

"You're a hard woman, Courtney Clayton," he teased. "But you've just made me an offer I can't refuse. Your prisoner, eh?"

Touching his growing erection, she said, "I'm not the one who's hard around here. That hard cock sentences you to do my bidding."

"Just call me slave," he murmured.

"Slave." She drew several silk scarves from the drawer of her night table.

"What's that?" He started to sit up.

"Just lie back, slave. I'll tell you what you need to know." She took his right hand and tied him to a bar of her iron headboard with a red silk scarf.

"Hey," he said, then laughed. "Where'd you learn to tie knots? I can be out of this one in two seconds flat."

She pressed her hips against him. "Play along," she commanded.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Or should I say, Your Wardenship."

"Mistress sounds just fine."

"Right. Mistress. Ouch," he protested as she tied his left wrist with a black scarf. "That one's lots tighter."

"Told you I'm a fast learner."

She tied both ankles to the bedposts with other scarves. "Now I have you just where I want you," she exclaimed, feasting her eyes on his magnificent spread-eagle vulnerability.

Despite Dylan's protests, his erection throbbed at an amazing angle, so she knew he was enjoying her game...at least as much as she was.

"Courtney, Courtney, let me out," he called.

"Not until you've been in." She took the head of his straining cock into her eager mouth.

He sizzled like raindrops falling on an overheated tin roof.

As she explored every vein and twitch of his straining love muscle, Dylan thrashed and struggled, adding to her fun. She juggled his balls as she played her mouth games.

"You're killing me," he accused Courtney, who was far too polite to respond when she had her mouth full.

To her amazement, he grew even larger as she sucked and licked. Ooh, she needed him inside her. She gave a final nibble, then pulled back enough to blow warm air on his shaft.

She took a condom and unrolled it with infinitesimal slowness, spreading the rubber over his kiss-slicked erection. Kissing her way up from his groin to his mouth, she angled herself to take all of him into her dripping core. *Ooh, so delicious.* She rotated her hips, making sure to position her clit for maximum friction with his glorious cock. He bucked his hips, making short work of his leg restraints, then his wristbands. His hands gripped her butt like a vise, his fingers playing with the delicate skin between her cheeks.

"Oh, Dylan, right there," she moaned, dashing her clit against him. The pressure was unbearable. She couldn't take

one more moment. She screamed as she crashed onto the shore of an orgasm that shook her from her toes to the tips of her hair.

"Courtney, Courtney," he called back to her, releasing a flood. "I love you," he cried out at the height of his passion.

Both let his words echo in the silence. Courtney was sure those were just passion words, the kind of thing a man said at extreme moments.

Afterwards, Dylan looked shy. She was afraid to ask him if he'd meant what he said. He nuzzled her, stretched and said, "I think bed is about the only place I'm fit to be today."

"Good," she whispered, glad to avoid any follow-up to what he'd said. He fell asleep in her arms. She watched him for several moments, then closed her eyes and joined his doze.

When she awoke, moments before him an hour or so later, Courtney stretched languorously, enjoying the luxury of time alone with him in bed. She nudged him, gently at first, then more insistently. Dylan came awake with a start. "Mmmf," he muttered. Then, appearing to become fully cognizant of where he was, he asked, "What is it?"

She smiled. A thought had come to her while they were napping. "I'd like to do something with you I once saw in a movie."

His eyebrows shot up. "You mean more tying me up?"

"Next time, I need to make better knots."

She contemplated the thought of there being a next time and fell silent for a moment, as did he. Too serious. She wanted their mood to be light today.

"But, no. Something else."

He looked skeptical. "Uh, Courtney, I'd like to say your wish is still my command and all that, but, um, what kind of movie are you talking about?"

She laughed. "You mean, is it some horror flick I'm envisioning here—like *The Bride of Frankenstein Strikes Back*?"

"Or even some romantic movie like *Romeo and Juliet*. You know, poison for him, a sword for her... Lots of scary things happen in movies..."

"You're the critic. But today, I'm thinking of the scene where two lovers take a bath together and draw all over each other's bodies."

"*Cousin, Cousine.*"

"Yeah." She licked her lips and sort of leered at him. "The French version." And then she frowned. "But I don't have any of those body paints. We could use some of my different kinds of soaps. Of course those pictures wouldn't last very long."

Dylan was massaging her shoulders. "I like that. But you know what else we could use for longer lasting drawings?"

"No, what?" When she heard his idea, she burst into laughter. "Even better than the movie, and definitely more delicious."

Both nude, they went about setting up her huge sunken tub. Courtney's bathroom was custom designed. Under an enormous skylight, she'd created a midnight blue and white room, a refuge where she could indulge. The large square ceramic tub easily accommodated two. She had the options of using the tub as a Jacuzzi or just soaking in deep water that maintained its temperature. Built out from the blue and white tiled wall was a shelf for Courtney's soaps, cloths, and whatever else was going to be part of her bath. There was also a shelf she could swing out to support a book, bath pillows to

lie back against, and dispensers for shampoo, conditioner, and body gel.

Courtney was famous for loving soaps. Her fans kept her stocked with hundreds, ranging from English lavender to mango and passion fruit, avocado glycerin and hard-milled vanilla mocha. Some looked and smelled like chocolate bars bursting with nuts, others promised serenity, abundance, creativity, and more. "Let's go with a strawberry and a vanilla cream," she said after surveying her inventory.

"Sounds good."

Once the soaps were in place, they picked candles and music. "Definitely Bach and Mozart for the bath," Courtney insisted.

"You're the musician," he said, approving her choices. She set up the CD for three hours of continuous music. On to the candles. Here she insisted he make the choices.

"Hmm." He surveyed her supply with great seriousness. "What about these white ones?"

She frowned. "Coconut? I don't know."

"All right. What does my lady suggest?"

"If you want white, maybe these. White rose and lavender combined."

"How about one coconut and two of the white rose and lavender?"

"Sure, why not? How bad can they smell?"

Now, for the *pièce de résistance*, they set up an ice bucket with champagne and two flutes and Courtney's fondue set. "I knew this old thing would come in handy some day," she said. They'd cut up some large, luscious-looking strawberries and cubed pound cake, mounding both in bowls. When the fondue pot was going and the chocolate beginning to melt,

Courtney started the warm—bordering on hot—water flowing into the tub and threw in two packets of Summer and Spice bubble bath.

“You have this down to a science,” Dylan observed as he followed Courtney into the tub.

“An art,” she said.

After debating how to arrange themselves, they decided to start off sitting opposite each other. They quickly decided they didn’t want to sit at opposite ends of the tub—far too much distance between them. So they met in the middle. Dylan’s legs straddled Courtney’s hips, with her legs perched on his.

“Hmm, I might have to reconsider being strictly a shower man,” Dylan said. His lids were half closed.

“I’ve always dreamed of doing this.” She reached for the champagne and poured some for each of them. “This must have been what I had in mind when I had this room built.”

“Here’s to lots more bath time for both of us—together,” Dylan toasted. They clinked glasses and sipped.

“So, when do we start drawing on each other?” Dylan picked up a bar of soap.

“First we have to fortify ourselves,” Courtney whispered. “We don’t want to deplete all our energy.”

“Fortify ourselves?”

“The chocolate.”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve heard about the restorative powers of chocolate.”

“I would hope so, you being a newspaperman and all.”

He sniffed the air appreciatively. “You know, I’m really not.”

“Not what?” She frowned.

“A newspaperman.” He sighed. “I kind of fell into reviewing movies after my gig as a stuntman came to a crashing halt.”

He proceeded to tell her about the accident that wrote *finis* to his movie work. “I know I can’t ever go back to stunt work, but I sure wish I could at least spend more time out of doors. Kind of ironic I should end up with such an indoor job when my heart’s in favor of the outdoors.”

“I hope you get what you want.”

“So do I.” He toasted her again on that.

“Looks like the chocolate’s good and melted.” She speared a piece of cake and coated it with the dark brown liquid. Holding it to her mouth, she blew to cool the cake, took a bite, put down her fork and proceeded to kiss Dylan full on the mouth with her lips loaded with chocolate.

He looked at her, wide-eyed. Then, following her lead, he took a chocolate-coated strawberry in his mouth and kissed her. Soon they were feeding each other and licking the chocolate off no matter where it dribbled.

“Luscious,” Dylan moaned. Some chocolate had landed on Courtney’s left breast. He followed its trail from her left to her right, tonguing harder when the nipples rose—as if trying to catch more chocolate.

Courtney put a dab of chocolate on her right index finger and began to write her initials right above Dylan’s left nipple. When a wobble caused her to mess up, she licked her mistake off, bringing him to amazing stiffness. “Courtney,” he moaned.

Their appetite for chocolate sated for a bit, each picked up a bar of soap and began drawing circles and stars and triangles and hearts on the other.

“Looks like you need a custom paint job here.” Dylan began soaping Courtney’s blonde triangle with his fingers. Her clit evidently required lots of paint, and he went at the task with the firm intention of getting it exactly right.

Courtney wasn’t one to ignore artistic opportunities. Declaring Vanilla Mocha the right medium for Dylan’s erection, she slid the soap through her hands to make lots of suds.

Soon each abandoned their soaps for the pleasure of holding the other close, so close.

“Dylan,” she murmured, “have you ever made love in a bathtub?”

“Let’s see,” he whispered, enumerating on his fingers. “Shower, hot tub, swimming pool, river, lake, and once at the edge of the ocean.” He furrowed his brow. “Can’t remember any time in a bathtub.”

She wiggled closer, tightening her hold on him with her legs. “How about if we make this the first time?”

He hugged her to him, his erection angling up, pointing to the skylight. “Mmm,” she murmured, stroking his cock. A drop of pearly white fluid beaded by the slit in the tip. She licked it, then ran her tongue all around. When she’d ringed the top of his cock with her tongue, she blew on it. Dylan’s head lolled back as he savored her warm breath.

He reached his hand into her cleft, nudging her slick pink lips with his knuckles, teasing her nub with quick flicks of his fingertips so she ground herself into them.

She put one hand over his, showing him exactly where she wanted him to press harder, tighter.

He looked her deep in the eyes, enjoying the flush of heat rouging her cheeks. “Do you ever bring yourself off with your hand?”

She gazed at him with half-closed eyes, a wicked smile playing around her lips. "Such personal questions you ask." She'd removed her hand from his.

He nuzzled her. "It turns me on to think of you pleasuring yourself."

She squeezed her legs together as if to expel his hand. "I can't talk about this."

"Courtney, don't you trust me?"

"It's not a matter of that..."

"It is, baby, it is. Courtney, you can tell me anything—show me anything. Ask me to do anything. I'd never hurt you..."

"Yeah, okay. Sometimes..." she admitted, now blushing an even darker hue of red.

He shook his head as if in wonder, his gray eyes brimming with some emotion. It couldn't be love, Courtney told herself, even if he'd said the word before. But it was tenderness, and passion. And yes, she almost felt she could trust him.

"I'd love to watch you as you pleasure yourself," he said. "Would you do that for me, here, now?"

She sighed deeply. Despite the growing intimacy between them, this felt like a huge step. She'd be letting him see her in a way no other person had ever come close to.

She wanted it. She wanted him to watch her, to see her. She wanted to share this with him. But she also wanted to watch him stroke himself. She felt a quickening in her core at the thought of how he would look...his hand on his cock.

She told him what she wanted. He didn't laugh. He took himself in hand as she began her familiar ritual.

Having him watch raised the stakes. She pressed herself against her own questing fingers, thrilled with the throb of her

muscles around her fingers, the hungry pulsing of her aroused clit.

She'd never before known she was such a voyeur, but watching Dylan stroke and fondle his cock was nearly enough to make her come, even without the stimulation of touching herself.

As her excitement grew, surrounded by the warm water, feasting on the sight of Dylan's hand on his huge cock, she felt her orgasm building, building. She came, gasping for breath, surprised at the intensity. And then she watched Dylan give it up, spurting his juices in an arc to join the waters around them.

He pulled her against him, so her rear pressed his cock, which, for the moment, relaxed. He kissed the back of her neck. "How you doing?"

She leaned back against him. "Time for more champagne and chocolate," she said. "But I'm too lazy to move to get them."

"Your wish is my command." He readjusted them both so he could reach the remnants of their erotic snack.

Dylan watched as Courtney took a bite of chocolate then sipped champagne. She looked at him. "Join me."

He pointed to his growing erection. "First things first."

Courtney's eyes widened. She'd never have believed they'd be ready for more action so soon. But seeing him erect got her going.

Dylan arose to get one of the condoms from the package on the shelf and sheathed his cock. Courtney's breath caught as she looked at how magnificent he was, standing proud and tall like some ancient warrior. A Trojan. She giggled at her own joke. She also wondered how complicated it would be to

keep the condom on when they were in the water. Before she knew it, Dylan was sitting back down, his hand securing the edge of the condom.

He looked at her as if to ask why she was laughing. She told him she'd share the joke later. For now they had more important places to focus. He'd gotten a bath pillow to sit on so he could angle himself exactly as was needed. With a wiggle or two, he adjusted himself to the perfect position. She bent her legs backward at the knee and straddled Dylan with her thighs. Then Dylan drew Courtney to himself, his penis penetrating to her core.

Still fascinated by how the condom fared underwater, Courtney pulled back the length of Dylan's erection so she could look down at his sheathed shaft. The condom clung to him almost as tightly as she did. He drew her back, so she swallowed him up.

In moments, their rhythmic grinding agitated the water and the bubbles in the tub so it looked almost like a washing machine going full tilt. Slosh, slosh, slosh. The bubbles grew thicker around them. The Bach on the CD was punctuated by their screams of delight and the sounds of water splashing within the tub and beyond. Soon the bubble-filled water inundated the chocolate remaining in the fondue pot, and a wayward splash put out one of the candles. But neither Dylan nor Courtney, both lost in a watery world of sensation, cared. Courtney's exclamation of release soared up to the skylight—and perhaps beyond—as Dylan joined her in a burst of ecstasy.

Spent, they hugged and stroked each other and sat, both enjoying the still warm water and the momentary peace. Then, deciding bath time was done, they took a few more

minutes to actually soap each other and rinse off. Dylan insisted on climbing out of the tub first. He went to the heating racks where Courtney stored her towels. Moments later, he returned with a thick white terry towel tied around his waist.

"For milady," he declared, holding the thick warm midnight blue towel for Courtney to step into. He insisted on toweling her dry, paying careful attention to every nook and cranny.

"You're so beautiful," he said, when she was dry and had slipped into a clean T-shirt.

Courtney pulled his towel away from his middle. "You're no slouch yourself." She raced away from him with the towel in her hand and laughed her head off.

"Hey, I'm not dry yet," he roared, running after her.

When he caught her, he grabbed her and hugged her hard, getting her all wet again.

"You're soaking my T-shirt," she hollered breathlessly.

"I guess you'll just have to take it off then," he crowed. Both of them naked, they raced back to the bathroom and dried off. Luckily, Courtney had lots more immense T-shirts around.

"Believe it or not, despite that wonderful chocolate fondue, I'm hungry," Courtney said.

"Making love raises other appetites," Dylan responded, grabbing a quick glance at a clock. "Not to mention, it's what other people might call time for dinner."

"Ooh, how did it ever get that late?"

"The big hand moves and then the little hand, and before you know it, the clock says it's late."

She grabbed his hands. "I like the way your big hands move. Dylan, what should we do for dinner? Do you want to go out?"

"Not really. What have you got to eat in the house?"

"Nothing exciting. How about if we order take-out? What do you like?"

"I'm easy. How about Chinese—if you have a good take-out place nearby."

"We do. The best. I'm going to call right now. Anything you don't eat?"

"No."

While Courtney called, Dylan climbed back into bed with the morning paper. Courtney joined him moments later. "They'll be here in half an hour."

"Great," Dylan mumbled, absorbed in an article.

In self-defense, Courtney grabbed a section of the paper. They both snuggled companionably, each engrossed. The doorbell's chime interrupted their reading.

"I'll go." Dylan pulled on his jeans under the T-shirt.

He came back carrying six white cartons emblazoned with the name of the restaurant in red. He'd grabbed a round tray—black lacquer with a large central decal of a rooster announcing the morning—and distributed the cartons on it, along with the napkins, chopsticks, packets of mustard, duck sauce, and soy sauce, and a waxed bag of fortune cookies. "What have we here?"

"Should be one container with egg rolls, one with fried rice, one spicy eggplant, one lemon chicken, one beef with broccoli, and one Buddha's Delight."

"You are hungry."

She smiled sheepishly. "It's always nice to have leftovers in the fridge. The only problem with ordering take-out is you don't get drinks."

"Not a biggie," Dylan said. "We can go into that beautiful kitchen of yours and brew some tea. You do have tea, don't you?"

"Of course," Courtney said. "A big stash of green tea and a gorgeous teapot. Just got them in Chinatown."

"Then we're set."

She went to the kitchen to get the tea going. She even had a set of teacups just like the kind in Chinese restaurants. Putting everything on the smaller mate of the tray Dylan had used, she brought it to the bedroom.

Neither of them could have said how they reached the decision to eat in bed. But they were both there, the food and drinks were there, so why go anywhere else to feast?

Along with the tea and cups, Courtney brought pretty cream-colored plates with dark blue borders. The restaurant had also sent wet towels in packets. These proved inadequate to mop up the grease of the egg rolls, so Dylan went to the bathroom and brought a damp washcloth and a towel.

"All the necessities of life. We really could move into the bed," she joked.

He looked at her. "I've heard lots worse ideas."

Both full, they put down their chopsticks. Though they were far from finishing all the goodies, they'd made a sizable dent. "That's really delicious." Dylan helped Courtney close up the leftover cartons.

"Nothing but the best for my honored guests. So, which fortune cookie do you want? You pick first."

"No, you." Dylan nodded to her.

“Okay. Whatever.”

When they each were holding a light brown cookie, Courtney said, “You open first.”

She listened very intently as he read: “Big changes will come your way.” He tossed it aside. “Now you.”

She looked at him, crossly. “You can’t just shrug those messages off.”

He pursed his lips. “Don’t tell me you take that nonsense seriously. It’s just some mass-produced mumbo jumbo that gets printed up and cut into pieces by giant machines.”

“Those are messages from the universe.”

He shrugged, picking his up again in a gesture that said, *I’m doing this to humor you*. “Okay, read your message from the universe.” He looked as if he had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

“Give me your fortune. I’ll hold it for you.”

He sighed, but handed it to her. “Okay, I’m still waiting to hear yours.”

She read it and frowned. “A big surprise will soon arrive.” Chewing on her lip nervously, she looked at him. “It doesn’t say whether the surprise will be a good one or a bad one.”

“Oh, Courtney, don’t worry. Those pieces of paper are meaningless. Why, probably fifty to a hundred people in Marin County alone are reading the same ones this very moment. They can’t all have meaning for everyone.”

Courtney looked skeptical. She and Dylan cleaned up and put away all the leftovers. Then they went back to bed again. “Are you good at crossword puzzles?” he asked her.

“The best,” she said. “I do them in ink.”

“Me too,” he said. “How about if we have a little contest—see which of us comes up with the most right answers in the shortest time?”

“You’re on,” Courtney said. “Uh, what does the winner get?”

“How about if the winner gets to choose who’s on top next time?”

“You’re on.”

“Or you are,” he chuckled.

The puzzle proved to be a challenge, even for two such experienced crossworders. They soon decided consulting a dictionary or almanac would take half a point off the score for each word.

“Ooh,” Courtney groaned, “what is the French word for fish?”

“Noun or verb?” Dylan asked. He was stuck on a three-letter shore bird he knew he knew. By the time they finished the puzzle, it was quite late.

Courtney totaled up their scores. “Looks like I’m the winner here,” she said. “Sorry, pal, you should never have pitted yourself against me. I was my dorm champion for two years running. Looks like my record remains intact.”

He furrowed his brow. “Wait a minute. Let me see that score sheet. I was sure I was ahead of you.”

She handed him the sheet. He retotaled the scores and scowled at her. “Do you have a calculator?”

“I happen to, not that I need it.”

“I just need to verify something. Hand it over.”

She did. When he retotaled the scores, he turned out to be the big winner. “Read it and weep.” He chortled.

She looked at the paper and frowned. "There must be something wrong."

"Yeah," he said. "The way you do math. What is it they teach you at Harvard?"

She gave him a warning look. "Don't even go there. Must be some mistake here." But try as she might, she couldn't find any error in his calculations—only hers.

Humble was not her style. Sighing, she threw down the paper. "Through some fluke, an error has been made here." She looked at him haughtily. "This has never happened before, and it will never happen again. But for this time, I'll concede the point." She choked a bit. "You've, uh, won." She thought for a moment. "This must be the unpleasant surprise the Chinese fortune cookie warned of."

* * * *

"Unpleasant? Hardly." He drew her to him and kissed her. "Ah, Courtney, even though I won, you get to pick the next position."

"Well, being that I'm the loser, I guess the puts me in the One Down position and you in the One Across." Her lips traced a fiery path down his body to his waiting cock. She licked his balls and then took his throbbing cock into her mouth. Dylan ran his fingers through her hair, aware that her lips—the lips that sang the songs America loved—were circling him in the deepest intimacy.

He held her to him lightly, on tenterhooks not to come in her mouth. But she felt so good, her tongue and teeth nibbling at him, giving him a pleasure so intense he thought he'd explode. He gently signaled her to stop, but she wouldn't. Instead she intensified her licking, her love bites so thrilling that he got lost in the pleasure of her movements, her breath, her

being with him. She took her left hand and began to fondle his balls and the base of his cock. He thought he'd died and gone to heaven.

His stomach tightened with the coming release. "Courtney, baby," he moaned. "I'm going to come. I can't stop..." And he began to spurt into her mouth. To his amazement, she swallowed his cum. "Oh, baby," he said. "I'm sorry."

She looked at him, his fluids slick on her lips, and grinned wickedly. "I wanted it. I wanted to taste you. You're delicious."

Turn about being fair play, he told her being one across was just the right position for him to taste her cum. He worked his way up, starting at those gorgeous pink-tipped toes, suckling each one while she fingered herself, wriggling and writhing.

As slowly as he could, he covered her feet with his kisses, nibbling at the fleshy tips of her toes, tonguing the arches till she moaned his name. She had great legs. The spot directly behind her knees drove her crazy. He kissed his way up her calves, her tight thighs, and then, just when he was approaching her quivering apex, back down to her knees.

"Dylan," she moaned, taking him by the ears and steering him to her moist waiting cleft. When his tongue first parted her lips, she groaned. God, she was scrumptious. Tonight she tasted of berries and musk—a heavy, sexy scent. He played with her breasts as he tongued each blonde curl covering her cleft, leaving a trail of wetness that blended with her pumping moisture.

She was so ready for him. He'd just begun to lick her clit when he felt her legs tighten around him, coming against his

Between the Sheets

mouth with fierceness and fire. He kept licking and sucking till she collapsed, begging for mercy.

And then they both laughed and laughed.

Chapter 5

Dylan had to leave early Monday. He was scheduled to go to Sacramento to meet with two independent filmmakers shooting a documentary in the Sierras. He lingered over his good-bye kiss to Courtney, promising he'd call as soon as he got back to town, probably late in the afternoon.

"It's really hard to leave you," he said softly, insisting Courtney stay snuggled in bed rather than come say good-bye at the door.

"Mmm," she murmured, allowing herself the rare luxury of a little extra sack time. She stretched out and returned to her dreams.

The phone's ring woke Courtney. She fumbled for the receiver as she registered the time: eight-thirty. She really needed to get going, just as soon as she took care of this call. Maybe it was already Dylan. She smiled, thinking he missed her so much he had to call right after leaving.

Her smile did not last long.

It was Glenys Harrity, not Dylan. "Uh, Courtney, have you been out this morning?"

"No," she said hazily. "Why?"

"You haven't seen the papers?"

She frowned. "I'm still in bed. What's up?"

She heard Glenys take a deep breath. "You've made the front page of the *National Feeding Frenzy*. Huge headlines, photos, the works."

"That rag?" Courtney asked, yawning. "Nobody takes that garbage seriously. They're always after celebrities with some trumped-up nonsense. I wouldn't give it any attention."

"Courtney, normally I'd agree with you. But this time... well it looks like they've taken some real stuff and run with it. Were you and the *Trib*'s movie critic, Dylan McLean, at a pizza place the other night?"

Courtney gasped, her hand coming up to her neck. "Yes."

"Actually, it looks like you were holding hands over the pizza. And then, uh, Courtney, was this Dylan McLean the reason you were asking me all those questions about how to seduce a guy?"

"Oh, God," Courtney said, her face now flaming red. "Don't tell me..."

"Darlin', it looks like you and Dylan McLean were doing a lot more than holding hands."

Courtney's dream had just transformed itself into a nightmare. Photos of her and Dylan in that scandal sheet?

"What does the article say?" she asked, feeling the start of a major headache.

"You sure you want to know?"

"I'm sure I don't want to, but I might as well get an idea."

"Okay. The headline says: *Courtney And the Critic: A Bedroom Duet*."

Courtney groaned. She felt sure she was going to be sick. "Oh, Glenys, that sounds so sordid and disgusting."

"That's their claim to fame. Clark Hammer, the reporter with this 'scoop', is widely regarded as a bottom feeder."

“That doesn’t help much.”

“No, it doesn’t, but I thought it might give you a little sense of relief.”

“Very little. Glenys, read me the rest.”

“Okay, but hang on to your breakfast. I’m quoting now:

“*San Francisco Trib*’s Dylan McLean heaped praise on Colossal Studio’s latest release, *The Peoria Predator*, which most reviewers have panned. Does that have any connection with the studio’s record producer, Gigantic, putting out a new CD—an effort from America’s former sweetheart, Courtney Clayton, who’s attempting to make a comeback? Looks to us like the young chanteuse took matters in hand. Or actually, she took McLean in hand, to the amazement of this erstwhile reporter (photos follow). Sharing a cozy pizza with the critic, our songbird then led him to her love nest in Sausalito for fun and frolic of a very adult nature.

“McLean, the stuntman turned critic, has developed a reputation for so-called professionalism, ethics, and objectivity in his reviews. Heck, he’s been known to snub journalists whose standards he claims don’t reach the same lofty heights.

“How then do we explain the pristine McLean’s playing games with Courtney in view of her connection with Colossal? Has our girl found a way to corrupt the incorruptible? What is it they teach in Harvard’s hallowed halls?

“Is this the behavior America would have expected from Howie’s dream girl—the angel who recorded everyone’s favorite Christmas carols? Say it

isn't so, Courtney. Only the photos—and this reporter's eyewitness experience—show it is.”

“Is that it?” Courtney croaked, wishing for nothing more than to burrow under the sheets and stay in bed for the next month or year.

“That's it.”

“Glenys, that's such a distortion. Nothing that's happened between Dylan and me has anything to do with his being a critic.”

“Hmm. I'm surprised your publicist, Hal, hasn't been on the phone with you already.”

“His wife is giving birth to their second baby today.”

“Well, you'd better get in touch with him, pronto. I understand the news services and TV stations are picking up on this. The sooner you start damage control, the better it'll be to contain this mess.”

“Glenys, I've got to get on this right now. Thanks for telling me.”

“I wish I could have been calling with better news. Courtney, just know you can count on me.”

Courtney couldn't believe something so beautiful could have such ugly consequences. But she was sure the tabloid story would be nothing more than a blip they'd be able to clear up. Pronto.

* * * *

Dylan remained in blissful ignorance of the brewing storm until he returned to San Francisco and the offices of the *Trib* late in the afternoon.

As soon as he walked in the door, all the chattering in the lobby came to an abrupt halt. Renee Montaine, the receptionist, motioned him to come to her desk.

“What’s up, Renee?” Everyone was staring at him, but they would break eye contact as soon as he looked in their direction. He looked to Renee for a clue.

She appeared sympathetic. “Jane Lundgren wants to see you,” she whispered.

“Jane? Whatever for?” Dylan asked, half to himself.

Renee seemed to want to answer, but shrugged. “You’d better go to her office.”

Dylan rushed to his editor’s office. One of the reasons he liked and got along so well with Joan was because of her hands-off policy. Her attitude was, “If it ain’t broke, I’m not gonna fix it.” That managerial style suited Dylan just fine. Except that now, when he had to answer an unexpected summons, his gut told him he wasn’t about to be heaped with praise.

Jane was barking into a phone and typing when Dylan, who was commanded to enter after he knocked on her usually open door, came in. She motioned him to sit.

What in the world is going on? He’d intended to call Courtney as soon as he got to his office. Judging that Jane would be tied up a bit longer, he took out his cell and started to punch in Courtney’s number. Jane hung up and glared at him, so he put away the phone and turned his full attention to her.

“McLean, you know what’s going on, don’t you?”

“I don’t know how to answer that question. I know what’s going on where?”

“Where have you been all day?”

“As a matter of fact, at a ranch outside Sacramento.”

“No doubt you didn’t listen to any news on the radio as you were driving back.”

“No,” Dylan said.

“Well, the delightful task of telling you that you and Courtney Clayton are the headline news of the day falls to me.”

Dylan jumped up. “Courtney and me?”

“Sit down, McLean. Seems you two have made it to the front page of the *National Feeding Frenzy*.”

“Shit!” Dylan exclaimed. “Sorry.” He sat.

“No need to apologize. That was my exact reaction when I saw the rag this morning.”

“It came out this morning?”

“Oh, yeah. Just in time to greet the nation’s readers over Monday morning coffee. Seems like Clark Hammer and that little worm of a photographer have made Courtney and you their topic du jour.”

“Clark Hammer. I fluffed him off at some meeting last year.”

“Not that anyone would blame you. But he’s getting his revenge now.”

“And dragging Courtney into it. Though I don’t have a clue as to what he’s come up with.” He got up again, paced for several seconds, then asked, “Jane, do you have a copy?”

“Oh, yes. Read it. Then we’ll talk.”

Dylan, still unable to believe what was happening, took the paper from her and sat down again. Muttering to himself, he read the article twice, wincing as he looked at the pictures.

“This is disgusting, twisted garbage!” He threw the paper onto Jane’s overflowing desk.

“What about the photos? Are they, um, accurate?”

Dylan made a face. “Much as I hate to admit it, yeah. They didn’t doctor anything. Of course, they took all those pictures without our permission or knowledge.”

"You're both public figures," Jane said. "Especially Courtney."

"Courtney," Dylan sighed, smacking his head. "She'll be frantic. I need to call her before we do another thing."

"Good luck," Jane said, her lips pursed. "The lady's not answering any of the numbers listed for her."

"I've got to try." In moments, Dylan was connected to Courtney's voice mail. He left a message for her there and on the two other numbers he had. Then he entered her pager number on his phone. After that, he was out of ways to contact her. He hoped she'd listen to the messages. She'd call him back soon. Poor thing, must be going through hell.

Jane looked at Dylan. "I've got to be straight with you. The publisher is on me for not checking for a connection. What with all the recent corporate scandals and so on..."

Dylan looked at Jane in horror. Bad enough he and Courtney were being hounded. He couldn't stand Jane also being in hot water.

"Jane, what can I do? Should I talk to him?"

Jane held up her hands. "Hey, McLean, you've always been square with me. I'm sure your review of *The Peoria Predator* is as unbiased as your other work. If our dear and beloved boss can't live with that, he can have my resignation."

"Oh, no, Jane, that would be awful. You're a phenomenal editor."

"I've got to be able to call 'em the way I see 'em. I won't have any publisher I work for second-guessing me. I'm going to stand behind you. I hope this will blow over real fast. We just have to find the healthiest way to react."

Dylan slumped down in his chair. "Jane, I really appreciate your going to bat for me. But ultimately, it's my mess. If

you need my resignation to make it come out right, you've got it."

"That's not the way we need to think here." She rolled up the sleeves of her white cotton shirt. "Now I'm envisioning two ways we could go. One is a news conference, where we invite responsible members of the media and answer questions. The other is that we issue a statement..."

* * * *

Hal Lincoln's wife gave birth to an adorable little girl at nine a.m. By nine thirty-three, Hal was already closeted with Courtney and her agent, Sharon Sheraton, in the latter's office. Hal was a short man, graying at thirty-nine, bearded and bespectacled. Nails bitten to the quick were the only indication of his agitation. Sharon Sheraton, a robust fifty-five year old, was now running manicured fingers through newly highlighted hair. When she'd totally trashed her hairdo, she tapped those fingers on her desk.

"Hal, ignoring the *Feeding Frenzy* is not going to make it go away."

He looked at her with the eyes of a man who'd just spent fifteen hours in the labor room with his wife. "Well, what do you suggest?"

Sharon shook her head. "We need to come up with a way to preserve Courtney's image." She looked at her client. "Honey, we've got to make you appear to be the victim here."

Courtney scowled at her. "I don't like the victim image. That's not how I want to be identified."

Sharon's brows shot up. "Well, what do you prefer? Scheming seducer, corrupter of the press?"

Courtney winced. Hal scowled at Sharon. "We don't have to get nasty among ourselves," he said. "We have enough of that coming from outside."

Courtney, feeling like her publicist and her agent were playing good cop, bad cop with her, groaned. Sharon had been her agent forever. On her recommendation, she'd signed with Hal for this new phase of her career. Hal was understandably preoccupied because of his new baby, so he wasn't coming up with much that was helpful. And Courtney did not at all like where Sharon was going. Furthermore, up till now, Courtney had always prided herself on being the one responsible for her decisions, for steering her career. She picked the new direction she wanted to move in. Sharon had actually recommended sticking with her old songs and her old image, at least until she reestablished herself. Michael Bartholomew had seconded Sharon. Courtney had gone out on a limb by insisting she wanted to go for the "adult woman in love" image. Was this why she was gun-shy about asserting herself when she thought her advisers were pushing her in the wrong direction?

If only she had a clue. Life had been so simple and beautiful just the day before. Now she didn't know what to do.

"Courtney, listen to me." Sharon's voice took on the honey tones legendary for getting her clients top dollar. "We've got to angle our response to get you the sympathy vote from all those fans. The ones who'll be let down to find out you're human. The best way to do that would be to show them the big bad critic took advantage of their little Courtney, and now the *National Feeding Frenzy* is staging a nasty campaign. I guarantee people will line up to buy your CDs and see your shows so they can demonstrate support and love and sympathy."

Courtney frowned. "Ugh, I hate that. Even if it were true, I'd hate it."

Hal looked at her. "You know, Sharon has a point. Going for sympathy may be the best way to get you out of this mess. In fact, it might be the only way—if you're serious about building your career."

"I don't want to get sympathy. I want to sue the *Feeding Frenzy* and that awful reporter for infringing on my privacy and slandering me."

Sharon and Hal looked at each other, shaking their heads. "You're going to claim infringement of privacy? Do you know how fast you'll be laughed out of court? Courtney, honey, you've grown up on a stage. Heck, didn't *Newsweek* announce when the braces came off your teeth?" Hal asked, sounding very reasonable to Courtney as she grew increasingly frazzled.

"As to slander, Courtney, you've got to be real careful when you go there," Hal continued.

"He made it sound like my career was washed up, that I'm some sort of pathetic has-been."

"That's his opinion, which he can back up by your four year hiatus," Sharon, an unlit cigarette dangling from her lips, pointed out.

"One I chose."

"Hon, that's not going to get a judge to declare him guilty of slander. As for the rest, well, they have those photos. And you said they're legit."

Courtney nodded painfully.

Sharon said, "The victim route is the best way to go. And you know," she added, her voice now just a shade above a whisper, "you do have to wonder how Clark Hammer and his smarmy photographer got wind of the story."

Courtney looked at her. "What do you mean?"

Sharon got up, went to her coffee machine and poured herself her third cup of the morning—and drank it black. "Courtney, we know how those papers operate. They pay big bucks to get access to stars' lives. Now how well do you know this Dylan McLean?"

Courtney gasped. "You can't be suggesting that reporter bribed Dylan to go along with the story?"

"You know the saying, everyone has a price. Let's face it. Dylan's young, just really getting started after having a big accident and a year of rehab. Being in the newspaper business, he would know how to contact reporters from the *Frenzy*—and just how much he could demand in payment."

"Everyone knows how to contact those scumbags—just lift any rock," Courtney said.

"But another newspaper person would know which rock to lift—and how much he could make." Sharon took a sip of her coffee. "No, I have to tell you. This whole thing smells fishier to me than a three day old flounder."

"I can't believe Dylan would do anything like that," Courtney said, on the brink of tears. Their lovemaking replayed in her head—the way he'd touched her, the way he'd felt inside her. He'd talked to her about trust. The things he'd said. The way she felt about him, even if she hadn't said the words. She shivered. How could a man she'd been so intimate with be a stranger capable of hurting her so? Thoughts of how her own mother let the man she loved wreck her life flashed across the screen of Courtney's mind.

"You know, he might still have bills he ran up during rehab. Trust me, Courtney, something is way off here, and I'm putting my money on it being McLean. I think he sold you

out. Now the only way for you to save your image is to go the victim route,” Sharon said, making a sucking-lemons face.

Hal joined the chorus. “Sorry, kid, I think Sharon is right. I’m going to set up a news conference for later today, at six. No, we’ve got to do it at five-thirty to get it in before *Monday Night Football*. That way we’ll be able to make the late news back East and defuse this bomb quickly.”

“I don’t like it. Is there anything else we can do?” Courtney was practically begging.

“First step is damage control. Courtney, I need you to dress in something dark and humble. Your line is going to be that you regarded Mr. McLean as someone you could trust and are disappointed your trust was misplaced. Answer three, four questions, then excuse yourself. Walk away with dignity.”

“But how am I going to answer any questions they ask?” Courtney would choke trying to say Dylan had betrayed her trust.

Hal shook her head. “I’ll be there to help you. You’ll make a statement, which I’m writing now, answer three, four questions, and thank them all for their understanding and support of you in this difficult situation.”

“But it’s dishonest.”

Sharon frowned at her. “Courtney, I didn’t want to have to put it this way, but I will. You’re not the only one who’s got a lot at risk here. You may be out on the stage alone, but you’ve got all of us depending on you, plus the musicians you lured away from other gigs. If you let this ship sink, you’ll be letting a lot of people down. Got it?”

Sighing, Courtney agreed.

* * * *

Dylan and Jane hammered out a statement. Dylan was careful to keep his conversation with Roy and subsequent exchanges with Courtney out of the chronology, but was as honest as a gentleman could be about everything else. They'd worked together drafting a careful explanation of the chain of events and responsibility alluded to in the *Frenzy* story and just about agreed on the final wording, when Alan Hirshman, the book critic, knocked on the door. Jane invited him in. "She's going on TV live in five minutes for a news conference," he announced breathlessly.

Jane looked at him. "Who's going on what news live in five minutes?"

"Courtney Clayton." Alan cringed, looking from Jane to Dylan as if afraid one or the other would decide to shoot the messenger. He collapsed onto a chair.

Jane turned on the TV and frowned at Alan. "Why wasn't I informed so I could send a reporter?"

"I think I heard they sent Jenkins, from the local news section." Jane made a sound like a punctured tire losing air.

"Shhh," Dylan said, frowning as Courtney came onto the camera. She looked gorgeous, of course, though pale and suffering in a navy blue wool dress that had Sunday School teacher written all over it. "Who are those characters with her?"

"Probably her handlers," Jane muttered.

Dylan looked at Courtney, replaying in his mind how he'd felt loving her. Knowing he loved her.

"Thank you for coming this evening for our news conference," the woman next to Courtney announced. An impressive number of reporters and photographers were gathered. "I'm Sharon Sheraton. In just a moment, my client, Courtney

Clayton, will read a statement she prepared together with me and Hal Lincoln, her media adviser. Afterwards, Ms. Clayton will answer a few questions. I'm sure you can appreciate how upsetting she's found the news of the day."

Courtney stepped to the podium. In a flat, emotionless voice, she read:

"I always appreciate the feedback of fans and critics who review my work. In my quest to be the best possible singer I can, I am open to learning from my listening audience. Mr. McLean offered me such feedback. Even though I know he's not a trained, experienced music critic, I wanted to hear his ideas.

"I arranged to meet with Mr. McLean. I thought we became good friends. I am at a loss to understand his decision to contact the *National Feeding Frenzy* and talk about our private relationship.

"I am completely dedicated to being the best singer I can be and to making my fans and all the people who love me proud. I am devastated beyond words to think these people are suffering any disappointment because of me."

Courtney's voice faltered convincingly on the last words. Nonetheless, reporters began clamoring to ask questions the moment she stopped speaking.

John Ross, who was there for one of the glossy weeklies and just happened to be one of Hal Lincoln's best buds, was the first reporter Hal called on for a question. "You poor thing. I'm sure all across America, your many loyal fans are just aching for the betrayal you've experienced."

"Wow," Alan said. "Listen to that guy torturing her with his hard questions."

Dylan stared at the TV, shaking his head in shocked disbelief.

John Ross continued with his question: "When exactly did you become aware that McLean had contacted the *Frenzy*—and what did you do?"

Courtney now looked like she really was going to burst into tears. Sharon Sheraton stepped in. "Courtney didn't know any of this was going on until the papers hit the stands this morning. Since then, she's been conferring with Hal and me on how best to let her fans know she'd never let them down."

Courtney glared at Sharon, who hugged the younger woman against her, effectively blocking her expression from the watching reporters and photographers.

Dylan sat in front of the TV, his head in his hands. "This can't be happening. She can't be saying those things." Alan and Jane just looked at each other, sadly shaking their heads.

Hal Lincoln called on Kathy Abrams, a new reporter for an L. A. paper, who asked, "This is a sad story for reporters and fans to have to listen to. Why do you think Dylan McLean contacted, uh, Clark Hammer of the *Frenzy*?"

Hal Lincoln fielded this one. "It's only too well-known that the *Frenzy* has a reputation for, well, corrupting people who should know better with the money they throw around."

"Notice how he didn't mention Dylan by name," Jane said, seething. "He's skating the fine edge of slander, and he knows it. Stating an abstraction in such a way, he knows everyone will think it's about Dylan."

"Just one more question," Hal Lincoln announced. "Courtney needs to recover from today's shock and I, well I

have a young lady, born just this morning waiting to see her old man.” He gave a goofy smile. “So who’ll ask the last one?”

He chose Helen Wheeler, a white-haired grandmotherly type who wrote a syndicated column on the joys of domesticity. “Congratulations to you, Hal. Be sure to give your new little lady a big hug. Just one more little question for Courtney.” She smiled. “Dear, are you ever going to gift us with another Christmas CD?”

Hal blew a kiss to her. “It might just be in the works. Helen, you’ll be the first to know. As for everyone, thanks for coming. And thanks for all your support for Courtney at this trying time. Good night, and God bless.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Hal whisked Courtney and Sharon away.

* * * *

Dylan, Alan, and Jane sat in her office like shell-shocked survivors of an ambush. “I can’t believe she said those things,” Dylan said shaking his head. “They’ve distorted things as badly as the *Frenzy*. Worse.”

Just then Jane’s fax machine emitted a signal. A short but definitely not sweet memo from the publisher had arrived:

“Fire McLean Effective Immediately. If He’s
Not Gone By The End Of The Day, You’re Both
Fired.”

Jane tried to crumple it, but she wasn’t fast enough. Both Dylan and Alan were able to read the message.

Alan, looking sheepish and uncomfortable, offered to leave. Both Dylan and Jane assured him he was welcome to stay.

“Jane, you can have my resignation right now.”

Jane's brows furrowed together. "Ridiculous," she snapped, jumping up. "We need to fight back. Hire a lawyer. He can't just fire you like that. And you can't allow people to think you sold out to the *Frenzy*."

Dylan pursed his lips. "I can't involve you in my battles. Legal defenses cost money, and there are no guarantees. I could never live with myself if you lost your job because of me."

"I'm ready to quit and tell him what he can do with his job." Jane stuck out her chin.

"You know that's not true. You love this job and you're great at it. No, Jane, this isn't your battle." Dylan had to limit the damage he'd set in motion the day he offered his opinion about Courtney's CD, solicited or not.

"Dylan, don't do anything rash. First, let's run the statement we drafted by Alan. As soon as we're satisfied we've covered all bases, we'll go public. I'm sure we'll be able to call our own news conference, set the record straight."

He gazed at her. "That would mean I'd have to call Courtney a liar. I won't do that."

"But she lied. She just falsely accused you of throwing her to the wolves, or, in this case, the *Frenzy*. How can you let her get away with that? Both of you are equally victims of those people." Jane was practically foaming at the mouth.

"Don't you see, Jane? If I call a news conference and try to refute what they said, this mess will keep escalating. Who knows where it'll end? No, I'm cutting out right now, while there's still something left. I've been thinking I need to be back outdoors more. Now's my time to get out of here."

Alan scowled. "Hey, man, I also can't believe you're leaving like this. I have to tell you, I'm itching to write up what Courtney just did to you. Talk about being screwed."

"Yeah, well, you don't get to write this one up. If there's a story here or a book, it's mine, and I'll write it later. Right now, I still have footprints from where Ms. Courtney Clayton stomped across the doormat I turned into for her. Her people outmaneuvered me, turned me into the fall guy. It won't ever happen again."

"Where are you going, man?" Alan asked.

"Back to my roots. There's a ranch in Wyoming that's calling—back to sanity and the outdoors. A place where spin is what kids do with bottles at parties, and I can spend the rest of my life free from Courtney Clayton—and the *Frenzy*."

Alan shook hands with him. "Sounds almost enviable. Good luck, McLean." He left.

Jane didn't look ready to give up. "At least let's make a statement together so you let her know she hasn't won."

"No statement, Jane. I'm about to turn into a silent, taciturn cowboy. Actually, I think she did me a favor. I was looking to get out of this rat race. She just made it inevitable."

* * * *

Courtney felt sick after the press conference. Why had she let Sharon and Hal talk her into making that hateful statement? The moment she got home, she heard Dylan's voice mail. Though she dreaded calling him, she had to talk to him, try to explain. There was no answer when she called his home and his cell phone numbers. She paged him. No response.

Courtney set up her answering machine to screen calls. The phone kept ringing—lots of people wanted to talk to her.

But tonight, there was only one person she wanted to talk to. He never called.

Not knowing what to do next, she decided to take a relaxing bath to wash the horrors of the day from herself and try to think. She had her phone handy when she climbed into the tub. The only problem was her last bath had been with Dylan. Could it really have been only yesterday, one day before? There was no trace of him left in the water, only her memories. They'd spent the night entwined in her bed. She'd kissed him goodbye less than twenty-four hours before. Would it turn out to be the last time she'd ever see him?

She couldn't bear to think that. He'd have to understand—after she explained it all. Dylan would forgive her. After the way they'd been together, she believed from the core of her being he'd have to know she didn't really mean what she said. *Right. He'll be the most understanding and forgiving man in the universe.*

Not.

She sat back in the tub, and began to weep. He hadn't called back, hadn't responded to her page. Courtney could visualize how he looked sitting in this very tub with her. If it were possible to hallucinate the scent of someone, the feel of his touch on her skin, his breath mingling with hers, that's what she was doing.

Clean, but hardly relaxed, Courtney scrambled out of her tub. She might never again be able to enjoy a bath in that tub. Shivering, she couldn't wait to get herself toweled dry and climb into her thick terry robe. She felt cold, colder than ever before in her life.

Courtney got into blue flannel pajamas and thick black cotton socks. The bath left her far too energized. What should

she do? First, she'd strip the sheets off her bed. She'd lifted one corner of the fitted sheet, then realized it still carried Dylan's scent. She put it back, then sprawled spread-eagle on the sheet that had touched him, inhaling his presence, closing her eyes, willing him back. She began to touch herself where he'd touched her. She stopped moments later, admitting to herself how inadequate her own hands felt in the places where Dylan's had been.

She'd page him again. Maybe the previous pages hadn't gotten through. Concentrating all her psychic energy, she punched in the numbers.

Nothing. Courtney paced, trying to ignore the gnawing at her heart. He didn't understand. He certainly wasn't about to forgive her. He was mad, furious. She wrung her hands. What should she do?

She needed to talk to someone. The person she needed most to talk to wasn't available. She hated to bother Glenys Harrity at home, but who else could she call? Glenys was at her door in half an hour, carrying a large bag of M&M's, a box of See's peanut brittle, chocolate mints, and several Cadbury bars. "Emergency rations," she announced.

Courtney smiled. "Glenys, I'm so sorry to pull you away from home."

"Nonsense, my girl. You rescued me. I was facing an evening of trying to fake remembering algebra to help Justin with his blasted homework. Now his father, the engineer, can step in. Should be a bonding experience for them. Engineers talk algebra. Have a mint."

Courtney took one, nibbling around the edges.

"That's good." Glenys opened several packages. "Chocolate has long been touted for its medicinal qualities. You look like you need a major helping."

"Glenys, you've brought enough to last five years."

"This is a two-night supply in my house. One night during times of major stress."

Despite her pain, Courtney laughed. She knew she could count on Glenys. The two women went into Courtney's kitchen. She started to try to play hostess, offering to make coffee or tea.

Glenys promptly took over. "Just sit down and relax. We'll have some nice hot chocolate. Do you still have those marshmallows I brought?"

"You mean for my last crisis?"

"I'd rather call it an opportunity." Glenys got the marshmallows out of the cabinet and poured the steaming drinks into thick, cream-colored mugs. She sat down opposite Courtney at the table—in the chair where Dylan had sat. A tear rolled down Courtney's cheek.

"Did you hear the news conference?" Courtney asked, after nearly scalding her tongue with her first taste of the drink.

"Is there any sentient being in America who didn't? I understand TV stations in other parts of the country actually interrupted broadcasts to carry it live."

Courtney winced. "Must be a slow night."

"Girlfriend, face it. You're news. And, unfortunately, this mess has all the elements to grab the public's attention. Beautiful, talented people caught up in sex and scandal."

Courtney screwed up her face.

Glenys bit her lip. "Sorry if I'm being too blunt. But I guess it's no help pretending this situation is other than it is."

We have to hope the public's usual short attention span comes into play—and they quickly move on.”

Courtney shook her head. “I’ve gone from America’s angel singer to scandal queen in one fell swoop.”

Glenys reached for a handful of M&M’s. She shook her head. “It doesn’t take much. And, let’s face it, the public loves to catch icons with their pants down, so to speak.” Seeing Courtney’s face flame, Glenys added, “Sorry. Unfortunate turn of phrase.”

“What am I going to do, Glenys? I never imagined anything this awful happening to me.”

“Fame is the downside of following your dreams.” Glenys shrugged, then studied Courtney for several moments. “Tell me, what are your concerns? Because you know, careerwise, all this publicity can do you nothing but good.”

Courtney shook her head. “Not the kind of publicity I would choose.”

“No, but you’re getting national press at no cost to yourself.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Glenys.” Her voice got very low.

The dawn of understanding lit Glenys’ face. “Of course, how stupid of me.” She paused for several moments. “Not to sound cynical or harsh, but anyone who knows you would understand the image in the *National Feeding Frenzy* is a distortion based on a few elements of truth.”

“That Clark Hammer certainly put a nasty spin on what happened,” Courtney said. “He snuck around and spied on me, but he didn’t make much up.”

Glenys took several moments to mull that over. “I see. But you know what it is here? You’re so used to being per-

ceived as perfect. Hell, I think we've all treated you that way. Alas, with the exception of yours truly, no human being is perfect. Okay, even yours truly has been known to slip off that pedestal. The point I'm making here is you're human. Maybe you made an error. That doesn't mean you're no longer the wonderful Courtney Clayton—just that you're growing up, becoming more complex and more real."

"That all sounds wonderful, and I wish we could get your spin into the public mind." Courtney's eyes began to well up.

"Give them time. Meanwhile, conduct yourself with your usual dignity, and just keep singing your songs." She paused. "But that's not everything, is it? We're not even at what's really bothering you, are we? Come on, girl, spit it out."

Courtney swallowed hard. "It's Dylan."

"The critic?"

"Yes."

"What about him?"

Courtney sighed deeply. "I'll never see him again, will I?" The last words came out as a sob.

"Oh, so that's what's going on here, is it? The young man."

"Yes. I haven't heard from him since the press conference."

Now Glenys winced. "Uh, Courtney, exactly what is it you expect to hear from him?"

Courtney shrugged, pouting. "I was sure he'd understand why I said..." She sniffled and gulped. "Why I said those awful things."

"What do you mean?"

"Sharon and Hal wrote the statement. They said it was the only way to salvage my career."

"I see. So they decided to sacrifice his reputation."

Courtney winced.

"Okay," Glenys said, taking a deep breath. "What do you want to do now? Independent of any concerns other than your heart."

If only it could be that easy. "I want to take it all back, admit to everyone I wasn't his victim. He was wonderful to me and tried to be fair."

Glenys recoiled, almost as if she were trying to distance herself from Courtney and her mess. "I don't know about that. How would you do it? What would you do, call another press conference?"

"Yes. And fire Sharon and Hal." Even as she said the words, Courtney's stomach roiled and her head whirled with dizziness. Sharon and Hal, who'd tried their best for her...

Glenys' smile had vanished. "Fire them both? That sounds pretty drastic. And I think you have to be really careful not to muddy the waters, confuse the public even further."

"You think I'd make matters even worse if I tried to straighten them out?"

Glenys reached across the table and put her hand on Courtney's. "I wish to God I knew exactly the right thing to tell you." She looked at her watch. "You know what? I heard Dylan's editor has called a press conference for after the football game. That should be around now. Let's turn on the TV and find out what they're saying."

"Dylan's called a press conference?"

"His editor has." Glenys appeared to think for several moments. "Dylan's the one you were calling about the other day, isn't he? When you wanted the information about seduction?"

Courtney nodded mutely.

Glenys smacked her forehead. "I should have known."

"Glenys, he's the most wonderful man ever." She wrung her hands. "Not like any of the guys I was with at Harvard. With him, I had all these...feelings. It was like we created our own little world—just him and me. And now, well, I'm really getting afraid I'll never see him again."

"Yeah. It looks like you might be in for some tough sledding if this guy has gotten to you. He has, hasn't he?"

Courtney nodded again.

Glenys patted her hand. "Let's see what we can learn from the press conference."

Courtney, walking like a robot, turned on the small TV perched on her kitchen desk.

Jane Lundgren was introducing herself and thanking all the reporters and photographers for coming. Courtney experienced a feeling of déjà vu. Except now she knew the goal and style of the statement would be far different than hers. For one thing, Jane Lundgren stood alone.

"I will read my statement first, then answer questions. I would like to preface my statement by naming the three people who drafted it: me, Dylan McLean, and Alan Hirshman, our book critic." She cleared her throat, put on reading glasses, and began:

"As editor of the Arts section of the *San Francisco Tribune*, I am proud to stand behind all, I repeat, *all* the columnists whose work we publish. I believe in giving writers wide latitude to express a variety of opinions. I may not always agree with their call, but as long as the writing is top-notch and they back

their work, I'm proud to have them appear in our paper.

"Dylan McLean, our movie critic, wrote a positive review of Colossal Studio's *The Peoria Predator*. Independent of that, he met Courtney Clayton, and they grew close.

"Somehow, Mr. McLean and Ms. Clayton came to the attention of Clark Hammer, a reporter for the *National Feeding Frenzy*, and Sid Zigmund, a photographer for the same, uh, paper. Using the usual methods that paper employs, they spied on these two people and drew conclusions from this spying.

"Earlier today, Ms. Clayton held a press conference during which she implied that Mr. McLean was responsible for drawing the attention of the *National Feeding Frenzy* to them. I can state emphatically and unconditionally this is not true. Like Ms. Clayton, Mr. McLean had a lot to lose and nothing to gain by appearing in the pages of this, uh, paper.

"Mr. McLean, distressed by both the *Frenzy* story and Ms. Clayton's press conference, has chosen to resign from the *Trib*, effective immediately."

Jane Lundgren paused now in her reading of the statement and surveyed the room.

"It gave me great pain to accept Mr. McLean's resignation. Though not a movie critic for very long, he has done a consistently fine job, setting high standards for his work and keeping them. I'm sorry we will be losing him. I'm sorry for any part I had in bringing us to where we are today.

“Now, I will answer questions the best I can. Please know I’m following guidelines my publisher and the paper’s attorneys have insisted upon.”

Courtney looked as if she’d lost her best friend. “Oh, Glenys, how awful. He’s resigned, and it’s all my fault.”

“Shh,” Glenys said. “Don’t jump to any conclusions. Let’s see what else we can find out.”

Jane Lundgren called on John Ross, the glossy magazine reporter who’d asked Courtney a question earlier. “Are you saying Courtney Clayton lied?”

Jane Lundgren looked very fierce. “On the advice of counsel, no comment.”

A loud buzz filled the room. Another reporter asked, “What are Mr. McLean’s plans now?”

Joan Lundgren shook her head. “I don’t know exactly, other than he wants to get far away from here as fast as he can.”

The remaining questions were for clarification of the statement. Courtney didn’t learn anything more. She turned off the TV.

“He’s gone,” she said to Glenys, beginning to weep. “He’s gone. I don’t know where, and it’s my fault.”

“Now, don’t take that on yourself. Dylan McLean had many ways to choose to act. Leaving is the one he’s picked.”

“Oh, Glenys,” Courtney sobbed. “He’s gone. What am I going to do now?”

Glenys hugged her. “You put one foot in front of the other and you move ahead. But first, tears and chocolate—lots of both.”

Chapter 6

Dylan believed in traveling light. Considering how long he'd been in California, he had amazingly little to pack and take home. A small ranch outside of Cheyenne was home. For a short, stupid time, he'd thought home was where Courtney was. Hah. Should have known better. It wasn't the first time a woman wrecked his life and his dreams by betraying him. But it would be the last.

Maybe she did me a favor, Dylan thought, packing the last of his gear into the back of his Jeep. He'd cleared out his office and condo in record time, donated to charity anything he wouldn't be able to get in the car.

He'd have to find a place so remote no one knew who he was. Luckily that would be possible in Wyoming. Most important, he'd have to develop a thick skin and lose whatever soft spots made him vulnerable to women like Courtney Clayton. He shook his head. So much poison bottled in such a delightful package. Fool that he was, he'd thought he was falling in love with her. Falling wasn't a strong enough word for what would happen to whatever poor idiot got caught up in her web. He wanted to rinse his head out for even letting such a thought lodge there, for however brief a time. He felt like a hick who'd gone to the big city and lost the ranch in the simplest con around.

That would never happen again.

* * * *

Courtney didn't have very long to luxuriate in the agony of her pain. She had a tour to prepare for. She was scheduled to be on the road for eight weeks, ending right after Thanksgiving. Thank goodness she was always too busy when she was on tour to think. Thinking was to be avoided. Likewise for remembering and feeling.

She was scheduled to kick off her tour a week after what became known as the day of the dueling press conferences. Personally, she called it Black Monday, the day Dylan disappeared from her life.

For the rest of the week, Hal Lincoln took care of diverting the press. Glenys and Sharon alternated with holding her hand and plying her with chocolate. And Michael Bartholomew worked with her on perfecting the songs she'd be touring with.

It was Michael who first noticed. "Courtney, I just can't believe how you sound!" he said when they met to rehearse the morning after Black Monday. Courtney had actually planned to cancel their session. After a sleepless, horrible night, she got out of bed thinking she was far too sick and miserable to work. But an inner voice chided. *What are you going to do if you stay home? Better go to the studio, sing with Michael. What else do you have left?*

Though Courtney tried to shut the voice up, it persisted. What indeed else did she have? She put on black jeans and a black pullover. Black boots, no makeup. She looked like a Goth, which was okay because she felt like one.

But she got herself to the studio on time. She was grateful Michael didn't say anything about the events of the previous day. But he did hand her a Starbucks' cup with steaming mo-

cha latte and a bag with two chocolate dipped hazelnut biscotti. She thanked him, sipped the latte, and nibbled at the biscotti.

Michael sat at the piano. "Let's run through your songs with just the piano first. Later, we'll rehearse with the rest of the band."

"You're the boss."

She decided to begin with *Send in the Clowns*, the song she'd previously found most challenging. She could manage that. She knew she'd never be able to manage *When I Fall in Love*... Not today. She couldn't help remembering how she'd sung it for Dylan. Tears filled her eyes as she infused all her memories and feelings into the lyrics.

She'd never sing for him again. Never see him, touch him, feel him. The passion between them was extinguished like a tea light candle—heat and light for the briefest of intervals. He probably hated her. He'd probably turn off the radio if her voice came on, throw her CDs and tapes in the trash.

He was gone from her life. She knew she'd never again find anyone as magical as Dylan.

When she finished singing, Michael came over and took her hands in his. "Wow. Courtney, the way you sang that song. You just took my breath away. I've never heard those lyrics sound more real."

She looked at him. "Michael, I didn't do anything differently than I always do."

"That's true from your point of view. But listening. Courtney, my toes are still curled. If you keep singing like that, you'll have everybody weeping—all the way to the record store. Now, let's see if we can make it sound like that again."

They could—and they did.

* * * *

Lucky thing Dylan liked driving. Though he was in no particular rush to get where he was going, neither did he have any reason to linger. He figured he could get to Cheyenne if he drove hard for two days or took it easier for three.

For one moment of weakness, he wondered what Courtney was doing. Should he have contacted her before he left? How could she have said those things about him? How could she believe him guilty of doing the things she implied he had? Well, he'd never work that one out. All he knew was he'd made a terrible mistake letting her into his life, trusting her. A mistake he was never again going to make with anyone.

The barren landscape Dylan drove through suited him just fine. He felt as dry and bereft as the land around him. Whenever Courtney invaded his mind, he'd banish her, tell her she was not welcome. As her invasions occurred every three minutes or so, he found himself telling her to leave often.

* * * *

Courtney's new style proved not to be a flash in the pan. As Michael put it, "It's like you've become a woman whose heart has been broken and stomped on."

As that summed up exactly how Courtney felt, she sighed at the irony of it all. She now sounded the way she'd wanted to when she tried to redesign her image. But look at the price. For it was clear she really would never see Dylan again.

The favorable press after her news conference did not make her feel any better, though Sharon and Hal were clapping each other on the back. "Brilliant," Hal bubbled. "Just brilliant! Courtney, you're a genius."

She looked at him in disgust. “Hal, go home and take care of your new baby.” When she saw how the media ate up her statement—and ignored Jane Lundgren’s—Courtney felt a stab of pain. How was she ever going to make any of this right? She felt like she kept sinking deeper and deeper into the mire of the myth she was creating.

Sharon was beaming. “Honey, this is perfect. Tickets for your shows have been sold out for weeks. Now people are clamoring for you to add shows, extend your tour. Suddenly you’re hotter than jalapenos. What do you say? Can we extend another week?”

“Why not?” Courtney asked. “What else do I have going on in my life?” Then she felt guilty. After all, Sharon and Hal were devoted to helping advance her career. The least she owed them was to cooperate.

* * * *

Clark Hammer and Sid Zigmund were in hog’s heaven. The edition of the *National Feeding Frenzy* with their story broke all previous sales records. Formerly marginal at the paper, the twosome now commanded the respect and envy of their peers and were in a great position to demand perks.

The question was, what could they do next?

“That Dylan McLean has a nerve, taking a powder and disappearing,” Clark Hammer complained. “Now we’ll just have to concentrate on Courtney Clayton for the follow up.”

Sid’s eyes gleamed at the prospect. “But, chief, doesn’t that mean he admits guilt—him quitting his job like that and taking off?”

Clark considered the point for a moment. Much as he hated to admit it, Sid might be on to something. “Yeah, it’s possible. But let’s face it, where’s the interest in this story?”

Who cares about some has-been movie critic when Courtney Clayton's going on tour—and her shows are sold out everywhere? That's where we go with this story."

"Works for me, chief."

Unfortunately for this twosome, by the following Monday, a new scandal involving the governor of a large state, a former Olympic athlete, and the CEO of a major oil company pushed interest in Courtney Clayton and Dylan McLean off the front pages of the *Frenzy*.

"I'm sure we'll come up with another headline snatcher on her tour," Clark Hammer told Sid. Too bad he wouldn't be able to get another photographer for this assignment. But he'd make do. His instincts and flair for writing made Sid Zigmund's second-rate photos Pulitzer Prize material.

* * * *

Courtney always kicked off her tours in her home city, San Francisco. From there, she'd travel east in a northern route, then come back west via a southern one: Salt Lake City, Cheyenne, Minneapolis, Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Atlanta, Miami, Austin, Phoenix, and L. A. Due to the increased demand for shows, they'd extended her tour to nine weeks. She looked forward to the mind-numbing busyness.

Michael Bartholomew and Courtney's musicians kept telling her how fantastic she sounded. She was bringing a whole new dimension to every song. Funny, when she listened to the playbacks, she couldn't hear what they were all raving about.

Part of the tour package was wardrobe for her new image. She'd gone with a hot new California designer, Elena Marco, for the gowns—seven changes of costume.

"You look gorgeous," Sharon Sheraton bubbled at Courtney's last fitting.

They'd decided to go for bright colors and blacks rather than the pastels Courtney had been identified with during the earlier phase of her career. Elena Marco was known for her superb craftsmanship—fabrics cut and draped perfectly to flatter the wearer. For her shows, she had two red gowns, two black, one royal blue, and two emerald green. Though Courtney had originally balked at showing much cleavage, Elena and Sharon convinced her it was the only way to go if she wanted to shed the little girl image.

"You know you're grown up, now let the fans know," Sharon said.

I've grown up all right. She just wasn't too sure she enjoyed the new country she was inhabiting.

On tour, Courtney would not travel light. She had seven musicians, her makeup and hair artist, and her wardrobe mistress. They were traveling on chartered flights. Her people would take care of all the practical matters, packing and unpacking, getting them to and from airports, hotels, and theaters. All Courtney had to do was show up and sing.

It's not fair to everyone for me to fall apart, she told herself. *Everyone's working so hard to make this tour a success. All my fans paying hard-earned money to buy tickets for my shows. I can't let them down.*

Holding herself—and everyone around her—to her usual high standards, Courtney spent twelve to fourteen hour days rehearsing, getting every detail right. But no matter how hard she worked, restful sleep eluded her. When she could fall asleep at all, her dreams were filled with Dylan. They alternated between wonderful dreams that almost convinced her

he was back with her, reliving the joy of their short time together, and nightmares almost as awful as what had really happened between them.

* * * *

Several hours away from home, Dylan figured he should call his grandparents to announce his imminent arrival.

"Grandma Bea, how are you and Grandpa?" Dylan greeted when she picked up.

"We're fine, Dylan. How are you? We saw that mess in the paper."

He winced. The wonders of modern communication. He'd been hoping the scandal might somehow have bypassed Wyoming. "Yeah, well you know about show business."

"We know you didn't do anything wrong."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. I did do something stupid, and you and Grandpa always warned us about avoiding that."

"Don't be hard on yourself, boy. You've got a good head and a good heart. We all know there's more to the story than the papers said."

"Thank you. Grandma, I'm headed home, to the ranch."

"When will you be here?"

"Two hours or so."

"Great. You still love steak and baked potatoes?"

"You've got it."

* * * *

Glenys called Courtney on the pretext of reviewing her current investments.

"Whatever," Courtney responded.

"Girlfriend, your head's not in this now."

"No," Courtney said. "Call me after the tour."

"Is your head going to be any more in place then?"

Courtney sighed. "I hope so."

"It's not just about the tour, is it?"

"No," Courtney replied very softly.

"Do you want to tell me?"

"Glenys, it's not feeling any better. I miss Dylan, and every day, I feel worse and worse about what I did to him."

"What are you going to do about that?"

"I don't know. I don't even know where he is now."

"That should be easy to fix."

"I called the paper and talked to his editor. She was very cold. She told me they don't know where he is, so it sounds like he doesn't want people to be in contact. Or at least one person."

"Honey, what would you say to him if he showed up on your doorstep tonight?"

Courtney cringed. "I'd throw myself at his feet, beg his forgiveness."

"Sounds pretty serious."

"It is. Glenys, did you ever feel like you just made the biggest mistake of your life?"

"Sure. About every three days I feel like that."

"This is serious."

"I know it is, and I shouldn't make light of it."

"Glenys, what am I going to do?" Courtney's voice rose at the end of her plea.

"Pretend he's out there in your audience every night. And every song you sing from now on, you're singing to him."

Chapter 7

Dylan arrived at the Double D ranch at six. The instant he passed through the gate of the Double D, for the first time in days, the ache around his heart began to ease. He drove down the familiar road.

He pulled his car in front of the large two-story house, parked, and walked quickly to the open door, where his grandmother, Beatrice Dwyer, waited with outstretched arms. With her white hair pulled back into a low ponytail, her superb posture and aura of energy, she defied the image of a little old granny knitting in her rocker.

“Dylan!” she exclaimed as he fiercely hugged her.

She stood back and looked at him. “You look good, boy, except for the city slicker pallor. But we’ll take care of that real fast. Right now, you look like a man in need of a meal and a good night’s sleep.”

“All I need is to see you again.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” Her delighted smile gave lie to her words. “Come, keep me company in the kitchen while I get dinner going.”

Dylan followed her. He sat down at the big rectangular table, where twelve could sit with comfort, sixteen with some squeezing. “Where’s Grandpa?”

“Just washing up. Rafe and Greg’ll be along shortly. I’m going to have all my boys together at once, and I’m floating on air.”

Given his druthers, Dylan would just as soon not have had to deal with his younger brothers this first night back. But beggars couldn’t be choosers. He was grateful to have a place to go. Besides, Greg and Rafe would probably be able to give him a good start on getting settled in the area. Dylan figured any ranch between Cheyenne and Torrington would be a good place to start his search. Greg and Rafe were on neighboring ranches close to Torrington.

Jackson Dwyer, Dylan’s grandfather, strode into the kitchen, sniffing the air for dinner. At seventy-eight, he was robust, stood tall, still had his own hair—all white now—and teeth. “Dylan!” he bellowed. “Let me get a look at you.”

Dylan let himself be swept into his grandfather’s bear hug.

Before Dylan and his grandfather had a chance to talk, his two brothers arrived together. Greg was a slightly taller, thinner version of Dylan. The two brothers always teased Rafe—a redhead, the only one of them who took after their father’s family. Both Dylan and Greg had clearly inherited the Dwyer look. Both could gaze at their grandfather and know what they’d look like in old age.

Bea got the steaks barbecuing out on the porch where they’d be eating. She had Jackson take over while she finished in the kitchen. The long metal table she’d covered with red and white check cotton was already set. She organized each man to carry something out—drinks, coleslaw, a heaping platter of baked potatoes, butter, a bowl of sour cream sprinkled with chives, and flaky biscuits fresh from the oven.

When they were all eating, Jackson asked Dylan how long they'd have the pleasure of his company.

Dylan shrugged. "I'm here for good."

"This because of that story in that scandal rag—the one 'bout you and that girl singer?"

Dylan pursed his lips. "I was hankering for work that would get me out-of-doors. Maybe that story rushed my decision, but it was in the works."

Jackson shook his head. "I'm glad to have you back here, boy. You gotta know that. But it sounds like you walked away from a mess, and that's not the way Dwyers do things."

"I'm a McLean."

"You're Dwyer, too. Walking away from a mess gets to a man."

Bea shook her head. Dylan grinned to himself. His grandmother was trying to catch his grandfather's eye. Jackson managed to look everywhere but at his wife.

"I'm not going to walk away from the mess forever. Just for right now," Dylan said. "Let's talk about something else—like where I can work and live."

Jackson started to say something, but Bea interrupted. "I'm with Dylan. Let's let that mess sit where it is for now. When Dylan's ready, he'll know how to take care of it."

Dylan smiled. It felt good to be home. He reached for a steak and baked potato, the first decent meal he'd be having since...since Courtney. *Now none of that*, he mumbled to himself. All he needed was to go wimpy and sentimental. He'd better eat lots of food with lots of gusto, or Grandma Bea would be all over him. Easing himself into the table banter, Dylan began to eat.

* * * *

Courtney's tour preview concert, for her special fans and other people her agent gave special privileges, was set for Monday night in San Francisco. She'd have two more shows there before taking off for Salt Lake City. Courtney hadn't sung for a large crowd since the summer before she started at Harvard. Now the butterflies were taking flight in her stomach like jets at a major international airport right before Thanksgiving.

Had she always gotten so nervous before concerts? It wasn't like this was something new, even if it had been so long since her last one. She supposed stage fright was an emotion people suppressed memories of. If she'd accurately remembered what it felt like, she'd have never gotten back on a stage.

If only she could stop thinking about how much depended on her doing well. What if she lost her voice in mid-concert, or she went flat or sharp on strategic notes? What if she tripped or fainted or forgot to zip what should be zipped? What if the musicians messed up? What if she forgot the lyrics for her new songs and all she could remember was Christmas carols?

This time, added to every other potential nightmare was her real fear that some heckler would bring up the scandal. Her stomach lurched in triple time.

What if, by some miracle, Dylan came to one of her concerts? How would she handle seeing him again? How would it be if her eyes met his in the middle of one of her songs?

Courtney had taken Glenys' advice to heart and now sang to Dylan. With her songs, she wanted to tell him she was sorry, she missed him, she wanted him back in her life. She loved him.

Oh, her mind backed away from that. She didn't want to believe she loved him. That was too scary, especially as she'd probably never see him again.

All those thoughts flew between her head and her gut as she sang. Her consistency of focus translated into a consistency of sound. On the last bar of *A Certain Smile*, tears welled in her eyes. No one listening or watching remained dry-eyed. They decided to make that the last song of the concert.

Sales of Courtney's CD had been skyrocketing since the appearance of the story in the *National Feeding Frenzy*. All indicators predicted she'd break previous sales records before she even got partway out on her tour. As CD sales always increased following a tour, it looked like Courtney's new career launch was a solid success.

Now if only she could smile—or sleep.

* * * *

After some mellowing out time, Dylan drove into Cheyenne to take care of all the details a move entailed. He passed several billboards announcing Courtney Clayton's Cheyenne appearance. He checked the dates, making sure he'd stay far away from the city while she was here. Only two nights from now. He'd have no problem being elsewhere.

Grandpa and Greg had been pressing him for details about Courtney and the scandal. Thank goodness Grandma had finally managed to get them off the subject. He knew he owed them some explanation, but it was all too raw and painful right now. Like a fresh amputation or an organ transplant completed without benefit of anesthetic. When the scar tissue was in place, oh, in another ten or twenty years, he'd be able to give everyone the information they were clamoring for. But not yet.

When he'd finished all the necessary arrangements and seen a few people, it was late. Dylan drove back to his grandparents' ranch. He was about to crawl into bed when his grandfather came in to his room.

"We need to talk," the older man said.

* * * *

One heckler showed up at Courtney's last show in San Francisco—breaking into *A Certain Smile*. She felt a stab of pain in the heart when a deep male voice shouted, "Courtney, baby! You want to see a certain smile? Do me like you did the newspaper guy."

Fighting an impulse to run off the stage, she continued singing. She was sure security was hustling off the big mouth. But she dreaded more of the same as her tour continued. On the other hand, maybe this was punishment she deserved for what she'd done to Dylan.

Thank goodness the Salt Lake City shows went without a hitch. Next on her tour was Cheyenne.

Dylan came from Wyoming.

Could he possibly have gone home? Courtney wondered if he'd come to her show. Then she scolded herself for spinning ridiculous fantasies. His silence told her loud and clear that he wanted nothing more to do with her. Ever.

But waking up cold and alone in her bed in Salt Lake City, she came to a decision. And, for the first time since the disastrous press conference, what she was about to do felt right.

At her first show in Cheyenne, she'd tell the world the truth. And if this meant the end of her singing career, if people rejected her... She'd have to live with it. After all, wasn't that what Dylan had been through because of her?

She had a brief shudder of guilt, thinking of Sharon and Hal—of Michael, of Glenys, of her musicians and everyone else who'd worked with her. Well, she had enough money. She'd provide them all with a generous severance package, make sure to stay involved with them until they got their lives together. And she'd still have enough for her mother and her to live comfortably forever.

Though how could she ever be comfortable again without Dylan in her life?

* * * *

"What is it, Grandpa?" Dylan asked warily.

The old man was sitting on Dylan's bed. "Don't get me wrong, boy. I'm glad to have you back home, where you belong. But not the way you've come. You gotta clean up your mess, just like Bea and me always said."

Dylan exhaled. "Grandpa, some messes just can't be cleaned up. You also said, know when to hold and when to fold. I folded."

"Don't you go using my words against me," Jackson said, a twinkle in his eyes.

Dylan shrugged. "I hate leaving messes as much as the next guy. But you also told me to be a gentleman. And to fix that mess, I'd have to accuse a beautiful woman of lying."

"So you let her get away with blackening your name?"

"Not easy choices there, Grandpa. Between a rock and a hard place, I took the lesser of two evils."

"Maybe. But doesn't sound like you're feeling real good about any of it."

"Grandpa," Dylan said. "I thought I loved her, you know? I thought there was something special between us. And then she kicked me in the teeth."

The old man shook his head. "What'd you do when she said all those lies?"

Dylan winced. "Quit my job. Came home."

"Did you talk to the lady? Ask her why she did what she did?"

"No."

Jackson snorted. "Just ran away like some guilty cockroach."

Dylan bristled. He got up out of the bed and began pacing.

"You know, there may be more to what she did—some reason you don't know."

Dylan whirled on his grandfather. "Like what? Grandpa, we were lovers. Yeah, the scandal sheet got that right. But all the rest of it..."

Jackson got up and put his hand on Dylan's shoulder. "I'm not the one who needs convincing here. Look, you gotta talk to this woman one more time. Get her to tell you the truth. Then you all can decide what to do with it."

Dylan threw up his hands. "Maybe some day."

"How about tomorrow?" Jackson held out a ticket to Courtney's Cheyenne concert.

* * * *

Courtney dressed for what could possibly be her last concert with a sense of dread and purpose. Much as she'd always loved touring, feeling her fans' adulation firsthand, none of it held a candle to how she'd felt with Dylan. And how bad she felt about what had happened between them.

But it was so strange, knowing she'd come to the end of her concert and then produce a bombshell.

Maybe her fans would hate her as much as Dylan probably did. There'd probably be lawsuits.

She couldn't let any of that distract her.

A knock on her dressing room door. "Five minutes, Ms. Clayton."

Courtney took one last look at herself in the mirror. Tonight she was starting out in the slinky red silk, with sequins and rhinestones that must have weighed ten pounds. The dress hugged her thighs, constricting her legs despite the slit that went halfway up her thighs.

She imagined Dylan in the small dressing room with her, raking her with his eyes before he ran his hands over the dress—and then under it. She felt a throbbing at the joining of her thighs that added further complications to her walk.

With a sigh, she went out the door and onto the stage. Tonight her singing would contain not only her lost love but her lost career, abandoned dreams.

She briefly wondered what the critics would make of that. And then she realized she just didn't give a damn.

* * * *

Dylan slumped in his seat, with Grandma Bea on one side and his brother Rafe on the other.

"Sit up, young man," his grandmother commanded. "Your grandfather gave up his seat at this show for you. Make him proud."

Dylan sat up and tried not to glare at his grandmother. He hadn't felt this hogtied and railroaded since his parents had forced him to attend Cecily Brown's dress-up birthday party in the second grade. Or since Courtney had tried to tie him down with those stupid silk scarves.

He forgot all his misgivings when Courtney stepped out on the stage. The moment she began to sing *Send in the Clowns*, he could hear a husky longing quality that announced she had earned the right to sing the lyrics—and then some.

He could swear she was looking right at him, singing to him. But he knew she couldn't make anything out in the dark of the audience. He was just one of many invisible fans who thought she was singing to him or her.

He got lost in the sheer gorgeousness of Courtney and her music. When she came to their song, *When I Fall in Love*...he felt a stirring in his groin and a sting of tears. Jealousy rose as he realized his was probably not the only hard-on in the audience. But he was probably the only one who had a boner and a snootful of tears.

He shifted in his seat, covering his crotch with the program. He'd need to get a social life soon. But he knew that, after Courtney, every other woman would be second or third-rate.

And then they came to the last song. *A Certain Smile*. She might have been singing about a smile, but she sure wasn't smiling. Looked more like her heart was broken. He could swear she had tears in her eyes. But then, remembering her betrayal, he tossed that illusion aside. She probably had some powder she rubbed in her eyes to produce pretend tears.

As the last notes of the song faded, Dylan began to think his ordeal was mostly over. Oh, afterwards, he'd try to get backstage to talk to Courtney just to get Grandpa off his back. But hell, security would be tight. He probably wouldn't be able to get within a hundred yards of her. His grandmother and Rafe would be witnesses that he gave it his best shot.

The audience cheered for what felt like ten minutes. Some people even rose to give Courtney a standing ovation. Dylan, still rock hard and aching, hoped she'd leave soon. Hoped she wouldn't.

Courtney curtsied and thanked the audience, accepting flowers, raising an eyebrow at the room keys now showering the stage. When the applause quieted, Courtney began to speak. Dylan's ears perked up like the rest of his anatomy.

"Thank you all for coming tonight. I have an announcement to make, and it's not going to be easy for me." Dylan thought he saw her lower lip tremble.

"You've all been here for what might be the last show of my tour."

Dylan heard a loud gasp. Someone shouted out, "No!" Another voice called out, "Why?"

She held her hands up again for quiet. "I so much appreciate all your love and support. But, as you know, I recently became involved in...in an unfortunate incident. And now I know I made the biggest mistake of my life. I blamed Dylan McLean, the most wonderful man I've ever known, for problems with the press."

Dylan couldn't believe his ears. He must have been hallucinating or dreaming, except Rafe was punching him on one side and his grandmother on the other. "Stand up," Grandma hissed. Dylan crunched down farther in his seat.

Courtney continued. "I haven't seen Dylan since the..." She appeared to swallow hard. "Nothing is worth a darn without him in my life. So I'm going to ask Dylan, wherever he is, to forgive me. And I'm going to devote my life to finding him and making it all up to him, if I can."

The crowd erupted. Just as Dylan was getting to his feet, Clark Hammer and Sid Zigmund jumped up directly in front of him. He saw Sid begin to take his infernal pictures while Clark yelled out, "I want an interview! 'Chanteuse Chucks It All For...'"

Before he could finish, Dylan grabbed him from behind, whirled him around, and did what he should have from the get-go—landed a solid punch right to the man's bulging mid-section.

Clark Hammer folded in the middle, sputtering. Rafe, meanwhile, grabbed the camera from Sid Zigmund and stomped it into oblivion. When Sid protested, Rafe growled he'd do the same to him.

Clark gasped, "McLean, I'm going to sue, charge you with assault and battery." But the ensuing melee drowned out his words. The flying camera parts had landed in a woman's décolletage, which led her escort to start swinging. His wayward punch brought another cowboy into the mix.

Dylan clawed and pushed his way through the thickening crowd to get to Courtney. By the time he arrived on stage, she was gone. The wail of sirens filled the air.

Chapter 8

Dylan had not expected to spend the night in jail. Neither had Rafe or Grandma Bea, but there they were. Waiting with the mob to be sorted out. At least they were in a different cell than Clark Hammer and Sid Zigmund. Those two had to be kept separate...for their safety.

"At least let my grandmother out!" Dylan bellowed to the guard who came by, ordering them to shut up. He pointed to her. "The woman's more than seventy years old."

Grandma Bea slapped his hand. "Don't you be giving out my secrets," she snapped. "Not with those two there." She indicated Hammer and Zigmund.

Clark Hammer waved his fist at Dylan. "This is all your fault. I'll see that you get the maximum..."

"Seal your lip, pardner, or you'll spend the night in less hospitable quarters," the guard said.

"But, Officer," the reporter whined. "I'm the victim here. This man attacked me. It's the grossest injustice for me and my associate to be locked up the same as him."

"That so?" asked the officer. The crowd had grown silent. "You people all agree with this yahoo's bellyachin'?"

"That's sure not what I saw," one man said, looking from Dylan to Clark. "Sounds to me like this guy's some trouble-maker."

The crowd agreed.

The guard smirked at Clark Hammer. "Don't look like you got any witnesses who agree with your story."

Clark Hammer narrowed his eyes. "My associate, Mr. Zigmund..."

The guard looked over at the photographer. "Don't seem like you got any reputable witnesses."

The guard winked at Dylan before departing.

Clark Hammer was still sputtering when the guard returned, half an hour later, with a woman in a full body cape.

"McLean," he called out. Dylan stepped to the front of his cell.

Courtney pulled her hood off and held her hands out to him. "I'm so sorry."

His heart was hammering as he let himself savor the warmth of her hand. Imagine her here, seeing him like this. Not at all the way he'd fantasized their being together again.

The guard cleared his throat. "Ms. Clayton here has requested amnesty for everyone arrested tonight."

The prisoners cheered.

"Except those two," he added, pointing to Clark Hammer and Sid Zigmund.

Both were jammed to the front of their cell, screaming. "You'll never get away with any of this!" Clark shrieked. "I'll fill my paper with stories about you two..."

Courtney shrugged. "As if anyone would want to read about two nobody has-beens."

The moment she'd sprung Dylan, he grabbed her in his arms and pulled her to him with a hunger that had them both shuddering.

Struggling to remember they were still in a public place, Dylan pulled back for a moment. "Courtney, I want you to meet my grandma Bea and my brother Rafe."

Courtney thanked them for bringing Dylan to the theater that night. And then she said, "And now if it's okay, I'd like to be alone with Dylan."

Rafe and Grandma Bea looked at each other, hugged Dylan and his lady, and made themselves scarce.

Courtney's car was waiting outside the police headquarters. Leaving there far more stylishly than he'd arrived, Dylan finally got a chance to ask Courtney, "Did you mean it? What you said on stage?"

She looked deep in his eyes. "With all my heart. Come with me. Let me show you how much I've missed you. And then we can talk."

* * * *

Having the power to get Dylan and the other good people out of jail was one of the perks of being a rich and famous star. A perk she'd lose when she gave it all up. But she was ready to walk away from everything, just like she said, to be with Dylan.

In her wildest dreams, she hadn't let herself believe he'd be in the audience for her last song.

And then the brawl. Well, she was in the Wild West.

He was more gorgeous than she'd remembered. Just a few more moments, and she'd have him where she wanted him. Her bed wouldn't be lonely tonight.

The elevator ride up to the penthouse felt like it took forever. But at last they were there. Her hand trembled as she put the keycard in the door. She flung open the door, but be-

fore she could take a step, he'd lifted her in his arms to carry her in.

She snuggled to him, her senses racing with awareness of how strong and warm he felt. How could she ever have thought she could give him up? She felt his heart hammering in time with hers where her left breast touched his chest.

He put her down gently on the bed.

"Stay with me tonight," she said.

He smiled. "You know I'm easy," he said, coming to her.

"That's what I like about you," she said, falling into his arms.

* * * *

Dylan had to remind himself to be gentle, not to tear Courtney's clothes off and jump her bones. They both kicked off shoes and socks. She stood barefoot on his feet, joining him in a dance to music only they could hear.

Easy does it, he thought while he still could. *Easy, easy, eas...* She was so beautiful. They whirled locked in their hug, then quickly landed on the bed, lost in a kiss that nearly blew steam out his ears. His tongue explored the beautiful cavern of her mouth—the place the songs came from. No, the songs came from her heart, and that's where his lips went next.

Far too many clothes for him. Her cape was long gone. Now he pulled off her blue T-shirt and began to tongue and nip at her silky skin, spilling over the wisp of lace bra, which he quickly removed. Her left nipple sprang up to meet him. Had he ever before appreciated how rosy pink her nipples were, or how hard they became when he attended to them?

Her breasts cried out for freedom, just like his straining cock. He groaned, as she wriggled her right breast to his lips.

“Equal time,” she murmured. “Dylan, take off your clothes.”

He rolled away from her for just the moments it took to shuck his shirt, pants, briefs. By the time he rolled back, she was gloriously naked, her arms and legs spread wide for him.

He nearly lost it right then, his erection milliseconds away from exploding.

She looked at him and licked her lips. “I want you, Dylan.” She ran her fingers lightly over her cleft, and his balls tightened.

“You’ve got me,” he growled.

He pulled her to him, his erection throbbing hard against her soft, firm belly.

“Come into me.” She rubbed herself against him.

He wouldn’t last past the first thrust. Using a control he didn’t know he had, he moved his cock aside and began to nibble his way from her chin, down, down to her hungry core.

With two trembling fingers, he began to fondle her pink folds, rosy like her nipples, and savor her wetness. She was slick with wanting him. He could slide right in—and come in about forty-five seconds. But he wanted to taste her first, to meet her damp welcome with his own moisture. With his fingers and his tongue, he explored her lovely openness, playing with her clit, darting fingers in and lingering to play.

She tasted like roses, fresh with dew. And vanilla. And spice, all swirled together. He inhaled her. She tightened her legs around him, pushing her pussy harder, harder against his questing lips and tongue. She moaned. Her pace quickened, and then she called out his name as she exploded in her first come of the night.

She reached for his cock. He bit his lip to try to refocus some attention. He didn't want to come in her hand, not this time, so he moved aside. Not that it would take him long to get hard again, but he wanted to come deep inside her, as deep as could be. To claim her with his body, to leave his imprint on her.

Panting now with need, he reached for one of the foil packets she'd left arrayed on the night table. Nothing subtle about that.

That vixen. She'd known exactly what she wanted, what would be happening. And to think, just a few hours ago he'd been gazing up at her from a sea of anonymous faces, missing her, convinced he'd never hold her again.

He took a deep breath and entered her with all the finesse he was capable of—which, at that point, was none.

* * * *

Courtney gasped with pleasure as she felt Dylan come into her—at last. If he'd delayed another second, she'd have died. The head of his cock moved aside her pleasure-swollen folds, coming into her like a submarine seeking buried treasure. Treasure. Pleasure. A song.

The thought evaporated as she gave herself to the pleasure of having him inside her, igniting her sensations with pulses of pure delight. She ground herself against him, rediscovering the heights of ecstasy he could bring her to with the movements of his hips, his hands firm on her butt. She wanted skin to skin contact, running hands and feet over him as he drew her into a deepening kiss.

He tightened in the prelude to his own release, raising her level of excitement. Wanting to come with him, she grasped him, matching him stroke for stroke. And she began

to shudder with an orgasm that surprised her with its intensity half a moment before he called out her name and began to come buckets.

When he'd subsided, he collapsed on her.

"I guess you missed me," she said, and began giggling.

He rose up on one elbow and raised an eyebrow, then began to laugh too. Despite his copious cum, he was still half-erect when he carefully pulled out of her.

Now that they'd loved each other, Courtney knew they'd need to talk. But it felt so good just having him next to her. She wished they could sleep in each other's arms and let the hurt of the past evaporate like dreams.

* * * *

There'd never been another woman in his life like Courtney. But she'd made a fool of him once. He'd never wanted to be one of those guys who thought with their cocks. Around her, he became one. But he'd never been a slow learner, and wasn't about to become one now. He needed to know she'd meant what she said, that she'd stand by her public announcement, before he let himself again succumb to her charms.

"Penny for your thoughts." She ran a beautifully manicured fingertip down his face.

"They're worth much more than that," he said. "Courtney, were you saying the truth last night?"

She sighed. "Dylan, I don't know if I can ever tell you how sorry I was the minute I said those words at the news conference," she whispered. "I could give the excuse of saying my agent and my publicist made me say them. But I won't. I take responsibility. I'm sorry. I'll do whatever I can to make it up to you and everyone else who was hurt."

Dylan thought about his fledgling career, about Jane Lundgren. About San Francisco and about being back home.

He ran his fingers through her hair. Though his half erection grew to full, he determined not to let lovemaking distract him from what needed to be said first.

Maybe he should put a brown paper wrapper around her. No, even that wouldn't stop him from wanting to bury his shaft deep inside her.

So he'd talk fast.

"In a way, you did me a favor."

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking surprised at his claim.

"Oh, got me out of the city. Hell, Courtney, I can write anywhere. I wanted to come home. The so-called scandal gave me the excuse to finally admit it."

She bit her lip. "There are probably easier ways to go home."

He shrugged, easing her to him in spoon fashion, nesting his throbbing cock between her legs. He nuzzled the back of her gorgeous neck. "What about you?" he asked. "You really going to quit your career?"

"At least a hiatus." She eased herself back against him. "I need some time to figure things out."

"You've got a great figure," he moaned, cupping her breasts and tweaking the nipples to hard nuggets.

"I need to get to know Wyoming," she said.

He stopped. "You'll stay here with me?"

"If you'll have me," she said. "You can write anywhere, and I can sing anywhere. Will you travel with me? Say when I get my head together and really figure out what songs I want to sing?"

He responded with his lips, his tongue, and his heart.

Epilogue

One Year Later

Three hundred guests converged on the M & C Ranch to witness the uniting in holy matrimony of Courtney Clayton and Dylan McLean.

“The ranch is gorgeous and you look gorgeous,” Glenys Harritty, Courtney’s matron of honor crowed.

Courtney raised her eyebrows. “The music studio’s almost done, so I’ll be able to record here when we come back from the honeymoon.”

Glenys squeezed her hand. “Didn’t I tell you it would all work out?”

Courtney beamed.

Grandma Bea and Courtney’s mom gave their nod of approval and squeezed Courtney’s hands.

Courtney followed them to the tent where all the guests were waiting.

Talk about stage fright.

* * * *

All decked out in his tux, Dylan waited for his beautiful bride to come to him. He pushed away his momentary twinge of doubt. What if Courtney... No, after all they’d been through together, he’d learned to trust her completely.

He had to be the luckiest man in the universe. Working his own ranch, his and Courtney's, writing what he wanted to. But most of all...

Everyone gasped as Courtney, a vision in white silk, came down the aisle on the arm of Roy Emberling.

Dylan watched her come to him with pride, desire, and love.

Roy stepped aside and Courtney joined Dylan.

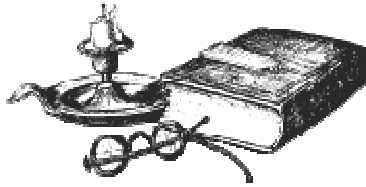
Just as Dylan had arranged, the musicians began to play *When I Fall in Love*... Courtney, surprised, squeezed his hand and thanked him without words.

With "their song" in the background, they joyfully exchanged vows.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing books is a dream come true for Mardi Ballou. Multi-published in erotic and mainstream romance, Mardi lives in Northern California with her hero husband, a knight in shining armor who provides both tech support and expert massage. No, she doesn't share. Mardi loves to travel, wracking up frequent flyer miles to visit her family in England and her native country, New Jersey. She wishes she could live in a structure big enough to house all the books and quilts she covets and have enough time to enjoy them all. She's still waiting to achieve her second major dream—winning an Oscar in some yet-to-be-created category she might qualify for. If you know how to make this happen or just want to schmooze, drop in on Mardi at MardiBallou.com.

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