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Impatient Passion

by Dee S. Knight

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Contemporary Erotica Romance

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Chapter One

The beginning of another week stretched in front of Austin Gardner.

She looked forward to it much like she would a trip across the Mohave on foot. With no shoes. Or water.

She knew it would be long and painful. Not only did she have to complete work on the Morris account for her supervisor, Henry Wyatt, but she faced umpteen meetings and, she had no doubt, at least a couple of run ins with Henry along the way.

She poured a steaming cup of coffee, lightened it with cream and stirred in two teaspoons of sugar before carrying it to her mother's bedroom.

Sarah Gardner, dazzling in a frilly, shocking pink bed jacket, was propped up with several pillows against the headboard. Her head was topped with the pink satin hair cover that she used every night. She was busy arranging her many bottles of pills on the nightstand within easy reach.

Austin set the cup down on the only free space on the bedside table she could find.

"Mother, I'll probably be home late tonight, but I'll bring dinner in, okay?"

"Well, I guess I don't have any choice, do I? What are you going to bring? How late will you be? You know I can't eat too late."

Her petulant tone grated on Austin's nerves but she kept control as she watched her mother finish aligning the bottles.

"I know. I should be home by eight, at the latest and I'll pick up something from The Mandarin. I have a project that has to be finished by Friday, and then next week

should be easier on both of us. Is there anything you need before I go? Ruthie should be here shortly."

Ruthie Myers was the housekeeper/sitter Austin had hired to stay with her mother so that she wouldn't be alone all day. She was a pleasant woman with the patience of a saint, and she and Sarah enjoyed watching the soaps and gossiping all day about what was going on in town, in the building, and in Ruthie's large family.

"No." Her mother sighed, and then said in a peevish tone, "Just try not to be too late. I can't eat late, you know."

With some effort Austin kept her tone light. "I know. If I can get away sooner I will. I love you, Mother. Have a good day."

"I imagine it will be like every other day," she said, with a sniff. Then she found the remote to the television and turned on the local morning news show.

Austin paused in the living room and took a long look at the morning view of the San Francisco Bay. The sun-dappled water was already broken by sailboats skimming across it, and the hills of Tiburon and Sausalito caught the morning sunlight and shone like gold. She sighed as she reflected how her life had changed over the last two years.

The death of her Uncle Dan had been a terrible shock. Her mother had the heart problem, but her uncle, who had been as sweet and easygoing as her mother was difficult, had been the one to die of a heart attack.

Austin had loved him greatly, and his death, leaving her the sole caregiver for her mother, had taken her a long time to adjust to. He left Austin a large sum of money and investments which allowed her to buy the beautiful apartment she and her mother now shared, but it didn't make up for the loss of the man she'd loved with all her heart.

Then, just after his death she was assigned the Sampson account.

Handling the intricate website design for a company like Sampson Financials had been a challenge, but her concepts had been lauded by the client and won her three

technology awards.

Before the Sampson account, she worked on her own with little interference from higher ups. She was given an account and would happily settle in to develop what the client needed. In fact, reading between the lines to determine what was needed and then incorporating features the client wanted, but hadn't quite known how to express, was what had been apparent in the Sampson Financials web site, and had been her hallmark ever since.

In two years she'd gone from a happy backbench employee to one in the spotlight and up for promotion to supervisor. It was not something Austin had planned on, and not something she was sure she wanted. As the supervisor's position loomed larger, her stress level, and, not coincidentally, her brushes with Henry, increased. He not only disliked her presence on his team, he obviously didn't want her as a competitor for higher positions.

With a resigned sigh, Austin picked up her backpack, slung her pocketbook over her shoulder and went out the door. Ruthie was just letting herself in.

"Hi, Ruthie. I hope you have a good day. I'll be late getting home, but I'll bring something in, so don't bother making dinner."

"Oh, okay, but you know how she likes to have her dinner early."

"I know, and she'll live. Thanks! Call if you need anything during the day." Austin waved and made her way to the elevators.

Austin caught the Number Thirty bus at the stop directly across the street from her building. As she settled into a seat, she mentally ticked off what she had left to do for the Morris site.

Henry would need a day to go over her work before he showed it to the clients, and she knew that he would pick it apart looking for flaws. At least his pickiness kept her on her toes, but she could have done without the additional pressure this week. In fact, part of the strain she felt didn't come from work, but from personal stress.

On Saturday she turned thirty-five, and she was having a mini life-crisis. Pressure at work, her mother's increasing difficulty, not having many friends to share things

with, and the lack of a family of her own were making her begin to wonder what was wrong with her.

As the bus made its starts and stops on the way to Union Square, Austin stopped thinking about her project at work and took mental stock of herself.

Many people had told her how intelligent she was, and that she had a good personality with a sharp sense of humor. Or at least I used to, she thought ruefully, wondering when she had last exhibited it.

She couldn't remember the last time she had gone out just to have fun and a few laughs. Maybe that was something she should work on. She had a sense of adventure, but again, it was not something she'd exercised in awhile. Really, since before her Uncle Dan died.

She sighed and concentrated on her physical attributes. She was no raving beauty, but she was fairly tall and slender. What people described as "willowy." I have good posture, good teeth, and nice hair with no dandruff, she thought with a smile. My hair is just ash blonde, but at least it's natural. "I'm not ugly."

At a startled glance from the man sitting beside her, she realized she had spoken out loud. "Sorry," she murmured.

So, what was the problem? She sighed again. She'd had this conversation with herself several times in the past few months, and hadn't come to any conclusion as to what to do. She knew she wasn't Jennifer Aniston, but she didn't have any illusions about finding Brad Pitt, either. She just wanted a good man to hold her and love her, and introduce her to those delicious mysteries of sex she'd been yearning for lately.

With the thought of her birthday looming ahead of her, Austin realized just how lonely she was. But she had no idea what to do about it.

The morning crowds poured onto the bus as it pulled into North Beach, and Austin knew that soon she would have to jockey for a position toward the door if she was going to squeeze off at her stop at Sutter and Stockton. Crowding was the worst thing about riding this particular bus, but in San Francisco owning a car was

definitely a problem.

She felt a tingle run along her spine. One like a person gets when a disaster is about to strike. One she associated with the company president, Tyler Birch. Usually it meant that he was nearby, but she assumed it was just because she was ready to get off the bus near the office. One thing was certain, Tyler Birch was a good man to stay away from, and her early warning system normally allowed her to avoid him.

A few minutes later she stood and wedged herself between two men standing with their briefcases. One of them immediately took her seat, brushing against her as he did so. The other tried to allow her room to get to the door, but she still pressed hard against him.

"Sorry," she said without looking up.

"That's okay," he replied. At the next stop Austin exited the bus and walked to Post Street, and into the building that housed Bay Web Computer Consulting in eight office spaces on its sixteenth floor.

She crowded into the elevator and was pushed back against the wall as it made stops at almost every floor. By the seventh floor that tingly feeling was still bothering her. She felt eyes on her and looked around. Tyler Birch, president of her firm and son of the founder, was against the side wall, watching her. When their eyes made contact, he half smiled and nodded good morning to her. She caught her breath, frowned, and made a quick nod in response then looked away. What a way to start the day, she thought, wondering how she was to avoid him when they got off of the elevator. She needn't have worried about keeping her distance. He exited the elevator ahead of her and was in the suite and on his way to his corner office by the time she got to the lobby.

"Good morning, Sharon. How was your weekend?" Sharon Sanders was receptionist and pool secretary for the designers who were below supervisory level. She was also one of the few people Austin called 'friend.'

"Good. I got the pictures back from our trip to Yosemite and I'll show them to you at lunch."

"If I get lunch. The Morris work has to be done by Wednesday so Henry has time to see it, and I'll be putting in the hours until then. But we'll get together sometime. Do I have any messages or things I need to take care of first thing this morning?"

"No, you're all clear."

"Good! I'll see you later. Stick your head in my cube for lunch and I'll see how time looks."

Austin walked down the hall and made a left turn into a large open space that housed ten cubicles. The cubicles were such that they could be made lower or higher, depending on the team configuration, the designer, and the noise level they could handle for their work. Most of the cube walls were decorated with pictures of family and drawings made by children. Austin's cube walls held only her name plate ("Austin D. Gardner, Senior Designer"), flowcharts and schedules. But it was in a coveted spot, near the window that overlooked Post Street and toward Union Square and Macy's. If she got the promotion, she would actually have a small office of her own, probably with no view.

She didn't mind sharing this space with the other designers, trainers and computer specialists. For one thing, they were often onsite and out of the office, and for another thing, they were generally a nice bunch of people. Many of them were just out of college and younger than she, but they had interesting conversations. She didn't socialize outside work with them, but while she was here, they were someone to talk to and have contact with besides her mother.

She blushed at that thought, suddenly ashamed, but it was true nonetheless. Mark Williams had the cube next to hers, and Austin remembered that he was on vacation this week, so her small little area would be pretty quiet. A plus, considering the amount of work she had to do.

She poured her first cup of coffee as her design program loaded, then settled in, the coffee she brought back forgotten as she became absorbed in her latest project, the web site for the Ron Morris Motors, Dodge, Chrysler, Jeep dealerships located around the Bay Area.

The trick wasn't really to incorporate the sales and service features Mr. Morris

wanted for customers, but to do it all in a slick, easy-to-use style that was user-friendly but still captured the sophistication he wanted. Austin had toured several of the dealerships and used that time to draw sketches and take photos. She spent hours deciding the color scheme for the site and the page flows before she ever started the more demanding programming aspects.

What she hoped to end up with was a smooth-flowing site that an adult could easily navigate without getting lost, and colors and shapes that fit the audience for the type of car featured. There were no strobing lights or flashing pictures. The finished product would reflect an establishment where customers could sense the years of experience, and trust the deal and the people who made it.

After several hours of working, Austin brought her mind back to the present and realized she had let her coffee get cold. She stretched and glanced at the clock on her computer. One-thirty! She had been so absorbed that she hadn't even heard Sharon when she had come to check on her for lunch.

She was digging in her purse for a few dollars to pick up something to eat when she felt someone behind her and knew immediately who it was.

"Do you need me, Mr. Birch?" She looked up to see Tyler Birch's reflection in the window, standing just at the edge of her cube.

"I came earlier, but you were really lost in your work. Does that happen often?"

"Are you asking me if I work hard?"

"No, I'm just wondering if I need to carry you out if we ever have a fire. I'm not sure you would hear the alarm, as absorbed as you were when I came by before. When I was here _twice_ before." Austin swiveled her chair to face Tyler. He stood at the entrance to her cube, one hand on the top of the wall and the other in his pocket, flipping change, the jingle adding emphasis to his words. His stance was casual, but his tone was not.

"I would like to see you for a few minutes if you're at a good stopping point. Or were you going out to lunch?"

"I was going down to get a quick hotdog, but that can wait."

"No, that's okay. I've got a meeting in an hour. Can you stop by sometime before then and chat for a few minutes?"

"Sure." He nodded at her and walked off. Austin wondered what he would want to talk with her about. Normally, Henry relayed any messages the gods at the top of the organizational chart had for her.

Within twenty minutes she was knocking on the doorframe to Tyler's office, having wolfed down a hotdog and soda from one of the street vendors on the square.

"Hi. Take a seat. If you don't mind, let me just finish this thought and I'll be right with you." Tyler had barely lifted his head to see who it was. His brow was furrowed as he bent his head toward his computer screen.

I guess I'm not the only one who gets lost in a project, Austin thought.

She really did not care for Tyler, but there wasn't a particular reason she could put her finger on.

It certainly wasn't because of his looks. He was a gorgeous hunk of man, older than she by a few years, she guessed. Taller than Austin's five foot ten by four or five inches, he had broad shoulders that tapered to narrow hips. His legs were strong and long, kept in shape by daily swims at the Aquatic Park. In fact, she had watched him many times from her balcony. And he does have fine form, she thought, with a smile. Fortunately, you don't have to like a man to appreciate a good body. His hair was black as night, with no hint of grey, and his eyes were deep blue. His nose looked like it had been broken once. Instead of looking ugly, it gave him a kind of rough, sexy look, breaking the otherwise perfect symmetry of his face. He had a mouth full of white, straight teeth, and dimples when he smiled. Which was not something Austin saw much of. And neither did many other people at the office, she knew. When he was at work he was serious and all business.

She guessed her negative feelings toward him had to do with his being the son of the founder of the company. And isn't that fair, she asked herself, that he can just waltz in to a good job without having to work his way up? Well, he can't pick who his family is, but he should have gone to work somewhere else, not taken advantage of

a connection. And, she continued, he seems arrogant and uppity around the designers, which he wouldn't if he had had to work his way up from that position himself.

In the years Austin had worked for Bay Web, her contact with Tyler had been limited, just the way she liked it. She glanced at him and found he was looking at her.

"You look as though you're having a conversation with yourself. Want to tell me what about?" The look he gave Austin was open, friendly.

"No."

He grimaced at her terse response. "Fair enough." Tyler got up and closed the door, which worried Austin. She had never been alone in a closed room with any of the staff there. Even Henry, when he was arguing with her over designs, left the door open. What was this about?

"Ms. Gardner, or Austin, if I may call you that?" She nodded, and he gave a half smile. "Austin, you've been working on the Ron Morris project haven't you? How do you think it's coming?"

"I'll have it ready for Henry to look at by end of day Wednesday. That should give him plenty of time to familiarize himself before Friday's presentation. Is there a problem?"

"No. How do you feel the work is going? I guess what I mean is, how do you feel about what you've done?"

"Good. I think I've captured what Mr. Morris wants, and I think he'll be happy with the results. Why? What's going on? I've given Henry the preliminary drafts."

"Yes, and he showed them to us at the executive meeting this morning." He stopped and regarded her with a frank expression. "I'll get right to the point. Austin, I want you to handle the presentation on Friday. Can you do it?" Tyler leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs and tapped his fingertips together, forming a steeple with his hands.

Austin was stunned. Presenting her own work to the client was not something she had ever done. In fact, not being able to do so had irritated her more than once, because she felt Henry might not have given her work the pitch he should have. She knew that part of being a backbench employee was being behind the camera, so to speak, not up where the client action was. However, this account was really important to her, and she had hated the thought of turning it over to Henry, especially since he hadn't shown much enthusiasm for her ideas. He wanted flash and lots of action on the screen instead of her more unadventurous, calm design. She quickly made up her mind. She looked up to see Tyler staring at her, quietly waiting for her response. "Yes, I can do it."

"Good. I hoped you would say that. I liked your prelims and I think you can best explain them to Morris."

"My only concern is Henry. This won't go over too well with him."

"Let me worry about that. Now," he said as he uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. He rested his elbows on the desk and looked at her intently. "I hope you won't take this the wrong way. I know we're a very casual company-this is California, after all, and what's California if not casual? But for this level of client dealing, I like the staff to be a bit more formal. No offense, but you look like the college kids out there." He waved vaguely toward the cubicle area. "I'd like you to represent the adult side of the firm on Friday. Will you come in to work dressed a little more formally and with a different hair style?" Austin bristled, and Tyler could obviously tell. "Now, don't go getting all huffy. This isn't anything I wouldn't ask of a man if he normally came in every day dressed for the beach." Austin opened her mouth and he held up his hand. "Which you don't. That's not what I meant."

"If you don't mind my asking, what exactly is wrong with how I look?"

Tyler stood and walked around his desk. He took her hands in his and forced her to stand. Austin was struck speechless as he casually appraised her, front and back, then motioned for her to sit again and went back to his chair. He leaned back and looked at her, still saying nothing.

Tyler sat quietly because, truth be told, he couldn't speak quite yet. He thought Austin was beautiful. Had thought so since she started working there, but had been

very careful never to reveal his thoughts. She had gorgeous blonde hair that she kept in a horrid braid. If it was loose, falling over him... He cleared his throat and forced his mind off of that track.

"With how you look? Nothing. With how you dress? Plenty. Bagginess is fine for sitting in a cubicle in front of a computer screen, but not for client presentations." Tyler saw Austin tense and a flush spread up her neck and across her face, but he continued. "You have very nice hair, but this is a San Francisco business, not Little House on the Prairie. Something a little more suitable to your age and responsibility would be good."

Austin caught her breath, and Tyler saw her eyes sparkle with tears. Fortunately, they didn't fall, but he immediately softened his tone. Leaning forward, he said a little more gently, "You have beautiful skin and you're one of the few women I know who doesn't need makeup. Your eyes are amazing, even behind those gosh awful glasses you wear to see the computer screen. But tennis shoes don't go with the image I have of the corporation, Austin."

He looked at her steadily, and saw that she had control of her emotions. No tears for her, he thought. She's pretty brave to sit through this and not lose it. He tempered his criticism with the next statements. "You're a valuable employee. Your work is excellent and has brought the company recognition. I take you seriously, and I want others to take you seriously too." He could see that his last words had an effect on her.

He lowered his head slightly and regarded her through his lashes. "I don't mean to be harsh. For here at the office your regular dress is okay. If it's a problem making a few changes for Friday, I understand. But I really wanted you to handle the presentation."

There it was. The challenge. Would she give in to his request or give up control of her work? "I'll do it," she said in a low voice. "Is that all?"

"Yes, Austin, that's all. Thanks." He didn't get up, but watched her as she pushed herself out of the chair and left the office. He knew she was upset over his requests, but it was time for her to step up to the plate and accept responsibility for her work and her experience, her age. In order to be a leader for those young kids in the

office, she needed to look the part. And he had plans for Ms. Austin D. Gardner that she wasn't aware of yet.

He sighed and turned his chair toward the window and the St. Francis Hotel. He was vaguely aware of the traffic on the street below him but he was really thinking about Austin and the first time he saw her.

She had applied for a job as a web designer five years ago. He had been there only a few years longer than that, coming in to learn the ropes before his father retired. As soon as he saw her, standing in the lobby with her portfolio, he'd felt a kick in his gut. She didn't have a ravishing model type of beauty, and the classic beauty she did have was hidden, as it was even now, under baggy trousers and a loose fitting tee shirt. Her hair was a little shorter then, but still braided. She had stood straight, whereas so many tall women slouched. When she turned and saw him just as he entered the lobby, she had smiled openly at him, and he had immediately gotten hard. Embarrassing! He was a man, not a boy, but his reaction to her had been no different than if he had been sixteen again. When he only nodded, rather coldly, at her, she had blinked those sparkling green eyes and stared at him frankly. Her eyes were the most amazing color, and for a moment he had sunk into their emerald depths. Then he had simply turned and walked down the hall. He stayed away from her after that, afraid that he would give himself away.

He knew quite a bit about her, but it was inferred from what he saw or heard in the office, what he had read in her personnel file and what he had discerned from his own innate sense of people. Her full name was Austin Duncinea Gardner. The Dulcinea, a romantic whim he guessed her mother had had, but to him it fit her perfectly. She was his ideal of what a woman should be-smart, beautiful, generous and kind, and a good listener who could carry on a full and interesting conversation. Or at least, that's what he had gleaned from listening to her in the office. He remembered that her uncle had died a couple of years back, and he had made sure that the firm had sent flowers. He had even sent an anonymous bouquet to her personally when he saw she was having a hard time afterwards. And he had tried as unobtrusively as possible to guide her work in the office. It was he who had assigned her the Sampson Financials account, and the Morris account, and several other large accounts in between. Now it was time for her to take the next step in her business life. Frankly, he was planning to take the next step too, on a personal level. He wasn't worried about Austin. She would do just fine. It was himself he was

worried about.

Chapter Two

It was after seven-thirty when Austin summoned the elevator. She was much further along than she planned, and was pleased with her progress. But she was tired and dreaded the thought of having to stop for dinner and then face her mother when she got home, a little later than she said she would be. And now-bother!-she would have to find time before Friday to get a dress or suit or something, and figure out some style for her hair. When would she have time?

She walked to the corner of Sutter and Stockton and waited for the bus. There was always a crowd waiting, and if she didn't want to be forced to await the next one she would have to shove and elbow her way on. A few minutes later she did just that, forcing herself into a mid-aisle crush, stretching her arm to reach a strap, wedging her backpack between her feet and holding her purse in front of her like a shield. The doors eased closed and the bus jerked and bucked as it pulled off. Austin was thrown into the person behind her. As the bus pulled off from the next stop, where even more people crammed on, she again was thrown against him, but there really wasn't enough room for her to straighten up and move away.

"Sorry," she said, loud enough for him to hear.

She knew it was a man, because as she half leaned against him she could feel the evidence, hard against her. Instead of trying to move away however, he slipped his right hand under her tee shirt and around her waist, and actually held her in place against his hardness.

"Shhh. Don't say anything. I won't hurt you, but this opportunity seems too good to pass up."

The sound was a low whisper against her ear.

Austin went rigid. She had never had this experience before. Although she had seen couples doing things on the buses that she would never have had the nerve to do, this was a complete stranger holding her against his penis. His rock-hard penis. He

could be a pervert. What did she mean "could be?" He was a pervert, holding her like this. But strangely enough, she didn't say anything.

Actually, in light of her thoughts just that morning, this was an adventure of sorts. A wild and crazy sort of thing that someone younger, someone prettier might do, just on a whim. She relaxed a little. At the next stop, no one got off from their section of the bus, but a couple of people forced their way on. The doors closed, forcing everyone into the aisle, but for once, Austin was glad to be packed in.

When she relaxed slightly, the man moved his hand a little higher until his thumb rubbed the bottom of her breast. He splayed his fingers and touched as much skin as possible, then eased his hand over her breast. When his thumb teased her nipple she heard a soft moan in her ear. His breath was a bit ragged as he leaned his head against hers and his breath feathered the hair at her ear. He pushed against her with his penis and then turned side to side slightly to rub it against her butt. She gasped with the sensation of the friction on her nipple and the thought of what he could do if they weren't fully clothed and riding with sixty other people on a city bus. Her eyes flew open at the thought and she quickly glanced around to see if anyone could see or hear what they were doing. No, too tightly packed. But that changed as they reached the next stop.

As people behind them jostled to get to the door, he removed his hand and stepped back from her slightly, while still keeping his mouth close to her ear. "Sweet Dulcie, you are the cause of my having a very uncomfortable evening ahead of me." She gasped and came to attention. Dulcie? From her middle name? But no one even knew what that was.

"Don't turn around or try to see who I am." He whispered, making identification of his voice nearly impossible. He leaned in even closer, ensuring that only she would hear what he said. She could feel the bulge between his legs pressing hard against her again. "Tomorrow, leave off your bra and I'll make you feel better than I did today. I'll look for you."

The bus jerked to a stop at one of the corners in North Beach, and Austin was pushed aside as people pressed to the door.

When she was able to pick up her backpack and sit down, she looked around. There

were several men seated and one or two still standing, but none of them even glanced at her. Was her mystery man still on the bus? Who was he? When she thought about what she had let him do, she was embarrassed and a little ashamed. Nothing like this had ever happened before, and it sure as heck would never happen again! Still, she felt exhilarated. Letting a stranger touch her had been daring and thrilling. And sexy, she thought. Her nipple was still erect from the rasp of his thumb and there was heat on her belly where he had spread his fingers.

She took a deep breath to calm her racing heart and took another long look at the men left on the bus. None of them could have known her middle name, but she skipped over that problem, just examining the possible candidates.

One was just a kid of about college age. Surely he wouldn't have the nerve or interest to manhandle her. Or would he? College-age kids were pretty brazen. He might try whatever he thought he could get away with. Another man was old, so she crossed him off the list of possibilities. The rest were business types, but all rather ordinary looking. She couldn't imagine any of them doing what she and Mystery Man had done. Although, there was one guy. He was standing and halfheartedly reading the newspaper. He glanced at her as she was assessing him and gave her a little smile. She shyly smiled back then quickly looked away. He was a possibility. But when the bus pulled up at the next stop he got off. Austin watched as he was greeted by a lovely woman and a small boy whom he swung up into his arms before they walked into a corner restaurant. Austin felt deflated and tired suddenly, and she closed her eyes for the rest of the journey.

The bus was almost empty when she got off at her stop. She dragged herself into the building and was in the elevator on her way up to the twelfth floor when she realized she hadn't stopped at The Mandarin to pick up dinner. Her mother would be upset, she knew, and she steeled herself for the conflict sure to come. Just what she needed after the long day she'd had. She opened the door and put her backpack down beside the entry table, and her keys and purse on top of it. She could hear the television in her mother's room. "Mother? It's just me."

There was no response. She glanced at her watch and saw that it was nearly eighty-three. She walked back to her mother's room and saw her propped up in bed almost as she had left her that morning. Had she even been up? "Mother?"

"Hello, Austin. About time you got home. I didn't hear from you all day, and when you hadn't called by four I asked Ruthie to make my dinner. The least you could have done is call if you were going to be late." She sniffed and turned back to the TV.

"I told you this morning I would be late," Austin said. "I told you I would bring dinner in, remember?"

"And did you?"

Sheepishly, Austin glanced at her mother then looked toward the television too. "Well, no. I forgot. But if you're hungry I can make us an omelet."

"I told you, Ruthie took care of me. And a good thing, too, I guess." She concentrated on the television. "Close the door on your way out, Austin. I don't want your noise in the kitchen to bother my show."

"Call if you need anything, Mother."

There was no response. Austin shook her head and closed the door before she went into the kitchen to examine what was in the refrigerator to put in an omelet. Actually, she realized as she pulled the eggs out, she wasn't even very hungry. She put the eggs back.

Retreating to her room, she pulled off her clothes and got under the shower. She soaped her breasts and slipped into the fantasy that it was Mystery Man smoothing the lather across her nipples and slowly down her body. Austin could almost feel his fingers, slippery from the soap, slide between her legs and between the lips of her labia, touching her, stroking her. Catching her breath, she closed her eyes as a hot melting feeling coalesced in her lower regions, so struck with sensation that she almost moaned aloud.

As she dried herself she looked in the mirror and imagined she could still see his handprint across her midriff. She shook her head. This is ridiculous, she chided herself. You have no idea who this pervert is and you're imagining that he's your knight in shining armor.

She leaned in toward the mirror and stared hard at her reflection. "There is no

knight, Austin Dulcinea. No Don Quixote to tilt at windmills for you or your honor. Nothing but a life here, taking care of your mother, and maybe a promotion you don't really want." Austin hung her towel on the rack and went into her bedroom where she pulled on her pajamas, crawled into bed and cried.

"Here's your coffee, Mother." Austin rushed into her mother's room and set the saucer down so fast a little coffee sloshed out of the cup. "Damn," she muttered as she pulled a tissue out of the box to mop up the spill. "I'm running late. Is there anything you need before I go?"

"No, but I did wonder where my coffee was. You're almost never this late." Her mother examined her through narrowed eyes. "You don't look very well." The statement was flat, without emotion or concern.

Great, thanks, mom, Austin thought to herself, but she managed a small smile. "I'll see you tonight. I might be late again, but I'll call Ruthie and let her know." She dashed out, grabbing her backpack, purse and keys as she passed by the hall table. Ruthie got off the elevator as Austin reached it, and in a fit of guilt for being late with the coffee, Austin gave her a few dollars so the two of them could have lunch at one of her mother's favorite restaurants in Ghirardelli Square. By the time she reached the office she was much later than normal.

"What happened to you?" asked Sharon, noting the dark circles under Austin's eyes and the time.

"Just life in general." Austin sighed and pulled her dampened braid over her shoulder. "Ever had one of those mornings? I didn't get to sleep until almost four and then slept through the alarm. I walked out of the building just in time to see the bus pull away and had to stand out in the mist for almost fifteen minutes because the next one was late. Don't worry. Next week, after the Morris project is finished, I'll take a day or two off."

"Yeah, right. Like that will ever happen. You've got the best attendance record here. You'd think they give awards for it or something. Don't you know the meaning of the words 'sick day?' It's a tried and true method that allows shopping, or sunning, or just sleeping in late. You would think after all the years we've worked together you would have learned something from me."

Austin had to laugh. "I'm a slow learner. Hey, I've got to get a new dress. Want to go over to Macy's with me at lunch?"

"Sure. I can get a sub for any time, so just come and get me. Here are your messages. Mr. Wyatt seemed quite adamant about your coming to see him as soon as you came in."

"Thanks, Sharon. See you later." Austin took a quick look at her other messages. Nothing important. She booted the computer and then picked up her coffee cup. Before she got to the coffee pot, she stuck her head in Henry's door.

"You wanted to see me, Henry?"

"Yes, come on in for a minute, Austin. Have a seat."

Austin placed her cup on Henry's desk and folded her hands in her lap. Henry came around his desk and closed the door.

Austin tensed. This was the second time in two days she had been closeted with one of her bosses, and she didn't like it.

"I understand Tyler Birch spoke with you yesterday about doing the presentation for the Morris account." He propped himself on the edge of his desk and rested his linked fingers on his thigh.

Henry was a handsome man in his mid-thirties. He looked like a surfer who had just traded in his surfboard for a computer-blond hair hanging over his collar, tanned skin with crinkles around the eyes from squinting into the sun, and a trim body. His only snag was that he was five feet five inches tall, and while height wasn't a problem from the top of a surfboard riding a wave, it did seem to cause trouble for him in the corporate world, and appeared to make him especially insecure around Austin

"Yes. I hope that's not a problem for you, Henry."

"Problem? No, not at all. In fact, I recommended that you give the presentation, over some strong objections of the top brass, I might add. Tyler included, despite what he

may have said yesterday. But I told them it was about time you pitched your own work and my opinion carries some weight here." He puffed out his chest a little. "The problem is, although I tooted your horn for you at the meeting, I have to admit to having a few reservations and I just want to make sure we're on the same page before Friday."

"What are your concerns?"

Henry gave a little sigh. "I'm still not convinced that you're taking the right approach with the color scheme. I think people who are going shopping for a car online probably want a bit more flash on the screen. That's what I would like to see when I look over the product Wednesday. Then I'll get with you Thursday for any fine tuning and you should be ready to go on Friday." He smiled at her, as if to give her confidence that she could do the job. "I'm just afraid that the way you've got the site designed now will put users to sleep, Austin, and we don't want that, do we?"

"But Henry-"

"No 'buts.' You're not in management yet, Austin," Henry said with just the hint of a threat in his voice, "and you've got to learn to take advice where it's sincerely offered for your own good." He twisted on his desk and pulled his calendar toward him. Let's say you get the design to me by tomorrow afternoon, and we'll schedule a meeting on Thursday to review it. We'll make it a lunch meeting. How does that sound?"

"I think I have a conflict with that time on Thursday. The planning committee."

"I'll cancel you out of that. This account is a very big one for us, and we can't afford to let it slip. If we come across like one of us doesn't have the experience necessary to handle the account, it will reflect on the whole company."

Arguing with him would be a lost cause, considering his tone of voice, so she nodded and resigned herself to additional work. There was no way she was going to give up her ideas for the web site, so she would have two different presentations ready. One to go over with Henry, and the other that truly reflected her ideas. If the client liked Henry's design, well, she wasn't sure what she would do. Turn the project over to him, she assumed, but she wasn't giving up without a fight.

"Okay, Henry. I'll have something to you tomorrow afternoon." She stood as Henry got up from the edge of his desk at the same time, and their bodies made contact. Henry put his hand on her elbow, ostensibly to steady her, but he pulled her a little closer.

"Hey, Austin. If you wanted to get to know me better, all you had to do was ask," he whispered. Austin felt a shock flash through her. She stepped aside quickly and pulled her arm out of his hand, reaching with her other hand to open his door. Her Mystery Man couldn't possibly be Henry Wyatt. Surely she would have noticed the disparity in height. That thought made her feel better, but her face was flushed from the surprise of Henry's whispered suggestion.

"Thanks for your help, Henry. Now, excuse me. I've got a lot to do." Austin turned to leave and ran right into Tyler Birch's chest. "Oh! Sorry."

Now Tyler held her elbow to steady her, and then looked down into her eyes. "Good morning, Austin." His eyes turned a deeper blue and creased with concern. "Are you feeling all right?" He glanced at Henry and handed him the papers he held. "Henry, I need you to look over these reports before the meeting this afternoon." Then he focused again on Austin.

"Yes, just had a hard time sleeping last night," she muttered. "Excuse me." She stepped around him and practically ran down the hall toward the coffee pot.

"Oh, damn," she said forcefully, not caring who heard her, then turned and reluctantly made her way back to Henry's office. Henry stood just inside the door holding her coffee cup that sported the slogan "Computer experts do it with small bytes." He smirked at her as he held it out.

"I'd like to experience that for myself, Austin. Maybe you can show me sometime." At her look of shock, he added, "Oh yeah. I hate to tell you, but you look like hell this morning. I hope you're going to look more rested and in control for Friday. We're trying to inspire confidence in our clients, you know, not scare them away."

Austin took her cup and spun away without commenting. Of course, she wanted Ron Morris to like her designs before, but now she was determined to do everything in her power to ensure that happened. Not just for the company, but for herself, too.

In a fury, she filled her cup and got to work. In the past two days she had been told she looked like a sloppy child running through some Midwestern meadow who didn't know how to dress to impress, and was an inexperienced novice who could blow a big deal by not presenting her own work correctly. She'd be damned if she would prove either man right.

At twelve-thirty, she saved her work and locked her workstation. She called home and told Ruthie that she would be late again and asked if she would take care of her mother's dinner. Then she called Sharon and asked if she was ready to go. It was a short walk to Macy's.

"The thing is, Sharon, I got the impression yesterday that Tyler Birch was supporting me, although it did make me mad that he suggested this clothing change. But this morning Henry said right out that Tyler wasn't in favor of my doing the presentation. I'm afraid to trust either of them." Austin pushed skirts along the rack, quickly evaluating and discarding. She wasn't sure what she was looking for exactly, but she would know the right thing when she saw it.

"If it were up to me, I'd go with Tyler Birch. That Henry makes me nervous. I think he's sneaky. How about this?" Sharon held up a rust colored suede skirt that would fall mid-calf on Austin.

"Oh, I like it. If I can find it, I have a sweater at home that will go just right with it. Now I need the right blouse." She moved to another rack and found a cream-colored button down blouse with a small collar and man's tie. "This will go perfectly with the skirt and my wrap around sweater, if I can find a nice leather belt. I love it that I normally don't have to try things on. Otherwise, how would we have time for a hotdog before getting back to the office?"

Sharon laughed.

When they were out on the sidewalk again and biting into their hotdogs, Sharon broached the subject again. "Austin, you know my position in the company allows me to hear all kinds of things. Most people don't pay any attention to the receptionist, even though I sit right out in the open. So, I'm telling you, based on overheard conversations and just gut instinct, Tyler is backing you. He's being discreet, and I don't know his rationale, but I think you can trust that he has your

interests at heart." She looked at her friend. "I hesitate to tell you this because I know you don't care for him, but I think he actually likes you a little."

"Whatever gives you that idea?" Austin frowned.

"Just little things. Nothing I can point to definitively, but I have a feeling. Are you about ready to go back?"

"No, I forgot a little something I have to pick up for my mother. You go on and I'll see you in a few minutes. Oh, and can I ask you for one more favor?"

"Sure. What?"

"Where do you get your hair done?"

"You're not going to do something drastic with your beautiful hair, are you?" Austin compressed her lips and closed her eyes as she nodded. Sharon shook her head sadly. "I'll call and see if Kathryn can take you tomorrow afternoon. She's over on Van Ness by the Civic Center."

"That would be great. Thanks. And thanks for coming with me, Sharon."

"No problem. We should come out and spend your money more often," she said with a laugh. "Don't forget you have a meeting this afternoon." With a wave, Sharon headed to the office.

Austin reentered the store and, after a furtive look around to be sure there was no one standing nearby that she knew, found the lingerie department. She had pushed the thought of her bus ride home to the back of her mind, but shopping had brought it to the forefront. Of course she wasn't going to follow the Mystery Man's suggestion. She felt herself blush just thinking of it. But the sexy feeling she felt the previous evening came back in a rush and she thought she would get some pretty things to wear under her new clothes. Something to give her that extra lift for the presentation.

She found a lacy thong panty with a matching push up bra and a white satin slip banded with lace. Then on a whim, she bought a garter belt trimmed in lace and stockings to match the skirt she had just bought. Austin realized with a little shock

that she had never owned such feminine, beautiful things, and she found herself humming as she walked back to the office.

*Chapter Three *

For the rest of the afternoon Austin went to meetings and worked at her desk. Unusually, she took a couple of breaks, stretching the day out. Based on the work accomplished, she could have left the office at quitting time, but somehow it happened that she left at the same time as the previous night. Before she rang for the elevator she slipped into the restroom. Her heart was racing and she didn't know if it was in fear that "he" would be on the bus again or fear that he wouldn't. She stood in the stall for a few moments, running through her mind every argument of why what she was thinking was wrong, crazy, the dumbest thing she had ever contemplated. Then, almost without will, she reached under her shirt and unsnapped her bra. She slipped the straps down her arms and over her hands and pulled it from under her shirt. She stuffed it in her backpack, quickly, before she changed her mind.

Oh God! She asked herself what she was doing, but had no good answer. No, that was wrong. She was feeling for the first time in her adult life. Feeling what desire was, and she wasn't going to miss the chance to find out more. Even if he was a pervert, what could happen to her on a bus full of people? She didn't think beyond that because she knew she didn't want to.

She splashed water on her face and took one final look in the mirror, then hurried out of the bathroom before she changed her mind. The elevator was empty except for a woman and a small boy who had pushed every button on the door panel, and by the time she arrived in the lobby and made a dash for the bus stop, she realized that she had missed the bus she needed. Austin was near tears, and didn't fully understand why.

"This is just stupid," she muttered. She took a deep breath and resigned herself to wait for the next bus, which would be along in just a few minutes. From this stop, she knew it would be just as crowded, but Mystery Man was already headed home. She sighed.

Within a few minutes, the bus rounded the corner and Austin forced her way on, standing near the back, packed in place. She bent her knees slightly to put her backpack and shopping bag between her feet, and as she straightened she felt a man's body pressed tightly against her. She caught her breath and held it.

She felt his breath against her hair and his whispered voice filled her ear. Nothing else intruded, not the bus noise or the sounds of people around them. Her hair moved slightly as he spoke, tickling her ear, his breath soft and minty.

"I thought I would miss you, sweet Dulcie. Take the edges of my raincoat and hold them tightly around you." He surrounded her with a large, black microfiber coat. With shaking hands she took the edges of the coat and held it closed in front of her. It was warm inside, and she could sense him as she dipped her nose toward the lapel. It smelled of clean refreshing rain and him, a male scent that was woodsy and fresh. It was strange, but she felt safe there, against him, even though they were engaging in distinctly non-public acts on a public bus.

Hands slipped around her waist and pulled her close. The bus jerked as it stopped for lights, throwing her around a little, but he kept her grounded fast against his body, a body that was hard with desire. Desire for her, she thought with a quickening of breath.

He slid his hands under her tee shirt and smoothed his fingers across her stomach. "You're so soft." One hand swept upwards and found her naked breast. He sighed into her ear. Austin closed her eyes and let his touch carry her away. His other hand crept below the waistband of her slacks. "Plain, cotton panties, Dulcie? You deserve silk and lace."

Austin gasped as he slid his fingers through the hair at the top of her thighs and rubbed her. She parted her legs slightly and he took full advantage by sliding a finger between the folds of her labia, rubbing her clitoris until she felt her breathing become fast and shallow. At the same time, he massaged her breast, focusing on her nipple until it stood at full attention. "Ah, you feel so good. Does it feel good to you?"

She couldn't speak, so she just nodded her head, closing her eyes and drifting with the sensation of his hands on her. She let go of everything and simply enjoyed the

mastery of his hands and the hard length of him pressed against her. She wanted to reach behind her and feel him, but was afraid to let go of the coat. Instead, she pushed into him and rubbed her buttocks against him. She did notice through her haze that her breathing wasn't the only one that had gotten erratic.

Several stops flashed by. They had refused to move out of the way of exiting passengers, risking discovery, but Austin realized at the edge of her mind that they would surely be discovered very soon if they didn't stop this fantastic foreplay.

As if reading her mind, Mystery Man moved his hands to her waist once more. He nipped her earlobe and gave her a final squeeze before removing his hands from her and taking control of his coat.

Austin could barely breathe and her knees were weak. "Don't turn around, Dulcie. You wouldn't want to spoil the fun." She felt him slip something in her pants pocket. "I've a suggestion for how we might spend your birthday."

Again Austin gasped. She heard a chuckle, and then he moved away from her, just as the back doors opened. She spun toward the exit but all she saw was a tall man in a large raincoat. His upturned collar met the bottom of a touring cap, so not even his hair was visible. Since it had turned misty, once he got off he looked like any number of other men in a hat and raincoat on the sidewalk outside the bus.

She found a seat and fell into it. A woman across the aisle from her gave her a strange look, and Austin was sure she knew what they had been doing. Her face felt hot and she knew she was blushing. In fact, her breathing was still rather uneven. She took deep breaths to calm herself.

I can't believe I let that happen, she thought. Mother would die if she knew. Hell, I would be aghast if anyone told me they had done something like this. And she did feel aghast. And desirable. And sexy.

The thrill couldn't be described. The fear of being caught heightened the excitement, she knew, but what was even better was almost getting to the point where discovery wasn't even important. My gosh! She had almost moaned out loud!

Suddenly she remembered the note he had put in her pocket and she pulled it out. It

was typed, so there was no hint there as to who he was. But who could it be? Someone who knew her middle name and her birth date. That had to narrow the number of possibilities tremendously. She concentrated on the note.

"Dulcinea. What a romantic your mother must have been to name you that. It conjures all kinds of visions. Of course, as you have no doubt noticed, I prefer Dulcie. To me it denotes a freer, more wanton version of the ideal. Still the model of all a woman should be, but lying in a field of wildflowers rather than standing on a pedestal. And that is how I see you, my Dulcie. Lying in a field of flowers. Naked. With lust glazing your eyes as I stroke you and you hold me, first in your hands and then fully and deeply within you." Austin felt a warm blush spread from her chest to her face, and a different kind of warmth spread in her crotch.

"I will start out slowly, however. I believe that no one has awakened you yet to the joys of your body. I hope that is the case, because I want to be your first. I will pay court to you, as Quixote did to his lady. Trust the true me! I will tilt windmills for you, my Dulcie."

Austin caught her breath. His words were so like what she had thought to herself the previous night. "If you wish to explore my vision, a limousine will pick you up outside your building at seven-fifteen Saturday evening. Wear something special, in green. Eat lightly before the driver picks you up, because we will dine late. Follow his instructions and he will bring you to me."

Austin contemplated the note again. What in the world was this all about? There was no way she could go out with this man. Going as far as she had was horrendous, but that at least had taken place with people around. To go somewhere with him alone? She could not do it. It would be exciting, she thought with a sigh, but too dangerous. And too crazy. She was not a danger-seeking, crazy person. In the very next thought she wondered what she had to wear that was both special and green.

Stop it! she told herself. Besides, mother probably has something planned for my birthday. With a start, she realized that the bus was approaching her stop. She pulled the cord and took the four steps to the exit. "Thanks!" she called out to the driver, who waved at her. She tucked the note back in her pocket and rushed into the building.

"Mother! It's just me," she called as she entered the apartment. Like the previous night, she could hear the television in her mother's room. She glanced in the hall mirror to be sure her coloring was normal and she didn't look ... out of the ordinary, she supposed. "Sorry I'm late. I missed the bus."

"Hello, Austin. Be quiet for just a minute." Austin sighed and waited until her mother muted the television at the commercial.

"Did you have a nice dinner?"

"Ruthie made her tortilla casserole. It didn't get quite hot enough, but it was all right. Of course, I had to eat it alone, but I suppose you had to work late."

"Yes. But as I told you, next week should be better and then I can put supper together for us. Let me show you what I bought today at lunch." Austin took her skirt out of the bag and held it up. "I have to give a presentation to a client on Friday. It's very important. What do you think of the skirt I'm thinking of wearing?"

"It looks awfully expensive. Are you sure you can afford such things? Oh, here's my show again. Close the door when you leave, will you?" She pressed a button on the remote, and the sounds of shooting filled the room. Austin picked up her bag and left, closing the door behind her.

When had her life become this depressing? They had never been close friends, but she used to be able to have a conversation with her mother. When had that ended?

Austin turned and grabbed the doorknob. Forcefully pushing the door open, she stood in the doorway until her mother looked up. With a look of annoyance, her mother muted the TV. "Mother, have you made plans for Saturday night?"

"Saturday night? What are you talking about?"

"It's my birthday, Mother. Have you made plans for us to do anything?"

A look of surprise passed over her mother's face, and then a look of embarrassment. "Oh, Austin, no. I'm sorry. I forgot. Ruthie asked me if I wanted to spend the weekend with her. Her grandson is in a Little League game and the family is getting together, and I told her I would like to go. She's taking me home with her Friday

when she leaves and I will come back with her on Monday." Austin straightened and set her shoulders, hiding the fleeting wave of nausea that swept over her. The nausea was quickly replaced with anger, and finally resignation, all in a matter of seconds.

"Fine. I'll get the details from Ruthie before I leave tomorrow. Goodnight, Mother." She closed the door. There was silence on the other side of the door for a few seconds, and then the sound of her mother's show could be heard faintly. Good sound control, considering the volume, Austin thought. It was amazing that those words came to mind after just finding out that her mother had forgotten her only child's birthday. She supposed she shouldn't be too surprised, but still, she was. Surprised and hurt at a level she didn't think her mother could still touch.

All of her life she had wondered what she could do to make her mother proud of her. To make her love her. And now she knew. Nothing. It was a relief to finally realize it. On a deeper level, it hurt, certainly. But oddly, now that she faced up to it, not as much as Austin might have expected.

Austin liked Ruthie's tortilla casserole and hoped there was some left for her to reheat. She put her new clothes away and went into the kitchen to find something for dinner.

There was plenty of casserole left, so Austin fixed a plate to heat in the microwave. Vaguely, she had the thought that she would miss Ruthie when her mother went somewhere else to live. She could face the fact now that they had never been close. Would never be close. Her mother seemed so unhappy, and surely they could find someplace for her to live where she could be happy. For the first time, Austin admitted that a different arrangement would make her happier, too.

Sarah enjoyed being with Ruthie's family more than she did being with her, Austin. Maybe I'm just not lovable, she thought. And then immediately put the idea out of her mind. Last week she might have believed that, but after the past two days she wouldn't let that germ of an idea grow. He might be a pervert and a stranger, she thought, but Mystery Man finds me lovable, or at least desirable. They weren't the same, but they were close enough for her right now. He knew her middle name. He knew her birthday and had offered to spend it with her.

The microwave sounded. She removed her plate of food and decided that if she didn't have anything special enough in green, she would go shopping again. She would _not_ cry herself to sleep tonight. Changes were coming.

The next morning when Austin walked into the lobby, Sharon glanced up at her while answering the phone, then did a double take. Austin had forsaken her baggy painters' pants and tee shirts for tailored slacks with a soft silk blouse tucked in. Instead of her usual beige, the slacks were forest green, complemented by the ivory colored blouse. Wrapped under the collar and trailing down the front was a silk scarf with bright splashes of color. She wore loafers and a few select pieces of jewelry, and carried a briefcase that had belonged to her Uncle Dan, instead of her backpack. Sharon held up a finger to ask Austin to wait and finished her phone call. "Who are you and what have you done with my friend?" she demanded. Austin laughed.

"Do you like?" She executed a pirouette.

"This is a day to mark down in the calendar. You look great." Sharon peered at Austin's face. "I even detect a little makeup."

"Just some lip gloss and blush. I don't feel comfortable in makeup. Were you able to get me a hair appointment?"

"This afternoon at four. That's the best I could do."

"That's wonderful. Thanks, Sharon. I don't know if I'm going to be able to do it today, but I need to go shopping again. Interested?"

"You know it. Here are your messages. Nothing too urgent. I can't wait to hear what the reactions are to your new look. What brought this on? It's not Friday yet."

"Just time for a change," Austin said softly. "I'll see you later." She hurried to her cube to start the day. She had to get the program to Henry this afternoon, and then catch the bus to Van Ness. That left a lot to get done and not a lot of time to do it. As she was pouring her coffee she felt the tingle down her spine that meant _he_ was behind her. Tyler.

"Good morning, Mr. Birch."

"Good morning, Austin. How did you know it was me? Is there a reflection in the coffee pot or something?"

"I don't know. Must be the temperature in the room changes." She turned and added a cool smile in case he took her words the wrong way. Tyler looked at Austin appreciatively.

"The colors in your scarf look great on you, if I may be so bold to mention it," he said. "Don't want to get in any trouble with the women's groups by telling you how nice you look today. And the soft flow of your blouse suits you." His words would have seemed more sincere, or at least not quite so sterile, had he smiled, but he didn't.

"Having pointed out my flaws in style so eloquently on Monday, I can hardly get upset when you endeavor to notice that I'm taking steps to correct them. Thank you." Austin turned and walked back to her cube. "The temperature changes all right. It goes down a couple of degrees," she murmured, as she settled at her desk.

"What was that?" Tyler asked. Austin jumped, spilling coffee on the desk.

"Oh, damn. Why did you sneak up on me like that?" She scrambled for tissues to catch the spill before it got to her papers, and made it just in time.

"I thought you said you could tell when I was there. Sorry."

"Is there something I can do for you?" Irritation was evident in her voice. "I have a lot of work to do before quitting time today."

"I wonder if you'll come back to my office for just a minute. I need to talk with you about something." He turned and left, assuming that she would follow.

"Of course, Mr. Birch. Whatever you say, Mr. Birch. Don't mind that I'm on a deadline here, Mr. Birch," she muttered. But she marched down the hall after him. He was waiting just inside his office and closed the door as soon as she entered and seated herself. Then he sat across from her and folded his hands on the desk, staring at Austin.

She spread her hands in front of her, palms up. "You want to tell me something?"

"Yes, I just don't quite know how to say it. I need to ask you a favor. Feel free to say no if you want, but it's something I would really appreciate if you can work it out. I hate to ask..."

Austin sighed. "Okay, okay."

He looked at her again, cocked his head slightly and furrowed his brows. "Why don't you call me Tyler? Everyone else around here does, including those college kids."

The question took her completely by surprise. Her eyes widened and she chuckled.

"That's the favor? You want me to call you Tyler and that's what you called me back here for?" She shook her head. "Well, I don't know you well enough to call you Tyler. You're my boss, I try to show a little respect. You're not a friend for heaven's sake. Is that what you wanted to talk to me about, because I've got work to do, and you closed the door. Do you know what that does to the gossip mill around here? And this is the third time in as many days I've been in a man's office with the door closed. Half the staff probably has me being fired and the rest probably think I'm screwing around, all because the doors are closed." Her voice had increased in volume as she spoke, and then wound down as she got to the end.

When she finished, she realized what she had said. "Oh, gosh. I'm sorry. I can't imagine why I said such a thing," she said softly. She sat back with her hands folded in her lap, looking anywhere but at Tyler Birch. "Am I finished now?"

Austin heard a strange sound coming from the direction of Tyler's desk. She looked at him and saw that he was straining not to laugh, but was losing the battle. That brought a small smile to her face and she relaxed a little. Tyler gave up and laughed out loud. "I'm sorry about the closed door, Austin. I'll try not to embarrass you like this again, I promise. But this favor is of a personal nature and it's not the business of anyone who happens to be walking by the office.

"I don't know if you know it-but of course, since we're not friends you probably don't." Austin winced, and Tyler smiled as he continued. "My sister lives here in

San Francisco too and her son is turning twelve this weekend. He's very interested in computers and does some work with the web for school projects. He was reading a magazine a few weeks ago and saw an article about design that mentioned you and the fact that you work here."

"Really? It mentioned me?"

Tyler nodded. "The awards for the Sampson Financial site. Anyway, Robbie attacked me at dinner the other night because I hadn't told him that I know you. I promised him I would ask if you would meet with him and show him some of your work. You know, give him some tips. I wouldn't ask it of you if he was a bad kid or if his interest was just superficial, but he's a great kid, and smart as a whip. And that's not just the bias of an uncle. I told him I would ask you if you might be willing to give up a few hours some Saturday. Would you? Be willing I mean?"

Austin frowned. "When do you mean? This Saturday? I don't know if I can this week." She looked up at him and found herself falling right into his blue eyes. She caught her breath.

"Well, that's too bad. His mom is planning a surprise party for him and my part of the surprise is keeping him occupied for a few hours while she gets things ready. I thought if you were free we could keep him occupied together. If it's a matter of pay for the time, I'll be happy to compensate you."

"No! Why would you say that? It's not money, it's ... something else."

"Oh, you have plans? I understand. Maybe some other time." He stood and came around the desk. "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention this to anyone. As I said-"

"What time would it be on Saturday?" Tyler stopped and looked down at her.

"I'm tasked with having him out of the house by ten and back by three."

Austin thought about how she needed to change her life. This small favor would get her out of an empty house on a day she should be with friends. Maybe she would make a new friend, a twelve-year old friend. One whose uncle had beautiful blue eyes and, she now saw, was devastating when he smiled. How bad could it be?

"I'll do it. Do you want to bring him here or do you think it would be better to meet outside the office? I do a lot of work at home, if that would suit."

"That would be nice. In fact, that would be wonderful. Are you sure meeting at your house won't be an imposition? I'll provide lunch if you like. You live at Bay View West, don't you?"

"And you knew that, how?"

"You've worked here for five years. Don't you think I would find out general things about an employee in that time period?"

Austin blew out a breath. "Just ring Gardner on the tenant panel."

"I do appreciate this, Austin. I think you'll like Robbie. And Austin, one other thing," he said softly. "Do you think you can call me Tyler in front of my nephew? He's not used to hearing me referred to in such reverent terms as 'Mr. Birch.'"

She chuckled. "I'll try." Tyler opened the door and Austin ducked through, hoping no one would see that she was coming out of his office. For the second time in a week. But as she glanced down the hall she saw Sharon. As their eyes met, Sharon smiled and raised her eyebrows. Austin shook her head sharply and stomped off toward her desk.

When Austin left his office, Tyler leaned back in his chair. He knew that he should feel guilty about using his nephew so shamelessly, but he didn't. Robbie really did want to meet Austin, and Tyler really did have to get him out of the house, but getting Austin and Robbie together _this_ weekend was all his idea. And he had handled things quite adroitly, he thought. Neither of them would be the wiser. He wiped the smile off his face and leaned forward to dig through a pile of paperwork.

*Chapter Four *

After skipping lunch, Austin completed both web designs. She finished saving the design she thought Henry would like and sent him an email telling him it was

available for review.

As she shut down her computer and gathered her things to go to the hair stylist she wondered if Mystery Man would be on the bus today, looking for her. She had received several compliments on her new style of dressing, and it boosted her confidence, making her anxious to try the next step in her appearance. "Bye, Sharon. See you in the morning."

"I'll be looking forward to seeing the new 'do.' And we need to talk, about you-know-what."

"Nothing to talk about, Sharon," Austin flew by and waved, casting a smile over her shoulder.

She was a few minutes late getting to the salon on Van Ness, but Kathryn had waited for her. She whistled when she unbraided Austin's hair and saw how long it was. "Gosh, when hair gets this long and pulled back into a harsh style, it often loses some of its fullness, but yours is just lovely. A beautiful color, too. What did you have in mind?"

"I'm looking for a completely new style. Something easy to care for." Austin stared at her reflection, hesitating to continue. "To tell the truth, someone I know just told me I should start to look more my age-thirty-five this weekend-and yet at the same time, I'm just now feeling a new thrill at being alive. I'd like something that's okay for work, can be changed for evening, and has a kick of sexiness about it. Is such a thing possible?"

Kathryn smiled. "Oh yes! I think I can picture just the thing for you. I would like to save the hair we cut off. I know a place where I can send it to be made into a hairpiece for you. It's your exact color and texture, and it would be a shame to lose it. Since you're here, and in the mood for a change, why don't you have a manicure and facial too? So many people overlook the benefits of a manicure, but they really can make you feel very special, particularly to someone who isn't used to them. And if you don't mind my saying so, from what you've said, you don't sound like a woman who has spent much time pampering yourself. This is your moment."

"You're right. Can I get it all done today, though?"

Kathryn took care of the arrangements.

Two hours later, Austin walked out of the salon a new woman, both in looks and in spirit. She felt giddy, and couldn't stop looking at her reflection in windows. Her hair rested on her shoulders, slightly turned under, reminiscent of a pageboy. Feathery bangs floated over her forehead-a forehead that, along with the rest of her face, shone with new life from the facial she'd been given. While she relaxed under a facemask, her nails had been trimmed, shaped, polished a pale pink and buffed. Her hands had been massaged and softened with a lightly aromatic lotion.

Every time she caught her reflection, she swung her head and watched the flow of her hair as it swirled around her face. It made her laugh in joy. Why hadn't she done this before? It felt so free. Kathryn would call her when her hairpiece came in, and maybe by that time she would be ready for a trim and another manicure. Looking good (yes, she dared to think that, for the first time in her life) was intoxicating. She wondered what her mother would-

"Austin?" Austin looked around. She stood in the courtyard of Opera Plaza, gazing insipidly at her reflection in the window of a sushi restaurant. Embarrassed at being caught admiring herself, she hoped it looked like she was anticipating dinner, although she didn't care for sushi.

Walking toward her was Tyler Birch and a beautiful woman. Oh no, she thought. Why him? Why tonight, just when I was feeling good about myself? She glanced around frantically to see if there was a path of escape. Perhaps she could still pretend she hadn't heard him. "Austin, is that you? Goodness, but you look different." They came to a stop directly in front of her. There was no escape now.

"Well, thank you. I'm sure coming from you that's quite a compliment, Mr. Birch."

"Now, Austin. I meant that in a nice way." Austin could swear that he almost smiled. The woman beside him looked at Austin and then at Tyler. She cleared her throat. "Oh, sorry. Austin, may I introduce my sister, Barbara Chambers? Barb, this is Austin Gardner, the woman Robbie and I were discussing the other night. She has agreed to meet with Robbie this Saturday, so while we're out of your hair, we'll be in hers."

"Austin, it's very nice to meet you, and I can't tell you what a favor you're doing me. And Tyler, I imagine, since he had to find a way to occupy Robbie for five whole hours." She smiled and Austin liked her instantly. Why couldn't her brother be more like her? "Robbie is over in the bookstore, but we're getting ready to have dinner and catch a movie he wants to see. Can you join us? At least for dinner? I'm sure you don't want to see whatever shoot 'em up adventure movie Ty and I have been roped into."

"Gosh, that's very nice, but I guess I should get home. I didn't expect to be this late, and I've got to get dinner together for my mother." Austin smiled ruefully. "I'm afraid you caught me in a moment of vanity. I wasn't staring longingly at the sushi, I was admiring my new hair style in the window. I just got it cut and it feels so different."

"Austin's hair was down to her waist or longer. But I have to admit to liking this style better. And a manicure too? This is a red-letter day."

There, Austin thought. She hadn't mistaken it. He had almost smiled again.

"Why, Mr. Birch, you flatterer."

Suddenly, a young voice called, "Mom? Can I get a book?" Austin looked toward the bookstore and saw a boy in jeans and a red tee shirt leaning out the door.

"I'd better go and see what he wants. Excuse me. Ty see if you can convince Austin to eat with us. And by the way, your hair really does look wonderful." She waved and hurried off to see her son.

"I thought you were going to quit calling me Mr. Birch."

Austin had to admit, in his open-throated Oxford shirt and jeans, he didn't look much like a Mr. Birch, but she wasn't ready to admit that, not even to herself.

"I said I would try not to in front of your nephew. I didn't mention anything about your sister."

"I see. Would you have dinner with us?" At her glance at the sushi restaurant he added, "We were going to Max's I'm afraid. Sushi isn't my cup of tea. Excuse the

twisted metaphor or analogy or whatever it was. We'd like it if you would join us."

"Thanks, and I really mean that, but my new hairdo and I have to get home. I'll see you tomorrow." She turned and strode toward Van Ness.

"Austin!" She stopped and sighed before turning back toward him. "My sister is right. Your hair looks beautiful." She smiled and waved, then hurried to the corner to catch her bus.

The Number Forty-seven bus was crowded as it headed up Van Ness, but there was no Mystery Man on it. She was able to find a seat and relax until it stopped right across from her building on North Point. As she let herself into the apartment, she wondered again what her mother would say about her hair.

When she had spoken with Ruthie that morning she discovered that her mother had gotten her story right. She was going home with Ruthie on Friday and would be back Monday. Austin didn't think she had ever had a weekend to herself before, and instead of sitting home alone as she would have in the past, she had two whole adventures planned. She couldn't wait for the weekend to get here. She glanced in the hall mirror and walked toward her mother's room.

"Mother?" She pushed open the door and saw her mother napping, propped up in bed, remote in hand. At least she hadn't gotten ready for bed yet. Austin went into the kitchen and saw evidence that her mother had had supper. She looked to see if any tortilla casserole was left, and popped a plate of it in the microwave. There was also enough lettuce and tomato to make a small salad. As the microwave timer went off, her mother called her name.

"Yes, Mother." She walked to her mother's room again. "I'm just having some dinner. Would you like to come in and have something to drink while I eat?"

"No, I don't want to. You're home late again-. Good Lord, Austin! What did you do with your hair?" her mother's eyes were wide and her voice sounded shocked.

Austin smiled happily. "I got it cut. Do you like it?"

"No. It took years for your hair to grow that long. I used to comb it and comb it, and

braid it, and now you've just taken a hatchet to it." She glowered at Austin. "What possessed you to do that?"

The smile faded from Austin's face. "I'm sorry you don't like it, Mother, because it's a done deal now. And I like it. Now, I'm going to eat." She spun on her heels and practically ran back to the kitchen. Even though she loved her hair, even though Barbara Chambers, a complete stranger, who had no reason to lie, had said it looked good, even though Tyler _Birch_, for Pete's sake had said it looked _beautiful_, the only comment she took to heart was her mother's.

How could she let it hurt so much? She had known deep in her heart that her mother wouldn't like it, she had almost been prepared for it, but it still cut to the core. She slammed her plate on the table, fell into her chair, and jabbed her fork into her salad, but her hunger had left her. Sipping her water, she considered what she should do. At a sound, she turned to the doorway and saw her mother.

"I guess I will sit in here with you after all." Her voice was conciliatory. She walked to the sink and poured a glass of water before settling at the table.

"If you've come to criticize my hair again, don't bother. I like it. And even if I didn't, it will grow back. It's not the end of the world."

"I know. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry I forgot about your birthday. Sometimes the days just slide together and I forget where I am on the calendar." Austin took a bite of her salad, and after a deep breath, felt herself calming.

"It's okay. It seems I have plans anyway. I just didn't want to interfere with anything you might have had in mind," she said in a low voice.

"Plans? What are you going to do?"

"My boss asked me to help his nephew out with a school project. It's nothing big, but it will be different." She took a bite of the casserole. Maybe she was hungry after all.

"Well, that should be nice." Her mother sat there, playing with her glass of water, and Austin realized that they had very little to say to each other.

"Mother, are you happy here?" She took another bite of the casserole and looked at the table instead of her mother. "I mean, are you happy living here? Would you like to live somewhere else? Closer to Ruthie, maybe?" Ruthie lived in Daly City, but it was a long distance to someone like her mother, who didn't drive.

Her mother seemed to consider this. "No, I don't think so. Are you going to throw me out?" Her voice was sharp.

"No! It's just that, well, sometimes it seems that we don't have very much in common. I get the feeling you aren't ... well, pleased to be around me, I guess." She found the courage to look into her mother's eyes. "I'm afraid I don't know how to make you happy, but I'll do whatever I can if you'll give me a hint."

"Yes, well, I'll think about it." She stood suddenly, put her glass in the sink and walked toward the door. "Goodnight, Austin." She went down the hallway without waiting for a response. Austin sighed and forced herself to finish her dinner before she made her way to bed, where she read for several hours before finally drifting to sleep.

Chapter Five

Austin closed her eyes on the bus the next morning, the result of another practically sleepless night. As the bus got more crowded, she imagined Mystery Man sitting beside her, resting his hand on her thigh under the sweater she was holding. He let it his hand ride up her leg under her skirt until he could touch her most private area. She opened her thighs to give him better access and he pressed his finger deep into her, then stroked her until she could feel herself getting warm. Her eyes flew open. She was wet, and there was even a slight musky order in the air. Glancing out the window to see where they were, she realized she had missed her stop. She edged her way to the door and got off at the next stop, then walked the block and a half back.

"Oh my gosh! I can't believe that's you!" Sharon walked around the counter that defined her desk to get a closer look at Austin's hair. "Austin, it's absolutely stunning. It looks perfect on you. And look at this outfit." Austin had worn a light brown cotton skirt with a turquoise blouse accented with baby pin tucks and a Peter

Pan collar. The sweater vest she wore was tan with flecks of brown, turquoise, red and green in it. With the proximity of her blouse, her eyes seemed to be blue-green instead of the dark green they normally were.

"Sharon, thank you so much for getting me the hair appointment. Kathryn was great. She knew exactly what to do, and my hair is cut so well, it takes nothing to make it fall like this. It was a wonderful experience. I had a facial and manicure, too. I've never done anything like this before." The door to the lobby opened and both women turned to see Tyler enter. He glanced at them and nodded.

"Ladies."

"Mr. Birch." Tyler barely missed a step at Austin's greeting, but she was sure he had heard it.

"Well, back to the salt mines since the boss is in. I have to meet with Henry during lunch today, but if the meeting tomorrow doesn't go too long, let's try to go out Friday. It's my birthday Saturday, and I feel like celebrating my new look."

"Your birthday? Why didn't you say something sooner? Let's have dinner Friday after work, my treat."

Austin laughed. "Combined with some shopping, maybe? It's a good thing birthdays only come once a year!" Austin strode to her cube and got her computer started before going for coffee. When she returned, she checked her emails. There was a reminder on her electronic calendar of the meeting with Henry and several other "group" messages that didn't really affect her. She hurriedly sent one to Sharon.

"Need I remind you that the subject of my B'day is _absolutely_ a closed topic? Telling anyone will put your life in serious jeopardy."

A few minutes later she received the reply. "Never fear. The subject of B'days is a double-edged sword. We all have one."

Austin laughed as she started her program and began working.

A few minutes later she received another email, this one from Tyler. "Robbie was very upset that he missed meeting his idol because he was debating about buying the

new Harry Potter book. He is greatly looking forward to Saturday. Barb enjoyed meeting you. Wish you had stayed for dinner. Your hair looks even better in the daylight than it did in the courtyard of Opera Plaza yesterday evening.

Birch"

How strange. A personal email from Tyler Birch. She didn't think he really knew what a personal life was if the clock said it was between 8 AM and 8 PM. She shrugged and went back to work. A few minutes later she received another email from Tyler.

"Sorry. I forgot why I was sending the earlier message. Reminder that the presentation is at 2:00 Friday. Plan to spend about an hour, then we wait until Ron makes up his mind. Sometimes he takes days, but I feel confident that he will know immediately that your work is perfect for him. Celebration drinks at the St. Francis after his decision. Plan for about 4:00, with dinner after.

Don't get all upset. Standard procedure for a successful deal.

Birch"

Well, great. He hadn't even asked if she was available for drinks and dinner. It was Friday night, and he just assumed that she was free.

She hit the Reply button. "Mr. Birch. I didn't know about the 'standard procedure for a successful deal.' I can certainly join you for a short time for drinks at 4:00, if that is really necessary, but I'm afraid I already have plans for dinner.

Gardner"

Within minutes, she sensed Tyler's presence behind her. "So, you aren't able to join us for dinner tomorrow? This is a very large deal for the firm, Ms. Gardner. I'm sorry if you weren't aware of the practice, but perhaps your plans are something you can change?"

Austin turned and looked up at him. She pitched her voice low. "No sir, I'm afraid not. As you are aware, this whole idea of giving the presentation just came up this

week. I have hardly had time to get everything I've needed done, what with having to shop for clothes, get my hair done, etc., all at your request. I do certainly appreciate the chance to present my own ideas to Mr. Morris, and I want you to know that I'm cognizant of what that means. But I'm simply not free for dinner tomorrow. I hope that won't be a problem, or in any way affect my giving the presentation."

Tyler crossed his arms and looked out her window for a few moments. "You have a nice view."

"Yes."

"You can come for drinks?" He turned his blue eyes on her, like a laser beam.

"Yes, I think so."

"Fine." He turned and walked away. Austin shook her head, and then was caught off guard by the unfamiliar swoosh of hair. She smiled delightedly and shook her head again before swiveling her chair back to work.

Austin returned to her desk after her meeting with Henry. He had found a few things he wanted changed in the "flashy" presentation she had worked up to please him. She wondered what he would say when he saw that she had two presentations ready. She feared he would not be pleased, but what else could she do? She couldn't in good conscience present the flashy web site as her work. Not for this client, anyway. To advocate that for Ron Morris Motors would be dishonest. If she had given Henry her real presentation, she believed that he would purposely undermine it. This was the only thing she could do, to keep everybody happy.

Of course, that's assuming that Tyler didn't mind having two presentations pitched. She had put that problem out of her mind. This might be the first and last presentation she ever made at Bay Web Computer Consulting. It might in fact put the lid on this whole promotion idea, which wouldn't be all bad. But she was at least going to give this one shot everything she had.

She settled in to make Henry's changes. Actually, she was glad the meeting with him was finally over. He had given her strange looks the whole time, and when the

sandwiches he ordered arrived, he sat quite close to her while they ate and shared the computer terminal. Maybe it had been her imagination, but it seemed that Henry stared at her breasts, something he had never done before. To be fair, in the clothes she normally wore, no one could tell she even had breasts, but that was beside the point.

Henry, of all people. If it had been Tyler Birch, she might feel different. He might have horned in on the family business, but the man was so good looking it should be illegal. She laughed out loud at the thought.

Austin was so in tune with the two web sites she had created, that she finished the changes to what she called "Henry's site" and reviewed her own, well before four o'clock. She picked up papers and dug out old files, and generally found things to putter with before she admitted what she was doing. She wanted to find a reason to take the late bus home. She wandered out toward Sharon's desk, ready to leave. If she stayed in the office much longer she would be dusting under the desk in an effort to delay her leaving, and that was just plain silly.

"Goodnight, Sharon."

"See you tomorrow. It's the big day, isn't it? I'm looking forward to dinner. Is The Cheesecake Factory all right? Hope so, because we've got reservations."

"That's great. It will be the perfect ending to the day. The only problem with going there is which luscious cheesecake to have."

"I always like the tiramisu," said a deep voice behind Austin. Oh no. She closed her eyes and wished she were somewhere else.

"Yes," she said, turning to face Tyler, "that's what I usually end up with, too. But I always debate over all of the other flavors first."

"So, these are your dinner plans that can't be changed?"

"Well, Mr. Birch," started Sharon, "it's Austin's bir-"

"Yes, these are the ones." Austin shot Sharon a withering look that said 'Be quiet!' quite clearly. "I had made these plans with my friend before I knew about your

'standard procedures.' Plus, I'm really very bad at small talk, as you'll find if we do get together for drinks. Your dinner will be much better without me. But I appreciate your thinking of me."

"As it happens, I'm getting used to having dinner invitations turned down by you. Goodnight, Sharon. Austin." Tyler nodded and walked out. Austin stood facing the door for a few seconds.

Sharon blew a breath and asked, "What was that all about?"

"Nothing," Austin replied as she turned around. "We had said we would go out to eat tomorrow night, and later I got a note from Mr. Birch saying that he wanted me to go with him and the client for drinks and dinner. I told him I had dinner plans. He asked if I would change them and I said no. Not a problem. I really don't want to spend all Friday evening with Birch and Morris."

Sharon regarded Austin. "Are you sure this is okay? You still want to go out?"

"Yes, I really do. I think it's sweet of you to suggest it. Now, I've got a gift I have to pick up, so I'd better be off. See you tomorrow." She waved and left the office.

Once on the street, she walked to Borders Books. Since it was Robbie's birthday, she would see what kind of computer books they had and, coincidentally, use up time so that she could catch a bus closer to seven o'clock.

She found two excellent books on web design that didn't seem they would be too much over the head of a twelve year old, so she got both of them and had them wrapped. She also found a funny card. She would give all of it to Tyler when they left Saturday, and Robbie could open them with his other gifts. She felt happy with her selections and was relaxing with a cup of coffee in the café, when she felt someone pressing into her chair as though they were trying to get by. But when she tried to move forward, a hand on her shoulder stopped her. She felt a soft squeeze, then the swoosh of air as the person behind her leaned in close to her ear.

"Dulcie," he whispered. "I missed you yesterday." Austin nodded her head. She was astounded. She had been wasting time hoping to meet up with him on the bus, and he had found her while she shopped for books. How strange was this?

"I had my hair cut."

He chuckled. It sounded like a deep rumble. "So I see. It looks beautiful." He ran his hand from the back of her neck up through her hair as he spoke, cascading it through his fingers. She sat still, eyes closed, relishing his touch.

"Thank you," she stammered. "Do you work here?"

"Now Dulcinea, no questions. Except one. Will you meet me tonight? I want to see you. I need to be with you. I know you might be nervous, but there's no reason to be. I promise you."

Meeting with him was something she was absolutely not going to do. Seeing someone on a crowded bus, even engaging in questionable activities on the bus, was one thing. But actually meeting with someone she didn't know? That was not going to happen. She wasn't stupid.

"You know I can't meet you without knowing who you are. How do you know so much about me?" She spoke in a low voice. He had stopped playing with her hair, but his hand caressed her jaw as his thumb gently stroked behind her ear. She imagined to anyone watching, they would look like lovers enjoying a secret conversation. She breathed deeply, smelling the fresh, woodsy scent she had noticed on his raincoat. With his soft breath on her hair she almost forgot where they were. She wanted his hands on her as they had been that last day on the bus, but meeting him alone was out of the question.

"You can. I think you will. Tonight-I can't wait until Saturday. I will be near the Aquatic Park. Come out between eleven and eleven-fifteen and stand in the light where anyone can see you. You won't be sorry, Dulcie." He straightened, and when she turned a few seconds later, there was no one nearby who seemed the slightest bit suspicious. She did see Tyler Birch standing several aisles away, looking through a magazine.

She turned back to her coffee, a frown puckering her brows. Just having Mystery Man's hand on her shoulder, running through her hair, stroking her ear drove her crazy. She could feel her nipples standing erect, and he hadn't even touched them. What would it be like to really be with him, if he was able to do this much with

small contacts in a public place?

Suddenly, she was afraid. Not of Mystery Man, but of what she would be like if she did ever meet with him. Just as she was taking her next sip, she sensed someone behind her again. Tyler Birch. She sighed.

"Hello, Mr. Birch."

"I wish I knew how you did that. A man likes to think he has some mystery about him, but when he can't even come up behind a beautiful woman without being busted, it destroys his confidence. May I join you?" He stepped to the seat adjacent to hers and put down a cup of iced tea. "You're not leaving, are you? Here. Let me get you a refill." Without waiting for a reply he took her half-filled cup and walked to the thermos jugs of coffee. Once there he turned and raised her cup and his eyebrows.

"Columbian." He nodded and filled her cup from the thermos marked Columbian Roast, then brought it back to her. "Thank you. I think." Again, he raised his eyebrows at her as he took his seat. "Well, you didn't exactly ask me if I wanted more coffee, and you assumed I wanted company. But this is fine. Thanks."

"You're right. I guess it was kind of rude." He didn't get up, though. "Concerning the coffee, you've already paid, so if you don't want the refill, just leave it. As for the other, _do_ you not want company?" He smiled at her, and sipped his tea.

"I guess I hadn't thought about it one way or the other. How was the movie last night?"

"Gory, loud, action-packed. In short, everything a soon-to-be twelve year old lives for. Academy award material, assuming pre-pubescent children are deciding the awards. And sometimes that's the way it seems." Austin chuckled.

"I know. They don't make movies like Dr. Zhivago any more."

"I loved that book. And they did an outstanding job on the film, too."

"I was in college when it won best picture, and a sucker for a romantic story, even one that was tragic." She chuckled. "I cried and cried at the end of the movie, and

went back to the dorm determined to find within me a deep, dark Russian soul." She said the last in a deep voice with a Russian accent. Tyler smiled at her.

"And did you?"

"No. Mid-terms came upon me and I worried about having an educated soul, or at least a soul with a degree. I'm embarrassed to say though, that I hadn't read the book when I saw the movie. I immediately ran out and read everything Pasternak wrote. For years I planned that if I ever got to Russia I would make a pilgrimage to his grave."

"In Moscow?"

She looked at him in surprise. "How did you know that? Or was it a lucky guess?"

"You weren't the only one thinking about exotic journeys, you know. Did you ever get there?"

"No, afraid not. That was a long time ago, and life happened in the meantime. You know how it is. Things get put off, then get put aside. I might start thinking in those terms again, though." She stared off into space for a moment, before sipping her coffee and casting a shy smile his way.

"Really?" Tyler leaned back in his seat, stretching his legs out and crossing his ankles. He pushed his paper cup forward an inch with his thumb, and then back an inch with his index finger while he shot her a soft half smile. "Some reason why you might be thinking of adventure now?"

She stared at her Styrofoam cup dreamily. "Oh, just time for some changes, I think. Each year we get a little older, you know. I feel like I've been marking time, taking the easy path. Living is too important. And so is loving. I have to stop wishing love will find me and start being a little more active in the process."

Austin suddenly looked at Tyler, horrified, and on impulse laid her hand on his wrist. "I can't believe I just told you something so personal. I don't know why in the world I did that, but I hope you will forget it-all of it." His wrist was warm under her fingers; she could almost feel the warmth spread up her arm and through the rest of

her, calming her and yet making her feel flustered at the same time. Before she knew it, he moved his arm and captured her fingers in his, looking at her with concern.

"Austin, you didn't tell me anything so very personal. Don't be upset. This is what friends do in the café at Borders. There are books all around, and we were discussing a book. Nothing we said will go any further."

"Friends, huh?" she said with the ghost of a smile.

"Well, at least two people who know each other. Besides, since we're telling secrets, I've had thoughts along those same lines myself, recently" he replied, smiling back. He released her hand and picked up his tea. She pulled her hand back slowly, and even more slowly, the butterflies in her stomach settled down.

"You? But surely you don't have...." she cocked her head, looking at him quizzically. He gazed calmly back at her, his blue eyes boring into hers. "I guess I'd better head for home," she said. "I've enjoyed this, Tyler, thanks. I'm glad you sat down."

"I am too. Can I give you a ride home? I know how packed the bus is from here toward your house. My car is in the garage at the office, and I'm headed that way."

"No thanks. I've come to enjoy the bus ride lately. But if you can find a way to keep these books from Robbie, will you take them with you? He can open them Saturday at his party. I hope he likes them, and that they're appropriate for his knowledge level. I'm afraid I don't have much experience shopping for children."

"Austin, you didn't have to do this. I'm sure he will love them. He's so excited about coming over Saturday." He took the bag with the books. "Good heavens! I'm sure he'll like them if he can lift them."

"Oh dear." Austin's brow creased. Tyler laughed.

"I'm joking. Be warned that if you bought him anything to do with web design and he has questions, you're the one he's going to be calling at all hours."

"Fair enough," she said as she stood. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow." She threw her

cup in the trashcan as she made her way to the escalator. Just as she got on she glanced back toward the café.

Tyler sat there, watching her. He smiled and waved, and she waved back, thinking how nice he had been to chat with. She was surprised, but then put him out of her mind as she thought about her other surprise of the afternoon.

Mystery Man and his suggestion that they meet. She replayed in her mind all that he had said. Meet a stranger, at that hour, alone? She would have to be out of her mind. And she was half afraid she was.

*Chapter Six *

The night dragged by. The bus ride was uneventful, as she had known it would be, since she hadn't expected her Mystery Man to be on the bus. Her mother had already eaten when she got home and was getting her things together for her weekend away. A weekend Austin was beginning to look forward to since her birthday no longer loomed over everything else.

Around eight she took a shower, then laid out her clothes for the next day and climbed into bed to read. As it got closer to eleven she became more and more nervous. Although she had positively decided that she would not go to Aquatic Park, she knew that was exactly what she wanted to do. She turned her light out at eleven fifteen and punched her pillow before slamming her head into it. She pulled the covers over her, and then kicked them off a few minutes later. Tossing and turning, she glanced at the clock.

Eleven twenty-five. With a cry, she threw off the covers and jumped out of bed. She stepped out of her pajamas and slipped into her painter's pants. Grabbing a tee shirt from a drawer, she yanked it over her head and pulled on her tennis shoes. She glanced in the mirror and saw a reflection of her old self-baggy pants and tee shirt, tennis shoes. New hair, though, she thought. And new attitude.

She considered telling her mother that she was going out, but decided against it. It would only raise questions Austin didn't want to answer. She grabbed her house

keys from the hall table. There was a Bobbie's whistle on the key ring that she would keep handy, just in case.

The clock in the building lobby showed eleven thirty-five.

She ran to the corner of the street and took a sharp left, running full tilt to Beach Street and the concrete bleachers near the swim area, where she stopped.

The area had lights and she knew she could be seen, but had a sinking feeling she was too late. She couldn't feel him there. Tears stung her eyes. Her breath was coming in gasps and she bent over to catch it. She heard her name called in a very low voice and she straightened, but did not turn.

Suddenly, he was behind her, his hands on her waist, his sweet breath sighing and his voice whispering her name in her ear. "I thought you wouldn't come," he finally murmured, sounding relieved. He kissed her neck and ran his mouth around her earlobe, finally taking it into his mouth and sucking it gently. She sank back against him, her breath coming in gasps again, but for a different reason. He moved his hands to her abdomen and she covered them with her own hands.

"I almost didn't. I was afraid."

"You have no reason to fear me, Dulcie." He kissed her again. Suddenly, a blindfold was slipped over Austin's eyes, and she cried out.

"What is this? Why won't you let me see who you are?"

"It's not time." The blindfold was soft and silky. He tied it tight enough to hold, but not so that it would be uncomfortable. "Take my hand. We're going to my car." For a second, Austin jerked her hand back and stood stock still. Fear clutched her stomach. She had a quick premonition that her body would be found somewhere tomorrow and her neighbors would all tell the news people, "She was such a sensible girl. I can't believe she would just go off with someone." She pulled her hands to her stomach and waited, but she did not try to remove the blindfold.

"Dulcie." His voice was like a caress on her cheek. "I won't hurt you, but I need to be with you, to hold you. Please trust me." He took one of her hands from her stomach and she slowly followed him, whether lured by the sound of his voice or

pushed by her own loneliness, she didn't know

Mystery Man opened the passenger's door and helped Austin get situated. She heard the driver's door click shut, then the engine roared to life and they pulled away from the curb. Austin had no idea where they were going, but they did not cross a bridge. Before long, the car climbed a hill and made a short, sharp left, then stopped.

The engine fell silent. In fact, there was no sound or movement for several minutes. Austin sat quietly, taking her cue from Mystery Man. Just as she was going to ask something, he opened his door and got out. He came to her side of the car and helped her out. She heard the roar of the ocean. The night wind was cool and strong, making her shiver in her tee shirt. Immediately, he put something over her shoulders, and she was enveloped in warmth and his unique scent. She should have been frightened, but instead she felt safe.

He must have been leaning on the hood of the car when he pulled her close to his chest, between his legs. There was a long, hard bulge between his thighs. He pulled her against it, nestling her there, his arms trapping hers inside the jacket.

"I'm sorry you can't see what I do right now," he sighed into her ear. "The ocean is like a silvery carpet laid out before us. The moonlight is shimmering across the water in ever changing patterns as the waves rush toward the shore. There are a few clouds skittering across the skies, letting the winds push them northward. And there are birds swooping, soaring, and diving again all along the beach. It's unbelievably beautiful, yet none of it compares to what I see when I look at you." He buried his head in her hair, and his embrace tightened.

"Your words are so lovely, but I don't deserve them. I'm so plain. I wish I knew who you are, and why you are doing this." He didn't answer. In a soft voice she continued, "Yet, in a way I don't want to know."

"You are not plain, Dulcinea. You are a gorgeous woman, as well as intelligent and kind. I'm going to kiss you now, Dulcie." He turned her to him and cupped her cheeks in his hands.

Austin wasn't sure what to expect, but she was unprepared for the electricity that pulsed through her lips as they met his. She heard a quick intake of his breath, and

thought that he was surprised too. He stood and quickly deepened the kiss, pulling her into his arms. Her arms found their way out of his jacket and wrapped around his waist, holding him to her. He broke contact in order to drop light kisses from one corner of her mouth to the other. He ran his tongue across her lips, and when her lips parted slightly he took full advantage, pushing his tongue into her mouth. He was gentle at first, running it over her teeth and along the inside of her lips, until Austin moaned, and he took that as permission to do more. He touched her tongue with his, and she felt her breath quicken.

As he pressed his lips ever tighter against hers, his hands explored her. He dropped the jacket from her shoulders. "Yes," she said against his lips. The hem of her tee shirt was no barrier to him and he ran his hands up her back as Austin arched it, pushing her breasts against him. He turned her away from him a fraction and moved one hand to a breast, cupping it and kneading it. Austin drew in a hard breath and she pulled her lips away from his. "Oh!" She leaned into his hand at the same time she placed her hand on the outside of her tee shirt over his, pressing him into her breast.

Mystery Man stepped back and pulled the tee shirt off of her. She covered her breasts, but he pulled her hands away from her body. Was he looking at her? She assumed so. Was he pleased? She could only hope. Then he brought her to him long enough to whisper, "If you could see how beautiful you are with the moonlight shining in your hair, illuminating your body. You take my breath away." He kissed her cheeks and was surprised to find them wet with tears. "What's wrong?" Worry was evident in his voice.

"I never thought to hear anyone say things like this to me. I thought..."

"Shhh." He drew her into his arms and rocked her, dropping kisses on the top of her head. When he felt her go still, he put his mouth to her ear and said simply, "I've been lonely too. I don't want to be lonely any more." He sank to the ground, pulling her with him, then lay beside her, putting his jacket under her head.

Austin couldn't determine where she was in the city to find grass as well as the sound of the ocean so close. She heard no traffic. Then, she forgot about where they were and concentrated only on her immediate location, which was in Mystery Man's arms, lying beside him in the moonlight.

From that point, everything was a blur for Austin. He kissed her lips, gently and then harder. Before she knew it, he ran kisses along her jaw and down her neck, licking the point where her pulse beat wildly. She thought she would die, it felt so good. But not as good as when he took her breast into his mouth and suckled her. He kneaded her breast with his lips then drew her nipple deep into his mouth, sucking, grazing it with his teeth. She groaned in sheer pleasure. His hands roamed over her, finally slipping under the waistband of her pants. He paused long enough to remove her shoes and pants. The grass was wet under her buttocks, but she didn't care. He returned to her breasts but his hand stroked her legs and hips. As he moved his attentions to her other breast, he tangled his fingers in the silky hair at the junction of her thighs. Austin moaned and spread her legs. He moved his head down her body and kissed the insides of her thighs before she felt his breath and tongue on her clit.

Austin didn't know what to do. She didn't even know men and women did things like this, felt like this. When he ran his tongue over her clit and then into the opening of her vagina, she wanted to scream his name, but she didn't know what it was. She felt heat build in her, like a volcano, from deep inside, pulsing to the surface. He moved his head to find her clitoris again, his tongue and lips driving her crazy.

Austin tangled her fingers in his hair and held his head in place. She moved her hips against him, and swung her head from side to side as her movements became frenzied. She could feel, only feel. Suddenly, she went rigid as her emotions flew out of control. There was blackness all around her and she seemed to fall from a great height. She couldn't tell if she was up or down, inside or out. She gulped for air, but there didn't seem to be enough to fill her.

Gradually, she came back to herself, but her breathing was uneven. She could feel the cool wind on her stomach, and a light breath tickling the hair covering her mons.

He rubbed his head on her stomach, nudging against her with his lips as he kissed his way up to take her nipple in his mouth again. She could feel his hard shaft against her belly, pressing into her. "Let me touch you," she said softly.

"Yes," he whispered against her breast. He knelt between her legs and unzipped his pants, pushing them to his knees. He took her hand to help her sit and then placed it

on him, hissing when she held him tightly and then as she slid her hand down his length.

"It feels so wonderful," she said. "What do I call you?"

"What?" he murmured. He was confused by the non sequitur and distracted by what her hand was doing to him.

"What do I call you? I wanted to shout your name earlier, but I didn't know what to call you. Will you love me tonight? Because if so, I will want to know your name." All the while, she stroked his penis. Just then, she moved her hand to the heavy sacks that hung below his penis and lightly squeezed them. He gasped. It was all he could do to think, much less speak, and at this point a whisper seemed appropriate. "I don't know. Alonso, like Don Quixote, I suppose. Oh, Dulcie, that feels so good."

"Alonso doesn't seem a good enough name for you, but until I know you really, it will do. Alonso, will you love me now? I want to know how it feels to be filled."

A groan escaped his lips. "Dulcie, I didn't think this far ahead. I didn't bring anything for protection, fool that I am. But on Saturday, if you still feel the same, nothing will stop me from loving you."

"Then let me taste you. As you did me."

"You don't know what you're asking. Do you know anything about men, Dulcie?" He moved away from her but remained on his knees.

"Please." Hearing her plea in that single word, he stared at her, knowing that she was a neophyte, that she didn't know what she was asking or what it entailed. But God, he wanted it. Her touch almost drove him to the point of madness; he was already at the point of pain. But even that wouldn't have convinced him to take her mouth if he hadn't recognized the need in her. Although this was all new, but still she needed to give back, to give pleasure to him as he had to her.

Alonso smiled grimly to himself, knowing that he was using her inexperienced desire as rationale for what he wanted, but it was enough to move him back to her.

Austin felt his penis nudge her mouth. She ran her tongue across her lips and then

across him. His sharp intake of breath let her know that he found what she had done pleasurable. He held her head with one hand and his penis with the other and guided it into her mouth. She took just the tip at first, tasting it, sampling it with her lips and tongue. Gradually, she moved her head forward to take more of him; he rocked, moving out of her mouth and then back in, and she soon picked up the rhythm. She ran her tongue across the tip and licked a pearl of moisture, savoring the flavor of him. After a few more moments, she heard his breathing become ragged and he pulled out of her mouth. She felt spurts of liquid hit her breasts, running between them onto her stomach. He bent over her, holding her head to his chest, whispering her name.

"You can't know how sexy you are. Just looking at you makes me hard all over again." He kissed her deeply and she tasted herself on his tongue. It was a heady, powerful feeling to realize what they had done to each other, how they made the other feel. She wanted everything he had to offer.

"Let me help you get dressed," he said in a low, soft voice. She felt him stand and in a moment he helped her put on her pants and tee shirt, then her shoes. Austin said nothing, allowing him to dress her. "I shouldn't have put you on the ground. You're liable to catch cold. Let's sit in the car for a few minutes."

He took her hand and walked her to the car. She heard the door open. In a moment, he pulled her on his lap, adjusting his position so that she could get her legs inside, and he closed the door, holding her on his lap. "Just sit a moment and get warm and then I'll take you home." He nuzzled her hair and sighed.

Finally, Austin spoke. "I want to be with you again."

"I want to be with you again, too."

"I must know you. Why can't I know what you look like? Why hide it from me?"

"It's not time." He was quiet for a moment, then, "Will you spend your birthday with me?"

"Yes."

"It's enough for now." They sat quietly for several more minutes, then he sighed. "It's after one. I'd better get you home." He opened the door and helped her out so he could stand, then settled her in the seat again.

Not much later they pulled up to the curb in front of her building. "Let me help you out. Swear that when I take the blindfold off you won't try to see me, Dulcie."

"I won't, I promise." He came around the car and helped her to the sidewalk. He took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly, then moved behind her and removed the blindfold.

He leaned to her ear. "Will you be all right getting into the building?"

"Yes."

"I'll wait to make sure of that, my precious." One quick kiss on the side of her head and he was gone. Austin felt chilled as soon as he moved away from her. She heard the sound of the engine revving and she opened her eyes. Her keys made a jingle as she dug them out of her pocket. She walked quickly to the main door of the building, suddenly in a hurry to get to bed where she could take her time and relive the night. As she entered the lobby, she heard the smooth throaty purr of a sports car drive off.

So he had stayed to make sure she got in safely. After all that has happened tonight, she thought, that's somehow the sweetest part of it.

Chapter Seven

When the alarm went off later that morning, Austin was not ready to get up. By the time she'd dropped off to sleep it was almost three and the alarm was set to go off just three and a half hours later. She had lain awake long after she went to bed, thinking about Alonso's words and his phrases, trying to place who he was. Surely it had to be someone who knew her very well, but there was no way to place the whispered voice with a full voice. Too many men would match his height. But there was one thing she knew for certain and that was that she was attracted to him. It wasn't just the way he talked to her, or even the fact that he quite obviously wanted

her. There was a chemical-or electrical-connection that she had felt when he kissed her.

She dragged herself out of bed and into the shower. Her clothes were ready to be put on, and when she looked in the mirror, she barely recognized the woman who looked back. Her hair was a shiny helmet swinging around her shoulders. Small, citrine, pear-shaped earrings twinkled between the strands. The blouse with its manly tie was rather severe around her face, but the soft texture of the sweater and the supple suede toned the look down. Added to the effect of the clothes she could see was the effect of those she couldn't see, but which she could feel.

The new bra and thong made her feel shocking, but not as much as the garter and stockings. She felt downright decadent, and only she would know it. Which actually made it all that much more delicious. Alonso had said she deserved silk and lace and now she was wearing them. She laughed at herself and her new way of thinking. She twirled in front of the mirror and then grabbed a pocketbook she hadn't used in years. It wasn't suede, but the color matched well enough. She dashed into the kitchen to pour her mother's coffee and then took it to her.

"Mother, here's your coffee. How did you sleep?"

"Fine." She muted the television. "That looks very nice. Why are you so dressed up?"

"Remember, I told you about my presentation? It's today. Do you have everything to take to Ruthie's? Is there anything you need me to do before I go?"

"No. There's a birthday card for you on the table. Don't open it until tomorrow. I will try to call you after the game. Happy birthday, Austin."

"Thank you, Mother. I hope you have a good time." She bent to kiss her mother's forehead. "I'd better go. Call me if you need anything." She turned and hurried out.

Ruthie walked in as she was leaving. Austin asked the housekeeper if she could make some time for her one morning the next week to discuss whether there was a place near her where Sarah might like to live. Then she ran for the bus.

Sharon once again made a fuss over Austin's outfit. "The sweater goes perfectly with the skirt and blouse," she said. "Where have all of these clothes been all of these years? In all the time you've worked here, I don't think I've ever seen you out of those awful baggy pants and tee shirts. And now I see you've had all of these wonderful things I could have been borrowing."

Austin burst into laughter.

"Well, it's good to know someone is in a good mood this morning." That voice could belong to no one other than Tyler Birch. But it was a little off, raspy and not as deep as usual, and Austin turned to him in surprise.

"Forgive me for saying so, Mr. Birch, but you don't sound well." He raised his eyebrows when she called him Mr. Birch.

"As a matter of fact, I had a rather late night and probably didn't get enough sleep. But thank you for your concern, Ms. Gardner. I'll see you in the conference room this afternoon." He turned and walked down the hall.

"You two are certainly formal with each other. Hope that doesn't come through with the client." Sharon raised her eyebrows and sat back behind the counter, where, as if by pre-arranged signal, the phone started ringing. Austin picked up her messages and went to her cubicle.

As soon as she booted her machine and brought up her email, she was surprised to see one from Tyler. "You look this morning exactly as I had envisioned when I (fortunately) lectured you about your dress. Ron Morris would like your designs now even if they were trash, which I know they aren't.

Birch"

The nerve of that man. As if she actually needed a lecture on how to dress appropriately for a business meeting. Did he think she was a rookie in the business world? Did he think she crawled out from under a stone and started living the day he deigned to notice her?

She hit Reply. "I am ever so grateful that you took enough interest in the poor flower girl to tutor her in the proper way to address the world. Whatever would I

have done without you? If Mr. Morris spends money based on the way women dress, you would be better off firing me and giving his project to Teresa Mitchell. Her salary is much less than mine and she's got more beauty and sex appeal in her little finger than I do with all of my new skirts and haircuts. Think of all the accounts you'd sell and all of the money you would save.

Gardner"

She hit Send, and immediately regretted it. It was like slamming the door to your car, and just when you can't stop it from closing, realizing the keys are still in the ignition. She jumped up and went at a near run to Tyler's office. Just as she rounded the corner, she saw him grinning at his computer screen. He glanced up.

"I just replied to your message, and I'd appreciate it if you would just delete it without reading. Please."

"Too late, Ms. Gardner. Actually, I thought it was a rather unique suggestion. I will have to pay more attention to Ms. Mitchell's work. Or at least her little finger," he muttered. He smiled at Austin and lowered his voice. "As for your being a poor flower girl, you're wrong. If you think someone else here outshines you in the looks department, you'd better get a new mirror." Austin's mouth fell open and she stared at Tyler. "Did you have something else to talk to me about?"

"No, um, I think that's all. The email said it all, I mean."

"Well, I assume you have work to do then, as do I." He dismissed her with a look and picked up some papers from his desk. Austin turned and went back to her cubicle. She was stunned by Tyler's words, but she did have work to do. For one thing, she wanted to be sure all of the handouts for the presentation were in order. As she approached her desk, she saw three or four of the college kids gathered around it.

She saw why when they parted to let her through. On her desk was a huge bouquet of lilacs, shaded from deep purple to light lavender, and white lilies. Lilacs were her favorite flower, but who knew that? Her Uncle Dan had, but she doubted that even her mother knew.

"Austin," one of the girls said, "who in the world sent that?"

"That's what I'd like to know," added Sharon. "Read the card."

"Well, it's got to be from my mother," Austin said. "Who else would be sending me flowers?" She pulled the envelope from the bouquet and removed the card.

"Dulcinea. I got no sleep last night, and perhaps you didn't either. Still, I want to see you tonight. Will you come to me? A black MG will be parked outside your building at eleven tonight. If you want to be with me, get in and put on the blindfold. I will join you shortly after that. Alonso"

"Well?" Sharon sniffed the flowers.

"My mom. She's going away for the weekend and just wanted me to know she would be thinking of me."

"Gosh, the most my mom ever got me was a phone card when she was going to be out of town," said one of the girls. "Maybe I should ask your mom to call my mom and give her some hints." She chuckled. After that, everyone drifted back to their cubes. Austin was moving the bouquet out of the way when Henry came into her cube.

"Good heavens, that's a big bouquet. Who's it from?"

"My mother. She's going out of town and wanted to wish me luck on the presentation."

"Well, she doesn't mind spending money on stupid gifts," he said. "Flowers die. Now, about the present-" he looked at her for the first time since coming into her cube. "My Lord, Austin. You look wonderful. I think after the presentation we should go out and have a few drinks. You know in case things go badly, you might need a little cheering up." He sidled up to her, and she backed up a step. Henry had never paid her any physical attention until she changed her dress style. Now he was an honest to goodness pest.

"Is there a question about the presentation?" Tyler's normally deep voice rasped the question.

"No, I don't think so." Henry backed up two steps. "I just came in to make sure. Austin looks good today, doesn't she?" he remarked offhandedly, while glancing at her a little too long for her comfort.

"Henry, unless you want to open yourself to a law suit by the lady, and every feminist group in the country, you'd better reconsider your words, or at least how you say them. And you'd better learn not to leer. It's poor form." He addressed Austin. "Is there anything last minute that needs to be done for the presentation?"

"I was planning to go over the information sheets when I got back here. But there's been a stir caused by the arrival of these flowers."

"Very nice," he said appreciatively. "I like lilacs. An admirer?" He raised his eyebrows and Austin blushed at the accuracy of his guess.

"My mother."

"Your mother? Very thoughtful. They won't be easy to get home on the bus. Let me know if there's a problem with the info sheets." He turned and left, Henry right behind him. The two looked like the stereotypical corporate shark and his own little remora. Oh, damn, thought Austin. He's right. Getting them home on the bus would be a problem. But she'd handle it. She tucked the card into her purse and settled down to work.

Just before two, Austin, suddenly nervous, picked up her stack of information sheets describing the characteristics of her programs and went to the conference room. She was the first to arrive and spent her time making sure both sites were in accessible folders and that the computer and projector screen were functioning properly. Presently, Henry came in and took a seat opposite the podium.

"Don't forget, if you need help during the presentation I'll be glad to take over. And if things don't go well, don't feel too bad. This is your first presentation, after all. Other opportunities will come up."

"I'm fine, Henry, but thanks." Actually, Austin's palms were damp and her stomach was full of butterflies. She didn't need the familiar tingle down her spine to tell her that Tyler was nearby. She heard his voice coming from the hall. He led Ron Morris

into the room, closed the door and made the introductions.

"Ron, I know you've met Austin Gardner before, and also Henry Wyatt." Ron nodded at Henry, but smiled and held out his hand to Austin.

"Nice to see you again Ms. Gardner."

"Thank you, Mr. Morris. The same here."

"Austin is going to make the presentation today, Ron. She has a site design that I think you will appreciate for its simplicity and sophistication. Austin?" Ron took a seat and Tyler turned to dim the lights. Just before he sat down she glanced at him. He gave her an encouraging smile and her nervousness vanished.

"Mr. Morris, I've developed two sites for you, actually." She chanced another glance at Tyler. A slight frown puckered the skin between his eyebrows. Henry looked very surprised.

"The first is something I collaborated with Henry on, and the second I designed alone. Either one is ready to be put into use immediately, or can easily be changed to address any additional needs you have. If you have any questions as I make the presentations, please let me know." Austin stepped to the podium where the controls for the computer were and launched into Henry's site design. Ron Morris and Tyler sat silently throughout. Henry tossed some comments out, further explaining why a color was used or why he felt the animation was effective.

"Are there any questions, Mr. Morris?"

"No." A one-word answer was not encouraging. She took a deep breath and opened the site she had developed.

"This is the vision I had for your site after visiting three of your showrooms in the Bay Area. I found the atmosphere in each to be inviting and friendly to customers. Your sales force inspires confidence in the buyer, without being pushy or overbearing. For that reason, I felt earth tones and a subtle draw would be more suitable for your web site. All of the incentives are present to draw the casual buyer in, and the site is easy for anyone to navigate. I think you'll like this." Once again, she gave a tour of the site.

By the time she finished, she had taken over an hour and a half of time. More than the time allotted, and she wondered if that had hurt her. When she concluded, Tyler turned the lights up, and stood at the head of the table, hands resting on the back of a chair. Austin stood at the podium waiting for any questions or comments.

Amazingly, Henry was the first to speak. "Well, Ron. I'm sure you thought that was quite a long presentation. Would you like to take a short break and then get together to discuss what you've seen? Austin, maybe you will excuse us." Austin shot a glance at Henry and then cast a furtive look at Tyler. His face was a blank. Still, he kept silent, waiting for Ron to speak.

"No, thanks." He looked squarely at Austin. "Ms. Gardner, which of these presentations do you prefer?"

Austin took only a moment. "While I think they both have merit, I definitely prefer the second. It reflects the feelings I got when I visited your business. I think it gives the Internet prospective buyer the same impression I got while onsite: that your staff will help with a purchase or will assist simply by answering questions. That they are competent adults who know what a large investment it is to buy a car."

"I see. Then why did you show me the first site?"

She shrugged slightly. "There are lots of different people using the Internet. A great many of them are young, impatient people who like the extra flash of lights and color. I saw young people at your showrooms, along with couples just starting out with families, and older, more established people. Henry and I thought that perhaps you would want to appeal to the younger audience, rather than what I had originally envisioned."

Ron snorted.

"Good answer, but it was the wrong approach for what I wanted. I wouldn't have signed anything based on appeal to only one area of our market. The second site addresses everything we need, and," he looked at Tyler, "I think we have a deal."

"I had a feeling you would like Austin's work," Tyler said quietly. "Let's go back to

my office and work out the details." He looked at Austin and Henry. "Austin, we will get back with you to set up a meeting time for you and Ron and his staff to finish up. Why don't both of you join us in the St. Francis for drinks in," he glanced at his watch then at Ron, "about an hour?" Ron nodded, and they left, leaving Austin and Henry in the conference room. Austin pulled out a chair and literally fell into it, heaving a sigh of relief.

"Well, you sure pulled off a surprise, didn't you? Why didn't you tell me what you had planned?" He spoke quietly.

"Henry, I tried to tell you why I had designed the site as I had. You didn't listen. Look, I could have been wrong, and you could have been right. But if I had pressed the point you wouldn't have understood, and you might have found a way to keep me from making the presentation. You couldn't have shown the second site with the confidence I had in it. It would have reflected badly, on both of us and on the firm."

"You still should have warned me. I am your manager, you know." He folded his hands on the table and looked at Austin with an expression that frightened her. "Don't ever embarrass me again, Austin, or you will be looking for work somewhere else." He got up and left her sitting alone in the room, wondering just how much trouble she was in. If Henry was this mad about not being informed, what would Tyler say to her? Of course, they did get the contract, and that should make up for something.

She sighed in relief that it was over, then got up to shut down the computer, gather her things and go back to her desk. She had forty-five minutes before she was expected at the St. Francis, and she intended to spend all of them looking at her flowers and thinking about tonight.

When Austin walked into the St. Francis, she saw Tyler and Ron Morris immediately, sitting at a quiet, corner table. Henry walked in right behind her, but cut around her and preceded her to the table. She was so annoyed with Henry that she failed to note the appreciative glances other men in the bar cast her way. Ron and Tyler stood when she approached, and Tyler pulled out a chair obviously meant for her, forcing Henry to sit in the chair nearest Ron.

"What will you have, Austin?" The waiter had slipped up silently and waited for

their order.

"Perrier, please, with a slice of lime." Henry ordered a Manhattan.

"Perrier? Are you sure? We're celebrating here, you know," said Ron, with a smile. "I look forward to a rewarding relationship between our companies."

"As do I, Mr. Morris-"

"Ron, please."

"Ron," Austin said with a smile. "But I'm afraid I had another appointment scheduled before I knew about this," she waved at the bar area, "and I won't be able to stay very long. I hope you'll forgive me for cutting our time short."

"Yes, a birthday dinner, isn't it, Austin?" Henry smiled at her with a glint in his eye. Austin flushed, first with embarrassment and then with anger. How had Henry found out?

"Oh, happy birthday, Austin," said Ron. "And many happy returns." He held up his glass in a mock toast.

"It's not until tomorrow," said Tyler quietly, "but it's never too soon to celebrate the good things in life." He looked at her with a smile.

"Does _everyone_ know about my birthday? This is embarrassing." The waiter brought the drinks and she picked hers up to give herself something else to focus on.

"Well, thirty-five is kind of a milestone year. Happy birthday, Austin." Henry's eyes positively gleamed with malice as he looked at her over the rim of his glass. Austin's face turned even redder as she took a sip of her Perrier. Ron cleared his throat and looked at his glass.

"Henry, telling a lady's age is always rude. May I see you a moment?" Without waiting for a reply, Tyler got up from his seat. "Excuse us, will you?" He walked toward the lobby and Henry, with another glance at Austin, stood.

"Ron, it was nice seeing you again." He held out his hand and Ron shook it, then

Henry left the table. When Tyler returned a few moments later, he was alone.

"Well, that was uncomfortable. I'm sorry for that Ron."

"It's not I who should be apologized to, but thanks." Ron smiled at Austin, who returned it, with appreciation.

"Austin and I will discuss this later." Tyler touched Austin's shoulder. "I was told that our table is about ready. Shall we go into the dining room? Austin, I hope you and Sharon have a pleasant dinner. I'll see you tomorrow morning?" She nodded.

"Thank you so much for giving my ideas consideration, Ron. I'll find out from Tyler what you discussed as to the next step and I'll be in touch very soon." She held out her hand. Ron held it for several moments and smiled into her eyes.

"I'll look forward to that."

Austin all but raced out of the hotel and across the street to Macy's.

The Cheesecake Factory occupied a large part of the top floor of the building, but the waiting area was already filled with people waiting for seating. With their reservations, she and Sharon were led to their table, which had a view of rush hour around Union Square.

Over glasses of wine, Austin told Sharon about what had happened during the afternoon.

"I can assure you I didn't tell anyone why we were coming to dinner. As far as I know, the only person who even knew we were coming to dinner is Tyler. But he wouldn't say anything to Henry. I don't think he even likes Henry very much."

"Really? Why do you say that?"

"Austin, you've got to open your eyes and ears a little more. Hello! Do we work in the same office?" Sharon laughed and shook her head. "If you saw them together very much, you'd know. It's not that Tyler is rude to Henry; he just doesn't go out of his way to see him. Or talk to him. Or include him in meetings. Henry's the only

person in the office he treats in a special way." She sipped her wine. "Well, except you, of course."

"You've implied that once before and I don't know what you mean. He treats me just as indifferently as he does anyone else."

"No he doesn't, and you treat him differently too. You're not sarcastic with anyone like you are with him. Lately, you've been going out of your way to trade barbs with him, and that says something, girl. I think you like him too." Austin's mouth dropped open and Sharon grinned at her.

"You are so wrong!" The talk for the rest of the dinner focused on Sharon and her boyfriend du jour. Austin had always thought Sharon was wild and a little naughty, the way she dated someone new almost every week. But now she wondered what Sharon would say if she described how she had spent the previous night. It was almost seven-thirty when they ended their dinner. Austin had decided to take a taxi home, and returned to the office to get her flowers. Sharon walked toward Market Street to catch her bus.

The lobby doors were still open, awaiting the cleaning people. Austin hurried through the lobby and back toward her cube. As she rounded the corner she gasped. Broken glass littered the water-covered floor and lilacs and lilies were hanging out of the trash can. Tyler Birch was standing over it all.

Chapter Eight

"What in hell is going on here?" Her voice was cold as ice as she rushed forward and stooped to see what could be salvaged of the flowers. Tyler's strong hands forced her to her feet, and she looked up at him, glaring, but trying to keep from crying too.

"Austin, I came back to wait for you, thinking I would give you a ride home with your flowers. I came in to leave you a note to tell you to come and get me in my office and found this." He gestured to the mess on the floor. "I'm sorry. I don't know how it happened. But you're going to ruin your skirt and maybe cut yourself if you

rummage around. Let me help."

"But," she looked helplessly at her flowers in the trashcan, "they were sitting far back from the edge. They couldn't have fallen off accidentally." She leaned her head against the front of his suit jacket, and he gently laid his arm across her shoulders. She could smell whiskey on his breath and something else that she couldn't identify readily. He felt strong and sure. "Lilacs are my favorite flower. You can't find them in florist shops. He went to so much trouble," she said softly.

"He?" Tyler pushed Austin away from him and looked down at her. "So I was right to begin with. You have an admirer. Well, I should have known." He guided her back toward the lobby. "Look, go and get some paper towels and wet them thoroughly. In the kitchen area should be some aluminum foil or plastic wrap or something to protect your clothes from the water." He gave her a little push and then said, "Bring it all back here and we'll see what we have."

When Austin came back with several wet paper towels and a large piece of aluminum foil, she found Tyler pulling stems of flowers out of the trash and making sure no glass was mixed in. A few were broken and couldn't be saved, but when he got finished, there was a very large bouquet remaining. He held the stems as Austin wrapped the wet paper towels around them and then secured them in the foil. Tyler picked the remaining glass from the floor and put it in the trashcan. "That should work," he said. "It's still a pretty nice looking bouquet."

"How did you think of that? I mean, I guess I would have eventually, when I stopped being flustered and angry."

"I have a sister. There was always some kind of disaster going on in the house. Now, let's get you home so you can get these in some fresh water."

"Thank you very much, Tyler." He retrieved his briefcase from his office and met her in the lobby where she held the flowers in one hand and her briefcase in the other.

Tyler opened the door of a dark green Jeep, holding her flowers until she buckled her seatbelt. As they drove toward the Fisherman's Wharf area, the fragrance of lilacs filled the vehicle.

"Austin, would you like to stop somewhere and get a drink?"

She brought a spray of lilacs to her nose and breathed the scent. "I'm sorry, but I have plans."

He pulled up to the front of her building. "Of course. Well, Robbie and I will be here a little after ten tomorrow. Is there anything I can bring? I thought we would just walk over to Boudin's for lunch. Robbie will be having a full complement of party food and goodies by the evening. And hey, I forgot earlier, but Barb said to be sure and invite you to the party. I should have thought of it sooner."

She opened the door and slipped out to the sidewalk. "Thanks, Tyler, but I have plans tomorrow night. I know that's beginning to sound like a broken record," she said with a smile, "but you don't know how different it is for me to be able to say it. Thanks for your help and the ride. I'll see you tomorrow morning." She closed the door and went into the building. Just inside the front door she turned to see him sitting at the curb. Once she was inside the building he pulled away.

Later, Austin realized that she couldn't remember exactly how she passed the time between when she got home at eight-thirty and when the mantle clock chimed ten forty-five. She arranged the flowers in a tall vase and put them on her dresser so that she could breathe in their scent as she slept. She decided to wear the thong, but not the bra or garter. Pulling a pair of jeans from the back of her closet, she matched them with a rust colored satin camisole that had been hidden deep in a dresser drawer.

After wearing loose fitting clothes for so long, the tightness of the jeans was actually a bit exciting. She felt her thighs move against the coarse fabric, and it was stimulating in a way she had never noticed before. Her nipples rubbing against the smoothness of the satin was stimulating too, and the thought that in a short while something else would be moving against her skin made her heart race. She added gold earrings that her uncle had given her years ago, and pulled a light cotton jacket over her camisole. She put her house keys in the jacket pocket, ran a brush through her hair and slipped into her tennis shoes.

She got to the lobby door exactly at eleven. A black MG was parked at the curb. Opening the passenger door she found a blood-red rose lying on a black silk scarf.

She picked them up and climbed in, buckling the seatbelt. Laying the rose on her lap, she folded the scarf so that it formed a band. She placed it over her eyes and tied it securely behind her head. Moments later, she heard the driver's door open and felt him sit beside her. After only a second he turned her face so that he could kiss her. His tongue brushed her lips and gained entry to her mouth. "I've been thinking about that all day," he whispered. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," she said, and punctuated it with a nod.

Alonso started the car and pulled smoothly away from the curb.

"Don't you think it looks a little strange for me to be riding around with my eyes covered?"

He chuckled. "This is San Francisco, Dulcie. Nothing looks strange." He spoke so low she could hardly hear him over the engine, but she laughed.

"You're right," she replied. "Are we going back to where we were last night?"

"Yes." She felt the car climb and turn, and then silence as he turned the engine off. Austin heard him open his door and then he opened hers, helping her out. "Stand right here for just a minute." She heard a slight swoosh, and then he lowered her onto a thick, soft blanket. She lay with her hands on her stomach and her knees bent. She felt him lie beside her, then put his arm under her head and turn her toward him. He kissed her cheek and ear.

"I can't believe you're here with me again. All day I kept thinking that maybe you wouldn't come. Did you get my flowers?"

"Yes, oh yes. They're so beautiful. Thank you. How did you know to give me lilacs?"

"I know many things about you, sweetheart. I'm glad they made you happy."

"The flowers are beautiful but you make me happy." She said it shyly, while smoothing her hand down his hair to his neck. He tightened his hold and ran his hand down her back to cup her buttocks against his hard erection. She could feel wetness between her legs, and her nipples were already erect with just his nearness.

"I want you." Her simple statement undid him. He groaned her name and leaned on his elbow so that he could unbutton her jacket. Pulling her to a sitting position, he slid the jacket off of her shoulders. The satin of her camisole shimmered in the moonlight, and he ran his hand from her stomach over her breasts, reveling in the smoothness of the satin covering the pebbly hardness of her nipples. The contradiction of texture stimulated him, and he couldn't wait any longer for the touch of her skin. He pulled the camisole from the waistband of her jeans, and over her head. She lay back on the blanket while he covered her breasts with his mouth and his hand. She wove her fingers through his hair, stroking it and encouraging him with little whimpers.

As he suckled, he unzipped her jeans and thrust his hand between her legs. He lifted his head, his eyes full of wonder that she couldn't see. "You're already so wet, Dulcie. Wet and hot, just waiting for me."

"Yes, waiting for you." He sat up and pulled her shoes off, followed by her jeans.

"Were you wearing this thong today or did you put it on just for me?" He stroked her thighs.

"Well, I was thinking of you when I bought it." He chuckled, and took them off.

"I'm glad I didn't know this today. I would have been a crazy man thinking of you in it." He slipped out of his shoes and stood to unzip his jeans. His socks, jeans and briefs fell beside Austin's clothes. His shirt came off with a quick pull over his head. He looked down at her, spread before him, like a goddess, offering all she had, all she was, and he wondered how he had gotten so lucky. He reached down to pull a small foil wrapped package from his jeans and removed the condom from its wrapper. He dropped to his knees and put it on, then gently spread Austin's legs and settled between them.

He kissed her deeply. She wrapped her arms around him and returned each caress of his hands, each stroke of his tongue. When he began to drive his tongue in and out of her mouth, she gently sucked it with each thrust. Slowly he moved his hips against Austin's, matching the action of his tongue.

She could feel the tip of his penis pushing against her, and tried to match that motion too, driving her hips upward as he pushed down. He moaned and raised his head just slightly, breaking the kiss. "I'm afraid I'm going to hurt you. Do you want me, Dulcie?"

"I want you," she moaned into his mouth.

"Put your legs around my waist, and hold tight." She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. Burying her head against his shoulder, she held her breath in preparation for the horrible pain she had heard always accompanied a first sexual experience.

She heard him take a ragged breath and felt his penis invade her, slowly at first, and then with a hard thrust. She gasped, feeling the stretching that allowed her to accept him totally. There was a pinprick of pain that disappeared as soon as she noticed it. Nothing she had heard or read about had ever prepared her for the feeling of being so connected. For the special feeling of being complete, whole.

She had taken him inside of her, and she could actually feel him stretch her and fill her. She cried silent tears that dampened her blindfold and seeped under it to wet her cheeks. She tightened her hold on his shoulders.

He lay still, breathing hard. Finally, he raised to his elbows and looked at her. Seeing her tears he closed his eyes and rested his forehead on hers.

"Did I hurt you?" Austin shook her head. Moments went by and when he spoke again his voice was low against her ear. "I'm sorry, Dulcinea. I wanted to make you happy. I wanted you so much, but I should have waited to make sure you were ready, that you understood. If I could undo this for you I would." Contrition was evident in his low voice. He moved to pull out of her, but she held him with her legs and wrapped her arms around his chest.

"No! Please. I can't explain how I feel. But happy doesn't begin to describe it. Fulfilled. I don't know. It's..." She fell silent, and he moved slightly against her, making her moan. "Oh yes." Her voice was low and husky, even to her own ears. "I don't know what to do. If you'll teach me how to make you happy, I'll do it, just please don't leave me unloved." Her words shocked her to her core. A week ago she

could never have imagined saying such words, even to herself. Even in her secret, innermost dreams. And now she had said them to a man who was a stranger. Someone whose face she hadn't even seen, but whose touch she knew as well as her own. Whose scent she knew she could use to distinguish him from any other man. "I need you."

Using his elbows to hold himself over her, he pumped her with long, slow strokes. She raised her hips to meet him and with each thrust a whimper escaped her lips. As the tempo of his movements increased she heard his breathing become rough and felt herself losing control. By the time she cried "Alonso!" to the wind, he was spilling himself into the condom and whispering "Austin" into her hair.

Austin couldn't ever remember feeling so happy. She nuzzled Alonso's neck as he rested most of his weight on her. When he eased away from her, her fingers whispered across his face tracing his smile, making her smile in return. He rolled off of her, taking her along so that she lay over him. He was still inside of her and she positioned her knees on either side of him, naturally allowing him greater access to her. She lazily rubbed her breasts against his chest then put her head against his heart, where she heard a steady beat. His hands roamed up and down her back. When she pushed her hips and ground them against him, he growled. She'd read in novels that a character "growled," but she had never understood it until that moment, and she marveled at the primal sound and how it stirred her. Smiling, she felt his penis enlarging even more as she moved, and she wondered at the power men and women held over each other.

"Wait a minute," he murmured, and lifted her off of him.

Murmuring in protest, she reached out blindly to touch him. She heard the crackle of foil and felt him sheathing himself in latex. Then he pulled her back over him, kissing her tenderly as he settled her over his penis, sighing with pleasure as she surrounded him.

Bringing her knees up along his body, she began a natural undulating motion that made him groan aloud. She felt his hands kneading her breasts and moaned with pleasure. In a very short time, her breath was uneven and she couldn't control her sense of freefall as the wonder of her climax overwhelmed her. She fell against his chest and held steady as he pulled her hard against him, until with a final thrust, he

was completed.

He pulled one side of the blanket over them and they lay together for a long while. She felt his fingers in her hair, heard her heart keeping time with his. Finally, he murmured that they needed to get dressed, that she would get too cold if they stayed much longer. She nodded, and he helped her up. He put her clothes in front of her, then leaned in to her ear.

"Dulcie, your clothes are in front of you. Take off the blindfold and get dressed. I will be behind you. When you're ready, put the blindfold back on, and we'll go." He moved away from her. Austin pulled off the silk scarf and stared at the ocean. As he had described the night before, the moonlight made light patterns on the incoming waves until it was like liquid silver hitting the shore and spreading along the sand. He moved close to her, still naked, and wrapped his arms around her waist. She could feel his penis rising again, bumping against her buttocks, and she knew an urge to feel him inside her again.

"Will this feeling ever go away," she asked quietly.

"Hmm?"

"Will the feeling of wanting you inside me ever go away?" His arms became a vise and he rested his cheek against the top of her head.

"I hope not," he whispered.

By the time he came to a stop outside her building, it was well after two. He turned the engine off and sat with his hands on the wheel staring straight ahead. Then he looked at Austin, sitting quietly in the passenger's seat. He wanted to tell her how he felt but his heart was so full he didn't know how to say it.

"Am I the old cow now?"

"What?" he whispered.

"The old cow. My mother told me only two things about sex. First that if a man can get milk for free he won't pay for it. He won't appreciate it. Second, that a bull always sniffs around the new cow in the pasture, but that after he's had his 'dirty

way' with her she becomes the old cow and he starts looking for the next new cow. Well, you've had the free milk, I just wondered if now I was the old cow."

With a grunt, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her long and hard. "You are not a cow of any sort. You are a wonderful woman who has so much love to give and I don't intend to ever give you up. There may be men like that, but I'm not a bull looking for an easy rut. Do you believe me?"

"Why can't I see your face? Know who you are? How can I trust someone I don't know?"

"Trust _me_, Dulcie. You know it's right. Don't you?"

"I think it is," she whispered in return.

"It's not time," he murmured. "Happy birthday, Dulcinea. Now go in. We meet again tonight to celebrate." He kissed her gently. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

"Goodnight." She opened the door and stood on the sidewalk. Removing the silk scarf, she reached behind her and slammed the door, then walked inside, her rose in one hand and the scarf dangling from the other.

*Chapter Nine *

It was the first time she could remember, ever, that she was alone for a whole weekend. That it was her birthday didn't bother her any more.

She dropped her keys on the hall table and without having to worry about waking anyone up, went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. This late at night-or early in the morning, she reminded herself-tea seemed a much better choice than coffee. But when she got into the kitchen, she thought, what the hell? and poured herself a glass of wine. Wrapping an afghan from the back of the sofa around her shoulders, she tuned the radio to an easy listening station and took her wine onto the balcony to look out over the Bay. She was too keyed up to sleep right now.

Listening to "The Way You Look Tonight," she replayed every word spoken between Alonso and herself and envisioned every action. She felt his hands touch her again and the way they molded to her. The shocking sensation of the tip of his penis penetrating her sent shivers through her as she relived it. Thinking about her orgasms, the first she'd ever experienced, the spiraling into nothingness, completely out of physical and emotional control, made her dizzy.

When she had finished her wine, she examined briefly how she felt physically. A little sore, a little achy from lying on the hard ground, a bit chilled from the night air-. Well, she thought, why are you standing out here on the balcony now? Because, she answered, I don't want to let go of the night. Eventually, she went inside, rinsed out her wine glass and went to bed. Naked. Another first.

When she opened her eyes to sunshine, she looked at the clock and almost panicked. It was already nine-forty and she hadn't showered, dressed, or formed a clear idea of what she wanted to show Robbie. But instead of jumping out of bed and dashing around, she stretched languidly and smiled to herself. This was the first birthday of her new self. She wanted to enjoy it.

Her body felt different, not only because of what Alonso had done to it, but because of the sensation of sleeping in the nude. She felt sensuous having done nothing more than leaving her pajamas off.

Climbing out of bed, she took a quick shower, dressed in jeans and a turquoise turtleneck, and pulled her hair up and held it in place with a clip. Her tennis shoes tapped quietly on the hardwood floors as she went into the kitchen. Coffee was dripping when she heard the door buzzer. When she answered and heard Tyler's voice, she pressed the button to allow them in the building. Moments later, when she opened her door, she was presented with a large white box. Her eyes widened and she smiled.

"If that's food, you may come in," she said, opening the door wider. "You must be Robbie." She held out her hand to the young man she had last seen hanging out the bookstore door yelling for his mother. "It's a pleasure to meet a fellow web designer."

"I'm excited to meet you too, Ms. Gardner. Thanks for taking your day off to show

me what you do." Austin glanced at Tyler. He was watching his nephew with a smile, and affection in his eyes. Then he looked up at Austin and gave her a lazy smile.

"Good morning, Austin."

"Good morning, Tyler." He seemed different this morning. Casual, and more confident somehow. Of course, it was Saturday, and he was also in jeans and a red tee shirt with yellow lettering. He filled it out so well she could easily read what it said. VMI, Virginia Military Institute. "What's this? You can't lay claim to having attended a military school and live in California. Especially in San Francisco."

"What can I say? It's old and comfortable, and I might be crazy, but I like to wear it. It reminds me of my cadet days and why I'm happy they're over. The way I see it, if anyone gets offended they need to get over it."

Austin chuckled and noticed that Robbie was shifting from one foot to another, listening to them talk.

"Robbie, are you ready for a bear claw, or whatever luscious things are in that box?"

"Yes ma'am! Uncle Ty said I had to mind my manners or he'd skin me alive, but since you asked, I can say that I'm really hungry and we had to smell these all the way over here."

Tyler and Austin laughed.

"Well, let's go get some juice and we'll see what you've brought. And Robbie, please call me Austin. I don't think your uncle will mind." She led the way into the kitchen and motioned them to the dinette while she got plates, glasses for the juice and cups for coffee. Then, armed with forks and napkins, they opened the box and admired the beautiful pastries arranged there. After much debate about which were the nuttiest, which were the gooiest, and which were the most nutritious ("None," pronounced Tyler. "That's why they're all so good."), they made their selections and settled down for a sugar fix and orange juice.

After Robbie's third pastry and a second, split by Tyler and Austin, she poured coffee and began asking Robbie what he wanted to know about her job. She talked

briefly about what she did on a daily basis, and then he expounded for several minutes on what he knew about the Internet and various web sites. Austin was finding out what would be a good starting point with Robbie.

Finally, Austin unfolded herself from her chair and suggested that they check out her computer. She topped off her coffee and Tyler's and led them to the small den she used for her work.

"Wow! Uncle Ty, look at this. Austin, are they real?" He had discovered her collection of knives and swords, which were displayed on shelves along the wall.

"Yes, they're all authentic. Do you like knives and stuff?"

"Anything that creates mayhem," answered Tyler, with a rueful smile.

"Well, you can create lots of mayhem with these things." Austin put down her coffee cup and handed Robbie one of the smaller knives from an upper shelf. "Be very careful, Robbie. The blade is sharp and I've got the scars to prove it. This is a dirk, a Scottish knife."

Robbie gingerly held the knife. "It's heavier than it looks. Did they wear these on their belts?"

"Well, this is a good place to start our work. Why don't you put the dirk on the table beside the computer and sit down at the keyboard." Austin booted the machine while Robbie got settled. "You're pretty proficient with the Internet, so I assume you know how to use search engines, right?" At a nod from Robbie, she continued talking while typing in her user name and password. "Our goal is to find out about dirks. You want to know what? How they were used? How they were worn? Any significance to the inscriptions found on them, like on this one?"

While she talked she jotted the questions down on a legal pad, and Robbie nodded at each question she posed. At the last question, she pointed to the dirk again and to the Gaelic inscription above the hilt, carved in small script. "Now, this dirk is a family piece, so I know what it means, but what if you wanted to find out what it means? Do you have an idea of how to go about it?"

"I think so."

"Okay, let's see if you can find the answers to these three questions. But instead of just finding the answers, I want you to really look at the web pages you come across. When you find an answer, write down the URL where you found it and then answer the following questions: Was the site easy to navigate? What were the fonts and colors like? Did they strain your eyes? Was the information organized so you could find it easily? Those are some basic questions web designers answer. See, we're not just working with computers, we're kind of psychologists too. We have to make people _want_ to use our sites. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah. This is interesting, and since this dirk belongs to your family I'll find out something about you too." Robbie grinned at her.

"Well, let's not get carried away," she said with a laugh. She rubbed the back of his head. "And let's not get too carried away with this project either. It is Saturday, so we don't want to spend the whole day sitting in front of a computer. Let's say you won't take any longer than an hour. Is that too much? We don't want to disturb you, so we'll be just in the next room. But holler out if you get stuck."

"Sure, thanks." He immediately began hitting keys to start his search. Austin picked up her coffee cup and motioned Tyler out the door. She sipped her coffee and made a face.

"Cold. That's the story of my life. I wish I had a nickel for every cup of coffee I've let get cold while working on the computer."

"I know what you mean. That's why God invented the microwave." Austin chuckled and went back into the kitchen to reheat her coffee.

"Austin, you were great in there. I almost wanted to stay and do the research with Robbie, and I hate sitting in front of the computer when I'm out of the office. He will learn a lot today and not even know it. This is very nice of you."

"No, you were right. He's a wonderful boy, and very quick, too. I'll bet he has those questions answered in less than an hour. Do you want to sit out on the balcony?"

They sat in well-padded metal chairs and watched the many sailboats on the bay.

The wind was gentle, and carried the scent of the sea up to them. "I swim at the Aquatic Park almost every morning, and never realized your balcony overlooks it."

"I know you do," she said, without thinking.

He shot a sideways glance at her with a warm smile. "I mean, it's hard to miss your car parked down there so early in the morning. I usually stand out here and have my first cup of caffeine, and it's often the only car there. You have a very good form. Swim form, that is." Her face turned a bright red, making Tyler laugh.

"Thanks. I'll try to improve a little each day knowing that I might be judged." He took a drink of coffee.

"Thanks for the pastries this morning. I didn't get up in time for breakfast and my stomach would have been making rude noises by lunch."

"My pleasure. Did you have a late night then?" He propped his feet on the railing of the balcony and looked at her through his lashes.

"Yes, very late." Damn! She was blushing again.

"And pleasant, judging by your blush. Lucky man." He looked out over the bay again. "Do you sail?"

"No. I'm worthless when it comes to water. A warm bath is usually as close as I get to a body of water."

"Too bad. I was going to suggest that we go sailing some weekend."

"Do you have a boat?"

"No, I don't go out often enough to warrant the expense, but I rent one every so often for Robbie and me. And Barb goes out with us sometimes. Robbie's dad died three years ago in a car accident. That's when they moved here, and I try to fill in as best I can. It's hard on the kid sometimes, though. Barb works long hours and I try to take Robbie out on the weekends to give her some time to herself, or to help out when she works."

"That's wonderful. He's lucky to have you for an uncle. It's pretty obvious that you enjoy doing it, and he just as obviously loves you. My uncle was a wonderful man. He kind of did the same thing for me you're doing with Robbie. My dad died when I was very young and we moved here from North Carolina to be near Uncle Dan. I adored him, and he taught me so much. I still miss him horribly." Austin propped her feet up on the railing too, as she relaxed.

"I always thought there was a tiny bit of a drawl in your voice," Tyler teased. "Since I'm originally from Virginia, we're practically kissin' cousins." He leered at her and she laughed. "I'm enjoying what time I have with Robbie. I know that there will be a moment not too far off when he won't want to spend time with me any more." He grimaced. "I don't mind telling you that I'm dreading it. I've come to love being with the little demon."

"Uncle Ty, you shouldn't call me a demon." Austin and Tyler jerked in their seats as though they had been caught doing something wrong.

"Robert, you shouldn't sneak up on people. Or eavesdrop."

"I didn't eavesdrop. I came to tell Austin that I'm finished." He grinned at Austin as she stared at him in amazement.

"What? Finished already? I didn't make your task hard enough! Let's see." They reviewed the sites Robbie had found and he showed her why he had described the sites as he had.

"Robbie, you're very good. You've got a good eye and an understanding of what makes things work for people. That's important if you're serious about any kind of computer work. Let's head to lunch and we can talk about the next step in design."

"Lunch! Yes!" Robbie went to the bathroom while Austin and Tyler waited for him in the foyer.

"Austin, I want to see you again." She looked up at him, startled. "I've hesitated to ask you because of our work situation, but I don't want to let that interfere any more. I'd like to take you out, but so far I haven't had much success." He made a face and then smiled at her. "I have the feeling that you're not too crazy about me, and I

really don't know why. It seems to me that we have quite a bit in common. But if you won't go out with me to get to know me better, go out with me so I can determine why you don't want to go out with me." Austin frowned and then laughed at his logic. "I'll tell you right now, Robbie really wanted to meet you, but I'm not so proud that I wouldn't have used him if I'd had to. Will you go out with me?"

"Tyler, I'm flattered, I really am. But there's a complication. In a way, I'm seeing someone. I'm not sure if-

"Are you engaged?" She shook her head, which made her hair swirl around her face in a way that took his breath away. "Are you in love with him?" She hesitated.

"I don't really know how I feel about him," she said softly.

Just as softly he said, "Well, if there's no real commitment between you yet, what could it harm?"

"I'm ready," said Robbie.

"I'm going to kill that kid," Tyler said under his breath, as Austin laughed. "Come on then, squirt." He pulled Robbie into the hallway and punched him playfully on the arm.

At Boudin's they ordered soup in a sourdough bread bowl and settled at a table. "Robbie, suppose you were going to design a web site for Boudin's. What kinds of things would you want to see in it?"

Robbie thought for a few minutes as he ate. "A picture, the locations of the restaurants, maybe a menu?"

"Very good. So as a designer you might want to visit the place you're designing for and take lots of notes. Try to get a feel for the place. What impresses you about here?"

"The smell. It's good. And all the people crowding in. And that we can each get different soup or bread." Robbie was so intrigued he forgot to eat.

"Great, so what you have to do is find a way to get those ideas across to people who

find your site on the Internet. Artists can draw a picture of what the restaurant looks like. You have to do that same thing with words as well as pictures. How do you think you would go about it?"

He wrinkled his nose as he considered. "I might have to think about it for a little while."

"That's okay. For the project I just worked on for your uncle I thought about it for several weeks."

"You did?" She nodded.

"But it paid off, Robbie, because Austin's work got us a big contract. And, I think, her next award." Austin looked at him in surprise.

"Wow, Austin. You're gong to be famous," Robbie said in awe.

Tyler looked at Austin. "That's one of the things Ron and I talked about over dinner last night. It will be good publicity for all of us, but I'm submitting it mostly because it's great work. You really got the mood of his company across, without hitting people over the head. His family has been selling cars since the Model A. It's important to him that the right persona is projected, and he thinks you did that."

"Thanks. I'm glad it worked out. I thought you would be mad because I didn't tell you about the two sites."

"I was surprised. And annoyed, I admit, when I thought you only had the first site prepared. That wasn't the work I had seen earlier. What was the point of that?"

"It was what Henry wanted for the project. He didn't have confidence that my vision was correct, which is why I was so glad you allowed me to do the presentation. Henry and I differed on the approach, that's all, but in the short time available I thought it would be easier to put in the extra work and have two sites ready rather than argue with him. He was annoyed, too." She looked around the restaurant.

"Robbie, how do you feel about chocolate? I think I would like a piece or three of Ghirardelli. Are you with me?"

"Til the end." Robbie looked at Austin shyly to see if she recognized the inscription from the dirk. Her mouth fell open in amazement.

"Well, uncle and nephew are both full of surprises," she said. "Do you know which clan it belongs to?"

"The Moran clan, from northwest of Inverness."

"Tyler, you have an astonishing nephew. Chocolates are on me. Come on."

They strolled through Ghirardelli Square, window shopping and munching on chocolates. In one window, Austin saw a shimmering, silk dress in emerald green.

"That would look incredible on you," Tyler said, low enough for just her to hear. "It's amazing how your eyes change color with what you have on."

She looked at him frankly. "Gosh, I don't quite know what to say. Thanks." She glanced at her watch. "I guess we'd better head back. It's almost time for you to take Robbie home." They walked to the end of the shopping area before going back to the apartment.

"Austin, can I look at more of your knives and stuff?"

"Sure, but be very careful." Robbie hurried back into the den. Austin picked up a magazine from the dining room table where she had left it earlier. "Tyler, I found this the other day. I wasn't going to show it to Robbie because I didn't want him to feel any pressure from me, but if you think he would like to enter this, I'd be happy to work with him. Or at least review his work, within the guidelines." Austin showed Tyler an ad for a contest for youngsters to develop a web site. Contestants had to be under thirteen years of age and were able to have a mentor to review their work.

"Thanks. I'll feel him out, but this would be a really good thing for him to get involved with. I don't think I'm being too subjective when I say I think he has some talent."

"Not too subjective at all. I agree with you. Just let me know if he is interested and I'll do what I can."

"That's nice of you." He took a step closer to her and looked down with a soft smile. She looked back at him.

"Not at all. I guess I'm not too proud to use your nephew either." It was said softly, but Tyler understood the message. He leaned over and kissed her very gently.

"You'll hear from me," he said. Continuing to look into her eyes he said, "Robbie? Time to go, squirt."

Robbie came out of the den with the pages from the legal pad that had the questions and notes. "Austin, may I take these? And those three things on the top shelf. Are they your web design awards?"

"Yes, that's them."

"Why don't you have them down lower, where they can be seen better?"

"I guess because I don't really think of them all that often. They were just part of doing my job, which I love. I tried to do the right thing by the client, and it was nice that I got recognized for it, but doing a good job and having fun while you're doing it is what it's all about. Don't you think so?"

Robbie thought for a minute. "Yeah, I guess so. Today has been great. Thanks very much. I hope I get to see you again."

"I hope so too, Robbie. I'm very glad you came over." She squeezed his shoulders. "Bye, Tyler."

"Bye, Austin. I'll call." He leaned close again and said, "I didn't know if you wanted Robbie to know, but happy birthday." He kissed her cheek and turned to go. As she closed the door, she put her hand to her cheek and smiled at the feeling that came over her.

*Chapter Ten *

At seven fifteen Austin waited in the lobby of her building. She wore the green silk dress she had seen-and bought-earlier that day. Her hair was pulled into a French twist with gold combs enhanced with dark green beads, and she wore thigh-high stockings with gold sandals. She had thrown a cream-colored shawl shot through with gold threads around her shoulders. Her only jewelry was gold button earrings and a thin gold necklace, and she carried a small evening clutch embroidered in a Chinese design with bright gold, red, green and dark blue threads. The dress didn't allow a bra, and she wore another thong.

Austin felt like a princess. A naughty princess, since the black silk scarf was tucked into her bag. When a black limousine stopped in front of the building, she walked out regally and climbed in the door the driver held open for her.

They drove south on Van Ness. Austin asked the driver where they were going and he handed her an envelope. Inside was a single ticket to the evening performance of Madame Butterfly. It had been years since she'd been to the opera.

While it was a wonderful treat, she almost wished they were going back to wherever they'd spent the last two nights.

I'm not really becoming wanton, she thought. Then she realized that if that were true she would be feeling some shame instead of the incredible longing she felt for Alonso.

Niggling at the back of her mind were thoughts of Tyler. After seeing him away from the office and relaxing with him, she was beginning to think she had misjudged him. He was very nice. In fact, she had tingled all over when he kissed her that afternoon. It was a gentle kiss, but one that made her wish he would kiss her again. There hadn't been the shock she had felt when she first kissed Alonso, not the lightning strike of heat. Tyler's kiss was more like a slow burning blaze, controlled, that provided heat for a long time. She shook her head, pushing Tyler Birch to the back of her mind and concentrating on Alonso and how he made her feel.

The driver got as close to the front steps of the opera house as he could and opened the door for her. "I will be as close to this point as I can be at the end of the performance, ma'am."

"Thank you." She walked into the War Memorial Opera House, showed her ticket and walked up the steps to the box seat, as the usher directed. Somehow, she knew that Alonso was already there. One of the chairs had been turned slightly sideways and the other was arranged closely behind it. Austin sat in the front of the two seats.

The crowd was large and she enjoyed looking at everyone and seeing how they were dressed. Before she knew it, the lights were dimmed for the beginning of the performance. As soon as the house lights went down, she felt Alonso slip into his seat. He leaned forward.

"I can't believe how beautiful you look tonight. You're the most beautiful woman here. Happy birthday, sweetheart." He ran a hand up her arm, and left it on her shoulder. She reached slightly behind her chair and put her hand on his knee. She could tell from the fabric that he was wearing a tuxedo. She wished she could see it, and admire him the way he had admired her.

At intermission he left, but returned just as the next act began. When Austin's tears ran down her cheeks at the end, Alonso caressed her shoulder and kissed the nape of her neck.

"When you get in the limousine, put on your scarf. You brought it, didn't you?" At her nod he continued, "I will join you as soon as I can."

She made her way outdoors and found the limousine where the driver waited to help her into the backseat. She noticed immediately that, unlike its position on the way to the opera house, the opaque window between the front and back seats was up. As soon as the door closed, Austin tied the blindfold securely and waited.

Within moments she heard the door open and she felt Alonso's arms surround her. He had evidently given orders to the driver, because they pulled away as soon as Alonso tapped on the glass partition. And when they started moving, he lifted her onto his lap and held her against him.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Very much. Thank you."

"Are you hungry?" His words were innocent, but the growl he added to the tone was

not.

Suddenly she felt hot. He kissed her cheek and she turned her face into his kiss. Immediately it became fiery. She wrapped her arms around his neck and angled her head to allow his tongue greater freedom and access. She heard someone whimpering, and realized with a start that it was she.

Alonso's hands were all over her, massaging her breasts, up and down her arms. He broke the kiss to lick her earlobe and graze her neck with his teeth. His hand went under the hem of her dress and up her leg. He hummed with approval when he felt the tops of her stockings and the thong, which he pushed aside in order to press his fingers into her.

Austin felt his penis push against her thighs and tried to adjust her position so that she could feel him and still allow him access to her, but she couldn't get situated properly. She groaned in frustration. Alonso chuckled.

"Wait," he murmured. He removed his hand, and she bit back another groan. Lifting her off of his lap, she felt him moving beside her. Then he took her hand and placed it on his shaft, wrapping her fingers around its thickness.

"Oh, yes," he sighed. He helped Austin pull her dress around her waist and then positioned her so that she straddled him, face to face. She could feel his penis impatiently trying to find the point of entry and when Alonso tugged the thin covering of her thong to one side, Austin didn't waste another moment; she sank onto him, spreading her knees to sheath all of him. She struggled to find her breath, while Alonso forced her down, pushing on her shoulders.

Austin could barely contain herself. Twisting her fingers together at the back of his neck, she threw her head back and when he allowed it, raised herself to the tip of his shaft and then impaled herself. She thought that his sudden intake of breath signaled that he was as wild with feeling as she, and she allowed the power of that knowledge to drive her. He ran his hands along her calves; the touch of his fingers stroking the sheer, silky stockings covering her legs only added to her heat.

After a few minutes, the friction of their bodies ignited a fire in Austin that threatened to burn out of control. She couldn't manage her breath, she couldn't still

her fingers from touching any part of Alonso she could reach, and she couldn't stop her body from moving to take every inch of him deep into her. Finally, she stopped fighting for control and fell into a web of pure pleasure. She heard him cry out, and knew that Alonso was falling as well. She collapsed against him where he held her in a vise-like grip until she could breathe normally again.

"I'm afraid I wrinkled your dress horribly," he said into her ear.

"It doesn't matter. All that matters is this. This need, this hunger. I can't get enough of you. Even now I want you again. I had no idea anything could be like this. How can I live without feeling you inside me?"

He kissed her, thrusting his tongue into her mouth and mating it with hers. There was passion in the kiss, but more than that. There was a sense of desperation.

As they felt the limousine slow, Austin moved off of Alonso's lap and tried to straighten her gown as much as she could. The car stopped and either the driver or Alonso opened the door and helped Austin out. With slow steps, she followed Alonso into a building and then into a room. Before the door closed she could hear the sea, and she wondered if they were near where they had been the past two nights.

He placed her on a chair, and she heard the tinkle of china and silverware. "Now, we'll eat to get back energy so we can expend it doing what we just did," he murmured. Austin laughed. The logic seemed vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place it. In fact, she couldn't really think at all. The raw experience they had shared in the back of the limousine was still too new, too fresh for cogent thought.

Alonso whispered, "Dulcinea, it's time for dinner. I hope you like portabella mushrooms?"

"Yes."

"Open," he murmured. She opened her mouth and he placed a bite on her tongue. The mushroom flavor, with tomato, basil, feta cheese and olive oil burst in her mouth. It was sexy being rather helpless, being fed. "A bite for you, and a bite for me."

The thought that they shared the same fork thrilled her to the core. After having sex

in the back seat of a car, it didn't seem likely that sharing a fork could compare in intimacy, but it did in a strange way.

Austin was shocked by how much flavor was intensified with the blindfold on. It was as though every nerve was set for high sensitivity. Each bite was a burst of zest that surpassed anything she had ever tasted.

The next course, roasted chicken with asparagus spears, was the same. Alonso held a glass of wine for her, and when she had drunk, he licked the excess moisture from her lips. Her tongue darted out to taste his, driving her crazy.

Finally, he fed her small bites of chocolate mousse, and when he kissed her she could taste the wine, the mousse and Alonso's own flavor on his tongue. The meal was delicious, but she couldn't wait for it to end. When he dabbed at her mouth with the napkin, she pulled it from his hand and sucked his middle finger into her mouth.

He moaned, felt himself begin to stiffen, and lifted her, carrying her up a set of stairs. Setting her on her feet, he unzipped the back of her dress and pushed it off, forming a silk puddle on the floor. The sopping wet thong was next to be pulled off.

"You're so wet," he murmured. "It makes me smile to know you're wet just for me." She stood before him, standing only in her stockings and sandals. He bent to remove the sandals and set her on the bed while he squatted to remove her stockings, rolling each down, kissing the insides of her thighs, and caressing her legs before finally pulling the stockings off her toes. He stood to remove his clothes as she whispered for him to hurry. In a matter of seconds he pushed her back against the pillows arranged against the headboard, spread her legs and sank his tongue into her cleft.

With a shock, he realized that he tasted something more than her essence. He hadn't noticed the spot on the back of her dress, which would probably prove to be the ruin of it. But more than that, it was proof that he had allowed himself to get so carried away in the backseat that he hadn't protected her. He felt a moment of panic, then he felt Austin's hands in his hair, heard his name in her moan, felt her hips shifting to meet his tongue and he forgot everything but satisfying her. Like an animal, he drove his face into her, laving her with his tongue until she literally screamed his name. He did have presence of mind left to put a condom on before he hammered himself into her, but that was the last coherent thought he had until he found himself

collapsed on her, much later, wrapped in her legs and arms.

"Dulcinea?"

"Hmm?" She couldn't move a muscle, but she heard him call her name from somewhere. "What is it?"

"You need to go home. I'll leave the room so you can get dressed, and then the driver will take you home."

"Um-hmm." She nestled against him, the blindfold still in place, although he couldn't understand how after the way they had thrashed in the bed.

"Will you come tomorrow night? I won't be able to see you all next week." That woke her up and she turned toward him.

"Why not?"

He kissed her deeply, his tongue probing her. "I just can't, but say you'll come tomorrow. I'll send the driver for you." His lips pulled at her earlobe.

"Yes, I will." It was a strain to move, but he pushed himself out of bed, and pulled her into a sitting position. When he was sure that she would be able to get up, he put on his pants and shirt and left the room. Once in the hall, he listened to be sure she was up and moving around, and then went down to see the driver.

When Austin walked downstairs, the driver was waiting for her in the living room. He held out his hand and helped her out of the house and into the car. She didn't even look around her, knowing that Alonso wanted his privacy, but instead settled in the backseat, where just a few hours ago the two of them had explored each other wildly. She ran her hand along the leather seat, leaning her head against the soft, upholstered back, closing her eyes and picturing what they might have looked like in the throes of passion. Before she knew it, her building loomed in front of her. The driver opened the door for her and helped her out. "Thank you. This must look a little..."

"Don't think a thing about it, ma'am. It was my pleasure to serve you tonight." For some reason, that struck her as funny and she giggled. Her eyes widened and she

covered her mouth, shocked at her behavior, but the driver didn't seem to think anything of it. He smiled kindly and handed her an envelope. "I'm to watch and make sure you get in the building safely, ma'am. And I believe that I'm to be here tomorrow night to pick you up?" Austin simply nodded, afraid to look him in the eyes. "Goodnight, then." He tipped his cap and stood aside to watch her enter the lobby of her building.

Slowly, she made her way to the elevator, leaning against the wall as it took her to her floor. She thought she could sleep for a year, but when she entered her apartment the first thing she did was sink onto her bed and open the envelope.

"Darling Dulcie. Tonight was incredible for me, as I hope it was for you. You have been beautiful each time I've held you, in your baggy pants, in your jeans and camisole, and tonight in the gorgeous gown you wore for me. But you have never been more beautiful than when you were lying naked in my bed. I don't know how I'll stand being without you next week. You're like a drug. The limousine will wait for you between eight and eight fifteen. Please don't keep me waiting. By tomorrow night I will be burning with need for you. Your Alonso." She looked from the note to the lilacs and lilies on the dresser. The fragrance was still strong, and she took a deep breath of the sweetness.

Austin went onto the balcony, hoping the cool air and the sight of the Bay in the moonlight would calm her, but it didn't. She was exhausted from the past several days of little sleep, the pressures of the presentation and her mother, and, she had to admit to herself, the strain of the relationship with Alonso.

Even though her mind needed sleep, she tried to sort out her feelings. He said she was like a drug to him, and she certainly understood how that felt. She hadn't been the same person since he had first laid his hand at her waist on the bus. Had that been last Monday? Not even a week and she had become a different woman. She had not only slept with a total stranger, but had begged him to take her, had felt his mouth on her and put hers on him, had straddled him in the backseat of a limousine, giving everything she had, without thought. And she would have done more. The fear in her was that she would do more, in fact. She had had no idea sex could hold such power. She was the drug? She felt like the addict.

Even with the driving hunger she felt for him though, she was aware of a vague

sense of restlessness. Something wasn't right. Well, of course not, you nitwit, she said to herself. You're having sex with a man who knows you but won't allow you to know him. With someone who won't even allow you to look at him. Are you stupid? Evidently.

And she knew that normally she was not stupid. In fact she was far from it. She was grounded, an award winning web site designer. That thought called up the image of Tyler Birch. He thought she was attractive and intelligent. Despite what Henry had said, Tyler had believed in her and her work. He wanted her to meet his sister and her son, to spend time getting to know the people most important to him. Tyler wanted to see her again.

With surprise, it came to her that Tyler was the only thing about which she didn't feel unsettled. She could see his brilliant blue eyes and his easy smile as she had seen them yesterday.

A clear picture, while everything else was a jumble of emotions.

She heaved a sigh and forced herself to go to bed. Her clothes were left where they had fallen as she took them off. Alonso had kept her thong she realized, but she didn't care. All she cared about was getting to bed. A glance at the clock showed it to be two-thirty. At least tomorrow was Sunday.

From somewhere, a bell was ringing. If she could find it, she could stop it, she was sure, but where was it? From a deep fog, she realized that it was the telephone, and she reached for it.

"Hello?" Even half asleep she recognized that the voice didn't sound like hers. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Hello? Gardner residence."

Someone blew a breath out in relief. "Austin? Gosh, I was afraid I had the wrong number. Is that you?"

"Yes." Who was this? It wasn't a voice she recognized, but someone she obviously should recognize.

In the background she heard another voice. "Here, let me have the phone. I was afraid of this." Then more loudly, "Austin? This is Tyler. Did we call too early?"

Tyler. "No, of course you didn't call too early. What time is it?" She could hear him chuckle. "Wait just a minute. Don't hang up, just wait a minute, okay?" She put the phone down and got up. Once again she had slept naked. She padded into the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face and brushed her teeth knowing that on the phone it wouldn't matter if her breath was fresh or not, but it made her feel better. She sat on the bed and picked up the phone.

"Okay, I think I'm awake now. What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty. Too early, obviously. You must have had a late night?" She let the question hang in the air. He cleared his throat. "Well, the reason I'm calling--we're--calling--is to see if you want to have brunch and then go to the zoo. Robbie has a million questions to ask you. Barb has to work this afternoon and, well..." His voice drifted off. She could hear Robbie in the background asking what she was saying. "Just hold on, champ, she's thinking," she heard Tyler say in an aside.

"That would be great. I haven't been to the zoo in a long time. When do you want to go?"

"On the off chance that you would say yes, I made brunch reservations at The Cheesecake Factory for eleven. Do you mind eating there twice in one week?"

"I don't think a person can eat there too often. I'll take the bus and meet you there." She had a smile in her voice when she said, "I promise to be more awake by then." When she hung up, she stretched and closed her eyes, but not to go back to sleep. She pictured a smiling Tyler in her mind, and got up a few minutes later feeling happy.

*Chapter Eleven *

The crowd for Sunday brunch was bigger than it had been for Friday evening dinner. Austin arrived a few minutes before eleven and stood off to one side of the desk, searching for Tyler. Remembering his comment about how she looked in green, she wore a light green silk blouse with cream-colored twill slacks. Her hair

was held back with a dark green scarf, and she wore gold, star-shaped earrings.

Right at eleven, the elevator door opened and there he was, Robbie and Barbara at his side. Austin stepped back into the cover of a potted tree, taking the chance to watch him unobserved. He looked wonderful in jeans and a light blue polo shirt. Barbara and Robbie made their way to the desk while Tyler anxiously looked through the crowd, his brows furrowed.

Suddenly, he turned and unerringly stared right at her, a smile lighting his face. She smiled back and waited for him to approach, which he did, his eyes never leaving hers. When he stood in front of her he held out his hand. She took it and he pulled her from behind the tree.

"What are you doing back there? Hiding?"

"Just people watching."

"But you saw me looking for you." His eyes were penetrating as he squeezed her hand.

"Maybe you're the 'people' I was watching." He laughed and turned her so they could find Barbara and Robbie.

"Barb is having brunch with us before she goes to work." Once they were together, they followed the hostess to a booth along the back wall.

"I'm so glad you came to eat with us," Barbara said.

"Me too," chimed in Robbie. Austin brushed her hand along the back of his head and smiled at him.

"Thanks for asking me." Austin sat between Robbie and Tyler, and Barbara sat on the other side of Robbie. No one talked for a few minutes while they looked at the pages of brunch menu and made their choices. The waitress brought coffee for the adults and milk for Robbie, then they ordered.

"Where do you work, Barbara?"

"The library. I got my MLS after I was married, and I was lucky to get on at the main library when we moved here. I do reference."

"Wow, Robbie, you've got a smart mom who can help you find out all kinds of information. Learning how to do research is a good skill to develop no matter what you do for a living."

"I think I want to go into computers, like Uncle Ty and you."

"Well, you still have research to do. How was your birthday party?" She took a roll and tore off a piece to munch while she listened to Robbie. She felt something warm against her thigh and glanced down to see Tyler's leg firmly against hers. She looked up at him and he smiled at her with a raised eyebrow. Her eyes softened and she took another bite of roll as she gave her attention back to Robbie. But she didn't move her leg and she was ever aware that his was there.

"It was great. Mom arranged a surprise party with some kids from school and pizza and a chocolate cake. Thanks so much for the books, Austin. I looked through them before I went to bed last night and I like them. I'm not quite sure I understand everything in them, though."

"That's what we're here for. I didn't understand everything I read when I first started out, either, but with a little help and a bit of hands on experience, it will make more sense to you. I'm glad you like them."

"Austin, you should have said that yesterday was your birthday too. Don't you think it's neat that our birthdays are the same? You should have come to the party and we could have shared."

"Robbie, I think that's the nicest invitation I've ever had. But yesterday was your day, and we did share part of it, so that made it special for me. I enjoyed our time together. And I had plans, so I couldn't come over and share your party."

"What did you do?"

"Robbie!" Barbara said, "That's not polite."

"Oh, sorry."

Austin chuckled. "It's okay. I went to the opera."

"You did? Uncle Ty went to the opera last night too." Austin snapped her head around and looked at Tyler, who suddenly seemed interested in a roll, himself.

In a soft voice, Austin commented, "I didn't see you."

"I know. But I saw you. You bought that dress we saw yesterday and it looked wonderful on you." He looked at his sister. "Austin's eyes change color with the shade of green she wears and she bought a dark green dress to wear last night."

His sister smiled and nodded her head at him, obviously enjoying the specter of her older brother in a situation he was unaccustomed to.

"Really?" She snickered at Tyler, and looked at Austin. "Did you enjoy the opera?"

"Yes, it was beautiful. I hadn't been in years. Just like the zoo," she said nudging Robbie with her shoulder. "I'm looking forward to it." Their food arrived, ending the conversation.

After they had made progress on their meals and made small talk, Robbie said, "Austin, Uncle Ty told me about the contest."

"He did? What do you think?"

"Do you think I can do it? Would you really help?"

"Yes, I'm sure you can do it, and I will help. Of course, the web site has to be your work, but I can give suggestions and stuff like that. But I don't want to pressure you into this. Are you sure it's something you want to put time into, with school and the other things you like to do?"

"Yes. Uncle Ty can I come to the office after school and work with Austin?"

Tyler shook his head. "I think we'd better keep personal stuff at home and office stuff at the office. But if your mom agrees, and Austin agrees," he directed looks at

both of them, "maybe Austin could come over to your house for dinners and work with you for an hour or so during the week." He looked intently at Austin. "Or maybe you're busy this week?"

"No, not busy."

"Austin," Barb said, "that's asking an awful lot of you. We don't want to impose on you." Austin had a quick vision of eating dinner every night with her mother, or by herself if she was home later than five-thirty, and then spending the rest of the evening alone, on the balcony or in her room. What was there for her at home? It came to her that having brunch with these people who were practically strangers felt more right to her than being in her own house.

"Barb, it would be pleasure, not an imposition. I would welcome it, but only if you let me help out with dinner preparations or cleaning up or supplying dinner or something."

Barb smiled. "Nope, that's all Tyler's responsibility." She laughed as her brother groaned. "He and Robbie usually do the clean up together when he comes over." She directed the next remark to Tyler. "I assume you will be joining us, big brother?" At his return smile, she continued to Austin, "But since you will be there to work with Robbie, Tyler gets the whole duty to himself."

"Chinese fortune cookie say, 'There will be much delivery of pizza in your future,'" Tyler said, raising his brows at his sister, who was making a face.

"Pizza! Oh, right!" added Robbie. Barbara and Austin laughed as the waitress came by to see if they wanted dessert.

"Tiramisu cheesecake," said Tyler and Austin, together.

"I thought you always debated which flavor to get?"

"Today is not a day for debate," she said softly.

"Do you want to share?"

"Okay. What are you getting, Robbie?"

"Chocolate." Barb chose pumpkin.

"Pumpkin? Mom, you always choose the weirdest flavors." Within minutes, the desserts were delivered and they dug in. After their coffee, Barb announced that she had to leave.

"So we will expect to see you tomorrow evening, Austin?"

"Are you sure it's not an imposition on you?"

"Heavens no! It's a godsend. I look forward to it. Besides, that means I'll get to see The Brother all week too, and that's always a pleasure. Goodbye, angel. I love you," she said to Robbie. "Have fun today and I'll see you tonight."

"Okay, Mom. I love you, too."

Barb kissed her fingertips and pressed them to Tyler's cheek. "Thanks for brunch, Ty. See you tomorrow, you two." Tyler paid the bill and they stood to leave, working their way through the crowd and across to the Union Square parking building.

It was a late summer day as only San Francisco could provide. Sunshine filling a cloudless sky, yet cool, with a light wind. Fog was due, so they knew it would be cooler that night. The zoo was full of children and parents pushing strollers. On the way there, Robbie had explained to Austin that he wanted to design his web pages around lions, and that was why he had asked Tyler if they could go to the zoo.

The contest dictated that the site have between four and sixteen pages, including all links. The first thing Austin asked was where Robbie thought he might get information about lions. He thought for a few moments and said the store might have something, so they started there. Then they looked at the map and began the walk to the Lion House. Tyler had a camera and he and Robbie shared it, snapping pictures as they saw something interesting. Tyler usually included Austin in the shots.

At the lion compound, Robbie asked to borrow the camera so that he could take

pictures of the big cats and their habitat that he might be able to use later. He read all of the signs and asked questions of some zoo personnel that he saw. Austin was impressed with his organizational skills. After he had exhausted the sources of information about lions, they made the outside loop, and wound up looking at the gorillas. Tyler had taken Austin's hand as they strolled along, and she felt contentment settle over her, a feeling she was unaccustomed to.

When they stopped to get something to drink, Tyler and Austin sat at a table and Robbie took care of getting the drinks. "What are you thinking?" Tyler stroked her knuckles with his thumb.

"What a wonderful day this has been. What a wonderful family you have. How nice it's been to be part of it. Thanks, Tyler." She looked at him with real pleasure, her eyes shining.

"I'm glad you're with us today."

She looked down at the table and then back up at him. "I wish I had seen you last night. Were you at the opera with someone?"

"Yes."

"Someone special?" He didn't answer, but looked intently into her eyes, seeming to seek something that he obviously didn't find. He sighed and leaned back in his seat. "I want to tell you about it, but it's not time."

Austin caught her breath and gave Tyler a sharp look. He calmly gazed back at her. Before she could say anything else, Robbie came to the table with their iced tea and Tyler's change. Robbie chatted with Austin about her dirk and where she had gotten some of the other things in her collection, and when they finished their iced tea they wandered toward the front gate. When they neared the entrance, Robbie saw some boys playing catch and asked if he could go over and join them.

"As long as we can see you from that bench over there, go use up some energy." Tyler pointed to a nearby bench that had room for him and Austin to sit, and Robbie ran off. Tyler crossed his legs, his right ankle on his left knee, and watched Robbie with eyes full of love. "It's hard for him living in the city with no siblings to play

with or yell at or boss around. There aren't any kids in his neighborhood close to his age."

"I understand how it is, being an only child myself. It can be lonely."

"You live with your mom, don't you?"

"Actually, she lives with me. Uncle Dan left his estate to me, since my mom has proven over and over that she can't handle money very well. He knew that I would take care of her, but that if she had the money we would be destitute within five years." Austin said it calmly, but pain was in her voice. He took her hand and held it on his thigh. "We don't get along very well, I'm afraid. That's how I can recognize how lucky you are to have Barb and Robbie in your life."

"I am lucky, Austin. But they're my sister and nephew, not my wife and son." He spoke very quietly. She leaned against him to hear. "Like you, I've been lonely for years. I've wanted my own family, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Is this guy you're seeing the man who can give it to you?" Tyler kept his eyes on Robbie. Austin sat up and tried to take back her hand, but Tyler kept a firm grip on it. Finally, she sighed and relaxed. "Because, Austin, I have to say, I think you're the woman who can give it to me." He slowly turned his head and gazed into her eyes. Austin held her breath as she looked into those blue depths and saw longing there. For a moment, she lost all capability for thought, then she mentally shook herself and forced herself to breathe normally.

"Tyler, why would you say that? We've been acquaintances for years, but we're just starting to know each other." She smiled. "Remember it was only a few days ago that I didn't even consider us friends."

He turned away and searched for Robbie on the playground before he spoke again.

"I think we'd better get Robbie and head for home. We're not doing very much of anything special for supper tonight, but do you want to join us?"

She turned and watched Robbie toss a ball with two other boys. "I'd like that if I can

provide supper. You've given me several meals this weekend." Neither said a word for a few minutes, but Austin was afraid she had angered Tyler. "Do we really need to go right now?"

"No, not just yet," he said quietly. He squeezed her hand reassuringly and they sat in companionable silence.

Thirty minutes later, Robbie headed their way. "I'm hungry." He stood in front of them and jumped from foot to foot.

"Well, Austin is providing the food for us men tonight. Austin, what are we having?" Tyler stood and since he still had hold of Austin's hand, she stood too.

"What would you like, Robbie?" He screwed up his face and thought for a minute.

With a grin he said, "Pizza!"

Tyler laughed and looked at Austin. "Barbara isn't big on pizza, in case you haven't guessed, so usually when I'm in charge of the meal she's forced to give in. We men have to have some say in the nutritional arena, don't we, Robbie?" Tyler threw his arm over Robbie's shoulders and gave a squeeze. Then with a firm grip on Austin's hand, he guided them to the exit and the car.

It was almost five when Tyler pulled into the driveway of Barb's Victorian style house on Lombard. Robbie jumped out of the backseat and raced up the steps to open the door. "He got a house key as part of his new twelve-year old responsibilities, and he's still enjoying it," Tyler explained. He and Austin followed at a more leisurely pace.

It was a little after five when Austin called for the large pizza with pepperoni, mushrooms, onions, peppers and extra cheese, and delivery was promised in an hour.

"Robbie, with an uncle in the business, I'll bet you have the baddest computer in the neighborhood."

"Not really," he said. "Uncle Ty says I really don't have a need yet."

"Well, with a national contest looming ahead, maybe he will change his mind." She glanced at Tyler with a smile and he grimaced at her. "And the special software that helps you make web pages would be a nice gift, Tyler. And the new version of Flash is out, too." She looked back down at Robbie who was grinning at her. "All of this can be yours, Robbie, if you butter up the old uncle well enough."

She lowered her voice and leaned toward Robbie conspiratorially. "Start by telling him how nice he is to have around, how much you depend on his advice, and how he has such good taste in clothes." Robbie giggled, and covered his mouth at the sound.

"But Austin, all of that is really _true._" She laughed with him, as he peeked around her to see if Tyler was paying attention.

"Uh-huh. I hear you talking," said Tyler with a grin.

"You're a lucky guy, Robbie."

"Why don't you go up and get some paper so you can write down all of the ideas you had today for your web site. If you need reminders, we'll be down here talking."

"Okay, Uncle Ty." Robbie took off up the stairs, and they could hear him tearing through his room, evidently trying to find a clean piece of paper.

"Would you like a beer? Or a soda?"

Austin took a Diet Coke and they went into the living room to relax. Austin sat in a chair, but Tyler pulled her out of it to sit next to him on the sofa. He put his arm across the back, and rested his hand on her shoulder while he sipped his beer.

"How late does Barb get home?"

"She'll be here by seven, then I'll head home."

"For some reason, I've just pictured you living with Barb and Robbie. Where _do_ you live?"

"West. Out toward the ocean. You want to come out and see the place tonight?" His

voice was low.

"Uh, can't. Got-"

"Plans," he finished. "That figures. Won't last forever, though," he murmured.

"Austin, I just want to warn you that I might not act in the office tomorrow the way I've acted this weekend."

"You mean, you'll disavow my existence?"

"That's pretty extreme," he said. "I just mean that I won't, you know, come up to take your hand or anything. I like to keep my personal life separate. I've never been in a situation where the two crossed, like they do now. In fact, I've always made it a point to avoid that."

"Is that why you never said anything to me about your feelings before now?"

"Part of it. It hasn't helped that I've felt like you hated my guts ever since you started working there. But I also didn't want to open you up to gossip. You know what some people will say when you get big accounts if they know how I feel about you."

"Sleeping with the boss."

"Right. If I'm not going to get the perks, I don't want either of us to get the blame." He squeezed her shoulder and smiled.

Austin stared off into space and muttered so low he almost couldn't hear her. "So the upshot is one man who won't let me see him during the night and another who pretends not to see me during the day." A little louder she said, "There must be something wrong with me, after all."

"I didn't hear all of that, but I can assure you there's nothing wrong with you." Tyler set his beer on the side table and put her Coke beside it. He turned her into his arms and kissed her, lightly at first but then deeper until his tongue rubbed hers enticingly and she heard herself moan. As if on their own accord her arms wrapped under his and wound around his shoulders. His lips pressed hers as his hand slid down her torso to stroke her hips and thigh. He broke the kiss just enough to whisper against

her lips, "Austin, I want you." Then his lips crushed hers again.

Her breath came in ragged gasps. One arm reached up so that her hand could smooth the hair on the back of his head and down to his neck, which also left her breast available for him to mold, and he didn't pass up the opportunity.

Robbie's voice interrupted them. "Uncle Ty? How much longer until supper?" Tyler groaned and held her close, even as he ended the kiss.

"About fifteen minutes, Robbie, and the guy should be here." He helped Austin sit up straight and ran his hands across his face, trying to compose himself. "Why don't you come down and set the table, squirt?" he called.

He looked at Austin. She was smoothing her blouse and the scarf in her hair, and trying to calm her breathing. He smiled at her as Robbie came pounding down the stairs and ran into the kitchen.

"It won't do any good, you know. All of the smoothing in the world won't alter the fact that we both look like we were ready to jump each other right here in my sister's living room." He ran his thumb across her lips. "They're swollen and reddened from my kisses," he said in a low, husky voice. "I think it looks great on you, but Robbie is the only one too young to know what it means, and even he will notice that you look different. If Barb were here she'd tell us to get a room. Do you want to?"

"My God, Tyler." She hid her face in her hands. "One week ago-just last Sunday-I was an innocent. I swear to you!" She laughed nervously. "I'd only been kissed two or three times in my whole life. And not like you just did, either. I wore baggy clothes that hid me well, and I stayed in the background at work with my big glasses for the computer screen hiding my eyes, and liked it. No one noticed me."

"Except me," he said.

She half smiled and stared down at the floor. "Except you. Now ... I don't even know how to begin to explain to you how things have changed in the past week. I really don't even understand it myself. But what you said today at the zoo, that I might be the one for you. You don't know me, Tyler. You don't understand how things are. Maybe if you had said those things last Sunday it would be different, but

I don't think anything can happen between us now. If you knew the truth, you wouldn't want anything to happen." She looked at him. "I was wrong about you. I admit it, I really like you." She ran her hand through his hair. "Maybe I could've loved you, but now we had better see if we can't just be friends and forget anything deeper than that." Austin stood and fled to the kitchen.

*Chapter Twelve *

Tyler started after her, but was interrupted by the doorbell. When he entered the kitchen a few moments later he carried a large pizza box.

"Yes!" Robbie said, giving Tyler a high-five. He put the box on the table and opened the lid.

"Do you have a soda, Robbie?"

"Yup."

"Austin, will you get your soda and my beer from the living room?" She heard Robbie whispering frantically as she went into the living room, and when she came back he was standing behind her chair, ready to pull it out. On her plate was a small box wrapped in a piece of the Sunday comics.

"What's this?"

"Austin, because I didn't know yesterday was your birthday too, and because you took your day off to help me learn about web sites, Uncle Ty and I got you this present. And this is your birthday dinner, even though you might not have gotten pizza if you had really chosen. Open it, Austin!"

Tyler could see tears glistening in her eyes. She blinked hard to keep them from falling, but wasn't successful.

"Oh no!" Robbie exclaimed, "You're supposed to be happy, Austin. Did I say it wrong?"

"No, Robbie. I think Austin is happy, but she's surprised. Right, Austin?"

She nodded vigorously and hugged Robbie.

"Yes, that's right. Not to be sexist, but it's an affliction that mostly affects girls. Sorry!" She dried her eyes on her napkin and picked up the box. "Whoever did the wrapping did a fine job. I can read the funnies and still have a present."

"I told you it was a good idea, Uncle Ty." Austin took the paper off of the box as gently as she could and lifted the lid. Inside was a gold pin in the shape of a knife. The hilt was set with tiny diamond and emerald chips. Robbie was holding his breath. "Do you like it? We hunted for it yesterday after we left your house because it goes with your knife collection."

"Oh my gosh, I don't know what to say, Robbie. It's absolutely beautiful. Thank you so much. I don't think I've ever been given a more wonderful gift. I'll always cherish it."

Tyler took it from her and pinned it on her blouse, then took his seat. Robbie beamed at her and took the third seat.

"Time for pizza, and we have cake left from yesterday, too. It's like having birthday dinner all over again." He took a slice of pizza and sat happily while he chewed. Tyler put a piece on Austin's plate and took a piece for himself. Robbie never noticed that she hardly touched hers, mainly because she kept him engaged in conversation. When they finished, she suggested that they wait for his mother before having dessert.

A little before seven she suddenly made her excuses to leave.

"But Austin, we haven't had cake yet," Robbie said.

"I know, Robbie, but I'm still full from pizza and I have to meet someone in an hour, so I'd better go. But I'll be here tomorrow with your uncle after work, okay?" He nodded. "Goodnight, and thank you again for the lovely pin and the pizza dinner."

"You're not thinking of walking up to the bus stop?" Tyler stopped her before she

got her purse.

"Sure, it's just a couple of blocks. In fact, in the same time I could almost walk home."

"You could, but you're not going to. Can't you just wait until Barb gets here?"

"I could, but I'm not going to." She smiled at him. "And thank you for the pin. Tyler, it's beautiful. I'm overwhelmed, really, as you can tell from my red, blotchy eyes and face." She patted her cheek.

He cupped her cheek in the palm of his hand. "Your face is beautiful, perfect. The face I love." She gasped as he leaned in and gave her a gentle kiss, then he straightened. "Robbie?" he called. "Come on. We're going to take Austin home."

After pacing her living room for thirty minutes, Austin wrote a note and put it in an envelope. At eight she walked to the limousine and handed the note to the driver. "Will you take this? I can't go tonight after all."

He tipped his hat and waited until she had reentered the lobby, then pulled away from the curb. She went to her apartment, satisfied that she had done the right thing. On a base level however, she was on fire with need for Alonso. Or Tyler.

That was why she had sent the driver away. Tyler's kiss had surprised her with its intensity. His raw feelings crashed against her and she felt a kindred spirit looking for something to help fill his life. He wouldn't want it to be her, though, if he knew that she had just spent the past three nights having sex with a stranger who found her on the bus. A stranger she couldn't even identify because she had let him have her while she was blindfolded.

How could she have been so stupid? Seeing her involvement from Tyler's perspective made her feel a deep shame she hadn't felt on her own. Tyler said he loved her. Austin didn't know how she could ever forgive herself for how her actions would hurt him. The whole thing was like something in a trashy novel, totally unbelievable, except that she had lived it. She poured a glass of wine and sat on the balcony.

Just before nine the buzzer from the lobby rang.

"Yes?"

"Let me in, Austin." Tyler's voice was strong and commanding. She pushed the button and within a minute he was at her door.

"I told you I had plans for tonight."

"I know. I came anyway. Where's your mother?" As he spoke, he closed the door and locked it.

"She's gone for the weekend." Austin's eyes widened at the sight of him, and feeling his power, she backed up. Tyler stepped forward. "I'm having wine on the balcony, do you want some?" Austin frowned at him, and studied his face trying to determine what was wrong. Tyler had a feral look about him. His eyes were dark as midnight and flashed as he gazed at her.

"Fine. Let's go and get it." He tracked behind her to the kitchen. When Austin reached up in the cabinet for a glass, she felt Tyler's hands on her waist. He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her against him.

One hand brushed her hair off of her neck so his tongue could trace the curve of her shoulder. His breath was hot on her skin, burning her, but she welcomed it. She couldn't catch her breath. Her arm reached up to hold his head; her fingers twisted in his hair at the same time she turned her head so he would have more of her neck and shoulder to kiss. He took advantage and covered her breast with his hand, kneading it, massaging it, rubbing the nipple until it was hard and firm. He unbuttoned her blouse and pushed her bra over her breasts. His teeth grazed her shoulder. The arm around her waist loosened its grasp so he could put his hand under her waistband and panties to stroke her. She could feel his erection bore into her as he cupped her and pressed her against him in the most intimate way.

"Tyler!"

"Don't ask me to stop, Austin. I need you."

"Don't stop!" Her words pushed him beyond the edge of control.

He stepped back to pull her blouse off her shoulders and drop it on the floor.

"Wait!" she cried. She bent and picked up the blouse long enough to remove her pin and put it on the counter. Tyler was pleased, but too impatient to show it. He grunted his frustration as he unsnapped her bra. In one move, he pushed her slacks and panties off of her. She was already barefoot. When she turned to face him in the glare of the kitchen lights, he could only stare.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I've been such a fool to wait to tell you."

"Let me see you," she whispered. She reached out a hand and touched his erection through his jeans. He groaned and stepped into her hand, pressing her against the counter and grinding his hips into her. She forced her hands between them and unsnapped his jeans, pushing them over his hips, along with his briefs. His penis leaped at her and she wrapped her hand around it, stroking it along its full length and rubbing it against her stomach. Tyler panted as he pulled his shirt over his head. When he was free of it he tilted her head back and took her mouth in a crushing kiss.

He breathed into her mouth; she took his breath and gave back a groan that said surrender in every sense of the word.

Tyler lifted her onto his shaft, sheathing himself easily in her wet heat. She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. He moved two steps to the right to brace her against the refrigerator, but he didn't break the kiss even as he pounded into her. He swallowed her cry as she climaxed and moaned when he shot into her seconds later.

Finally, he lifted his lips from hers and looked in her eyes. They were the color of shamrocks, and glazed with lust. He was sure his reflected the same feeling to her.

When Austin returned Tyler's gaze, she saw something a Saxon might have seen on the face of an invading Norseman. One that said, "All you have and all you are is mine."

Tyler smiled with the confidence of a conqueror. As if he had read her thoughts, he said in a husky voice, "You're mine now."

Austin sighed. She had come home.

*Chapter Thirteen *

Tyler looked around the kitchen and saw the table. He carried her there, still impaled, and laid her on it, resting his weight on his elbows. "Oh my God, Austin," he breathed into her hair, "I'll try to go a little slower this time." He straightened and pulled her to the very edge of the table, grasping her ankles and placing them on his shoulders. Then, giving credence to his words, his hips began a long, slow stroke, so that the tip of his penis barely touched her before sliding back in.

Her eyes widened but never left his face. She put her hands under her head providing him a full view of her body. Tyler smiled as he used one hand to tweak her nipples; the other hand held her in place as he pierced her. Soon, he saw the flush spread over her breasts, up her neck and onto her cheeks; her breath came in short pants and he sensed the fall off the cliff that marked her orgasm.

Tyler sped his thrusts to help her along. When he saw her release, he allowed himself the same. He let her legs dangle off the table while he leaned over and braced himself on his elbows to keep most of his weight off of her.

"It's only ten after nine. That might be a record for the fastest two deeds," he said with a chuckle.

"Fast, but wonderful," she breathed.

He laughed and kissed the tip of her nose.

"I'm glad you think so. I'd like to make it last and give you more pleasure, but I'm on too short a fuse tonight. This is all I've thought about all day. There you were at brunch talking about web sites to Robbie with my little sister sitting across the table and I couldn't rid my mind of the picture of your naked body filled by me. And that was it for the rest of the day-I pictured us on the table at the restaurant, on the beach, in a bed, on the ground, on a crowded bus, it was just me and you, making love."

She looked at him with a start. "On a bus?"

"Oh yeah," he drawled. He kissed each of her breasts, sucking gently on a nipple before continuing, "Haven't you ever thought about anonymous sex? A public place only makes it more exciting." He watched her eyes as he spoke. "Of course, in my fantasy it wasn't anonymous, since I only see me with you. God, I'm getting hard again just thinking of it."

She could feel the truth of that as his penis bumped against her opening, demanding entrance.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go find a semi-public place." He offered his hand and helped her from the table. He stooped to his jeans to remove a foil packet. Leading her onto the balcony, he sat in one of the armless chairs. He applied the condom, then turned her to face him and guided her so that she straddled him. She stood on tiptoes as he positioned his penis at her opening, and held her as she enveloped him. For many moments they sat like that, his arms around her waist and hers around his neck, interlocked like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. When he nudged her with his hips, she sat up enough both to kiss him and to allow her breasts to brush against the soft hair on his chest.

"Oh, Austin. You can't imagine what it feels like to be inside you like this."

"I know now what it's like to have you stretch me and then fill me totally. It feels so right. You're part of me and always will be now. Tyler, don't let me go." It occurred to Austin then that she hadn't felt a moment of embarrassment with Tyler. Their nakedness seemed natural to her, as though she really had found the missing part of her. An image of how she might have looked straddling Alonso in the back of the limousine flashed through her mind, but she banished it, wanting Alonso to have no part of what she and Tyler shared.

"Never." They rocked gently, in tune with the other's rhythm. Below them, on the street, she heard laughter and people talking. The buses going by on North Point broke the quiet, and there were sounds from the Bay: boats, water lapping against the shore, and fog horns from ships coming through the Golden Gate. Briefly, Austin thought she even heard the sounds of other lovers from some other apartment. But she was sure that whoever was around, no one felt as she did tonight.

Tyler reached between them to stroke her breasts and kiss the curve where her pulse beat uncontrollably. He licked her there and she moaned. "I like to hear you moan. It makes me feel that I'm pleasuring you."

"You do. I've never felt like this. I like to watch you. Watching you like this is the most erotic thing I can imagine. I can see how each of our movements affects you. When you catch your breath, gasp, close your eyes or clench your jaw-just like that," she said, as she touched his jaw, "it all means that I'm touching you on some level. I feel so special with you."

"You are special, my heart." He heard her intake of breath and looked at her. Tears fell, making tracks down her cheeks. Tyler stopped moving and reached up to wipe them with his thumb. "What's wrong?"

"I don't think I've ever been so happy."

He smiled at her and kissed her gently. She ran her tongue across his lips, and he deepened the kiss, holding her close against him. He rocked his hips harder, faster, and her breathing turned ragged. She fancied she could feel his heart beat in time with hers, the cadence changing from a waltz to one more suited to a march, in double time. They finished together, his moan and her cry echoing into the night.

They heard someone on Beach Street say, "Oh man, did you hear that? Someone's fucking up there," and it made them laugh.

"Enough sharing," Tyler said. "It's early, but I want to hold you in my arms in bed. Do you object?"

"My bedroom is just inside and to the right, beside the den." He helped her up and held her steady until she could move, then allowed her to lead him to bed. She kicked the green silk dress she had dropped on the floor the previous night, out of the way.

"It's just a double bed," she said.

"It wouldn't matter if it was a twin," he growled. "I'm not letting you go tonight. When is your mother due back?"

Her eyes got wide and she slapped a hand across her forehead. "Oh my gosh, my mother. You can't stay here, Tyler. If my mother comes home and finds a man here..."

"Then you're coming with me, because we are staying together tonight, one way or another." Austin retrieved her hand from his and walked into the living room. The telephone there had an answering machine in it, and a red light flashed, indicating three messages.

She rewound the tape. Tyler didn't touch her, but she could sense him and leaned back into his warmth. He wrapped his arms around her waist, then and kissed the top of her head. Austin hit Play.

The first message was from Tyler saying that he might be a few minutes late getting to The Cheesecake Factory, but to wait for him. She pressed Delete. The second message was from her mother saying that since there was no reason for Ruthie to come to the house early on Monday, she wouldn't be back until the afternoon. She breathed a sigh of relief and pressed Delete. The third message was from Alonso.

She reached to delete it, but Tyler held her back.

"Austin, this is Alonso," his whispered voice said. "The car will be there at eight." They stood quietly, then Tyler reached down and pressed Delete.

"Why didn't you go?" His voice was quiet.

"I can't really say. I was confused. The day with you and Robbie and Barb overwhelmed me. With you I felt like I was part of something good. With him I feel like I'm half an equation but the other half is missing, or wrong. Something. Anyway, whatever I have with him, it can never end with the right answer, the right..." She stopped and hung her head, speaking softly. "Your kiss at the house held the possibility of fulfillment." She wrapped her arms backwards, around his hips. "Until last week I was alone, and then he ... I can't explain this right now. I don't understand it well enough to explain. It just wouldn't have been right to go to him, when I wanted to be with you. And then, here you were."

"Come on. We don't have to worry now about your mother." He led her to the bed.

She pulled the covers over them and he pulled her into his arms. Within moments she was breathing deeply. He wanted to protect her and instinctively his arms tightened around her as he swore he would do everything in his power to keep her from pain.

Austin moaned in her sleep. She opened her eyes, but there was total blackness.

A dream, she thought. I'm having a dream, and it was delicious. Her hands were bound and stretched over her head, tied to something. The familiar blindfold covered her eyes, and something heavy lay on her stomach. "Oh!" Lips and tongue raked across her breasts, hot breath perversely sending shivers through her. "Alonso," she whispered.

Whiskers rasped a line from her breasts down her abdomen and to her cleft. His tongue stroked her clit with the softest stimulation. Her hips rose to meet it. Strong hands grasped her thighs and pushed them out, and with the access provided, his tongue thrust home. Austin cried out, thrashing and pulling on her bonds. Thousand of pinpricks of light shot through the blackness made by the blindfold. Before she came back to herself, she felt him slide into her, eased by the flow of her juices. His strokes were quick and hard, facilitated by his being above her, braced on his hands. She could hear him grunt as every drive pushed her into the mattress. Sweat and the moisture from their union caused their bodies to make a slapping sound each time they came together, and the bed squeaked softly, matching their rhythm. The smell of sex was redolent and before she was fully recovered from her previous climax, she was over the edge again, her back arched, her head pressed into the pillow. "Tyler!" Did she whisper his name or scream it? She wasn't sure. With a loud groan, he arched and went rigid as he came. He collapsed beside her, his breathing heavy next to her ear.

"Austin? I love you."

She barely heard him over the roar in her head, remnants of her orgasms, but when she figured out what he'd said, she whispered back, "I love you, too." Then she fell into a deep sleep.

When she awoke, she was completely covered by the sheet, her forehead pressed to Tyler's chest. Her right arm was thrown across his waist and his left arm was across

her shoulders. That and his leg, wrapped over hers, held her firmly against him. His steady breathing and strong heartbeat, like a tattoo in her ear, was calming. She took a deep breath and captured his scent. Musk hung heavy in the air, but beneath that she was aware of the clean smell of soap, and something very male. Very Tyler. His penis was erect and warm against her torso, not pressing for attention, just present.

The hair on his chest tickled her nose. She didn't want to move and disturb Tyler, so she wrinkled her nose, scrunching her face and trying to get away from the irritant.

A deep rumble of laughter emanated from the still form beside her. He twisted away from her slightly, trying to find relief from her twitching nose. Austin laughed, since his movement only made her nose itch more. She stuck out her tongue and licked his nipple, which he had moved just beside her mouth. She felt a shiver go through him and his arm tightened around her. "Hmm," he sighed. She licked harder and pressed her mouth hard against it to suck.

"Austin, what are you doing?" he asked sleepily. There was no answer as she skimmed her hand over his hips and down his thigh. Slowly, she scooted along his torso, tracing a path with her tongue and lips, until she took the tip of his penis in her mouth. "Austin!" There was no more sleepiness in his voice. She held him steady at her mouth, enjoying that he grew longer and harder as she handled him, provoking a sharp intake of breath from Tyler. Austin circled his glans with her tongue, then smiled as Tyler released his breath with a hiss. He pushed his hips forward as he held her head steady, easing his penis further into her mouth. She ran her tongue along his length, taking a little more of him with each gentle thrust of his hips.

She was vaguely aware of Tyler's moans. She knew only the feeling of intimacy of having this most private part of Tyler in her mouth. Her heart raced and she realized that her own excitement was proven by the moisture she could feel between her thighs. She pushed her hand between Tyler's legs and squeezed his buttocks, pressing him further into her mouth, until she held all of him. Tyler stopped moving, holding himself rigid. She could hear his panting. Austin rubbed his buttocks, squeezed and pressed him forward, at the same time she compressed her lips around him.

He groaned. "Austin, I can't hold it." She repeated her caress, and felt him jerk in

her mouth, his semen shooting into her throat. She pulled back, swallowing what was in her mouth, rubbing him against her cheek and chin until he finished. He tasted salty and a little bitter, not unpleasant at all.

Tyler reached to her and pulled her up from under the sheet. He lay his head on the pillow and looked at her. She smiled sweetly at him, running her hand over his rough cheek. He closed his eyes hard, and when he opened them he smoothed the back of his fingers down her cheek, wiping the evidence of their lovemaking from her.

"Austin, no one has ever done that for me before. I'd never have asked you to."

"I wanted to have you in me, to taste you."

"I don't deserve you," he said in a low voice, as he pulled her closer and kissed her deeply. They lay there until they drifted into sleep again.

*Chapter Fourteen *

The shower turning off woke her. Sunshine poured in the window, and for a moment she couldn't place where she was or who might have been showering. A simple glance of the twisted, rumpled sheets brought the previous night to mind in a flood of sensations. She heard the bathroom door open and looked up to see Tyler strolling toward the bed with a towel wrapped around his waist. She sighed. "Tyler Birch, you are one gorgeous man. What time is it?"

"Thanks," he said with a slow smile. "It's almost seven-thirty." He sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand. "You don't have anything pressing to do today, do you?"

She thought for a moment. "Not unless I've been scheduled to get with Ron Morris."

"No, not until Wednesday. Then we're playing hooky today. I've already called and left a message for Sharon to let everyone know I'm out for the day. You can do the same."

"What will I tell her? What if she thinks it's funny that we're out at the same time?"

"I told her I had meetings at client sites. You can tell her that I told you to take off today after all the work you put in last week. No one will think a thing." He kissed her hand. "Besides, I've let work take precedence long enough. It's time to do something that makes me happy." Austin looked in Tyler's eyes and smiled at what she saw. She turned on her side and scooted toward him. "What shall we do?"

"Let's go to a little bakery I know in Mill Valley for breakfast and then window shop in Sausalito. I've got tickets to the Giants game this afternoon. We'll meet with Robbie, and then spend the night in a little place I know in Tiburon, where we can see the city from our bedroom window. How does that sound?"

"Hmm. It all sounds wonderful. But the part about spending the night in Tiburon sounds the very best. I'll shower and be ready in half an hour or so. Or wait. I'd better call Sharon first. If I leave a message I won't have to answer any questions. She'll be surprised enough that I'm taking a day off." The sheet fell off of her as she sat up to kiss him, and he gently stroked her breast. She sighed and made her call, then stood up, started to stretch and glanced back at him, suddenly shy about standing before him fully naked. She reached for her robe, lying across the chair at the foot of the bed before going to the bathroom, but Tyler pulled it out of her hand.

"I want to watch you." She smiled at him and blushed, but sauntered across the room, turning to look at him over her shoulder when she reached the door. He smiled languidly, but his eyes were hooded. "If you don't want to spend the whole day in bed, you'd better stop that."

Austin laughed and went in to shower.

When she came out, Tyler had made the bed and picked up her clothes from the kitchen floor. She put on a pair of navy blue silk slacks and a pull over sweater so pale pink that it was hard to discern the color. Her tennis shoes and gold hoop earrings finished her ensemble, except for the knife pin, which she attached just above her heart. Tyler whistled with appreciation as she came out onto the balcony where he was looking at the Bay.

He touched the pin. "I'm so glad you told Robbie that you like it. I told him about your birthday after we left, just to see if he suggested doing something, and it never

fails to surprise me what a great kid he is. He immediately suggested jewelry and found this at the first store we went to. Wrapped it himself too. He was very proud at having found just the 'right' gift for you."

"It's beautiful, and I love it. I was so surprised." Glancing at the pin, she took his hand in hers and kissed his palm. "What are you doing for a change of clothes?"

"I didn't want to go out before you were available to let me back in, but I always keep an extra set of clothes in the car for when I swim. And speaking of which, I might need to give up coming here to swim every morning." At her raised eyebrow he smiled. "Now that I know which balcony is yours, I'll only want to do the backstroke to see if you're up here checking out my 'form.'"

"And I will be, too," she said with a laugh.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "I'll go down and get my clothes and be right back."

They left the apartment by eight-thirty, after leaving a note for Austin's mother explaining that she wouldn't be home that night. Tyler threw Austin's overnight case in the back of the Jeep and they kept up an easy conversation as they crossed the Golden Gate Bridge and wove through Mill Valley to the bakery.

The breakfast rolls were delicious-flaky and tender-and the coffee was hot and strong. They sat side by side while they ate and relaxed, watching Mill Valley commuters pass by the restaurant on the way into the city, Austin told Tyler about life with her mother and uncle, and about the serendipitous discovery of her talent for design, while she was working as a programmer at an insurance company. She hesitantly told him how she had never really known her father and because of that had always felt she missed out on some special kind of love, regardless of whether or not it would have been true. And how she had felt like a failure for years because she could never seem to fit what her mother wanted in a daughter.

Finally, she tried to describe her love for her uncle and how he had tried to fill the roles of a father who was missing physically and a mother who was missing emotionally. "It was a big task to take on, but he never minded. Always there when I needed a shoulder to cry on or good advice. I still miss him horribly." Tyler took her hand, resting it on his thigh, and rubbed her knuckles with his thumb.

He told her about how he had tried to rebel against his father, who had been very much in his life, as a forceful personality. He explained that he hadn't wanted to go to VMI-hadn't wanted to work that hard, academically or physically-but how much he had learned from the experience. How he had tried rebelling next by going into a field different from his dad's and how he had eventually been forced, through a kind of failure, to give in and take over Bay Web when his dad had a mild heart attack and retired early.

"What business were you in?"

"Marketing. First in Chicago, where I cut my teeth, and then both there and here with my own firm."

"And it was a failure?"

"No, actually I was quite successful. When I sold the company I made enough money to last two lifetimes. The failure was in myself, wanting to do something just to spite Dad. I was financially successful, but unhappy in the long run. He had wanted me to come in with him from the beginning, and it's what I ended up doing anyway. I could have saved a lot of scars if I'd listened instead of fighting him." He smiled at her, ruefully.

"How did he finally convince you to come in?"

"Well, getting sick was the proverbial straw, I guess. But the way it really happened was that Dad planned a good siege." At her puzzled look he explained, "Dad went to VMI too. It's a small school, without the reputations of the big service academies, but because of that it's often underestimated, which isn't a bad thing in a battle. That's how my dad handled me-like we were in a battle and I was a strategic challenge. He kept treating me like I was part of the firm. Always asked my advice, kept me in the loop of what was happening, basically just treated me like I was already on staff. I was pissed-I wasn't interested and didn't want to be made to feel guilty because I wasn't a part of his company. But he didn't listen, just waited me out. When I realized that what he had been offering all along was what I really wanted, I was pretty much ready to step in and take over some of the work. I should have paid more attention in those military science courses myself," he said with a smile. "But my marketing experience has come in handy a time or two, and I've

been able to put my mark on the firm by leading it into web design in addition to the traditional computer work Dad had founded the company on. That's when we changed the name from Bay Computer to Bay Web. We were ahead of the curve on web design, and now we're able to do pretty well from that income alone. Of course, most of the credit there goes to an incredibly talented and beautiful senior designer." They smiled at each other and Tyler leaned in to kiss her.

Austin shook her head. "I was so wrong about you. I wish I had tried harder to get to know you." He squeezed her hand. "You never married?"

"No. Never found the woman I _wanted_ to marry until five years ago and I saw you standing in the lobby." Austin blushed. "Why didn't you marry? I'll bet you had plenty of chances."

"You'd be wrong. I guess I was always trying so hard to be a daughter that I never had time to think about being a wife. And I was always led to believe that I was plain. My mother was a real southern beauty, and she's got the pictures to prove it. I look like my dad. Not that much to write home about. I guess the more I felt that way the more I dressed as an excuse to be passed over. A self-fulfilling prophesy in the making." She looked down at the table, suddenly reticent. "You might not believe this, but it was just last week, when I realized that I was going to be thirty-five and had barely been kissed, that I decided to make some changes in my life. That very day, you called me in and _told_ me to make some changes. I was so angry, but it was fate hitting me from all angles."

"Is that when you met Alonso?" She looked up, startled.

"How...?"

"The answering machine."

"Oh. Let's not talk about him right now. I can't explain to you about that here, in the sunshine. That will take darkness." He furrowed his brow and looked at her with concern. "It might change everything between us. I'm too happy right now and I don't want to take a chance."

Tyler studied Austin. "Obviously, it's not time. When you're ready, I'll be here,

wanting to hear what you have to say. But just be aware that I love you and nothing you say is going to change my mind about that." She smiled at him in wonder and he squeezed her hand. "Let's go walk around and see what we can find in the Sausalito boutiques."

They drove to the coastal town known for its artists and houseboats where they strolled hand in hand, looking in the windows. Austin bought a pretty skirt she thought Barb would like and a pair of outrageous sunglasses for Robbie.

Before lunch they drove back across the bridge and made their way to PacBell Park for the ballgame. Tyler's tickets were being held, which involved a short wait in line, but they were very good seats. While waiting for the game to start, Tyler bought hotdogs and beer and they watched people as the stadium filled.

Tyler didn't miss an opportunity to touch Austin. He held her hand on his thigh or slung his arm over the back of the seat and rested his hand on her shoulder. He put his mouth to her ear to explain a play or answer a question. His attitude was casual, but as the game wore on his touching became more intimate-rubbing her arm instead of simply resting his hand on her shoulder, giving her a short kiss on the ear before talking. The game was fun and the afternoon relaxed, but by the time they were stretching at the seventh inning, Austin began to feel the strain of having Tyler near her, but in public.

When they sat for the beginning of the inning, Tyler put his arm around her and pulled her to him to speak just to her. "See the pitcher? He's in the best position of any of the players because he gets to cover the mound." He leaned back and watched her. Austin nodded, her eyes on the field, then realization struck and she turned to Tyler, to see if he really meant the double entendre. She smiled when she saw his innocent expression.

"You," she said, playfully slapping his leg.

"What?" His eyes widened and his brows rose. She moved her hand to the inside of his thigh and rubbed him with the tips of her fingers, which made his eyes soften and as he moved to adjust himself she knew she had caused some effect. She smiled with the knowledge and leaned close to him so that only he would hear her.

"As a woman, I pay particular attention to the man at home plate, with that big bat. Look how long and hard it is."

Tyler laughed at her. "You probably wish you were down there on the field yourself," he said. "Then you'd be able to handle all those balls, feeling the weight in your hands, fingering them to find the right spot and then squeezing for the moment to let go." Austin dropped her head on his shoulder and groaned.

"You'd be the best player this team ever had if you'd sign up because you always get beyond first base. Knocking it out of the park is your specialty."

"Aw, thanks." He kissed her. "If we were on the team together they wouldn't ever get us out of the practice cage. We'd be having too much fun practicing for our positions."

"Tyler, what time do we have to be at Barb's?"

"Six."

"What time is it now?"

"Two forty-five."

"Would you mind not seeing the end of the game? If I can't touch you very soon I'm going to scream."

He laughed and grabbed her hand. "I thought it was just me." They practically ran for the parking lot. Once in the car, Tyler took Austin in his arms and kissed her long and hard, reaching under her sweater and feeling her breasts. She ran her hand along the bulge between his legs until he groaned. He looked around the parking lot, but there were too many people to feel comfortable doing anything more than what they were doing.

"It's too far to go to Tiburon and your mother will be at your house." Frustration was obvious in his voice and his posture.

"What about your house?"

He glanced at her then out the windshield. "Probably shouldn't. Damn!"

"What about Barb's? What time does Robbie get home?"

"Around four." He looked at her. "That's not much time."

"We haven't needed much time so far," she said, blushing. That made him laugh. With another quick kiss, he started the car and drove for Lombard like a madman.

After letting them in, Tyler sent Rosa, the afternoon housekeeper he employed for Barb so that Robbie wasn't alone after school, home. When she protested that Robbie would be expecting her, he gave her \$50 and told her it was a surprise for Robbie. He put her in a cab and then took the stairs two at a time to find Austin in the guest room, naked, lying across the bed. He locked the door and ripped his clothes off, watching her watch him as he stalked her to the bed. His penis was allowed only momentary freedom because after checking to see that Austin was wet enough to receive him, he applied a condom and in one push, he thrust himself home.

"Oh my God, that feels so good," she moaned. "I didn't think we'd ever get here, I need you so much."

"I know." He barely could talk. His movements were almost crazed. He took Austin's bottom lip between his teeth and nipped it. Running his tongue across it he tasted a drop of blood, but Austin didn't seem to mind. He took her wrists in one of his hands and pulled her arms up and over her head, trapping them there. Her legs wrapped around his, her ankles holding his calves tightly. His breath raged out like a bellows. He increased the pace and length of his thrusts, sliding into Austin like silk, pounding into her like a sledgehammer.

"I feel like I'm on fire," she said in a low, raspy voice. "This can't be real. Oh my God!" she cried, and he could see in her eyes that she was lost. He didn't need even two more strokes to be over the edge, and he dropped his head to her forehead as he came in a shuddering gasp. He crushed her into the mattress, his hands holding hers captive above her head so that his skin touched hers for the full length of their bodies.

Tyler rolled off of Austin and he lay quietly for a long while, just touching her and smiling. "What does that feel like to you?" Austin rolled to her side, her arm under her head so she could see his face.

"Hard to describe exactly, because it's so great." He smiled gently at her. "And to tell the truth, I'm hardly aware of anything for part of the time." He saw her nod her agreement.

"I know. Nothing prepared me for that."

"You have very powerful orgasms. When you come it's like you're pulling me into you a little further, and the contractions flow all along the length of me, squeezing me. That's why it's hard for me to last much past you. It's incredible and nothing like I've ever experienced before." He had turned on his side and was running his fingers up and down her arm. "And of course, I've never loved anyone I've been with before, so that adds to it." Austin's face lit up.

"I love feeling you inside me and knowing that sometimes when you come I keep some of you in me." Tyler frowned and stilled his hand.

"We should talk about that. I should have been protecting you, all of the time. I don't have any good excuses for why I didn't been except that we've been pretty hot and heavy at this, and I love you so much I just wanted to feel you without anything else. Not good enough excuses. I don't want anything to pressure you into saying or doing what you don't want. If something should happen..."

"Don't worry about it. I want just you inside me," Austin whispered. "If a baby should result, then we'll see." She touched his face. "I..." She leaned her head against his chest and he stroked her back.

"We'd better get dressed unless we want to have a conversation with Robbie that Barb hasn't asked me to have."

She chuckled. "You're right, but I don't seem to have the energy."

"At least now you can work with him earlier than we had planned and we can leave before dinner. I want you all to myself tonight." He picked up her hand and examined each finger before putting them all in his mouth and gently sucking them.

"We don't have time to do what I will want to do if you keep doing that." Austin laughed as Tyler widened his eyes. "Don't try to look innocent! You know exactly what I mean."

"I can see right now that the business is going to go to hell. I don't know how I'm going to spend all day in the same building with you, much less just down the hall, without touching you, and I can't take time off every day. This is going to be damn hard." He continued playing with her fingers, his arm under his head, stretched beside her crosswise on the bed.

"I'm afraid, Tyler."

"Of what?"

"Of Alonso. Of what you'll think of me. Of not being with you like this again."

Tyler pulled her into his arms.

"You shouldn't worry about something that's not going to happen. Come on, let's get dressed. I'm not usually in such a rush to get away from my nephew, but the sooner you finish working with Robbie, the sooner we can get out of here."

That was the argument that finally gave Austin the incentive to get dressed. She smoothed the bedspread, hoping it wasn't too badly stained, and after a final quick kiss, she followed Tyler downstairs and to the kitchen. Not five minutes later they heard the front door open and close. "Uncle Ty?" called Robbie.

"In the kitchen, champ!" he called. Austin shot Tyler a look of relief as Robbie tore into the kitchen. She greeted Robbie and, after listening to his chatter about his day and watching him eat four of the chocolate chip cookies Rosa had made, they lost themselves in web site planning for the next hour and a half.

Tyler ordered Chinese and had the table set and the food ready to be reheated when Barb got home a little after five. "Austin and I won't stay for dinner, but everything is set for you and Robbie." Barb grinned as she examined her brother. "What? Is my fly open?" He looked down.

"No, I just think it's funny that my big brother has finally been hooked."

He looked chagrined. "Yeah, well. You like her, don't you, Barb?"

"I think she's wonderful. Perfect for you. If you'd asked me to find someone for you, I couldn't have chosen any better."

"I thought that too. It's taken me long enough. I admit I'm a fool for not asking her out the moment I saw her five years ago. But maybe it's not too late for us."

"Ty, she probably wasn't ready for you five years ago. Things happen when they're supposed to. She's wonderful. Neither of you is too old to get married, or to start a family. And unless I miss my guess, judging how she is with Robbie, I'd say Austin wants a family. You couldn't do better, and I'm very happy for you."

"Thanks, sis. I hope you're right."

"Hope she's right about what? Hello, Barb." Austin stepped to Tyler, wrapped her arm around his waist and smiled at Barb. Tyler put his arm over her shoulders, kissing the top of her head.

"Bye, Barb," Tyler said as he picked up a brown bag from the counter with his free hand and guided Austin toward the door. "Bye, Robbie," he called. Barbara was laughing as she closed the door behind them.

"Austin, let's save Tiburon for the weekend when we don't have to get up early and fight traffic to come to work. It's my parents' house and they're away right now, so it will be available. Is that okay?"

"I don't care where we spend the night as long as we're together."

"Then let's go to my house. It will work out." Austin was confused at his comment, but didn't ask any questions. She rested her hand on his thigh, enjoying the feel of his leg as it tensed and relaxed with driving.

He pulled up a long, steep driveway and around to the back of the house. The house itself was beautiful, sitting on a bluff. The exterior was a Spanish design of stucco

and wood. The covered patio extended from the house to abut the drive. As they entered, Austin noted the earth tones and Mexican tile that characterized the large eat-in kitchen. Tyler put the bag on the counter and got out plates for their food. Austin opened the bag and the aroma of fried rice and sweet and sour chicken overwhelmed her, making her mouth water.

"Did we eat today?"

"Hey, I splurged for a roll this morning and a hotdog at the game. I'm insulted you don't remember. You've been a very cheap date," he said with a grin.

"Don't even get me started thinking about big wieners surrounded by soft, warm buns," she said in a sultry tone. Tyler licked his lips and started for her, but she laughed and stepped out of reach. "Besides, that was hours ago. I've been a very active girl since then and need sustenance. This smells great. How did you know what to get?" Tyler gave her the plates to put on the table, while he dumped the food into bowls for the microwave. He got beers out of the refrigerator.

"I took a chance that we would like the same things. Is beer okay or do you want wine?" he asked.

"Beer is fine."

Tyler poured the beer into chilled glasses and handed her one. "Are you a purist or are forks okay?"

"A fork is good for me, and I hope that doesn't offend your sensibilities." He got silverware out of the drawer and handed it to her.

"Are you kidding? My cleaning bill doubles every time I try to eat with chopsticks." He glanced at the microwave. "Let's see, there are thirty-five seconds left. What shall we do with all that time? Oh! I know!" He pulled her into his arms and kissed her gently, ending with a kiss on the tip of her nose just as the timer sounded.

They ate in comfortable silence. Tyler simply placed the dishes in the sink when they were through and led Austin up the stairs to his room. The house was dark as they passed through, and he didn't stop to let her look around, but stayed focused on his destination. He turned on one small lamp near the bed, keeping the rest of the

room swathed in shadow.

"Do you know it's only seven fifteen and we're going to bed?"

"Yeah, but not to sleep. There's a difference."

"It's very strange, but I feel kind of shy here in your house, whereas I didn't feel the least bit shy in mine last night. Why is that, do you think?"

"I don't know," he said into her ear as he nibbled her earlobe. He reached for the hem of her sweater and pulled it over her head. Releasing her from her bra he bent to lave her breasts with his tongue and then hold her nipple loosely in his teeth. His breath was hot when he turned his attention to her mouth, taking it hard.

When he broke away from her, he concentrated on getting his clothes off while she removed the rest of hers. He yanked the covers to the foot of the bed and positioned Austin face down in the center. Of her own volition, she stretched her arms over her head to grasp the posts of the Mission style headboard. Tyler knelt between her legs and rubbed his hands the length of her back, leaning into her as he neared the top and spread out toward her shoulders. She sighed with contentment. He kneaded her buttocks, bending to kiss each of them, and eased his hand along the crack that separated them, extending his exploration. Lifting her slightly against his thighs, he pushed three fingers into her, moving them in and out, in and out, until he was sure she was ready for him. He moved forward, lifting her hips over his and guiding his penis into her as she bent her legs to rest on his. He held her in position and bucked her to completion in a matter of minutes. When he came, he leaned over her and cupped her breasts tightly, his head against her back. In that moment, he knew that nothing like Austin had ever happened to him before and never would.

*Chapter Fifteen *

Holding her, side by side and under the sheet, he ran his fingers through her hair and marveled at its silkiness. "I can't believe it, but each time we come together it's better than the last. In all my years of -- how can I put this delicately -- being intimate, and the thousands of women I've had," she snapped her head up and

pinned him with a glare, "I'm kidding, Austin."

"Well, I should hope so," she murmured as she put her head back on his chest.

"As I was saying. In my experience, limited though it is," he felt her laugh, "I don't think I've ever done it so many times with the same woman. You might think that sounds rude to say, but I have a point to make here. I was thinking about this at the ballgame while I fantasized about being a pitcher covering your mound." Another laugh. "I've made love to you more than any other individual woman. Somehow, the joy of that fact is amazing to me. It's nice; it feels natural. I like being with you, Austin, and not just in bed, although that is incredible for me. I liked being in the kitchen with you tonight, putting a meal together. Not having to eat alone, but rather with someone I genuinely like. Walking along the street in Sausalito and window shopping. Talking over pastry for breakfast. All of it feels right to me." He could feel her nod.

"I know. I feel the same. This has been a wonderful three days. I wish it didn't have to end." He squeezed her closer. "Will you turn out the light, Tyler? I think I want to tell you about Alonso now. I have to get it over with, but I don't think I can do it if you can look at me." He reached over and turned the lamp beside the bed off. Austin moved away from him, to the side of the bed.

"Oh no. I'll let you talk in the dark, but you're going to have to do it while I hold you." He pulled her back into the circle of his arms and kissed her before she started.

She was quiet for several moments, then she took a deep breath. "I've been so unhappy. I guess since Uncle Dan died, but lately especially. Birthday and all, I guess thinking that living with my mother was all there was for me, and I wasn't sure what to do about it. I had felt a stirring for the past several weeks to do something and make changes, but it was frightening, and I just couldn't see past my loneliness to do it. I tell you this not as an excuse, but just to give you an idea of why I might have done what I did." He didn't say anything, just let her proceed as she felt she could.

"Last Monday you chastised me for not taking responsibility for my position, for my age. With everything I had been feeling, that set me on fire. You were giving me a push toward what to do, how to start to change, but I guess I wasn't at the point

where I was willing to listen, and certainly not to you. But when I squeezed onto the crowded bus on the way home, I was already in a mood to do something to jump start life." Austin stopped talking. After a minute or so, Tyler shook her slightly.

"And?" he prompted.

"I was jostled into a man standing behind me and I suddenly felt myself wanting to lean into him. As you said earlier, it was anonymous and I could almost rationalize that the bus and the crowd forced the situation. I wanted an adventure. A _safe_ adventure. I leaned back against him, but instead of trying to move away from me, he put his hand under my tee shirt and pulled me toward him. I could feel his erection; he rubbed it into me. And I wanted him to.

"Before it was over he had touched my breast. I felt like a different person, like someone who could actually inspire excitement, and I was impatient to experience it. This man might have been a pervert, he might have been a stranger, but I felt the first flickering of what passion might be like. But then came the kicker. He wasn't a stranger. Before he got off the bus he called me by my middle name, something almost no one knows. He told me to leave off my bra the next day so he could make me feel better. To tell the truth, I could hardly wait all day Tuesday to see if he would find me on the bus again." Austin expected Tyler to express disgust, to push her away, or ask how she could have let this happen, but all he did was gently run his fingers along her back as she spoke. That gave her the courage to tell him the rest.

When she finished the whole story, she waited for him to throw her out. That was what she expected. Although at the time she had found what she did with Alonso exciting, telling Tyler about it finally brought on the sense of shame she knew she should have felt. She was rigid in Tyler's arms as she waited for his outrage. "I just have one question, Austin."

She gave a snort. "Just one? When my actions warrant so much more?"

"Why didn't you go last night?" This was not the question she expected and it temporarily confused her so much she couldn't get her mind around what he was asking.

"Why didn't I meet him last night?" He waited silently. "Because I realized that I didn't want to be with a man who wouldn't let me see his face as we made love, who wouldn't be the other half of me at the most intimate moment two people can share. I got a taste of what being with a family who love each other could be like, and it wasn't enough to just 'be' with a man. Because when you kissed me Sunday afternoon, I felt something more than just a sexual stirring. Being with him was passionate beyond anything I had ever imagined possible. I wanted him, didn't think I could ever get enough of him. But it doesn't compare to being with you. What do you want me to say?" She was crying quietly. Tyler tilted her face to his and took her lips in a long kiss, stroking them with his tongue, and finally tempting her tongue into his mouth.

When the kiss ended, Austin said, "That's why I didn't go. Because of a kiss like that. I couldn't put it fully into words last night, but I realized I love you. I didn't want to be with anyone else. But I didn't really believe I would be with you either."

For several moments Tyler was quiet. "You love me?"

"Yes."

"Enough to marry me? To commit?"

"Yes." There was wonder in her voice. "Are you asking?"

Tyler put his mouth directly against Austin's ear and whispered, "It's time, Dulcinea. The blindfold's off. Open your eyes and see the man who loves you."

The shock Austin felt was so great that had she been standing she surely would have fallen. She almost laughed at that bit of Tyler-like logic. And then laughter did bubble up from deep inside her. Hysterical laughter, that she fought to control. How could this possibly be? It was a nightmare. Disgust, anger, a lack of understanding. All of this she had expected from Tyler. Thought she deserved from Tyler. As an outside possibility she had hoped for some form of forgiveness that would allow them to go forward. But never had she expected to find that Tyler was complicit in her sin. It just wasn't possible.

With a shaky voice she said, "Why did you come to my house last night, Tyler?"

His hand continued its path up and down her back, but it no longer soothed her. "I got the note you gave the driver that said you couldn't come, wouldn't see me any more, and I had to know why. But when you let me in, all I could think of was having you. Having you as Tyler, knowing that you wanted _me_, and not some mystery man."

Austin shrunk away from him at his use of that term.

"I was only barely making it through the days last week, feeling how much you disliked me. Knowing how much you wanted 'Alonso.' I was almost jealous of him. Hell, I _was_ jealous of him! You could barely spare me a civil word yet you were-" He stopped.

"Wanting him," Austin said quietly.

"Yes." Austin pulled away from him and sat up, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them.

Tyler let her go. "Monday morning you moved toward the door of the bus and brushed against me. I got a hard on like you wouldn't believe, just with that contact from you. You apologized in a perfunctory way, so I don't think you even knew it was me. But in the elevator you wouldn't even smile at me. I couldn't figure out what it was about me you disliked so much. It tore me up because my feelings for you just kept getting stronger. I didn't know what to do to get close to you, but that afternoon fate just pushed you into my arms, so to speak. I decided not to let the opportunity pass by." In fact, Austin remembered, he had said as much at the time.

"But I knew that if you knew it was me you'd back away, or worse. I saw the possibility of your leaving the firm, leaving me. So I called you Dulcie and kept you in the dark."

"Why were you even on the bus?"

"I was having work done here and stayed with Barb for a few days. The bus was easier than using the car. Austin, I never meant to hurt you. I never even thought through the possibility of being with you physically. Hell, I wasn't thinking at all. I didn't plan that first time, it just happened. But then I saw it as a way to touch you,

put my arms around you, smell your hair, to be close. You don't know how much I wanted that." He laughed, but with no humor. "I'm usually so sensible, but there was no logic I could use to dissuade myself from being with you, whatever it took. I spent my lunchtime Tuesday looking for a raincoat large enough to cover us both, just with the wild desire to feel your skin. And once I had that, it wasn't enough. I had to keep you from knowing it was me until I could find a way for you to get to know me. Once you did, once you fell in love with me, then I could tell you the truth."

"And you were so sure I would fall in love with you?"

"Yes."

She snorted in derision.

"It's not that I think I'm irresistible," he said sharply. "I just know we're right for each other. If you would give me a chance."

"So you asked me to meet you and simpleminded me fell right into your plan. I couldn't wait to get you inside me." She laughed bitterly. "Serves me right. My first man and I fall for a con job. I'm so desperate I let a man _blindfold_ me for Pete's sake. I _beg_ him to take me however he wants, even in my mouth, all the while accepting that he offered nothing more than whispers and riddles. How pathetic am I?" Her voice broke on a sob. Can't he understand? she thought. How can I trust him? God, how can I trust myself?

Tyler sat up to enfold her in his arms, but she pushed him away and tried to scramble off the bed. He fought to stop her, finally pinning her arms and dragging her to sit between his legs, her back against his chest. His breathing was labored by the time he restrained her; she heaved from crying and the effort to escape. He pulled her close and rocked her, whispering soft words of love in her ear.

When she stopped struggling, he said, "Pathetic? You're not. How can you say that? I was the first man you were ever with, Austin, the _only_ man you've ever been with. You can think of it as a con job if you want to, and maybe in a way it was. But I've loved you for the last five years, even if I never told you. I know you, inside out."

She snorted at that. "Definitely inside."

He shook her. "Stop it!" he ordered. "No one else has ever had you. No one else ever will if I have my way. That means no one knows you better than I do. Even _you_ don't know you the way I do." His voice softened. "You know you love me. You said so just a little while ago, and early this morning, when you were half asleep and speaking honestly, without the fear of worrying how I would react. And God knows I love you." He nuzzled her hair. His penis grew large and hard against her buttocks

"So that wasn't a dream last night. You used the black scarf and not only blindfolded me but tied my hands. And then you fucked me." He stilled, but she could feel his penis continuing to nudge her, bump her, seek a path into her, with a mind of its own.

"I wouldn't call it that. You found the scarf exciting, so do I sometimes. Feeling in control is an aphrodisiac. But not as much as watching your face when I fill you. Or hearing you call my name when you come."

"Think back. I whispered 'Alonso' last night. That's who I thought was inside me." Her voice was filled with bitterness.

"_You_ think back. You called out 'Tyler' when I sent you crashing over the edge. You can try to work your way around this any way you want, Austin. We love each other. We belong with each other. I told you last night that you are mine now, and that's the fact of it.

"We're neither of us children, Austin. I'm forty. I've waited for a long time to find the woman I could love, and I spent five wasted years passively waiting for her to notice me in a positive way once I found her. I might have been impatient last week, but you know the true me now and I'm not giving up." He rubbed her breasts in a slow circular pattern, smaller with each pass until he concentrated on her nipples, making her breath come in ragged gulps.

Tyler pushed her forward, positioning his hands under her buttocks and thighs, lifting her, pushing her thighs far enough apart to guide himself inside her tight opening. She felt helpless against him, not only because of his power and strength

but because even after what she had just learned, she wanted him, didn't want to resist him. He wrapped his legs over hers, pulling her close to him and reaching around to stroke her clit as he worked himself in and out of her. She moaned his name.

She heard the uneven, strained sound of his breathing, felt how much it cost him to remain in control. He stroked her harder. When she gasped for breath and went rigid he didn't let up, but kept up his pace until he brought her to completion a second time. When he finally let go, she felt the power. If they had come together that way just minutes earlier, before his revelations, she would have known with certainty that he was hers. And there would have been no question that she was his. But now? Now she felt no certainty except that she was adrift.

"That was wonderful," she said, when she caught her breath. "I doubt anyone will ever measure up to you in bed, Tyler. I have to admit, we're great at fucking." That she had come so close to love and then lost the trust required to give herself completely hurt to her very core. Until she could think through what had happened, until she could get away and try to find a way to understand it all, she struck out. She hurt; at this point she wanted to hurt Tyler a little too.

He tensed at the use of the word, and when he spoke, the discipline used to control himself was evident. "Unlike you, Austin, I wasn't a virgin just last week. I'm not bragging, just stating fact that over the years I have had some experience with fucking. While it's usually satisfying physically, it does nothing for the soul. It doesn't feed the emotions the way we do when we come together. Don't ever refer to what we have together as 'fucking' again."

"What would you call it? We lay on the wet grass and you stuck your tongue so deep inside me I didn't believe it was possible. I straddled you like a bitch in heat wanting nothing more than to feel you so deep inside me I wouldn't know where you ended and I began. While we were cruising through the city, for Pete's sake. For the past twenty-four hours we've taken every opportunity to screw that we could." She groaned, dropping her head and covering her eyes with her hands. "Oh, God. My mother is going to eat her cereal tomorrow morning over the spot where I wrapped my ankles around your neck. And you're right. Being tied and blindfolded last night was exhilarating while you 'did' me."

She stopped for a second and then continued in a lower voice. "I've just used terms tonight that I've never even spoken out loud before. But they all seem very apt for what we've done for the past week." Suddenly she felt weary. "Maybe for you it was feeding the soul. It turns out I didn't even know who I was with for half of my carnal experience. Would you consider that I was feeding my soul, Tyler?"

Austin pushed away from him and forced herself off the bed. He switched on the lamp. She flinched in the light, covering herself. She turned her back while she found her clothes, getting dressed while Tyler watched her from the bed. "Where are you going?"

"Home. I'll call a cab." He got up and moved toward her.

"I'll take you, if that's what you want."

"No. I'll take a cab. And you'll have my resignation effective whenever you want, in the morning." Tyler grabbed her arm and turned her to face him.

"What are you talking about? I don't want your resignation and I won't accept it."

She cocked her head and looked at him questioningly, her lips barely turned up.

"Won't accept it? You don't have control over everything you know. I'll make it for two weeks. Hopefully I can get the Morris project fine tuned before then and that will give you time to find someone to take my place." She glanced at the bed.

"Although I have to admit, it's going to be very hard finding someone to take _your_ place. Maybe I could come to your office for a quick fuck each morning before work to get me through the day?"

Tyler lunged forward, kissing her hard, passionately, once again biting her lip and licking clean the blood he drew. She knew that even now, there was pure desire in her eyes because she felt it within her, in her rapid heartbeat and quickened breath. How would she ever work through this?

"I'm warning you, Austin. I grew up with a strong-willed father who taught me well, and I've been to the best military school in the country. I know how to fight dirty, and I will. This isn't over." His hands dug into her shoulders.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Austin said, "The only thing I'd like from you

is that you let me keep working with Robbie. I'd prefer he not find out yet that we're not together. When he's entered the contest, then we can tell him about my ... leaving. But I'm only willing to be together for his sake. I like him a lot, and he doesn't deserve to be brought into the middle of this." She shook off Tyler's arms and went to the living room to call for the cab. Tyler got dressed and waited with her, but they waited in silence. He didn't try to touch her or kiss her again before she left.

*Chapter Sixteen *

Austin was in the office by six the next morning after a sleepless night. The first thing she did was compose her resignation letter, effective in two weeks, stating that she was interested in exploring new opportunities elsewhere. Still feeling the pain from the night before, she added that she appreciated everything Tyler had taught her and that she would use the knowledge well in the future. With determination, she sealed the letter in an envelope and slid it under Tyler's door.

With her notice delivered, Austin caught up on email and reviewed what she needed to do with her projects before handing them off to someone else. The Morris account would get the bulk of her attention over the next two weeks.

She suddenly realized that she felt relief over the resignation itself, if not over what had brought it about. The promotion she wasn't looking forward to but feared she would get, no longer hung over her head.

More than anything else though, resigning would remove her from Tyler. She'd spent most of the night on the Internet looking for job possibilities, so she still hadn't worked through the conflict she felt. If not for her liaison with Alonso, if not for Tyler's deception and her willing participation in it, she would be happily contemplating a future with him. Knowing that it wouldn't happen, yet seeing him every day would kill her. She wanted to make the move before she had time to talk herself out of it.

By seven-thirty, Austin was complete on what she had missed Monday and outlined what she wanted to have ready for her meeting with Ron Morris the next day. Her

desk looked clear.

Since she was caught up, breakfast away from the office sounded good, and she could review the results of last night's job search while she was at it. Settling at a table with her pastry and hot coffee, she took out the sheets of jobs. On each, she highlighted the particular skill she possessed that she would bring to the company, and which she would make sure was emphasized in her resume. It was an encouraging task. Since her five years with Bay Web, she had developed into an accomplished web developer. Her awards had brought her recognition, and the fact that she worked for Bay Web itself was helpful because it was a well-respected firm.

By the time she finished her breakfast she had a good idea of how she would start her job search. Several positions she found were outside California, which was exciting to think about. After leaving North Carolina as a child, she had lived in San Francisco her whole life except for her years at Oregon State.

She was surprised to find that the idea of spreading her wings sent a thrill through her, not of fear, as she might have supposed, but anticipation. She laughed softly and thought that she couldn't wait to tell Tyler that and get his reaction. Her smile disappeared with the realization that talking to him wouldn't be possible, bringing home to her just how close she had come to him in the short time of their friendship. She enjoyed talking to him, sharing with him, and she was unhappy that she had lost their easy companionship just as it developed.

Nonetheless, as she strolled back to the office she noticed a new spring in her step, and her animation was noted with several appreciative glances as she passed men on the sidewalk. She enjoyed the attention, and ironically thought to herself that had Tyler not taken steps to change her she wouldn't be this woman that men now noticed.

"Good morning. Sharon."

"Hey, how was your day off? You look great, by the way. I just keep loving these new clothes. And you look different, too. What is it? Did you splurge and get a facial or something?"

Austin laughed. "No, no facial. As for the clothes, I'm finding all of these old things

I had stuffed back in my closet. Its kind of fun exploring." Austin wore a light blue short-sleeved sweater with embroidered flowers along the hem and collar, and a tan jersey skirt. Her knife pin was attached just over her left breast.

"Where did you get that pin, Austin? It's very unique. Is it new?"

"Yes," she lowered her voice and leaned forward. "It's from my new boyfriend. Birthday gift." She raised her eyebrows tellingly. Sharon's eyes widened and her mouth fell open.

"Boyfriend!" Sharon squealed. "Why haven't I heard anything about a boy-"

"Ms. Gardner." Tyler stood at the lobby door that led to the hall. His voice was loud enough to be heard through the cube offices as well as the lobby. Austin looked at him coolly. "Would you come to my office, please?" He turned and left.

"I should have warned you right off. He's been here since early this morning. Before I got here at eight, and he's asked me a dozen times where you are. Something big must be happening and I don't think it's good. He's in a horrible mood, which isn't like him. I hope there's nothing wrong with the Morris account. Here are your messages." Austin absentmindedly accepted the phone slips Sharon held out, took a deep breath and marched down the hall to Tyler's office.

He was waiting just inside, hand on the doorknob. As she entered he closed the door. "I'd prefer you not close the door," she said firmly, standing in front of the guest chair. She rested her briefcase on the chair arm and looked him in the eye, seemingly calm.

"Well, I prefer to discuss this," he held up her resignation letter, "in private. Please sit." He walked to the chair behind his desk, then noticed that Austin remained standing. "Suit yourself," he muttered. He took a breath and when he spoke his tone was all business.

"I told you I would not accept your resignation, and I won't. You may have this back. If there are problems related to the workplace or your compensation for work, I will be more than happy to discuss them with you. I feel certain we can work out an equitable settlement. Do you have complaints?" He looked up at Austin with

hooded eyes and no expression except general curiosity.

With effort, Austin carefully schooled her face. Considering the knot in her stomach she wondered how he could be so controlled, but then she examined his face carefully, noticing the dark circles under his eyes and the place on his chin where he had cut himself shaving. Part of her wanted to touch his face where he had cut himself, run her thumb over those dark circles and smooth the furrow between his brows. Another part of her looked carefully for any signs that he felt remorse, shame, love, any emotion at all, but saw none of them. That was the part of her that answered him.

"I appreciate the offer, but I am neither dissatisfied with my compensation nor with the workplace in general." She looked down at the floor and then raised her eyes to meet his. "I need to leave. I'm afraid there is nothing you can offer that would change my mind at this juncture." The words were quietly but firmly spoken. By the time she was finished his jaw was clenched and she could see the tension build as he listened to her.

"I see." He raked his fingers through his hair and then scraped his hands over his face. "Austin, this is a personal problem between us, but I'd like to talk to you just about the business. I need you. Your leaving puts the company in something of a bind with Ron Morris, since we just sold him not only on your package but also on you, as the developer. You're who he wants on this project and who we'd like him to have. It's a very big deal for us. Isn't there some way we can work this out? Your leaving so suddenly like this, well, I just don't know how we're going to work through it."

He looked so miserable that she softened her tone. "I can't Tyler. This isn't easy for me either. I prepared an outline this morning of what needs to be tied up with Mr. Morris. I'll be available for the next two weeks and hope to have him ready to use the site by the time I leave. If not, there are many people working here who are capable of taking over." She dropped her eyes again before saying, "Ironically, it's my success on the Morris account and other accounts I've worked on here that have boosted my confidence enough to go somewhere else."

He gave a small, bitter laugh. "The irony isn't wasted on me. But that doesn't change the fact that we sold you. Your ideas, your style. That isn't something you can just

hand off to someone else. Can't you give me more time than two weeks? Say six months. If you are still determined to leave at the end of that time I'll help you in whatever way I can."

Austin was surprised and a little hurt that his concern was all for the company. For a moment she faltered, considering his argument. She didn't want to be unfair. Looking down at her briefcase she thought of the job descriptions she had just read through and remembered the feeling of eagerness she had felt.

More than that, she considered the pull she felt by simply standing on the opposite side of the desk. Right now, she wanted nothing more than to stand between his legs and hold his head against her breasts, feeling the heat from his breath on her. She wanted his lips on hers. She didn't want to fear what would happen to her if she gave into those desires. But the fear stayed with her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Birch." She saw him flinch and softened her tone. "I'm afraid I have to go. Unless you wish to fire me effective immediately, my last day will be a week from Friday."

"I'm afraid it will be slightly longer than that, Ms. Gardner." His eyes turned cold, as did his voice. If she hadn't known better, she could almost believe he hated her. Maybe he did by now. "Your letter says 'two weeks.' There is no date. This is Tuesday, not Monday. I expect to see you in the office as usual until two weeks from today."

"As you wish." She picked up her briefcase and turned toward the door.

"Austin." She pivoted. He spoke so softly she took a few steps back in order to hear him. "What did you mean about using what I had taught you?"

She smiled sadly. "I'm sorry I put that in. It was nasty of me, but I really don't want to leave that way. I meant all I've learned working for you, Tyler. This has been a wonderful experience for me and I'm grateful you gave me the opportunities you did. And just recently I've learned how wonderful it could be to have you as a friend, too. I wish you understood why I have to leave." She shook her head. "We came so close."

His eyes filled with pain.

"You're making a mistake, Austin. You won't find anyone else like me. We were meant to be together. You might find someone else to hold you, but not to fulfill you as I do."

"I hope that's not the case. For either of us."

Tyler cleared his face of all emotion and stood behind his desk as though at attention.

"Very well. I would like you to come to the executive staff meeting at ten. We have to find out where you are on your projects and decide what to do about them. Please do not discuss your resignation with anyone until after the meeting. I would like you to bring a list of the projects currently assigned to you and their status. And you might as well take this with you," he tossed her resignation letter across the desk. "I don't want it. Your employee file will reflect that you left with the proper notice and under good circumstances." He walked to the door and opened it, then returned to his desk without another word.

By lunch, everyone knew that Austin was leaving. Henry was a little upset that she hadn't sent the resignation letter to him, since he was her immediate supervisor, but there wasn't much he could say about it. He gave her a tight smile and wished her well. "Do you have another job? You know the market is pretty tight. If you need help, let me know."

Sharon suggested that they go out to lunch so she could hear about the changes, and they went to a diner just up the street.

After they ordered, Sharon said, "Well? Give! What's going on? When did you decide to leave? I can't believe this! And just when things were starting to go so well for you."

Austin laughed. "So many questions! I know this is sudden. I really just made the decision on the spur of the moment, last night." That much was true, Austin thought. "It's time to make a change. Sometimes you just know when the time is right and you'd better leap or you could miss the chance." The waitress brought their drinks and Austin took a sip.

"Does this have anything to do with the new boyfriend?" Sharon asked, eyeing the knife pin.

"Isn't it pretty?" She played with the straw in her glass, swirling it around, making the ice cubes clink. "No, the 'boyfriend' is a twelve year old boy whom I met over the weekend. He's very sweet and when he found out that my birthday was Saturday he got me this."

She laughed at Sharon's grimace, but assured her that she was not looking for a man. "In fact," Austin said, "I might just swear off men. They're a lot of trouble."

Sharon looked out the window and said, "Yes, but some of them are worth it." Austin followed her gaze and saw Tyler crossing the street, his hand on the back of a beautiful woman. She was talking animatedly, and Tyler laughed at something she said as she gestured wildly. The pain was so swift and sharp that she couldn't catch her breath. "He is gorgeous, and so nice. If I could meet someone like Tyler Birch, I'd consider taking the big step," Sharon finished.

"You mean marriage?" Austin couldn't take her eyes off of the two of them. She could feel her face flush with heat and she was surprised that she could even keep up with what Sharon said.

"Marriage! No, I mean sharing an apartment. A really nice one, that I could only afford if there were two incomes." She sighed. Austin burst into laughter, finally tearing her eyes away from Tyler and the woman. A moment later, without really wanting it, her eyes were pulled to the window again, but they were out of sight. She tried to recapture the easiness she had felt at the beginning of lunch but her stomach was in knots, and lunch didn't settle well.

Afterwards she immersed herself in preparations for the meeting the next morning. It was the best way to keep the picture of Tyler with another woman out of her mind. She tried to indicate that she didn't want to be disturbed while not being impolite, but getting her work done at the same time people were dropping in to find out if she really was leaving, and if so, where she was going, was difficult. Without looking up, she felt the familiar tingle go up her spine that told her Tyler was nearby. "Do you need me for something?" She turned around, taking off her glasses.

He stood just outside her cubicle, hands in his pockets. "It's just after five. Will you be ready to leave in a few minutes?"

"Oh gosh! I hadn't realized it was so late. I'll get the Morris work together and meet you in the lobby." She stood and stretched her shoulders, getting rid of the kinks that formed after hours spent staring at a computer screen, and looked up to see that he was still there. He looked at her intently for a moment and then left. She put the CD and supporting documentation she might need for reference, and her glasses in her briefcase and shut down her computer. When she reached the lobby, Tyler was waiting. He held the door for her and they took the elevator to the garage.

They traveled in silence until finally Tyler asked her how she wanted to handle their time with Robbie. "I think we can be polite to each other, don't you?"

"That won't be good enough. He's used to seeing us be more than civil. He's used to seeing us as people who really like each other, and he'll pick up on this tension."

She sighed and fought the feeling of wanting to rest her hand on his thigh as he drove. "I don't know what else to do. This is so hard. Look, I have a lot to do, so I'll beg off dinner and go home after we're finished. Most of the time I will be with Robbie by myself."

Tyler's eyes darkened anger as his lips compressed into a thin line. "I wish you would reconsider this move. How can we work things out if you're going to cut and run?"

"I don't expect us to work things out." She couldn't keep the sadness from her voice. "I want... Well, it really doesn't matter what I want. It has to be like this Tyler. I can't help it." She looked out the window while her hands twisted in her lap. "Besides, based on the woman I saw you with during lunch, it won't take you long to find another plaything, if you haven't already." She glanced at him and saw that he looked chagrined.

"It's not what you think."

"Right, I could see what it wasn't. Hand on her waist, attentive looks, laughter at the appropriate places. It was all perfectly innocent."

Tyler glanced at her and almost smiled. "She's the wife of a friend. She was in town shopping and asked if I would go with her to buy her husband an anniversary gift. Their fifteenth. But if you're jealous, there might be hope after all." Austin snorted, but she felt a tiny coil of tension inside unwind.

As they entered the house, Robbie rushed to meet them. "Austin, hi." He stopped and looked at her approvingly. "Gosh, you look really pretty today. And you're wearing the pin."

"Of course, I love this pin. You should have heard all the compliments I got on it today. I told everyone that I got it from a most wonderful man that I met over the weekend, and all of the women were envious." Robbie grinned.

"Hello. Am I invisible? Doesn't anyone say hello to the old uncle anymore?" Robbie laughed and playfully slapped Tyler on the arm, then led Austin back to the computer. Tyler wandered into the kitchen where Barb was putting dinner together.

"Hey, handsome," she said, as she mixed salad. "Where's the better half?" When she looked up and saw his face, she knew something awful had happened. "Ty, what's wrong?"

"Barb, I screwed up royally. Austin is leaving."

"Leaving, what do you mean leaving? You mean you?"

He nodded, miserably. "And the firm, and for all I know the country. We had a disagreement last night. Well, 'disagreement' hardly covers it, I guess. She said she didn't want to see me anymore." He looked at her dinner preparations. "I didn't know until we were on the way over that she won't stay for dinner, so I guess I won't either. We don't want to upset Robbie until he gets through this work with her, and she thinks it would be too hard to pretend through a meal."

Barb sat down. "This is really serious then. Can you tell me what it's about?"

"No." He stared at the floor. "But I can tell you it's all my fault. There isn't anything Austin did wrong here." He sighed. "But I don't think there's any way I can fix it. I think she's really going."

"Oh, Tyler. I am so very sorry. I wish there was something I could do."

"Believe me, if I thought there was, I would ask. I'm not above groveling in this case." He smiled at his sister. "Is there anything I can do to help here? Might as well keep busy while they're doing their thing." He crossed to the cabinet and removed plates, glasses and silverware for Barb and Robbie. He helped with dinner preparations and was chatting with Barb when Austin came into the kitchen.

"Hello Barb," she said quietly. "I guess Tyler told you about our little problem?"

"Not the specifics, no. Do you want to enlighten me? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Thanks, but I think the way we're handling it is for the best. I just don't want to upset Robbie."

"Thanks for the beautiful skirt. And Robbie loved those sunglasses. I hope he told you. I found the bag in the guest room last night." She looked from one to the other. "Any idea how it got there?"

"It doesn't matter now," said Tyler, in a flat tone. He looked at Austin. "Are you finished? Ready to go?"

"Yes."

Barbara took Austin's hand and held her back while Tyler went to say goodnight to Robbie. "This breaks my heart, Austin. Just yesterday you two were so happy. I don't understand what could have happened so suddenly to change it. Can't you please reconsider and try to work things out?" Tears glistened in Barb's eyes, which brought them to the surface in Austin's eyes.

"I wish I could, Barb." She turned to leave. "Robbie," she called, "see you tomorrow."

"Okay, Austin. Goodnight."

As they got into the Jeep, Austin said, "You don't have to leave. I can walk or call a

cab."

"I'm taking you home. Will you let me buy you dinner? In payment for working with Robbie?" He backed into the street and drove toward her apartment.

"No, thanks. That's not necessary. To tell the truth, I'm tired. I didn't sleep last night and it's been a stressful day." Tyler moved his hand off of the gearshift and squeezed her knee, leaving his hand resting there. "Tyler, please."

"I can picture you saying that with pleasure in your voice," he said softly. "Austin, I love you. Doesn't that mean anything to you?" He looked at her while they were stopped at a red light. His fingers lightly stroked her knee.

"Look, this isn't easy for me, either. I thought..." She stared out the side window. Then softly she said, "But it isn't going to work between us."

"Why not?" His voice was demanding. "If we love each other why can't we make it work?" The light turned green and the car behind him immediately blew his horn. "Oh, damn." Tyler pulled off.

"Because we don't live in a fairy tale. Because sometimes love isn't enough."

"We're adults, Austin. I know we don't live in a fairy tale, and as adults we should be able to face our problems, not run from them. What you're doing is something I would expect of Robbie." The frustration he had been feeling all day suddenly erupted. He pulled over to the curb and stopped, putting the Jeep in first gear and turning it off.

"For God's sake." He raked his hand through his hair. "What do you want from me? Just tell me and I'll do it." His voice broke and he took a deep breath. "I know I shouldn't have touched you on the bus. I shouldn't have lured you into an impossible situation. I know I shouldn't have kissed you, touched you, made love to you. I especially shouldn't have made love to you, not without your knowing it was me and how much I love you. But I wanted you so much and I thought you hated me as Tyler. I needed time, but once I'd touched you I couldn't wait. As Tyler, I thought if I just won you over, then it would be all right, even after we had gone so far. I never meant to hurt you, Austin."

Giving in to what she had wanted to do earlier, she took his hand. He leaned back against his headrest, eyes closed, holding her hand so hard it hurt. "Please don't leave me." It was a whispered plea.

"Tyler, I blame myself as much as you. I gave myself to a man I didn't even know. I was foolish and stupid. The fact that it was you doesn't change anything, because I didn't know it was you. Don't you see? I can't trust myself. Dulcinea, indeed. You know full well what Dulcinea was. I'm much the same, based on my actions." She sat quietly. "I'm so ashamed. Think for a moment. I needed a change and I thought to have a little innocent adventure. What if it hadn't been you? What if it had been just some man? How would you feel then?" More quietly, she said, "How could I not know you were the same man? I usually can tell when you're nearby. By the time you told me, I know your scent, your touch. How could I be so stupid?"

Tyler shrugged and said quietly. "I don't know exactly. You wanted Alonso to be exotic, different, a mystery. Without the normal visual clues you probably made him what you thought he should be. It was just me, Austin, the whole time. As for how I would feel if you had gone with any man, that wouldn't have happened."

"How do you know that?"

"I told you things that let you know you were safe. I gave you clues that let you know that I was someone you could trust. No other man could have done that, and you wouldn't have gone unless it was someone who made you feel safe. I know you." He turned his head to look at her. His words were spoken with total confidence, and the look of sincerity in his eyes backed them up. "As for your being mixed up between Alonso and Tyler, there's no confusion if you'll just think about it. You knew Alonso was with you because he touched you physically. He pulled you to him with his hands. You always know I'm near you even when there's several feet between us. That's because I touch you with my soul. Think about it." He released her hand and started the car.

*Chapter Seventeen *

Austin sat in silence until Tyler stopped in front of her building. "I'm sorry this has

upset Barb."

"She just told me last night how much she likes you. She said she was happy because you were perfect for me." He laughed bitterly. "She loves her brother so I guess she never considered that I wasn't perfect for you."

"Tyler-"

"I'll see you tomorrow, Austin. You're not the only one who's had a stressful day. Let me know if there are any problems with Ron tomorrow. I told him your news, so there might be a few wrinkles we hadn't anticipated."

"Okay." She sat there after he finished speaking, unwilling to leave things the way they were, but not sure how to fix them. In the end she decided not to try. "Thanks for the ride. I'll check in as soon as I get back to the office and update you." He didn't respond. She got out of the car and hurried to the lobby door. When she got inside she turned and saw that he had waited until she was safely inside before leaving, and felt hot tears spring to her eyes.

Upstairs, she said hello to her mother and changed into pajamas and a robe before wandering to the kitchen for something to eat. Her feet were encased in big fluffy slippers. She always had at least one pair of special slippers in her closet. The softness, warmth, and sheer frivolity of the special slippers had always helped her feel better when loneliness crashed into her. These were brown fleece in the shape of a rabbit, long ears flapping gently as she walked.

Her mother came into the kitchen while Austin was eating the sandwich she had fixed, taking the chair across from her. Austin stood and poured a glass of water, setting in front of her mother. Sarah looked at Austin expectantly. "Did you have a good weekend at Ruthie's?"

Her mother waved the question away. "Something's wrong. What is it?"

Austin chuckled. "No easing into the subject, huh? I quit my job this morning."

"What? Why? How are we going to live? Did they fire you?" Her mother's tone reflected shock, fear and accusation, from one question to the next.

"Fire me? No. Why would you say that?" Irritation snapped in her question. "I'll get another job, Mother. I have several in mind, and I'm sending my resume off to them tonight. We won't starve."

The buzzer rang from the call box, interrupting them. Since Austin was eating she thought Sarah might answer it, but instead she just sat, looking at her glass of water. The buzzer sounded again. Austin sighed as she got up to push the button. "Yes?"

"Austin, I've got your briefcase." Damn! She hadn't even noticed that she didn't have it. She punched the button to open the lobby door.

"Mother, the owner of the company brought me home, and he's bringing my briefcase up." Her mother fixed her with a stare. There was suspicion in her eyes, although Austin didn't have the faintest idea what for.

When the doorbell rang, her mother practically jumped up to answer it, yanking on Austin's arm and pulling the door open with a jerk. Tyler stood there, looking tired and irritable, holding her briefcase in front of him. His look of surprise at facing Sarah Gardner instead of Austin was quite evident. "Mrs. Gardner? Hello, I'm Tyler Birch. Is Austin available?"

"Not to you."

"Mother!" Austin stepped from behind her mother, aware of her state of dress, but wanting to save Tyler any further embarrassment. "Come in Tyler. I'm really sorry for the inconvenience. I would have noticed it was missing as soon as I went to send out my..." Her words trailed off as she realized that he didn't want to know about her resume update. Tyler stepped just inside the door and held out the case.

"So you're the man who fired my daughter? How are we going to live now? We won't be able to stay here. Where will I go?"

"Mother, why don't you go back to your room and watch TV?" Austin could count on one hand the number of nights her mother had left her bedroom in the past month, and this had to be one of the nights.

"Mrs. Gardner, I didn't fire Austin. I'd give anything if she would stay, but she

doesn't want to." Sarah regarded him with distrust, but there was nothing left she could say. Glancing quickly at Austin, he added a slight drawl to his voice. "I'm sure Austin will find another job soon. She's very talented. Any company will be lucky to get her, so I don't think you have to worry about Austin, or where you will live." He smiled at Sarah and touched her face with his fingertips. Sarah suddenly smiled back at him, like a young girl.

"Would you like to come in for something to eat? Austin will fix you a sandwich."

"Well, I..." He looked at Austin, who was staring at her mother, so amazed by the change in her attitude that she simply nodded.

"If you want. We have turkey and ham."

"That would be nice then, if it's not too much trouble," he said softly, and followed her into the kitchen.

As Austin moved from the refrigerator to the counter, putting together a sandwich for Tyler, he and her mother settled at the table and struck up a conversation. By the time she placed a sandwich and a glass of diet soda in front of him, Sarah and Tyler seemed almost like long lost friends, and Austin felt the outsider. She sat and picked up her own sandwich, keeping quiet while she ate and listened to her mother talk about her life in North Carolina, and Austin's father.

"He was a handsome devil, that Ted Gardner," she said, with a far-away look in her eyes. "Always kidding me, always making me laugh." Her mother? Laugh? That was something Austin couldn't imagine. "When he asked me to marry him I thought I was the luckiest girl in the world, and I guess I was." She sighed. "But then I got pregnant, and everything changed."

Austin heard her mother but kept her eyes on her plate as she chewed her food.

"Why, Mrs. Gardner? Weren't you happy to be having a child?"

"Oh." Her mother almost simpered. "Call me Sarah, Tyler." She patted his hand. "No, I didn't want to have a baby. I had grown up with seven younger sisters and brothers, and I knew what it was like to care for a child. I didn't want any part of it. The responsibility on Ted was great. Suddenly we had an extra mouth to feed and

there was no work where we lived. He had to go out of town everyday, just to put food on the table. If I hadn't had Austin to take care of, I could have gone with him, moved, maybe. But I did have her."

Without wanting to, Austin looked at her mother, the sandwich she had been eating forgotten. Tyler watched Austin from the corner of his eye. Distress was plain on her face.

"Austin, this sandwich is wonderful. It's really hitting the spot. Thanks." Sarah continued as though Tyler hadn't spoken, lost now in her memories.

"But that man did love Austin. He named her you know. Had a dream of going to Texas. Said he'd heard the oil fields outside Austin had work. We never knew if it was true or not, since we never got there."

"You must have loved your daughter too, Sarah. You gave her the middle name of Dulcinea. It's a beautiful name idealizing a beautiful woman. Is that why you named her that?"

"What?" Sarah's eyes focused on Tyler. "No. Her father gave her that name. Heard it in some song, he said. Said it was pretty, but I never gave it a thought. One day, he went away to work and didn't come home. A building he was working in collapsed. It was the worst day of my life. After that, my brother offered to bring us out here, though I warned him that Austin could be a handful, even at eight years old. But I needed have worried. They got along like gangbusters, did Dan and Austin. Better than Dan and I ever got along, I can tell you! And now Dan's gone too, and Austin has control of everything." She looked Tyler in the eye. "Did you know that Austin wants to send me away to live? And now she's out of work, I don't know how she will even be able to do that." Sarah shook her head and took a sip of water.

Tears slid down Austin's face. "I told you, Mother. I want you to be happy somewhere. We'll work something out." She wiped her eyes with her napkin and stood up to put her plate in the sink.

"Well, I'm sure I don't know how," Sarah stated. "Tyler, I must go now, but I'm so glad you came by." She held her hand out to him and smiled. "Please come back and visit again. I think I detect a slight Southern accent in your voice, and it's been so

long since I've heard that." Tyler took her hand and stood as she got up from the table.

When the bedroom door closed, Austin stood, head down, in danger of collapsing had she not been supporting herself by leaning against the counter. Tyler watched her stand there without saying a word. Finally she said, "I'm sorry you were here for this. I don't know what else to say except that I think it would be easier if you left now."

Tyler threw his napkin on the table and took two long strides to her, wrapping his arms around her and turning her so that her head rested against his chest. He rubbed her back as she sobbed, her arms around his waist. "It's all right, Austin. Let it all out. Let me be your strength for a little while." He rested his cheek on the top of her head and rocked her gently until he could feel her relax and her sobbing ceased. When she pushed him away gently he let her go, leaning her against the counter.

"Thank you." She wiped her eyes before pouring a glass of water. She drank it all, then poured another. When she sat at the table once again, Tyler took his place. He simply looked at her, not wanting to force her into talking before she was ready.

"Well, now we know that I wasn't named Dulcinea in an effort to inspire. Just a pretty name my father heard on the radio. That's funny isn't it, after our farce last week?" She gave a shaky laugh and then hiccupped from her crying. "Go ahead and eat your sandwich if you want to, Tyler. I'm finished wallowing for the moment."

He picked up what was left of his sandwich and bit into it.

"The fact of the matter is, I don't know exactly what to do with her. She can't live by herself, and I'm not sure where she might be happy." She scrubbed her face with her hands, trying to wipe away not only the unhappiness of the last few years of living with her mother, but the fresh pain of the last few minutes. "Whether I stay or go, something has to be done before one of us goes crazy." She blew out a breath. "And I'm not at all sure it will be my mother."

"Does someone come in during the day?" Tyler tried to overlook the panic he felt at Austin's mentioning she might leave San Francisco.

"Yes, a woman who worked for my uncle for many years. She and mother are friends. She lives in Daly City."

"There isn't someplace close to her your mother would like to live?"

"That's what I brought up to her the other day, when I found out she forgot my birthday." Tyler winced. "My talking to her about the possibility of moving is what caused her most recent upset. Well, the one before your firing me, that is." She smiled wanly at him. "Aren't you glad I'm leaving now? You wouldn't want to be in love with a woman from such a dysfunctional family."

Tyler snorted and pushed his empty plate away. "Name me one person who comes from a perfect family. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell me who I should or should not be in love with. There's no way in the world I could _not_ be in love with a woman who wears slippers like those and still make them seem sexy."

Caught unaware by his comment, she giggled. He smiled, then sighed, looking at her, and took a sip of his soda. "Changing the subject, I'm thinking about something and I'd like you to give me your opinion." Austin folded her hands on the table and sat quietly, waiting for him to continue.

"What is it you're looking for in a job? I mean, I assume you've got that briefcase full of job descriptions off the Internet." She blushed. "That's what I thought. Do you want to work for someone else or do you just not want to work for me?"

"I've enjoyed being at Bay Web, but I can't work there any longer. Not after... What does that leave except getting another job?"

"Going into business for yourself." Austin's eyes widened as she regarded him with an expression of intense interest. "Doing what you do takes little capital to get started. You already have the perfect desktop computer and laptops come loaded with lots of power for not too much money these days. Seems to me you need some business cards and contacts. You've already got the reputation."

"But wouldn't that put me in competition with you?"

"In the web design field, yes. But we do much more than web design. And

competition isn't a bad thing. Remember, we would be in competition with you too. You might not be able to handle large accounts at the beginning, so we would be in a different niche for awhile. I think we could handle being business colleagues, don't you?" He looked at her thoughtfully. "I hope you wouldn't take your Bay Web accounts with you, but that's a chance I will have to take."

"Tyler, this isn't something I had ever considered. But I have to admit, the idea is intriguing." She gazed into his blue eyes, which had softened since he had held her while she cried, and felt again the strength and comfort he had offered a few minutes earlier. "Why are you helping me?"

"You shouldn't have to ask that." His eyes filled with love and then pain before he controlled himself. "As a matter of fact, I heard from a VMI classmate this afternoon, who's throwing some business my way. I would be willing to call him and tell him about you, if this idea sounds like something like you want to try. He could be your first client. He's a good guy, with a courier service in Dallas. It would mean going there, but only for a couple of weeks. You know there's plenty of business here in the Bay Area for someone with your talent." Austin looked away from Tyler, thinking about what it would take to get started. This would be a break with everything in her old life. It would force her independence and give her a fresh start. Just days after her birthday; it seemed fitting.

"Yes." She faced Tyler again, a determined look in her eyes. "Yes, I'd like to try it, if you truly, objectively think it's something I can do."

"I wouldn't have suggested it if I didn't think you could handle it. Good. I'll call Sandy tomorrow and feel him out." He stood and took his plate to the sink. "I guess I'd better go now. Thank you for the sandwich." He walked toward the front door, with Austin padding behind him. When he stopped and turned, leaning over in a natural move to kiss her, Austin stepped back. With a look of sadness, he brushed his thumb over her cheek and silently left.

The rest of the week went quickly. Austin spent most of her time going over the projects she was turning over to other designers. Mark Williams was taking over her largest accounts, and being promoted to senior designer in compensation.

Tyler made good on his promise to call his friend and recommend Austin for the

project he had mentioned. Sandy Carter, who had known Tyler since college, spoke with Austin by phone and made arrangements for her to be in Dallas the week after she left Bay Web. With all of the activity, she barely had time to say hello to Tyler during the rest of the week. He drove her to Barb's and then home after she worked with Robbie each evening, but he did not come back to her apartment.

She and Tyler saw each other only briefly, at meetings, or passing in the lobby or the hall. Each time, Austin felt the familiar pull. She wanted him, sexually and personally, to talk to and be around. She'd had time during the week to analyze her feelings regarding Tyler. She'd said she loved him, but she didn't think she could, not truly. Not if she could give herself to a stranger and then turn around and do the same with him. The way she had wanted them both must mean there was something wrong with her. Enough so that she couldn't trust her own feelings, at least. And she decided that he couldn't really love her either, despite what he told her or himself.

She hated herself for what she had done, and knew that sooner or later Tyler would too. Loving him was too big a risk to take. She wanted to be friends, but didn't know if she could even handle that due to her desire for him. Keeping herself in check, stopping herself from touching him in a familiar way or talking with him, laughing with him over something she thought or heard, all of that made it difficult even being around him. At least each day when he dropped her off she could relax and let the coil of tension in her unwind.

On Friday, Austin worked with Robbie for an extra half hour, and they determined that he was ready to show his project to someone else to get a response. They called Barb and Tyler to the computer and Robbie performed an "unveiling." Barb and Tyler made their comments, which Robbie noted, and Austin said that during the next week they would incorporate the comments Robbie wanted and fine-tune the web site before submitting it.

"Austin," Robbie said, after his mother and uncle had gone back into the living room, "I could never have done this without you. It was a lot of fun." He hugged her hard. "You're the best, Austin. Thanks."

"Robbie, you did all the work. All I did was help with the program and show you some techniques I use. This project is all yours, and you did a wonderful job. The subject matter is very interesting, and the site flows beautifully. You should be very

proud. Just as I'm proud that you let me work on it with you." She hugged him back, tears springing to her eyes. When he sat down beside her, she put her arm around his shoulder, enjoying the feeling of having him for a friend.

"Austin?"

"Hmm?"

"Is there something wrong?" She removed her arm and looked at him, apprehension in her eyes.

"Why do you ask?"

"Uncle Ty doesn't seem happy like he used to, and neither do you. You two used to have fun with each other and talk, and now you don't look at each other at all. I thought you were going to get married."

"Robbie! Who said we were going to get married?"

"No one, I just thought by the way you were acting that you might. That would have been good because you're so neat, and so is Uncle Ty. Something is wrong isn't there? Is it because my project took up too much time?"

Austin put her arms around Robbie and gave him a quick hug. "No, sweetheart. It has nothing to do with your project. I think your project is wonderful and so does your uncle. What's wrong has nothing to do with you-we both love you. It's just that, sometimes things go well between people and sometimes they don't. It's like... You know lots of people at school don't you?" Robbie nodded. "Well, once in awhile you meet someone and you have fun, so you start hanging out with them. Maybe after awhile it's not the way you thought it would be. You still like them, but it's hard to be around them, so you don't hang out any more. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"That doesn't mean anything is wrong with you or with them. It's just not the same as when you first met them. That's kind of how it is with your uncle and me right now. He's a very nice man, but we just aren't meant to be together as boyfriend/girlfriend like we thought we might be. We didn't want to tell you until your project

was finished because we didn't want to upset you." She brushed his hair off of his forehead. "And you're so smart you figured it out anyway." Austin smiled, although her eyes were misty. "We shouldn't have tried to put one over on you."

"Well, I think it's too bad. I could tell Uncle Ty really liked you. He never invited a woman to go with us anywhere before, so when you came to the zoo I knew you must be special. Will you and I still be friends, even if you're not seeing Uncle Ty?"

"I hope so. If you want to be and if it's okay with your mom, I would like to stay friends with you. Are we okay now?"

"Yeah, thanks." Austin wiped her eyes and stood. As she turned, she saw Tyler standing in the doorway.

"Hey, champ," he said to Robbie, but watched Austin's eyes. "I think your mom has dinner on the table and I've got to get Austin home."

"Okay. Uncle Ty, are you coming by tomorrow?" Tyler looked down at the boy and ruffled his hair as Robbie stood next to him.

"I don't know yet, Robbie. I'll call you tomorrow, okay?" Robbie quickly hugged his uncle around the waist and then slipped through the doorway. "I've already said goodbye to Barb. Shall we go?" Austin picked up her purse and followed him out the front door.

"You let him down pretty easily back there. Thanks," Tyler told her once he got in the Jeep.

"I like him a lot. I wouldn't want to hurt him for the world." Austin buckled her seatbelt and settled her purse in her lap, waiting for Tyler to start the car. Instead he leaned forward, hands on the wheel, chin resting on his hands and turned to look at her.

"Austin, would you have dinner with me tonight?"

"Tyler that's not a good idea."

"What's wrong with it? Your mother has probably already eaten, so you'll have dinner alone and it's plain that I've got no one to eat with. A restaurant full of people, what can happen?"

She looked at him. "I once thought that same thing about a bus."

He winced, then sighed and turned to stare out the windshield. "I just don't want to face another night of going home and being alone. Before last week, I could deal with it. After spending time with you, being with you, I hate it." He looked back at her again. "Won't you just have dinner with me? As a friend?"

As a friend. Austin thought about that description. It was what she wanted, what she needed. She considered: could she handle indulging herself by spending time with him? She wondered if she could even keep it friendly being with him on a non-business level. Would the pain later be that much greater, after an evening of laughter, of sharing? It would be much easier just to go home, but God! Who was she kidding? She needed him like a plant needs the sun. And she knew she wanted him as far more than a friend.

After several seconds Austin sighed and said, "If it's someplace raucous. If I see a single candle on a tablecloth that implies romance, I'll walk out."

"You've got it." Tyler started the Jeep and they pulled out of the drive. He drove down Lombard to Columbus and found a place to park near Green Street. From there they walked to O'Reilly's, a pub and restaurant with flowing Guinness and very good food. There was already a Friday night crowd gathered, which meant Tyler had to get on the list for seating in the restaurant.

"I think this fits what you had in mind," Tyler said to Austin, raising his voice to be heard over the general noise in the bar where they waited for their table. "Wine?" She nodded and climbed onto a bar stool with a slight smile. Tyler ordered a pint for himself and a Chardonnay for Austin, then squeezed in to lean his elbow on the bar.

"Have you been here before?"

"No. I've wanted to but it's not the kind of place to come alone, is it?" He looked at her. It wasn't a whine, just a statement. Her eyes were bright as she took in the

atmosphere.

"No, it's definitely more fun to be here with someone. I bring clients here often. The food is good and it's different from what people generally think of as San Francisco cuisine. I hope you like it." Their drinks arrived. "Let's see if we can find a table." He helped Austin off of the stool and guided her to a small round table along the back wall where they would be out of the traffic but able to watch the people and see what was happening.

"Robbie's web site looks very good. You've helped him a lot. I'd better be careful or I'll end up having to hire the kid," he said with a smile.

"You could do a lot worse. He has really good instincts of what will work, and a good eye for color and form. If I may be so bold, since I'm leaving," she took a quick sip of wine and missed the look of pain that flitted through his eyes, "Robbie could almost replace Henry right now." Tyler burst out laughing.

"Well, I'll take that under advisement. Tell me about Henry. Just your impression of how he is to work with."

Austin measured her words. "We didn't jell. I don't know if it was because of me or him, or, most likely, both of us. I always thought he was being condescending, until the last week." At Tyler's raised eyebrows, she said, "Then I thought he was condescending and a leech." She chuckled, but Tyler did not. Instead, he studied her to see how serious she was.

"You mean he hit on you?" Even with the noise in the room she could hear the undertone of anger in his voice.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," she said, with a shrug. "He barely even hinted at anything sexual before I stopped wearing my old clothes, so I wasn't as prepared as I might have been. And actually," she blushed and stared at her wine glass, "I thought it might have been me more than him."

"What?"

"Because of ... our week, you, I felt different about myself. I thought maybe I was sending out signals without meaning to. In case that was it, I just excused him and

put the blame for his actions on me."

Tyler took a long pull on his Guinness and looked around the room casually. But Austin could tell that he was anything but casual as she glanced at his profile. His jaw was tense and a tiny muscle flexed just under his ear. He looked back at her. "What else?"

She frowned at him. "Tyler, what is this about?"

He shook his head. "Tell me more about Henry, Austin."

"I don't know what you're aiming at. There isn't anything particularly to tell. When we discussed the Morris presentation, he told me that he had to convince you to let me give it. You had just indicated the day before that you had confidence in me." She shrugged. "Sharon told me to trust you."

Tyler smiled grimly. "Looks like a raise for Sharon. Maybe I should have enlisted her help in wooing you."

"Ty-" Just then Tyler's name was called for their table. Tyler effectively cut off anything she was going to say by helping her to her feet and motioning her to follow the hostess into restaurant.

*Chapter Eighteen *

Tyler ordered cottage pie for Austin and rack of lamb for himself, then directed the conversation back to the previous subject. "Thanks for your evaluation on Henry. I've wondered how things were between you, but you've never hinted at problems or asked for help, so I decided to let things take their natural course."

"Did you have any reason to think that I might need your help?"

Tyler was quiet for a moment. "Ever since I gave you the Sampson Financials account there have been undercurrents from him. Little cutting things he would say. Trying to undermine you with the other managers, but in a subtle way. I kept an eye

on things while I was watching out for you. None of the others seem to take him very seriously, so I didn't worry too much. But had you come to me with a specific complaint I would have taken action against him. I just wondered if he had tried to undercut me or the company while talking to you. And based on your comment, I'd say yes."

Tyler took a sip of his drink. "I'm going to let him go. We will be short-handed as it is after next week, but I need everyone working together, not trying to cause trouble. That means I'll lose both of you within a week's time. Not that he does much design work, but someone will have to pick up his administrative tasks until I can find a replacement." He sighed.

"I'm sorry this is hitting you all at once." Austin spoke in a low voice, and Tyler looked into her eyes. He softened his expression and ran his hand under her hair to caress the back of her neck.

"Don't get me wrong," he said. "Business is important to me, but your leaving is going to kill me. I'll take care of Henry. That's a necessary part of my job. But how I'm going to get through not seeing you every day, I don't know. Right now, even with you leaving at the end of the week, at least I still have glimpses of you in the office; I can hear your voice as I pass a room where you're meeting. After next week, for the first time ever, I will dread going to work." He removed his hand, feeling her hair brush over his knuckles, and took another long pull on his Guinness. Austin sat quietly.

"I have to, Tyler."

In a harsh voice he said, "I don't want to talk about the 'whys' again." He adopted a lighter tone. "Let's change the subject. I understand you've talked with Sandy. When do you go to Dallas?"

"The Monday after I finish at the office. That gives me a few days to get things set up here. Not that I know exactly how to go about setting up a business, but that will give me a little extra time, anyway. Actually, I'm beginning to have confidence problems. You know, wondering if I'm getting in too far over my head. I hated the thought of the promotion at work because of the added stress of responsibility for others. Now I'm beginning to feel the stress of responsibility for myself."

Tyler looked at her in surprise. "How did you know about the promotion? And why wouldn't you have wanted it? I had plans to make you more of a mentor for the other designers, as well as have you handle some project work. It would have been similar to what you've been doing with Robbie."

Austin returned his look. "That's what you wanted me to do? But that would have been wonderful. I thought you were planning to stick me in an office and have me do paperwork. I thought you wanted me to be another Henry. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you? You weren't supposed to know about the promotion at all. It was a position I made up, with you in mind. Telling someone about a new position usually comes after it's been approved, which it would have been at the next board meeting. I thought it would please you and I wanted it to be a surprise. Plus it's something we could really use at the office. Why didn't you tell me your concerns? I would have explained it then, to alleviate your worry."

"You weren't my friend or lover then, remember? You were 'Mr. Birch.' There was no way I was going to broach the subject with him. And then... We really are a mess, aren't we?" Austin smiled wryly. "Well, you can take pleasure in the fact that you really do know me well enough to know what I would like. I would have loved that job."

"You could still have it, you know. I have some influence with the president of the company." He looked up at her through his lashes.

"Don't, Tyler," she said softly. "I'm leaving for Dallas in a little over a week."

"But you'll come back to San Francisco to do the work, won't you? I mean," he glanced at her offhandedly, "this is home base, right?"

"Yes, I guess so. I know there's work to be found here, but I'm not averse to moving around a little, going where other work is for a time."

"I see." Tyler paused, as if considering a point. "Since I've got some experience in starting a business, why don't we get together tomorrow and talk about how you might want to go about this? We can make a run to the office place for supplies, go

over the paperwork you'll need, maybe talk about billing, marketing, that sort of thing?" He looked into her eyes. "I'd like to do it."

"Why?" she asked in a low voice.

"Just to spend time with you," he answered, in just as low a voice. Austin didn't answer, and before Tyler could state his case again, their food arrived.

"That looks delicious," said Austin, eyeing his plate of lamb chops and vegetables. Tyler took a bite and nodded that it was.

"Here," he said, holding out a fork with a bite of lamb and carrots on it. He guided it to her lips and without thinking, she took the fork into her mouth, holding it lightly with her lips as Tyler withdrew it. His eyes smoldered as he watched her, and she suddenly felt the intimacy of the action deep inside her.

"Why don't you let me have a taste of that cottage pie?" His voice was husky. She stared at him, a deep heat permeating her belly and lower regions. She barely saw her plate as she scooped up some cottage pie and held her fork out to him. He watched her eyes as he leaned forward and took the food into his mouth. Just as he closed his lips, Austin, watching the action, licked her lips. Tyler moaned as she pulled the fork out. "Austin," he whispered.

Austin put her fork down. "I knew this wasn't a good idea," she said. "I can't do this if you're going to..."

"Going to what? Going to remind you of what you mean to me? What I mean to you?" He said it gently, but he took her hand and placed it on his thigh so that her fingertips grazed the evidence of his passion. "I'm hard right now, Austin, but it's like this all the time around you. I just want you to know." He released her hand, and picked up his fork. "I'll change the subject again. How's your mother? What does she think about your new career?"

Austin didn't move for a few moments then she slowly picked up her fork and took a bite, chewing and swallowing before answering. "As a matter of fact, I think there is a solution to the problem of my mother," Austin said. "For the time I'm in Dallas, her friend Ruthie is going to stay at the apartment with her husband while they have

renovations done to their house. The renovations involve adding a bath and more space to their youngest daughter's bedroom. She's getting married next month, and Ruthie has asked Mother to move in when their daughter moves out. Mother is thrilled. Ruthie has a big family and there will be lots of activity around her down there. And she and Ruthie really do get along very well, so maybe it will work out."

Austin raised an eyebrow at Tyler. "Ruthie says mother gets bored at my house and that's why she seemed so unhappy sometimes." She pushed a bite of food around her plate and looked up at Tyler. "When I think of the hoops I used to jump through to please her, it makes me cringe."

She shook her head and smiled sadly, staring at her wine glass. "What does my mother think of my career change, you ask? Not too much. She pointed out that I knew nothing of being on my own, and that I will probably fail and have to come crawling back to your company to ask for my old job back." Austin glanced at Tyler and then picked up another bite of food. "But on the subject of Tyler Birch, my mother expounds. You're handsome, very kind and attentive to ladies, and-this is the highest compliment-Southern. Did I mention handsome? You've got a real fan in my mother, although to put it unkindly, I'm not so sure that's a compliment." Obviously upset, she put the food in her mouth and chewed savagely. Tyler didn't say anything until he had taken another sip of his drink.

"Austin, I love my mother and my sister. Individually they are wonderful women, but put them together for the space of an hour or more and sometimes there's more tension in a room than you can cut with a knife. Some women just react with each other in a negative way. Barbara could do no wrong as far as Dad was concerned, but after she got in her teens, there was always a little edge between her and Mom. It eased considerably after Barb got married, and especially after she had Robbie, but you can still feel it sometimes. And the ironic thing is they love each other tremendously. I'm sure your mother loves you, just not in the same way you express love. When the chips are down, I think your mother will be there for you."

Austin snorted. "Right. I hope I never have to count on that. You heard her, Tyler. She never wanted me and she really didn't make it too much of a secret. All of my life I've felt unlovable. Do you know what that does to a person?"

"No, I don't." He reached for her hand, and she let him take it.

"When you're a child, it makes you doubt everything about yourself, and you get so lonely you cry yourself to sleep night after night. When you're thirty-five, it makes you willing to meet a stranger at the Aquatic Park at midnight and let him blindfold you so you don't see his face when you have sex for the first time." She spoke just to him. He switched her hand from his right to his left so that he could put his arm around her shoulders. Her eyes were dry, but he could feel tears just below the surface. She took a breath to control it. "I'm whining. Sorry. I know what I did last week is no one's fault but my own. And I'm not as bad as I used to be. Working at Bay Web has helped me-working on accounts where I could express myself and receive recognition has helped me. Although I made a mess of things last week, I'm not giving up on my vow to change my life. Thanks to you, I have a business plan and even a client. And," she added softly, "I have you to thank for so much else, too."

"I don't want your thanks, Austin. You know what I want." He leaned over and kissed her softly, gently, taking her lower lip between his and sucking it lightly before releasing it. He looked at her plate and saw that it was almost empty. "Are you finished?" She nodded her head, keeping her eyes on his face. "Let's go then." He signaled the waitress for the check and within a few minutes they were on the street walking quickly toward the Jeep.

When they got in, Tyler reached for Austin. She fell into his arms. He kissed her greedily, pulling her as close as he could with the gearshift between them. She whimpered, reaching between his legs and stroking him through the zipper of his slacks until he groaned. He broke the kiss and rubbed his thumb across her lips. She ran her tongue across it and sucked the tip of it into her mouth. He replaced his thumb with his tongue, searing her lips, pressing far into her mouth and claiming her.

"Austin," he whispered against her lips, "you're mine, now and always. I love you." Before she could answer or even breathe, his tongue was sweeping first across her teeth and then across the roof of her mouth.

Austin thought she would die if Tyler didn't take her soon. This was bad for her, she knew it. She couldn't let herself love him, and she shouldn't want him this much without loving him. If she slept with him, had sex with him without loving him, it was the same as going with Alonso. But what was she supposed to do? The feelings she felt deep inside were too strong to quell with logic. She pulled away from him,

running her fingers through his hair and punctuating each word with a kiss somewhere on his face.

"Tyler ... can't ... we ... go ... somewhere?" He reluctantly leaned away from her, back into the driver's seat, breathing hard. He started the Jeep and peeled rubber as he pulled away from the curb. Neither of them said a word as Tyler drove west.

Presently, he drove up the steep hill that Austin recognized from feel if not from sight and pulled the Jeep onto a small parking area of concrete, facing the ocean. Austin looked out the windshield and saw distant waves crashing on the shore. White gulls swooped in the moonlight, looking for fish. In the silence that followed Tyler's turning the engine off, she turned in her seat, and saw his house directly behind them. He had brought her home those nights, to love her where he knew they would be safe from prying eyes and trouble. He had protected her, even then. He had told her over and over that he loved her. This proved to her in more than words that he cared for her. It was a small but important difference. She thought her heart would burst and she caught her breath, stopping herself just in time from blurting out that she loved him. Not love, she told herself. Not love, because that would be too dangerous. Lust, she said to herself. I can handle lust.

She reached her hand to stroke his hair and caress his earlobe. "I just want you to know, I'm not Dulcinea. I'm going to tell people the D stands for Dorothy from now on. So, if I'm Dorothy, which are you? The scarecrow, the lion or the tin man?"

He considered. "The only one I can't be is the scarecrow, because I have a heart. And it was bursting with love for you, but I sadly lacked the brains or the courage to tell you." He cupped her breast in his left hand and kneaded it lightly until she groaned. "But I hope you know now." He bent his head to kiss her breast through her clothing, then teased her nipple with the pad of his thumb.

When she pressed the bulge in his pants, making him groan himself, she said, "I don't know. I think based on what I feel here, you could be the tin man."

He chuckled, stepped out of the Jeep and walked around to help Austin out, taking her in his arms and kissing her hard. But when Austin took his hand and tried to pull him toward the house, he didn't budge. Instead, he turned her toward the ocean and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back against his chest. He rested his chin

on the top of her head.

"Tyler," she said, softly. "Let's go inside." He shook his head. After a moment, Austin said in a teasing voice, "Tyler, Dorothy doesn't have her ruby slippers and only you know the way to bring her home to that happy place where she belongs. Let's go inside." She rubbed her hips against him and could feel the immediate reaction. Tyler only tightened his arms around her and stood his ground.

"Tyler," she made her voice very matter of fact. "I need you."

"I need you." He kissed the top of her head.

"Well? Can't we just enjoy each other until I leave?" When he shook his head again, she said quietly, "I guess you might as well take me home, then." They stood silently for so long Austin almost believed he hadn't heard her. Then he released her and opened the passenger door. He got in and started the Jeep.

He didn't say a word all the way back to her building, but when he stopped in front, he pulled her to him before she could open the door and escape. He kissed her softly and said, "I'll be here at nine. We'll have breakfast before talking." When Austin looked at him, she let her confusion and a little anger show in her eyes. She simply nodded and got out.

Austin spent a restless Friday night, but she was fully awake and ready when Tyler arrived. He insisted that Sarah accompany them to breakfast at a touristy restaurant on Pier 39, where they could hear the sea lions barking on their floating platforms. They chatted casually during breakfast, with Tyler and Sarah doing most of the talking. He resolutely kept Austin sitting close to him and took her hand as soon as they walked anywhere.

They dropped her mother off at the apartment and went to the office, where Tyler went over the paperwork Austin would need to apply for in order to run her own business in California. He gave her the name of his corporate attorney and promised to call him Monday morning to introduce her.

After they spent hours planning what she would need and where and how to go about applying for it, Tyler took Austin to the office supply store he used. On his

recommendation, she ordered professionally printed business cards, since they would represent her when she was no longer face to face with a prospective client. She chose a cream-colored medium weight card with Gardner Web Designs in a plain, easy to read type, in rust. As they strolled through the store, Tyler recommended some items and talked her out of other things, based on his experience.

By mid-afternoon, Tyler insisted on stopping for a drink in the newly gentrified area on the Embarcadero. They shared an appetizer, watching the afternoon sunlight sparkle on the Bay all the way to Oakland, and making up vignettes about the people window shopping in the boutiques lining that section of the street. Lazily, they strolled to the car and headed down the Embarcadero toward Austin's apartment. She laid her head on the headrest and closed her eyes, letting the glow of the warm, friendly day they shared flow over her. It felt so natural to be with him. "It seems like years ago since my birthday instead of just a week. And even longer since we first..."

"Fucked, is how you phrased it, I believe, even though that wasn't accurate. It's funny, but to me it seems like just yesterday." He took her hand and kissed her knuckles then gently rubbed them with his thumb as he drove. Austin opened her eyes and gazed at him, her mouth slightly open, her body frozen in place, while she listened to his softly spoken words, forgetting that they were traveling down a city street. "The first time I saw your body, lying there in the moonlight, I was stunned. Instead of trying to cover yourself, you lay quietly and let me drink my fill. Your eyes were covered, and you couldn't see the effect your body was having on me, but Austin, I'd never been harder. Your beautiful, silky hair fanned out around your head, your lips were swollen and reddened, because, honey, we had been kissing for long, slow minutes. I could just see the very tip of your tongue between your lips, like you were concentrating on what to do next." Tyler stole a glance at Austin, then looked back at traffic.

"Your breasts were rising and falling rapidly because your breath was already getting ragged from our kissing, and your nipples were hard as little pebbles, bright red against the white of your skin. I wanted to believe it was because you were excited at the thought that I was looking at you, but it was probably the wind." He smiled at her. "No matter, because all I wanted was to suck them and feel their rigid points on my tongue. Your hands were resting on your stomach, but I wanted them

to be wrapped around me, stroking me, and later they were. Remember?" They stopped for a red light, and Tyler could see Austin blush.

"The golden triangle of hair on your mound glistened in the moonlight, and the wind blew the curls. Strong legs that I wanted wrapped around my waist ended in beautiful little ankles. When I realized that I couldn't be with you totally that night, I thought I would die from the pain. Not just the pain of my erection, although that was enough, but the pain of not being joined with you. That's why I had to see you Friday, too." He pulled away from the light and at that, Austin tried to draw her hand back, but Tyler held it firmly in his.

Instead of the friendly, soft expression she had worn most of the day, her face was now hard. She stared blindly out the windshield instead of looking at him. They had spent a comfortable day with each other. Except for the fact that she still wanted him physically, just as she did every minute she was with him, she was as happy as she could imagine. She could look at him, talk to him, laugh with him. Even hold his hand and feel his touch. It was almost like being with someone she loved. Until he brought up her time with Alonso. She was reminded now of how easy she had been. Tyler didn't know it, but he had just brought home again why she couldn't love him, why she couldn't take a chance that he really loved her, and consequently, why she was leaving. That he did that made her angry.

"Don't be like that, Austin," he murmured. Louder he said, "I had to have you, and I couldn't wait another day. If 'Tyler' had asked you out, you wouldn't have gone. In fact, if you'll remember, I did ask you out, and you turned me down flat. It's just as well, since I couldn't have sat next to you in a movie or bar without knowing you fully after that Thursday." He stopped the car.

"Why are we stopping?" she demanded. Tyler chuckled.

"Because this is where you live." He still had hold of her hand, and when she tried to get out he pulled her back to him. Leaning his head to her ear, he said, "Are you surprised that I have such perfect recollection of our first experience? Don't be. I remember everything about you. I know your body as well as I know my own." He stuck the tip of his tongue into her ear and ran it lightly around the edges, drawing a soft, involuntary moan from her.

Although just moments ago she had been angry, wanting nothing more than to escape him, now she relaxed against him, her breath quickly becoming uneven. She twined her fingers through the hair along the back of his neck, turning her head to lay kisses along his jaw line. "Don't go too far. I'll be right back with dinner." He pulled her away from him. Her eyes were already glazed with lust and it took her a moment to come to her senses. She nodded and got out. As always, he waited until she entered the building before pulling away.

Within forty minutes Tyler had returned with fried chicken dinners for the three of them from Powell's Place, and a movie to watch while they ate. Sarah was pleased that Tyler knew that she ate early, and that he had brought southern treats like sweet potatoes and peach cobbler. Austin was just glad that he was there at all. They ate in the kitchen, but saved their cobbler to eat in the living room after they had started the movie, a light romantic comedy that Tyler thought Sarah would enjoy. At eight o'clock Sarah said goodnight, admitting that she couldn't remember when she had enjoyed an evening so much. When Tyler invited her to join them and his sister and nephew at the Palace Hotel for brunch Sunday morning, she was stunned and excited.

"What are you doing?" Austin hissed. "This is the first I've heard about brunch tomorrow morning. And even if I had agreed to go, why are you inviting my mother?"

"Because it makes her happy. Because I think if she's happier maybe you will be too. And because more than anything I want you to be happy." He kissed her soundly, then whispered, "Now that your mother's gone to bed, let's sit here and neck." He sat on one end of the sofa and pulled Austin onto his lap, her legs stretched out toward the other end of the sofa. "I want to explore that body I described to you earlier." He ran his fingers through her hair.

"It's so silky, Austin," he whispered. "I love how it feels on my fingers."

"Tyler, it's time for you to go. I appreciate the dinner, I really do, and..." She caught her breath as he nibbled her earlobe. "And the movie was very enjoyable-oh!" He licked the place on her neck where her pulse beat, then turned her head to cover her mouth with his, his hands holding her head in place. His tongue explored every inch of her mouth, and before Austin knew it, her arms were around his neck and her

tongue was dancing with his.

He unbuttoned the top two buttons of her shirt and slid his hand in to cover her breast, softly kneading it over her bra. She threw her head back and allowed him access to her throat, which he kissed and licked with passion. Sliding out from under her, he unzipped her slacks, pulling them off of her, and opened her shirt, exposing her midriff. He positioned one of her legs along the back of the sofa and the other on the floor, then knelt between them. Unhooking the front closure of her bra, he bared her breasts and buried his head in the cleavage between. Tyler took a nipple into his mouth and suckled, pulling it taut in his mouth. Austin fisted her hands in his hair and sank into the sensation of being with him like this, with her mother only a few feet away. It felt sinful somehow, and exciting to be taking this chance.

"Tyler, take me. Take me right here. I've got to feel you inside me." She lifted her hips, against him. Tyler moved his mouth to the apex of her thighs and breathed his hot breath onto her. It was an indescribable feeling, and she almost came right then and there. Her hips raised up as he breathed in, then he pressed them down, his face forcing her against the sofa, blowing his breath through her panties, against her. Her own breath was ragged and hard.

"Tyler, let's go to my bedroom." She felt him shake his head. "I want you inside me, Tyler," she begged. Again he shook his head. Austin didn't know how much more she could stand, when he stopped completely. He took a deep breath, taking in her scent-she was happy to realize that his breathing was just as uneven as hers-and raised himself over her, looking at her with midnight eyes filled with desire. He pulled her against his chest and whispered into her ear, "You're mine, Austin. Don't forget it. I love you." After kissing her hard, he got off the couch, picked up the tape and moved toward the front door. He tossed over his shoulder, "I'll be here to get you all at ten thirty. Goodnight." And he was gone.

Chapter Nineteen

Sunday morning at ten thirty sharp the entry buzzer sounded and Austin and her mother joined Tyler in the lobby. They met Robbie and Barb at the hotel. Robbie was on his best behavior and thoroughly charmed Austin's mother. The brunch was

sumptuous and the atmosphere overwhelming; Sarah loved every moment. When they finished eating, Robbie went home with his mother to change clothes, while Tyler took Austin and her mother home. He used the bathroom to put on shorts, polo shirt and deck shoes, and he waited for Austin to change into shorts so they could go sailing. "Why are you doing this, Tyler?"

"What, Austin?"

"Trying to occupy my every waking moment. Why are we going sailing when you know I'm not crazy about the water? In fact, why are we doing everything except what I really want, which is to feel you between my legs?"

Tyler grinned. "While that's a charming offer, I have wants too. Foremost among them is to be between your legs, but only when you're ready to make love, not have sex. For the rest, I'm spending time with you while I can, and it's as simple as that." They pulled into Robbie's drive and he came dashing out to climb in the backseat.

At first, Austin was petrified being in the sailboat on the Bay. Robbie and Tyler were accomplished sailors though, and after a short while she relaxed enough to enjoy the feel of the wind blowing her hair wildly, and the water as the boat cut through it. When it was time to go back in, she was almost sorry. The three of them had dinner at a North Beach restaurant and took dessert home to Robbie's to wait for Barb. But when she arrived, Tyler told her that he and Austin would take their dessert with them.

Tyler fixed drinks at his house, and they settled onto a loveseat on the patio, Tyler's arm around Austin's shoulders. When he felt her shiver, he lit the chiminea and went inside to get her a jacket. The stars were hard to see against the lights from the city, but Austin imagined she saw them nonetheless, as she sat beside Tyler, wrapped in his jacket and his arms, her head on his shoulder. "Do you want your dessert?"

She shook her head.

"No, I'm happy just sitting here."

He squeezed her shoulders. "Don't go, Austin."

She had been sitting with her eyes closed, sleepy from the day on the water, and

almost thought that she imagined his voice.

"What?"

"Don't go. Stay here. If you have to leave the firm and do your own thing, okay, but don't go down to Dallas. Stay here in San Francisco. Let's date the way other people do. For a month or so, if you need that long, and then let's get married."

Conflicting emotions came to the forefront of her mind. Joy, wild and inescapable that he still wanted to marry her, and sadness that it wouldn't happen. She snorted a laugh, fighting to keep her response light. "Honestly, Tyler, I think we've gone way beyond dating. We've done things with each other that people married for years haven't done, and in places where they haven't done them. I'd say we went beyond dating after that Thursday night you were describing so beautifully yesterday. No, I think it's time we move on."

"So, you don't love me? Alonso loses his Dulcinea because he wanted her too much? You won't even give Tyler and Austin a chance to explore love?"

She stilled, not wanting to answer a direct question about love. "Tyler, I want to sit here and feel sleepy in your arms for a little while, and then I want you to take me up to that huge bed of yours and screw me. Or if you don't want to go that far, the kitchen table will do nicely, or the rug in the living room or I'll straddle you right here. I just want to end this longing I feel in my belly whenever I'm with you. It's been almost a week since you've been inside me. Don't you want me?"

"More than anything, but I told you my conditions this afternoon."

"Can't you see that we've gone beyond being friends who go out for a movie and burger? You started this with me, this burning inside. I didn't know what passion was all about before you and now when I think of you or see you or hear your voice all I want is to be filled." That is certainly true, she thought.

"Forget this talk of love and getting to know each other, for Pete's sake." Please, I can't handle it. Lust. I can handle that.

"I know what I want from you. I need you and it's your fault I feel this way. Can't

we just satisfy each other until I go?"

His voice was flat. "Come on. I'll take you home."

"What if I say I love you? Will you take me then?" The glare Tyler directed to her could have started a blaze on its own.

When he stood, Austin grabbed the waistband of his shorts and pulled him to her face. She could feel his erection pressing against her, and scrambled to unbuckle his belt, but he stopped her. He pulled her to her feet and twisted her arms behind her, taking her mouth in a harsh kiss, conquering her, subduing her. She cried out, and he knew he might have hurt her, but he was almost beyond caring. Her breasts flattened against his chest. He freed her hands and lifted her over his erection, grinding his hips into hers. Austin dropped her head to his shoulder and scraped her teeth across his shirt, her breath hot through the material and on his skin. She threw her arms around his neck and wrapped her legs around his waist, hanging on for her life while she thrust her hips against him, trying to find relief even through their clothing. He was saying something but she couldn't understand, could barely hear. Finally, she could just make out, "Say you love me, damn it, say you love me, and mean it."

"I can't!"

Tyler pulled her arms from his neck and literally shook her off of him. She couldn't stand alone and he held her steady at arm's length until she regained her feet. "Then to hell with you, Austin. I don't know what else to do." He spoke without fire. Almost resignedly. When she looked like she had come to her senses, he retrieved her purse from the kitchen table and walked her to the Jeep. He didn't kiss her before she got out, but as usual, he waited until she was inside before he left.

On Monday morning Austin took her coffee onto the balcony. Tyler's car was parked on the street below and she scanned the swimming area of the Aquatic Park to find him. It wasn't difficult. A lone swimmer sliced through the water without letup. After several minutes, he suddenly stopped swimming and tread water as he gazed toward her balcony, brushing his hair from his face. She raised her hand in greeting, but he simply stared, then began long, strong strokes once again.

She felt bereft. A breeze off the Bay, which she hadn't felt before, now made her

shiver, and she went back inside. She wondered how she would make it through the week being with Tyler and yet not being with him, and she thought that life would be easier when she left town and got to Dallas and a new life.

Tyler was noticeably cool that day. However, he did call his attorney and introduce her, securing her an appointment for later in the week. Late that afternoon, after almost everyone left for the day, she saw Henry enter Tyler's office. She heard his voice raised in anger, and a few minutes later he stomped out, met by security guards who escorted him from the building after he had gathered his personal belongings. She hoped that action wouldn't end up hurting Tyler later.

Tyler came to get her at five to go to Robbie's. He looked tired, and she felt as tired as he looked. On the way, Tyler told her that she should consider Friday her last day. "I was mad when I told you that you had to stay the full two weeks," he said. "I know you have things to do, and quite frankly, maybe it will be easier when the break is made and you're gone." It wasn't said with malice, but it hurt her in a deep part of her soul.

"Thanks." She sighed. "It will feel strange not coming over here any more."

"You'll have lots of new things going on. I'm sure this will become secondary. You seem to be able to push things aside easily enough, so I'm sure Robbie will be relegated back somewhere near where you've put me." Tyler gave Austin a sharp look.

She narrowed her eyes and answered, "Oh my. Aren't we in a bad mood? God, why can't we just go back to your house tonight and be with each other? We'd be satisfied, instead of on edge. I wish we would."

"I thought I explained to you before that I already had experience with fucking. If you think I simply need sex to relieve my pressures, perhaps you should consider that I don't need you for it." At her quick intake of breath, he immediately regretted his words. "I'm sorry, but you try my very soul. I love you. I want you to love me. If you don't or can't then I might have to accept it, but I don't have to accept it graciously." Austin's face was red, from anger or hurt, he couldn't tell. "I guess we should be quiet with each other before we say something we can't take back," he said in a low voice.

Tyler stood just outside the doorway and listened to Robbie and Austin as they started work. He knew his nephew well enough to sense his confusion with how he and Austin acted toward each other. Sunday they had gotten along fine and today they were almost like strangers. He certainly couldn't expect his twelve year old nephew to understand what he couldn't explain to himself, and it hurt him that Robbie had been drawn into their troubles despite their efforts to prevent it.

Tyler sighed and left Austin and Robbie to their work while he went to the kitchen to prepare supper. Nothing seemed to work right though, and he made lots of noise banging the wrong sized lids on pans and dropping silverware. Just like my life, he thought. Nothing seemed to fit any more.

When the computer work was finished, Austin and Robbie chatted for a few minutes.

"Are you going to keep coming over when you stop working for Uncle Tyler?" Robbie tried to sound nonchalant, but his brow was creased in worry.

"That will be a little difficult at first because I'm starting a new business and my first client is in Texas. I'll be going there next week. But," seeing the stricken look on Robbie's face, she took a pen from her purse and a piece of paper from his desk, "here's my email address. I hope to get lots of reports on what you're doing. I will write back-I always answer email. And I guess San Francisco will be my home base, so when I come back I'll call, okay?"

Softly she said, "I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed working with you on this project Rob." He smiled slightly at the more grown-up version of his name. "I'm very proud to know you, and nothing that happens between Tyler and me can change that. Thank you for including me in your life for these past weeks." They hugged, and Austin got up to leave.

"And now I have the happy duty to tell you that I think you are ready to submit this site to the contest officials. You might want to have your mom or your uncle go through it one more time, but they had so few suggestions last week that I think you've completed all you can. I won't need to come back any more in the evenings, but if you have any questions, call me at the office or at home, okay?" Robbie nodded.

"Do you really think it's good, Austin?" They left the den and walked toward the kitchen.

"Yes, I really do. But one of the most important things about designing, right up there with finding out what the client wants, is that you like your work and feel comfortable about it. Otherwise you won't be able to convey to others how great it is. Strangely enough, even when people like something, they sometimes need to be reassured that they've made the right choice. You will have some stiff competition in the contest, but I think you have a shot at a prize."

"Wow!"

"But even if the judges are harebrained and you don't win a prize, you've got a great jumping off point for lots of other work. I wouldn't tell you that I think your work is very good if I didn't really think it. And neither would your uncle." Tyler leaned against the counter, sleeves rolled up, tie off and top button undone, with his arms and ankles crossed.

"Your work is good, Robbie. And Austin is right about your needing to feel comfortable with it. Are you happy with the results?" Robbie nodded, as he picked up a piece of carrot and munched on it. "Good. I think I hear your mom, so I guess we'll go?" He looked at Austin and saw her nod. "We'll see you tomorrow, champ."

"No. Austin says we're finished." Tyler turned a startled look her way and she shrugged at him.

With a grim set to his mouth, Tyler narrowed his eyes and directed her to the door. "Well, I'll probably see you this weekend then. Hey, sis. We're just leaving." He brushed past Barb and impatiently held the door open for Austin, but she stopped and spoke to Barb.

"I think Robbie and I are finished, Barb. Thanks so much for your hospitality these past several days. I would really like it if you and Robbie could meet me for lunch or dinner before I go. Would you?" Barb creased her brow in a worried frown and glanced at her brother who stood rigidly at the door.

"Austin's going away next week, Mom, to Texas."

"Oh, no!" Now she looked very worried and gazed steadily at her brother before turning to Austin, while she put a protective arm around Robbie's shoulders. "Oh, no," she said more quietly. She looked quite flustered for a moment, as though she were thinking of what to say. "I have Thursday off. Will you be too busy to meet for an early dinner on Thursday?"

"That will be fine. I have an appointment with an attorney Thursday afternoon and will be free after that. Do you want to meet at the North Beach Café?"

"Fine, we'll see you there." She turned to her brother. "Do you want to come to dinner tomorrow, Tyler?"

"No, Barb," His eyes softened as he looked at her, "But thanks. I'll call you later in the week."

Tyler drove Austin to her building without a word, the casual friendliness they had shared over the weekend gone. "See you tomorrow," Austin said. Tyler didn't respond, and she got out.

Chapter Twenty

The next few days were a blur for Austin. Every morning began on her balcony where she watched Tyler swim, but he hadn't stopped his laps to look at her again. Instead, it was as though she didn't exist. At the office, she tied up loose ends on the Morris account by holding a final meeting with Ron Morris, at which time she introduced Mark. The men seemed to hit it off, she was relieved to note, since trouble with Ron could mean the loss of the account for Tyler. Working with the other designers in the firm, going over her work and handing over projects that she had been responsible for, made her feel sad. It surprised her, that feeling of possessiveness she felt for her work, and the reluctance to see someone else put their own mark on it. But she tried to focus on what the future held.

Several times she felt Tyler nearby. At off moments she would glance up to find him looking at her from across the lobby or from a doorway. She always smiled but he only nodded and moved on. He hadn't spoken a word to her since Barb's house

Monday evening.

She called Sandy Carter to see if they could accelerate their schedule and found that it would be no problem. He told her he would make hotel arrangements for her for the following Monday, and they scheduled a meeting for first thing Tuesday. She planned to shop for a good laptop after work on Friday and by the end of the weekend she would be packed and ready to go.

Before leaving the office for her appointment Thursday, she stood over her almost-empty desk, and looked out toward Union Square. She would miss this view, and the excitement of the city. She thought of the day Tyler had stood in her cube and mentioned what a nice view she had. She hadn't figured out yet how she would handle life without having him in her life. So much had changed in the past few weeks, she mused. Most for the better. Especially her change in attitude, her approach to life. But, she thought, also in finding that she could be loved. She had Tyler to thank for that, entirely. She couldn't have asked for a better friend, or a better lover.

She sighed and prepared to leave the office. She didn't want to think about Tyler right now. She had begun to think she loved him. Did she? Or did she just want him? When he had revealed that he was Alonso, part of her had felt such great relief that she had only been with one man, with Tyler, after all. Another, darker part of her knew that it didn't make any difference. She had gone with a stranger for all intents and purposes, and had been wild with him. Didn't that say something about her judgment? How could she love, really love Tyler, if she had been willing to go with Alonso. Even worse, and this was what scared Austin right to her core, how could Tyler really love her, knowing what she had done? All of her life she had tried to win her mother's love and lost. What if she trusted Tyler and found later that he regretted loving her because of what she'd done? She knew she would never be able to bear it.

Tyler had prepared her well for the questions, the forms and all of the rest of the rigmarole the government demanded from an entrepreneur just starting a business. She found Harvey Johnston, the attorney Tyler had sent her to, to be very helpful and organized. Within an hour and a half everything was completed. Harvey said he would send or fax anything to her that needed attention in the next few weeks, and other than that, just to leave things to him. She gave him one of the new business

cards that she had picked up on her way to the appointment, and caught a taxi to the North Beach Café.

Since she was a few minutes early, Austin found a table looking out on the street and ordered a glass of white wine. She felt a hodge-podge of feelings: excited, sad, scared stiff, confident, insecure. She wondered how all of those emotions could be happening at one time, and that didn't even take into account the confusion she felt over Tyler. Tyler, who she wanted to love. Who she didn't want to leave. About whom she was afraid to do the first and afraid not to do the second.

Lost in the process of self-examination, she didn't realize Tyler had seated himself until he tapped the table. "Earth to Austin," he said softly, leaning over and turning his head to see her eyes. Her mouth dropped open as she focused, then she snapped her head around looking for Barb and Robbie. "They'll be here in a minute or two," he said, reading the expression on her face.

"Why are you here, Tyler?"

"I brought the gift, so it would have been impolite not to invite me to dinner."

"Gift? But this is my dinner for Robbie and Barb, for all they've done for me. For all they've given me in the past couple of weeks." She shook her head a little sadly.

"Actually, I'm surprised you would have dinner with me. You've avoided me well enough this week."

"Aw, Austin, you never listen, do you? You hear, but you don't listen." The waitress came up and Tyler ordered a glass of wine for himself. "And as for avoiding you this week, I've been aware of you every second of every day. And you've been aware of me a few times too, I know. But, it's been busy for both of us. How did your meeting go with Harvey?"

"Very well. Thanks for introducing me to him. It seems that every good thing that's happened to me lately I have you to thank. And I do, Tyler. I wish we hadn't been mad at each so much these past two weeks. I've missed talking to you. I couldn't ask for a better friend." The scowl on his face darkened like a thunderstorm, and his eyes flashed. But he took a breath and seemed to relax. "Oh, Tyler, I meant that in a good way, not to hurt you. Haven't we already done enough of that?"

The waitress brought his wine and he held it up in the form of a toast.

"Here's to friends, then. My best friend, my lover, hopefully someday my wife. And may she return from Dallas quickly to the man who loves her, and where she belongs." Austin's eyes were guarded but there was a hint of a smile on her face as she shook her head. Tyler clinked his glass to hers and sipped his wine.

"What are we toasting to?" Barb said as she and Robbie came to the table.

"Friends," Tyler said, shooting a secret smile to Austin.

"Austin, I know Tyler might not have been invited to dinner, but he and Robbie conspired. I hope it's okay."

"I've learned lately that it really doesn't matter what you want or don't want from Tyler. He is single-minded and focused."

Barb laughed. "You should meet our father," she said wryly.

"Uncle Tyler, did you bring it?" Robbie's stage whisper was loud enough to be heard by Austin and he knew it, since he gave her a sideways smile.

Tyler's whisper was just as loud. "Yes, I did. We'll give it to her after dinner." Austin looked at Barb, who smiled and shrugged.

"So, tell me all about your job in Dallas." That set the tone for the dinner, friendly, chatty, pleasant.

After almost two hours, dessert arrived along with coffee and three large boxes. Austin looked expectantly at Barb and Robbie, and finally her gaze settled on Tyler who grinned at her. "I think we surprised her, Robbie."

"Open it, Austin," said Robbie, excitedly.

"We're going to miss you, Austin, but hope you're home soon. In the meantime, this can help us all stay in contact," said Barb, with a smile. "Even me," she said with a laugh.

"This is very unexpected," Austin murmured, as she tore off the wrapping paper. Inside the heaviest box was a state of the art laptop computer. The color drained from her face and she almost dropped it, her hands were shaking so. "Oh no! This is too much. I can't possibly-"

"Yes, you can," Tyler interrupted. "These are from people who love you. A person can always accept gifts from people who love them."

Austin focused her emerald gaze on Tyler.

"You've done so much for me already," she said in a low voice.

"Not what I want to. Do you really want to argue this point here?" He raised one eyebrow and Austin blushed.

The second box contained a carrying case filled with software she would need, and the third case contained a portable printer.

"Do you like it, Austin? Now we can email wherever you are."

"Robbie I love it. I love it all. I can't wait to get it set up and use it, and guess who will get the first email?" Robbie grinned, and for the first time Austin realized how like Tyler he looked. "Thank you all so very much. I'm ... I'm overwhelmed. This was supposed to be my dinner for you," she said to Barb.

"Well, as you said, there's no arguing with Tyler and his henchman." Barb laughed as she ruffled Robbie's hair.

"Let me put those over here so you can have your dessert and coffee." Tyler took the boxes and piled them next to his chair. "Robbie, shall we let your mom and Austin have some time for girl talk? Let's take care of the bill and walk up the street a little and see what's happening." He took Austin's hand and rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. "We'll be back in a little while. Take your time."

After the men left, Austin took a sip of her coffee. "My stomach is in so many knots, I can't eat this dessert," she said in a shaky voice to Barb. "Will Robbie eat it tomorrow if I ask them to package it?"

"A twelve year old boy? You've got to be kidding!" Barb laughed, and Austin signaled the waitress to bring a carry out container and more coffee.

"Austin, are you happy about this change in your life? You haven't seemed all that excited tonight."

Austin thought for several minutes before putting her cup down and looking Barb square in the face. "Yes and no. How's that for a direct answer? It's exciting, but I'm scared to death. I'm ready for a change, I think. Ironically, I've spent most of my life being lonely, and now I'm leaving friends like you and Robbie who are dear to me, and suddenly I'm not sure exactly why." She gave a sardonic smile. "It seemed like a good decision at the time. Now? I don't know."

"It's none of my business, I know, and I'm not really snooping, but... Well, hell, I guess I am snooping. What is going on with you and Tyler? I have to say, I'm not the only one confused. Robbie and I saw the two of you happy, then barely speaking, then seemingly happy last weekend, and then barely speaking again on Monday. Now tonight you seem," she held her hand parallel to the table and tilted it back and forth like airplane wings, "not happy exactly, but at least somewhat friendly. At one time I was familiar with the ups and downs of lovers, but either I'm not remembering correctly, or things have changed since I was courted. Are you two okay?"

"That's the question, isn't it? I can't explain it fully to you," Austin looked at the table and rubbed at a non-existent spot on the tablecloth. She was blushing when she looked up at Barb. "Tyler says he loves me, but he lied to me about something very important. Based on that lie I did things I'm not proud of. Ashamed of, actually." Her blush deepened and Barb creased her brows with concern. "I can't seem to get past what he did or what I did. Or forgive either of us, when it comes down to it. I want to, but I just can't." Barb could see Austin's eyes fill with tears.

"Oh, Austin." Barb covered Austin's hand with her own, and squeezed it. "All Tyler told me was that he did something horrible and that it was all his fault. I don't know what happened, but he doesn't think badly of you, he doesn't blame you for any of it. Whatever it is, can't you find it in yourself to forgive him, and especially forgive yourself? He loves you, Austin. He does, believe me."

Austin caught her breath and wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand. "No, I can't. He expects too much of me. I showed the poorest judgment, Barb. I can't forgive myself. Sometime, for some reason, even if he loves me, Tyler will throw that back at me. If I loved him, I would never be able to survive that, so leaving him and starting over is the only way I have to go. And it will be best for him too." Only through great self-control was Austin able to keep tears from running down her face. "I had a totally wrong picture of him before, Barb. He's a wonderful man. If only I had opened my eyes earlier, maybe none of this would have happened. But now I can only go forward and hope to do better. And I hope Tyler finds someone who deserves him."

Barb bit her lower lip and considered what to say. "Tyler is a wonderful man. He had a hard time of it with Dad, because Dad expected so much. It seems like they were constantly butting heads, even over silly things. But all of us are proud of him, not just for what he's done, but for who he is. That doesn't mean I'm blind to his faults, mind you. However, I have never seen him act with anyone the way he acts with you. He's in love with you Austin. It's not something he says, it's something he is. He's head over heels and there'll be no finding anyone else for him. I think you're it. I hope when you have a little distance between you, you'll figure out that he's the one for you, too." Barb stared at the back wall of the restaurant and lost focus for a moment.

"When I met Robbie's father, I thought he was a dork."

"No!"

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Barb smiled at the memory. "He introduced himself to me at a dance at school and I couldn't get away fast enough. But he persisted and finally I danced with him just to get rid of him. By the end of the dance, I gave him my dorm phone number. He went to a college about fifty miles away, and he came up or I went down every weekend after that. I'm not even sure now what it was he said during that dance that made him seem so special all of a sudden, but I just knew that I wanted to be with him. We dated the last two years in school and got married right after graduation. He got work in northern Virginia and I started teaching. Then we moved to Michigan and I got my MLS while he climbed the corporate ladder. I found out I was pregnant the week after I got my Master's. Gosh, Rob was so happy. We loved each other very much, Austin, even though I couldn't imagine being with

him when we first met. Then one day, he drove off to work and never came home."

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "What I'm trying to say I guess, is that first, you never know who's destined to be your love. It can be the least likely suspect sometimes. You have to be open to the possibilities. Right now maybe you don't think it's Tyler, but don't close your heart to him. And second, nothing lasts forever. I was lucky to have the years with Rob that I did, but even so, I didn't know that the morning he left would be our last chance to hold each other, to kiss, to say 'I love you.' You can't waste the time you have. Please, don't waste the time you have with Tyler, if he's the one."

"Barb, I... I don't know what to say. I understand, and I promise I'll try to be open. Thanks." She leaned across the corner of the table and hugged Barb.

"Girl talk, Uncle Ty. It stinks!"

"You are so right, Robbie." The women broke apart with a laugh and wiped their eyes.

"Hey, you guys do your bonding thing your way and we'll do ours our way," said Barb with a smile. "Well, Roberto, are you ready to go home? Better say bye to Austin because she will probably be too busy packing this weekend to see you."

Robbie went around the table and wrapped his arms around Austin's neck. "Bye, Austin. Don't forget me."

"Not a chance in the world, Robbie."

"You'll be home soon, won't you?" Robbie frowned and looked into her eyes.

"As soon as I am, I will call. Promise. Please write and let me know how school is going and don't forget that I'm just a phone call or email away if you need my help with anything. Oh! I almost forgot." She picked up her purse and rummaged through it, pulling out a business card. "You two are among the first to get one of these. What do you think?"

"Very nice," said Barb, raising her eyebrows and handing it to Robbie.

"Neat. I like the font you used."

"Leave it to you to notice that. I should have taken you with me when I ordered them. But I had your uncle's input, so that was second best."

"Hey!" Tyler feigned indignation.

"I picked these out in kind of a hurry. Maybe you could develop some designs for me to look at for a logo, or we can come up with one together when I come home next. Okay?"

"Sure!"

"Come on, Robbie." Barb stood waiting by her chair. Austin stood and the women hugged. "Take care of yourself. Call us if there's anything we can do, or even if you just want some girl talk. Just because I'm related to him," she waved to Tyler, "doesn't mean I can't commiserate about what a baboon he is." Austin and Barb laughed. Tyler frowned, but his eyes didn't show anger.

"Do you want this baboon to help you get a cab?"

"No, thanks, big brother. Take care of Austin. I'll talk to you soon." Barb picked up the dessert they were taking home and she and Robbie left. Tyler picked up the three boxes and led Austin to the Jeep.

"Tyler, you shouldn't have done this," she said as they drove toward her building.

"Why not? You need these things. This way I know you're well equipped and not just trying to get by. It's a small way to help ensure the success of your new enterprise." He glanced at her. "I wanted to do it. And it made Robbie happy."

"They're wonderful gifts. I said I was overwhelmed, and even that doesn't describe how I feel. Thank you so much." He captured her hand and brought it to his lips, then held it on his thigh as he drove.

"You know, I think Barb is going to miss you. Being a single mother doesn't give her a lot of time to get out and do things with other people. Other women. I think

she likes having you around. Not as much as I do, of course..." He grinned at her. "But I hope you stay in touch with her. My sister is pretty special."

"Yes, I think so too." At her building, Tyler parked and carried the gifts upstairs. Sarah heard his voice and came out to say hello, then she exclaimed over the gifts as Austin showed them to her. She gave Tyler a brief hug and went back into her room.

"Well, I guess that's that," Austin said, looking around the room, trying to think of something to say. "Um, do you want to have some coffee and sit on the balcony for a little while?"

"No. Let's go for a walk." He took her hand and tugged her toward the door. She grabbed a sweater draped on the back of a dining room chair, stuck her key in her pocket, and followed him down the hallway. When they got outside, he turned her to the pier that marked the outer boundary of the Aquatic Park. They walked to the end and watched the traffic on the Bay. Tyler stepped behind Austin, pulling her back tightly against his chest and enveloping her in his arms. She leaned her head back under his chin, as she had that last night they watched the ocean, at his house. His fingers were linked across her stomach and her hands rested lightly on them.

"I wish I could undo everything that's happened. I wish I was still a virgin and we were standing here like this, in love, with that discovery still ahead of us. This is one of those perfect moments that are tinged by regret."

Tyler stood quietly. His arms tightened slightly and Austin could feel his erection pressing against her buttocks, hard, insistent, ever-present between them it seemed. He leaned over to kiss her ear before speaking. "I don't regret loving you, or making love to you. God, making love to you is amazing! I can't ever be sorry about that. I regret the subterfuge, about not letting you know years ago that I loved you. I regret that you can't seem to get past what happened and recognize that we're made for each other. In my heart, you're mine, you know, and always will be. Every moment you deny your love for me is a moment wasted that we can't get back. I regret that, most of all."

"Barb said almost the same thing to me tonight. Did you plan that?" There was teasing in her voice, not accusation.

"No, but she's a smart woman. She knows from personal experience that you can't go back and recapture time with someone you love. Once it's gone, it's gone. If something happened to you, or to me, we'd never have our chance. Changing your mind then would be too late. I can't stand the thought of that. I love you so much, Austin. Say you love me."

It was barely a whisper. "I wish I could, Tyler, but I can't." He sighed, and straightened up. They stood there for almost half an hour, and then he took her hand and led her home.

*Chapter Twenty-One *

Friday passed like a dream. Austin found helium and Mylar balloons with "Good Luck" printed on them tied all over her desk and chair. The parade of well wishers didn't let up all morning and she was taken out to a lunch that lasted over two hours. By the time the hubbub died down it was mid afternoon. Sharon came back to her cube with a cup of coffee and propped herself against the desk, one hand under the opposite elbow and ankles crossed. "Well, are you ready to go?"

"As ready as I'm going to be, I guess. I didn't think it would be this hard to leave." Austin gave a shaky laugh and her eyes filled with tears.

"You'll be back, won't you?" Sharon suddenly looked worried. "I mean, you aren't going to stay away because of things around here, are you?" She nodded her head in the direction of Tyler's office.

"What do you mean?" Austin didn't meet Sharon's eyes.

"You know what I'm talking about. I told _you_, remember? I don't know how far it's gone, but I know it's not going well. I'd hate to have you move to Dallas and not come back. I'll miss you, friend."

"I'll miss you too. You've been a bright spot for me every day. Um, as to the other, I don't think anything will ever come of that. It's just a passing thing for him. Once I'm gone I'm sure you'll notice no difference at all."

"We'll see, but I doubt it. Anyway, here's a little something to remember me by." She pulled a small, gaily wrapped box from her pocket and put it on the desk.

"Oh, no, Sharon! You shouldn't have." Austin pulled the bow off and opened one end of the paper, trying to be neat about it. When she lifted the lid, she saw a gleaming gold pin, nestled in cotton. It depicted the Golden Gate Bridge spanning the bay between the Marin headlands and San Francisco. "It's just beautiful! Thank you so much." Austin wiped the tears from her eyes.

"I know, I know!" Sharon held her free hand up. "It's like what the tourists buy down at Fisherman's Wharf, but I don't want you to forget where home is, or where your friends are."

"Hardly a tourist trinket! This is beautiful. It's too much." Austin covered her face with her hands and stopped her tears with a deep breath then she looked up and smiled tremulously at Sharon. "I hate the thought of leaving." Pinning the piece of jewelry to her collar, she lifted her head slightly and said, "Look what Sharon gave me, Tyler." Sharon looked up, perplexed. She didn't see Tyler Birch anywhere, and then he stepped around the wall and into the cubicle. Sharon's mouth fell open as she looked from Tyler to Austin, then she smiled, knowingly.

"Let's see." Austin stood and turned toward him. "Very nice, Sharon. A good way for you to remember where home is," he said to Austin. "Don't forget it," he said in a low voice.

"Well, I've got to get back out front. I'm going to miss you more than you know. Will you keep in touch?" Austin nodded and took her friend in her arms. "Promise? You've got my email address and my home phone. And of course, the office phone if you need anything." She glanced quickly at Tyler to see if he reacted to that. "And oh, yeah. If you need any help with your new business, typing or anything I can do, I'll be happy to. Just let me know."

"On your own time, of course," Tyler said, wryly.

Sharon smiled at him as she broke off the hug. "Of course." Looking at Austin, "Bye, honey. Take care!" Tyler stepped closer to Austin and looked down at the pin.

"Very pretty. I'm leaving early, so I'll drive you home. You've got your box of personal items and the balloons and gifts and such. Are you about ready to go?"

"No." She looked out the window onto Union Square and sighed. "Yes."

Tyler stuck loose gift boxes, cards and other personal small items in a book box sitting on her desk extension and put his briefcase on top. He tucked the box under his arm and looked around for anything else he could carry, finally picking up Austin's briefcase, and leaving her to handle the balloons and her purse. She was stopped by almost everyone in the office again on her way out. It took a long time to get through the office, but short work after that to reach the Jeep and store everything in the back.

Tyler closed the back door and put his hands on Austin's shoulders. "Are you all right?" he asked tenderly. She nodded, but tears ran down her cheeks. He wiped them with his thumbs and kissed her forehead. "Didn't you realize how many friends you have here? You're going to be missed by more than just me." He glanced at his watch. "It's almost three. Let's take these things home and go get a drink. Then I've got an idea for dinner. Okay?"

"Okay." Within minutes they were clear of the garage and maneuvering the streets to reach the north end of Van Ness. Once there, they dropped off the balloons and the gifts, surprising Sarah and Ruthie who were in the kitchen having coffee. Austin introduced Ruthie to Tyler, who gave her his business card and asked her to call if there was anything she or Sarah needed while Austin was gone. Austin grabbed her sweater for the chill that would come when the sun set, and they left.

Tyler drove to the end of Jefferson and parked in the garage, then led Austin across the street to the ticket counter for the Blue and Gold line and bought tickets for the next Bay cruise. "What are we doing, Tyler? We're probably the only San Franciscans in this whole line," Austin whispered to Tyler as they took their places in the line to board.

"So? Have you ever been on a cruise around the Bay?"

"Not since I was a child, when we first got here."

"That's my point. People rarely see the sights in their own hometown. I've only been on them because of business clients who wanted to come. Or a visiting relative. It's fun." He caught a tendril of hair flying in her eyes and tucked it behind her ear. "Besides, who's going to know we're not tourists?"

Austin stood back and inspected him, head to toe. "You mean other than the fact you have on suit pants, a white shirt and tie? No one would ever guess." She laughed at his sheepish smile.

"Oh, yeah." He took off his tie and stuffed it in Austin's purse. Then he unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and rolled his sleeves up to the elbow. Raising his eyebrows questioningly, he looked at Austin.

"Much better," she said with a smile. "You look so natural, even the dress shoes almost seem right." She reached up and straightened his collar where it had flipped up. Tyler smiled down into her face and captured her hand, kissing her wrist before holding it by his side.

"Are you newlyweds?" asked the woman standing in line behind them. She had short brown hair with a few wisps of grey streaked through it, and wore a short-sleeved pullover sweater and twill slacks with tennis shoes. She stood next to a balding man in a tan windbreaker jacket, who had a camera dangling from a cord around his neck.

Austin smiled at her. "No, why do you ask?"

"Oh, it's just that that's such a sweet, intimate thing to do, straightening his collar like that. It's what I do for my John." She gestured to the man standing beside her who smiled good naturedly at them. She lowered her voice slightly. "It's just my way of being able to touch him in public. Sometimes it's hard to keep my hands off the man, and we've been married thirty years. We're here celebrating our anniversary." Tyler squeezed Austin's hand.

"Susan, these nice people aren't interested in our anniversary." His reprimand was mild with no hint of reproof, and he smiled as he put his arm over her shoulders.

"No, I think it's wonderful that you've been married that long," said Austin. "Where

are you from?"

"Minnesota. Outside Minneapolis. John was stationed here before we were married and always wanted to come back, but with the farm and raising kids, there just didn't seem to be a chance. Our children gave us this trip as our anniversary gift. It's a beautiful city."

"It is, isn't it? This is Austin, by the way, and I'm Tyler. Welcome to San Francisco. So, Susan, you think that Austin here is hinting that she can't keep her hands off me because she straightened my collar?" His eyes twinkled as he looked down at Austin, who was blushing. Susan laughed.

"Now, don't go trying to get me involved. I've said too much already. But true love is what it is for me." She smiled up into her husband's face and he rubbed her arm with his fingertips.

"I think it is for her too, and I keep telling her so, but she won't admit it. What do you suggest I do?"

"Susan...!" John said.

"Tyler!" said Austin at the same time.

"Now, John, the man asked my opinion."

John just shook his head, as Austin and Tyler chuckled. "He's a very handsome man, Austin." Austin could feel Tyler preening beside her. "And he seems quite nice. From my point of view, it looks to me like you care for him a lot, on a pretty familiar level, if you know what I mean." Austin blushed but chuckled.

"Susan! We don't know these people!"

Tyler snickered.

Susan looked at John. "John, this isn't like home. People here are much more cosmopolitan than in Minnesota." She looked back at Austin. "Anyway, unless you know something about him that's bad, I would say you should give him a try. Real love doesn't come around every day. If you pass it up, you lose something very

precious, and you can't ever get it back." Tyler sobered with those words and released Austin's hand to put his arm around her waist so he could pull her against him.

Susan looked at Tyler. "And you. If you love her, like I think you do, don't give up. John here had to ask me to marry him twice and twice I turned him down. Then I thought he was giving up and going to start dating the Lindstrom girl down the road and I marched myself to his front door and asked him to marry me."

"Oh, I was never interested in Myra Lindstrom. I just had to make you see how much you loved me."

Susan smiled and slapped his chest playfully. "I know. See? He didn't give up, he tricked me. Of course, I've always believed that you've got to love yourself before you can love someone else, and I had to overcome a few things." She beamed up at Austin and Tyler. "But it all worked out, as you can see. Just as happy now as we were thirty years ago. And I hope the same happens for you two."

"Thanks, Susan." Tyler stuck out his hand to John. "You're a lucky man, John. I hope you have a wonderful time here in the city. Susan," Tyler leaned down to plant a kiss on her cheek, "I appreciate your advice more than you know. I'm glad we met up with you. Where are you staying, anyway?"

"The Tuscan Inn, over there somewhere," Susan waved off toward the city, opposite of where the hotel was, and John chuckled, "until next Saturday. We just got here last night and we want to see everything there is. Then we'll go home and rest."

The line started moving for boarding when Tyler pulled a business card out of his wallet. "If you need anything while you're here, just call and let me know. Austin here is on her way out of town for business on Monday, but I'll be around if you have questions about anything in the city." They said their goodbyes and separated as they got on the boat.

Tyler and Austin found an empty place by the railing, Tyler behind Austin, his hands on her stomach and her hands on the railing, close to the pose they had struck the previous night at the Aquatic Park. The boat pulled smoothly out of the protected pier area, past the barking sea lions and into the Bay proper, and Tyler

braced his legs to absorb the movement and to keep Austin steady. They slowly made their way around Alcatraz and past Angel Island.

The engine vibration and the natural motion as the boat cut through the water brought Tyler's erection in contact with Austin. He unbuttoned the bottom two buttons of her blouse and slid one hand inside where he gently rubbed her stomach. Austin pushed back into his body and snuggled her head under his chin. They rode out under the Golden Gate Bridge, made a turn and headed back toward the city. Tyler nuzzled Austin's ear. He could feel her breath coming in short uneven gulps and knew that she felt what he was feeling, the rolling of the desk, the undulations of the water under them, the vibrations through the soles of their shoes and the constant friction of their bodies as they stood so close.

"Austin, I love you. You're mine, and I'm yours. Forever. That's how it works." He kissed her ear and settled his cheek in her hair. "Look out there. This is our bay and our city. Home. Don't forget it while you're in Dallas. This is where you belong. Imprint it in your mind." She turned her head toward him slightly and nodded.

When the boat pulled up to the dock, he removed his hand and let her button her blouse. They made their way off of the boat and bought the tourist photos that the cruise line takes of each passenger group as they board. Tyler kept one and gave Austin one.

"Ready for drinks?"

They walked up the street to The Franciscan where they settled into chairs with a Bay view and ordered wine. They were quiet and relaxed as they sipped their drinks, looking out over the water with the late afternoon sunshine sparkling on it. There was no need to say anything; Tyler held Austin's hand, absently rubbing his thumb across her knuckles. When the waitress approached to see if they wanted another glass, Tyler shook his head and asked for the check.

"I liked Susan and John."

"Of course you did since Susan said just what you wanted her to. I could almost believe she was a plant." She smiled to take the sting out of her words. "But, I thought they were a sweet couple, too."

"I should have gotten their last name. We could have sent them flowers or something." Tyler handed the waitress a couple of bills and told her to keep the change. Just as they were leaving, they saw John and Susan coming in. Tyler whispered something to Austin and at her nod, he approached them.

"Hello again. Listen, you might think this is a little strange, but Austin and I are celebrating and seeing the sights during her last weekend home for awhile. You know, seeing the things that the natives never take time to see." Susan nodded at him, smiling. "Well, I have plans to take her to a long-standing San Francisco play. It's been years since I've seen it, but I remember it as being fun, with lots of comedy and music. It's not something you'll be able to see at home. I think I can get four tickets if you would let us be your hosts. Kind of an anniversary gift. Would you be interested?"

Susan and John looked at each other. "We hardly know what to say," said John. "We don't even know you. We can't possibly let you do this for us."

"Please." Tyler lowered his voice. "If you're with us, Austin can see what two loving people are like. It might help my cause, if you know what I mean." Once again, John and Susan exchanged looks. John smiled at his wife and then at Tyler.

"Well, we'd hate to stand in the way of true love. This is very nice of you, Tyler. We'd love to come and see this play. When do we need to be ready?"

"The curtain goes up at eight, but its general seating so we need to be there no later than seven or seven-fifteen. If you don't mind an early dinner, why don't we pick you up at five-thirty? Does that suit? We don't want to cut into your sightseeing time."

"Lovely! By the way, we're Susan and John Matthews. We'll be in the lobby of the hotel at five-thirty. Thank you, Tyler." Tyler shook John's hand and went back to Austin, who waved to them as she and Tyler left.

"That's very nice of you, Tyler. But if you don't mind my asking, exactly what have you invited them to?"

"It's a surprise," Tyler said with a grin and a gleam in his eye. "A surprise in keeping

with our tourist extravaganza for your last weekend here." She laughed.

"Honestly, you make it sound like I'm never coming back." Tyler looked at her and his grin faded. He took her hand and hurried her to the Jeep in the parking garage. Austin tried to lighten his suddenly somber mood by saying brightly, "Well, MacDuff, lead on! What's next on the agenda?"

He took a deep breath, as if to dispel disturbing images. "Al fresco dining with a view of the sun setting into the golden Pacific."

"Oooh. Very romantic. And where might this restaurant be?"

"A very discriminating establishment. I could barely get a table. But I hope you enjoy it." As Austin suspected, within half an hour they climbed the hill and pulled around the back of Tyler's house. He ushered her into the kitchen and pulled out a chair at the table for her to sit, and they chatted while he started their dinner. Turning on the broiler, he removed a loaf of Italian bread from its wrapper, cut four thick slices, brushed them generously with olive oil and popped them under the broiler. Lifting the cover of a dish of chopped tomatoes he added chopped fresh basil, stirred the mixture and set it aside.

"Would you get some wine glasses, Austin? And here's a tray. The wine is in the 'fridge, and napkins are on the island." While Austin got the tray ready, Tyler flipped the bread slices and left them in another three minutes before removing them and turning the oven temperature down. They were put on a metal rack to cool slightly while Tyler sliced two russet potatoes lengthwise into quarters, rubbed them with olive oil and sprinkled them lightly with herbs. They were placed on a cookie sheet and set aside. From the refrigerator, Tyler pulled out two large stuffed chicken breasts. Austin leaned against the island watching the activity, impressed with his efficiency.

"What are they stuffed with?"

"One has crab, the other has cheese and ham. I thought we could split them and share all of the flavors." He leaned over and took her mouth, kissing her long and hard. "Although I like your flavor pretty darn much. No seasoning needed," he said. He turned and put the potatoes in the oven and set the timer for twenty minutes.

Topping each slice of toast with the tomato and basil mixture, he slid them onto a plate.

"Now my darlin', if you will bring the plate, I will bring the wine. The sunset is to the front." For the first time while she was awake and alert, Austin walked through the living room of Tyler's house. It was beautifully laid out, large but not overwhelming, with a huge stone fireplace at one end. The colors and furniture were soft and restful, which suited the room, and were arranged to take full advantage of the two focal points, the fireplace and the picture window facing the ocean. She continued out the front door to a large porch that extended the length of the house. Tyler set the tray with the wine and glasses on a round table covered with a bright cloth. "I forgot the corkscrew. Be right back."

When he returned to the porch and opened the wine, the sun was low in the sky. He poured their glasses and pulled chairs up on either side of the table. Austin sat in one and put her feet on the railing, taking a deep breath of salt tinged air. "This is glorious, Tyler. What a perfect way to spend the evening."

"I think so, too," he responded quietly. "Here." He held out a piece of toast, pulling back slightly and shaking his head when she reached for it. "I want to feed it to you."

Meeting his eyes, she leaned toward him and took the toast in her mouth, biting it in two. Tyler wiped a tiny piece of tomato from her lip and then ate the remaining half of toast. Austin picked up a piece and bit it, then fed the other half to Tyler, who slid the toast behind his teeth and sucked on Austin's finger before letting it go.

Austin smiled at him and sipped at her wine, turning again toward the beach and the glorious purples and oranges that streaked the sky marking the setting sun. "You are the sexiest man alive, I believe," she said, watching the birds dive toward the water.

"I'm glad you think so. I don't think it's the unanimous opinion of all the women I know, however."

"You know some pretty stupid women, then," she laughed.

"Huh-uh. Just sexy for you. Or at least, I try to be." Austin reached her hand across to him and he took it, looking at her long fingers and short, shaped nails.

"For me," she said, her voice low and sultry, "you don't have to try. You just are."

Tyler heard the timer go off. With a sigh he said, "Just your voice drives me crazy, but this time you're saved by the bell." He got up to put the chicken in the oven.

"Is there anything you want me to be doing?" She put a tease in her voice.

Tyler laughed. "Well, I can tell you double entendres don't help, you temptress. No, you stay here. I won't be a minute." True to his word, he returned to the porch just before the sun sank into the sea. He stood behind Austin's chair, hands on her shoulders. She reached one hand up, linking her fingers through his, and they felt the night settle around them.

*Chapter Twenty-Two *

Dinner was an unqualified success. Austin mixed a salad while Tyler finished the chicken and potatoes. They ate in the dining room instead of the kitchen, adding a further sense of distinction to the evening. As a team, they cleaned the kitchen and put the dishes in the dishwasher. Tyler made coffee and got out a selection of cookies from his favorite bakery and arranged them on a plate.

"It's a little chilly, but do you want to sit on the porch or the patio? Or shall we start a fire and settle in the living room?"

"The living room is fine. Dinner was delicious. Do you cook like this for yourself all the time?"

Tyler laughed. "No! Usually I make a sandwich or bring home carry out from someplace. Often, if I eat at Barb's she makes enough for me to bring home and nuke."

"That makes this very special, then. Thanks." Austin took the cookie plate from his hand, turned him toward her and wrapped herself around him. Her kiss was soft at first. She could taste wine, chicken, the olive oil from the potatoes, and that special flavor that belonged to Tyler alone. It was that flavor that made her deepen the kiss,

to angle her head and whimper her need as she ran her tongue across his lips. Tyler's arms crushed her to him. He opened his mouth, and teased her tongue with his, extending the invitation to enter.

Without breaking contact, he lifted her onto the counter and spread her legs, running his hands up the inside of her thighs then around her hips and up her ribs until they captured her breasts. Austin moaned as his thumbs pressed and chafed her already sensitive nipples. He unbuttoned her blouse, pulling it from the waistband of her slacks and off of her shoulders. The single clasp of her bra was no barrier at all to him, and within seconds his hot mouth was suckling her, as she arched her back giving him free access. His teeth lightly raked across her nipples as Tyler slipped his hands below her waistband. He buried his head between her breasts, his breathing shallow and ragged. Austin fisted his hair and held him to her, moaning with need for him. Tyler could barely speak or hear, the roaring in his ears was so great with his desire, but he forced himself to stop.

"Do you love me, Austin?"

"What?" Her voice was raspy, deep, laden with desire.

"Do you love me?"

"Tyler!" All manner of need was in that one word. "Tyler, honey, please."

With great effort, Tyler pushed himself away from the counter. He pulled the straps of her bra over her shoulders and hooked it. He handed her the blouse, which had fallen to the floor, and turned away, gulping air to clear his head. He stepped to the patio door and opened it, standing in the cool night air until he was sure he could control himself. Austin sat on the counter, her cheeks flaming, and watched him. When he came in, he lifted her to the floor and kissed her gently.

"You can't tell me what I need to hear, and I can't be with you without it." The words were soft. She almost thought his heartbeat was louder than his words, and yet she heard them in her soul.

"I'm sorry. I can't." He leaned his forehead against hers.

"Let's go and have our cookies and coffee." He poured two mugs of coffee then

followed Austin into the living room. After starting the gas fire Tyler joined Austin on the sofa, wrapping his arm around her and watching the flames while nibbling on cookies. After several minutes of silence, Tyler opened a drawer on the end table and pulled out a small box.

"Tyler, you've already given me too much," she protested.

"Never!" he said with a smile. She opened the box to find an antique heart pendant on a delicate sterling chain. The heart was covered in fine filigree work. Austin held her breath as she examined it. "Do you like it? It was my grandmother's." Austin's eyes flew to his as she held the necklace out to him.

"I can't accept this. This is precious, and I can't..." A sob broke from her. Tyler wrapped her in his arms, rocking her as she cried.

"It was given to me by my mother for the woman I am going to marry. I intend to marry you, Austin. Please wear it, to remind you of me. You can't say now that you love me, because you can't forgive yourself or me for what happened, but I know you do. If the day ever comes when you are certain that you can't under any circumstances love me, let me have it back then, and I'll give it to Barb for Robbie. If you don't keep it, I won't have any other need for it." Tyler took the necklace from her and put it around her neck.

"Are you okay?" She nodded, sniffing. "Come on, I'll take you home."

Tyler arrived at her apartment the next morning carrying a box of pastries, so Sarah made coffee and joined them. She had changed tremendously since Tyler had met her. Part of the change Austin decided was that Sarah was involved in activities, thanks in large part to Tyler including her in things they did. Another change was brought about by Austin's being happy, she thought. Because she was happier, she approached her mother differently. It was amazing to her, but suddenly, she didn't feel as though she was the last person on earth her mother wanted to be with. The thought of moving in with Ruthie added to her mother's change too, and Austin was pleased that things would work out for her. Sarah certainly liked being with Tyler, Austin realized as they sat in the kitchen and Sarah and Tyler chatted.

But, she realized, she did too. It was hard to imagine a day without his smile, his

deep voice, his warm hand holding hers. Or of course, without the warmth of his body pressed against hers at some point during the day, or his hot mouth taking charge of hers. It occurred to Austin that Tyler had seen her at her worst. Crying, admitting her worst fears, angry, dressed horribly, first thing in the morning, begging him for sex. Yet he still insisted he loved her. More than she loved herself, she realized with a start. And she sat up straight as this thought hit her—they hadn't had sex in more than a week. Actually, in almost two weeks. And it wasn't sex he was after. It was obvious that he wanted her, he had demonstrated that in every way _except_ take her. For the first time since he had admitted being Alonso, Austin allowed herself to consider the possibility that Tyler truly did in fact love her. Maybe enough to forgive her. Maybe even enough to help her find a way to forgive herself.

Attuned to her, Tyler immediately noticed her startled look and rigid back. "What's wrong?"

Austin turned her eyes to him, looking at him intently, trying to see behind his expression and words. His brows creased with concern.

"Nothing. I just thought of something, that's all." He caressed her cheek and rubbed his thumb lightly under her eyes. Her mother watched them with a small smile. When Tyler dropped his hand, he and Sarah picked up their conversation as though they hadn't momentarily stopped.

After breakfast, Tyler and Austin loaded software on the new laptop. Austin was amazed with the features, speed and power of the machine. During the loading time, she and Tyler talked. He asked her about her knife and sword collection and her opinion of some of the books on the shelves that he had also read.

They looked at the directions for the printer and tried it out. Tyler helped her set her email up and get all of her supplies in the computer case. The printer came with its own case; she planned to pack it in her suitcase and put her purse in her carry-on. The computer, her briefcase and a carry on bag were all she could take on board, and all she would be able to handle.

That afternoon, Tyler took her to Coit Tower on Telegraph Hill. The view from the top was magnificent and they enjoyed pointing out all of the city landmarks to each

other. Afterward, they bought Italian ice cream and strolled through Washington Square before taking a self tour of the cathedral.

By the time they had to pick up Susan and John, Austin was ready to eat. They went to Fior d'Italia, a North Beach legend, and spent the meal talking about their lives-how they were different and how they were similar. John described what it was like being stationed in the area many years ago and how different he had felt when he went back to landlocked farm country. Tyler understood, since he had gone to school in a conservative mountain town in Virginia after having spent most of his life in California. The women discovered that the things women are concerned with are mostly the same anywhere. The dinner passed quickly with the good food and conversation.

They walked to Beach Blanket Babylon Boulevard and found the line for the play to be around the corner already. The men got in line and the women walked around a little more, looking in shop and restaurant windows. When the doors opened and they made their way to their seats, Austin was excited about seeing the show.

"How did you manage to get four tickets to this show on a Saturday night?" She looked at Tyler suspiciously.

He took her hand and smiled like the Cheshire cat. "Just never you mind. I have my ways." The show was every bit as wonderful as Tyler remembered from having seen it years ago. At the end, when the audience sang along with the cast, exhorting San Francisco to open its Golden Gate, Austin had tears in her eyes. They walked to The North Beach Café afterwards, for dessert and coffee, and Tyler presented Austin with a flat square box wrapped in the comics. Susan raised her eyebrows, looking expectantly at Austin.

"You'll have to forgive me, but since Austin is leaving Monday I have these little things I need to pass on to her." Tyler's eyes twinkled as he saw her examine the wrapping paper. "No, Robbie didn't do that. I borrowed the idea."

"Really, Tyler, this is getting crazy." She turned to Susan and held out the pendant. "He gave me this just last night. Isn't it beautiful? And he and his nephew gave me this gorgeous pin for my birthday a couple of weeks ago. He's too generous."

"It's my belief that a man can't be too generous," said Susan, with a laugh. "When I had our first boy, John gave me flowers every day for a month, plus a very nice bracelet. For our second boy, I got flowers for two weeks and no bracelet. When our daughter came along, I was lucky to get a card." She patted John's hand as she laughed. He looked at Tyler sheepishly.

"Heck, by the time Martha came along, I thought it was old hat. How was I to know?" he laughed at himself and they joined him.

"My point, Austin, is to enjoy it while he feels like doing it. It won't last forever."

Austin tore off the paper to reveal a mousepad, personalized with a photo of her and Robbie taken at the zoo. Lions were in the background. "A remembrance of the work you and Robbie did on his project," explained Tyler.

"I love it! What a perfect gift, Tyler. Thank you."

"You may thank me again later, when we're alone," he said in a stage whisper, making the Matthews' laugh and Austin blush.

"Really! Have some decorum."

After they dropped the Matthews off at their hotel, Tyler took Austin home. They sat in the Jeep, around the corner and near the back of the building, just holding hands and enjoying the quiet between them.

"What do you want to do tomorrow?" asked Tyler.

"What do I want to do, or what do I have to do?"

"Both."

"I have to pack and get the room ready for Ruthie and Harry. What I want to do is spend all day in bed with you." Tyler grinned at her and squeezed her hand. "And," she sighed, "I have also made the discovery that I have enough clothes for working here, in casual California, but not the kind of business clothes I need. So I have to do some shopping if I can find the time. It promises to be a full day, without adding the activity I really want." She smiled at him. "You might have noticed that your

distinctly firm resolve not to provide me succor and comfort does not stop me from wanting it. What do you want to do?"

"What I want to do, not too surprisingly, is the same thing you want to do."

"I'm shocked!"

"I knew you would be. What I'm going to do is come over here around eight-thirty, take you and your mother to breakfast-we'll just go someplace fast like Peter D's-and then I'll sit and talk to you while you decide what to pack. We'll go shopping so that I can interfere with what you buy, and while you're putting your new things in a suitcase I'll clean the bathroom and help you get the room ready."

"You won't!"

"I will. Do you think just because I'm single I don't know how to clean? I'm an expert at it because 'Ah went to a verah fine militree school, ma'am.' Cadets are taught well, and believe me, I've cleaned more than my share of toilets, so don't worry. As for my firm resolve..." Tyler looked at her with such longing, she cupped his cheek with her hand and looked at him expectantly.

"Yes?" she asked hopefully.

"I want you to come to my place for the night and stay with me. I'll take you to the airport Monday morning."

Austin leaned into Tyler and kissed him gently. "But what about your resolve?"

"I can't stand seeing you go away without spending every minute I can with you."

"What about tonight?"

"I'm not made of stone. One night is all my firm resolve can stand."

Austin chuckled.

"So, I guess I'd better get in if I have to be up and ready to roll at eight-thirty."

Goodnight."

"Huh-uh. I can't see the lobby door from here. I'll walk you." He got out and took Austin's hand.

"Honestly, Tyler, I don't deserve you."

"You probably deserve better than me, but I'm what you've got. Don't forget it!" He gave her a quick kiss and she went inside.

Sunday breakfast was quite good and fast, too. Austin had what she needed to pack organized in her mind, so getting it laid out on the bed didn't take any time at all. What she didn't need she pushed to the back of the closet and she emptied three drawers for Ruthie and Harry to use. When she had everything she wanted to take with her ready to put in the suitcases, she and Tyler went shopping at Union Square.

At Macy's, she picked out three business suits in hunter green, a shimmering turquoise and a royal blue. Tyler found two microfiber pants suits in sea green and rust that would be suitable for business. He helped her pick out silk blouses in pastels and a couple of bright colors that would allow them to be worn with any of the suits. While she was trying on clothes, he did some shopping on his own, buying several pairs of lacy thongs and matching bras, as well as a gold Byzantine bracelet, and the matching necklace and earrings.

Austin finished with the larger items and quickly snatched several pairs of thigh high hosiery off the rack and then looked at accessories. She didn't need any jewelry, but Tyler insisted she buy two pairs of earrings that he thought would set off the green and royal blue suits, and a beautiful flowing scarf that had the right colors of turquoise, green and blue.

"You are a great shopper," she said as they left the store loaded down with packages. "I'm impressed. You've got good taste."

"Years of shopping with my mother. Wait until you meet her. _There's_ someone to go shopping with. Do you have an appropriate garment bag to carry these suits?"

"I'll just fold them and then get them pressed when I get there."

"I've got one I can loan you. You might not have time for the cleaners. Shopping makes me thirsty. Want to stop at the St. Francis for a drink?"

An hour later they were on their way to Austin's. She rode silently, thinking about what the next day would bring.

Tyler let her sit in silence, seeming to know that she was nervous. When they reached the apartment, he told her to leave the suits in the Jeep and just take in what she was putting in her regular suitcase.

While she arranged things and packed them, just as he said he would, he cleaned the bathroom. Sarah came through and acted like she might faint when she saw him, but Tyler assured her that he was happy to help. Austin finished in her room and together they changed the sheets and vacuumed and dusted. They had a cup of coffee with Sarah, making sure that she had all of the necessary phone numbers.

"Sarah, be sure to call me if there is anything you need," insisted Tyler. "I want to know how you're doing."

"Thank you, Tyler. And thank you for being such a good man for my daughter. She needs you."

"Mother! What in the world are you talking about?"

"I know she needs me, Sarah, and I want to take care of her. And you too, so that's why we need to stay in touch." He kissed her on the cheek.

"Mother, I'm not going to be gone all that long. I'll be at this hotel in Dallas," she passed her mother a piece of paper with the hotel name and number, "and I've left a copy of this beside the phone for Ruthie too. I'll be at Tyler's tonight and Dallas tomorrow night. Goodbye, Mother."

"Bye, Austin. I hope you have success with your business. I'll talk to you tomorrow." She walked them to the door, kissed Austin on the cheek, waved, then closed the door and locked it.

"Well," Austin laughed, "I can hardly believe it. I almost feel like she likes me."

"She does. She loves you. You'll come to accept it one day. Come on." He had her computer case and her large suitcase, and she carried the overnight bag and her briefcase.

Tyler's garment bag worked well for the suits. There was space for everything and it was surprisingly easy for Austin to carry. Austin held out clothes to wear the next day on the plane and put everything else in the Jeep. "I'm exhausted." She fell onto the sofa. "What shall we do for dinner?"

"Whatever Waiters on Wheels will deliver. What do you fancy? Or do you want Chinese? Or pizza?"

"Whatever you choose will be fine." Dialing Waiters on Wheels, Tyler ordered barbequed pork and beef with a couple of side dishes from Memphis Minnie's. He fixed a Scotch and water for himself and a glass of wine for Austin, then carried them into the living room, where he lounged with her on the sofa.

"Are you nervous?"

"Nervous? No, nervous doesn't begin to describe it." She looked into his eyes. "I wish I had your confidence about everything."

"As soon as you get there and get started, it will all fall into place. Like everything else, taking the first step is the hardest."

"I guess."

"Do you trust me?"

She hesitated. "Yes. When it comes to business, I do trust you." Austin ran her hand along his jaw line, feeling the roughness of his whiskers and felt a deep desire to be with him.

As if he could read her mind, he leaned into her and brushed her lips with his, dropping lightning kisses all along her mouth, resisting the temptation to fill her mouth with his tongue, although she had opened her mouth in anticipation. "I suggested this venture, and if you trust me then you trust I wouldn't set you up for a

fall. I know this is going to be a very good opportunity for you. You're great at your job and working with people." He looked into her eyes and said with conviction, "This is going to be good for you, Austin."

"From your luscious mouth to God's ear," she said, and he chuckled. They chatted about general things until the food was delivered. The aroma made Austin realize how hungry she was.

Dinner was a simple affair, in the kitchen. As they had the previous Friday, they cleaned the kitchen and loaded the dishwasher together. When they were finished, Tyler took Austin's hand and led her back to the living room, where he started the fire and they settled on the sofa with another glass of wine.

"I picked up a few things for you while you were in the dressing room today." He handed her the bag of underwear first. She glanced in and then looked at Tyler with a big smile.

"Why, Mr. Birch. I do believe you're trying to ply me with good wine," she held up her glass, "and clothing of the devil. I love it when a man does that." Tyler laughed. Austin pulled out a thong and bra. "Would you like me to model them?"

"Actually no," Tyler said, although his voice had deepened by a couple of octaves. "I'd like you to model these instead." He held out the boxes that contained the jewelry. "These and nothing else." Austin looked at the small boxes and then deeply into Tyler's eyes.

"Tyler, I can't promise anything..."

"I know. But I can't let you go 1,500 miles away and not be with you beforehand. I want to leave you with the clear picture in your mind of what we're like together, and I want something to carry with me as well."

Austin opened the boxes. Her face reflected her astonishment when she saw the exquisite work of the pieces, done in 18k gold. She put on the earrings and the necklace, carefully laying the heart pendant and chain on the coffee table. She asked Tyler to help her with the bracelet clasp, then she admired it on her wrist, watching the faceted metal flash and shimmer in the light from the fireplace.

Standing, she focused on Tyler's eyes as she slowly pulled her sweater over her head, dropping it on the floor and shaking her hair free, knowing how he liked to see it float around her face. She unclasped her bra, cupping her hands over her breasts and kneading them, finally concentrating on her nipples. Her mouth opened slightly. Tyler moved his eyes off of her breasts to her opened lips and she saw him lick his lips. She was getting excited, watching him watch her. She pulled off the bra and dropped it on the floor.

With great care, she unzipped her jeans, pushing them slowly over her hips and then to the floor. She toed her shoes off, and scraped her socks off with her jeans. In just a pair of bikini panties and her jewelry, she stood before Tyler.

He gestured her to him and she slowly walked to stand between his legs. He buried his face in her stomach, turning so that he grazed her with his whiskers, and then licked over the scratchiness when he turned back. The sensation was astonishing. Austin arched her back and ran her fingers through his hair, contrasting in her mind the soft texture of his hair with the friction he was creating on her abdomen. Tyler slipped his fingers under the waistband of her panties and pulled them down until she stepped out of them.

Tyler pushed her back from him. "Spread your legs," he ordered. She smiled into his eyes and stood with her feet about a foot apart. Standing there, she saw his eyes travel down the full length of her body and back up, getting darker with each passing second. Austin looked behind him to a mirror on the opposing wall, clearly reflecting her. Fascinated, she watched herself as she raised her arms and locked her hands behind her neck and under her hair, displaying the necklace, earrings and bracelet in such a way that they seemed to gather and discharge light from each other. She saw the gleam from the gold highlighted against her hair and body, backlit by the fire. She looked back at Tyler and smiled as he moaned appreciatively.

Tyler stood, watching her as he removed his own clothing. Like her, his movements were unhurried. He smiled into her eyes, which she knew sparked with desire as he revealed himself. Just as Austin had with him, he stepped before her when he had only his briefs on, and used her hands to show that he wanted her to remove them. She dropped to her knees to pull his briefs to the floor, and when she looked up, she was confronted with the entire length and thickness of him at mouth level.

Had she ever really looked at him before? She couldn't remember, but she could see now that he was magnificent. And huge. She was in awe of the fact that he had pressed all of him into her. It was no wonder he could make her feel as he did, full and complete.

She looked up to see Tyler looking down at her, desire, and something more, reflected in his eyes. Without breaking eye contact, she moved her tongue across his glans. Tyler hissed in a breath and stood rigidly. His hands found their way through her hair so he could hold her in place. She gazed at his stiff shaft before licking him again, then folded her lips over him. She heard him catch his breath again, and then she wasn't sure he was even breathing. She glanced up and saw that he watched her as she took him in her mouth. Her head slowly sank, devouring him a little at a time, and then letting him go. Again, her head began the descent and ascent. Austin savored the taste of him, the coarse texture of his length contrasted with the smoothness of his glans. She finally heard Tyler expel a long, shuddering breath.

"Enough." He said it gently, but through clenched teeth. There was no mistaking his meaning. He pulled her to her feet and took her mouth with his tongue, roughly, thoroughly, mimicking the actions he had just performed in her mouth and what he would soon be doing with his shaft, inside her body.

Austin moved her hands across his chest, feeling the soft, curly hair that covered it, rubbing his nipples. She broke their kiss to lave his nipples with her tongue and suckle him, making him groan. His penis tapped softly against her stomach, and she closed the distance between them so that she could push into it and chafe it against her skin.

Tyler gave a hard laugh. "You'll be the death of me. Here I'm trying to take this slow and easy and you're making it so I won't last two minutes when I get inside you."

"I don't want you to last more than two minutes. I'm ready to come right now. It will only take a touch from you, and you're trying to take your time. Tyler," she stretched her body full length against his as she kissed him briefly. "It's been thirteen days. I can't stand much more."

Tyler glanced at the clock on the mantle. "Thirteen days, two hours and twenty-six minutes. Don't think I haven't felt every one of them. But I'm determined to make

this something you'll carry with you, not just here," he cupped her mound suddenly, "or here," he ran his hand gently over her heart and left breast, "but here." He touched her temple. "I want you to know in your mind that this experience between us means something important in your life." He rubbed his lips over hers, and with just a fraction of space between them, he whispered, "I love you, Austin."

*Chapter Twenty-Three *

Tyler was right, in that what they shared was nothing that Austin could have imagined. He led her upstairs to his bed and then he did take his time, making each second count for both of them. His strokes were long and slow. He gentled her with soft words and softer kisses, caressed her with light breath blown on her hair as he leaned over her, took her to the heights again and again before allowing himself completion. It was the sweetest thing she had ever known, and yet it brought about the wildest, most passionate climaxes she had yet felt. All the while she was spiraling through space, pinpricks of light flashing around her, far from the world of logic or reasoning, she felt Tyler, knew he was there for her, waiting for her to come back down, wanting to take her back up again, and never letting her feel alone. When he let himself go at last and she soared with him, it was as though there was only one body, one mind, one spirit. No Tyler, no Austin, but some combination that would never be totally separate entities again.

Tyler collapsed on her, only barely able to determine where he was. As soon as he realized that he had all of his weight on her, he rolled to the side, pulling her tight against him. "Austin?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you all right?"

He felt moisture on his chest where her head was. He pulled back and looked down at her, and saw tears falling down her cheeks. "What's wrong?"

"We made love, didn't we?" He leaned to kiss the tears off her cheeks. "I'll never be the same. How can I stand to be away from you now?" Tyler felt a swelling in his

chest.

"Yes, sweetheart, we made love. So it felt as good to you as it did to me?"

"I don't know how I'm going to bear it."

"Nor do I. Don't worry about it now. Just get some rest."

Within minutes he heard her deep breathing and he adjusted her so that she would be more comfortable. He didn't sleep, though. He didn't want to lose a single moment of awareness with her.

Monday morning, the alarm sounded at six. Austin stirred as Tyler shut the alarm off and then rubbed her arms to wake her gently. She smiled against his chest and nuzzled him. He was hard against her stomach in seconds and Austin leaned up enough to find his nipple. She adjusted herself to him, throwing a leg over his hip and with a soft moan, Tyler slipped into her, amazed and thrilled that she was so ready for him. Their lovemaking was tender; when the end came, Tyler found her lips for a kiss and Austin sighed into his mouth contentedly.

"I hate to say it, but we have to get up," Tyler whispered.

"Just a minute longer. Now I understand those looks you've been giving me, what you've been showing me all weekend. I feel like when I leave here I'll be gone for months, not just a couple of weeks. I don't want to go."

Tyler held her closely, his fingers lightly stroking her back, his breath blowing against her hair. "You'll be fine once you get going. Besides, I've decided that I want to show you off to my friend, Sandy. He won't believe that I've found such a stunning, intelligent woman." His arm tightened. "And that reminds me, he is likely to tell you all kinds of wild things about what went on at The Institute and attribute them to me. Don't believe them. All lies." He could feel her smile. "Now, come on. I'll shower first, but then you'll have to get up." He patted her on the bottom and got out of bed.

Just as he was soaping himself, he felt the shower curtain pulled back and Austin took the soap out of his hand. "Here, let me do that." She rubbed him thoroughly with the bar of soap and then spread the suds deliciously over his body, taking

particular care with his groin area. Tyler took the soap and returned the favor, making Austin groan with pleasure when he shampooed her hair.

When she reached for him, he stopped her with a hard kiss. "No time, sweetheart. If we do much more of this you'll miss your plane." He got out and dried himself while Austin stayed under the spray a bit longer.

Traffic to the airport was light, considering the hour, and they had time to stop at a hotel near there to catch a quick breakfast and coffee. Tyler stayed with Austin until security kept him from going any further into the airport. Just before leaving, he pulled a package from his coat pocket. "Today's gift," he said, handing it to her. "Open it later." Tyler gave her a long, thoughtful look. "You know how I feel, Austin. You know I love you, and you know what I want-what I need-from you. But even without your assurances, I'm very glad you stayed with me last night. Call me tonight?"

Tears glistened in Austin's eyes and fell silently down her cheeks. Her lips trembled and he could see the effort it took for her to control herself with all of the people milling around them. "I'll call you tonight. Thank you, Tyler. You're the most wonderful man I know." Touching his cheek, she turned and hurried toward the security check point. When she passed through, she turned to see him, watching her. He smiled and they raised hands at each other before she disappeared down the concourse on the way to her gate.

Several hours later, after a late arriving flight and manhandling her bags through the airport and to the car rental area, she arrived at her downtown Dallas hotel to find that Sandy Carter had reserved a mini-suite, with a small kitchen, sitting/living room and separate bedroom. There was a message waiting for her from Sandy, asking her to call when she got in so that he and his wife could take her to dinner. The second call she made was to Tyler. "I'm here. Tyler, I'm in a suite, can you believe it? Am I going to make enough money to afford this kind of stuff?" Tyler laughed.

"Well, the client is supposed to pay for your expenses, and I wouldn't worry too much about it with Sandy. If he got you that room, he feels it will be worth the expense, and he's right. Did you have a good flight?"

"Yes, it was okay. I've got a good place to set up the computer and a dedicated

phone plug, so I'll send you an email with phone numbers and all that stuff. Sandy and his wife have offered to take me out to dinner. Tyler, I love the photo. It's right beside the bed. Thanks." The gift Tyler had given her at the airport was a framed photograph of the two of them standing in front of the monkey cages at the zoo. Robbie did have a good eye for form, she reflected. He had borrowed Tyler's camera and captured them laughing with each other, Tyler's hand barely touching her own.

"I'm glad you like the picture. I thought it was good, too. As for dinner, remember what I told you about not believing anything he says about me. Call me when you get in, okay?"

"I will, if it's not too late. Tyler?"

"Yeah."

"I miss you." There was a moment of silence.

"I miss you too. Call me no matter what time it is. Bye, Austin."

Sandy and his wife, Ellen, met Austin at the hotel dining room. Dinner was delicious and fun. Sandy did tell wild stories about Tyler and things they had done as cadets, but ended by insisting to Austin that Tyler was one of the finest men he knew. Ellen was just as nice as Sandy, and spent most of her conversation time talking about their three teenage children and good places to go shopping and dining in Dallas. She made plans to meet Austin for lunch later that week and to have her to their house for dinner over the weekend. Sandy said he would meet her the next morning to lead her to the office.

It was ten-thirty by the time Austin returned to her suite. Sitting on the coffee table was a bouquet of lilacs and lilies. She cried out in pure pleasure as she buried her face in the blossoms. Quickly checking her emails, she found one from Robbie asking if she had arrived and what Dallas was like. Thinking of Robbie made her smile and she happily tapped out a reply. To save time the next morning, she laid out her clothes and then got ready for bed. She looked with a soft smile at the photo of her and Tyler at the zoo, touching his face with her fingertip before setting the alarm, and climbing into bed.

She placed her call to Tyler, enthusing over the flowers and telling him about her dinner, her impressions of Sandy and his wife and what the plans were for the next day. He told her about his meetings that day and that Sharon had asked him to tell her hello. "So, I guess we're an item," Tyler said. Austin chuckled.

"Sharon had us together when I still thought you were an arrogant, spoiled rich kid who stepped in to take over your father's business. She's got good instincts."

"So _that's_ what you thought of me," Tyler said, with a smile in his voice. "No wonder you weren't in any hurry to get to know me better."

"My loss," Austin said softly. "Tyler, we'd better go. We've both got busy days tomorrow and we've been on the phone for almost forty-five minutes. Forget the suite. Am I going to make enough money to afford these phone calls?" Tyler laughed.

"Talk to you tomorrow. Goodnight, sweetheart. I love you."

"Goodnight."

The rest of the week flew by. Each night she talked with Tyler, relating her activities and hearing what he had done. Ellen met Austin for lunch on Thursday and invited her to a barbeque on Saturday evening.

By Friday, she had preliminary storyboards to show Sandy and his executive committee, and pending approval, she felt that she would be in position to leave by the end of the next week with a good start on the project. She hoped that Tyler would fly to Dallas for the weekend, but even when he knew of the invitation to the barbeque he didn't offer, and she wasn't sure enough of herself to ask him.

The party Saturday was fun. Sandy and Ellen had a large home in Richardson, and Austin fit right in with the group when she offered to help in the kitchen before relaxing on the patio. Austin met several of their neighbors and colleagues, some of whom she recognized from the office. One of the neighbors Sandy introduced her to was Jack Walters, a real estate developer, and another VMI alumnus. Sandy gave her such a rousing endorsement that Jack asked if she would consider working up a proposal for him. Surprised, Austin said she would call his office on Monday to

schedule an introductory meeting. Jack reminded Austin of Tyler in many ways, particularly in his easy confidence in himself and his success. Probably because of his similarity to Tyler, she felt comfortable with him right away.

Austin called Tyler after she returned to her hotel that night, but it was very late and she was tired. "Tyler, there was food enough for an army, and it was all so good. You should have been there." Her voice was gently chiding since she wished he had been there.

"I'll bet it was good. One week down, and just one more to go. It sounds like you've made good progress and Sandy is pleased, I'm sure."

"Yes, he seems to be. But guess what? Sandy introduced me to a neighbor of his who handles real estate development all over the state, and he asked me to make an appointment next week regarding a proposal. This could be a really big job for me. It's someone else who went to school with you and Sandy. Do you remember Jack Walters?"

Tyler was silent for several moments. "Tyler?"

"Yes, I'm here. So, are you going to give Walters a proposal? Won't that mean staying down there a while longer?"

She hesitated. "Yes, it will. But remember I said I would be willing to go where the work is, and right now there's the possibility of another job right here. I'm already set up." She softened her voice. "You know how business is. I can build a name for myself if I can land a job this big. He seemed very interested. Do you remember him?"

"I'll bet he's interested," Tyler mumbled. Then louder, "I seem to remember the name, if not the guy." He sighed. "Yeah, I know how business is, and I know it's important to make a good start. I just miss you, is all. Robbie is going to be disappointed."

"I knew you'd understand. Tell Robbie I miss him and I said hello. Barb, too."

Again, Tyler was quiet. "Are you doing anything exciting tomorrow?"

"Robbie and I are going sailing again. I've got some paperwork to catch up on. Nothing big. You?"

"Nothing much to do alone." She hesitated several seconds then sighed as she continued. "I might go out and walk around a little, get some exercise, and then I've got work to do, too." She waited for Tyler to say something else, but he was strangely quiet. "Well, I'm really kind of tired. It's been a long week. I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

"Yes. Goodnight, sweetheart."

The next week, Austin finished all of the preliminary onsite work for Sandy. She made an appointment with Jack Walters near the end of the week, and promised to have a proposal worked up by the middle of the following week. The project would be quite large and she estimated off the top of her head that it would involve at least two more weeks in Dallas just to do the onsite work. By that time, she would have Sandy's project ready for onsite review.

Jack's work was statewide, with offices in several different cities, so she knew some of her time would be spent traveling. It was a project that would test her skills, and the challenge of it was exciting. She found that Jack was an easy person to work with, too, charming and cognizant of what would make her job easier. She was able to book the suite for the next week, and included expenses in her proposal that would allow her to keep it for another three weeks beyond that if she got the contract. Tyler was supportive, but, she finally noticed, not thrilled. Once again, he didn't offer to fly down for the weekend.

That Saturday, she and Ellen went shopping for school clothes for the children, and had a great lunch at a Mexican restaurant Ellen liked. Sunday, Austin worked for a few hours and then took a city tour that included both historical and modern sights. She found a quiet Italian restaurant for dinner. Both days she and Tyler missed talking.

When Austin met with Jack on Wednesday, he was very happy with her proposal. He promised to show it to his people and give her an answer by Friday. Thursday afternoon, he called and said the project was a go, and invited her to dinner to celebrate their new partnership. By the time he brought her back to the hotel, after a

fine dinner at a Vietnamese restaurant in Richardson, Austin thought it was too late to call Tyler.

She had been asleep for almost an hour when the phone woke her. Even through the haze of sleep, she could hear first the concern, then the anger in Tyler's voice when she explained why she hadn't called, and when they hung up, it took her a long time to get back to sleep.

Friday, Jack asked if she wanted to start work over the weekend. He said he had a meeting in San Antonio on Monday and that if she wanted to she could fly down with him on Saturday, see the office, go onsite with him, and between all of that, see some of the famous city. Still smarting from her conversation with Tyler the previous night, she agreed. Jack said he would pick her up early Saturday and they would fly down in his private plane. He was careful to tell her that she would have her own room while away.

That night, Austin merely told Tyler that she would be out of reach for the weekend, but that she would call him when she got back to Dallas. The silence she heard told her that Tyler hadn't gotten past his anger of their last phone call, either. She assured him that she would be working, and by the end of the conversation, he finally sounded more relaxed and told her that he hoped things went well. That he missed her. That he loved her.

The weekend was very full. Jack showed her the office and drove her to two areas in the city he had slated for development within the year. One would be a new hotel, the other would be an area of upscale homes. Austin took pictures and copious notes.

But Saturday evening and most of Sunday, Jack showed her San Antonio. Saturday night, he took her to a rodeo and bought her a Stetson hat, so she would "fit in." Sunday, they had lunch along the famous River Walk and took in The Alamo.

On Monday Jack introduced her to the San Antonio staff, and asked that the managers be available to her for an hour that afternoon before they flew back to Dallas. When Jack dropped her at the hotel, Austin told him that the trip had not only been productive but also fun. She was so pleased with all that she had gotten accomplished that she overlooked Tyler's peevishness when she called him late Monday night.

The next day, she got the photos developed and started work. She scanned a couple of them, one good picture of The Alamo that happened to have Jack smiling in the foreground, and one of her in her new hat at the rodeo, and emailed them to Robbie. The next night, Tyler asked her exactly what kind of project Jack Walters had in mind, since it looked as though she was doing more sightseeing than work.

"Robbie showed me the pictures you sent him. He said he thinks The Alamo is smaller than he had imagined but that you look 'neat' in your cowboy hat. I have to say, 'neat' isn't exactly the first word that came to my mind when I saw the picture. By the way, having seen Walters in your photo, I remember him now. He was a year behind Sandy and me, but a cadet is a cadet. You've been warned."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that maybe you should watch yourself. Not all of us are gentleman. Or based on the smile Jack is giving you in that picture, maybe you already know that. Based on the smile in your picture, maybe you don't mind."

The sarcasm that tinged his words wasn't wasted on Austin and her anger came through clearly. "Wait a minute, Tyler. What exactly are you accusing me of? Maybe you should think about which of you isn't being the gentleman. I'm glad now that I accepted Jack's dinner invitation for tomorrow night." She regretted the words as soon as they were out of her mouth, but, she reasoned, Tyler had made her angry, practically accusing her of sleeping with Jack.

There was silence on the other end of the line. "Austin, when are you coming home?" It was said quietly, but the voice was not soft.

"I'm here for another three weeks, at least."

"And this is your fourth week there. Are you planning to set up shop in Dallas?"

"Things have gone well, and Jack has said that he can introduce me to business friends who he thinks might be interested in doing some work. By the end of the three weeks I'll have Sandy's project ready for review and maybe even finished. Jack's work will take longer, of course, and I haven't decided if I'll continue with it here or come back to San Francisco." _San Francisco_ not _home_.

"I guess you have to do what you have to do," he said. "I know how demanding business can be. Is there anything I can do to help you on this end?"

"No, I don't think so, Tyler. I'm really tired, so I think I'd better go. Goodnight."

"Goodnight." With a twinge of sadness, she realized that he hadn't said he loved her.

*Chapter Twenty-Four *

In the weeks that followed, Austin saw Jack frequently. They went to dinner two or three times a week and often combined business with dining. On the weekends, he took her to plays, to galleries, to parties and just out for casual afternoons. She took another out of town trip with him, to a site that was almost completed in Houston.

Tyler had said that she wouldn't find anyone else like him. Well, she mused, Jack Walters was pretty darn close. And she knew that he liked her. In addition, she had become aware that a lot of other men noticed her, whether in a restaurant, on the street, or in one of the offices. She wasn't vain about the attention, but recognized that she was getting it partially due to a heightened sense of confidence in herself. While she was flattered with the attention, she always wore the pendant Tyler had given her, either over her blouse or under it.

Strangely, it seemed the more she saw of Jack the shorter her phone calls with Tyler were. She felt uncomfortable talking to him about things she was doing outside of work because she was often with Jack during those times, and Tyler avoided asking any questions that were not strictly work related. They didn't even talk every night anymore, and often Tyler was polite rather than warm when they did speak.

While she still hoped Tyler would come to Dallas for the weekends, she had given up thinking that he would. Even though her self confidence was growing, the longer she was here the less confidence she had in their relationship. She couldn't bring herself to ask him to come to Dallas, and she didn't understand why he didn't offer to come. She was nervous about the direction their relationship was going, and didn't know how to handle it. Tyler didn't help with his silences or avoidance of what she did when she wasn't working.

She knew that her feelings for Jack weren't anything other than friendly. Honestly though, in the back of her mind she knew that without her strong ties to Tyler, they could become more. For his part, Jack made no demands on her other than a few kisses when he brought her to the hotel after an evening out.

Tyler made the ultimate demands of her: commitment and love. Throughout their stormy relationship, it seemed they had known only extremes. Either they had been upset with each other or passionately falling all over each other. There had been very little middle ground for them, the ground where stability and commitment could grow. She knew now that the time Tyler had asked of her, to date and get to know one another would have provided that because in fact, that's what she was now experiencing with Jack.

Things changed for Austin at the end of her sixth week in Dallas. For weeks she had felt unnaturally tired, so she finally called Ellen and asked for the name of her doctor. With Ellen's help in getting her a last-minute appointment, she found out on Friday that she was six weeks pregnant.

Austin, pale and stunned, hardly heard the doctor's advice about diet, exercise, or anything else. Clutching the scripts for vitamins in her hand, she walked out of the office and drove to a nearby shopping mall. Focusing on finding the baby section in the Neiman Marcus store, she was blind to anything or anyone else. She stood in the middle of the baby section smiling at the soft pastel colors. Without any reasoning as to why she chose the particular items she did, she picked out a blanket and a pair of booties. She simply wanted something that would be for her baby, for _their_ baby. Hers and Tyler's. Suddenly, she felt almost giddy. She couldn't wait to tell him, but she didn't want to do it over the telephone.

She dropped off the prescriptions for vitamins the doctor had given her at a local pharmacy and went to a nearby restaurant for something to drink while she waited. She couldn't stop from smiling. Did it show? she wondered. Did her happiness show to everyone around her? She thought it did.

Austin remembered that afternoon in Barbara's guest room when Tyler had told her that they had acted irresponsibly and that there could be a problem. She had said they would work it out when or if something happened, but she had been so happy she truly hadn't given it the proper thought. Yes, they had been careless and now a

child was involved. But Tyler loved her, and she thought she might love him, too.

When she returned to the room she sat on the sofa with her hand over her stomach and thought about Tyler. She hoped he would be happy. He had to be happy. Would he still want to marry her? Did she love him, did she trust him enough to marry him? She had to, because his child was growing in her. She laughed out loud. Picking up the phone she called the office, only to get his voice mail. She asked him to call her as soon as he got the message. Confidence be damned, she would ask him to please come down this weekend. She wanted to see his face when he found out he was going to be a father.

She hadn't heard from Tyler before Jack picked her up for dinner. Afterward they had initial storyboards to go over, and she planned to do that in the room so she wouldn't miss Tyler's call. She smiled to herself as she ordered Perrier rather than wine with dinner, but didn't respond to the implied question in Jack's raised eyebrows.

They returned to her room at the hotel, while it was still early California time. There were no messages for her, but Austin thought perhaps Tyler had gotten tied up in meetings. She put on a pot of decaf coffee while Jack took off his jacket and tie, and settled on the sofa where the storyboards were arranged. She sat next to him and began to thoroughly explain her ideas for his web site. They hadn't gotten more than half an hour into the presentation, when Austin cocked her head, as though she could hear something. There was a knock at the door.

"Excuse me, Jack." She went to the door and opened it just as Tyler was raising his hand to knock again.

"Tyler!" She hugged him and gave him a quick kiss. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"I'm here to see you, of course." The harshness of his tone was like a slap.

She glanced at her watch and saw that it was almost ten-thirty. She looked at him with a questioning look and a slight upturn of the ends of her mouth. "I called you this afternoon, but you couldn't have gotten the message. How did you know to come?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked irritably. "I was waiting in the lobby and saw you arrive. When I didn't see your company leave, I decided to come up." He looked past her to the living room. "May I come in or not?" His tone was sharp, and Austin saw that his eyes were dark and cold.

"Sure, come in." The tone of the voices brought Jack to his feet so that he could see who was at the door. His brows were creased with concern until Tyler walked in and he could see that Austin was all right.

"Hello, Walters," Tyler said, holding out his hand. "Kind of late for a business meeting, isn't it?" Jack understood immediately. To Austin's eye, they looked like evenly matched boxers measuring each other, circling, looking for the best place to land a punch.

"Tyler Birch, isn't it? Sandy told me that Austin used to work for you." The emphasis on the words used to was slight but unmistakable nonetheless. "And I don't think it's so late. We just got in from dinner, and Austin is showing me her initial plans for my company's site. If we'd known you were coming in, we would have scheduled dinner so you could join us." He smiled casually; Tyler's scowled. "As it is, we have plans for tomorrow. If you'd like to tag along I can probably get another concert ticket. Or are you just passing through and thought you'd stop to see Austin while you were here?" Jack's proprietary comments toward Austin were reinforced by his moving next to her in front of the sofa, leaving Tyler standing alone in the center of the room.

Tyler glanced at Austin, and saw only that she was pale and looked a little nervous. He focused his glare on Jack.

"No, I came specifically to see Austin. I have a business proposition of my own to discuss with her. I'll only be here until Sunday, so whatever plans you have will need to be changed." He put his hands in his pockets, seemingly relaxed, but his legs were parted and he stood on the balls of his feet, alert and ready for action.

Austin looked at him, full of questions. He hadn't gotten her message so she wondered what had brought him here, today of all days, and why he seemed so angry. Even in anger he looked magnificent though, and she stared at him, unable to get her fill. He wore typical clothing for a successful businessman, a dark blue suit,

expensive shirt and tie, but she could see his muscles bunch under his suit jacket in tension, stretching the white dress shirt he wore.

Somehow, the ice blue tie with navy accents didn't finish the picture of a harmless businessman, but instead added to the image of a dangerous man in disguise. With his expression, he looks like a warrior, she thought, but to what purpose? The men continued to spar, ignoring her presence.

"I think we should let the lady decide that, don't you? Austin and I have been seeing each other pretty regularly, and I have to say, she hasn't mentioned you, so I don't think you have the right to be making decisions for her. Besides, I don't see a ring on her finger."

Tyler laughed bitterly. "Yes, well, there's a good reason for that. Let's ask the _lady_ about it, shall we?" Tyler looked truly angry now, as he switched his gaze to Austin. Jack, with a thoughtful look, also turned to Austin.

"May I suggest you two stop talking about me like I'm not here? Tyler, I don't know why you've come, but you should have let me know instead of just showing up. Jack and I have business to get through, and to tell the truth, I'm tired, so I would appreciate it if you would let us get to it. You're welcome to sit here and wait for us to finish." He compressed his lips but didn't say a word. Austin turned to Jack.

"Jack, I guess I'll have to cancel going to the concert tomorrow. I'm sorry for the short notice, but..." she waved in the direction of Tyler. "I'm sorry."

"That's okay, Austin." He reached out to take her hand, but a low growl from Tyler made Austin step back. "Now," he said, turning toward Tyler, "if you'll excuse us, at least let us get through what we need to do tonight."

Tyler set his jaw. "I'm staying here, in room 312, Austin. I will see you at breakfast. Eight thirty?" At a nod from Austin, Tyler turned and left.

"I'm sorry, Jack. I don't know what's gotten into him. He's usually not like this at all." Jack just chuckled.

"Don't worry. I know exactly what's gotten into him. He's jealous, Austin, and with good reason." Startled, she looked up into his eyes, and noticed for the first time that

they held passion, shooting their normal soft grey color with flashing specks of black. They were beautiful eyes. Eyes a woman could get lost in, if she didn't already love someone else. With a shock, Austin realized the full truth of that thought.

"Jack, you and I have known each other only a short time. I've enjoyed it. You're a remarkable man in so many ways, and I have a lot to thank you for. But Tyler and I..."

"That's all right, I understand. We have a good business relationship, you and I. But if you ever need me for anything else, don't hesitate." He reached a hand behind Austin's neck and pulled her to him, pressing her lips in a searing kiss that she felt right through her. She grasped his arms to steady herself.

When he broke the kiss, she said, "That VMI must be some school!" Jack burst into laughter.

"Why don't I take this work with me? It looks like I'll be a homebody for the weekend anyway, and we can get together first thing Monday morning and discuss them. I'll mark anything I don't understand. All right?"

"Thanks. I appreciate your understanding."

"Goodnight, then." He brushed his lips across hers, gathered up the storyboards and left.

Austin thought about calling Tyler's room, but decided that with the attitude he had shown, she would be better able to deal with him in the morning. She got into her nightgown and crawled into bed, falling into a sound sleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

The sound of the ocean was in the distance and she was standing on a hill. She felt such peace, as she stroked her hands across her rounded stomach and smiled at the thought of her baby. Somewhere behind her a house was being built, and she saw it rising into the sky. A sturdy building with a good foundation. A man was standing inside the doorway, beckoning to her, but she shook her head at him. He picked up a hammer and pounded a nail into a 2X4, making the wall thicker, sturdier. He

beckoned to her again, and with a feeling of happiness and longing she started toward him. Just as she got near, the man closed the door and then the pounding was to keep the door closed and her out. Pounding... Pounding...

Austin came awake with a start, and realized that the pounding was coming from her hotel door. She glanced at the clock. Two-fifteen. Her mind could barely function after being so soundly asleep, but she grabbed her robe off of the foot of the bed and padded to the door, checking the peephole. Tyler's angry face stared back at her from the hallway. "Tyler," she said sleepily, as she opened the door, "what are you doing here?"

Without answering, Tyler pushed past her and strode into the suite, looking around the living room and then checking the bedroom and bath. "What are you doing?" she demanded, more awake now.

"Where is that bastard?" Even from several feet away she could smell the Scotch on his breath and his eyes were so bloodshot she didn't know how he could see anything except through a red haze.

"Jack? He left right after you did. He's been gone hours."

"I've been right downstairs, and he didn't leave."

"Well, he left here." He moved closer to her with an angry look. "You've obviously been in the bar, which is probably why you didn't see him leave. Just as I told you, I was tired. He took the storyboards and left." Instead of being frightened, she moved to his side and took his hand, raising it to rub gently against her cheek.

"I'm glad you're here, but what's wrong with you? You came storming in here like the hotel detective. What did you think I was doing?" Tyler pulled his hand away from her cheek and put both hands in his pockets as he stepped away from her.

"What _have_ you been doing, Austin? Huh? I get fewer calls from you. When I call, I get the answering service. Emails to me are short and there's not much personal about them any more. All Robbie gets are pictures of you flitting around Texas. And here's Jack Walters, single, squiring you to rodeos, concerts, buying you Stetsons. What am I supposed to think?"

Austin buttoned her robe and went to the kitchenette for a glass of water before sitting on the edge of the sofa. "I don't know. How about that I have some sense? That I value a business contact more than a quick roll in the hay? That I really have left my heart in San Francisco? Pick one of the above.

"And while we're on the subject of phone calls, it seems to me that lately all I get are silences or fits of pique. You ask questions about business, never about what I'm doing or how I'm feeling. I've worked hard since I've been here. If you would take a look at what I've turned out so far, you would know that I've put in lots of hours behind that wonderful computer you got me. But I can't sit in this room every minute of every day, can I? Especially now that-" She stopped and looked away, biting her bottom lip.

His gaze focused on her, the intensity of it making her nervous suddenly.

"Especially now that, what?"

"Nothing. I'm tired, Tyler. I thought you said you would meet me for breakfast."

"I said I would see you at breakfast. I didn't say I would stay in my room and you'd stay in your room and we would separately go to breakfast. I've been waiting for that bastard to leave for over three hours." In four long steps, Tyler crossed the room and pulled Austin into his arms, taking her mouth in a crushing kiss, and caressing her breast with a bruising stroke. She pushed, but he held her tightly, pulling her against him, holding her head in place as he forced his tongue between her lips and took control. Raising his lips a fraction of an inch, he whispered harshly, "You're mine. I don't know how many times I have to say it." This time when she pushed him, he let her go. She put her fingers to her lips, breathing hard, and took a step back from him.

"Possession? Is that what this is about? Is that why you're here, to stake a claim because of Jack? If that's the case, just get out and take yourself right back to San Francisco. I was wrong about you again." Her cheeks flushed red with anger and her breath was fast. A warning bell was ringing in the back of her mind. Why had he come?

"That's not why I'm here, and you know it. Have you been using the knowledge and skills I taught you, like you said in your resignation letter? Have you and Jack taken

a couple of bus rides around San Antonio or Dallas?" He sneered at her. "When were you going to tell me?"

"I'm _tired_, Tyler. Can't we just leave this until later?" No matter what, she didn't want to tell him about their baby like this, in anger, while he was drunk. Her happiness of the afternoon had turned to ashes.

Tyler's eyes were ice cold. "How far along are you, Austin? I mean, it _is_ my baby, isn't it, or do you have even more explaining to do?" Austin's face lost all color. At first she thought she would simply pass out, she was so dizzy and spots filled her eyesight. But then she took a deep breath and reversed the step back she had taken, slapping him, hard. He hardly seemed to feel it. She wondered how he could even focus through the Scotch haze.

"How dare you, of all people, accuse me of doing something untrustworthy? Get out of here, and don't come back. Get out, or I'll call the manager."

His words, which had been slurred before, were now very clear. "Yeah," he said thoughtfully, "you've been here long enough to make good old Jack a dad, haven't you, considering you started going out the second week you were here. Interesting, now that I think about it. I did everything I could think of to make you love me, but I guess none of it mattered. You can't make someone love someone else. Remember what Susan said? You have to love yourself first. God knows I tried, but I couldn't help you there either. Maybe old Jack knew what to do." Austin picked up the phone receiver, but Tyler forced her to put it back. "Don't bother. I'm going, and I won't disturb your precious plans for the weekend, either." He turned toward the door.

"Tyler?" He faced Austin to find her holding out his grandmother's pendant. "Take this with you." This time the color drained from his face. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out as he reached and snatched it from her hand. The door closed softly behind him before Austin sank into the sofa and burst into tears.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Austin spent the weekend in her room, working and eating from room service. The

last thing she wanted was to accidentally run into Tyler if he had stayed until his flight on Sunday. Monday morning she met with Jack and they went over the storyboards. He signed off on the work she had done and gave his approval for the next phase to start. Then he asked her out for dinner that night, saying that she looked like she could use some cheering up. They had a delicious meal and went to the movies, a comedy that he advised would take her mind off Tyler. Funny, she thought. He hardly knows me and can put his finger right on the problem.

When she got back to the hotel, there were several phone messages waiting for her, all but one from Tyler, and a bouquet of California poppies and Queen Anne's Lace had been put in her room. Her computer mailbox had one message from Robbie, one from Sharon, and six from Tyler.

Robbie's message was very sweet. "Austin, are you all right? Uncle Ty came to the house last night. He said he wanted to talk to mom alone, but I sat on the stairs and listened (don't tell mom). He said he had seen you in Texas over the weekend, but that he had made you mad and you threw him out. Did you? He said something else I couldn't hear, but I did hear the word 'doctor.' Are you sick, Austin? I sure hope you're all right. Mom tried to make Uncle Ty feel better, but I don't think she did. He sounded pretty upset when he left. I got a letter from the contest people today. Guess what! My web project is one of the five semi-finalists. The winner is going to be announced in Denver, just before Thanksgiving. Can you come? I will send you all of the information soon. I'm worried about you, Austin. When are you going to come home? Love, Robbie"

Tears sprang to Austin's eyes, and she quickly typed a reply "Dear Robbie. Don't you worry about a thing because I'm fine. Your uncle did come to Dallas on Friday but we didn't find too much time to talk because I was working when he arrived. I'm sorry to hear he's upset, but don't _you_ worry about it, okay? I can't tell you how thrilled I am about your placement in the contest!! You did it! Can I call 'em or what? Please send me the information about the ceremony. If there is any way I can work it out, I will be there. I'm so proud of you. Love, Austin"

Sharon's note was similar in tone. "Hey, I am writing at the boss man's request, so I guess it's okay to do it from work. You should be so thankful you aren't here-he's been like a grizzly bear with a hangnail coming off a seven day bender for the past several weeks. No one seems to know what the problem is, but today was absolutely

the worst. Nothing anyone does is right, and he yells over the smallest thing. Someone needs a vacation, if you ask me, which of course no one does. Strangely enough, now that I think about it, this all started shortly after you left, and it's gotten progressively worse the longer you've been gone. Coincidence? Maybe not! Anyway, the reason I'm writing. Mr. B says the company needs you. He said to emphasize that it's the company that needs you, like he thinks that will influence you in some way. He says to tell you that he knows you're in business for yourself, and that he would like to subcontract your services for a very large project. He needs you to contact him ASAP, since he didn't get to talk to you about it himself. What does he mean by that?? Anyway, I haven't heard anything about a large job, but it's possible, although it's hard to imagine he's brought in any new business with the mood he's been in. Please come back and get him off our backs! Hey, have you looked at that pin I gave you recently? Remember home? I thought you were just going to be down there for two weeks. Love, Sharon"

The phone message not from Tyler was from Ellen, and Austin resolved to call her friend first thing in the morning. The card with the flowers simply said, "I'm so sorry. No more drinking for me. Please call and say you forgive me. I love you, Tyler" The phone and email messages were all in the same vein, and she discounted all of them. As for the job offer, she would have to think about whether she wanted to talk to him about it.

Tuesday morning she arranged to meet Ellen for lunch and some shopping. Over salad, Ellen said, "You know, I saw you last Friday in Neiman Marcus's. I called to you, but you were focused totally on some baby things. Do you know someone who's pregnant?"

"So that's how Tyler knew," Austin murmured. Ellen shot her a worried look.

"Tyler? I mentioned to Sandy that I'd seen you, but I didn't know he had said anything to Tyler. What's wrong?" Austin put down her fork and sat back in her seat. She had never felt so alone. Finally, needing to talk, she told Ellen a little about her relationship with Tyler. Then she told her about the baby and Tyler's reaction when he had come to the hotel Friday night. Tears came to her eyes when she described how Tyler had left, thinking the worst about her.

Ellen frowned, biting her lip and taking it all in. "Austin, I didn't really think

anything of it when I told Sandy about seeing you. I hope you don't think I had anything to do with this mess." Austin shook her head and Ellen blew a sigh of relief. "Well, we didn't know that you were seeing quite so much of Jack, but I'm sure Sandy had some inkling of Tyler's feelings for you. Not that he let me in on the secret," she muttered. She leaned forward and looked into Austin's eyes. "Jack is really a nice man. Very special, handsome, strong, thrifty in thought, word, and deed. All of that stuff. But do you love him?"

"No. I love Tyler, the ass." She looked sheepish. "But I guess he has reason to doubt that, considering our history."

"So you haven't actually said those words to him?"

Austin shook her head. "I did once, but it was before the big blowup. It's taken a very long time for me to get beyond my lack of trust of both of us." She smiled wryly and bit her lip. "But worse than not saying that I love him, is this. He gave me a piece of jewelry of his grandmother's and I agreed to return it to him if I ever decided I couldn't love him. That's what I did before he left my room Saturday morning."

Ellen grimaced. "Oh no!" She stared off into space for a moment. "Well, forgive me if I'm wrong here, but I get the feeling you haven't had lots of experience with men." Austin blushed and shook her head. "Okay, me either, since I've only ever been with Sandy, but I've learned a lot through the years. The first thing you've got to do is be honest with Tyler about the baby. He knows intellectually that it's his, but in his heart he's afraid there's a chance it's not. Men are like that. As fine a man as Tyler is, he's just as insecure as the next guy when it comes to some things. And he sees that he and Jack are an awful lot alike. You've struck fear in his heart with the thought that you might enjoy Jack's company as much as his. So I would say that you've got to tell him that there is absolutely no question that the baby is his, and that you want to keep it." Ellen looked sharply at Austin. "You do want to keep it?"

"Yes!"

Ellen's gaze softened.

"Then it's what to do after that we need to discuss. Do you want to just take him

back afterwards, knowing he will definitely want to marry you right away? Or do you want to make him sweat a little first? That would be my choice if it was me, but you know Tyler better than I do." Ellen speared a piece of lettuce with her fork.

Austin sat quietly, considering her options.

"He wants to offer me a job. I think I'll find out what that's about. But take him back? He will have to sweat a little first." The decision made, the knots in Austin's stomach relaxed and she actually enjoyed the flavor of her salad. "Tell me about being pregnant, Ellen. It's a little scary to me, and I need a friend I can talk to."

When her phone rang that evening, she let the answering service get it. She wasn't ready to speak to Tyler on a personal level quite yet. But she listened to the two messages he left asking her to return his call, letting the sound of his voice roll over her. He sounded subdued, his voice firm but quiet.

The next morning, knowing his habit of arriving early at the office, she called his direct line at a time she thought no one else would be wandering through. "Hello, Tyler. It's Austin." There was silence on the other end of the line, and for a moment she was petrified that she had it all wrong and that he didn't want to speak to her after all. Softly she said, "Tyler, are you there? I got a message to call you, but perhaps I got it wrong. Sorry to bother you." She held her breath.

"No! Austin, don't hang up. I was just caught off guard, that's all. After all of my messages, I guess I thought you would call home rather than the office." He was quiet again, and Austin didn't say a word. Then, very quietly, "How are you? Are you feeling well? Did you get the flowers?"

"Yes, the flowers are very nice, thanks, but they really weren't necessary. There was nothing to apologize for. You said what you thought you needed to. No need to apologize for honest opinion. As to your other questions, I'm feeling well, thank you. Sharon said you wanted to discuss a job with me?" Her tone was businesslike.

"I didn't say what I really thought. I was drunk," Tyler explained. His tone held a note of frustration in it, and gained some volume. "I've told you that in every email and phone message. I spent three hours drinking Scotch. How could I possibly have meant what I said?"

"My mother always used to say that a drunk man's words are a sober man's thoughts. I believe there's some truth to that. You simply confirmed to me my own worst fears. You believe that because I willingly experienced passion with Alonso, that I would happily do the same with the first new man that came along, like Jack. I expressed these fears of myself to you, and you assured me over and over that I was wrong. Funny how you changed your mind."

She heard someone in the background and realized that she hadn't caught him alone in the office after all. In a low voice he said, "Austin, don't hang up. Wait just a minute, okay?" She heard the receiver being laid on the desk and Tyler talking to someone, then his office door being closed. He picked up the phone and took a deep breath.

"Austin, I spoke with Barb and she told me that you predicted that I would do that. She's pretty pissed at me actually, because she said she defended me to you and I proved her wrong. But Austin, I don't believe that of you. I never did, and I never will. God! If I could take back last Friday night, don't you think I would? I was scared to death. You stayed away and showed no signs of wanting to come home, our phone calls made me feel more and more like we were friends instead of lovers, you were having a good time, and I felt helpless. And jealous that you weren't just having a good time but having a good time with another man. I was scared! Can't you believe me?" His voice broke, and he had to stop to compose himself. "I can't handle this first thing in the morning. Why didn't you call me at home where I could deal with it?"

"I was scared too. Scared that I would give you my heart and my trust after having to fight for it so hard for myself and you would throw it back at me. And that's what happened." She sighed. "Look, Tyler, it doesn't matter. I'm not calling about personal issues, anyway. I called for business, but I do have one question for you, and I want you to consider carefully before you answer. I am pregnant. Whose baby is it?"

"Mine," he whispered. "You're carrying my baby in you." There was wonder in his voice as well as conviction. He cleared his throat, and when he spoke again his voice was raspy with emotion. "You're sure you're all right?"

"Yes." Her tone was businesslike again. "I want you to know that I don't expect

anything to change between us. You said your piece and I said mine. There's no need for you to fear that I will expect support or help from you when the baby comes. It isn't necessary, especially considering the way things are between us. But there's no reason why we can't have a business relationship, and since I hope to stay in touch with Robbie, I'm sure you will see pictures and hear stories of our son or daughter." She paused to see if Tyler would make any objections to what she was saying. He was quiet on the other end of the line. "Now, what is the business proposition you want to discuss?"

She heard keys being struck. When he spoke, he had control of himself and his tone was every bit as businesslike as hers. "I have paperwork to show you. This isn't an ordinary job, which is why I'm not having one of our staff designers do it. Besides, the client asked for you, not knowing that you no longer work here. I have to rearrange several meetings, but I'm looking at my calendar and flight schedules now, and I can be in Dallas on Friday. Can we meet and discuss the project? That way if we need more time we'll be able to extend our discussions into Saturday." His voice turned to steel. "That is, if you're not tied up."

Austin was stunned. She had expected Tyler to express excitement about the baby and insist that he wanted to help take care of it. Instead, she had said don't worry about it and he seemed to agree not to.

Well, be careful what you ask for, she told herself. She took a deep breath and said, "Friday afternoon will be fine, but I've scheduled a trip to Fort Worth for Saturday with Jack. He has a different type of development that he wants featured on his site and I said I would take a look at it and make the necessary revisions." She heard Tyler snort and she smiled as she reviewed what else she had planned for the weekend. "However, I don't know why you can't come along with us. I'm sure your input will be very valuable. We usually have dinner while we're out, but if you and I have work to discuss, that will take precedence, of course."

"Fine," Tyler said sarcastically. "So we're set for Friday afternoon? I'll see you then. Bye." Austin was left listening to a dial tone. She looked at the receiver and then replaced it on the phone. The conversation hadn't ended exactly as she had planned, and she dialed his office again.

"Tyler? I forgot to ask if you would like me to get you a room or will Sharon handle

it? Since I'm right here, I'd be happy to. How long will you be here?"

"I thought perhaps you would let me stay with you. You've got that big suite..."

She chuckled. "I really don't think that would be a good idea. So, shall I check or will Sharon?"

"Sharon will. Goodbye." She smiled as she hung the phone up this time. He was definitely grumpy.

Several hours later, Austin received a call from Ellen. "I just wanted to let you know that Tyler called Sandy a little while ago. He wanted to know about some good restaurants-romantic spots, I believe Sandy phrased it-for this weekend. And Sandy has invited you all over for a barbeque. How long is he planning to stay?"

"I don't know, he wouldn't say. But we're meeting for business on Friday, and he knows that Jack and I have plans for Saturday."

"Whooee. You're pushing it, aren't you? Well, we'll see how he reacts to that situation. I think you're coming over here on Sunday. I hope everything works out as you want it to. Let me know what I can do to help."

Austin completed the onsite review stage of Sandy's site and called his office to schedule time the following week for that process. She had an introductory meeting with one of Jack's friends, who had a trucking company, and she worked feverishly on Jack's site, while still making time each day for walking and resting during the afternoon. Before she knew it, Friday arrived.

Before lunch, while she was at work at the computer, she felt the certain knowledge that Tyler was nearby. Just as he knocked, she opened the door and saw nothing but a huge stuffed panda. Laughing, she took it in her arms and held the door open for Tyler, who managed to drag his suitcase, briefcase and a bouquet of spring flowers into her suite.

"Your room isn't ready yet?"

"No, not for another few hours. I caught the earliest flight I could." He stood looking at her with a silly grin on his face, his eyes sparkling. "You look very well."

Very beautiful." His voice deepened. "Very sexy."

"That's nice of you to say, Tyler, but remember, this is business." She took the flowers into the kitchenette and filled a large glass with water before dropping them in. She put them in her bedroom, next to the picture of the two of them at the zoo, where the subtle, sweet scent would wake her for the next several mornings.

When she walked back into the living area, Tyler grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to him. "Business, hell. I require a kiss." He bent his face to hers and gently kissed her, just brushing his tongue across her lips. It was the opposite of the bruising kiss he had forced on her the previous week, intoxicating her with its promise of what it could become if only she gave consent.

She stood there, hands lightly resting on his forearms, enjoying his scent and nearness. "That was nice." She stepped away from him, noticing the questioning look in his eyes. "Thanks for the flowers, and the bear." She picked the bear up from the sofa where she had deposited him to take care of the flowers, and held him at arms length, admiring him. "He makes me smile."

"I'm glad. You make me smile." Tyler put his hands on her shoulders and stood close behind her, as he too admired the bear. "He almost had to have his own seat, he's so big. Since the plane was full, I had to carry him the whole way, making the woman beside me very unhappy each time she had to get up to go to the bathroom."

"Poor woman! Are you hungry? I'm at a good stopping place if you're ready for lunch. We can run downstairs and then get started immediately afterwards. We'll be clear then if you need to get back to San Francisco early. I know you're buried under work." She smiled mischievously knowing that he couldn't see.

She felt his hands tighten on her shoulders when she mentioned his leaving, but his voice remained calm when he said, "No rush. Sandy and Ellen have invited us to their house for a barbeque on Sunday, and we'll see where we are in our talks then. Lunch does sound good, though."

Austin closed the door to the bedroom while she changed clothes, putting on the turquoise pantsuit, accented with the scarf Tyler had suggested she buy, held in place with the knife pin. The Byzantine earrings added a touch of formality to the

outfit. Tyler's eyes widened when she came out, both in appreciation and in question of why she had changed out of her casual clothing. "Business," she reminded him.

"Oh, yeah," he said with a smile.

During lunch, Austin casually asked about all of the things she missed about home. But when it came to Robbie and Barb, and how they were, she couldn't hide the affection from her voice.

"Robbie is beside himself over the awards ceremony for the contest. Has he told you about it? It's a formal evening and in Denver, so he gets to miss two whole days of school to go. He will live off of this experience for years. And it's all thanks to you, my darlin'." Tyler took a bite of chicken/pecan salad, then offhandedly said, "He would love for you to be at the ceremony. Are you thinking about going?"

"Are you kidding? I think I'm almost as excited as he is. I bought my dress the day after he told me about it. I really like it. It's 'something special, in green.'" Tyler snapped his eyes to hers, and she raised her eyebrows, but didn't smile. "How is Barb going to keep Robbie focused until then?"

At that, Tyler's eyes sparkled and he laughed. "I don't know. It's been a chore ever since he got the word. I'm glad you'll be there, though. I can't wait to see this dress. I hope it's half as good as the other one." He looked at her through his thick lashes, with the hint of a smile in his voice. "Want to save money and share a room?" She smiled and shook her head.

"I already have a room reserved, thank you. And besides, I'll be sharing my room with someone else. Someone very special to me. But I will sit next to you at the dinner if you're nice." She smiled dreamily as she sipped her tea. "And this dress might just top the other one."

Tyler glowered as he considered that she wouldn't be going to the awards ceremony alone. "Who are you going with? You wouldn't consider bringing that bastard to my nephew's award ceremony-." He took a deep breath and continued in a calmer voice. "Never mind. I guess I'll just have to wait." Another deep breath. "Speaking of awards, your site for Ron Morris is also in the top five for its category. We got notification yesterday, and I've got a copy of the letter in my briefcase for you.

Congratulations! They'll announce the winners just after the first of the year." He held up his iced tea glass in salute.

"Barb and Robbie both send their love, by the way." He dropped his voice. "Barb knows about the baby, but I haven't told anyone else." Tyler suddenly looked troubled. "Austin, I don't want you to get upset about this, and I know what you said on the phone Wednesday, but I just want to be clear. You want this baby, don't you? It was my responsibility to protect you, and I failed to do it. I just want to be sure that you aren't considering..."

"No, Tyler. I'm not considering anything other than having a healthy baby that I will love with all my heart. The thought of anything else never entered my mind." He released his breath and smiled at her.

"_We_ will love." He reached across the table and stroked her hand with his fingers. "But we can talk about that later."

She put her hand in her lap and said pleasantly, "There isn't much to talk about, but the thought is duly noted." Tyler's brow furrowed, and they finished their lunch in silence.

After lunch, Tyler assumed his business manner. They sat at the desk in Austin's suite and Tyler described the new account the firm was after. It was a financial concern with international operations. The company would consult for certain aspects of the eBusiness software development and to design and develop the interactive web site. The prospective client had been impressed with the Sampson Financials site and other samples of work they had seen, and were especially interested in working with Austin on the web part of the job.

Tyler proposed to pay Austin the same rate Sandy was paying, plus a bonus if they came in on schedule or ahead. She would have access to the office equipment if she needed it, or staff for any additional clerical help she might need. She would be part of a large team, but would be totally in charge of the web site design, and would have at least one of Tyler's design people under her. Travel, within reason, would be taken care of as part of the overall contract, as would normal expenses associated with a project. He estimated that the whole effort would take a year, and her part, probably the better part of nine months. His only stipulation was that her home base

had to be San Francisco because proximity to the team was important.

Austin was stunned at the scope of the work, and she immediately began thinking about new techniques she had picked up over the last several weeks and how she might apply them to such a visible project. "Tyler, I don't know what to say. I'm excited but a little apprehensive, too. This is larger than anything I've ever considered. I don't know that I have the range of knowledge for something like this."

He was enthusiastic. "Of course you do. Naturally, it will be a hell of a challenge. It will be for all of us, but I know it's something we can do. And it would be the first thing you and I have worked on together as partners, since you would be your own boss. I think it's exciting. I dealt with accounts of this size when I had the marketing firm, and believe me, it can be done. It will make the name Gardner Web Designs known throughout the business world, and it won't hurt Bay Web, either."

He paused and studied her. "Of course, you've got the baby to consider and how the project would affect your pregnancy. When I first talked to these people, I didn't know you were pregnant. I'm not being sexist, I'm just pointing out that taking on something of this size won't be easy with everything else you'll have going on, and by necessity we will have to count on you for a lot of hours and effort. Then there's some travel involved, and since the baby would come before the end of the project, the timing of having a new baby at home might affect your being able to work through project completion." Austin immediately noticed and appreciated his reference to how the project would affect her pregnancy, not the other way around.

Austin absentmindedly rubbed her hand across her stomach as Tyler spoke.

Tyler smiled. "Speaking strictly as the father of our baby and not as project manager or business partner, I find what you're doing to be endearing."

Austin looked at her stomach and then at Tyler, letting the edges of her mouth turn up slightly. "As the mother of your child, I appreciate that. As a _possible_ business partner, your warning about time on the project and the pregnancy is well taken. I knew the baby would affect my work, but I hadn't considered anything like this project. I just thought I would be able to adjust the number of accounts I took on. This will take some thinking. When is your proposal due?"

"In about three and a half weeks, right after Thanksgiving. If you think you can't do it I have a couple of other firms in mind, but you are first choice, for both the client and me. If you think it's too much I'll understand, but I would appreciate knowing as soon as possible so I can try to get someone else lined up." Tyler stood and stretched, glancing at his watch. "We've been at this a few hours. Want to walk somewhere and work the kinks out? And then, are you free for dinner?"

"Free for dinner? Yes." She wrinkled her brow. "When would this project start?"

"Right after the first of the year. It would take up a big chunk of next year, and you would probably only be able to take on very small accounts for most of that time. Have you noticed any differences in how you feel yet?" He eyed her stomach.

"Hmm. Not really. Just tired, but I've got some vitamins and they seem to be helping." She said almost to herself, "It would be nice to be in my own home again instead of a hotel, and I've been lonesome here."

"I didn't think you've had time to be lonesome with that Walters character hanging around," Tyler muttered. "Ready to get some fresh air? I rented a convertible, which we can still use down here, and I saw a big park on my way into town. Do you mind if I use your bedroom to change into something more comfortable?"

"At least that 'Walters character' has been around. No one I know from San Francisco offered to come and spend weekends with me, and take me out for exercise," she chided gently. "But you're here now, and that's important." She couldn't help herself, she reached out and gently touched his cheek. Tyler took her hand. "Go ahead, I'll change after you."

Tyler looked crestfallen, but after her touch he regained his humor. "We could change at the same time, you know." He flashed her a wicked grin, waggling his eyebrows.

"That's okay. You go ahead and stop trying to tempt me." Austin laughed and pushed him gently toward the bedroom.

"You don't know what you're missing," he said, but he picked up his suitcase and disappeared into the second room of the suite, leaving Austin to remember only to

well what she was missing.

*Chapter Twenty-Six *

Tyler re-emerged twenty minutes later in jeans, tennis shoes and a polo shirt. Austin's breath caught in her throat as she saw him come into the living room, hair slightly damp, face freshly washed, fastening his watch on his wrist. She stared at him as his muscles flexed with every move he made, and remembered how those same muscles felt as he drove into her. At a chuckle from Tyler, she snapped her eyes to his face and saw him grinning at her.

"What?" she stammered.

"I know just what you're thinking, Austin. I feel the same way when I look at you, no matter what you're wearing." He made no move toward her, but she could feel his heat. "You can go and change your clothes now. I'm finished."

Austin also changed into jeans and a plaid flannel shirt. She wore the hat Jack had gotten her, which caused Tyler to frown. "I think I'll find you a different hat to wear," he said, wryly.

"This one is nice. I like it," she said, stubbornly. He only frowned as he put his hand on her lower back and guided her out into the late afternoon sunshine.

Instead of the park, they wandered downtown to window shop and get a feel for Dallas as a city. Austin didn't reach for his hand, and used whichever hand was near him to hold onto her purse. They walked for almost an hour and a half before they stopped to eat, selecting a good Mexican restaurant Austin had been to with Jack. It was early when they got back to the hotel. Tyler checked the desk and got the key to his room, then went back to Austin's room with her.

When she closed the door, Tyler took her in his arms. "Kiss time," he murmured.

Austin felt the heat of the kiss all through her, swirling through her brain and making all thought disappear, swirling through her lungs and making steady breathing impossible, swirling down to her toes and making her legs turn to rubber.

She knew it was silly, but she pictured their baby being surrounded by the heat of that kiss and being happy that his father and mother could generate such a force.

When Tyler lifted his face to brush smaller, lighter kisses along her lips, he whispered, "Do you think little junior could feel that? I swear, your kisses make me warm all the way to my toes."

She smiled. "I just wondered the same thing."

Tyler picked Austin up and carried her to the sofa where he propped pillows behind her back and removed her shoes. Sitting, he stretched her legs over his lap and massaged her feet through her socks. Austin closed her eyes and sank into the pillows, little cries of satisfaction punctuating the quiet of the room. Tyler chuckled. "If anyone had this room bugged they would think we were doing more in here than having a foot massage."

"Oh, Tyler, don't stop. That feels so good. I may never want sex again if you can make me feel this good without it."

"Well, if I'd known that I wouldn't have started down this road. I give good back rubs too. In fact, there are many of my talents you have yet to discover."

She cocked one eye open. "Oh really? That sounds like a challenge."

"Take it as you choose. But if you want to spend some time together so you have the chance to explore, well, that could be arranged." Tyler continued rubbing a foot with one hand, while he stretched his other across her stomach. "Who is the special person you're going to share your hotel room with in Denver?" He spoke quietly.

Austin opened her eyes, regarding him thoughtfully.

"Tyler," she spoke so quietly he almost couldn't hear her. He looked into her dark green eyes. "I meant the baby."

He smiled at her happily, seeming to relax for the first time since he had arrived. "I shouldn't have teased you earlier," she said. "You really don't mind about the baby." It was a statement not a question.

Tyler didn't answer for a few moments. "More than that. I'm happy. Thrilled with the prospect of being a father. The only thing that would make me happier is if you loved me, if you would agree to marry me. When those things happen, I'll be happy for life. But this baby is wondrous to me. That you want our baby is such a gift." He looked into her eyes and she could see unshed tears glistening in the lamplight. He adjusted his position so that he could lay his cheek against her stomach and Austin stroked his head. She wondered if this was just one end of the extremes they seemed to experience with each other, if by next week they would be at each other's throats. With a certainty, she knew they wouldn't. Tyler loved her. She knew it, trusted it, and if he could love her then she could love herself. Was already well on the way to it, actually. He would help her the rest of the way. And so would their little one.

Presently, he raised her legs and got up, opening his briefcase and taking out a velvet pouch. He lifted the heart pendant from it and brought it to drape around Austin's neck. "This belongs here with you. This heart and my heart."

Austin's eyes filled to overflowing. Tyler sat beside her and took her in his arms while she cried. "I should never have given it back to you. I was so upset that you thought I could betray you."

"It's over, sweetheart. If I hadn't been so bullheaded probably none of this would have happened. I stayed away from you thinking you would be lonely and want to come home. I should have come down here every weekend to hold you and remind you of my love. I was jealous and scared of losing you, but I never meant those things I said."

"I love you, Tyler. I love you so much, and I've been miserable these past weeks." Tyler froze, hardly breathing.

"What?"

Austin pulled away and looked into his eyes. Her hand stroked his cheek and she kissed him lightly. "I love you, Tyler. I don't deserve you, but I love you just the same."

Tyler lifted Austin onto his lap and cradled her in his arms, not speaking, just rocking her gently. Austin whispered, "Let's just have a very small wedding, okay?"

We can have a larger reception if you want, but let's just have closest friends and family for the wedding." Tyler nodded against her head. "When?"

"Tomorrow?"

Austin laughed. "I don't think we can do things quite that fast, but I would like to hurry it along too, now that I've stopped being such an idiot. I've wasted too much time for us as it is. I'm sorry for that."

"All behind us. I'm only thinking of the future now." He kissed the top of her head. "Now that we're engaged, you're not going to make me go to my own room are you?" he asked, hopefully.

She wiped her eyes and smiled at him. "Well, I don't know. Today was for business. It probably isn't proper for you to stay with me. Of course, if anyone checks, you are registered for a room." She stopped as if to consider. "I guess it will be all right for you to stay here."

"Good, let's go to bed."

Austin burst out laughing. "Tyler, it's only a little after seven."

"I didn't say to sleep. You never learn!" He picked Austin up and carried her to the bedroom, where he very slowly removed her clothes, searching with his eyes for any changes that had occurred in her body, stopping to plant kisses on various body parts. When he removed his own clothes, Austin almost cried with her need for him. She opened her arms and he filled them, giving her a deep kiss, his tongue finding its way to hers where they mated.

He touched her everywhere, making as thorough an inspection with his hands as he had with his eyes. Austin pressed against him, moaning her encouragement, taking a nipple into her mouth and laving it with her tongue as she made her own inspection of him.

"Austin, will it be okay for us to..."

"The doctor said it's fine this early. Don't worry," she said between heated kisses. "Tyler, I can't wait any longer. It's been so very long." He moved between her legs

and sank into her, moving deliberately and slowly so that she felt every bit of him against every bit of her, but keeping his weight off of her. He raised her arms above her head and held them with one of his large hands until Austin grabbed the headboard herself. Tyler took her mouth and matched his tongue to the movements of his hips, allowing her to gently suck on it as she would eventually contract around him with her climaxes. Her cries of fulfillment filled his mouth and he let himself go.

Austin lowered her arms and wrapped them around Tyler's neck, pulling him onto her. He attempted to roll off of her, but she resisted. "I've been here almost six weeks now. That's six weeks without you. I don't want to let you go so soon."

"I've felt every minute of those six weeks too. God! Being with you is so wonderful. And you love me! Seems like a miracle." He nestled his head against the curve in her neck, while keeping most of his weight off of her by resting on his elbows.

"All this time I've thought San Francisco was home. These past weeks I've come to think of this hotel room as home. But now that we're together again I realize that anywhere you are is home. The city doesn't matter. I love you, Tyler."

He sighed. "Oh, sweetheart, you can't say that often enough. I didn't think I could be this happy. Come here." He rolled to the side and pulled her into his arms, covering her with the sheet and anchoring her to him. "It is still early, but I loathe the thought of getting up. And now that I've got you back in bed I may never again get out. Do you want to watch some TV?"

Laughing, Austin slapped him playfully on the stomach. "So we're already like an old married couple, huh? Nothing better to do in bed than watch TV?"

"Huh-uh. We'll always have something better to do than TV. It's just that... I hate to admit this but it's been a roller coaster week and a long day. I'm not at all sure I can do anything else right now. Have I destroyed all of your illusions about my super human male virility?"

"I have recent history to draw from, and there's nothing wrong with your virility." She ran her fingers through the hair carpeting his chest. "To tell the truth, and believe me I feel wimpy saying it, but I might be able to go to sleep. Would you

mind terribly?"

He stroked her hair and kissed her, then leaned over her to turn out the light. "Goodnight, love." Austin snuggled against him and was sound asleep before Tyler even got totally settled.

Tyler awoke disoriented, but he quickly remembered that Austin was beside him and realized that something was wrong. "Tyler." He could barely hear her.

"Yes. Austin, what's wrong? Let me get the light." He closed his eyes against the sudden glare, and then opened them slowly to see Austin, lying in a pool of blood. "Oh God! Just lie still, I'm calling 911." He placed the call and notified the front desk to expect an ambulance. Quickly getting dressed, he packed a towel between Austin's legs. She was shivering, so he wrapped the blanket from the bed around her and carried her to the lobby, arriving seconds before the ambulance. He fortunately thought to bring her purse, so he had all of the insurance information the hospital needed, and after turning her over to the emergency room staff, he paced the hallway and waiting room, trying to ignore the blood on his clothes from where it had leaked through the towels and blanket.

Finally, a doctor came toward him. "I'm Dr. Smithson, Mr...?"

"Birch, Tyler Birch. I'm Austin's, Ms. Gardner's, fiancé." It felt wonderful and frightening at the same time to say it out loud to this man, who might be ready to give him horrible news about Austin. "How is she?"

"Did you know she was pregnant? Forgive me for being blunt, but she's lost the baby. Were you the father?" Tyler slumped into a chair along the wall and hung his head, taking deep breaths until he could face this stranger again.

"Yes, I was the father." Tyler stood again. He was taller than the doctor and even if it was imagined, he wanted to feel in a position of power when he discussed Austin. He was pale, but beginning to feel more in control. "Is Austin going to be all right?"

"She's healthy and strong, and not too old to be starting childbearing, although the risks are higher for someone her age. But I find no reason why she shouldn't be able to have more children. Actually miscarriages are fairly common occurrences in the

first trimester of a pregnancy. She has lost a lot of blood, so we're keeping her for the rest of the night. She needs to get plenty of rest and don't let her engage in any strenuous activity for a few days. Absolutely no lifting." The doctor looked over his glasses with a stern expression. "And no sex for at least six weeks. Could be more. When she feels like it, she'll know." Tyler compressed his lips and narrowed his eyes.

"Thank you for your help, Doctor. I'll do whatever it takes to make her well again, you can be assured."

The doctor's expression softened. "Good. Now, come back tomorrow and you can take her home."

"I'm not leaving here without Austin, Dr. Smithson, so if you'll tell me what room she's in I'd appreciate it."

"You're not family, I believe you told me. You aren't allowed."

Tyler drew himself up to his full height and exuded the confidence and power he had developed over the years of running businesses. "I am the family she has here. I would be her husband long before now if the two of us weren't such stubborn fools, so I am going to stay with her tonight, doctor, with your permission or that of the director of the hospital. Now, where did they take her?"

The doctor regarded Tyler quietly for a moment. He scribbled a note on a script he took out of his pocket and handed it to Tyler. "Fourth floor, ask at the nurse's desk. If they question why you're there, just show them this." He held out his hand, "Nice to meet you Mr. Birch."

"Same here. And thanks again for helping Austin." Tyler located the elevators and found Austin's room. He pulled the curtains around her bed and moved a chair to the bedside. Austin's face had little color. Her hair looked wet and stringy around her face, and he tried to finger comb it a little. Austin opened her eyes, focusing immediately on Tyler's eyes and the tears running down his face.

"The baby. It's gone, isn't it?" she whispered.

"Yes, sweetheart, I'm afraid so. But you're going to be just fine. I've talked with the

doctor and he says that there's nothing wrong with you. These things just happen. They don't know why all the time."

"You still want to marry me, Tyler? I lost our baby."

"I wanted to marry you before I knew we had a baby. I love you and nothing changes that. Do you still want to marry me?" His heart was in his throat, but he forced himself to look into her eyes.

"Yes. You're my home and my life. You're sure the doctor said nothing was wrong? Can we have other babies?"

Tyler could hardly speak. He didn't even try to check the tears or wipe them from his cheeks. "Austin, he said as far as he could tell, we can have a whole house full of kids. And in a few weeks, or whenever you're ready, we can start. Now, go to sleep, honey. I'll be right here, so don't worry." Austin smiled, nodded, and fell asleep.

She was tired and weak when she was released the next day, but Tyler helped her to the hotel and took care of her every need. He had called Sandy and asked him to get in touch with Jack, canceling the trip to Fort Worth, and had spoken with the hotel manager, canceling his room and asking for the cleaning staff to replace the blanket, and clean the sheets and whatever mess was in Austin's room. It was spotless when they returned. A large basket of fruit was on the coffee table with a "Get Well" wish from the hotel and staff. Austin wanted for nothing, and at one point she laughed when Tyler offered to carry her into the bathroom.

"I'm not an invalid, you know."

"Today, you are. Tomorrow you can go out and fight dragons again. After the barbeque, of course, and if you think I'm making a fuss over you, wait until you get around Sandy and Ellen." Remembering her reaction the previous night when he had given her a foot massage, he was in the process of doing the same again.

"Really, Austin, let me pamper you. It keeps me from feeling so helpless."

That night, Tyler came out of the bathroom to see Austin sitting on the bed in her pajamas, a small white box opened beside her. She held a baby blanket to her cheek, letting it absorb tears that ran freely down her face. Tyler could see a pair of booties

nestled in tissue paper. He picked up the box and sat beside her, putting his arm over her shoulders and pulling her against him as she silently mourned the loss of their child.

"I went from the doctor's office and bought these immediately. It's where I was when Ellen saw me. I felt that if I had something for the baby it would make it real. It was like a guarantee that nothing would change the fact of our baby. It seemed like such a miracle, and I was so happy. I left a message for you to call me so I could ask you to come down for a couple of days because I didn't want to tell you over the phone. I couldn't believe it when I opened the door and there you were, but," she chuckled, "it turned out not to be a good night to talk." She sat up and wiped her eyes, touching Tyler's cheek tenderly when she saw his face crumple.

"I'm so sorry, Austin." His voice broke with emotion.

"No, I'm not casting blame, Tyler. It's past. These will be for the next baby." Resolutely, she put the blanket back in the box and lovingly tucked it in the dresser drawer. Tyler got up and went to his suitcase.

"As it happens, I have something to show you too. Remember Susan and John from Minnesota? Susan was taking pictures on the Bay cruise. She sent this with a letter last week." He held out a box. Inside was a note and a framed photograph. In the background and slightly out of focus was the Golden Gate Bridge. In the foreground, sharp and clear were Austin and Tyler. Austin's hands were on the boat railing; and one of Tyler's hands was protectively braced on her stomach. He had his head positioned at her ear and her face was turned slightly toward him, eyes closed, a secret smile on her lips. The wind whipped their clothing and hair, but they seemed unaware. Even someone who had never met them would have no trouble seeing how much in love they were. Austin opened the letter.

"Dear Tyler. I was taking a picture of the Bridge when I saw that a much better picture would be of you and Austin. I hope this doesn't embarrass you. The love you share is so obvious and beautiful in your pose. But even more, it comes through in your regard for each other. Please accept this with our thanks for sharing your evening and your lovely city with us. John and I wish only happiness for you and Austin. Susan"

She picked up the photo again. "Tyler, it's beautiful. We really did look like lovers, didn't we?"

"Yes. She sent the negative too, so we know that copies of this aren't being distributed all over Minnesota." Austin laughed.

"It might increase tourism for San Francisco. We should buy a billboard. The mayor could pay us for advertising the effects the city can have on people."

"Just to let you know how much I love our being together, I already have a copy of this on my desk. This one is for your desk." He dropped lightning kisses on her mouth.

"Oh, my. Your desk at the office? That's a pretty big step."

"It's about damn time. I want everybody to see. Maybe we should get it blown up and hang a copy in the lobby." Austin giggled, the release of laughter suddenly making her feel better.

Temporarily standing the picture on the dresser next to the one of them at the zoo, he said, "Time for you to get some rest."

Climbing into bed next to her, they cuddled, Tyler stroking her back and nuzzling her hair. "I'm almost afraid to go to sleep," she said with a nervous laugh. "That's silly, isn't it?"

"Not at all, but don't be. I'm right here."

"I'm so glad you were here before. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't been." Tyler shuddered and held her a little closer.

"I don't even want to think about it, so let's not. Just go to sleep, sweetheart." And she did.

***Chapter Twenty-Seven ***

The next afternoon, sitting on the patio while Sandy grilled steaks and he and Tyler drank beer and talked sports, Austin expressed her fears to Ellen about getting pregnant again.

"Don't let that stop you. I had a miscarriage between our first and second children. It's scary, but it really does just happen sometimes, seemingly for no reason. I was so scared I swore off sex, but Sandy wouldn't take the pledge with me." They laughed. "Then I got pregnant with Lauren. I practically counted the minutes until I was past the number of days when I had had the miscarriage. Intellectually, I knew there wasn't anything magical about that number, but I just felt safe then, and sure enough, everything went well. If the doctor didn't find anything wrong, then it will probably work out for you. The biggest thing is to try not to worry."

"Well, I know that Tyler and Sandy are enough alike that swearing off sex wouldn't work for me either. And truth be told, I think the cure would be a lot worse than the ailment, anyway." Ellen burst out laughing, which brought a questioning look from the guys.

"What are you two talking about?" called Sandy. Tyler smiled at Austin and winked.

"Nothing, dear," called back his wife. "Ah, it's too bad you're on medications. This is the kind of day that calls for a nice glass of California wine. Speaking of which, when are you going back to California? I assume tall, dark and handsome is here to drag you back by the hair."

Austin snickered. "I didn't make him sweat for very long, did I? Maybe I'm ready to be dragged back. And in a manner of speaking, that's what he's doing. The job he offered me is very big. It would be great for my business and give me a secure income while cultivating smaller clients. But he is insisting that I home base in San Francisco."

"That's reasonable. It's obvious from just one glance that the man is crazy over you, so it makes sense that he wants you close by. Where do you stand on Jack's job?"

"I can finish it pretty easily between Thanksgiving and Christmas and will just need to come back for a couple of weeks for the onsite review." She laughed. "When I first came down I told Tyler it would be for two weeks and it will be closer to nine

or ten by the time I get finished to where I can go back to San Francisco. When I tell him I need to come down for another two weeks for Jack's onsite, he'll probably insist on coming with me."

Austin sobered and said thoughtfully, "It's hard to know what to do about the job. I'm not sure I'm competent-or maybe it's organized enough-to deal with something this large."

"All I can say is, Sandy is thrilled with what you've done for him. He says they're anticipating getting lots of business from it, and the comments from the people in the office who've seen it are very positive. I think you can probably handle whatever you set your mind to."

"Well, thanks. We'll see. Oh look, I think the men are waving frantically for us to eat. And I'm ready."

In the middle of the meal, Tyler cleared his throat and announced, "Austin and I are getting married this coming week, barring any unforeseen problems with state law. Would you come?"

"Austin, we sat over there and you never even hinted at such a thing!"

"I didn't know. Or not the details, anyway." She looked at Tyler, who was accepting congratulations from Sandy. "This week? What about Barb and Robbie and my mother? And your parents?"

"My thought is, whoever can come, can come. Whoever can't will be invited to a reception when we get home. I know this is quick, but Austin, do you realize they almost didn't let me in your hospital room? That wimpy doctor tried to intimidate me into leaving you there alone, just because I wasn't family. I don't want to not be family any more. Even if we get married all over again in San Francisco, I want to do it now. Are you willing?" She gave him a brilliant smile and held out her hand to him. "Great! We'll make the phone calls when we get back to the hotel."

He turned to Sandy. "Would you be my best man?"

"And Ellen, would you be my matron of honor? You've been so good to me since I've been here."

"Sure, unless Barb can come and you would prefer her to do it. At any rate, please let us give you the reception here. It could be our wedding gift."

They spent a pleasant afternoon discussing weddings and business, before Austin and Tyler went back to the hotel.

That night, after calling Austin's mother, Barb, and Tyler's parents, they lay in bed, stomach to stomach. Tyler kissed Austin's forehead. "I'll have Sharon forward my calls and if I can use your computer during the week I think I can keep up with most of what I have going on. The worst thing that could happen is I would have to fly back for a day or two, but I don't think anything drastic will come up. I can do the onsite walk through for Sandy's group, if you want. That way you can work on the Walters' account and rest, as you feel like it. Get back on your feet slowly. Then, when it's time, we can go to Denver together. We'll evaluate at Thanksgiving where you are on Jack's project and how things stand at home, and see how much longer you'd have to stay here or how badly I'm needed there. What do you think?"

"I'd like us to be together as long as possible. We've spent too much time apart as it is. As far as the wedding is concerned, there is one small problem."

"What would that be?"

"There won't be much of a wedding night for you. In my mind I want you right now, but I just can't seem to do much with this body. Are you sure you don't want to wait?"

"I am sure I don't want to wait. I want to be married to you as soon as possible. Married or not, waiting to make love will be hard, no pun intended, but holding off until you're ready is something we can do. Lovingly. Not a problem. We can schedule a honeymoon later, maybe a long weekend in Mendocino, or something. And until then," he murmured, kissing her brow, "I know a few things that will make you feel better. When you're ready, you just let me know."

"Well, I just ask because, I know there are other ways I might be able to satisfy you, too..." Austin slipped under the covers and very shortly Tyler knew exactly what she meant.

Between work, the necessary paperwork for the marriage license and blood tests, the wedding was scheduled for Friday. Barb and Robbie, Tyler's parents, Austin's mother and Ruthie all came.

When she walked into the office of the Justice of the Peace, she could see the awe in Tyler's eyes. Austin had asked Robbie to give her away, and he walked beside her as a proud but nervous young man in a dark blue suit that matched what Tyler wore. Tyler smiled encouragingly at him, but then his eyes were for Austin alone. She wore a Victorian style gown, ivory, waltz length, with a high neckline and an abundance of lace and seed pearls. Her hair was pulled back from her face and a wreath of flowers circled her head. She wore only small emerald earrings and the heart pendant, which fit the style of the dress as if it had been made for it. She carried a bouquet Tyler had sent, of lilacs and white lilies.

Ellen gave up the role of attendant when it was certain Barb would be able to be there. The reception she and Sandy provided was a Texas style barbeque, which allowed everyone to be comfortable and enjoy lots of good food. Austin was exhausted by the time she returned to the hotel as Mrs. Tyler Birch, but it was a happy exhaustion.

They slept until late in the morning on Saturday, and faced their first full day as a married couple. "I feel different," murmured Austin, her back against Tyler's front, spoon fashion.

"So do I."

"Good different or bad different? Or indifferent different?"

Tyler laughed into her hair. "Very good different. It doesn't seem like a ring on your finger should affect how you feel when you wake up the same way you've woken up all week, but it really does. It feels more special somehow."

"Yes, that's how I feel. Special." He squeezed her tighter against him, and she could feel the hard length of him through her nightgown, against her buttocks.

Tyler kissed the back of her head. "Did I ever tell you about the first time I saw you?" She shook her head. "You were standing in the lobby. Big baggy lavender tee

shirt and big baggy canvas slacks. What are they called? Painter's pants or something like that? Anyway, they were baggy, but I could still discern a very nice shape under all of it. You had your hair pulled back in a braid with a rubber band on the end and it hung far below your shoulders."

Austin rolled over so she could see his face, astounded that he remembered that day so well. "Those big old glasses of yours were on your head, ready to drop down over your eyes as soon as you had to focus on a computer screen. You had on tennis shoes, and you must have had an itch on your ankle because you kept rubbing the toe of one foot against the ankle of the other. Or maybe you were just nervous. You didn't have any jewelry on. You carried that huge portfolio under your arm. I noticed that you were tall, but that portfolio still looked oversized. I thought to myself how proud you looked, because you didn't slouch, but stood up straight, as if you were daring anyone to comment on your height. You were waiting for Sharon to find someone, Henry I'd guess, and when I stopped to glance at you, you gave me the most brilliant smile I'd ever seen. It was so open and innocent, totally without guile." He kissed her forehead.

"I was stunned, too scared to say anything or do anything, and I got the most enormous hard-on you've ever seen. I went from nothing to honest to goodness pain in two seconds, all because of that smile. I just turned and walked away as fast as I could, hoping you would get hired. Actually determining that you would get hired. If Henry hadn't recommended you I would have found a way to get you to stay, but fortunately he recognized talent when he saw it. For five long, hopelessly stupid years I watched you in every way I could without actually coming into contact with you, because I knew what would happen to my body. But I listened whenever I came close to your cube and I paid attention to what was being said about you, and I accumulated a lot of information."

"Like my favorite flower, my middle name-"

"No, your middle name was shamelessly lifted from your personnel file. I felt awful for you when your uncle died. I didn't know what to do. I sent extra flowers when I knew all of the hoopla would have died down and that that's when you would feel the most alone. And then I tried to get your mind on other things, to keep you busy. The Sampson account was timed perfectly. I knew you would do it justice, and you proved me right, in spades. I'm proud of you, Austin. And I'm proud that you're my

wife." They kissed, a long and tender kiss that brought groans from both them in frustration.

"Do you want to know what I remember from our first meeting?"

"Do you remember it?" he asked, surprised.

"Well, maybe not in as fondly a context as you. I was standing in the lobby of the only place in town I really wanted to work. Your company had such a good reputation, that I knew if I could get on there I could learn so much, and get some real experience with good clients. While I was waiting, anxious as a racehorse waiting for the start gun, in walked the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen. He had dark hair and the most piercing, beautiful blue eyes I could have imagined. The dark blue suit fit him perfectly, just showing strong muscles down the arms and across the shoulders. When he first came in, he reached to put something in his pocket and I caught just a fleeting glimpse of his thighs. To tell you the truth, I didn't know anything about male thighs at the time, but just seeing them in motion sent little shivers down my spine." She reached her hand down to stroke Tyler's thigh as she spoke and sent a shiver through him.

"Then I looked up past the white shirt and grey tie, as he stopped and glanced right at me. In a split second, just the time of that glance, so many thoughts raced through my mind: Did he notice me? If he did, did he like what he saw? Is he somebody at the firm? Is he as nice as he looks? Well, you get the picture. I was nervous, remember, so I didn't have time to think about how to be coy. I just smiled to relieve my tension. And this hunk of a man kind of glared at me and charged away down the hallway."

"Oh, dear," murmured Tyler.

"I knew then that if he was somebody, I wouldn't be getting the job. I was actually surprised when Henry called and offered it to me. When I found out who you were I was sure that you were the most arrogant, stuck up person I could ever hope to meet. You never even came around to say 'Welcome.' But for some reason, I always seemed to know when you were nearby because I got this funny little tingle down my spine. When I felt that, I looked to see where you were so I could find a way to avoid you. Did pretty well, too, until I was blindsided a couple of months ago." She

smiled at him and then snuggled against his chest. "Thank heaven!"

They stayed in bed for most of the morning, then met the family for lunch so that Austin and Tyler's parents could get to know each other. By the time the visitors had to leave for San Francisco on Sunday, she truly felt welcomed into the family.

*Chapter Twenty-Eight *

Snow fell as Austin gazed from the window of their hotel room in Chicago. She wondered for the hundredth time why the Internet awards ceremony couldn't have been located someplace warm if it had to be held in January. She looked out over the city and took a few minutes to reflect on the past several months, before rushing to get dressed. Marriage to Tyler was as wonderful as she had thought it might be. Their ordinary, day to day lives were so interesting that she marveled anyone could even use the term "ordinary" to express them. Tyler himself made life extraordinary.

A couple of weeks after their wedding they flew to Denver to see Robbie win second place in the national web design contest. Robbie was thrilled, but no more so than the rest of the family. He handled the honor and excitement well, and made friends with the other four contestants so that they could stay in touch and learn from each other.

Tyler's parents had happily accepted Austin into their hearts, and she and Barb had developed a close relationship since she finished her work in Dallas and moved back to San Francisco. Thanksgiving and Christmas were spent as family holidays, and her mother, it turned out, loved the hubbub of fixing big meals and visiting. Her relationship with Austin had taken a giant leap forward when Austin came home a few weeks before Christmas still needing some help during the day. Sarah had gladly moved in to Tyler's house to fill in while he was at work. Mother and daughter had hours to get to know each other as adults, while Sarah finally accepted a real role in her daughter's life.

The best thing for Austin though, was the end of loneliness she had known for so long. By doctor's order, Tyler and she had been unable to make love since they had gotten married, but neither of them had allowed the other to feel much strain over

that. Instead, they had taken their time learning each other's habits, and delighted in sharing their work and their home. Being together was a joy for Austin, and Tyler seemed to feel the same. The huge contract had started the previous week, and Austin looked forward to meeting the challenge of her work with Tyler by her side.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked, kissing the back of her neck.

"How lucky I am," she replied.

"That makes two of us. But you're going to be lucky accepting the first place award in your bathrobe if you don't get dressed." Austin saw with surprise that Tyler was already in his tux. She shooed him out of the room and set about getting ready.

She was wearing the same dress that she had worn to Robbie's award, but tonight she determined that it would have the effect she had originally planned for it in November. The doctor's prescribed waiting period had been over for a couple of weeks, but she still had not been able to handle intimacy. Tyler had exerted no pressure on her, merely waited for her to let him know when she was ready, and she was grateful for that, especially knowing how anxious he was for them to be truly together.

When she emerged, Tyler was just as stunned as he had been the first time she wore the dress. It was floor length, sleeveless, forest green velvet, in an A-line style. The Bolero jacket that covered the bodice was covered in swirls of green, blue and turquoise sequins. The Byzantine necklace, bracelet and earrings, and her wedding ring were her only jewelry adornments. Her hair was pulled back in a French twist and secured with sequined hairpins, but tendrils of hair were allowed loose to fan around her face. She carried an evening bag that matched the color of her dress, and wore black velvet slippers. She pirouetted, smiling, and he simply grinned. "You are without a doubt the most gorgeous woman in the world."

"I could say how good you look in that tux, but words couldn't do justice. I hope I don't drool every time I glance at you during dinner." She placed her hand just over her heart. "I feel naked without my pendant."

"You look perfect, although I wouldn't complain about naked, either." She laughed and he kissed her before leading her downstairs.

Several hours later, they stood waiting for the elevator. "This has been a wonderful evening," Austin said, resting her head on Tyler's shoulder, her hand in his.

"That's easy for the first place winner to say. I'm so proud of you." He kissed the top of her head. "We're going to have to put up a shelf at home for all of the awards you'll be getting over the next few years." He held up the bronze paperweight and looked at the inscription, which gave Austin's name and the name of the client for whom the site had been designed. "I know Ron Morris will be pleased with this. He'll probably arrange for all kinds of publicity at home."

"I'm glad because it will give the company some free publicity too, if that's the case."

He hummed his agreement. "It's mutually good." She could feel him smile down at her. "Are you ready for a foot massage?"

"I don't think so, tonight." His look became questioning.

The elevator arrived and they got on with several other people. Tyler stood at the back wall, with Austin in front of him. With just a slight adjustment, she rubbed against him. She heard him grunt softly, and then he leaned into her, his free hand on her hip as he bent his mouth to her ear. "Are you playing games with me?" he whispered huskily. A whisper that she remembered well. It sent shivers of hot desire through her. She shook her head, then ground her buttocks against him causing an intake of breath. He moved his hand to her abdomen and splayed his fingers against her, rubbing his thumb against the bottom of her breast. Bending his knees just a little, he fit his hard length at the crack of her buttocks and pressed forcefully; Austin pressed back, then reached around his hips to hold him in place firmly against her. The breath blowing the hair at her ears turned ragged.

Austin glanced at the mirror lining the elevator walls and the reflection she saw of them in profile was very sensual. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes glassy. Tyler's eyes were closed and his hand was hidden under her jacket. His face held a look of intense concentration. Their bodies moved just slightly, but in a rhythmic, rocking motion. A man riding up alone was trying hard not to stare at them, but was finding it hard to avert his eyes. Others in the elevator nonchalantly ignored them, although Austin did notice that one man reached over and took the hand of the woman standing next to him, and smiled.

The door opened on their floor, and Tyler reluctantly let go of Austin.
"Newlyweds," he said by way of explanation, as she pulled him off the elevator.

Immediately after displaying the Do Not Disturb sign and locking the door, he put his hands on Austin's hips and pulled her close. "That was good," he said, his eyes dark with passion, "but not very nice, unless you know something I don't?" He raised his eyebrows at her, and she smiled saucily.

"The doctor said I would know when I felt ready, and I feel ready right now. At last!" She slowly pulled away from him, raising her arms to pull the pins from her hair. It fell sensually around her shoulders. She removed the Bolero jacket and tossed it on the sofa. Toeing her feet out of her slippers, she returned to Tyler to remove his jacket. She took out his shirt studs, kissing him each time she removed one. The shirt was soon off his shoulders and on the floor. Austin bent to untie his shoes and he leaned against the door as she slipped them and his socks off his feet. He unzipped his pants and she pulled both them and his briefs over his hips and down his legs so that he could step out of them.

She stood back to look at Tyler. "You only get better and better," she said in a husky voice. Smiling lazily at her, his eyes midnight blue with passion, his wedding band flashing in the light from the living room lamp, he moved sinuously to the bedroom door, as Austin watched in fascination. He held out his hand. "Come here, wife. I think it's time we start the next stage of married life, and you have far too many clothes on." With the same kind of brilliant smile she had given him in his office lobby five years earlier, Austin put her hand in his and followed him into the bedroom.

"Oh, husband, I so agree."

The End

About The Author

Dee S. Knight believes that the easiest way to thoroughly clean a house is to move, and she has done that frequently in the past with her computer consultant husband.

For the past thirty years, as a long distance trucker, teacher, computer trainer and consultant, she and her hubby have happily lived the adventure they call their lives. They fortunately consider anywhere they're together home.

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