



*Hurricane
Watch*

MELISSA GOOD

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by

Melissa Good

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Chapter One

THE OFFICE WAS mostly silent, save the faint scratching of a pen on paper and the soft, distinctive hum of the computer on the desk. It was a room filled with warm mahogany wood. On one side there was a small conference table surrounded by chairs, and a discreet credenza where a pitcher of water and a set of glasses rested on trays. In the rear center, there was a desk, its back facing a large, floor to ceiling window which afforded a horizon view of a choppy, greenish blue Atlantic Ocean.

Seated at the desk was a tall, dark haired woman, dressed in a conservative gray skirt and white silk shirt, the sleeves of which were rolled up past her elbows, exposing tanned, muscular forearms. Draped over the back of the chair was a gray blazer, and the dark head was propped up on one fist, while the other hand curled about a busily moving pen. One paper was completed, and then turned over coming to rest next to a small aquarium where two suspicious Siamese fighting fish swam languidly, sparing occasional fishy eyes for the desk's tenant.

"Twelve down, eighteen to go." Dar sighed, scratching her jaw with the edge of the pen. "You'd think we'd have gotten our staff evaluations on computer by now." She paused, and then punched a button on the large console phone on her desk. "Mari?"

"Yes. Hello, Dar. Good afternoon." The Personnel Vice President's voice was relaxed and friendly. "How are you?"

"Mind if I ask why one of the largest, goddamn IS companies in the world can't put its evals on the intranet?" Dar asked, testily. "Do you know how much faster it would be?"

"Oh, I'm fine, thanks. How's Kerry?"

"Electronic forms, Mari. I already used up my social ten seconds today."

"Ah, Dar," Mariana sighed, as though she'd been answering that very question all day long, which she had. "If we did that, how would we comply with the regulation that dictates we make sure all our senior staff knows how to write longhand?" she inquired lightly. "Now, now, you shouldn't complain. You only have thirty people you're directly responsible for. Think how José must feel. He has two hundred."

Dar considered this, chewing the end of her pen. "You're right. That put me in a much better mood." She chuckled. "He must be tearing what's left of his hair out."

"You're not kidding." Mari sighed. "Actually, the reason they're not e-forms is because there were some concerns about employee security. The e-forms might be accessible by people on the intranet that really shouldn't be able to read them."

"Oh." Dar thought about that. "So, I probably shouldn't tell you that I just passed by the main printer room and saw all of José's completed forms that he had his secretary type in for him printing out?"

Mari sighed aggrievedly.

"It was like a feeding frenzy in there." Dar grinned at the phone. "I'm surprised we don't have Metro Dade downstairs treating a hundred cases of terminal paper cut."

"And you didn't stop it? Come on, Dar, you're supposed to be the responsible management up there."

"Hey, how was I supposed to know that wasn't a new sales incentive of his?" Dar asked, reasonably. "After all, I fill out mine longhand."

"Jesu. All right, I could use a cup of coffee anyway. I'll wander down there." Mariana exhaled.

"How are you doing?"

"Bout halfway," Dar lied.

"Uh huh." Mariana sounded supremely unconvinced. "Why do all you guys have to wait until the last minute?"

"Because it's such a pain in the ass, Mari." Dar responded, exasperatedly. "Tell Houston to get their anal pussies into the 21st Century with the rest of us, and put these damn things online. If they'd migrate to Linux, security wouldn't be a goddamned problem!"

"Can you spell that phonetically, Dar? I'm sending them a carrier pigeon," Mariana responded, in a serious voice. "All right, I'll put in a recommendation, again, for the forms to be changed to e-forms."

"Thanks," Dar grumped. "Gotta go." She hung up, and went back to her task. Each form had fifty categories in which she had to grade her employees, and a comments section which by regulation had to be filled in. "Jesus Christ," she sighed, riffling through the stack. "Can't I just send in a slip of paper that says 'If they're not fired, they're fine?'" she complained to the fish, who wiggled their fins at her.

"No, huh." She bent her head to the paper, then reached out and snagged a piece of dried fruit from a cobalt blue dish on her desktop and nibbled it.

A tap at the outer door was a welcome interruption. "C'mon in," she called out, looking up to see her secretary poke her head in. "Maria, have we gotten the status reports from marketing yet?" The short, older woman shook her head. "Nada and I have called that new facilitatoria there three times." She walked across the carpeted floor and put several folders into Dar's inbox. "Three new accounts. Kerrisita is going to be busy this week."

"Mm," Dar agreed, a faint grin tugging at her lips. "Hang on." She punched a number into the phone. It rang twice and then a perky voice answered. "I need to talk to José," Dar stated crisply. "I'm sorry. He's in conference right now," the voice answered.

"Tell him to get out of the john and onto the phone or he'll have me in there hunting him down in thirty seconds," Dar replied, pitching her voice lower. "With a web cam."

Dead silence. "One moment, please."

Dar waited, checking her watch. She tilted her head and regarded her admin, who had a discrete hand covering her mouth to stifle her laughter. "I'm waiting," she barked, after about twenty seconds.

At twenty two, the line picked up. "What the hell, Dar?" José snarled.

"I need those status reports," Dar snarled right back. "And I frankly don't have the time to have my goddamned staff running around the building chasing down your staff to get them."

In the silence, she could hear his heavy breathing. She waited making a few more comments on the sheet she was working on, and munching another piece of dried fruit. "I'm waiting," she commented crisply.

"Hold on." The line went to music, and Dar hummed along, selecting a pecan from the dish and pushing it towards Maria. "Want some trail mix?"

The secretary accepted the offer, picking up a piece of apricot and putting it into her mouth. "Is good, yes?" She indicated the dish.

Dar glanced at the mix and then she took another nut. "Yeah," she said. "Just something different for a change."

"They'll be there in five minutes," José's voice came back on. "And stop scaring the shit out of my staff."

"If your staff did their jobs, I wouldn't have to be calling you now, would I?" Dar replied silkily, before she disconnected. "Asshole" she muttered, shaking her head. "Okay. If you don't get those reports by the time you get out to your desk, let me know."

"Si. Dar, have you seen Mr. José's new assistant?" Maria lowered her voice. "I'm not the one for to be talking in corners, but I hear twice today he is very sharp, and they are looking for him to how you say...go against you."

Dar leaned on her elbows and fiddled with the pen in her hands, then looked up. "I've heard the same thing." Her pale, intense blue eyes regarded Maria. "Here we go again, huh?"

"Dios Mio." The older woman's brow creased. "Is trouble, no?"

Her boss pondered the words, then gave a half shrug. "Mr. Fabricini and I have met before," Dar said. "In fact, we used to be friends." Her lips quirked. "Sort of."

"Si?"

"Mm. We're not friends now," Dar acknowledged. "He doesn't much like me anymore."

Maria sighed. "Is bad." She frowned. "Why cannot everyone just come, do their work, go home, not spend all day making problems," she exhaled.

"Yeah, I know." Dar fiddled with her pen. "Kerry's got a meeting with him today. Figured she'd at least start off neutral."

"Poor Kerrisita."

A quiet smile edged Dar's face. "She's tough. She'll be fine, Maria," she said. "Listen, I know I've got a meeting after lunch with the executive committee, but did we reschedule that client briefing for tomorrow or is it still at four?"

"I'll check." Maria headed for the door. "And I'll let you know about those reports."

"Thanks." Dar let out a breath, and went back to her task, concentrating for a minute, then dropping her pen down and leaning back, her expression thoughtful. After a moment, she got up and stretched, dropping her pen on the desk before she turned and strolled to the almost hidden door in the back of her office.

Pushing it open, she entered a long, utilitarian appearing hallway with walls on both sides, broken here and there by an anonymous door. Whistling softly under her breath, Dar covered the length of it and paused before the door at the other end, then lifted her hand and knocked lightly on it.

The door opened so quickly she almost jumped back as a young woman of middling height and athletic build appeared in front of her. "Whoa."

"Hey." Kerry Stuart entered the hallway, bumping her back a step and closing the door behind her. "I was just coming to look for you." She pushed the sleeves on her mint green linen shirt up past her elbows, and looked up at Dar, her pale hair ever so slightly disheveled. "What's up?"

"Word of warning. Maria heard rumors our new friend in Sales is after me," Dar told her, with a wry expression. "And if she heard it, it must be white boarded over in Sales somewhere."

Kerry rolled her eyes.

"Sorry." Dar's gaze dropped. "I didn't expect that bit of my past to come back around and kick me in the ass this month." She leaned against the wall and exhaled. "Like we don't have enough problems."

"Don't worry about it, boss." Kerry gave her a friendly pat on the side. "Thanks for the warning, but I can handle him," she said. "I'll let you know what happens in the meeting, okay?"

"Okay." Dar stuck her hands in the slit pockets of her skirt. "See you later." She gave Kerry a smile, then retreated back down the hallway to her own office.

Kerry watched Dar until she disappeared, then she leaned back against the wall, letting her head fall back against the hard surface. "Well," she said, after a moment. "No one ever said this job was going to be easy now, did they?"

She pushed off the wall and re-entered her office, pausing at her desk long enough to pick up her mug and then heading out the front door into the hallway.

Unlike the back corridor, the walls here were covered in stately and expensive textured weave, and the floor was covered in dark carpet. Kerry walked a few steps on it before she turned into the break room and proceeded over to the counter at the rear of it.

"Morning, Kerry," a woman seated at one of the tables greeted her.

"Morning," Kerry replied cordially. She removed a canister from one of the cupboards and took a tea ball from it, setting it into her cup and running hot water over it. A gentle steam of raspberry and cream emerged.

"How was your weekend?" the woman asked. "Do anything interesting?" She was flipping through a fashion magazine in a bored manner.

"Not really," Kerry replied. "Just did some stuff around the h...apartment. You know laundry, that sort of stuff." She half turned. "What about you, Margie?"

The other woman was looking at her. "Same stuff," she agreed. "Thought you were away somewhere. I didn't see your car in the lot," she added. "My boyfriend lives in your complex." Kerry picked up her cup and stirred it. "It was in the shop," she answered, after a brief pause.

"But it's true. I'm not around a lot. This place keeps me pretty busy." She took a sip of her tea.

"How are things over in Marketing?"

Margie closed her magazine. "Same dry stuff, different end market. You know the drill. Nothing exciting happening around here, I guess." She gave Kerry a faint, speculative smile. "Though I hear there might be some action over in Sales coming your way."

Kerry shrugged. "Show me the money," she remarked. "Then we can talk. So far all I've heard is some pretty unrealistic projections."

Margie got up and brushed off her silk dress. "Well, that's not my area," she said. "See ya." She detoured around where Kerry was standing. "Nice shirt," she added. "Doesn't Dar have one just like it?"

With a grin, she walked out and left Kerry alone in the break room.

"HELLO, STEVEN." DAR stood quietly behind her desk, her hands resting on the surface, as he entered. "My assistant said you wanted a minute. That's all I've got."

"Well, well, well, look at what we have here. If it isn't my old and best buddy, Dar Roberts."

Steven sauntered in, shutting the door behind him as he crossed the room towards her.

He hadn't changed much, Dar noted. Still tall, with a sleek, runner's physique, and thick, dark hair. His hazel eyes studied her as he came forward, and that slick, toothy smile creased his face as he held a hand out. "Been a while, hasn't it?"

Not nearly long enough. Dar reluctantly took his grip, and returned the strong handshake with one of her own. "Certainly has," she'd replied evenly. "I believe the last time I saw you was right after you were thrown out of school that last semester."

"Mm...yes, and you enjoyed engineering that, didn't you?" he chuckled. "That's okay, no hard feelings. After all, things turned out all right, didn't they? Here we both are." He'd spread his

arms out. "My office isn't as nice as this one." Now he turned his eyes on her. "Maybe that'll change soon."

Dar had merely lifted an eyebrow and refused to take the bait. "Well, best of luck to you," she'd said, keeping a neutral expression.

A knock came at the inner door. "C'mon in," Dar called out, half turning her head to watch as Kerry entered.

Kerry had passed through the sunlight pouring in her window, burnishing her pale hair, and highlighting her graceful physique. "I've got those reports," she said, giving Steven a curious look, then turning her attention to Dar. "That New York center is going to be almost impossible to complete. Verizon is projecting sixty days to pull the circuits."

"Not good enough," Dar had said, tersely. "I'll see what I can do." She turned to where Steven was watching with interest. "Kerry, this is Steven Fabricini, José's new AVP," she stated. "This is Kerry Stuart, my right hand, and our Director of Operations."

Kerry almost, almost smiled at that. Dar could see the crinkling of the skin around her eyes as she extended a courteous hand to Steven. "Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise, I'm sure," he said lazily, giving her a charming smile. "We'll be working very closely together, I can see that."

Kerry merely nodded, then turned and slipped out, leaving them alone again.

"Well, well, Dar, you old whore. Your taste certainly has improved." Steven laughed. "That's a nice piece of ass."

Dar felt an odd, cold flush come over her, and she realized almost too late he was trying to get under her skin. Her jaw tightened on her first, instinctual reaction and she used leaning against her chair back to give her a moment to revise it before she answered. "Discriminatory comments about employees are against policy, Steven."

He laughed. "That's right. Straight arrow stickler for policy, weren't you? How could I forget?" His expression shifted. "She know you're gay?"

Dar merely stared back at him. "Your minute's up."

"Ah now, Dar." He stood up, that obnoxious smile sliding onto his face. "You've got everyone here so blinded by that kiss my ass attitude, but I know better." He pointed a finger at her. "I know you, and that's how I'm going to beat you."

Dar looked at him coolly. "Steven, I'm not the person you knew back then. Be careful you don't promise things you can't deliver."

"Aren't you?" Fabricini asked. "I guess we'll find out. I know I'm a lot smarter than I was back then," he said. "Smart enough to know a status quo that needs rupturing when I see it." He turned and sauntered out, wagging his fingers at her as he left the office. "Do yourself a favor, and just stay out of my way."

Dar sighed, and sat down in her chair. "I swear I should go run a taco stand on South Beach." She propped her head up on her fist. "Worst thing I'd have to worry about there is drunken rollerbladers."

Her phone buzzed. "Dar?" Maria's voice echoed softly. "Are you ready for the conference call?"

"Yeah," Dar said. "It'll go through lunch. Mind bringing me back something?" She looked over at the fish, studying their twitching motions. "Too bad they don't have sushi."

"Como?"

"Never mind. Put 'em through."

THE MEETING ROOM was small, only an oval table, with six chairs around it, and a whiteboard against the beige corded wall covering. Currently four people were seated around the table, three of them staring across the table at the fourth.

"I'm sorry. I'm not sure I understand the question," Kerry stated, turning her pencil in her hands, and peering patiently across the table. José, Eleanor and Steven rounded out the participants, and Kerry had the very uncomfortable sensation of being a rabbit in a cage with three hungry snakes. Fortunately, she sighed, rabbits did have claws, and teeth, and could use them when needed.

"What does half a dozen prospective leads that haven't even gone to bid status have to do with projections from last year?"

Steven Fabricini had been very obviously miffed that Dar had sent her, Kerry realized, but she also understood why her boss had done so. She had the answers to their questions, and it prevented the meeting from appearing to be a forum where Dar would be pushed into the defensive, attacked by the three sales and marketers.

Now Steven stood, walking to the whiteboard. "Well, as I see it, if we can show that kind of potential, then facilities has the obligation to add bandwidth so we have the ability to close the deals." He held his hands out. "What is there to understand?"

Kerry cocked her head. "That's like saying you're going to buy six hamburgers at McDonalds because you might be hungry," she stated. "Upping bandwidth on the network is done via a formula based on your department's past performance. If you want that changed, you need to close more contracts, because we are not going to acquire hard circuits on the possibility of leads."

She consulted the information Dar had printed out for her. "According to the last five years projections, infrastructure is increasing the acquisition of circuits based on a new account rate of ten percent." She looked up. "Are you saying we're going to close more new accounts than that?" "We have no idea!" José threw his hands up. "But we can't sell the accounts if we don't have the bandwidth to handle their demands immediately."

"Don't you see, Kerry?" Eleanor added smoothly, smiling at her. "We have to have a bargaining chip."

"Ah," Kerry stated, folding her hands over the papers. "Okay, so what happens if we don't add that many accounts and we end up with a negative balance we have to compensate for?"

"See? That's your problem, cupcake. You can't think like that. You have to think positive." Steven pointed the marker at her. "You're too conservative, and it's killing our potential to sign new business."

Kerry propped her chin up on one hand. "No, we're just following the written guidelines for new business, as set down by corporate in Houston. If you have an issue with how the business case has to be structured, you need to address that with Alastair McLean, since it's his model."

She neatly flipped the tables on him. "And those five accounts you tossed into this issue do not adhere to that standard. In fact, two of them show significant potential for our taking a loss on the overall account, despite the bonus you all will get for signing the new business." Her voice was gentle, and almost pleasant. "So, as you can see, I'm really not convinced we should go to Infrastructure on this, and ask them to accelerate their program." She stood up. "Now, if you'll all excuse me, I have a lunch meeting I'm due at in twenty minutes."

José grabbed his papers and left with a disgusted look. Eleanor trailed after him, leaving Steven and Kerry in the room. He sauntered over to her. "You're pretty sharp."

Sea green eyes regarded him. "Thank you." She picked up her papers. "Excuse me."

"Hey, hey, hold on." Steven circled around and perched on the table. "I'm not going to bite you." He smiled. "Unless you want me to, of course." He flicked the papers. "No need to be hostile. We're on the same side, remember?"

"Are we?" Kerry asked. "Then why accuse our division of deliberately sabotaging yours?" She held up the printed out email. "Or didn't you write this?"

"Aw, c'mon," Steven chuckled. "It's just a game, loosen up." He slapped his folded papers against her arm lightly. "We're both pretty new here, right?"

"More or less," Kerry replied relaxing her pose.

"So, we can talk. Look, I'm not here to make trouble, okay? I'm just trying my best to jump-start some sales here. It's to all our benefit, remember?" His brows lifted. "We can help each other. Things are kind of stagnating, and if we work together, maybe we can get things moving again." Kerry studied him. He was charming, he knew it, and she could feel the allure of that engaging smile. "I'd be glad to help in any way I could," she answered, carefully. "Without compromising our standards."

He moved closer, in a casual way. "Ah, now Kerry, would I ask you to compromise your standards?" He grinned. "I heard you say you have a lunch meeting, maybe tomorrow we could grab a bite in the cafeteria and chat. How about it?" Steven captured her eyes, and his lips twitched a little.

"All right," Kerry said, quietly. "We can do that." She shifted her papers. "I have to go. I'll be late for my meeting." She favored him with a gentle smile.

He winked. "Go on, cupcake. See you later." He watched her leave, and then smiled to himself, letting out a low, soft chuckle. "Now that is a nice piece of ass just waiting to be led out of the cesspool."

THE CAFETERIA WAS crowded with the early lunch people, staff who came in before eight, and by noon were more than ready to eat. Kerry picked up her tray, and wound her way through the room. She spotted Maria and several other older women seated near the back where a window allowed a view of the water. "Hi," she greeted them, putting her tray down by an empty chair. "Looks like we're going to get some rain."

"Si," Maria agreed, looking out at the threatening clouds. "How are you, Kerrisita? Did your meeting go all right?"

Kerry seated herself, and picked up her silverware. "More or less." She took a sip of her iced tea, and speared a piece of lettuce. "We agreed to disagree, you know?" She gave the older woman a wry look, then glanced around casually. "Boss get stuck again?"

Maria nodded. "Si, a conference call from France. She asked me to bring her a sandwich."

Kerry clucked and shook her head, but didn't say anything. The table talk turned to the latest episode of a favorite TV show, and she joined in cheerfully, pausing to acknowledge the arrival of newcomers at the next table. "Afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Kerry." Duks Draefus settled his tray down, one of his staff at his side. "You are here early today also."

Kerry gave the Finance VP a brief grin. "I take an early lunch any time I can. Everything tends to fall apart in the afternoons here." She turned back to Maria. "Right?"

"Always," Maria agreed. "Tomas and I will go see the movies tonight. Have you seen that new one, Kerrisita? With the pig?"

The others at the table chimed in, and Duks was left to dissect his meatloaf with his staff.

"Guess that honeymoon ended fast." The faintly sarcastic remark made Duks raise his head, and regard the speaker coolly.

"Excuse me?"

Comptroller Selene Advosan leaned closer. "C'mon, Duks. When she first started, she and the ice princess were tighter than a champagne cork in a bottle. I haven't even seen them eat lunch together since the New Year. I guess the novelty wore off."

The Financial VP chewed his corned beef sandwich thoughtfully. "Never noticed." He shrugged, then glanced over at Kerry, who appeared perfectly at home with her tablemates, and was laughing at something Maria had said. "Maybe they're just busy. Dar never did lunch much anyway, and they seem friendly enough."

"Yeah, but I thought we had a juicy one going there for a little while." Selene sighed. "I should have known better. Dar's way out of her league."

"Mm." Duks dismissed the subject, and concentrated on his lunch.

Kerry put her tray away, and joined Maria as the secretary ordered a sandwich for their boss. The older woman checked the available options, then glanced sideways. "What you think, chicken salad?" she inquired, her brow creasing.

"Tuna melt, on raisin toast," Kerry murmured. "With French fries."

"Aie, Kerrisita!" Maria winced, and gave her an appalled look. Kerry shrugged, and smiled.

"Dios Mio. All right." She ordered the sandwich, and gathered some napkins as it was being made. She took the bag the counterwoman handed her and clucked, then followed Kerry out the door and to the elevator, which swallowed them up along with several other staff members. At the last minute, running footsteps and a hand between the doors delayed them as Steven Fabricini slid in.

"Well, hello there." He sorted his way through the mailman and two administrative assistants, choosing to lean against the same wall as Kerry. "How was lunch?"

"Fine thanks," Kerry replied readily. "This cafeteria's really not bad. It's better than most of the restaurants around here."

"Ah." He watched as the doors opened, and one woman left. "You live in the area?"

"Kendall," Kerry answered amiably.

"Hey, me too." Steven smiled. "Seems like most of the building does; either that, or up in Miramar." He glanced up as the mailman and the other woman left. "Guess we're headed to the same place," he noted, seeing the fifteen button the only one left lit.

"Guess we are." Kerry eyed him. "Where in Kendall did you end up?"

He told her, crossing his arms. "It's a nice little complex, got a clubhouse, and all that."

"That's not too far from where I am. I like the area. We go rollerblading down to that little bakery on the corner near the mall all the time," she commented.

"Hey, I blade all the time." Steven smiled. "Maybe we'll bump into each other sometime down there. I like that little place." The door opened and he gestured. "Ladies first."

Kerry followed Maria out, seeing the stiff set of the secretary's back and biting off a tiny smile. Steven accompanied them down the hall and into Dar's outer office, where the executive's distinctive, vibrant voice could be heard growling through the thick wood paneling. "Aie, what now," Maria sighed.

Steven chuckled. "Dar never needed a reason to be rude, crude and obnoxious." He brushed by them and walked into Dar's office, closing the door behind him.

Kerry and Maria exchanged glances, then Kerry picked up the paper bag. "I'll drop this off." She paused with a hand on the doorknob, then opened the inner office door, and stepped inside.

"Mike, I don't give a goddamn what they're telling you, it's bullshit." Dar punctuated her words by slamming her pencil on the desk. "I'm not going to accept sixty days to pull a lousy circuit, so they better come up with something else."

"Look, Dar, we've been going around and around with them for two months. They won't budge," the man's voice answered, sounding tired. "They've got unions to deal with up there, and facilities that are older than my damn mother."

Dar looked up as the door opened, and her nostrils flared a bit as Steven walked brazenly into her office. "Hang on a minute." She hit the hold button. "People knock before they come into this office."

Steven clucked, and dropped into a chair. "Get your panties out of a wad, Dar."

"What do you want? I'm in the middle of something," She snapped back.

Steven leaned back, glancing up as the outer door opened, and Kerry slipped in. "Thought people knocked first?" he asked mockingly, smiling at Dar.

"She doesn't have to knock. She works here," Dar replied. "You've got ten seconds. Talk, or get out."

Kerry paced quietly across the carpet and deposited the bag on Dar's desk. "Lunch," she murmured, then headed for the inner door.

"Thanks." Dar spared her a brief glance. "Hold on a second; I have some contracts to turn over to you." Then she focused back on her unwelcome guest. "What is it?"

"I want a task force." He leaned forward abruptly. "I want two people from your staff so I can figure out what the hell you're trying to accomplish around here, and see if I can straighten it out." He pointed. "I want Kerry, and whoever else you have assigned over to me for a period of two months, starting tomorrow."

Silence fell. Dar folded her hands over her desk, and blinked at him. "That's what you want?" She inquired mildly.

"That's what I want." He smiled.

One long, powerful finger pointed at the door. "What I want is you out of my office," the executive stated flatly. "I don't have the time, or the people to dedicate to you for your wild goose chase. If you want to bring in temps to play with files, talk to Mariana."

"Afraid of what I'll find, Dar?" He crossed his legs, and smiled at her, as he glanced sideways at the quietly waiting Kerry. "You can't hide it forever."

Dar merely stared at him.

"Fine." He stood up and brushed his pants off. "I'll just make it a formal request up the line. I'll get what I want, and everyone will know it. Sorry, Dar, I was trying to spare you that for old time's sake." He winked at Kerry then left, the door closing behind him with a bang.

A silence settled, then Kerry cleared her throat. "You know what I want?"

Dar raised an eyebrow at her.

Kerry walked over and settled on the corner of Dar's desk. "I want a shower." She pointed "Right in that corner, so every time I have to talk to that sneaky little piece of pig manure I can go and wash myself off." She made a face and gagged. "He makes me feel so slimy!" She shuddered.

"Ugh, Dar! Gag! Gross! Yuck!"

That got a weary chuckle from Dar, who shook her head and sighed. "He's a piece of work, that's for sure." She punched the phone button. "Mike you still there?"

"Yeah," a muffled voice answered. "Just eating my lunch."

"All right, gimme the name of someone up in their chain, and I'll see what I can do to shove things along a little." Dar propped her head up on one hand. "Sixty days, my dog could pull a circuit in less than sixty days."

"Probably do a neater job of it," the voice agreed. "I'll email you with some names. Thanks Dar."

"Yeah, yeah." Dar sighed, as she disconnected, and turned to face Kerry. "Hey."

Kerry cocked her head and smiled. "Hey." She indicated the bag. "Tuna on raisin...better eat the French fries before they soak through the bag."

Dar's expression gentled and she captured Kerry's hand, squeezing it. "Thanks. How'd the meeting go? You must have made an impression, or he wouldn't be asking for you."

Kerry rolled her sea green eyes. "I think he's just bound and determined to screw you over. He went from being condescending and antagonistic, to hitting on me." She made a face. "He wants to do lunch tomorrow." She watched Dar's right eyebrow lift. "Here, just in the cafeteria," she amended with a gentle twinkle. The eyebrow remained where it was. "Oo, do I sense some territoriality raising its head?"

"Hmph," Dar snorted softly. "No, that's not-- You can go to lunch with whoever you want to, Kerry. I'm not--"

A hand cupped her cheek unexpectedly. "I'm flattered," Kerry whispered.

Dar fell silent, then chuckled a little. "Yeah, well, I've been known to be territorial before," she admitted wryly. "But be careful, all right? He's very sharp."

Kerry leaned closer. "Not as sharp as you are," she murmured softly. "Even though he thinks he is," she informed her boss. "What is his problem with you, anyway?"

Dar sighed. "We went to school together and we were pretty good friends, even though we didn't have much in common. We were both in the martial arts together, and hung out with some of the same crowd. The trouble started when I beat him in the nationals that year."

"Ah." Kerry lifted a hand. "I get it. Let me guess, he was god's gift to karate?"

"No," Dar replied, surprisingly. "He wasn't really that good, maybe that was the problem. He never made it past the preliminary rounds, and I was the one that kicked him into the loser's bracket, purely by chance." She exhaled, remembering. "He felt I should have helped him get further because he was trying to impress this girl on the opposing team that he'd been after for years. It was why he got involved in the stuff to begin with."

"That doesn't make sense. Why would you have taken a dive for him?" Kerry inquired. "I can't see you doing that in any case."

Pale blue eyes winked at her from under long, dark lashes. "It was complicated. He thought I owed him the favor, but at any rate, I didn't, and he lost. He dropped out of the karate program after that." She paused, ordering her thoughts. "He was majoring in systems design, and through a chance routine I was running, I discovered he'd stolen his entire senior design matrix from someone else."

"Uh oh." Kerry winced.

"Yeah, well, me being a moral and upright bastard in the old days, I had to go running to the department head with it. Steven was tossed out of school." Dar sighed. "Our last meeting wasn't very pleasant. He told me he'd get back at me someday, and now, here he is trying."

"Jesus, he should get a life. What was that, ten years ago? What a waste of time." Kerry folded her arms across her chest. "He gives me the creeps."

"Mm," Dar agreed. "Well, we have to deal with him. If he keeps pushing you, you can tell him you're not interested, or that you're involved with someone."

"Both of which are completely true," Kerry agreed. "Your sandwich is getting cold." She gave her boss a not so subtle nudge.

Dar smiled, and opened the bag, tugging out the sandwich and munching on a fry. "Mm--bet Maria made a face at you for this." She bit into the gooey sandwich happily. "She usually brings me chicken salad on pita."

"You like pita?"

"No." Dar wiped her lips with the napkin from the bag. "But if I'm hungry enough I'll eat pretty much anything and she knows it."

"Hmm."

"Don't get any ideas."

Kerry watched her indulgently for a minute, then stood up. "Yes, she did give me a hard time, but not nearly as bad a look as when old Stevie snake was flirting with me." She touched Dar's shoulder. "I think she has a protective streak, too."

"Mm hmm," Dar nodded, with her mouth full. "She thinks you're a manifestation of the Blessed Virgin for getting me to eat trail mix instead of malted milk balls."

Kerry snorted softly. "That didn't take much effort at all. C'mon, anyone could have done it."

Dar studied her sandwich for a moment, before taking a bite of it. "No one else ever tried," she remarked casually as she chewed the mouthful, enjoying the gentle tang of the raisins in the bread. "Even my mother gave up on me."

"Well." Kerry reached over and gently pushed an errant, dark lock out of Dar's eyes. "I'm pretty stubborn." She smiled. "Not to mention a little on the possessive side myself," she confessed.

"Was your mother into greens?"

"Vegetarian," Dar replied, wiping her mouth. "She tried, but my father told me even as a baby I used to chuck up the strained peas, and go after his hamburger. Must have driven her nuts." She finished off her fries and neatly disposed of the bag. "Thank you. Now I have just enough time to review this damn status report before the executive committee meeting, and I'm stuck with a new client briefing at four. I won't get out of here before seven."

Kerry nodded. "I'm meeting a few folks over at the gym for a climbing session at six. Will you be over for our class?"

"Oh yeah," Dar responded positively. "I'll be ready for that. It's been a long, aggravating day, and it's only lunchtime."

"Yikes." Kerry's hands had found their way across her boss's neck, feeling the tension in her shoulders. She stood up and went behind the chair, reaching over and giving her a gentle massage, enjoying the warm feel of Dar's skin under the cool silk of her blouse. "You're all wound up, huh?"

"Mm." Dar closed her eyes and dropped her head forward, submitting to her companion's touch gratefully. "Yeah. Ow--oh--damn, that feels good." She finally leaned back, as Kerry finished, and looked up at her. "Thanks."

Kerry smiled back. "You're welcome. I'd better get going. Did you actually have stuff to give me, or was that just a reason for me not to leave?"

A soft chuckle. "I'm not that bad. Here," Dar handed her the three folders. "Three new ones, and in case I didn't say it before, the two you structured last week were very well done." She patted Kerry on the leg. "I got a note from Eleanor regarding the New England Power meeting. She was very impressed with how you handled it."

Kerry positively beamed. A big, sunny grin covered her face, and her eyes sparkled, as she drank in the words. "Wow, thanks."

Compliments from Dar, business ones anyway, were coveted treats all the more so because they were usually unexpected. Her reaction made Dar smile, which made her feel even better. "Boss, you rock."

Dar's phone buzzed. "Dar?" Maria sounded resigned.

"Yes?" The executive answered, leaning on an elbow.

"Personnel, line numero uno."

"I bet I know what this is." Dar sighed. "Thanks." She hit the button. "Dar Roberts."

"You are such the troublemaker, you know that?" Mariana's voice sounded halfway between irritation and wry amusement. "Are you trying to set some record for complaints against one employee?"

Dar lifted her hands and let them fall on the desk. "What did I do?" she asked. "Now?"

"Oh, let's see--" A rustle of paper. "Being rude, obstructionist, uncooperative, detrimental to the progress of business--"

"She really wasn't, Mari." Kerry spoke over her boss's shoulder. "I was here. She was really polite, as a matter of fact."

Mariana sighed. "What did he want?"

"Me." Kerry replied. "He wanted me, and another staff member assigned to him personally for two months, while he, as he put it, 'straightened us out.'"

A soft curse in a fluid language followed. "And you told him no, I take it?"

"I told him I didn't have the time or the staff to go on wild goose chases and that if he wanted dog's bodies to hunt stuff down, to go see you," Dar replied. "I'm not assigning one of the cleaning staff much less Kerry to that horse's ass."

"Mm. I see." The Personnel VP sighed. "Well, he kicked a copy of this up to Alastair, along with a bunch of statistics. It looks pretty nasty, Dar. I'll forward you a copy."

Dar drummed her fingers on her desk. "Did he copy José?"

A moment's silence. "Um, now that you mention it, no," Mariana replied.

Dar smiled. "Okay. Thanks. I'll handle Alastair if he decides to get involved." She pulled a folder over to her. "Meet you in the conference room?"

"You got it," Mariana agreed, and hung up.

"He sounds like he really means to make a case out of this, Dar," Kerry stated quietly, her brow creasing in concern. "Would it be easier if we just went along with it? I mean, it's not like he's going to actually find anything if he investigates our area."

The pale blue eyes thoughtfully roamed the room, settling on Kerry's face with quiet intentness.

"Yes, it would be easier," she stated flatly. "But I'm not gonna do it." The ferocity in her voice surprised Kerry. "He wants a fight? He'll get one."

Chapter Two

DAR GLANCED AT her watch as she entered her office. It was a few minutes to seven and she lifted her cell phone, dialing a number without looking. Three rings, then four, then a breathless voice answered. "Hey."

"Oh." Kerry paused to breathe. "Hey, what's up?"

"Where are you?" Dar inquired, hearing the panting.

"Halfway up the climbing wall, holding on by one hand," Kerry replied. "So as much as I love talking to you, could you kinda--"

"Sorry," Dar apologized. "I just got back from the briefing. I'll be over in about ten minutes."

"Right. I'll let everyone know," Kerry responded. "Ooof--oh...wait, okay," She sighed. "That's better. I was sort of upside down, and trying to hold myself up, my arm was giving out."

Dar chuckled softly. "Okay, well, get both hands back on those holds, okay? I'll see you in a bit," She cleared her throat audibly. "Take care."

"Okay, see ya." Kerry hung up, and managed to clip her cell phone to the back of her workout shorts. "Glad I got the lightweight model," she commented to the rough wall before her eyes.

"Well, time to go down."

She worked her way slowly across the wall, moving from handhold to handhold, and finally let go of the last one, landing lightly on the floor. She straightened up slowly, then leaned against the wall and caught her breath. Her shoulders and thighs ached,

"Whoa." She shook her arms out and flexed her hands, then paced back out of the climbing room and paused, searching the crowded gym. "Ah." She spotted Ken standing next to his small office, and she headed in his direction.

He looked up as she approached, and a smile creased his friendly face. "Hey there."

"Hey Ken," Kerry wiped her brow with the towel she had tucked in her waistband. "Dar's on her way over. She had a late meeting."

Ken rubbed his neck. "I'm still sore from last night," he complained wryly. "Maybe we can just have coffee tonight, huh?"

Kerry laughed gently. "I think she's really enjoying your sessions, but I'm sure she'd take it easy on you if you asked her." She looked up as Colleen approached, already in her workout gear.

"Hey, Col, it'll be a few minutes. Dar's on her way over."

The redhead grinned. "Good. I thought I was going to be late. I had two tellers come up short today, and we spent an extra hour trying to figure out what happened." She tugged on Kerry's shorts. "Let's get a drink while we're waiting."

"Okay. I've got to put my stuff on,," Kerry agreed. "You want anything, Ken?"

"No." The gym manager shook his head. "You two go on. I've got to give a few tours." He indicated a small group of uncertain looking women. "New members."

Kerry nodded then followed Colleen towards the juice bar. "Order me a strawberry banana, would you? I'm going to go change." She angled her steps towards the locker room, waving at three sweating women who passed by. "Hey guys."

"Hi Kerry," the closest one, a programming specialist who worked in Mark's department, answered. "The boss around?"

"On her way," Kerry smiled, as she continued into the tile lined locker room, which echoed with the sounds of the showers, and the clank of locks against the metal doors.

Kerry went to her assigned space and unlocked it, pulling out her light cotton pants and top, and the white belt that went with them. She stripped off her shorts and the t-shirt she wore when climbing, along with the knee protectors that kept her kneecaps from being smashed against the rough concrete.

Idly she glanced to the right, and caught sight of herself in the mirror, and paused to evaluate the reflection. Turned sideways as she was, she could see the smooth curve of her thigh muscles.

They had become a good deal more pronounced. She slid a hand up along her waistline, where she was just beginning to see a little definition.

She'd put on twenty five pounds since she'd hooked up with Dar, more than half of it muscle. Her entire body shape had changed beyond anything she'd expected, hiding her bones and giving her face a rounder and, to her surprise, younger appearance.

"Hmm." She raised an eyebrow at the sight, watching the rounded shoulder muscles shift as she moved her arm. It had taken her a while to get used to it. She'd been so accustomed to thinking about herself in a certain way, that this sudden change had made her a little uncomfortable at first.

Okay, she sighed, as she slipped into the cotton pants. A lot uncomfortable, as her mind fought against a lifetime of being subjected to her mother's views on what a woman should, or should not look like. Women were not supposed to look like wrestlers. Slim...yes. Poised...yes. Buff? No.

A lot of people here at the gym fit into her mother's views, keeping strictly to the light aerobics, and the sweat rooms producing bodies like whippets, all slim bone and taut skin, avoiding the weight rooms and machines like the plague.

Dar had gone a long way towards providing her with an example of a different way of thinking. The taller woman regarded strength training as an important part of her fitness regimen. She was completely unapologetic over the amount of smooth muscles that covered her body. Dar explained to Kerry, a touch sheepishly, that she preferred it that way, since the muscles burned up a lot of the excess she tended to indulge in.

That made a lot of sense to Kerry, and she decided if she was going to share a life with Dar, she'd better make an effort to ensure sharing Dar's eating habits wasn't going to be totally self-destructive.

It had come as something of a surprise to her, however, that she liked the activities, and was becoming reasonably competent at them. She'd never really enjoyed sports in her younger years. Comfortable with the thought that the hour of climbing she'd just enjoyed would also make the pound of strawberries and crock of thick, dark chocolate waiting at home equally and guiltlessly enjoyable, she finished fastening her gear and met her eyes again in the mirror. "Ready to kick some booty?"

As if on cue, her stomach started growling, and she rolled her eyes. She locked her locker and headed for the door as she tied her belt.

"Took you long enough." Colleen gently pushed Kerry's drink over to her. "So, how's the week been?" she asked. "Since I never see you anymore to ask you down in Kendall."

Kerry looked mildly abashed. "Yeah, that only visit on the weekends thing didn't last long, did it?"

Colleen chuckled. "Did you really think it would?" she asked. "C'mon, Ker."

Kerry sucked her drink down. "I was trying to give Dar space," she said. "Turned out she wanted me around as much as I wanted to be there."

"Could have told you that before," Colleen tsked. "So anyway, how's work?"

Kerry sighed. "Personally, great. Professionally, great, except that new guy I told you about. He's been driving us crazy this week." She took a long gulp of the frothy fruit drink, enjoying the tangy sweet taste. "He's got it out for Dar."

Colleen sipped her own drink, and fiddled with a napkin. "Well, you be careful, there, m'dear.

Don't get caught in the crossfire," she warned. "Dar's fully capable of taking care of herself."

"I'm already in the middle of it." Kerry sighed. "It's a mess, but we'll handle it." Her eyes went to the door just in time to see it open and a familiar form ease inside. Dar was still in her business

suit, but had her gym bag hitched over one shoulder. She pushed it back as her eyes swept the interior of the gym.

Kerry counted. It took less than five seconds. It was a game they played sometimes, to see how fast they could find each other. On the count of one thousand four, the blue eyes zeroed in on hers, and Dar's lips twitched into a grin. She made her way over to where they were seated, gracefully sidestepping a pair of power walkers who were strutting their way across the machine area.

"Hey." Kerry offered her a sip of her drink. "How'd it go?" She felt safe in this moderate display of affection, since the crowd was busy and most of the people there who knew them weren't gossipmongers.

A shrug. "Same as always." Dar accepted the glass, and took a swallow of the fruit smoothie.

"Hello, Colleen."

The redhead smiled. "Hi Dar. Any chance of going over those punches today?"

"Sure," Dar replied, handing Kerry back her cup. "I'm going to go change. Meet you guys over by the mats." She headed into the locker room, crossing to her locker right next to Kerry's, and unlocking it. She put her bag inside, and changed quickly, glad to get out of her skirt, hose and pumps, and into a comfortable pair of cotton pants and soft boots.

She hung up her work clothes, and shrugged into the mid length shirt, pulling the long, black belt from her bag and glancing at it before she wrapped it twice around her waist and tied it off.

Putting this on had felt very strange, she remembered. She usually worked out with the trainer on the island in a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt, but when she actually started teaching class, Ken said it would make the students feel less awkward with their own new garb if she wore hers as well.

So she'd rooted around in the three trunks tucked into the condo's closet that represented her personal possessions, and dug the old thing out. She was a little surprised it still fit. She'd had her doubts about wearing it, but then Kerry had told her she liked it. She'd told Dar she thought she looked really cute in it, and since then Dar hadn't minded wearing it.

"A little egotistical?" she asked herself wryly. "Oh. Just a little." She locked the locker and headed out towards the class area, chuckling a bit under her breath.

They were all waiting, a group of ten including Kerry and Colleen. Dar took them through a series of warm up routines, using the time to stretch out her own muscles. She then went over several concepts she'd taught the week before, and linked that into the day's lesson. As always, Kerry watched her with that little look of utter concentration, her brow furrowed, the tip of her tongue poking out a bit, as she repeated the exercise, uncertain at first, then with more confidence.

"Nice," Dar complimented her. "Okay, now you and Colleen go at each other." The rest of the class watched as the blonde and the redhead squared off, and Kerry edged forward, getting the hold on Colleen's arm, and correctly dumping her on her butt. "Right."

"Ugh." Colleen squinted up at her friend. "I'll be needing a pillow on my butt, much more of this."

Kerry grinned, and offered her a hand up.

Dar hadn't expected to enjoy teaching. She'd volunteered on the spur of the moment, and afterward had almost regretted it, but as the weeks went on she'd found herself looking forward to her little class. "Okay, good." She nodded as two of the men squared off against each other, and demonstrated. "Right, a little higher on the kick. You have to get it just above the knee." She got in closer, and tapped the man on the thigh. "That's it."

The class finished, and she leaned against the wall, watching as Ken ambled over, an apologetic look on his face. "Evening, Ken," She greeted the shorter man. "How's the neck?"

"Hurts like heck," he admitted. "I think I'm going to have to give it a miss tonight."

Dar chewed her lip. "Sorry about that," she told him sincerely. "I didn't expect that kick to connect that hard."

"Don't worry about it," he chuckled deprecatingly, then he glanced up at her. "Say, Dar, you ever give any thought to going back into competition?"

The question surprised her. "No, I..." She paused. "No... c'mon Ken, it's been ten years. I'm way past that."

Ken shook his head. "I have to disagree. I mean, I don't know if you're interested, but I was at a match this past weekend, and I have to tell you, honestly, Dar, you'd have walked away with the trophy." He put his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "I know it was just a little local thing, but if you wanted to, you could go back into it. You've still got the moves. It would just take a little work."

Dar's first instinct was to say no, absolutely not. She didn't have time for that. Her life was too complicated as it was, and there was no way she'd have time to do it right, to get into the kind of shape she knew she'd have to in order to really compete.

But... A seductive tendril she'd thought long buried surfaced, reminding her of just how much she'd enjoyed competing, how much she'd enjoyed winning. *Maybe seeing Steven shook that loose and brought it to the surface*, she mused. Her eyes flicked over Ken's waiting face.

"Something to think about," she replied quietly. "I don't know. I really hadn't considered it before."

He grinned. "Well, you think about it." He patted her arm. "We'll talk about it in a couple of days."

Dar walked slowly across the busy gym, her eyes thoughtful.

KERRY RELAXED INTO the soft leather seat and sighed. "God, I'm starving. I am so glad I stuck that bowl of chicken satay in the refrigerator before we left this morning."

"Mm...that sounds good," Dar agreed as she gazed out at the road.

Kerry glanced at her, studying Dar's profile. "You're quiet tonight," she said after a moment of silence. "Everything okay or are you still stewing about Mr. Slimeball?"

Pale blue eyes left the road and gazed at her for a moment. "He's not worth stewing over," she stated, knowing it for a lie. "I managed to put a corn cob up José's tailpipe. I gave him a copy of that email." She chuckled softly. "I haven't seen him change to that shade of red in a while. I usually cause that."

Kerry stretched out and leaned on the armrest. "What does he hope to accomplish, Dar? Fabricini, I mean."

"Bottom line?" Dar turned into the ferry terminal and drove onto the boat, which had just docked. She put the car into park and rolled the windows down, then turned the engine off. The cool January air blew in ripe with the salt tang of the sea and she settled back, propping one knee up against the steering wheel. "He wants José's job, and my head," she said. "If he can prove we lost money because of something I did, he's got a wedge to work with. Sales aren't that great, and if he makes it look like he can pull a rabbit out of his ass someone in Houston might listen."

"You think so? Really? They'd take his word so fast?" Kerry asked in an incredulous voice.

Dar shrugged. "New kid on the block," she said. "Carries weight sometimes."

Kerry blinked. "But, how can he prove something happened because of you? You know nothing like that did, Dar. If there's one department in the entire company that runs like clockwork it's ours."

Dar ducked her head to one side. "No one's perfect, Kerry. It's possible he could dig up something where we could have done our jobs better, and we lost out because of it. We've got so many things going on at once, and so much of it involves making decisions based on the best information available. It can happen."

"Wow." Kerry frowned. "But nothing-- You don't mean little stuff, like having to reorder circuits or things like that, do you?" she asked. "Dar, even I know that Sales messes up a heck of a lot more and for bigger dollars than we do."

"True," Dar said. "But if you stack up a bunch of little stuff, and put it on letterhead, and show you've got a better plan, businessmen listen."

"Well..."

"I listened to you when you did it," Dar interrupted mildly. "You pulled together a list of little annoyances in the integration and put a reasonable plan in front of my puss and I caved right away."

"Dar."

"I did." She settled her hands on her knee. "But I've got a pretty good batting average. He'd have to find something really major, and I'm not really worried about that." She fell silent and watched the ripple of the water in the ferry's wake, scattering the moonlight over its surface.

"So, what are you really worried about?" Kerry prodded gently. "Is it because he's made it so personal?"

Dar thought about that. "Maybe," she acknowledged. "Or maybe it's because he's sniffing after you." She let a rueful grin cross her face. "And if he does find out about us, he will most certainly make an issue of it."

"Mmph." Kerry rolled her head to one side, waving at the deckhand as they docked on the island.

"Well, we just have to make sure that doesn't happen. Right?"

"Right." Dar drove off the ferry, and through the spray, and turned onto the access road that lead to the condo. She pulled in next to Kerry's Mustang, and turned the car off.

Kerry regarded the other car. "I might have to start leaving that at my place," she said.

"Apparently one of Eleanor's goons is hanging out with someone who lives near me and noticed I wasn't around."

Dar half turned in her seat, one hand playing with the car keys. "Ah," She exhaled. "Guess you haven't been there a lot, huh?"

"No." Kerry plucked a bit of lint from the seat. "I guess I could start going back there during the week again."

A little silence fell between them.

"You want to do that?" Dar finally asked, a quiet note of resignation in her tone.

Kerry looked out the windshield at the wall of the condo. "No," she said after a pause. "To hell with it. I'll think of something if she starts asking questions again." She glanced sideways.

"Unless you think I should."

"Nope. That sounds good to me," Dar responded immediately. "C'mon, let's go get slurped." She got out and took her bag, then waited for Kerry to join her before she trotted up the stairs and keyed the door open.

They ducked inside and turned the lights on. Kerry dropped her bag on the couch and continued on into the kitchen towards the utility room, which was issuing shrill yelps. "Okay...okay Chino."

Take it easy." She unlatched the gate, and let the three month old Labrador puppy out. "Did you miss us?"

The puppy scrambled up her leg, hopping up and down until she picked her up and cuddled her. "Hey." Kerry laughed as the pink tongue got her neck. "Hey...no nibbling!" The sharp little teeth nipped her skin, as she glanced into the puppy's area. "You were a good girl, weren'tcha!"

Dar wandered over, and the puppy whined, wiggling towards her. "Hey, puppy."

"All right, all right, here." Kerry turned her over. "Go. I know who your favorite is. Look, Dar, she was a good girl all day."

Dar suffered a nose nibble, and peered into the room. "Hey, look at that. Good girl," she praised Chino. "Getting resident services to come and let her out twice during the day was a good idea, huh?"

"You bet," Kerry agreed. "Want to take her for a walk while I get dinner up?" She watched indulgently as Dar scratched Chino's chin, the little tag on her collar which bore her name and their address jingled softly as she moved. "Dar?"

"Hmm?" The executive glanced up. "Oh, right, sorry." She kissed the puppy on the head.

"C'mon, Chino, let's go out, see if you'll piddle for me, huh?" She slipped out the back door and down the patio steps into the moonlit grassy area.

Kerry had to laugh, as she rinsed her hands off. "No one at work would believe hearing that."

She shook head wryly. Dar had proven to be an extremely soft touch when it came to their little addition, and Chino had learned all it took to get a puppy biscuit was a pair of soulful brown eyes, and a tiny paw.

She'd find Dar, and sit next to her, raising the paw up and patting Dar's leg with it, and the well trained human would immediately produce an Iams biscuit which Chino would crunch contentedly.

It was cute in the extreme, and Kerry loved watching her intimidating lover turn into a blue eyed puddle over Chino's admittedly adorable ways.

She put up the satay and some rice and added some fresh green beans to the steamer. "That'll do." She dusted her hands off and retrieved her bag, glancing around the living room with a sense of quiet satisfaction.

At one time it had seemed very sterile to her, but since she'd moved in, she'd coaxed some personal items out of Dar, and added her own stuff to it resulting in a warmer and more cheerful atmosphere.

The room now included some prints they'd picked out at the Grove Art Festival, a colorful native woven blanket that was draped over the central table, and a brass sculpture of dolphins and waves sitting in the middle of it. On the entertainment center, once barren of anything but a little dust, there were pictures of her and of Dar at various ages, and one of them together that always made Kerry smile when she looked at it.

She walked over and picked it up, both of them staring back at her sprawled on the couch pretty much in each other's laps. "What this picture didn't kick off." She shook her head. "Good thing I got it back before I left home."

Kerry set the picture back down and trotted up the stairs, dropping her laptop off in her office and continuing on to her room.

She still had to run that through her head when she walked in, as the spacious vaulted ceiling and the wide glass doors that opened out onto the Atlantic Ocean hit her eyes. It was the master suite for the condo, and though she slept downstairs with Dar in the big waterbed, Kerry had taken pains to carve out her own little space here.

She'd moved most of her things up from her apartment. It still seemed a bit strange to see Pool holding out his arms for a hug from the comfortable, overstuffed chair perfectly situated for reading as the sunlight came in the room.

She'd hung her pictures on the wall, and it was her quilt on the bed, and the dresser held her things in slight disarray.

Go spend time back in Kendall? Kerry gave her head a faint shake. *No way. This was home now, even if she and Dar hadn't quite made that formal commitment to each other.*

She put her bag down and went to the glass doors, sliding them open. She went out onto the wraparound balcony to just stand and gaze out over the black, rippling water for a long moment, watching the quarter moon send a tiny splash of light over the waves. It smelled of salt, and the rich scent of the freshly fertilized lawn below her, and the hint of hickory smoke from the beach club just down the way.

It was beautiful, and she loved it, even though she had to pinch herself sometimes just to prove it was real, and not just some outlandish dream. Not just the house, but her life. Sometimes she was a little afraid to go to sleep at night, fearing she'd wake up one day and it would all be gone as though it had never existed.

A sigh. "C'mon, Kerry, get changed, and stop being goofy." She went back inside, closing the doors. Kerry slipped out of her work clothes, exchanging them for her favorite sleep shirt and hanging her jacket and skirt up in the huge walk in closet.

A tiny whine alerted her, and she looked up as Chino pushed the door open with her nose, and came stumbling in, having laboriously negotiated the stairs. "Hey, Chino. C'mere honey." Kerry sat down and let the puppy scramble over her. She played with her for a minute then got to her feet and headed downstairs, with the animal trotting behind her.

Dar was in her office, working on something, and she looked up as Kerry poked her head in. For a minute, they just looked at each other, and then Dar leaned back in her comfortable chair. "That smells great." She put her hands behind her head and exhaled, pulling the thin fabric of her worn baseball shirt against her body. "Ken sprang something on me tonight. He broached the subject of me going back into competition."

Kerry came forward and perched on the arm of the couch. "Really?" She watched Dar's face. "You think you want to?"

Dar nibbled the inside of her lip. "I don't know. When he first mentioned it, I came up with all the reasons why I couldn't, and they seemed like good ones." She shrugged. "I mean, it takes time, a lot of effort and training," She sighed. "It's been a long, long time. I don't know if I could still do it."

"But?" Kerry saw the indecision in her expression. "You're thinking about it."

Both hands lifted, then fell to the arms of the chair. "Maybe the stuff I've been doing with him triggered some stupid adolescent urge or something. I don't know. I've been getting quite a kick out of trying to see how much I could get back." She looked up. "What do you think?"

Kerry studied her in silence. "I think you should go for it." She grinned. "I love the classes, but watching you and Ken go at it afterward has been such a blast. You get this incredible look on your face when you get past him."

Dar scratched her jaw, looking a touch embarrassed. "I do?"

"Yes, you do." Kerry held out a hand, as she checked her watch. "Come on...we'll talk about it over dinner. It should be ready."

They settled in front of the large screen television, Dar flipping it on after she set her gently steaming plate down. "Oh, look, it's the Crocodile Fanatic," She peered. "What's he after now?"

Kerry observed the screen. "Snakes." She took a bite of chicken and then a mouthful of the steamed rice, which she'd put a touch of ginger and spices into. "Hmm...rattlesnakes." She shook her head. "Jesus. He's picking them up by the...Dar, he's crawling into a cave of those things. Isn't the Discovery Channel afraid they're going to have a lawsuit on their hands when he gets eaten alive?"

Dar pulled her plate over and took a bite. "They probably had him sign a document in quintuplet that absolves them of any responsibility for him." The spicy peanut sauce on the chicken contrasted with the gentle, gingery taste of the rice, and she sighed contentedly. "Kerry, this is great."

"Thank you." Kerry took a sip of ice tea. "We have strawberries for dessert, you know."

"I know," Dar chuckled softly, as she settled an arm over Kerry's shoulders, eating one handed.

"What's he doing now? Oh...hey...is his wife pregnant?"

Kerry peered. "Either that, or she's been munching on the crocodile crackers overtime." She watched. "And he drags her up into mountains, and hands her the tail of a rattlesnake to hold onto...Jesus!" The man on the screen cooed at the angry female rattlesnake. "You gotta love them? No Steve. I don't!"

She chewed. "He's got such a cute accent, though." She reached over and picked up a green bean from Dar's plate, and offered it to her. "Here, I sautéed them in a little garlic butter. Just pretend it's a French fry."

Dar obligingly took the bean, chewing it speculatively. "I think I'm being condescended to," She blinked. "Look at him. There must be a dozen snakes under that rock. Can't he just leave it alone? Wait, did he just say 'shit'?"

Kerry's brow creased. "Yeah, he just said 'shit'. What's...oh man, did you see how pale he just got?" She turned up the sound a little. "Oh Jesus. He's got a snake between his legs."

Her lover burst out laughing. "Typical guy."

"Tch, Dar. No. He's got a rattlesnake between his legs! Look, they're going nuts. He doesn't know what to do!" They watched as the man on the screen eased out of the way, and scooted out of range. "Wow. That was outrageous. I wonder if they'd show it if he actually got nailed in the nuts by a poisonous snake."

"Well," Dar laughed helplessly. "At least he could get a tourniquet in place, unlike if he got bit on the face," She sighed, and chewed a mouthful of rice. "I think he's an adrenaline junkie."

She quieted for a moment. *Looking for that fix, that excitement...was that what was tugging her towards resuming the aggressiveness of competition? Otherwise, what was the attraction of going back ten years, and trying to recapture that particular bit of glory? Or was this a reaction to her turning thirty, a reassurance to her ego that she still had 'it'?*

Now, that was a depressing thought.

Conceit or a challenge it would just be fun to attempt

Hmm. She took another bite of her rice, pausing as Kerry shifted and snuggled up next to her, letting her head rest on Dar's shoulder. "You think I should go for it?"

"Mm hmm," Kerry nodded, her mouth full of chicken. She swallowed and licked her lips. "I love watching you fight."

Dar forgot about crocodiles as she looked at Kerry's profile, both eyebrows lifting in surprise.

"You do?"

"Sure," her partner cheerfully assured her. "It's really sexy." She found her jaw being gently gripped and her face turned so she was forced to meet Dar's eyes. "What?"

Both dark eyebrows were up near Dar's hairline. "Sexy?"

Kerry grinned. "Gonna do it?"

Dar drummed her fingers on the arm of the couch, a thoughtful expression on her face.

Chapter Three

"SO, HOW'D A sharp girl like you end up in a rat's nest like this?"

The smile was meant to make her understand it was all in good fun. Kerry reflected, taking a thoughtful sip of her peach ice tea. "I submitted a resumé, and it was accepted," she replied dryly, "and I happen to like it very much." It had been a slow morning, unfortunately, and no crises had developed that might have excused her lunch invitation from Steven Fabricini, although, Dar had volunteered to create one if she really didn't want to go.

"You do, huh?" Steven chuckled, scooping up a spoonful of yogurt. "That's hard to believe considering who you work for."

Kerry shrugged. "You know, people say that a lot, but I really enjoy working for Dar. She's smart, she knows her stuff, she gives credit where credit's due, and she stands up for her staff." she commented, honestly. "If you know what you're doing, you have no problem with her." Just like Mark Polenti had said at their first meeting. "Of course, if you don't..." She let the thought hang.

He laughed. "You poor little thing. Wait until you get thrown to the fire as a sacrifice the first time she has to take the blame for something. You can't really be that naive, can you?" He leaned forward. "Listen, cupcake, I know her, all right? You don't. She will turn on you like a rabid dog at the first opportunity."

"Really." Kerry nibbled on her sandwich. "Well, thanks for the warning."

"Anytime." Fabricini smiled, then lowered his voice. "Listen, there's no reason we can't work together, all right? My job here is to try and punch through these roadblocks we seem to be coming up against, and if I do it, the whole company benefits.

Don't get caught on the wrong side of that, hmm?"

"What kind of roadblocks are you talking about?" Kerry asked.

He regarded her for an instant. "Sales dried up," he said. "Everyone looks at this company as too slow and too old school. We can't get our foot in the door."

Kerry took a sip of her drink. "I see."

"We need fresh blood, and new ideas," he added, "new incentives for customers. We can't rely on those old metrics of yours to drive new business. It doesn't work anymore."

"So, you want to give them a good deal, maybe some free services up front, to get them to sign-- is that it?" Kerry rested her chin on one hand, letting her other hand lay casually on the table.

He put a hand on her wrist. "You're a sharp kid. Everyone says so, and when this all shakes out, there could be opportunity for you, if you know what I mean."

Kerry smiled kindly at him. "You mean, if you dig up enough things to force Dar out, I might get her job."

He smiled back. "I said you were sharp." A dangerous glint entered his eyes. "Stick with me, cupcake."

She wiped her lips with her napkin, and set it down neatly on her plate. "There's just a few things I'd like to get squared away first." She paused.

"What's that?" he smiled, a knowing look on his face.

"One, you need to let go of my wrist before I sink my fork into the back of your hand," Kerry responded very mildly. "Two, if you call me cupcake again, I'm going to file a discrimination complaint on you with our personnel department. I don't appreciate it."

She stood up and took her tray as he released her. "Excuse me," she said. "I have actual work to do."

She left him sitting there, as she counted to twenty under her breath, waiting for her heart to stop hammering in her ears from anger. "Stupid piece of goddamned...oh. Sorry," she muttered, as she collided with a large, animate object. "Sorry Mark."

Mark Polenti, their MIS director, peered over her shoulder. "You okay?" he asked. "Hey, what did you do to puss face over there? He looks like he's been hit in the head with an obsolete mainframe."

Kerry took several calming breaths. "He is such a pig." She put her tray down in the washing area. "He wants me to work with him to find dirt on Dar, and then had the balls to say if I did, he'd see if he could get me her job when it was all over."

Mark burst into laughter. "Boy, did he ever get his lines crossed." He patted Kerry's shoulder. "Guess he picked on you because you're the newest, figured the rest of us had our loyalties set by now." He put his own tray down. "So, what'd you tell him?"

"To kiss my ass," Kerry replied, with a hint of a blush. "More or less."

They both watched as their subject sauntered up, his neck still red from anger, and deposited his tray. "My mistake." He oozed savage politeness to Kerry. "I should have guessed Dar would pick someone who thought just like she does." He threw his napkin in the bin. "Your loss." He left, giving them a disgusted look.

Mark and Kerry eyed each other. "Asshole," they both said in sync. Kerry sighed. "Well, at least I won't have to worry about him asking me out on a date now," she remarked wryly. "That's a relief."

"Yeah, but he could get nasty that way," Mark replied, snagging two large chocolate chip cookies and offering her one. "You know how people are in this place."

"Been there, done that." Kerry accepted the cookie, and bit into it. "I think everyone's over that one already." She glanced around. "We've been pretty careful not to hang out together here."

"Yeah, but watch out," the MIS chief warned, as they headed for the elevator. "Doesn't take much to get that crap started up again and big D's in a hornet's nest right now."

"Yeah, I know." Kerry sighed, and punched the button for the fourteenth floor, then held the door as she heard footsteps approach. She couldn't see outside from where she was, but she knew it was Dar from the weight and rhythm of them.

A smile was already pulling at her lips as Dar stepped inside, moving to the rear of the car and leaning against it. "Speak of the devil," Kerry commented, as the doors slid shut. "I just pretty much blew up my lunch meeting."

"Really?" Dar crossed her arms. "You lasted a lot longer than I would have." She gave Mark a wry look. "He must have stirred up a pile of crap though, because Mariana just called me and told me they're calling a meeting of all the upper management staff." As if on cue, both Kerry's and Mark's pagers went off. "I really don't have time for this crap today."

Kerry was listening to the voice page. "Yep, one o'clock in the big conference room."

Mark cursed softly. "I've got HP coming in this afternoon about the servers. Damn." He glanced at Dar. "What's it about?"

The executive shrugged. "Mari didn't have details. She was waiting on a packet from Houston." She sighed. "Alastair endorsed it and it's from Houston Personnel center, so god only knows what it is, probably another poster campaign."

Mark snickered. "I liked the security posters, Dar. I have the one about preventing hackers framed in my bedroom."

The doors slid open and they walked out, surprised to see Mariana standing in front of Dar's doorway. "Uh oh," the executive murmured. "That doesn't look good." She gave them both a nod. "See you all shortly."

"Dar, I need to talk to you," Mari said as she approached. "You're not going to believe what they just dumped on us."

"Oh, I'll believe anything...once." Dar gestured towards the door. "C'mon." She led the way into her office. "Maria, book me for a one p.m. meeting, and cancel the briefing conference call, please."

"Si." Her secretary looked up from the phone. "Dar, your little puppy called."

"Thanks," Dar said absently as she went through the door to the inner office, then she stopped short, causing Mariana to crash into her. "Wait a minute, what?" She turned. "Sorry." She poked her head back out. "Maria, who did you say called?"

The older woman smiled. "Si, the puppy. I got a call, I picked up, is nothing. I said, 'hello, hello,' and then, 'buenos dias,' but nothing. I almost hang up, and I hear..." She made little whining noises. "I check caller ID, is your house."

Dar blinked, ignoring the muffled laugh from behind her. "She must have gotten out and knocked the phone off the hook in the living room. Do me a favor, call resident services out there and have them go check, will you?" She shook her head and ducked back in the office. "Great, with my luck she went and called Singapore while she was at it," she muttered as she closed the door. "All right, what's up?"

Mariana threw a packet on her desk for an answer. "Before you start screaming, I've already been on the phone with Alastair, twice, and he's not backing down."

Dar circled her desk and sat down, picking up the packet. Her eyes scanned it, and she looked up. "You're joking."

A shake of Mariana's head. "Nope. It's an executive retreat, with a program specifically for 'team building'. They have a reservation for twelve of us starting Friday afternoon. They're sending a bus to pick us up." She crossed her arms. "Alastair says they've been using a very similar program out in Texas for three months and it's worked great for them."

Dar covered her eyes. "Let me see if I understand this" she muttered. "He wants to send us all on a bus out into the wilderness, to climb over rocks and trees and live in a cabin, and that's going to help us get along?"

"That's essentially it, yes." Mari nodded. "For the record, I've read up on this stuff. I was trying to find some kind of help here, and it's got its merits, Dar, but it depends on the participants."

"In our case, it depends on the participants not killing each other!" Dar ended up yelling, her voice bouncing off the walls. "Is he nuts?" She punched the phone. "Beatrice, is he there?" Then she drummed her fingers until the line opened.

"Now Dar, before you say anything, let me get my spiel in." Alastair's voice was cheerful, as usual. "Okay?"

Dar folded her hands on her desk. "Okay," she responded in a quiet tone.

"I got that email yesterday, and to be honest, it concerned me," the CEO stated. "Not because I thought it was true, although you can be a stubborn obstructionist when you need to be, Dar, but it's always been in our best interests if you know what I mean."

"Uh huh," Dar grunted.

"I see it as an overall problem company-wide, and that's why we've been using these seminars. They're wonderful! You'll love it. Listen, it's just a weekend out in the middle of nowhere. No cell phones, no computers and the food's pretty good. We found the damn things really do work to get people to know each other better."

"Uh huh."

"So, I'm sure if this new guy and you get to know each other, things will smooth out, and besides, the rest of the group needs a little team building. I've been getting a bunch of grumpies from that office lately."

"Alastair?"

"Yes? You can go off on me now, Dar."

"The problem with me and Steven Fabricini is that we do know each other. I got him thrown out of school ten years ago and he's kept a grudge." Dar paused. "You think sending us both out into the woods is a good idea?"

Long pause. "Ah." Alastair muttered. "I see...wish I'd known that."

"Asking might have been helpful."

"Arhm..."

"Can we cancel this now?" Dar asked, hopefully.

"Well, see, it's prepaid, and we've already transmitted the payment." He sighed. "And if we cancel, we lose all that money..." He paused. "Let's do it anyway, Dar. I'm counting on you to set an example and bring everyone back with at least a little more team spirit."

"You want me to foster team spirit?" Dar's voice took on a puzzled tone. "Do you actually know who you're talking to here?"

"Now Dar."

Dar sighed. "Alastair, I really don't have time for this, and you're tossing my top ops staff out incommunicado. What if something goes wrong over the weekend?" She tossed her last card on the table.

Alastair chuckled. "Dar, we both know you pick the kind of people who won't screw you over in a pinch. Your staff can cover things. Go on, have a good time and loosen up a little. I went on one of these things and I had the time of my life. Trust me." He heard the repeated sigh on the other end. "You're mad at me, huh?"

"If I thought this was going to do a damn bit of good, I wouldn't be," Dar snapped back. "For Christ's sake, Alastair!"

"Ah ah, keep an open mind, Dar. You never know what can happen. You all could come back best of friends," Alastair chuckled. "And, by the way, I just processed your year-end bonus. I know I forgot to send you a birthday card, but see if that's an acceptable substitute."

"Alastair..."

"Gotta go, the chairman of IBM is here. We're going to swap lies and exaggerations over rubber chicken," Alastair told her. "Just do it, Dar. When you get back, if it was that awful, I'll make it up to you."

"How?" Dar inquired sourly.

A slight pause. "We'll talk about resolving the issues in a more direct way."

Dar's dark eyebrows lifted. "All right," she agreed quietly.

Alastair chuckled. "That's my Dar. Try to have a good time, huh?" He hung up.

Mari shifted in her chair, and shook her head. "You have such an interesting relationship with him," she sighed. "You're one of the few people I can say for sure he really, really likes."

"Well, I tried." Dar gave her a wry look. "This is going to be a nightmare, Mariana."

"I know," the personnel VP agreed. "You and me, Duks, Kerry, José, Steven, Mark, his second, Eleanor, and El's assistants, and my assistant Mary Lou." She paused. "You know what your biggest problem is going to be, don't you?"

"Besides not killing Steven?" Dar played with a pencil. "Yeah. I do." She glanced up at Mariana.

"Not giving him a real hook to hang me with."

"You two have such a cute little chemistry when you're around each other," Mari told her wryly.

"That's going to be tough to hide out there in the wilderness with nothing to do but talk to each other and roast marshmallows." She stood up. "Thanks for trying, my friend. It was a good fight, and you'd have had him if we hadn't already coughed up the bucks."

"Yeah." Dar leaned back, exhaling. "I should have just offered him my bonus back to cover it," she told her friend wryly. "It would be worth the money."

Mari chuckled as she turned to leave. "It's just two days, Dar. We'll be back in Miami on Sunday afternoon. I'm sure we'll survive."

Dar regarded her back as she left, then she threw her pencil down on the desk, leaning forward and studying the packet in consternation. A light tap on the inside door, however, put a wry smile on her face. "C'mon in."

Kerry poked her head in, then entered. "Hey."

"Hey." Dar leaned back in her chair and folded her hands across her stomach.

"Are we in trouble?" Kerry inquired curiously.

"We may be." Dar pushed the packet over to her. "Cancel your plans for the weekend."

"You mean our plans?" Kerry approached the desk. "Did we have any? Other than hanging with Chino?"

"We do now." Dar steepled her fingers and waited for Kerry to read the bad news.

Kerry took the packet and sat down in one of Dar's visitor chairs, studying it with interest. "Oh, I've heard of these." She glanced up with a smile. "This sounds interesting. It's upstate from here, isn't it?"

"Mm hmm," Dar acknowledged.

A shrug. "Sounds like it might even be fun, Dar. I mean, there are cabins, it's not like you're out foraging for hickory nuts or something."

Dar chuckled. "If it were just you and me, or just you, me, Duks and Mariana, and even throw Mark in there, I'd agree with you, but we're going to have Steven, José, Eleanor, and a couple other people with us."

"So?" Kerry peered at the agenda. "Oh, that's cool. They have obstacle courses, and you have to help each other through them." She looked up. "Who knows? Maybe it'll help, Dar."

The dark haired woman gazed at her. "So, you don't mind spending an entire weekend pretending not to know me?" she inquired mildly. "Other than as your boss?"

Kerry blinked. "Oh." She bit her lip. "Jesus, I didn't even think of that."

"Living in cabins with these people?" Dar added. "Making believe we don't really like each other?"

"Right. Hmm. You couldn't get us out of this?" Kerry winced. "I have enough trouble doing that for the eight hours we're here for work."

"I tried." Dar lifted her hands and let them fall. "Alastair had already paid for the damn thing. We're kind of stuck."

They looked at each other. "Ew," Kerry finally sighed. "How are we going to do this?" She stood up and put the packet back down on Dar's desk, then circled around and perched on the edge of the wood next to where Dar was sitting. "We avoid the problem by avoiding each other during the day."

"Unfortunately true." The executive's lips twitched. "Even Mari says we click when we're together."

Kerry raked her fingers through her pale hair. "Maybe we can act it out," she said. "What's the most obvious stuff?"

Dar looked at her. "Well, for a start, I have to say you're the first assistant I've ever had who's made a habit of camping on my desk." She tweaked the edge of Kerry's skirt. "Most of them wouldn't get within ten feet of me."

Kerry's eyebrows lifted. "Their loss," she replied in a sultry tone which brought a genuine smile to her boss's face. Reflexively she reached out and touched Dar's cheek, letting her thumb trace the smile, then she uttered a soft sigh. "Two days, huh? This is going to be a bitch on wheels, Dar."

The smile widened slightly and Dar curled a hand around Kerry's knee and gave it a gentle squeeze. "We'll survive." She glanced at her watch. "Let's go to the damn meeting. I want to see Stevie baby's face when he sees what his email kicked off. What did he want from you, by the way?"

"Oh." Kerry stood, and backed out of Dar's way so she could stand up. "He wanted me to sell you out for the possibility of getting your job."

Dar paused in the middle of standing, then she slowly straightened and ran a hand through her hair. "Funny," she commented briefly. "That's the deal Elana took."

Kerry snorted. "I knew she was an idiot when I saw her. Trade you for this job? Give me a break." She bumped Dar lightly. "Not for any job on earth...or anything else on earth for that matter, or anything on Mars, Jupiter, the moon..."

Her words were abruptly cut off by a pair of warm lips and a fierce hug. "Mm," Kerry murmured, when they parted. "I'm not sure, but I think that might clue them in to our relationship, Dar." She leaned back in and ran her hands over the cool fabric of her lover's shirt and kissed her again.

"Yes it would, but thank you." Dar caressed her cheek, and pressed her lips against Kerry's forehead before she released her. "C'mon, we're going to be late."

THEY COULD HEAR the yelling halfway down the corridor. "Oh, this sounds pleasant." Dar muttered, glancing at her companion. Kerry pursed her lips in agreement and pulled the door to the conference room open, motioning Dar to precede her.

The loud voices ceased as her six-foot-plus frame cleared the door, and all eyes turned her way. Dar was aware of Kerry entering behind her, but she kept her attention on the group around the table and paused, putting her hands on her hips.

The silence went on for a long moment, then Dar lifted one elegant eyebrow. "Is there a problem?" she snapped, putting aggravation into her voice. "Or are you people just yelling at each other out of boredom?"

José stood up, or to be more accurate, stood further up, since he was already kneeling on one knee on his chair. He waved a familiar looking packet at her. "Have you seen this shit?" He slapped it on the table. "What is this crap?"

Dar's eyes went to Mariana, who was leaning with her fingertips on the table. "I take it you've filled everyone in?" She waited for the Personnel VP to nod.

"She certainly did." Eleanor tapped her pen on the table. "Good grief, Dar, surely they can't expect us to just pick up and go. We all have lives!" A sweet smile at the Operations VP. "At least most of us do, at any rate."

"Yeah, I'm not going along with this." Steven stated suddenly. "It's senseless."

Dar sauntered around to the head of the table, which they'd left conspicuously empty, and leaned on the back of the chair there. "It's paid for. We're going." she stated bluntly "It wasn't my idea, but Alastair's insistent, and that's all there is to it."

A chorus of voices thundered at her. Dar put up with it for a moment, then she straightened and sucked in a breath. "Shut the hell up!" she thundered, making the glasses on the sideboard rattle. Kerry's eyes widened and she slumped down in her chair a little in pure reaction as a conspicuous silence dropped over the room.

Dar let that go on a minute, then she pointed at Steven. "Next time, be careful what you ask for." She pitched her voice low, and her eyes swept over Eleanor and José. "You people had to start this, now Houston answered, and, by god, you're going to go to this stupid thing and not say another word about it, or I'm gonna take the charge for the course out of your damn paychecks!" Each word had gotten louder and more penetrating, until the last word barked out, making the glasses rattle again. "Understood?"

Silence.

"I'll, um, bring a deck of cards." Mark offered, hesitantly.

Steven snorted, and leaned back. "I'm not going," he stated, staring insolently at Dar.

"Jes, you are." José turned on him. "If I gotta do this, you gotta do this." The Sales VP gave the room a disgusted look. "Lemme go call my wife."

Mariana passed a packet out to each person. "There are instructions in here on what to bring and what not to bring. No electronics, no cell phones, that kind of thing. Four changes of comfortable clothing, sundries, and any prescription drugs you need. "

"Does that include tranquilizers?" Eleanor muttered, glancing at the glowering Dar. "I'll bring some extra."

"I'll bring the rifle for them." Dar responded. "How fast can you run?"

Duks had been fiddling with the packet, reviewing it. He glanced at his assistant, a young, heavysset woman with short blonde hair and thick glasses. "Sandy, you all right with this?"

She pushed her glasses up her nose. "Yes, I'll get mother to watch my cats. It'll be different, at least."

She glanced sideways at Kerry. "Have you been on one of these before?"

"No." Kerry had been keeping an eye on her boss, who still had distinct, angry waves pouring from her. "I never have, but I'm sure it'll be a learning experience, if nothing else." She glanced at Steven, whose face had settled into a grim mask, and whose eyes were fastened on Dar.

Duks rubbed his jaw as his glance followed Kerry's. "Oh, yeah." He nodded solemnly. "We are going to learn something. Of that, I'm sure."

Chapter Four

KERRY GLANCED BETWEEN two different shirts, then finally chose one and stuffed it in her overnight bag, which hadn't gotten much use since she'd moved in with Dar. Her lover had taken Chino in the cart and was scooting off across the island to the small Italian shop in the center to pick up two orders of pasta for dinner.

She finished packing her bag, zipping it up and trotting down the stairs, stopping to review the chewed boot that Chino had gotten to after the clever little puppy had escaped from her utility room dwelling.

"Ooo, you're a lucky little girl, Chino. This is an old one." she chuckled, turning it over and running a finger over the shredded heel. The puppy had pulled it out of Dar's closet, after turning over the wastepaper basket and managing to knock the phone off the hook.

A visit by the puppy sitter had returned her to her room, but now they had to figure out how she got out in the first place.

The back door opened as she passed through the kitchen, and Dar walked in, carrying the puppy under one arm, and a large, nice smelling bag under the other.

"Mm, that smells good." Kerry smiled, taking the bag from her. "I can just imagine what we're going to get at the retreat. What do you think, beanie weenies?"

Dar sighed, and put Chino down. The puppy immediately went to her bowl and started to lap water. "Probably. From what the packet said, it's very 'rustic', which usually means burgers and dogs. Guess it could be worse."

"Oh yeah. They could have picked one that only served raw vegetables. They have those you know. It combines a health food seminar with a corporate twist." Kerry teased. "Just your cup of tea."

A low snort. "I'd have flown to Houston and beaten Alastair with a bag of celery until he screamed if he'd done that to me and he knows it." Dar muttered. "It's going to be bad enough as it is." She tugged the two containers out of the bag and pulled out a long, fragrant loaf of garlic bread stuffed with cheese. "You all packed?"

"Mm hmm." Kerry retrieved some silverware and a pair of napkins and tugged Dar towards the living room. "C'mon, Dar. It's not going to be that bad. I bet everyone gets so involved in either what we're doing or in how uncomfortable they are that they'll forget how much we all don't like each other." She opened her container of pasta and breathed in the rich scent. "Mm..."

"I'm not nearly as worried about that as I am about us." Dar said. "I'm not that great an actor." Kerry set the container down and rested her elbows on her knees. "Maybe I could be sick tomorrow. Give it a skip. Or you could." She suggested. "If we're both not there, it won't be a problem. Will it?"

"Maybe." Dar sighed, prodding with a fork at her own dinner, a large pile of angel hair bolognaise. She split the garlic bread in half and gave Kerry her portion. "Here. That might work, but damn it, the whole thing is just ridiculous and if either of us duck out someone's gonna say something anyway."

"Well." Kerry accepted the fresh bread and tore off a chunk, dipping it in the Alfredo sauce and taking a bite. "I mean, we are all adults, after all, and professionals, for goodness sake. Surely we can get along for two days."

"Meh." Dar chewed a bit of her pasta. "I'm not sure I want to get along with everyone."

"Dar."

"Anyway, they send reports on us back to the office. Maybe that'll put a lid on things." Dar added. "Like a bunch of kids at camp."

"I never liked camp." Kerry remarked. "You mean Alastair gets to hear what we've been up to?"

"Yep." Dar gave Kerry a wry look, as the blonde woman flipped through the channels and settled on the History Channel. "That should kick start some cooperation. No one wants Alastair to know they acted like a cranky little baby."

Kerry licked her fingers. "Do you think he's really concerned about our office?" she asked. "You don't think he's buying into Steven's accusations, do you?"

Dar shrugged, as she plowed through a mouthful of her dinner. "Hard to say." she answered, after she swallowed. "How's your pasta?"

Kerry leaned over and kissed her gently. "Taste for yourself." She teased, then offered Dar a forkful.

"Uh uh." Dar evaded the fork and went for the source, running her tongue over Kerry's lips before she returned the kiss, putting her almost finished container down on the coffee table and freeing up her hands to stroke Kerry's face, then travel down her shoulders. "Oh yeah, I like that."

"Me too." Kerry put her own dish down, and turned her attention fully to her companion's body, which her hands were itching to feel. She loved the silky texture of Dar's skin, and her fingers slid beneath the cotton t-shirt eagerly as they spent a leisurely few minutes exploring each other. She nuzzled Dar's neck and tucked a playful touch under the waistband of her jeans, feeling the muscles contract giving her easy passage. "Wanna give 'In Search of Ancient Mysteries' a miss?" she inquired softly.

"This qualifies, doesn't it?" Dar replied with a chuckle, as she teased a shirt button loose.

"Who you calling ancient?" Kerry bit down on a tasty earlobe, feeling the laugh travel through Dar's body. "Hmm?" She tickled Dar's belly button, an area she'd discovered was very sensitive.

"C'mon, I hear a nice, warm waterbed whispering my name." She nipped the soft skin on Dar's neck, then glanced up. "Hey!"

Dar reacted, her body shifting as she straightened up. "What in...oh." A soft laugh. "Chino, what do you think you're doing?"

The puppy was busted, tiny paws propped up on the low table, face covered in bolognaise sauce, wide brown eyes fastened on them in a big, canine "uh oh." A thin strand of spaghetti drooped from her mouth, and the pink tongue licked at it.

"Bad puppy!" Kerry scolded her sternly, getting a tail wag. "No, don't wag your little butt at me. Bad girl!"

The small, creamy ears drooped and she dropped off the table, sitting down and looking up at them through dark eyelashes. The effect was ruined by a satisfied lip lick, however. Both women laughed. "Oh, it's not funny." Dar sighed. "But I can't help it; look at that puss."

"Yeah, she's got a better pout than you do." Kerry replied with a faint giggle.

Both dark eyebrows lifted. "I most certainly do not have a pout," Dar stated sternly.

Kerry traced the warm, coral colored lips with a delicate finger. "Yes you do. When you want something you know is bad for you," she teased gently. "Like that cake I made for your birthday." The lips edged in a sheepish grin. "See?" She laughed. "I love that smile."

"Does that mean I get the cake?" Dar asked ingeniously. She reached down and tickled Chino's ears, and the puppy stumbled over, putting her paws up on the edge of the couch and licking Kerry's arm.

"I bet you'd like some too, hmm?"

"No no no. No chocolate for her." Kerry rubbed the silky ears. "I'm glad Colleen agreed to come puppy sit. I'd feel really bad leaving her here with just the island people dropping in once in a while." She flicked a glance to Dar. "That is okay, right?"

"Mm hmm," Dar agreed. "That works. I was going to see if Clemente could have someone hang out in here, but Colleen's a better choice, even if I do think she's still a little unsure about me." She tugged lightly on a lock of Kerry's hair.

Kerry sighed. "It's...she just worries about me, that's all. She thinks it's great we're together, but the work thing weirds her out," She admitted, slowly. "And it is sort of weird. I feel like I'm two different people sometimes."

"Mm, yeah, me too." Dar agreed.

"And I feel so..." Kerry pushed a lock of Dar's hair back. "I get upset when you get so stressed, like when you were yelling at everyone at the meeting today. My guts hurt me," she admitted. "I got so mad at that creep today, I almost slapped him in the lunchroom, and it wasn't because I felt he was insulting my intelligence. It was just that he was doing something to get at you, and I just couldn't stand it."

Dar remained quiet, letting the puppy chew on her fingers while she considered Kerry's words.

"Sorry," She finally muttered. "It's just the way I do things."

"I know." Kerry smiled a little. "It's just..." She paused. "Your reputation is based on reality, and I forget that sometimes, because I know you mostly like this." She put a hand on Dar's cheek. "I forget most everyone else sees a different picture."

Dar exhaled. "You make me sound very schizophrenic." She made a wry face. "And unfortunately, you're going to have to live with Ms. Hyde this weekend. I'll apologize in advance."

Kerry laughed ruefully. "Probably better off that way or I'm liable to forget and start hugging you in front of everyone." She demonstrated, settling more comfortably as Dar returned the hug.

"Mm, that feels so good. "

"How about we get rid of our plates and keep searching?" Dar rumbled, right into her ear, the warm breath sending a light, pleasant shiver down Kerry's back. "I don't want to think or talk about work any more tonight."

Kerry murmured agreement as she nipped her way along Dar's collarbone. She broke off reluctantly and turned to grab the containers, only to find a cream colored puppy with an Alfredo colored nose licking her chops. "Oh, poo, Dar. She's going to be sick to her stomach."

Dar lifted the pasta containers out of Chino's reach and brought them into the kitchen, putting them in the garbage and dropping the silverware into the dishwasher. Kerry slid up behind her and captured her with a solid grip around her waist. "Whoa." The hands slipped up under her shirt and explored her skin, making her knees shiver and almost unlock, and she grabbed the counter momentarily for balance.

Then she turned and met the relentless attack, wrapping her fingers in Kerry's blonde hair. She ducked her head as the smaller woman pressed up against her, losing herself in the intense passion and letting the complications of her life drop away, fogging her awareness as her heart started pounding.

"I love you," Kerry said as they stopped to take a breath, "and pretending not to is going to kick my ass."

"Likewise." Dar kissed her on the lips, gently nudging her towards the bedroom.

KERRY BECAME AWARE of her surroundings when a sharp crack of thunder rattled the windows. She blinked her eyes open and glanced at the clock, realizing that though it was close to dawn, the weather was keeping it very dark outside.

Thunder rolled again, accompanied by several flashes of lightning. She peeked up to see the dim reflection of the clock's light against half open blue eyes. "Sounds nasty."

"Uh huh," Dar agreed.

"You're not considering going out and running in this, are you?"

"No," Dar mumbled as she ran light fingertips across Kerry's bare ribs. "You think I'm nuts?"

"Just checking." Kerry nuzzled the soft breast she was resting on. "You've been very consistent lately."

Her lover snuggled closer, and made a soft noise deep in her throat. "Running is a good way to start out the day. It kinda clears my head and gives me a little time to think." Thunder grumbled overhead. "However, this is perfect sleeping in weather," she muttered.

Kerry eyed the rain lashing against the window, along with the almost constant flashes of lightning. "Yeah, it sure is." She slid a knee between Dar's thighs and went belly to belly with her, curling an arm around her back and exhaling contentedly. "Well, we have an hour or so before we have to get up, then."

"Mm hmm." Dar tugged the covers a little closer, and let her eyes slide shut.

The phone rang.

Dar cursed softly, and untangled one arm, reaching out and capturing the instrument. "Yeah?"

"Dar, it's Mark." The MIS chief sounded pissed.

"What's up?" Dar answered, stifling a yawn. "Meteor fall on Houston or something?"

"Worse. The overseas gateways are down. Exxon tanker dropped anchor in the wrong place going across the North Atlantic and snagged the cable. Took out three hundred pairs."

"Ugh." Dar winced. "Jesus, can we reroute?" She felt Kerry stir against her, and she stroked the woman's back lightly. "Oh shit! They've got a transatlantic sales meeting with four new British clients this morning!"

"I know," Mark replied, "that's why I'm calling. The shit's going to hit the fan in so many directions, we might as well set up a freaking stand and sell fertilizer." A soft sound of clicking keys came through the phone. "One of the pairs that were cut was the admin line. They can't tell who's up and who's down, and they can't reroute until they get some diagnostics over the cable. It could take hours, maybe all day."

"Can we buy transponder time and go via sat?" Kerry uttered, very softly.

Dar considered that for a minute.

"Did you say something, Dar?" Mark inquired. "Thought I heard something."

Tell him? What the hell, he knows she logs on from here all the time. "Kerry suggested a possibility. Switch it to a sat conference and rent uplink time."

"Oh yeah? Uh, tell her I said hi." Mark's voice held a touch of triumphant amusement, despite the circumstances. "That's...well, they were going to do a multimedia real time. I'm not sure the sat can handle that kind of bandwidth, but it's a thought. We'd have to reconfigure all the sets here, and there for the different network type. I'd have to put that on the fiber backbone."

"Is there any other possibility? Other than the reroute, which we have no reasonable ETA on?"

Dar inquired.

"Not that I can see, boss. That's why I was calling you." Mark replied. "Got two for the price of one too. Kerry was next on my list of notifies."

"Please don't page me," Kerry mumbled. "I left it on vibrate and it's on the dresser. It always scares the crap out of me when it goes off."

Dar muffled a laugh. "Okay, contact Intelsat, see if we can get one, no, get two transponders, and bring some of your people in early to go up and reconfigure the presentation system in the big conference room." She gave Kerry a hug. "Good work." she mouthed.

Kerry shrugged modestly. "I learned from the best," she mouthed back, resting her chin on Dar's breastbone with a contented sigh.

"Okay, will do." Mark replied, amid another clatter of keys and a rumble of thunder. "See ya in the office."

"I'll bring pastalitos," Dar remarked wryly, "and lots of Cuban coffee." She hung up, then sighed as she regarded the dimly seen ceiling. "So much for sleeping in."

Kerry didn't let go of her. "Why? Is there anything you can do in the next hour there?" she asked, reasonably. "It's going to take at least that long for Mark to get someone at Intelsat to answer him, considering they're in California and it's only quarter to six here." She started a slow, teasing rubbing up and down Dar's belly, running her fingers over the lightly rippled surface in little circles.

Dar hesitated, torn between a natural urge to pounce on the situation, and her body's insidious desire to remain right where she was, in this nice, warm cuddle, where she could almost feel the affection surrounding her in the circle of Kerry's arms.

Unsurprisingly, her body won out and she capitulated, resettling her hold around her lover's body, and exhaling softly. "You're right. No sense in going in there just to pace around the carpet." The gentle stroking was relaxing her and she felt her eyes flutter closed as she eased forward, finding Kerry's lips waiting for her.

They were both too sleepy to go too far, but they spent a very pleasant half an hour in nibbling and touching each other, until the reluctant gray light warned them of the growing dawn. Dar stretched and rolled out of bed, offering a hand down to her languidly watching lover. "I'm gonna go take a shower. The coffee should be ready."

"Y'know..." Kerry hopped out of the waterbed. "It would save time if we showered together."

Dar's dark brow lifted. "Oh it would, would it?" She laughed. "And save water, too, maybe," she agreed. "All right, let's go." She lead the way into the bathroom, flipping on the light and ducking into the free standing stall shower to start the water running.

"Mm." Kerry curled an arm around her, and nipped her waistline. "You know, Dar, I think the thought of not being able to touch you for two and a half days is making me...um..." She hesitated.

"Horny," Dar supplied, giving her a quick kiss. "That's all right." She smiled at the dull red flush that covered Kerry's neck and face. "C'mere." She drew Kerry into the shower, and let the warm, pulsing water cascade over both of them. Then she picked up a natural sponge, added some liquid soap to it, and started scrubbing Kerry's body.

"Mmm." Kerry swayed a little, then captured her own bit of sponge and returned the service, rubbing the soft surface against Dar's tanned skin. She'd gotten halfway around her ribcage before she found herself sliding closer and replacing the sponge with her lips, unable to deny her body's cravings.

Dar responded, dropping soap slick hands down over Kerry's hips, pulling her forward and into the intense flow from the shower head. She let herself forget the time as Kerry's hands slid up her thigh and then allowed a spiral of passion to take them over, building to a fiery intensity. It left

them both shaking as Dar leaned back against the water warmed shower tile and managed to keep her legs from collapsing under her. "Whoa."

Kerry sucked in a breath that was half heated skin, and half chlorine tinted water, with the soft tang of their soap on the peripheries. "Oh..." She caught her breath, and bumped her head against Dar's arm. "Guess we're skipping breakfast this morning."

Dar chuckled, on an uneven breath. "Thought that was breakfast." They finished showering and got out, wrapping towels around each other and easing into the living room. They could hear faint whines as Chino heard them moving.

"Okay," Dar sighed, running her fingers through her damp hair. "Onward to Hell." She gave Kerry's blonde head one last kiss. "Oh Eleanor, you wish you had as much of a life as I do."

Chapter Five

KERRY REACHED OVER and flicked her computer on as she sat down at her desk. She glanced at her inbox and took a sip of fragrant, steaming coffee. Leaning back in her comfortable leather chair and smiling a little, she rested her head against the soft surface as she waited for her computer to finish booting up.

It did, and she was logging in when her phone rang. She punched the button. "Kerry Stuart."

"Hi, Kerry? It's John Brown in Charlotte." The man's voice sounded harried but friendly. He was a supervisor in the networking office, she recalled.

"Good morning, John. What can I do for you?" She answered cordially.

"Well, um, I got a request from your office, and I just wanted to check it out with someone. I don't want to do something then get my ass nailed, if you know what I mean. I tried Ms. Robert's office first, but she's not there."

"She's just down the hall in Ops, but what's the problem?" Kerry inquired curiously. "What did we ask for?"

"It's the fractional T1 we use for the insurance division's data transfer. We got a request to turn their link off and reroute network traffic from your office to the London conference center," John replied. "They're gonna go bonkershits if we do that, so-- "

Kerry's brow creased. "We asked for that? Wait, no, I mean, I know we've got a problem with the overseas links, but we found a way around that. Who made the request?"

Ruffle of papers. "Someone named Fab--Fabarini or something," he muttered. "I didn't get the spelling. One of my guys took the call and he gave it to me to check out." A pause. "You want me to go ahead?"

Kerry drummed her fingers on her desk. "No," she replied evenly. "In fact, don't do anything from this office unless you get it from Dar, Mark, or me."

A long pause. "Uh, okay," John replied, obviously confused. "I mean, usually I wouldn't question stuff like that. I mean you guys ask for shuffling all the time, but this seemed a little drastic, you know?"

That stupid piece of-- "Yes, I know, but, as a favor to me, just clear everything through Operations here first, okay?"

"Sure." John agreed amiably. "Better for me that way so I don't get my ass nailed from Insurance and Banking when they find out their pipe got taken down." He rattled a few keys. "Thanks, Kerry."

"No problem," Kerry responded, and hung up. She stewed for a moment, then she stood, about to head out the door to find Dar. The phone rang before she could move, though, and she punched the button again. "Kerry Stuart."

"This is José." The VP's voice sounded flustered. "We're having a meeting here. Come down. I can't find Dar."

Green eyes regarded the phone. "Sure," Kerry replied. "Be right there." She circled her desk and strode out of her office, heading for the large conference room at the end of the hall. She opened the door, seeing a group of six or seven people inside, and walked on in.

"We were heading right for disaster!" Steven Fabricini was insisting, thumping a fist on the table. "Can you imagine the egg on our face?" He turned and saw Kerry approaching. "And you people didn't do a goddamned thing about it! This is disgraceful!" He threw his hands up. "If I hadn't been here, I can only imagine what would have happened!" A pause. "Nice of you to show up, waltzing in here at nine o'clock."

Kerry paused and regarded him, then walked around to an empty chair and sat down, folding her hands on the table. "Mind starting at the beginning? I'm not sure what you're talking about."

José threw a pencil on the table. "We have a big goddamn conference with the overseas office in London and the lines are down."

Kerry nodded slowly. "The intercontinental trunks, yes. We were notified," She replied calmly, savoring what she knew was coming. "I was paged this morning."

"And you did nothing," Steven fumed. "Well, I took care of it. I have the network office tying in some extra lines for us, so we'll be okay."

Kerry cocked her head. "No you don't," She replied calmly. "Netops cleared it through us, and I told them not to do it."

"What?" José sat up. "Are you crazy woman?"

"That's it! I knew it. You are trying to sabotage us," Fabricini accused, leaning on his hands.

Kerry exhaled. "Those extra circuits belong to a live account, which you were going to take down without any prior notification, so yes, I told them not to do it." She stood and put her hands on her hips. "And it's not needed, because we already have an alternate link up."

Silence. "What?" José asked again, looking at Steven. "You said there was nothing." He looked back at Kerry. "No one was in your office. We called three times!"

Kerry shrugged. "No one paged me," she replied simply. "Or called my cell phone, or left me voice mail, or contacted Maria. Seems to me someone didn't try very hard to find out if we were doing something."

She brushed a fleck of dust off her sleeve, then she walked over to the presentation computer, and signed into it, hitting the key which would switch the output to the overhead screen. She waited, then accessed their intranet, and started a conferencing session. A list of remote offices popped up, the London one conspicuously in the center. "There you go." She glanced up. "Is there anything else I can do? I've got a pretty big inbox to clear before we leave this afternoon."

Steven wasn't finished. "Okay, so who did you steal lines from?" he asked, sarcastically.

Kerry smiled at him, with no humor in her face. "No one. We bought sat time and used an uplink," she replied briefly. "And it's been done since before dawn, so I guess you can say I've been working for three hours longer than you have." She gave them all a look, then walked around the table and headed for the door.

"You should have let us know," José interrupted her. "You can't blame us for thinking we were high and dry, Ms Stuart. I have a department and company to protect here."

Kerry turned at the door, and regarded him. "You're right," she told him, sincerely. "We should have paged you, but we were hoping to get the alternate route up before anyone even realized there was a problem." she admitted "I apologize for that. I'll make sure you get notified the next time."

José fiddled with his tie. "Exactly, exactly, yes. Good." He nodded, then waved at his secretary. "Get this conference hooked up, will you?"

Kerry slipped out the door, glancing back in as she closed it and seeing the hostile eyes watching her. She sighed and let the lock click behind her, leaning against the wall as she willed her body to stop shaking.

She hated face-to-face conflict like that. All at once, her stomach rebelled, and she got to the ladies room just in time to lose her breakfast, her body violently reacting to the sudden, unexpected stress.

She leaned against the wall afterward, closing her eyes and hoping her stomach would settle.

"Okay, Kerry, just relax. You've been in more tense situations than that. What's up with you?" she asked herself silently. And it was true, she had, with her father, with Dar-- So why did this bastard get to her like this?

She sighed, and trudged to the sink, washing her mouth out and splashing water over her face, which felt overheated. She was just drying her face off with a paper towel when footsteps approached, and she glanced up as the door swung open and a familiar dark head poked in. "Oh, hi," she greeted Dar. "I was just coming to look for you."

Dar slipped inside and let the door close. "I was just coming to look for you." She gazed at Kerry. "You okay?"

Embarrassed, Kerry nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." She decided Dar didn't need any more stress of her own. "I was just making sure the conference went off. I logged on and confirmed the London servers were accessible from the big presentation room."

The blue eyes studied her in puzzled concern for a moment. "Good, good, I'm glad you did that." Dar glanced behind her then came closer, very gently touching Kerry's cheek. "You look really pale. You sure you're okay?"

Kerry also glanced around, conscious of how public a place they were in. "Yeah, I'm sure. Something disagreed with me, maybe that meat pastelito I had." She put a hand over her stomach. "But I'm fine now."

Dar stepped back, giving her a relieved nod. "Oh, yeah, they were kinda greasy this morning," she commented. "Well, if that crisis is done, I've got another one for us to work on."

Kerry exhaled. "Lead on," she responded. "What's up now?" She followed Dar outside and down the hall hearing the faint sounds of the presentation going on in the conference room.

"We took over a manufacturing plant's IS and we've got two mainframes down," Dar responded.

"And?" Kerry inquired. "That doesn't sound too tough."

"It's in Hong Kong," Dar replied dryly, "which now has a technology restriction and we can't get parts in to fix them."

"Oh." The blonde chewed her lip. "That sucks."

"Mm. "

"Smuggle the chips inside fortune cookies?"

Dar chuckled wryly as they headed down the corridor.

"DAR?" MARIA'S VOICE broke into her concentration, as she poured over circuiting diagrams. Dar glanced up with a start, aware suddenly of the time.

"Yes?" She asked, checking her watch. Shit.

"Mariana just called. The bus is here." The secretary said. "She asks are you ready?"

Dar sat back, regarding the pile on her desk with a look of mild disgust. "No, but that's not going to stop this thing from happening, is it?" she muttered in response "I've got a six inch stack of paper I need to go over and three reports that are due."

She sighed and rubbed her temples. "Tell her I'll change and be down in the lobby in ten minutes. You might want to call Kerry, and see if she's headed down."

"Not quite," a soft voice answered from the inner door.

Dar glanced up to see Kerry's head poking into her office "Never mind on that last, Maria. She's right here. "

"Okay. I will wrap things up here, Dar. Try to have a good weekend, okay?" Even Maria sounded doubtful. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Dar sighed. "You have a good weekend too, Maria." She glanced at Kerry. "You ready?"

Kerry entered, already changed into jeans and a sweatshirt. "As I ever will be." She gave Dar a wry look. "I finished up everything I could Dar, but there's still a lot of stuff pending, cleanup from this morning, and what not."

"I know," Dar sighed, and stood up, stretching her six foot plus frame out and rolling her neck around to loosen it. "What a day. All right, let me go get out of this monkey suit and we'll head down." She stepped around the desk and held her arms out. "One for the road?"

Dar got no argument from Kerry. She slid into Dar's embrace, feeling the cool silk under her fingers that warmed as she closed her arms around Dar's body. "Mmm--" She sensed the pressure of lips against her head, and she let herself absorb the sweet feeling, wishing she could just stay like this and not have to get on that damned bus.

After a long moment, they parted reluctantly, and Dar let her fingers brush across Kerry's cheek.

"I resent having to spend an entire weekend pretending not to be desperately in love with you," she stated seriously. "I think I resent that more than having to go in the first place."

Kerry blushed a little. "I just hope I don't slip up and forget you're just my boss," she admitted.

"You'd better stay far away from me at night." She gave Dar a pat. "Go change. I'll get my bag."

Dar sighed, watching her leave before she went over to the small closet in her office and opened it. Inside were her bag and a hanger ready for her suit to fit on. She kicked off her shoes into the closet and flexed her toes against the carpet as she shrugged out of her jacket and set it to one side. "Damn it," she muttered. "I should have just called Alastair and said forget it. This is nuts." She slipped off her skirt and hose and traded them for a pair of worn jeans from her bag, buttoning them and glancing at her reflection in the door's full length mirror as she unfolded a cotton polo shirt to put on.

"Hmph," she grunted as she shook the shirt out. "Starting to look like you can kick some ass again, Roberts. Been a while." She pulled the polo over her head and tucked it into the waistband of the jeans, adding a leather belt and buckling it.

She heard Kerry returning as she brought her bag over to the couch and sat down to put her hiking boots on. A moment later, the door opened and her lover appeared, carrying her own bag and running her fingers through her pale hair. "Hey."

"Dar, it's cold out," Kerry scolded. "You need a sweater or something. You're going to catch a chill." She dug through her boss's bag, and retrieved a soft, fleece sweatshirt. "Put this on."

"Yes, mother," Dar chuckled, but did as she was told, slipping the fabric over her head and adjusting the waistband. "Better?"

Kerry reviewed the rich, crimson color against Dar's tanned skin and dark hair, and smiled. "Oh, I like that. You look really good in red." She shouldered her bag and exhaled. "Okay, let's go." They went down the hall to the elevator and got in, riding it down in silence and exchanging one, last look before the door opened.

The rest of the group was there waiting, and Dar and Kerry collected several annoyed looks as they joined them. "Sorry," Dar addressed the woman sent to collect them. "Just tying up loose ends."

The woman, a perky blonde with an infectious smile, nodded. "Well, that's great, glad you could join us." She checked her clipboard. "You would be Roberts and Stuart, right?"

Dar nodded. "Yep."

"Excellent. Well, okay. My name's Skippy, and I'll be your guide during the seminar." She checked her list. "What we're going to do is get on board the bus and get started. The camp is about three and a half hours north of here. On the way we'll have you fill out some questionnaires, and pass out a little snack in case anyone gets hungry, okay?"

"A snack?" José objected. "Hey, come on now, most of us didn't get lunch." He glanced around, twitching his jacket closed. "It's almost six o'clock." Several other people nodded with him.

"All right." Skippy didn't miss a beat. "We also have some full dinners on board, so let's get going, and I'll explain more about the program when we're on the way." She checked them over as they boarded the huge, chartered bus. "Now, no one has anything nasty, like a computer, or anything like that, right?" she reminded them. "We're trying to get your minds into a different space this weekend."

"I wonder how many people have asked her if she has any peanut butter." Duks commented in a low murmur, causing Dar to chuckle. "I cannot believe I am doing this, my friend, or that you are, for that matter."

Dar shrugged. "What choice did we have? Hope everyone lives through it," she replied laconically as she watched Kerry board, then stepped up after her, glad to leave the thick, diesel smell behind. The bus was plush, with two rows of seats going back on either side, spaced far enough apart to provide a decent amount of leg space.

There was really no excuse to squeeze in, so Dar reluctantly went past the row Kerry had settled in, and slid into the next row, pushing the arm between the two seats up and stretching out. If she leaned against the window, she could see Kerry's head doing the same and as she watched, the blonde woman turned and peeked back through the opening at her.

Kerry stuck her tongue out and made Dar smile, but she quickly stopped as Steven settled in the seat across from her, his dark eyes regarding her coolly. Duks took the seat behind her, and Mariana took the one behind Steven, and she briefly kicked herself for not arranging to do the same with Kerry.

Great. Now she was stuck looking at Steven's obnoxious puss for three hours. With an aggrieved sigh, Dar propped one knee up, and rested her arm against it as the bus pulled out of the parking lot into the fading twilight.

"HERE YOU GO," Skippy smiled at Kerry as she handed her a clipboard with a sheaf of papers on it. "Just fill everything out, and feel free to ask me if you have any questions."

Kerry took the papers. "Okay. What's this all for?" She asked, glancing at the forms.

Skippy put a hand on the seat back next to her. "Well, it's so we know you better and can tailor the seminar more closely to your needs."

"Ah, wouldn't it have been more efficient to give us these earlier?" Kerry asked curiously. "I mean it's not like you'll have much time to do any tinkering."

Skippy's perky smile became a little fixed. "Why, we'll stay up all night if we have to, don't you worry. Just fill out that information for us."

Kerry pulled the cap off her pen and studied the papers. "If I didn't know better I'd say this was just to keep us busy on the trip," she murmured with a shake of her head. "Because I don't know how much tailoring you're going to get done with a list of my favorite library books."

"Now, now, you just let us do our jobs. That information tells our analysts a lot about you,"

Skippy informed her as she escaped down the row, handing Dar her clipboard and leaning over to give Steven his. "There you go--any questions?"

"Yeah, do you have an assigned seat, or can you help me fill mine out?" Steven asked her, giving the young blonde a smile.

Skippy beamed at him "Well, let me pass out the rest of these, and I'll come back to give you a hand, okay?" She scuttled down the aisle, making sure everyone had a clipboard. "Yes sir?" She leaned over where Duks was seated. "Did you need something? A pen?"

Duks held up one of his never-ending supply of mechanical pencils. "No, thank you."

"You must be an accountant." She smiled at him. "They always have those things."

Duks nodded gravely at her. "When you graduate from college with a financial degree, they give you a dozen cases of them," he assured her. "With your name on them." He held his up. "See?"

"Oh, yes." Skippy edged away from him, and turned a bright smile on Dar, who was neatly printing in her name. "And what are you?"

"Trouble," Dar replied, peering at her from under dark lashes, and leaving a faint smile on her lips.

"Ah." Skippy backed off. "Well, how about some pop, huh? We've got cola, orange, and lime."

"Milk," Dar replied, intent on sucking as much enjoyment out of the weekend as she could. That included tormenting little blonde girls who were far too perky for their own good.

"Milk, okay, I think we have some of that. Let me go look." She escaped down the row towards the front of the bus, where Eleanor and her assistant were installed in regal splendor.

The Marketing VP, a colorful, warm woven throw tucked around her knees, and her assistant, a tall, thin man with nervously blinking eyes and thick glasses were hunched over their forms. Just about everyone else had chosen to wear jeans, except for José, who was in a pair of neatly pressed chinos and a guyabera.

Dar tucked her knees up and rested her clipboard against them, chewing on her pen top as she studied the forms. They were a collection of questions meant to probe her innermost psyche, she reasoned. Otherwise, why ask if she liked chicken instead of fish, or if she picked an aisle seat or a window in an airplane?

She half believed Kerry was right. This stuff was just to keep them occupied for a while until they got there or until the boredom of the trip set in and they fell asleep.

Skippy came back and handed Dar a small carton of milk, then sat down next to Steven and started going over the questions with him.

"Psst." A soft whisper caught her attention, and she glanced over at the back of the next seat.

Kerry's green eyes were peering at her.

"Yeah?" she asked softly.

"Do we get points if we can answer more than ten percent of the questions with 'none of the above'?" Kerry inquired. "I hate all those animals in question six."

"Hey!" José's voice rose. "What do you mean here, relations with animals? What kind of people do you think we are?"

"Sir. That means pets." Skippy smiled perkily at him. "You know, like doggies and kitties. Do you have any loved pets?" Her smile faded. "Not do you, uh, love pets, not in that way...um, we really don't...care to know about that."

"What about my python?" Duks commented dryly from his dark corner. "Do you consider the rats I feed her pets too?"

Dar covered her eyes and bit back a laugh.

"Um, well, no, because they're kind of, um, transient, right? We mean permanent pets," Skippy replied. "Like those that are there all the time."

"Like my Sweetie Pie," Mariana mused, from her seat across from Dar. "She's the prettiest parrot."

Skippy smiled at her. "See? Yes, that's what I meant."

"Mm. I loved her so much. I had her stuffed when she died," the Personnel VP added. "Now she's the most permanent thing in the house."

Dar clamped her jaw muscles tightly.

"You people are so disrespectful," Steven said sharply. "This woman is here to do a job, and you all think it's a joke." He glared at them, and Skippy beamed gratefully at him. "The company takes this seriously, and you should too." He sat down, smiling at the guide as she eased into the seat next to him.

Dar sighed, and went back to scribbling.

The droning of the bus's tires finally changed, and Dar shifted, blinking her eyes and glancing out the window. It was pitch dark outside, only the very occasional lamp flicking by along with the rare, desultory billboard. She glanced to her left, between the seats, and spotted the gentle curve of Kerry's cheek as the blonde woman dozed, her head resting against the chilly window. Across from her, Steven and Skippy were conversing in low tones, and everyone else seemed to have fallen asleep. Dar straightened, and checked her watch, then stood and stretched the kink out of her back from the semi comfortable seat. "Almost there?" she inquired quietly.

Skippy turned her head. "Yes. We just turned off the expressway. We've got a little bit to go yet." She replied cheerfully. "It's way, way out there. We wanted to get to where you couldn't hear the traffic at all."

Dar leaned against her seat back and peered out the window. A billboard went by. "Aardvark Bail Bonds," she commented, "next right." Her head turned. "Guess you're not the only ones who wanted some privacy."

Skippy blinked at her. "What do you mean?"

Dar peered out again. "Bill's Bail Haven," she enunciated. "No waiting, six lines." Her blue eyes regarded her wryly. "We're out near Stark."

"Stark?" Steven asked, obviously disgruntled at having his discussion interrupted. "What are you talking about, Dar?"

"The federal penitentiary," came the droll response. "There's also a state jail out near here if I'm not mistaken. No wonder it's empty."

"Oh, well, we're not going there," Skippy assured her. "It's a camp just west of here, really. We wouldn't take you to a prison."

"Oh, I don't know," Steven sniped. "I'd like to see that, myself."

Dar gazed at him. "Steven, you'd have a lot more to worry about than I would," she replied silkily.

He leaned back. "Oh, I don't think so. I think those women would knock that tough attitude of yours right off."

Dar put her hands on her hips, and smiled at him. "They might try. Idiots have been known to." Skippy had been watching them, her head bobbing between them like an errant, blonde ping-pong ball. "Oh, do you two know each other well?" she asked brightly.

Steven studied Dar's tall form speculatively. "C'mon, Dar. Those days are long behind you. Cut the crap." He laughed. "When was the last time you even hit the mat?"

"Mat?" Skippy seemed to sense a fight, and dove into an attempt to divert it. "What kind of mats are those? Are you into aerobics? I am."

Dar decided to ignore them, and instead strolled off down the aisle, ending up in the back of the bus where there was a toilet and a small refrigerator. Dar opened the fridge, finding a can of Yoo-hoo to her muted delight. She also picked up a bag of pretzels and held on as the bus took a right turn and slowed drastically.

"Oh, we're almost there." Skippy stood up and went to her seat at the front, gathering up her stack of paper and peering out the front window. "Okay, folks. You'd better wake up, because the road gets a little bumpy up here and I don't want anyone to get scared." Her perky voice stirred the rest of the group, who struggled awake, peering around.

Dar made her way back to her seat and dropped into it, opening her soda and sucking at it in silence. A blonde head appeared over the seat in front of her and she glanced up, only just barely keeping herself from giving Kerry a friendly smile. The green eyes, amber in the bus's low light, twinkled a little in acknowledgment. She offered Kerry some pretzels.

"Thanks," Kerry replied politely, selecting one and munching on it.

The bus turned to the right again and now it felt like they were going over a thousand bumps, the vibration rattling through them unpleasantly.

"Jesu Christo," José blurted. "What kind of place is this we're going to?" They all peered out the windows, but could only see darkness and trees, whose leaves slapped against the bus's tall sides. After ten minutes of rattling, the bus slowed and pulled in under some kind of portal, now rocking unevenly as the road turned to soft dirt.

Finally, the bus stopped and the interior lights came on. "Okay." Skippy faced them. "We're in front of the main hall. We're going to get off the bus and I'll walk you over to your cabin." She checked a list. "We have some hot coffee in the hall and some sandwiches if you're hungry, but this camp is not a luxury hotel, okay?"

"Does that mean we have only mustard or catsup but not both?" Duks commented dryly as he hefted his bag to his shoulder.

Skippy smiled. "You'll see. We try to make it so you don't concentrate on your surroundings, but on each other instead." She led the way. "Well, let's get started!"

They got off the bus and were assaulted by cold air full of the smell of pine and sand. In front of them was a wooden building with a porch that circled most of it, and they followed Skippy up the stairs and through the swinging door.

It was a drab place and Dar was forcibly reminded of a few Navy camps she'd been in during her younger years. There were trestle tables arranged in neat rows, with long, narrow benches next to them, and faded banners on the walls. The place had been swept, but it was chilled inside, and only three lights were on, lending a dank, almost dingy quality to it. "Nice," she stated with a shake of her head. "What is this place?"

Skippy looked up from her papers. "It's a YMCA camp," she replied, with a slightly smug smile. Eleanor had been looking around and now she stared at the woman, aghast. "You can't expect us to stay in this disgusting place." She tugged her jacket around her. "This is ludicrous."

José stepped up next to her. "I must agree. This is not a place for people like us." He waved a hand at her. "There must be a hotel around here."

Duks perched on the edge of a table. "I could protest this on religious grounds," he stated, mildly, glancing at Mariana. "Do I have a case?"

The Personnel VP blew out a breath. "I have to admit, this is not what I expected from your company," she addressed Skippy. "I know this is not the kind of facility they used in Houston." Steven had been roaming around, studying the walls. "Oh, I don't know. It's not so bad." He turned a smile on them. "Kinda reminds me of when I was a Boy Scout." He spread his arms out. "C'mon, it's only for two nights. Lots of fresh air would probably do us all some good." He took in a deep breath.

As though by common accord they all turned to Dar, who was leaning against the wall. The tall Operations VP shrugged. "I've been in worse," she commented. "My guess is there's no other place around here, right?" Her eyes went to Skippy.

"No." The perky blonde looked disturbed. "They assured us you wouldn't have any problem with this place. We were very explicit in describing it."

José snorted. "They must be laughing their asses off at us." He spat disgustedly. "Big joke, big joke, wait until I get back there. I'm going to call up those bastards and give them a piece of my mind." He pointed at Dar. "See what you got us into?"

"Yes, I hold you responsible for this, Dar." Eleanor agreed. "What were you thinking of?"

Mariana got between them. "Wait a minute. This has nothing to do with Dar."

"Of course it does," Steven interrupted smoothly. "Her lack of cooperation is what landed us here, Mariana, but now that we're here, we might as well make the best of it." He smiled at Skippy, who still appeared very upset. "I'm sure we'll carry on, despite what old Dar's gotten us into."

"That's a very good attitude St...I mean, Mr. Fabricini," Skippy asserted.

Dar gave them all a dour look, realizing Steven had won a point. "Arguing about this right now is pointless," she stated evenly. "We can discuss it when we get back to Miami, or better yet, we can all take a flight over to Houston and talk about it with Alastair directly."

That threat got a wide-eyed response. "Right now, let's just get through this." She looked over at Skippy. "You were going to take us over to a cabin? I think some sleep would be a good idea."

"Um, right, okay, let's go." The guide knew when to beat a retreat. "Right this way. Now, we put sheets and blankets on the bunks. It's a little nippy tonight, so I have someone out checking for space heaters, but we don't have those right now." She led the way across the dark ground towards a smaller, wooden structure. "Here we are." She opened the door and stood back to let them enter. "Watch your step."

It was, Kerry decided, pretty horrifying. She'd been to camps, sure, but the ones her parents had sent her to had carpet on the floors and private bunks for each camper. This was not like that. It was basically two rooms with a shared bathroom in the middle, featuring wooden framed bunks against the walls and shuttered windows between them. Six bunks in one room, six in the other, and the bathroom was split in two also, with two toilet stalls and two showers, lacking curtains. *Oh boy.* Kerry glanced at Dar, who looked like she was caught between wild amusement and true irritation. "Men on one side, women on the other," the Operations VP stated flatly. "Just don't think about it. Pick a bunk, and let's just get some sleep."

Dar stalked across the wooden floor, selecting the bunk in the back corner and tossing her bag down on it. Kerry ambled over and chose the next one, sitting down on it and folding her hands in her lap.

Mariana followed suit, silently picking the bunk to the other side of Dar, then smiling as Mary Lou sat down next to her, leaving the far bunk for Eleanor.

"Right." Duks grunted and headed towards the other room, which connected via a door. He opened it and passed through. "C'mon boys."

Steven laughed gently, giving Dar a smile before he followed the finance VP into the next room and José trailed after him with a disgusted look. Eleanor's assistant meekly went along leaving the women all looking at each other.

"I'm going to be ill," Eleanor stated firmly, holding her bag. "This is unacceptable."

Kerry stood and circled the small room. "Well, it's not really that bad," she stated. "I mean, it could be worse. The linens are fresh and it's clean in here, so they obviously keep it up." She glanced up and decided not to mention the huge spider web. "It's only for a night or two." She glanced at Eleanor. "Look, we're sort of stuck here and it doesn't make sense to fight about it now. Let's wait until we get home, then we can talk about it."

Eleanor pursed her lips, unable to find a way to argue with Kerry's logic and she tentatively approached the bunk, touching the fabric with one finger. "Well, it is clean." She pushed the pillow experimentally. "I suppose I could make a sacrifice." She looked up at Dar. "But you're going to pay for this, Roberts."

Dar was seated on her bunk, leaning against the wall and staring at her impassively. "Threats are pointless," she stated point blank, "so shut up. I didn't ask for this. I wasn't the one who sent the damn email to Alastair and I don't want to hear that crap for the next two days."

"Well, he wouldn't have had to send it if you'd cooperated with him, now would he?" Eleanor shot back.

"I don't cooperate with unreasonable requests. You should damn well know that by now," Dar responded. "I don't care who makes them, not you, not Alastair, and especially not your little hatchet boy."

"Ladies." Mariana held a hand up. "Can we can it for the evening, please?" she requested. "We've got plenty of time to assign blame and fight with each other when we get back to Miami. Let's just get this over with."

Dar sighed. Mariana was right, and besides, she was letting Eleanor get to her. "Right." She sat up and unbuckled her overnight bag, tugging out a flannel nightshirt. An awkward silence fell and she glanced up to see everyone just sort of looking at each other. "C'mon now folks. We're all girls here," Dar reminded them drolly as she pulled off her sweatshirt, and tugged her polo from its neat tuck into her jeans.

"Oh no." Eleanor took her bag and retreated to the bathroom, leaving the rest of them in still uncomfortable silence.

Dar sighed. "Just shut off the light," she directed Mary Lou. "Nobody can see each other in the dark."

The tall ash blonde nodded appreciatively and did so, plunging the room into inky blackness, broken by conspicuous rustlings and the sounds of bare feet moving on the wood. Next door, ribald male voices were heard and they could see the light under the door.

"See? The boys don't care," Dar remarked, tucking her clothes away and seating herself on her bunk, which was raised slightly off the floor.

Mariana snorted. "Care? They compete. They're probably measuring themselves as we speak."

A round of chuckles.

"Not in this weather," Dar drawled wryly. "They'd need a caliper."

Another round of chuckles, this time louder.

A wild scream erupted from the bathroom and after a stunned moment, the door was thrown open disgorging a half clad Eleanor who screamed and bolted for the door of the cabin.

Unfortunately, she forgot to open it and slammed face first into the planks. "Oh my god, oh my god, help!"

Dar hopped out of bed and headed over, hearing heavy footsteps from next door. She reached Eleanor just as José flung the door open, resplendent in his white silk boxers with red hearts.

"Jesu! What is going on here?"

"I have no idea," Dar snarled. "Eleanor, what in the hell happened?"

The Marketing executive turned and waved her hands wildly. "It attacked me! My god. I have to get away!" She pointed at the bathroom. "In there!"

Kerry had followed Dar across the floor and now she ducked her head into the bathroom, glancing around cautiously. She saw the toilet, one small sink that had Eleanor's makeup all over it, the shower stall, and a snake. She started to pull her head back out, then froze. "Oh...Jesus." Her eyes widened. "Anyone know the local fauna?" She jumped back as the snake slithered out.

"Look out!"

"Dios Mio!" José yelped, spotting it. He jumped back inside the boys' room and slammed the door.

The snake, a three foot long green specimen, headed towards Dar. "Where's Steve Irwin when you need him?" Dar muttered as she peered at it in the low light. "I think it's harmless."

"You think?" Mariana was standing on her bed. "Dar, don't you 'I think' me, okay? I am not going to spend all day Monday filling out paperwork because you got bit by an 'I think.'"

"No, it is." Dar waited for the snake to crawl up on her foot, then she captured its neck and lifted it up. "Probably looking for a warm place." She examined it. "Yeah, it's just a garden snake. It's not dangerous."

The door to the men's side cracked open and three sets of eyes peered out. "Goodness," Eleanor's assistant squeaked.

Dar sighed and motioned Eleanor away from the door. "Move, I'll put it outside."

"What?" Steven now stuck his head through the door. "And let it attack someone else? No way. Kill it!"

"We can't always kill things that have the potential to annoy us," Dar stated looking at him steadily. "Now get outta my way, Eleanor." She moved towards the door and the woman screamed, backing away from her and tripping over the broom left in the cabin for sweeping. She tumbled over it, landing on her butt on the floor and scrambling back, looking like a huge, white skinned spider.

Dar removed the snake from the premises, then dusted her hands off and went back inside.

The boys were behind their door. The girls were clustered back against the wall, behind Kerry's Tweety clad form.

Everyone was looking at her. "We voted you Snake Hunter," Kerry informed her, with a faint grin. "As in, could you check for more?"

Dar put her hands on her hips. "I didn't get a vote," she protested. "Besides, in this weather it's easy. Look where it's warm."

As one, five sets of eyes turned towards their bunks. "Oh my god." Eleanor slumped to the floor, in a faint.

"Uh, I think we'd better leave the light on," Mariana stated nervously as she and Mary Lou struggled to get Eleanor into her bunk.

Dar sighed and shook her head, going over to her bunk and sitting down on it. "I'm sure it was just an isolated thing," she reassured them. "C'mon, we've got to get some sleep. God only knows what Mary Sunshine has in store for us tomorrow." She stretched herself out on her cot on one side, crossing her ankles and propping her head up on one hand.

Kerry slowly did the same, crawling into her bed after she peered around it nervously, then lying down so her head was close to Dar's. "I hate snakes," she muttered.

"Hmm? How do you feel about lizards?" Dar inquired seriously.

"Um, I don't know. Why?" Kerry asked, hesitantly.

"There's one on your leg." Dar pointed.

Kerry yelled and jumped, leaping across the space between their two bunks and landing practically in Dar's arms. "Shit!" She watched the tiny lizard scamper away, then exhaled raggedly. "Damn."

Then she realized where she was and peeked at Dar's face. "Uh, sorry." She eased away from the taller woman, whose eyes twinkled. "Dar, this isn't funny. I hate these things."

Dar almost told her to stay where she was, that she would protect her, but Mariana and Mary Lou were watching them. "Look, just relax, lizards are good. They eat bugs."

Wrong thing to say. In a split second everyone was in the middle of the room, staring at the beds. Dar sighed and pulled the covers up over her face. It was going to be a very long night.

Chapter Six

THEY'D FINALLY GOTTEN to sleep. Dar had convinced them, by sheer force of will, that if they'd turn the lights off and pull the covers up over their heads no bugs would get to them, even if there were bugs.

So they had and now she was snuggled down in her own bunk, waiting for her body to relax in this strange environment and listening to the soft breathing around her.

A low, rumbling sound came from next door and Dar smirked quietly, then exhaled, hoping none of her sleeping companions were prone to snoring.

Kerry wasn't, she knew, unless she was flat on her back and exhausted. Dar suspected she'd be guilty of that in the same state as well. Usually Kerry preferred to curl up on her side, or against Dar's shoulder, her breath gently warming the taller woman's neck.

It was incredible, Dar mused, just how good that felt. She turned her head and gazed into the darkness, barely able to distinguish the huddled figure in the bed next to her. Hmm. Dar inched forward, getting as close to the head of her bunk as she could, then she slipped a hand between the rough two by fours that lined the beds and closed her fingers over the hand she could just see curled over Kerry's head.

A soft gasp, then the blonde head lifted and the faint light reflected off her pupils. "Oh" she barely whispered, "you scared the bejesus out of me."

Dar smiled and chafed her hand. "Cold?" She murmured in response.

"Mm." Kerry squirmed closer until her face was within inches of her lover's. "Even with the extra padding I'm still shivering; pretty embarrassing for a northerner," she admitted. "Camp wasn't like this for my younger WASP self."

Dar grinned, then looked around carefully. "Can't have that." She slipped out of her bunk and into Kerry's, the darkness shrouding them in safety.

"Dar," Kerry mouthed, "What are you doing?"

"Protecting corporate assets," the executive purred right into her ear as she curled her body around Kerry's and tucked the cover around both of them. "Got a problem with that?"

"I don't, but everyone else is going to, Dar," Kerry breathed. "I thought we were trying to keep this quiet. I think them waking up with us in bed together is going to be just a tad conspicuous, don't you?"

"Shh, I'll get out of here before it's light. Just relax." Dar reassured her. "Unless you don't want to be warm, that is. I can leave."

Kerry snuggled closer. "Mmph," she grumbled, burying her face into a very welcome, very warm neck. "Well, at least I'll be safe from snakes." A pause. "Legless ones, anyway."

Dar chuckled softly and felt her body easing into sleep, comfortably tucked around Kerry's, her hands moving in slow, gentle circles against the smaller woman's skin.

Kerry's breathing evened out and slowed, and she dozed off, her hands flexing gently against Dar's chest. Somehow that made the aggravations of the day ease and float off, clearing her mind and allowing her to drift off as well.

She was seated on a grassy slope, overlooking a river valley. The open, rolling land stretched out before her, split by the deep blue and gray line of water whose rush and rustle came to her faintly. The wind blew against her face, pushing the hair back and ruffling the soft fabric that covered the body of the blonde woman lying curled up, with a pale head pillowed on her outstretched legs.

A hand she recognized as her own gently stroked the soft hair spilling over her skin and she was lazily aware of the soft buzz of a bee nearby, and a songbird trilling overhead.

Her eyes traveled down her companion's body and she felt the strange blur of surprise and familiarity as she realized the woman nestled against her was with child, her belly swollen under the soft fabric. Her other hand was interlaced with the woman's, and both were tucked against the surface. As she sat, caught between her dream and the faint memories resting against her consciousness, she felt the soft flutter of a tiny life against her fingers.

A little smile moved the lips of the blonde woman and her eyes slid half open, meeting the blue ones watching her and taking on a quiet, warm sparkle.

She felt the muscles of her face move and knew she was smiling back.

The blonde woman nestled her head back down and closed her eyes, and she tilted her own head back to rest against a tree's rough bark as the sweet, cool wind lulled her into a dreamy, wonderful haze.

SHE JUST BARELY beat the dawn. Dar's eyes fluttered open as the first gray outlines were beginning to be seen beyond the trees, her heart pumping as she tried to reconcile the strange surroundings.

Then memory flared and she let her head briefly drop back onto the pillow as she let her heartbeat slow, safe for at least a few minutes more in the darkness.

She then remembered her dream and her brows knit as she tried to figure out where in the hell she'd imagined a pregnant Kerry. *Could it be a premonition?* Kerry hadn't said anything like that

had happened during her visit home, but Dar sucked in a breath, remembering finding her lover in the bathroom the day before, white as a sheet, and she wondered. *Surely Kerry would have told her if she'd been assaulted at home, right?*

Unless it wasn't an assault, of course. Unless... Dar mentally slapped herself. "Stop it," she mouthed silently. Kerry had gone over every minute of her visit home from when she'd left Miami until she'd been rescued by Dar in that hospital and there hadn't been time enough for her to get a bag of fries at Burger King much less anything else.

Besides, she'd had her period since then and she was regular as clockwork. Dar dismissed the thought and frowned again. *Just mental housekeeping? Yeah.*

And if it wasn't? Well... Dar put her chin down on her forearm and thought about that. She'd never wanted children. She knew herself to lack the patience she thought a parent needed, and that complication was something she had never considered adding to her life.

She still didn't. Her eyes traveled over Kerry's peaceful face. What did Kerry want, though? Did she want kids? Dar reached out and fingered a bit of her lover's pale hair, trying to remember if they'd ever talked about it.

She didn't think so, but what if she did? Dar bit the inside of her lip and wondered if she could adjust to the thought of a family if it turned out Kerry really wanted one. Could she?

She closed her eyes and remembered the look of utter love that had been in the eyes looking up at her, and she knew the answer. For that, she would accept anything. Everything. The sense of panic receded and she relaxed, speculating that her own subconscious had maybe just prodded her into a moment of self-awareness, one that brought a wry, wistful smile to her face.

The outline of the window was becoming clearer and, reluctantly, Dar eased out from under the covers, settling them back around Kerry's sleeping body before she moved silently back to her own bed.

The mattress was simply laid on a metal base without any telltale springs and she managed to settle down on its marginally comfortable surface without waking anyone up.

It was cold. She rolled onto her stomach and wrapped her arms around the almost flat pillow, resting her chin on the surface and glowering at the rest of the cabin. She wondered what would happen if she went back to where she'd been and let them wake up and find them together.

If Eleanor hadn't been there she would have. Mariana knew about them and she figured out that Mary Lou wouldn't give a damn. She thought about doing it anyway. The constant need to deny their relationship grated on her.

Dar argued with herself for about five minutes, then sighed and decided she'd better get up and go do something before she caused havoc for both of them.

And Kerry had been worried about spilling the beans herself. Dar gave the growing dawn an evil look, then she sat up and grabbed her bag, pulling out a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt and trudging off to the bathroom.

It was a relatively nice morning, she decided. She exited the cabin and stood on the porch, breathing in air thick with the scent of trees around her and with a faint hint of hickory smoke.

Fog was rolling across the grounds, rising from the lake and she could barely see the outline of the main hall or of the scattered cabins that peeked out from between the trees.

Dar stepped off the porch, her sneakers crunching gently over the fallen pine needles, and the tiny pine cones. She headed down towards the lake, taking deep breaths to wake her body up and spotted a small path that was well tended that apparently went around the water's edge. She broke into a light jog as she reached it, then headed on down the path, enjoying the brisk morning air.

The sun was rising over the water and its rays filtered through the trees throwing pale salmon stripes across the path and her as she ran in silence.

She was about three quarters of the way around before she heard steps behind her and she cocked an ear, frowning as she didn't recognize the sound of them. A glance back made her curse roundly and she took a breath, composing her temper before Steven Fabricini caught up to her. "Morning."

He fell into step next to her, running easily in his black and silver running suit. "I'm surprised, Dar, didn't think you kept this up." He peered around in mock cheerfulness. "I do marathons, so it's part of every morning for me."

Dar debated not answering, then she twitched her lips. "Great way to start a morning," she commented.

"Oh yeah," He agreed. "I do between five and eight miles a day, twice that on weekends. I placed top ten my last three races."

Dar glanced at him. "Congratulations."

"Not your speed, huh?" Steven laughed. "No, I can see you've lost that edge."

A subtle, dangerous glint appeared in ice blue eyes. "Bunch of guys running around New York in their underwear is not my idea of fun," she commented mildly.

"Oh, you're wrong." Steven shook his head in amusement. "It's the competition that I like, pitting yourself against a hundred or a thousand other people who all want what you want, and you beat them." He eyed Dar. "I like that," he purred. "I like leaving people in my dust, just like I'm going to leave you in my dust, Dar."

"Think so?"

"I know so. You've made too many enemies," Steven told her confidently. "Even this trip. I thought this was a mistake, but now..." He laughed. "I'm going to enjoy watching your decline, Dar. I really am." He surged ahead, lengthening his stride and pulling ahead of her. "Time to think about retiring." He yelled back, heading around a bend in the path and disappearing from view.

Dar continued on at a steady pace, smiling a little when she heard a muted scream. "Watch out, Steven," she commented to the empty air. "Lake bends in there--must be a big mud wash." A loud, outraged yell shook the air. "The sticky, stinking kind." She trotted around the bend and slowed to a halt, putting her hands on her hips and observing the black, odorous, thrashing form. "Last step's a bitch, Steven," she remarked cheerfully, hopping up on a long, sturdy log which went over the muddy pit, balancing neatly as she crossed over his head and landed on the other side. "Guess I don't have to worry about your dust right now, huh?" She waved and broke into a jog again, contentedly increasing her pace and heading back towards the camp.

SHE WAS ON the back of a horse, the easy, rocking rhythm familiar to her from childhood. So comforting was the motion that she was half asleep, her head nodding against the tall back of the person in front of her. Her arms circled a lean waist, loosely clasped against a surface that had the feel of sun warmed leather, and she could feel the cool hardness of metal under her cheek.

She was too sleepy to open her eyes, too sleepy to look around her. All she wanted was for the hot sun to finally fall behind the mountains she knew were at their back, and give her some relief from its relentless force.

A warm pressure surrounded her fingers, and she cast a lazy half of an eye up, to gaze at the long, dark hair that gently covered the dark leather surface and the dully gleaming bronze of the metal she was leaning against.

"Almost there." The low, vibrant voice was as familiar to her as her own and she gave the tall figure a gentle squeeze to let her know she'd heard. She was aware of being hot, and tired, and hungry, but there was a distinct sense of contentment, which warred against that and made her wish the ride would never end.

Strange.

Kerry was chiefly aware of being cold. She opened one eye grumpily and confirmed that she was where she was afraid she was, stuck in this damned backwater camp full of snakes and spiders and who knew what else. She rolled over, then smiled a bit as she detected Dar's scent on the sheets and pillow next to her.

Her dream drifted back into her consciousness and she reflected on its weird quality. She was sure that the person she'd been seated against had been Dar, but Dar in armor and leather?

Kerry's brow wrinkled and she smiled a little. *Was that how her subconscious saw her tall lover? As some warrior?*

Yeah, maybe. Or maybe it was her mind's way of rationalizing the reason she suffered all the discomforts of being Dar's right hand was in order to stay at the tall woman's side. Woo, that was profound. She almost had to giggle imagining herself telling Dar about it.

She could hear her voice, "I was dressed in what?" Kerry smiled at the vision.

A glance to her right told her Dar was missing and as she viewed the dawn light, she figured she was out running. *Should she join her?* Kerry pondered the web covered ceilings and decided acting as though running with her boss every morning was normal wasn't a smart idea.

Even if it had become normal, much to her surprise. It beat aerobics, too.

Mary Lou pushed herself up at that point and ruffled her short, ash blonde hair. "Oh my god."

She peered around the cabin, then gazed at Kerry. "This is a nightmare, right?"

Kerry sighed, sitting up cross legged on the bed and tucking the blanket around her. "It sure feels like it, doesn't it?" She rummaged up a smile. "I went to camp a few times in my younger years, but boy, it sure wasn't like this."

"Me too." Mary Lou stifled a yawn. "Up in the mountains, everyone dressed alike and had a group sing at the end of it."

"The camp show." Kerry chuckled softly. "Boy, did they learn fast I can't sing."

"Would you both shut up!" Eleanor groaned, lifting her head from her pillow and peering at them in the dawn's quiet. The Marketing VP's hair looked like a curious ferret had been nesting in it and her eyes had blue and black rings around them from her smeared mascara.

She looked, Kerry realized, like a grumpy, blonde raccoon.

Mariana kept her eyes straight up, folding her hands on her stomach. "All right, we've got one day here and then tomorrow we'll be going home," she paused, "We're all adults." She paused again. "We can do this."

Mary Lou yawned. "You're right, Mari. I'm sure we'll survive. Look, we made it through the night, didn't we?" She glanced over towards Kerry. "Hey, where's Dar?"

Everyone sat up to look. "Maybe the spiders ate her," Kerry remarked innocently. "Just kidding, I don't know," she added when all eyes turned to her in question.

"It's not funny," Eleanor told her. "This pointless exercise is supposed to make us more agreeable with each other. So far, it's certainly not working."

Kerry clasped her hands together. "I don't know if that's really true," she said. "I think it's supposed to let you see other aspects of people you work with so maybe you find something in common with them."

Eleanor snorted. "Don't hold your breath."

Dar chose that moment to reenter the cabin, her dark hair damp with sweat. "Morning," she greeted them briskly as she headed over to where her bunk was. "Our hostess has provided something resembling breakfast up at that main hall. They want to start things up at nine."

Kerry checked her watch. Seven thirty. "Okay. You said something resembling...what are we talking about here, peanut butter and jelly?"

"Yes." Eleanor edged to a more dignified sitting posture. "I usually have Mueslix."

Dar sat down and started taking off her sneakers. "Well, there's coffee and hot water and a couple of baskets of bagels, and some boxes of individual cereal," she paused, exhaling, "and bananas."

"Great." Mariana sat up, then gazed at Dar. "What on earth have you been doing?"

Dar gave her a look. "Running," she answered briefly. "You all want to pick who takes a shower first?"

They all looked at the bathroom with its tiny, bare shower stall, then back at her in mute horror, except for Kerry. The blonde woman merely looked off out the window with lightly twitching lips.

"Fine." Dar stood and stripped off her sweatshirt leaving her in her sports bra, then picked up the towel she'd rolled into her bag and her small kit of soaps. "Be right back." She padded barefoot to the bathroom and kicked the door shut.

"Rude," Eleanor spat with a disgusted look.

"Efficient," Mariana disagreed. "She's right. We're going to feel awful if we don't shower."

"Practical." Kerry nodded. "That's Dar."

"Buff." Mary Lou noted, approvingly. "Very nice."

They all looked at her in surprise.

"Hey, I call 'em like I see 'em," The Personnel assistant stated, lifting her shoulders in a little shrug. They all got up and twitched their beds into some kind of order. Mariana and Mary Lou went to the window and peered out at the new day. "Dear god, what is that?" Mariana suddenly said, with a start.

They clustered behind her and peered out. "Oh...my...gosh..." Mary Lou exhaled, "it's a bog monster." The sun was behind the approaching apparition, which was moving towards them with stiff, unnatural motions, a solid black form with little white flecks here and there.

"God in the heavens," Eleanor snapped. "What is that?"

The figure lurched up onto the steps and opened the door, and the women all clustered in the back. "Where in the hell is that bitch?" the figure screamed, eyes and teeth white against the black stained skin. A pungent, unpleasant odor floated in with it. "Dar, I'm going to kick your ass!"

"Steven?" Eleanor asked, cautiously. "What happened to you?"

He ignored her. "Bitch! Get out here!" he yelled louder.

The bathroom door opened and Dar stepped out, her towel wrapped around her otherwise bare body and her dark hair slicked wetly back. "Yes?" she asked, taking in the apparition with a stifled grin. "Looks like you're next up for the shower, Steven," she drawled, leaning one hand against the wooden wall and crossing her ankles.

He seethed and, for a moment, Dar thought he was going to attack her. Muscles along her arms and thighs visibly tensed, but he thought better of it. Instead, he threw open the door to the men's

part of the cabin and stormed through. A chorus of loud complaints echoed back, then José came to the door, rubbing his eyes. "What in the hell is going on? Oh Dios Mio, Dar, put your clothing on!"

He was almost run over from behind as the doorway filled with bug eyed, wild haired men. Dar smiled, perversely flattered. She kept her pose in the doorway, not intimidated by the stares. "You guys must not get out much."

José looked like he was going to say something, and then thought better of it. He slammed the door shut, sending a scattering of debris from the ceiling rafters onto the floor.

"What did you do to him?" Mary Lou asked, curiously.

"Nothing." Dar headed for her bunk, her workout clothes in her hand. "Though I'm sure he'll blame me for him being stupid, just like always." She rummaged in her overnight bag, ignoring the rest of them as she pulled out a fresh shirt.

"Guess I'll go next," Kerry volunteered, after a moment's awkward silence. She picked up her toiletries bag and a change of clothes and disappeared into the small bathroom, closing the door behind her and leaving the rest of them to gawk. "Been there, done that, seen it all," she uttered to herself, unable to hold back a grin now that she was alone. "Dar, you little exhibitionist punk." She pulled off her sleeping shirt and turned on the shower, keeping a cautious hand under the stream before she stepped under it and quickly scrubbed her skin with body wash.

"Really can't get much worse, can it?" she said, watching the corners of the stall for snakes.

"We'll get through it. I know we will."

She jumped as a crash sounded from the men's cabin and she heard the sound of water running rapidly, as yells soon followed. "Okay, maybe not." She hurriedly rinsed her hair and grabbed for a towel before the wall collapsed and she stole Dar's thunder.

THE SUN FILTERED through the pine trees and bathed the camp in a cheerful light, taking some of the dinginess out of it and rendering it more rustic than rundown.

Dar walked up the steps to the main hall, a straggle of disgruntled people behind her. She held the screen door open with dour courtesy, following Mariana inside as the last one in.

"Thanks, Dar." Mari glanced behind her. "Looks like nice weather at least."

"Mm." Dar nodded as they gathered around a trestle serving board and she picked up a clean, but battered looking plate. Kerry was two people ahead of her in line. They hadn't really spoken to each other since she'd come back from running.

It was grating on her nerves. Dar felt annoyed at herself as she picked up a muffin and a bowl with a box of cereal. *Was it grating on Kerry's?*

"Not much of a selection, huh?" Mariana selected a banana and a bagel. "What do they have to put...oh." She sighed and scooped some peanut butter onto her plate. "Great."

Dar, however, brightened. "Mm." She took her own scoop and plopped it down. "Favorite of mine."

"Really?"

"Uh huh," Dar said. "My father used to trade for big cans of the stuff for me on base," she volunteered. "I'm surprised I never overdosed on it."

"What kind of base?" Mary Lou asked from the other side of Mariana. "My family was Air Force."

"Navy," Dar replied, then edged out of line and headed for a table. She put her plate down at an empty one, then looked around for something to drink.

"Here." Kerry put down two glasses of milk by her plate before seating herself and taking a sip from a glass of juice she'd gotten for herself.

Steven and José were just passing the table and they both glanced at Kerry, then looked at Dar. José just continued past, but Steven's eyebrow twitched and he smiled faintly. Dar merely returned his gaze without reacting, but she could feel the skin on the back of her neck heating and she caught Mari's expression from the next table over.

Screw it. "Thanks, Ker." She seated herself and opened the cereal box, dumping its contents in the bowl and pouring one of the glasses of milk over it. After a moment, she looked up to find Kerry staring at the glass with slightly widened eyes.

"Shit," Kerry uttered quietly.

"No problem." Dar dug into her flakes, chewing them noisily. "Eat." She glanced around, then back at Kerry, who was visibly blushing now. "Looks like everyone's heard about my drinking problem," she added in a louder voice. "Even you."

Kerry rested her head on her fist to hide her face and focused on her plate as Mari managed a hesitant laugh and José frowned at them.

It was going to be a very long day.

"ALL RIGHT." SKIPPY had donned a perky pink sweatshirt with her company's name on it over neatly pressed white slacks. "Well, did we all have a good night?" Silence greeted her words.

"Well, that's great. I'm glad to hear it, okay."

They were seated around a circular table in the smaller hall near the lake, its screened in walls giving a good view of the water that no one seemed to appreciate.

"Okay. Let's start with this little exercise." Skippy plugged bravely on. "I'd like everyone to tell us about a favorite hobby of yours." She looked encouragingly at Duks, bypassing Steven. "How about you start?"

Duks inhaled, then exhaled, folding his arms across his chest. "A hobby is it? All right...I collect pencils."

Skippy sighed. "Mr. Draefus..."

"No, no, I mean it." Duks held up a hand. "My oldest one is from 1833, truthfully."

Everyone looked at Duks suspiciously. "Who's next?" The accountant went on blithely.

Mariana was next to him. "I grow herb gardens."

"Oh, that's so nice," their guide burred. "For cooking?"

The personnel VP smiled. "For Santeria, my uncle's a priest."

Skippy's eyes jiggled. "Oh, um, next?"

"I, um," Charles swallowed nervously, "I raise fish," he mumbled. "Salt water tropical fish. I have a tank."

"Really?" Dar asked. "How big?"

He looked up at her and pushed his glasses up onto his nose. "Seven hundred gallons." He nodded a little. "I converted my garage."

Even Dar's eyes popped. "That's not a tank, that's the Seaquarium," she murmured. "That must take a lot of time to take care of."

"It does, but my wife and the kids, they help," Charles stated, happy at the reaction. "I have a baby nurse shark," he stated proudly. "I had to segment him, though. He was eating all the flounder and getting fat."

"My god," Eleanor blinked at her assistant in amazement, "that's incredible."

Everyone looked at her. "What?" The Marketing VP snapped. "Oh, a hobby, how silly. I have no hobby."

"Nothing? What do you do in your spare time?" Skippy inquired, encouraged by her last success. Eleanor remained silent for a moment. "Well, I go to dinner, of course, and go out shopping, and play cards with friends of ours."

"Oh, well, that's nice," the blonde guide smiled perkily. "What about you?" She turned her gaze to Steven.

He glared at Dar. "I run," he answered grumpily. "I enter marathons."

Big smile from Skippy. "Oh, that's wonderful. I always wanted to do that. I participate in all our corporate walks and runs. Isn't it great exercise?"

"Yeah." He tried to clean the black muck from under his nails with little success. "Great."

Mary Lou leaned back and grasped her knee with both hands. "I fly ultra lights," she stated, grinning at the reaction. "Yeah, that's me out there in south Dade on the weekends, buzzing around." Her eyes slid to Dar, who was seated next to her. "What about you?"

The blue eyes blinked innocently. "I collect heads," she answered with a straight face. "You know, shrunken ones, with the laces through the lips."

Everyone stared at her, with reactions ranging from horror to wry amusement. "Well, it's what you all expected to hear," the executive drawled. "Isn't it?" She caught the swiftly hidden grin on Kerry's face. "Actually, I scuba dive."

Skippy nodded her head like a back car seat Chihuahua and turned to Kerry, hopefully. "Hi there."

Kerry drew in a breath. "I write poetry," she answered very quietly, her peripheral vision catching the warm twinkle in Dar's eyes.

"You do?" Mariana half turned to look at her. "Really?"

Kerry nodded. "I have, off and on, since I was small," she elaborated. "And I scu...like to take pictures, too. Photography."

"That's wonderful." Skippy looked like she could have kissed her. "So creative!"

José had propped his chin up on his hand with a bored look. "I collect baseball cards," he told them.

"For investments, you know?"

Another pathetically grateful look from the guide. "Oh, that's so fantastic. I always wanted to do that." She made a mark on her clipboard. "Well, we certainly are a varied group, aren't we?" She went through her papers. "Okay, well, I hope you all learned something about each other. Um, let's try a trust exercise now." She stood up. "Everybody stand up, and we'll take turns catching each other."

They all looked at her.

"It'll be fun," she assured them. "Really."

"THIS IS A bad idea." Dar stood in the back of the circle of people.

Kerry turned and glanced at her. "It's okay. We used to do this during practice for gymnastics. It's just a game, Dar." She kept herself from giving Dar a comforting pat on the arm, but leaned closer and dropped her voice. "Don't worry, whatever happens, I won't let you fall."

Dar gazed at her, a smile playing about the edges of her lips. "I knew that," she murmured back.

"I just..." She chewed her lip. "I don't like people touching me."

Kerry rubbed her jaw. "Well, you could tell everyone not to catch you," she commented softly.

"But that's gonna hurt."

Dar sighed and watched as Skippy joined them with her ever-present clipboard, her hair tucked up under a delightfully pink hat with a prancing, coy pony on it. The executive had an almost irresistible desire to snatch it and bury it deep in the earth.

"Okay. This is how this works," the guide explained. "One person stands in the middle, and the rest of you get behind. Then that person just lets themselves fall back, and everyone else catches them. Okay?"

"What if they don't?" Duks asked, in his deep rumble.

"Excuse me?" Skippy peered at him.

"What if they don't catch the person?" The Financial VP inquired.

"Oh, well...um... I guess they just...well, they fall, I guess." The woman's brow knit. "I don't know, really. It's never happened."

"That's very reassuring." Duks put his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels. He was wearing a pair of cotton painter's pants and comfortable looking hiking boots, along with a crimson flannel shirt. Then he turned to Mariana, who was wearing a crisp tan shirt over blue jeans. "You did bring workman's comp packets just in case, right?"

Mariana cleared her throat. "Of course."

Skippy blinked at her, disconcerted. "You did? Oh, well, I'm sure you won't need them," she hastened to reassure her. "This is a very safe course. We never have accidents, never."

"Don't worry, my dear. The ship is absolutely unsinkable," Mary Lou muttered, sotto voce, making Dar snicker in reaction.

"Shh," Kerry scolded her. "Or we'll be at this all day. Let's get it over with."

"Um, who wants to start?" Skippy gave Steven a little smile.

With a little shrug he came forward. "Might as well, can't be worse than being dumped on my ass in the mud this morning." He glared at Dar.

"I didn't touch you," Dar shot right back. "If you can't watch where you're running, don't blame me."

"You could have warned me!"

Everyone looked at Dar, who shrugged. "How was I supposed to know that mud was there?" she asked reasonably. "You decided to run ahead of me. Not my fault you didn't stop in time," she said. "My reputation as a psychic is highly overrated."

"Your reputation is highly overrated, that's for damn sure," Steven shot back.

"Oh, will you two shut up?" Eleanor snapped, in a foul mood. "Let's get this idiocy over with already."

Sullen glares all around. Steven turned his back on them and let his arms hang down straight, his bright blue sweatshirt over a white polo shirt contrasting with his khaki chinos. "Ready?"

José sidled forward and nudged them all along. "Come on, come on." They clustered in a group. "All right."

Steven very obviously squared his shoulders, then let himself tip back.

A loud explosion behind them sounded. Everyone jumped and whirled, even Skippy, who threw her clipboard up as a defense. "Oh my!"

Steven, forgotten by the distracted group, dropped into the pine needle filled ground with a thump. "Son of a bitch!" he screamed as his head hit the turf. "You bastards!"

The sound was repeated and they realized it was a backfire from some vehicle. Skippy dashed over to where Steven was lying, rubbing his head, and knelt down. "Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. Are you all right?"

They were all torn between giving him guilty looks and watching the camp entrance, where a low growling sound indicated someone was approaching. "Listen, sorry about that kid." José offered him a hand up. "That noise, you know, it just startled us, sounded like a damn gun." The sound got louder, then a flash of sun on metal almost blinded them as a Harley roared in. It slowed a bit as the driver checked out the scene, then thumped across the uneven ground and headed in their direction. It pulled to a stop and the rider pulled his helmet off. "Hey." It took all Dar's considerable concentration to keep a devilish grin off her face. "Hey, Mark, didn't think you'd make it." She greeted him. The MIS chief got off his bike and glanced down at his body, which was covered in tiny, blood specked forms. "Neither did I, goddamned love bugs. The company owes me big time for this one. It's gonna take me a week to get all their guts off my bike." He glanced over. "What's he doing on the ground?"

Chapter Seven

"SO MUCH FOR that." Kerry leaned back against a pine tree, crossing her ankles and folding her arms. She looked past the figures of Skippy and Steven, in earnest conversation nearby. "Okay, so it probably was a bad idea." Dar was scuffing the pine needle littered ground with one boot. "Pure chance," she shrugged. "Not like I called Mark up and arranged it, or told him to go first." "You'll get blamed anyway," Duks said. "The man does not like you, my friend." "That was a bitch, Dar." Mark shook his head as he joined them, having changed out of his leather and love bug carcass outfit into something less gruesome. "I ended up having the Erding office bring the equipment in for them. You're gonna owe a few folks out there." Dar nodded. "Good going." She re-tucked her long sleeved, heavy cotton shirt into her jeans. "Glad you could join us." She glanced over where Steven, José and Eleanor were now clustering together. "Tilts the scale a little." "Yeah, you look like you're having a great time," Mark commented dryly. "This place is a dump." He glanced over as Skippy returned with a bunch of little sacks slung over her shoulder. "Uh oh, now what?" "Okay!" Skippy looked perkily grim. "Here's what we're going to do now. We've got a course set up-- you can see the entrance to it over there." She pointed and they all looked over to where a trail was clearly marked. "It's a ten mile path, and along the way there are different stations and obstacles you have to get through." She handed each one of them a bag. "The object of this is for all of you to get through." She gave them a look. "All of you, not just some of you, okay? You all have to get back. All of you. Everyone get my point?" Kerry muffled a wry chuckle. "Great," Mariana sighed, "I can see where this is going." Skippy looked at them as though waiting for more commentary, then she shook her head and went back to her program. "Okay. In this sack is your lunch and a snack." She held up a sample. "The directions are on the top." Dar laughed on seeing them. "You guys shop on the Military channel by any chance?"

Skippy scowled, in a nice way, at her. "Anyway, at each station is a check point. You have to get this card stamped at each checkpoint. About halfway, there's a cabin with water and juice, and things like that," she exhaled. "It's not a race, okay? The purpose is to make you work together, to get through the obstacles."

"We got that point," Duks informed her. "Yes, we understand we are not to leave any of our colleagues behind."

"Right...okay...well, go on. We'll have dinner waiting for you guys when you get back." Skippy made shooing motions with her hands.

"Wait, you want us to walk for ten miles?" Eleanor objected. "You must be joking." She glanced around for support. "That's ridiculous."

"It's not that bad," Kerry told her kindly as she moved closer to the Marketing VP. "Really."

"Oh no, no, no way." Eleanor backed away from her. "I'm sorry. I've had enough."

"Look." Skippy clasped her clipboard to her chest. "This is the important part of the seminar, okay? I have to write a report on your group for your leadership team, and it's based mostly on this exercise."

"Yes," Steven spoke up suddenly. "You don't want to be the one with the bad marks in that report, do you, Eleanor? We know YOU don't want this to be a failure."

Dar's eyes narrowed.

Mariana exhaled. "Come on, Eleanor. God knows I'm not up to walking ten miles, but we'll get through it." She glanced over at Dar. "Let's get going. The sooner we start, the sooner we finish." She shouldered her pack. "We can rest along the way, right?" This she directed at Skippy.

The guide smiled in relief. "Right. There are benches and things for you to rest on. It's not an endurance race or anything," she assured them. "And there are water fountains."

The group moved off reluctantly and approached the path, passing the sign and entering a tree lined, fairly well marked lane covered in sand and pine needles.

A grumpy silence held over them and they strung out a little on the path, with José and Steven deciding to set the pace and Dar choosing to bring up the rear. Kerry casually dropped back next to her.

The wind picked up a little and blew the leaves against each other, whistling lightly around them and isolating their conversation.

"Having fun?" Dar inquired.

"Mm, not really, but did it seem to you like Mary Sunshine back there was awfully glad to get rid of us?" Kerry asked, adjusting her canvas pack to settle around her slim waist, instead of over her shoulder. "Here, let me get yours. It's easier to carry this way." She adjusted her companion's pack, slipping her arms around Dar for the moment needed to fasten the straps.

Well, slightly more than the moment, but not long enough to attract attention from their grouching coworkers stomping ahead of them.

"Yeah." Dar glanced around. "I don't think we're going to rate a good report from her. We've been sort of uncooperative." She took a breath of the cool air and felt her temper settle a little. "This is kind of nice, though."

"Wait until we get to the obstacles." Kerry chuckled, rolling her eyes. "Hey, you know, I had the weirdest dream last night." She missed the sudden, startled glance in her direction from Dar. "We were riding a horse and you were wearing armor."

"What?" Dar started laughing. "You're joking."

"No, no, really." Kerry chuckled too. "I know, it was really strange, but it was really vivid, too. I could smell the horse and the leather stuff you were wearing, and the armor was some kind of brass."

Dar didn't reply. She went silent for a moment and paced along, thinking. "Well," she finally said. "I guess it was the atmosphere then. I had a pretty strange dream too." Then she fell silent. Kerry waited for a long minute. "What was it about? Was I in it?" she coaxed, interested.

"Yeah," Dar responded. "We were on a hill, someplace I didn't recognize really, over some river. It was warm out and we were just out there, watching the clouds go by." She paused. "You were sleeping. You had your head resting on my leg." She tapped her thigh.

Kerry waited. "And that's strange?" she queried, puzzled. "I don't get it."

"You were pregnant," Dar said, very softly. "That was the strange part." She walked on a few more paces before she realized she was walking alone. With a start, she stopped and looked behind her. Kerry was standing on the path, staring at her. "Hey, it was just a dream." But she felt the question in her own voice and knew Kerry had heard it.

Kerry took a breath, then started forward, breaking into a trot and catching up with Dar. They continued walking in silence for a little stretch.

"That is strange," Kerry finally said. "I mean, it's kind of a shock to hear that, it's something I..." she hesitated. "I know I don't have to worry about that anymore, unless I want to...um...you know." She looked up at Dar's face, seeing the odd hints of tension around her eyes. "Uh, have you...I mean, do you want...um..."

"No, no." Dar lifted her hands and let them fall. "Kids and me, they don't mix well," she stated firmly, then hesitated. "I mean, well, I um...I mean, if you wanted...someday...I think...um..." She fell silent, then peered at Kerry. "You know?"

Kerry's face wrinkled up into a confused grin. "I think so, but it's not in my plans anytime soon, if that's what you're worried about."

"I wasn't worried," Dar replied instantly. "Not at all. I was just saying that...um...it's possible to get used to anything, if you know what I mean."

Now, Kerry smiled. "I know what you mean," she reassured her boss. "But that's a strange image, for a dream."

"Well, what about me in armor?" Dar asked, glad to change the subject. "Maybe it was those sandwiches we had last night. I'm still not sure of what they were."

"Maybe," Kerry agreed softly. "Jesus, I haven't thought about being pregnant for..." A pause. "A while."

A gust of wind blew past them, lifting up dark and pale hair and whipping it around both their faces. They'd let the group get a short distance in front of them and the winding path had isolated the two of them briefly.

Dar glanced over and saw the look of quiet, grim introspection on her lover's face and she debated with herself, whether or not to push Kerry on the subject. Finally she sighed, and flexed her shoulders. "You, um," a light shrug, "Want to talk about it?"

Kerry regarded the passing trees thoughtfully. "Not really much to talk about. It was just mostly stupidity on my part, when I was home last year," she related, in a quiet tone. "They were giving me a hard time. I felt lousy," A slight pause. "I felt ugly," Kerry wryly corrected herself. "And I went to a party with some old friends from college, got drunk until I didn't know half of what I was doing, and ended up in bed with some guy I hadn't seen for five years."

She studied her boots, remembering just how disgusted she'd felt when she woke up. "I wasn't on the pill, of course," she snorted softly. "I got lucky, nothing happened."

Dar snuck a look ahead of them, then settled an arm around her companion's shoulders, pulling her close. "That's lousy. Sorry you had to go through it," Dar stated gently. "I can't tell you how mad that makes me."

"That I'd do something that stupid?" Kerry asked bitterly. "Yeah, well, I was pretty mad at myself too."

"No." Dar kissed her head. "That your parents made you feel that bad about yourself."

"Don't put the blame on them, Dar." Her lover shook her head. "They didn't make me go to that party, or get plastered, or jump in bed with that guy."

"I know," the executive agreed, with a sigh. "But I think you did that as a reaction to how you were feeling. When that guy came on to you, it made you feel better about yourself, didn't it?"

She felt Kerry's shoulders move a little in a shrug. "Didn't it? I bet he was good looking."

A hazy memory surfaced and Kerry's nostrils flared. "Yeah," she admitted wryly. "He looked like that guy from Dune," she admitted. "He was really cute and he told me he thought I was cute, and I..." A long sigh. "I guess I really needed to hear that then."

She glanced up at Dar, who was still walking along with her arm around Kerry's shoulders. "He was a nice guy, too. He called me the next day, all panicky because he hadn't had protection on, and telling me he was healthy, and saying he'd 'do the right thing' if it turned out I was pregnant." She had to laugh. "It was surreal."

Dar laughed gently. "Well, you'll never have to get me drunk to make me tell you how cute you are, okay?" She hugged Kerry.

The blonde woman rested her head against Dar's arm. "You make me feel so wonderful, did you know that?" she replied simply. "It's such a pleasure to be in love with you."

Dar blinked, speechless for a few heartbeats. "Likewise," she finally managed to say, faintly.

They walked along in silence for a few steps. "Boy, that was like a burst of compressed love packets, wasn't it," Kerry finally said, with a little laugh. "Did I blow it with the milk? I thought I was doing so good till then."

"Who cares?" Dar shrugged her shoulders. "Half the building knows I'm a MacArthur Dairy commercial. Don't worry about it."

A yell up ahead distracted them. "Oh hell." Dar's face took on an annoyed look. "Damn, for ten cents I'd just lose this place."

Kerry patted her companion's belly. "All of us have to get through, remember? C'mon, let's see what they found." She disentangled herself from Dar's grip lengthened her stride, climbing up the tiny, root encrusted rise and peeking down the path.

The rest of the group was standing on the edge of a slice across the path, into which a creek had carved itself deeply, causing a chasm about fifty feet across.

A single, braced rope bridge went over it, consisting of a simple strand, with two others running alongside. The entire thing was suspended over the water about twenty feet, providing an annoying, but not lethal drop if one got dumped off the bridge.

The object, obviously, was to get to the other side. If one walked carefully it seemed achievable enough.

The problem was the fifteen foot python wrapped around the rope, sunning itself. "Oh boy," Dar muttered, coming up behind her. "This could get ugly."

"Now what?" José turned and put his hands on his hips. He was wearing a pair of coach's shorts and a polo shirt with the name "Marelito Bowling League" on it, with black socks and sneakers.

"We go back, si?"

"Hell yes," Steven agreed. "That's it. No way, no how am I messing around with a goddamned snake."

Eleanor was seated on a nearby log, fanning herself, and the rest of them were peering at the snake uncomfortably. They turned to look at Dar when she edged closer. "To hell with them." José decided. "We don't have to put up with this."

The tall, dark haired executive put a hand on either rope and her hiking boots on the very edge of the bridge. "Well, hold on," she murmured, taking a step forward and letting the rope take her weight.

"Dar." Kerry's voice objected instinctively.

"Hey, crazy woman, get the hell back here!" José yelled.

"Ah, my friend," Duks went to the edge of the bridge, "you don't need to go over there."

"Shit," Mark cursed.

"Shh." Dar turned her head and glared at them. "Just, let me check the situation out, all right?"

"You're going to end up with your ass in that creek and I'm going to laugh my head off," Steven sniped.

Dar ignored him and continued slowly moving forward, holding the two ropes on either side of her as she approached the snake. She felt the rope bridge sway under her movement and the wind. The creek chuckled by below her and she could hear the ominous creaking of the hemp fibers, which seemed impossibly loud to her.

A bird called out overhead, almost making her jump, and she glared up at it before she continued forward a few more steps. She was almost to where the snake was now, and she could feel her heart starting to pound and her knees shake under the strain of keeping level. "Nice snaky," she murmured, "easy now."

Snakes were deaf. She knew that, but it made her feel better to say it anyway. Ten feet away and she could see the soft, glistening surface of the animal as it rested contentedly in the sun, its large, square head spread out on the top rope.

Dar took another step forward, then held on as a breeze made the entire bridge sway, causing the snake to shift a little. Dar ducked her head forward, then took two more steps which brought her even with the large creature's head.

She reached out, hearing a collective gasp from the other shore and picked the head up, examining it curiously. With an utterly cool expression, she turned her head and regarded her co workers.

They stared at her in awe.

"Made in China." Dar held the head up. "It's rubber."

A moment of shock, then everyone started moving again. "Son of a bitch!" Mark breathed, shaking his head. "These people are effing nuts!"

Dar set the rubber head back down and patted the snake, then she regarded the rest of the bridge. "I'm going on across. It's not that hard, just take it slow, and hold on," she advised the group as she continued on her way. She placed her feet carefully one after the other until she reached the other side and hopped down. There was a small machine that looked like a timecard stamper there. She pulled out her little card and stuck it in the slot.

It made a very satisfying clunking noise and stamped a tiny cobra on her card in the number one slot. She put the card away and glanced back across the creek, not surprised to see Kerry making her way across the bridge, a determined look of concentration on the smaller woman's face.

Steven was standing impatiently on the edge, waiting his turn. Everyone else was trying to convince Eleanor to give it a go and Dar was exceedingly glad she was on this side of the bridge and not the other.

Part of her felt quite satisfied, having removed an obstacle from the group's path, but the other part was still annoyed that they were doing this at all. She watched Kerry stop at the snake and look at it, examining the head thoughtfully before she edged past, gripping the ropes tightly on either side.

Kerry looked a little uneasy, Dar thought, and she put her own hands casually on the guide ropes as Kerry paused, taking a deep breath, then swallowing, before she continued on. The wind came through, swaying the bridge and Dar saw her lover's face tense up and her knuckles whiten on the ropes. "You okay?" she called out, a little concerned.

Kerry waited for the swaying to stop then she risked prying her eyes open, to see Dar's blue ones fastened on her. "C'mon, Kerry. You can get past this." She forced a foot forward, keeping her gaze fixed on Dar instead of looking down. Six steps, seven, and she was close enough to see the faint wrinkle in Dar's forehead.

Then she was stepping on the last bit, where a wooden plank anchored the bridge and Dar's hands were reaching for her, only at the last minute holding off and ending up back on the ropes instead.

"Thanks." She closed her eyes and appreciated the solid ground under her feet as Dar stepped aside and let her past. "I'm not really thrilled about heights," Kerry explained, apologetically. "That climbing wall is okay, because it's so close to the ground, and all, but that..." She shook her head and pushed a faintly shaking hand through her hair. "Whoo, haven't had a reaction like that in a while."

It took all of Dar's willpower not to hug her, even with everyone over there watching them.

Instead, she put a hand on Kerry's shoulder and patted it. "Take it easy. Why don't you sit down on that bench over there? You're kind of pale."

"In a minute," Kerry stated, tugging her card out of her pack with grim determination. "I want my stamp." She watched the machine impact the heavy cardboard. "Dar, that was amazing. Everyone thought you'd lost your mind." She looked up at her boss. "Mariana was freaking." A shrug. "Nah, it's cold out." She held up a hand in the cool breeze. "Snake'd be sleepy, they're cold blooded," she reminded her lover. "I just wanted to see if it was sleepy enough for us to squeeze by. I didn't expect it to be fake." She glanced back to where Steven was clambering rapidly across. "It was pretty cool though, huh?" A rakish grin edged her face.

Kerry laughed gently. "Yeah." She walked over and sat down on the bench, willing her legs to stop shaking. She watched as Steven brushed by Dar without a word and stalked to the stamper, then wandered off down the path a little.

Duks was headed across next and Kerry could see that Mariana had convinced Eleanor to cross ahead of her. She wondered briefly what argument the Personnel chief had used, then she contented herself with just watching Dar, who was standing by the exit to the bridge, one hand resting on the rope.

Oh, boy, had that ever rocked. She grinned to herself. *The guys got their macho egos kicked right in the balls with that one.* She'd been so proud of Dar she could hardly stop herself from cheering as the taller woman made her way fearlessly towards the ominously coiled snake.

She watched Duks get across, exchanging a few words with Dar and giving her a light slap on the side, which got him a modest shrug and a chuckle. Dar was pleased with herself though, Kerry could tell, and she grinned at her as they both walked back to where Kerry was sitting.

"Well, well." Duks took a seat next to her after getting his card stamped. "That was a first. I wonder what the rest will be like?"

Dar put a boot up on the edge of the bench and leaned against her knee. "They can't get too bad. I mean, after all, this isn't a military course. They have to gear it for us soft, lazy executives," she commented. "So I doubt we'll be facing staked pits or anything like that."

"Have you?" Duks asked. "Been the military course?"

"Yes." Dar plucked at the denim fabric on her thigh. "But that was a long time ago."

"Ah, I see," Duks murmured, peeking past Dar and observing as Eleanor squeaked across, with Mark going just in front of her coaxing, and Mariana bringing up the rear. The ropes creaked at the triple weight, but seemed to be holding all right. "I still haven't forgiven you for causing me to be awakened like that this morning, Dar. That was not a nice thing to do to a poor, inoffensive, sleeping man."

"Wasn't my fault," Dar responded. "You guys looked pretty damn funny standing there in your boxers, though, I'll give you that."

"Mm. I am going to pretend you didn't say that, just to preserve my tattered dignity," Duks replied. "And, by the way, Mr. 'I have a Hoover stuck up my rear over there' suspects you two are more than friends," he warned softly. "He was making some very crude, but completely in character comments after breakfast."

Dar and Kerry exchanged glances. "That's been said before." Dar shrugged. "Most everyone's over that, I think."

"True, true, but disappearing from the group on the walk was probably not a good idea," Duks remarked as the three travelers reached their side of the creek. "And Kerry, my young friend, do not take any offense, but your eyes give you quite the bit away." He gave Kerry a wry grin as she crossed her arms and glanced at the dirt trail. "It's quite becoming, but you would do as well to watch the birdies or something else, hmm?"

Kerry sighed. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize," Dar said, suddenly as the other three came up. "To hell with them. Let them think whatever the hell they want." She shook herself, then she walked back to the bridge and leaned on the railing, staring intently at the water below.

Kerry gave Duks a wry look, then she glanced up at the newcomers. "Hey, that was fun, right?" "Disgusting." Eleanor was carefully wiping off her hands, muddy from the rope. "Just disgusting." She stole a glance at the brooding Dar and then turned her attention back to them. "I can't believe they expected us to go past that horrible thing. You can be sure I'm lodging an official complaint as soon as we get back to Miami."

"That was pretty wild," Mark agreed, dusting his hands off. "Good thing we had Dar along. Man, she'd give Tarzan a run for the money for guts, you gotta say that." He walked over and got a drink of water from the coral fountain that had been tucked into an alcove and got his card stamped. "This is kinda cool, though."

Eleanor snorted. "I didn't think you'd enjoy anything that didn't have a computer attached to it," she sniped. "What's your hobby, by the way, Internet surfing?"

"No, that's my job." Mark laughed. "My hobby's restoring bikes, that one I came in on is my favorite."

Kerry smiled at him. "Can I get a ride later?" she inquired teasingly. "I always wanted to say I'd gotten to ride on a Hog."

He grinned back. "Absofriggenlutely," he agreed, "so long as someone takes a picture for me, or nobody'd believe it."

Everyone else made it across with no further incident and they moved up along the trail, though this time Kerry was careful to separate herself from Dar who remained at the back. She strolled along with Mark instead, listening as he described what he'd done for the Hong Kong problem. Steven was forging on ahead, searching for the next obstacle, and the rest were strung out in a reluctant string.

Duks fell back to where Dar was pacing along in silence. "Didn't mean to get you angry, my friend," he commented quietly.

"I know," Dar replied tersely.

"Just a friendly warning. You know what kind of trouble that crap can lead to," the Finance VP went on. "And you don't need any more crap to deal with than what we already throw on you." Dar's jaw bunched, then she reached out and broke off a dead branch as they passed it, whipping the shards off into the underbrush. "To be honest, I'm not sure I care anymore," she admitted. "It's all so stupid. I feel like saying to hell with it, and just..." She stopped, and exhaled.

"That puts Mari in a very tough place," Duks remarked quietly. "You know that. Come now, Dar, surely you know the consequences."

She gazed off into the trees. "Of course I know. It's just-- This is much more than I ever expected it to be, Duks. It might be more than I can handle." Her eyes flicked to his. "And if I have to choose, the company's not going to even be in the running."

Duks blew out a breath. "Ah." His lips pursed. "I see. All right. What if we moved Kerry to another division?" he reasoned. "Then it wouldn't matter. It's just the direct reporting that causes the issue."

"I'd thought about that," Dar told him quietly. "But this is what she does, Duks. I'm not tossing her somewhere else in the company for everyone to make cracks about." She raked her dark hair back. "No, maybe this whole thing with Steven's just putting me on edge. I'll get over it." She brushed the subject off. "Sorry about that, I think I need some chocolate."

Duks gave her a look, then chuckled in relief. "You and your chocolate." He watched Dar dig in her belt pack and tug out a few silver wrapped items. "If you tell me you are carrying around little chocolate kisses, I'm going to have to lose my very meager breakfast over there by the wayside, Dar."

She stopped and glanced at her open hand, then grinned a touch sheepishly. "Want one?" she offered weakly. "I um..." She waved ahead of them. "I think Kerry stuck them in there."

"Oh disgusting," Duks clucked. "I am getting slimed by all this mushdom." He did take a kiss though. "I never, ever thought you had it in you."

Dar sucked happily on her kiss, rolling it around so the chocolate flavor got equally distributed.

"Yeah well, wonders never cease," she commented as a shout from the front of the group indicated the next obstacle had been encountered. "Let's go see what they found this time."

IT LOOKED LIKE the next problem was a maze. At least, that's what Kerry thought it was, seeing the multitude of wooden paths that wound among each other. The paths were about six inches wide and reminded her of balance beams, which had always been a bane of hers. "Now what?" She glanced at the paths, puzzled.

"We have to get there." Steven pointed to a low platform about a hundred yards away. "Just a matter of picking the right path." He studied the choices. "I think this is the right one."

"Why?" José disagreed, kicking the one nearest him with a toe. "Why not this one?"

"Or this one?" Duks was investigating one that went around the perimeter.

"Look, this one goes directly across to there. It's closer," Steven argued. "That one there goes all the way over to that side and zig zags, and the other one goes around the edges."

"Well, but wouldn't they tend to not make the right one the most direct?" Mariana asked, reasonably. "What would be the challenge, otherwise?" She watched Mary Lou approach yet another path. "Not that it's... I mean, we can just try each one until we find the right one, I suppose."

"Wouldn't it be faster if we each tried one and whoever figures out the right one first tells everyone, and then everyone else can just get on that path?" Kerry inquired, peering over the paths. Each wooden walkway was suspended over a coral grotto of pits and slopes, filled with impassable bushes and rock walls. "What is this thing, anyway?"

Dar stepped up behind her, and turned in a full circle. "My guess is it used to be a lake," she stated. "See how the land slopes up around here?" She pointed. "So that used to be the bottom of it, soft coral and limestone shaped by the water."

"Would you can the Discovery Channel, please?" Steven rolled his eyes. "Let's get this over with." He stepped out on his chosen path. "You all can do what you want. I'm heading over there."

"This is foolish," Eleanor muttered. "They're going to get a huge piece of my mind when I get back to Miami." She put a hesitant foot on a board.

"Jesu...if I fall off this, I'm suing."

Dar was the last one to choose. She waited for everyone else to pick a path, then she stood on the edge of the puzzle and gazed across. Kerry was off to her left and she considered it, then picked a path most likely to intersect with the one Kerry was on. It wasn't particularly hard, the board being eight inches or so across, you just had to be careful of your step. Falling wouldn't be painful, just embarrassing, unless you were a guy and fell straight down or you chose to take a dive off the planks and hit your head on the coral.

"See? I told you," Steven yelled in triumph as his path wound closer to the platform. "You guys better start backtracking."

Dar bounced on her feet twice and regarded his planks. "Maybe," she was forced to agree, giving Kerry a wry look as the blonde woman glanced her way. "I don't..." She stopped as a faint tremor ran through her legs. "Did you feel that?"

Kerry concentrated. "Feel what?" She looked puzzled.

"Like a...a shudder or something." Dar waited, but the feeling wasn't repeated. "No? Must be me, then." She shook her head, then continued on a bit, watching Duks and Eleanor's paths come close to each other. Then she felt it again. "There, did you feel that?"

"Feel what?" Mark had circled around away from the perimeter. "Dar, are you all right?"

The tall, dark haired woman stopped still and concentrated. "Yeah. I think I..." Now it was stronger. "There...tell me you didn't feel that, like a truck going by on the freeway."

"I felt it," Kerry acknowledged, looking around nervously. "Is it an earthquake?"

"Earthquake!" Eleanor heard her. "What are you saying? Don't be foolish. There are no earthquakes in Florida."

Dar's brow creased. "She's right. The entire state's built on limestone over a water base. There's nothing to quake. It'd just turn to sand and--" Abruptly her footing lurched under her. "Hey!"

"What the--" José wavered back and forth. "This is some piece of shit trick. Goddamn these people." He flailed his arms for balance. "Jesu!"

Dar saw the crack. "Oh shit." Her eyes went wide in shock. "Hang on!" Instinctively, she dove in Kerry's direction as the entire grotto collapsed under them, in a rumble of rock and splintering wood.

She fell, they all did, with dirt and coral and trees tumbling after them, screams going up as the earth dropped out from under their feet, crumbling and diving down into a sudden, gaping, widening well. Dar covered her head as she dropped, trying to fend off branches with her other hand, and she remained upright until a rock hit her mid fall, knocking her sideways and into the collapsing earth rim.

She grabbed at a limb, but the weight of the earth pressed her onward and she found herself slipping down a moving slope, with rocks and sticks pelting her painfully. "Kerry!" she yelled, just before a sizable chunk of coral smacked her in the head and knocked her into a dark fog for a long, frightening moment. Then she hit bottom and felt the impact of what seemed like half the world dropping on top of her.

Kerry had screamed as the wood disintegrated beneath her feet, but she'd managed to grab hold of the supports as she dropped and swung over to the side of the falling pit, scraping along the edges and trying to get a grip on anything to stop her slide. Around her, she could hear the others screaming and she ducked a branch, then got her feet under her and managed to slow her descent for a moment.

Not long enough, though, as the earth ledge she'd been bracing against collapsed and she found herself tumbling head over heels towards a pile of coral. "Jesus!" She managed to shove away from them, but got caught by a falling tree which she grabbed and clung to as it rushed downward. She felt a tremendous jolt as it hit bottom and she went flying through the air.

Luck put her down in a pile of earth and small rocks, instead of anything harder and she crawled out of the way of some falling limbs and huddled under a tree trunk as the collapse roared around her. She heard her name called and she lifted her head, peering through the branches towards the sound. She spotted Dar's falling body, then saw it crumble in mid air and land, with rocks and dirt on top of her. "Dar!"

Kerry didn't wait for anything else. She dug out from her hiding spot and dashed across the still moving earth, through clouds of dust and shredded leaves, dodging the odd rolling boulder. "D... oh god." She saw the arm sticking out from the dirt and scrambled over the last obstacle. Kerry jumped down next to where her lover had fallen and started frantically throwing debris off her. "Dar? Hey!" She shoved dirt away from Dar's head and was rewarded by a groan. "Hey, hey, come on."

"Okay, okay, take it easy," Dar mumbled, getting her arms under her and pushing away from the dirt a little. She felt rocks and earth roll off her back, aided by Kerry's hands "Whoa, watch that last step." She managed to joke faintly as she succeeded in sitting up, reaching to rub her head with a wince. "Goddamn it."

Kerry got into the dirt next to her and brushed her off gently. "Jesus. Are you all right?" She checked Dar's head anxiously. "What happened? I thought you said there were no earthquakes in Florida?"

"Calm down." Dar caught her hands and chafed them, feeling the tremors. "It wasn't an earthquake." She looked around them as the rumble eased, and the dust settled, hearing the cries of their companions. "It's a sinkhole."

"A sinkhole?" Kerry sank down next to her and leaned against her shoulder, sliding an arm around Dar's waist. "A sinkhole. Okay, so this is not part of the test, right?"

"No." Dar gazed at her. "Are you okay?"

"What? Oh sure. I'm fine. Absolutely," Kerry assured her. "Just a few bumps."

"You're sure?" Her lover gently inquired.

"Yes. I am," Kerry stated.

"Okay. Well, you might want to let up on my arm, then. I'm losing feeling in my fingers." Dar's eyes twinkled a little.

Kerry stared down at her own hand, clenched around Dar's wrist in a white knuckled death grip.

"Oh." She loosened her hold. "Sorry." She took several breaths, then studied her companion.

"You're bleeding."

Dar glanced at her shoulder "No. I'm all right. It's just a scratch."

A soft, knowing chuckle. "Where have I heard that before?" Kerry replied as she checked the wound. "Looks like a branch poked in here." She sighed and looked over her shoulder. "Guess we'd better go find everyone."

"Yeah." Dar stood, then winced as her weight came down on one knee. "Oh, shit." Her face twisted in pain and she sat back down, holding her breath until the jolts of pain subsided. "Son of a bitch."

"What?" Kerry grabbed her anxiously. "Take it easy." She gently straightened Dar's leg out.

"What is it?"

"My knee," Dar exhaled. "I think the cap is dislocated." She gingerly felt the front of her leg.

"Yeah, feel that."

Kerry laid hesitant fingers over the denim covered surface and felt an ominous bulge. "Ow, Jesus, Dar that must hurt like crazy."

It was making her nauseous, in fact. "Yeah...um..." Dar took a deep breath. "Listen, could you just, um, kind of twist that, and move it towards the inside of my leg?"

Wide green eyes stared at her. "What?" Kerry yelped. "You want me to do what?"

"Kerry, come on, stay with me here," Dar urged. "If you just knock it back in place it's going to hurt a hell of a lot less."

"I don't think I can. God, Dar-- "

"Yes, you can," Dar's voice dropped. "Come on now. It'll just take a second. Grab it and twist."

She took hold of a nearby branch and clenched it as Kerry's shaking hands fastened over the misplaced bone. "That's it, go on."

Kerry closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, feeling the hard surface moving and slipping under her fingers. She fought down a queasy sensation and took as firm a hold as she could, tentatively twisting the bone out and down, conscious of the unmoving silence from her lover. "Okay, hold on."

She held her breath and pushed, then gasped as she felt the part slide into place. "Did I get it?"

Receiving no answer, she forced her eyes open to see a very pale Dar slumped against the debris, out cold. "Oh shit!"

DAR BECAME GROGGILY aware of a dull, throbbing pain in her leg, and a warm tingling on her lips. She spent a moment deciding the two were probably not related, and let her eyelids drift open to see very concerned, very vibrant green eyes inches from her own. "Uh." She blinked and swallowed, running her tongue over her lips tentatively. "Did you just kiss me?"

Kerry let out a shaky sigh of relief. "Yes. I was trying to wake you up."

"Mm. You know, shaking me would have done it too, but I'm not complaining," Dar advised her wryly. "Damn, sorry about that."

"Wow, the pain must have been incredible, Dar, I..."

Her lover sighed. "No, it wasn't that. I mean, yes, it hurt, but not enough to knock me out." She cleared her throat a little and struggled to sit up. "It was the feeling of my bones grinding together. I used to pass out whenever they had to set something" She gave Kerry an apologetic look "Should have warned you." Her lips quirked. "That, and long needles. Watch out."

Kerry regarded her in mild surprise. "Oh." She sat back, rubbing Dar's arm gently. "I never would have guessed. I mean, you're so, um..." She lifted a hand. "You know."

"Tough." Dar smiled self-deprecatingly, as she eased her arms around her knees. "I know. It's a good act," she acknowledged, straightening her leg carefully. "That's better," she sighed. "All right, where were we? Going to check for the others, right?"

Kerry sat back. "Dar, why don't you stay here? I'll go check on everyone." She got up, ducking under the branch they were sheltering beneath. "Maybe I can find something for you to wrap around that."

Dar reached over her head and grabbed the branch, pulling herself to her feet. "No. I'd better find out now how--ouch." She sucked in a breath, then exhaled it as she slowly put weight on her leg. It hurt, but it held, and she eased it up, flexed it a few times then put her foot back down again.

"Okay. I think that's going to be all right." She glanced out over the rubble. "Jesus."

The ground they'd been crossing had turned into a bowl like pit, with walls over thirty feet high all around them. The bottom was littered with rocks and shattered trees and a muddy seeping of water that Dar could feel chilling her soles.

A yell drifted over--her name--and they turned to see Mark climbing up on a half submerged tree trunk, waving at them. "Come on." Dar looked around, then picked up a broken limb to use as a support. "This could be our lucky day."

"Lucky?" Kerry peered at her. "Let me check your head again."

"Lucky because this pain in the ass exercise is over," her boss clarified, "and we can go the hell home."

"Ahh," Kerry sighed. "Gotcha."

They slowly made their way across the rubble, with Kerry managing to resist the urge to take Dar's arm an entire five minutes before she gave in, gently tucking a hand inside Dar's elbow as they went over uncertain footing. "I know," she started talking nervously, as she felt Dar take a breath. "I know, and I don't care, Dar. I'll quit, I just...I don't care if they know."

Long pause. "Um, actually, I was just going to remind you to watch out for those soft, white areas," Dar replied gently. "They're limestone and probably slippery." She paused, thinking. "As for whether or not they know, I'm not going to worry about that right now. The important thing is for us to all get out of here."

"Oh." Kerry glanced down, and nodded a little. "Okay. Sorry." She felt a little silly. Of course Dar was right. No one would even be thinking about that now and she shouldn't either. Duks' comment had shaken her up a little, that was all.

Then she felt Dar's arm shift and warm fingers curled around her own as she looked up, startled. Blue eyes gazed steadily back at her, a faint hint of challenge in the lilt of Dar's eyebrows. Kerry smiled and gave the fingers a squeeze, then turned her attention back to finding a way across the slippery ground.

"HEY, GIVE ME a hand here," Mark called over to where Duks was standing. "Hold still, Mary Lou. Let me get this branch off you." He gave Duks a nod as the Finance VP joined him and put a hand on the heavy limb. "Thanks."

"Take it easy, Mary Lou," Duks told the young woman as he and Mark pushed against the limb, trying to force it away from her body. "Argh." They shoved harder and managed to move the tree off Mary Lou's trapped leg. "There you go."

"Augh." The young woman crawled free and pulled herself to her feet. "Thank you, thank you." She gave Mark a grateful look as he took her arm, leading her over to where the rest of the group was gathering.

Dar was off a little ways, poking in the debris with her stick, while Kerry crouched next to Mariana, who had gotten a nasty cut on her arm. Other than that and some bangs and bruises, they'd all survived intact, and now were standing or sitting in a rough circle, dazedly looking around them.

"Now what, Sherlock?" Steven came up behind Dar and glared at the walls blocking them in. "You going to wave your damn broom and fly us all out of here." He spat disgustedly. "I can't believe you got us into this, I think I'm going to--Urp." The end of Dar's stick was pinning him to a tree trunk and he struggled to breathe.

"You." Dar pressed harder. "Are." She leaned closer. "Getting." Her voice dropped, but somehow became more penetrating. "On my nerves!" She paused, glaring. "So shut up, or I'm gonna shove this stick right up your ass." A deathly silence. "Got me?"

Steven nodded once, then slumped as the stick was removed and he could breathe again. "Bitch." He rubbed his throat.

The tanned face creased into a feral smile. "Jackass," she responded, then turned and resumed her study of the wall.

"Oh, boy," Mariana whispered as Kerry finished tying a bit of shirt sleeve over her cut. "DR's on the ragged edge, I see."

Kerry glanced up at her boss, then exhaled. "Yeah, but it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't pushed her. He's been doing that all weekend. I was sort of surprised she hadn't said anything before." Truculent green eyes regarded Mariana. "It's not her fault."

The Personnel VP allowed a weary smile to cross her face. "Whose fault it is doesn't impact the amount of paperwork I'm going to have to do for this little trip." She nudged Kerry with her knee. "Go see if you can settle her down a little. We don't need police reports on top of everything else."

Kerry blinked. "Oh, no, Dar wouldn't..." She paused, remembering Kyle. "Okay. I see your point." She stood, buckling her belt pack back around her waist and picked her way over to where Dar was standing. Steven gave her a cold stare as she passed and she returned it with a charming smile, which seemed to annoy him a lot.

Dar was scanning the wall, her pale blue eyes flicking here and there as she rested her weight on the stick to keep it off her knee. "That's a possibility." She pointed as Kerry came up next to her. "It'd be tough, but I think we might make it, or at least a few of us would, and then we could go get help."

Kerry gazed up. "You mean where those trees are hanging down?"

"Mm hmm." Dar's attention was tightly focused. "Yeah, we could get a boost up there and use those roots as handholds."

It was a possibility, Kerry reasoned. "That might work, yeah." She put her hand on the stick, covering Dar's fingers, which brought the ice blue eyes down to fasten on her. "You doing all right?"

A faint crease showed in Dar's forehead. "Hmm? Oh, yeah, my knee aches a little and I've got a killer headache, but I'm okay. How about you?"

Kerry let her eyes slide to where Steven was sitting dourly on a log, then move back to Dar's face. One eyebrow rose in question.

Dar looked puzzled for a moment, then she rolled her eyes. "Oh, yeah, I'm fine. I just let him get to me for a minute." She dismissed the incident. "We'd better get started."

Kerry tightened her fingers on Dar's hand. "Maybe we should have our lunches first, give everyone a chance to calm down...hmm?"

Dar considered that. "Maybe," she acknowledged. "Half an hour won't make much of a difference, I guess." She allowed Kerry to lead her back to the group. "Okay." She got their attention effortlessly. "We obviously need to get out of here."

"Yes," Duks agreed. "Quickly. This is becoming quite slimy and I suspect water will be making us float shortly." He tapped his foot in a growing puddle of clear, cold water.

"Jesu." José dabbed at a raw looking scratch on his head. "We could have been killed."

"But we weren't," Dar told him. "There's a spot over there." She pointed. "I think we could all make it up there, and if not, those of us who can, will go get help."

"From who? That idiotic woman?" Eleanor snapped, obviously upset and frightened. "Don't be stupid, Dar. We can't climb up there and I'm not sitting down here in this freezing muck."

"Come now, El," Mariana forestalled Dar's rising ire. "Either you climb, or you stay here. You can't say you're not going to climb, and you don't want to stay here. Pick one." She sighed. "I'm going to be filling out workman's comps on you people all of next week, aren't I?"

"We can call for real help when we get up there," Dar explained. "But everyone should try to make it. We don't know how long it's going to take, and you don't want to be stuck out here when it gets dark."

No one looked like they liked the idea, but reluctant nods went around the group.

"It will be lighter if we eat those lunches they gave us first," Kerry reminded her boss. "I could use the break."

"Oh yeah." Mark pawed at his pouch. "That's a good idea." Everyone stirred, pulling out their packages with varying levels of enthusiasm. "What is this?"

Dar had seated herself on a rock, easing her leg out in front of her and turning her pack over in her finger. "They're called MRE's nowadays" She remarked. "Military food." She looked up as Kerry sat down next to her cross legged on a flat piece of limestone. "They won't kill you, but I won't guarantee anything else."

"Oh, lovely." Kerry pulled at the package, tugging out small foil wrapped containers. "How does it work?" She glanced up, then put her hand on Dar's knee. "Hey."

Dar had been leaning her head against the rock she was seated against, her eyes closed. Now she forced them open and regarded her friend. "Yeah?" She felt suddenly exhausted and the throbbing in her head was getting worse.

"Here." Kerry tucked something into her hand. "I think you need that more than I do."

Dar peered at the packet. "Oh." She smiled in reflex at the army issue generic Tylenol. "Yeah."

With a sigh, she put her package on her lap and unwrapped its parts. "Okay, this is a self-heating pouch." She picked it up and pulled two lurid tabs on either end. "Do that and whatever's inside gets heated up by chemical action." She glanced up, startled to see the whole group of them, less Steven, gathering around her. "It's not that hard, people. We are a technology company. Please remember that."

"Well, well." Duks pulled his tabs, then set the large packet aside. "And what's this? Do not tell me this is what you give us atheists on Christmas." He picked up a smaller packet. "Crackers, graham, 2."

"Oh my god. Is this that stuff they feed the soldiers?" Eleanor's eyes widened.

"Mm, yeah, I saw a special on that the other day." Mark investigated his package. "Silverware too. Pretty neat."

Kerry opened her heated package and sniffed it. "Oh." She pulled her head back in surprise. "I think this is lasagna." She poked a spork in and dug a bit out, tasting it warily. "Hey, that's not bad."

They ate their meals mostly in silence, on top of the soft, limestone rocks which were slowly becoming flooded by water. Dar found herself pushing her food around with her spork. She glanced to one side, then offered the remainder to Kerry. "Here, you want to finish this?"

Kerry eyed her. "You don't like it?"

A shrug. "It's not bad. I'm just not that hungry," Dar admitted. "Go on. I saw you thinking about licking out that pouch."

Kerry blushed, but took the offering and finished it off, then passed Dar her container of apple juice. "Here. I don't like it. Why don't you take your aspirin?"

Dar took her advice and swallowed both Kerry's tablets and her own, washing them down with the juice. Then she regarded the group. "Well?"

"Right." Duks slapped his knee. "Let's get going. I can't wait to get back to our charming camp and the peanut butter sandwiches I'm sure will be there for us." He stood up, balancing carefully on his rock.

José joined him. "Son of a bitch. I'm going to have a thing to say when I get back, I'll tell you that." He glanced. "Come on Eleanor, let's get this over with, eh?"

They moved to the far wall, slipping and sliding over the slick rocks, and started a slow path up. Dar went to the front, discarding her stick as she slowly moved from rock to rock. "Okay, everyone get up here first."

"I'm not going that way," Steven stated. "I'll meet you all up at the top." He turned aside and started his own path up, grabbing on to thick vines which trailed down from half dislodged trees.

"He's right, it's easier there." Eleanor abandoned them and followed Steven's determined form.

"Come on, José, Charles, no sense in taking the hard way up."

"Si," the Sales VP agreed as he edged away from them and followed her. "I'm coming." Eleanor's thin assistant followed obediently, pushing his glasses up nervously.

Dar gazed after them as though about to speak, then shrugged and turned back to her task, leaning her head against the cool branches for a moment before she straightened and looked for the next step up. The throbbing was starting to subside, but she felt an odd kind of distance to her thoughts that made her wonder if she hadn't done more than get her bell rung.

A hand suddenly warmed her back and she turned to see Kerry next to her, ostensibly looking for a good hold. "Is that a good way up?" The blonde woman asked, stepping up next to her and gazing, then turning to watch Steven's progress up the wall. "Or do they have the right idea, much as I hate to admit it?"

Dar smiled wearily. "Well, that's an easier climb, but I'm not sure it's worth it," she remarked.

"Why?" Kerry asked curiously.

"Those vines are covered with poison ivy," Dar replied, glancing over as Duks and Mark, who were right behind her, started chuckling.

"Oh, no, don't say that." Mariana pushed the frazzled hair back out of her eyes. "I'll never hear the end of that, Dar. You'll have done it on purpose to them."

Dar merely shook her head and continued her way up, finding easy holds for the rest of her group. "Easy there," she warned. "Grab that root. Yeah, there." They moved slowly up the slope,

using the handholds to keep their balance. Fortunately, the walls weren't directly vertical and they made fair time, stopping halfway to catch their breaths and take a rest.

Steven, José, Charles and Eleanor had already reached the top and disappeared, and Dar found herself glad of their absence, realizing the constant strain of their irritating presence had really been wearing her down. Duks and Mariana seemed to be glad too, as they leaned against each other and wiped muddy sweat off their brows. Mark engaged Mary Lou into a conversation about the Marlins, which left Dar and Kerry standing next to each other against the slope.

"How's the knee?" Kerry asked.

Dar shrugged and flexed the leg in question. "It's all right." She leaned back against the dirt, feeling the coolness through the fabric of her shirt. The joint had stiffened up, but was more a nagging ache than a sharp pain, for which she was grateful.

The climb wasn't helping, though she'd been able to use her arms and shoulders to pull herself up most of the way. "Come on," she exhaled. "I vote we commandeer the damn bus and get the hell out of here the minute we get back."

They all looked at Mariana, who stuck her tongue out at Dar. "Only if you stop at the first blessed Dairy Queen we find, DR. I have to get the taste of that mint jelly out of my mouth." Dar brightened a little. "Dairy Queen, hey, yeah. They do have those up here, don't they." Ice cream would just hit the spot, she mused, as she resumed her hunt for roots to grab onto. Her stomach still felt queasy, but she knew she'd never, ever been too nauseous to eat ice cream.

"You had to mention that," Kerry sighed, as she climbed up next to her lover. "Now we'll be hearing about chocolate bonnets until we get there."

"What's that?" Duks inquired, offering Mary Lou a hand up next to him.

"It's a hardened chocolate shell," Dar answered, with a half grin. "They dip the cones in it, and let it harden." She pulled herself up one more level. "It's messy as hell, but it tastes great."

"I take it you've been subjected to that, Kerry?" Mary Lou asked, as she edged up the rocks.

"Oh yeah," Kerry answered, then realized how that sounded. "Um, one of the last Dairy Queens in Miami is just down the road from our Kendall office. We have to pass by there to and from meetings."

"Uh, huh, I see." Mary Lou nodded.

They continued to climb until Dar, in the lead, was almost at the top. She slid over one final bit and grabbed a tree hanging off the edge, pulling herself up and over onto the rough path they'd come in on.

No one else was there. "Bastards," Dar muttered, as she turned to put a hand under Kerry's elbow to haul her up. "Went on without us."

"Those pigs." Kerry's brow creased. "I can't believe they did that. We would have waited."

The rest of the group came up and sat down on the path. "Well," Mariana exhaled. "That's more exercise than I've gotten since I was in the Girl Scouts."

"You have that correct," Duks agreed, sprawling with his legs outstretched and leaning back on his hands. "But we have made it, and as such, I proclaim this part of our little seminar a success." Dar got to her feet. "I'll vote for that," she agreed. "But then, we never had a cooperation issue between us anyway."

Mariana sighed, and got up as well. "All right, all right, so it was a bad idea." She brushed herself off. "Although, if this hadn't happened, it might have been more valuable."

"Yeah," Kerry agreed softly as they trudged off down the path, as the late afternoon sun slanted through the trees. "Well, maybe we can work out something on a smaller scale back there, like in a hotel, or something."

"A comfortable hotel," Mary Lou agreed.

"A comfortable hotel with beds, air conditioning, and televisions," Mark added.

"Don't forget modem jacks." Dar gave them a half grin. "And room service."

"Room service, oh yes," Duks agreed.

They all laughed a little as they came to a bend in the path, walking around it almost abreast, stopping as they reached the overlook to the rope bridge.

They stopped, staring at the strands in puzzlement.

Clothing hung off the railing, and loud, angry, frustrated voices were heard below.

"Uh oh." Mariana peeked over, then hid her eyes. "I don't think I have a personnel report to cover this, Dar."

"What?" The executive peered over. "Oh boy."

Kerry balanced on her shoulder. "Oh my god, they're naked."

"Throw the goddamn clothes down, you idiots!" Steven screamed, his head just poking out of the water.

Dar leaned against the railing. "Say please," she called out, tauntingly.

"Dar." Kerry gave her a slap. "C'mon now." She picked up the shirts and pants and balled them up, then hesitated. "If I throw them, they'll fall in the water," she yelled down.

"What in the heck are you people doing, anyway?" Mark leaned next to Dar. "Lousy time to go swimming, you know?"

José stood up, the water draining off his belly. "Some bastards came with guns and made us!"

Dar sighed. "It was funny, right up till now." She backed up and glanced around, then her eyes fell on the snake. "Hold on." She made her way along the bridge until she got to it, then she carefully untangled its length from the ropes and slung it around her neck. "Here." She edged back to where Kerry was waiting. "Tie it on to its tail." She turned to Mark. "Keep an eye out for anyone coming. Musta been some hunters or someone who decided to play a joke on them."

Mark backed up and looked around. "What am I supposed to be looking for? Morons with rifles? My job description doesn't cover this, Dar," he muttered.

Kerry finished tying the clothes to the snake's tail, then watched as Dar lowered it down to where José was standing, having to crouch all the way down and extend her arm to get it low enough. Kerry kept one hand on the platform and the other hovering, in case her boss lost her balance, though if Dar did and she grabbed her, for sure they were both going creekward.

"Okay, you got it?" Dar yelled wincing as the strain pulled against her leg. She watched José reach up, then closed her eyes in reflex. "Oh god. I didn't need to see that," she muttered, hearing Eleanor scream.

"Shut up, I'm getting the goddamn clothes," José snapped, finally working them free. "Here." He released the snake's tail. "Done...aiiiee!" he yelped as the snake, freed from Dar's hand, dropped in rubbery coils around him. "Jesu, Dar. I'm gonna kick your ass when I get up there."

Dar straightened slowly, conscious of Kerry's hand on her elbow. "You couldn't kick my ass if I were a desk chair and you had brass boots," she yelled back down.

"Would you two just shut up!" Eleanor screamed. "Oh my god, I'm itching all over."

"So am I," Steven chattered, tugging his long sleeve shirt on. "Oh shit. Augh!"

"On second thought, clothes were probably a bad idea," Dar commented with mild interest to Kerry. "That fabric rubbed up all over the poison ivy."

"Ouch." Kerry winced, looking at her hands. "Thanks for telling me."

Dar smiled. "I'm sure you'll be fine." She chuckled, then exhaled, as the four complaining, blotchy, muddy, wet, angry people closed in on them. "All right, enough!" She raised her voice. "Let's just get the hell out of here and scream at each other later, all right?"

"That's the smartest thing you've said since we've been here," Eleanor snapped. "Get out of my way." She shoved Dar aside and stomped across the rope bridge, seemingly oblivious of its height and unsteadiness, scratching frantically at her arm as she did so.

"Okay." Dar leaned back against the ropes. "Guess we're going back to camp." They all filed past her one at a time and she watched them cross, waiting for Kerry to get part of the way over before she brought up the rear, placing her feet carefully on the rope.

"Goddamn it all to hell. I'm going to sue until I've gotten every single cent out of this goddamned company." José was stomping along. "Irresponsible, danger to its customers--putas!"

Dar sighed and tried to filter his voice out, concentrating on the pain in her leg instead. That worked, but it got her preoccupied, so much so that she didn't realize everyone stopped and she thumped into Kerry's back with a jolt, knocking the breath out of both of them. "Wh...oh...sorry." She steadied herself on Kerry's shoulder and exhaled. "What's up?"

Silently, Mark pointed into the camp. Dar stepped up next to him and peered through the leaves to where she could see the main hall. Their bus was parked off to one side and in front of the structure were two pickup trucks, with various camping style items in the back and prominent shotgun racks. Two men were sprawled in the back of one truck chugging beer and two others were on the porch, one of them pinning a hapless Skippy against the wall as he tried to kiss her. The guide was squirming frantically, trying to escape.

"It's those bastards that made us strip," Steven snarled. "Let me at their ugly butts." He scratched his arms frantically. "Auggghghh."

Dar felt a cold wave wash over her, leaching the color from the vibrant foliage and draining the exhaustion that had been plaguing her since the accident. She felt her attention focus on the men, and a faint, grim smile played about her lips. "All right, that's it. I've had enough," she said as she pushed her way past José and Steven, and stalked into the open clearing.

"Where in the hell do you think you're going?" Steven hissed, grabbing at her arm.

She shook him off like his touch was nothing. "I'm going to go work out some repressed frustration," she growled, then started moving again. "Just be glad it's on them and not you."

"Dar!" Kerry's voice was low, but anxious. "Wait--"

For a long moment she was alone, then she heard steps behind her and a hand grabbed the back of her shirt. She pulled free. "Stay here." She told Kerry as she headed towards the two men on the porch. "Hey!"

She was up on the platform before they could react, then one belched. "Hey, you're pretty!" He lurched towards her, reaching out a hand. "C'mere, pretty lady."

Dar felt the motion before it happened, a reaction buried deep in her body that twisted her shoulders and sent an elbow into his jaw, slamming him back against the wall with a startled yelp.

She turned as the other one came for her and nailed him with an overhand right, almost exulting in the sharp sting of impact that traveled up her arm and through her shoulders. He staggered back and she followed, grabbing him by the dirty fabric of his flannel shirt and lifting him up as she shoved him against the door of the main hall.

He opened his mouth, then looked into her eyes and fell silent, his lip quivering.

"You," Dar sent her voice as low as it would go. "Are between me--" She kned him in the groin and watched his eyes roll up into his head. "And Dairy Queen."

She let him drop and he collapsed, grabbing his parts and making a low, whining sound. Dar turned and glared at the two beer guzzlers, who had picked up their rifles and started to hop over the side of the truck. She leveled her gaze on them and stalked towards them, her hands flexing and unflexing into fists.

They stopped in mid motion, one falling over and landing on his head and the other falling back on his ass in the truck bed. The one who had fallen out of the truck scrambled to the driver's side, pulled the door open and got inside, then hastily started the truck and threw it into gear. He stepped on the gas and it took off, its tires bumping in the dirt and tossing the man in back up and down like a frog on a hot car roof, his desperate yells following the truck's engine sound out of the camp.

Dar turned and looked at the man she'd hit first. He crawled out of her sight and off the porch, rolling under it and startling the camp dog, who scooted out barking in outrage. Then her eyes slowly swept up and pinned themselves on Skippy. "Where's the bus driver?"

The girl opened her mouth and closed it several times before any sound came out. "Oh, uh...I...he's...um...I..."

"Find him," Dar growled.

"Yyyyes ma'am." Skippy fled.

It was quiet then, only the sound of Kerry's hiking boots scuffing across the sandy ground broke the silence as the blonde woman crossed the area and hopped up on the porch. "Well," she murmured, putting her hands on her hips.

Dar regarded her wryly. "Sorry I took off like that. You okay?"

Kerry pursed her lips and regarded the moaning man on the floor. "Um, yeah, I guess." She waved the rest of their group forward. "You all right?"

Dar leaned back against the wall as their group arrived, giving her wary, respectful looks. "Yeah, I'm fine, actually," she remarked. "I just want some ice cream." She walked to the bench outside the door and sat down on it, stretching her legs out before her and exhaling.

Skippy came back, eyeing Dar nervously. "He's on his way."

"Good," Dar said, her eyes closed. "Do you have first aid stuff here?" She turned her head. "A sinkhole opened up underneath us. Those four got tangled in poison ivy." She nodded towards Steven, Eleanor, Charles and José, who glared at her.

"Uh." Skippy glanced between them. "Maybe I'd better call the paramedics."

Eleanor gave her an evil look. "Will they keep us here?"

"I...I don't know, um, probably," the guide responded weakly.

"Just put us on the damn bus," the Marketing VP snarled. "My lawyer will do the rest of the talking."

"Mine too," José chimed in.

"I am a lawyer," Steven added. "And boy, I hope you guys have insurance," he snapped at her.

"This was disgraceful, not to mention dangerous."

"Yeah." José grunted.

"Hold it." Kerry stood up and walked between them, seeing that Skippy was about to burst into tears. "Stop yelling at her. It's not her fault." She gave the guide a quietly sympathetic look.

"She's just doing her job."

Skippy gave her a tremulous smile. "Thanks."

Kerry grinned warmly back.

"Shut up, you whore," Steven spat disgustedly.

Kerry turned to look at him, aware of the sudden motion on the peripherals of her vision.

"Excuse me?"

"You're Dar's whore. We all know it, so just shut up, and go lick her or some--" He never even saw the fist that hit his face, sending a sharp crack across the porch. Steven's body slid down onto the ground, bonelessly.

Kerry shook her hand out. "Ouch." She winced. "That hurt like heck." Everyone was looking at her in shock including Dar, who had stood and started to walk over. "And for the record. I'm not anyone's whore."

An awkward silence fell. Finally, Skippy cleared her throat. "Um, would anyone like some cookies?" she offered with desperate cheerfulness. "We've got three kinds, and some juice, while we wait for the bus. I mean, I've asked the camp manager to get your things from the cabin, and I, you know, we've never had anything like this happen before, and we're really sorry. Really, really sorry. Can I get you all some juice?"

Long pause. "Cookies?" her voice cracked a little.

Mariana, mercifully, came to her rescue. "That would be great, and if you have Calamine lotion. I'm sure it wasn't your fault. Let's see if we can find some Band-Aids, too." She ushered Skippy inside the hall as Kerry walked back over and sat down next to Dar, somewhat self-consciously. Her hand hurt like hell and she cradled it in her other one, staring down at the swelling knuckles as though they belonged to someone else.

Jesus. She'd hit someone. Worse, she'd hit the assistant vice president of marketing for the company she worked for. All over a couple of words. Ashamed, she glanced up at Dar.

Warm, proud blue eyes gazed back at her, over lips that held a definite, gentle smile.

"I shouldn't have done that," Kerry whispered.

"No, but it's all right," Dar told her, deliberately reaching over and taking her hand, examining the bruises carefully. "That's going to hurt for a few days."

"Mm." Kerry absorbed the warmth of her lover's fingers around hers. "Looks like yours did that night," she murmured, glancing around at the rest of the group, who were studiously looking elsewhere. "This is really messed up."

"Don't worry about it,"

Dar told her. "We'll get through this, trust me."

Liquid green eyes gazed up at her. "I do."

Dar nodded a little reassuringly, then sat back and exhaled, willing that driver to hurry.

Chapter Eight

IT WAS DARK by the time they headed back after two stops on the road to pick up medical supplies and another stop at Dairy Queen, which gave up not only Dar's ice cream, but burgers and all the trimmings to the exhausted group. Even Skippy left her perky manner at the camp and joined in, munching her burger in silence, and trying to avoid the baleful stares from the three riders suffering most.

Steven had remained quiet after he'd woken up, nursing his grievances in moody silence and scratching ceaselessly. Most of his exposed skin, like Eleanor's, and José's, was a patchy red and

they each took possession of a large bottle of lotion, applying it so thickly they began to resemble creatures from science fiction.

Mark had reclaimed his Harley and headed back ahead of them, taking Mary Lou with him on the back of the bike. Duks and Mariana were both snoozing, having finished their dinner.

Dar was sprawled in a seat near the back, biting off pieces of chocolate and licking melting drops of vanilla ice cream with an absorbed expression on her face. Kerry was in the seat across from her, nursing a large hot fudge sundae with extra cherries.

"You know something, Dar?" She looked up, sucking on a stem.

"Mm?" Blue eyes looked up over the half eaten chocolate bonnet.

"Ice cream does make you feel better," Kerry admitted. "Why is that?"

Dar nibbled a bit more chocolate. "I have no idea." She chewed contentedly. "And I don't much care. I just know whenever I've felt really lousy an ice cream cone always makes me feel better."

"Mm." Kerry worked around a mouthful of hot fudge. "Probably because it's so bad for you."

"Probably," Dar agreed, mildly.

They munched in silence for a moment. "What's going to happen Monday?" Kerry finally asked, quietly.

"Don't worry about it," Her lover replied.

"He's going to make a lot of trouble." Kerry indicated the front rows of the bus. "They all are."

"I know. Don't worry about it," Dar repeated. "Let me handle things." She caught an errant drip of ice cream with an agile tongue. "What's the worst that can happen? They fire me?"

Kerry absorbed that. "Dar, I...I'd rather just resign, than see you go through all that," she uttered, very softly.

"I don't want you to do that," Dar objected instantly. "Just let me work things out, Kerry. You said you trusted me."

"W...well yeah, I do. I just..." Kerry sighed. "I don't want to see you get hurt."

A faint smile edged Dar's lips. "I'll be fine. Let's just forget about it until Monday, all right?"

Kerry exhaled. "All right," she agreed reluctantly. "I'll just be glad to get back home."

"HEY COL." KERRY watched the traffic carefully as she steered the Lexus down the Rickenbacker causeway. "We're back."

"Good grief, girl. What happened?" Colleen burred from the phone's receiver. "You weren't due back until tomorrow afternoon."

"I know." Kerry glanced at Dar, who was leaning against the door with half closed eyes. "We had a little trouble." Dar had wanted to drive, but Kerry had insisted and now she was very glad. The trip home had been uneventful, with most of them snoozing through the drive and dispersing rapidly as they got to the parking lot of the office.

"Oh boy," the redhead clucked. "Well, things are fine here. Your puppy's been an angel, and I've just been lounging around watching football on this lovely television," she told her. "Did you guys get to eat?"

"Well, not really," Kerry responded. "Hang out. We'll get something when we get there, or at least I will," she added. "Dar's not really feeling well."

"I'm fine," Dar mumbled. "I just have a headache."

"Oh? Okay, I'll turn on the lights in her room, then." Colleen's voice faded a bit as she walked.

"And turn the comforter down. You want me to put up some coffee or something?"

"That sounds great," Kerry agreed. "We're about to get on the ferry. See you in fifteen minutes." She hung up the phone and tucked it away, then steered the car onto the boat and parked it, reaching over and covering Dar's hand with her own. "Almost home."

"Kerry, I'm fine." Blue eyes turned her way. "Honestly."

"Dar, look, we both know you hate people making a fuss over you, but you're limping and I know you're hurting. Would you please save the 'I'm so tough I could chew circuit boards' attitude for everyone else?" Kerry scolded her. "It's okay not to feel well, for Christ's sake." Dar slumped against the seat, poking her lower lip out a little.

"That's a very adorable pout, but it doesn't fool me." Kerry felt a grin tugging at her lips anyway.

"I think it'd be a good idea for you to change, and lie down. Is that too much to ask?"

Dar sighed. "No. No, you're right." She rubbed her temples. "I need some aspirin, and an ice pack for this damn knee, and..." She scowled a little "More ice cream."

Kerry started up the Lexus as the ferry docked and drove up the ramp, turning at the first turn and heading towards the condo. "I think we have some mocha chip in the freezer," she commented wryly. "Though you might want to think about at least having a grilled cheese sandwich or something with that."

"Ugh." Dar winced. "No. I...my stomach's just not in the mood for that. I just want some ice cream."

Kerry parked the car and got out, popping the trunk and grabbing both of their bags. "Okay. I hear you."

Dar eyed her. "I'm being an idiot," she acknowledged. "Humor me."

"I am. C'mon." Kerry waited for Dar to join her at the steps and just kept herself from grabbing Dar's arm as she limped up them. "Got a little stiff, huh?" she commented offhandedly.

"Yeah," Dar admitted, reluctantly. "Hurts like hell."

"Uh huh."

They both paused at the landing before going up the last set of steps, and looked at each other. Kerry wasn't sure later which one of them moved first, but somehow she'd gotten her arm around Dar's back, and Dar had put her longer arm across Kerry's shoulders, in a quiet surrender that surprised both of them.

"Thanks," Dar said.

"Anytime," Kerry replied as she helped her up the stairs. The door opened as they got to it, and Colleen's friendly greeting cut off in a spate of outraged Irish tainted expletives when she saw her friend's condition.

"Good Mary and Joseph, Kerry. What in the hell did you two do to yourselves?" Colleen held on to the wriggling Chino and backed up to let them in. "What happened to your hand? And you're limping, Dar?"

"It's a long story," Kerry sighed as she helped Dar into her room. "Let me get things settled, and I'll tell you the sordid tale."

Dar leaned against the wall and let her head thump back, shifting her weight onto her good leg and working at her belt buckle.

Kerry gently brushed her hands away and took care of that, freeing the belt then unbuttoning the soft, faded jeans. "That coffee smells good," she murmured, sliding the fabric down over Dar's hips and letting it fall, then tangling her fingers in the soft cotton shirt and leaning forward to nuzzle Dar's chest. "But you smell better."

A soft chuckle. "Good thing we showered before we left," Dar remarked wryly as she nibbled an ear. "Or you certainly wouldn't have said that."

Kerry smiled, kissing her lightly on the lips before she turned her attention to the injured woman's leg. "Oh, shit, Dar."

Dar exhaled. "Yeah, swelled up a little, I guess." She regarded her knee in irritation. The skin was swollen and tight over the injury and colored a lurid collection of reds, blues, and purples. She pulled her shirt off over her head and draped it over the chair nearby. "Can you hand me my shorts?"

Kerry retrieved her pajamas and handed them over, then knelt and gently touched her lover's knee, which was slightly flexed as Dar kept her weight off of it. "Dar, this looks really bad." She glanced up, irreverently enjoying the view. "I think you should get it checked out."

"Nah," Dar disagreed. "It'll be okay tomorrow, just needs a little rest." She winced as she bent her leg enough to get her shorts on over the bad leg, then almost went down as she put her weight on it to get the other shorts leg on.

"Dar--" Kerry stood quickly and grabbed her, supporting her until she could manage to stand upright. "Now you look here," she snapped, reaching down and pulling her lover's shorts up, then snapping the waistband to get her attention. "That is not going to be okay. Tomorrow, you're going to call Dr. Steve."

"C'mon, Kerry, it's not--" Dar stopped, as a white hot bolt of pain ran through her and her jaw clenched. She waited a moment for the stars to stop spinning around her head and sighed. "Okay, maybe it is."

A gentle hand patted her belly. "Good girl."

"I'm not going to the hospital," Dar warned. "I hate them."

"I know." Kerry quirked a grin. "Let's see what Dr. Steve says. Maybe he can take you first thing Monday morning at his office, hm?"

"Monday's out of the question. We've got too much stuff going on," Dar countered.

"Dar." Kerry gave her a look. "All right, we'll talk him into meeting us at the office tomorrow then." She gave her lover a triumphant smirk. "I'm sure he'll do that for you."

Yeah, he probably would. Dar grumpily concurred. "Well, we'll see." She twitched her shirt a little straighter. "Maybe it'll be okay tomorrow."

Just like a little kid. Kerry put an arm around her waist and hugged her gently. "Come on, into bed."

Dar resisted the tug. "I'd rather sit out in the living room for a bit, just to relax," she objected.

"Besides, it's hard to eat ice cream lying down."

Kerry started laughing. "You do have a one track mind sometimes, you know that?" She relented.

"Okay. You can listen to me tell our sad story, and I'll get you some darn ice cream."

Dar allowed herself to be assisted into the living room, one long arm draped over Kerry's shoulder. "I like listening to you tell stories," she commented. "You know that."

"Huh?" Kerry glanced up. "What do you mean?"

Dar fell silent, considering her words. "I don't know. I think I need that coffee," she finally muttered in consternation, glancing over to see Colleen reappearing from the kitchen. "Thanks, Colleen." She sat down on the couch and Chino stumbled over, climbing onto her feet and whining. "Okay, okay." She leaned over and picked the puppy up, suffering the tiny claws and enthusiastic tongue.

Colleen put a tray of coffee cups down and stared at Dar's knee. "Jesus and Mary, you look like you were playing rugby or something." She sat down and handed cups around. "So what happened?"

Chino wriggled loose and went over to greet Kerry, nuzzling her arm until she picked the puppy up and cuddled it. "Hey puppy, did you miss us?"

Chino yawned, making a squeaking noise, then nibbled on Kerry's arm as the blonde woman tickled her tummy.

Dar settled back into the comfortingly soft leather and propped her leg up on the coffee table, sipping at her coffee and trying to make her body unwind. "What didn't happen?" she asked rhetorically. "I knew this was going to end up a mess."

"Wait, I'll be right back," Kerry said, heading off into the kitchen, depositing Chino in Dar's lap on the way.

Dar shifted her position, stretching out on the couch and resting her head on the arm. "Been quiet here?" she asked Colleen, more to fill the silence than anything else.

"Pretty much, yes," Colleen answered, pushing her crimson hair back with a freckled hand. "She was a good girl, except she managed to get a hold of a banana somehow and I had to chase her halfway round the earth to get it back."

Dar smiled and rubbed the puppy's head. "Did you do that?" She watched Chino cock her head, the soft ears flopping over. "Bananas are probably bad for puppies, huh?"

"Oh yeah." Colleen laughed. "Ours got into a bunch when she was a pup and ended up nonstop pooping for a week." She glanced up as Kerry reentered, carrying a bowl and something in her other hand.

Kerry knelt next to where Dar was sprawled and handed her the bowl. "Here you go." She offered her the other hand. "And here's some aspirin for the knee."

Dar balanced the bowl on her chest and took the aspirin, throwing them in the back of her mouth and washing them down with a mouthful of coffee. "Thanks." She set the cup down and rescued the ice cream from the interestedly sniffing Chino. "Hold on there, that's mine."

Kerry chuckled and stood up. "You want an ice pack?"

Dar shook her head. "Nope," she mumbled around a mouthful of ice cream, watching Kerry as she returned to the kitchen, coming back with a steaming bowlful of something and a fork.

"Col, there's more of this if you want," Kerry commented, waving the fork at her.

"Nope, had something just before you called, but thanks," the redhead responded with a grin.

"Now, tell your tale, and I'll be on my way. The cats will be glad to see me."

Kerry sighed. "Where do I start?" she said. "They sent us to a retreat upstate as sort of a team building exercise because everyone's always fighting in our office."

"Oh, lord, they sent our management away on one of those, and a branch manager came back pregnant," Colleen responded. "Hasn't been another one since."

Dar chuckled. "I have a feeling we won't be having many after this either."

"Probably not." Kerry gave her a look, then chewed a forkful of her leftover Schezuan chicken.

"Anyway, so we got there and..."

There was something soothing about Kerry's voice, Dar decided, as she sucked on her ice cream. Even if she didn't listen to all the words, the tone, rising and falling, getting louder to make a point, then dropping off, was as easy on her ears as Kerry's adorable good looks were easy on her eyes.

Monday, she knew, was going to be an absolute disaster. She almost wished she could just call in sick, but that would leave Kerry to deal with it and that wasn't fair. Dar scooped up the last of the frozen treat and was about to lick the spoon, when the beseeching brown eyes gazing up between her breasts got the better of her. "Oh, all right." She held up the spoon and watched Chino lick it clean, a tiny smudge of ice cream splotching her jet black nose. "You like ice cream too, huh?"

The puppy made an eager noise and scrambled up, sticking her entire face in the empty bowl, smearing the chocolate all over her creamy fur. "Hey, hey."

"Dar, are you feeding that puppy ice cream?" Kerry sounded humorously outraged. "I can't believe it."

"Well, no, that wasn't my intention," Dar protested, trying to get the puppy out of the bowl. "Hey, get out of there."

Chino finally gave up, pulled her head out of the bowl and licked her chops, then scrambled up and started to clean Dar's face. "Aww, c'mon."

Kerry laughed. "I know you gave her to me, Dar, but I gotta tell you, I think that's your dog."

"No." Dar finally got the puppy to settle back down on her stomach. "It's not my dog, it's your dog. She just likes to sit on me."

"If you say so." Kerry grinned, and went back to her story.

Dar listened for a minute, then put the bowl aside and wiggled into a more comfortable position. She felt her body finally start to relax, settling deeper into the soft leather and she decided to close her eyes, so she could concentrate on hearing the story.

"So then Dar just kind of cleared the decks with all of them, and we..." Kerry looked up as Colleen poked her. "What?"

The redhead pointed and grinned.

Kerry glanced over and saw her lover fast asleep on the couch, the puppy snoozing on top of her, both looking contented as could be. "Awww--" She couldn't help smiling. "Wait, I have to get a camera, shh." She got up and dashed upstairs picked up the 35 millimeter camera on the dresser and headed back down.

"Shh, she'll hear you," Colleen whispered, watching her sneak forward and get into position.

"Okay, okay." Kerry focused the lens expertly, wanting to get a perfect shot because she knew the flash would probably wake Dar up. She framed Dar's head and chest in the picture, along with the sleeping puppy, and pressed the shutter, hearing a click and seeing the bright pop of the flash go off.

Sure enough, sleepy blue eyes blinked at her as she lowered the camera, then glanced around the room dazedly. "Oh, you didn't," Dar groaned piteously.

"Yes, I did." Kerry grinned, clasp the camera to her. "You looked soooooo cute, I couldn't resist."

Dar covered her eyes with an arm and sighed.

Colleen laughed. "Well, that's me signal to leave anyway. It's getting late and I can get the bits and pieces of the rest from you tomorrow." She stood and hugged Kerry. "Take it easy you two, and I hope the knee feels better for you tomorrow, Dar."

"Thanks." Dar gave her a smile. "And thanks for taking care of Chino."

The redhead waved, and trotted out the door, leaving them looking at each other. "You took my picture?" Dar whined. "Keerrryyyy."

"Oh, come on. The camera loves you and you know it. You could be covered in mud with a pig on your head and you'd still look fantastic, so be quiet, Dar Roberts." Kerry put the camera on the table and crossed to her lover, kneeling down and scratching the sleepy Chino's ears. "You ready for bed?"

"Is that a question or an invitation?" Dar responded, with a sly grin.

Kerry leaned forward and kissed her. "Does that answer your question?"

Dar curled an arm around her and tugged her down, returning the kiss with enthusiasm. "Oh yeah."

Chino yawned, then burped, putting her head down along side Dar's leg and hiding her eyes.

Chapter Nine

KERRY AWOKE AS the sunlight hit her face and she blinked sleepily at the clock. "Mm. It's Sunday and I'm not in some bug infested cabin in north nowhere. This is good." She was on her side, facing the door and a long arm was draped over her, attached to the sleeping woman snuggled up behind her.

She lifted her hand and flexed it, making a face at the stiff soreness in her fingers. "Jesus, no one tells you doing that hurts. How do those guys on TV do it all the time?" She let her hand drop and put her head back down on the pillow, allowing the clean smell of the sun warmed linen to enter her lungs.

It was funny. Most of the time, she still thought of herself as this young kid, especially at work, when she would walk into that huge office and have to slap herself and say, "This is mine." Now here she was, waking up in this beautiful place with this beautiful woman wrapped around her, and damn it if she still didn't have to slap herself and say, "This is mine."

She curled her fingers around Dar's and enjoyed the warm, living feel of them as they twitched against the bare skin of her stomach, and the gentle pressure of Dar's breathing pressed lightly against her back. *This is mine. How did I luck into this?* She turned her head and gazed at her lover's face, open and relaxed in sleep.

Trusting. The faintest hint of a smile there. Dark hair disheveled and half obscuring one closed eye.

Which opened and collected sunlight into its pale blue depths as she watched, and the slim, perfectly arched brow above it lifted up. "Something wrong?"

Kerry shook her head silently.

Dar snuggled a little closer and shrugged, then let her eyes close again. "Good. I don't feel like moving," she muttered.

Kerry pressed back against her gently, letting her own eyes drift closed. Dar almost never slept in and she suspected the previous day had taken more out of Dar than she was willing to admit, but if it gave her an excuse to laze around in bed all morning, was she going to complain?

Nu uh. No way. She wrapped her fingers more firmly around Dar's and dozed back off.

DAR WAS VERY reluctant to move. She'd finally found a really comfortable spot, where her knee was gently supported by Kerry's muscular legs and the aching had subsided a little, allowing her to sleep.

But an open eyelid showed that it was late morning and she knew that at the very least, poor Chino needed to be taken care of. She eyed the still sleeping Kerry and grinned a little, enjoying the look of childlike pleasure Kerry always had when she was dreaming. Slowly, Dar slid away from her lover and rolled onto her back, straightening her leg out cautiously.

Ow. She exhaled in disgust. She eased the comforter back and regarded her knee with a jaundiced eye, noting the extended bruising and the continued swelling of the affected joint.

Hesitantly she drew it up, encouraged a bit when she found she could bend it a little more than the previous night, and the sharp pains seemed to have subsided to a continuous, dull ache. With a sigh, she rolled over and got to the edge of the water bed, levering herself up and out of the warm comfort mostly using her arms. Then she cautiously put a little weight on the leg and winced, sucking in a breath and grabbing the dresser.

Damn, damn, damn. She limped heavily over to the dresser and got into a pair of shorts by sitting on the edge of the bed. Then she rummaged in a lower drawer and found an old knee brace she'd used back in the old days, when this stuff had practically been an everyday occurrence. "Well, it's better than nothing," she muttered, examining it, then slipping it on and adjusting it over the joint.

Standing, she found she could put a little more pressure on the leg, enough for her to walk, albeit with a limp. She moved into the living room after slipping into a cutoff half sweatshirt, walking gingerly around for a few moments to test the brace.

Ugh.

Chino heard her coming, and she started jumping up and down, whimpering until Dar let her out of the utility room. "C'mon, sweetie." She opened the back door and let the puppy out, stepping out onto the back porch to watch while the bouncing animal raced around the small, fenced in area, and spent apparently enormous brain energy in picking a spot to relieve herself.

"Another example of human mental superiority," Dar told the puppy. "We don't waste time choosing where to pee." The cool air fluttered her shirt's ragged half sleeves and brushed against the bare skin of her stomach, and she took a moment to breathe in the salty air as she stretched in the warm sunlight.

Then she ran a hand through her disordered hair and limped inside, followed by the eager puppy, who bounced all over the kitchen until Dar retrieved the scoop and dished out some puppy kibble. "Whoa, whoa, take it easy, Chino. Chew it, okay? Don't choke." She watched the animal devour the food like an animated vacuum, chuckling as she shook her head.

Then she turned and leaned on the counter as she got some coffee started. "Let's see, Chino, do we have breakfast?" She opened the cabinet and took down a bright blue box, shaking it gently. "Hmm, we sure do." Then she considered. "Hey, what if I make your mom some breakfast as a surprise?"

Chino turned and looked at her, then sneezed and went back to her food.

"Everyone's a damn critic," Dar replied, with a snort. "Okay, so I'm not Julia Child, but I can make breakfast." She glanced into the refrigerator. "I'm sure I can. I run a damn zillion dollar operation. I can figure out how to use the toaster."

Chino barked at her.

"Are you laughing at me, Miss Puppy?" Dar put a hand on her hip and glared at the animal.

"We'll see if you get any treats from me today." She limped around the kitchen and got out the bread and butter, with some jelly for toast. "Okay, I can handle toast. What do you think, can I do pancakes?"

Chino's gentle brown eyes widened.

"No, you're probably right. I better stick to something easy, like eggs." Dar decided, pulling out a carton of them. "She likes them scrambled. How many eggs do you put in for that?" She inspected the round, white objects. "Hmm, they look small, five or six, I guess, huh?" She pulled out the eggs and put them on the counter, where they rocked gently. "Okay, do we have..." She checked the freezer. "Ah, yes." She pulled out a package of frozen sausage. "Brown and serve, already cooked. That's good. I won't give anyone botulism."

The puppy barked, then wagged her tail.

"No comments from the peanut gallery." Dar pointed the box at her. "Okay. I need two pans, a dish for these eggs, and something to mix them up with. She peered in the cabinet. "No, grits are a bad idea. Last time I tried making them I ended up having to throw the entire pot out." She chuckled wryly at herself, as she got the two frying pans and a bowl out. "Okay, first, break the eggs."

She cracked the white shells and emptied their contents in the bowl, careful not to put shards in there. "No, Kerry gets plenty of calcium. She doesn't need to get surprised by little crunchy bits of it." She took a fork and mixed the eggs, after piercing the yolks to bleed a sluggish yellow in their depths. "Do I put anything in them?" She looked at the spices doubtfully. "Mm, maybe just a pinch of salt and pepper." She shook a little of both spices in and continued mixing. "Okay, that looks good."

She put the flame on two burners, and let the pans heat up. "Are you supposed to put anything in these, I wonder?" She recalled watching a Louisianan cooking show on one of her last flights out, and remembered the chef putting half a stick of butter in a pan. "Oh, right, something to keep it from sticking, okay." She limped to the refrigerator and retrieved the butter, then cut a healthy sized cube off and let it drop into the pan. It sizzled immediately and splattered her. "Yeow!"

Chino barked, then hid under the table.

"Okay, okay." Dar stirred the butter around and watched it melt. "They don't warn you about that, do they?" she muttered, pouring the eggs in and turning the flame down. Then she dropped the contents of the sausage box into the other pan.

"I think I've got this under control, Chino." Dar remarked, stirring the eggs with a wooden spoon. "Yeah, there they go, out of the liquid stage into the Jell-O stage." She paused and took a fork to the sausages, moving them around when they started to sizzle. "Hey, that smells pretty good, huh?" She glanced down to see a puppy glued to her foot. "Oh, yeah, I guess it does." She stirred the eggs some more. "Ah, out of the Jell-O stage, into the fluffy stage." Triumphant, she removed the pan from the fire. "Yeow!!" She dropped it back down and turned off the fire hastily. "Damn it, that's hot."

She rummaged for a pot holder, then managed to get the pan off the stove, scooping the eggs off into a plate. "Okay. So far, so good." She turned her attention to the sausage, poking them hesitantly. "Well, they look hot." She rolled them over. "Oh, brown, right, I got it, brown and serve. That must be the brown part."

She let them continue to cook for a moment and stuck a few pieces of bread in the toaster, turning it on. "Now this, I can't screw up." She nodded briskly at it. "Kerry fireproofed the controls after that damned bagel set off the fire alarm." She turned the sausages a few more times as the bread toasted, then added them to the plate of eggs, and caught the bread as it popped out. "Hey, we're doing good here, Chino, doing good, and I didn't even manage to--"

A gentle throat clearing interrupted her monologue and she glanced up, startled, to see Kerry leaning against the doorway, a thin t-shirt covering her to her thighs, her hair loosely disheveled around her face. "What are you doing?"

Dar felt a stupid grin crossing her face as she regarded her sleep rumped lover, who was looking at her from under lazy blonde lashes. "Um..."

Kerry entered the kitchen and glanced at the full, gently steaming plate. "Where did this come from?"

Dar held out the plate. "I made it," she announced proudly. "I was going to surprise you in bed, but..."

Kerry broke off a corner of egg and nibbled it. "Mm." She gave Dar a look of delighted surprise. "Very good." She took the plate from her friend's hands and put it down on the counter as her eyes traveled down Dar's body.

I've closed million dollar deals that haven't felt this good, Dar reflected in a moment of quiet clarity. "I was just getting some toast." She shifted awkwardly and picked up the bread, feeling a warm hand on her bare side. "Hmm?"

"Tell you what." Kerry leaned over and kissed her belly button gently. "I'll take this outside and you," She handed her the portable phone. "Call Dr. Steve." Her fingers dropped to touch the brace. "Okay?"

"Um, it feels a lot better today." Dar objected hopefully. "Really, Kerry, it does. This brace really helps."

Sea green eyes lifted and regarded her.

Dar sighed. "All right." She watched her lover take the plate out to the balcony and she limped behind her, grateful to settle into one of the bucket chairs in the salty breeze as Kerry returned to get their coffee and some silverware. She thought a minute, then dialed a number, waiting for the service to pick up. "Hello. Yes, please." She waited. "It's for Dr. Steve. I'll leave my number." She gave it, and her name. "I banged up my knee a little yesterday and I just want to talk to him about it." She listened for a moment. "Okay, thanks." She hung up the phone as Kerry settled into her chair. "Happy now?"

Kerry speared a bit of sausage on her fork and offered it. "Dar, there's no sense in you being miserable, is there?" She watched her lover chew the sausage and swallow it. "What, no grits?" "I know, and no, I didn't want to push my luck." Dar informed her. "This was about my limit." A soft chuckle. "Well, it's very good. I'm impressed." She took a forkful of eggs. "Nice and fluffy and no shells. Perfect."

Dar studied her hands. "I used to watch my father make them," she remarked quietly. "One of his few specialties and he didn't make them for everyone, just people he really, really liked."

Kerry munched contentedly. "Oh, so is this how I know I've been truly accepted?" Her eyes twinkled. "I get breakfast made for me?"

A pensive smile shaped Dar's lips. "I don't know, you're the first person I've ever made anything for."

The phone rang, and she picked it up. "Hello?"

Kerry had paused, with the fork in her mouth as she sucked the tines. The eggs took on a new flavor as she absorbed the words Dar had just said. It had nothing to do with food, and everything to do with Dar's willingness to accept her as a part of her life. As a part of herself.

Delicious. Kerry smiled, and picked up another mouthful.

"Yeah, hi Dr. Steve." Dar leaned back and braced her foot against the balcony carefully, studying the bruised flesh around the brace. "No, we did a little hiking upstate yesterday, and we had a little accident. I twisted the hell out of my knee, and it's turning all kinds of god-awful colors." A pause, while Dar listened. "No, no, no hospitals. It's not that bad, just a little sore." Another pause. "No, well, yeah." A touch of resignation entered Dar's voice. "Yeah, it is... ..well, no, I can't." A much longer pause, during which Dar's shoulders slumped. "Okay, yeah.... ..No, I'll meet you over there." She exhaled. "Yeah, an hour's good... ..Okay, bye." She hung up and gave Kerry a wry look. "Well, he wants to x-ray it."

"Good for him." Kerry responded. "I think that's a great idea." She offered Dar a forkful of eggs. "His office in an hour? Good. I've been looking forward to meeting him." A reluctant smile found its way onto Dar's face. "He's been wanting to meet you too," she admitted. "Oh well, at least it's just his office." She leaned back and let the sun drench her body. "What's the worst he can do, right?"

DAR SAT QUIETLY on the examining table, leaning on her hands as she regarded her knee morosely. Dr. Steve had done what seemed like a hundred or so x-rays and was now off in his inner sanctum, doing whatever it is he did to make sense out of them. At least she didn't have to wear that damned, stupid gown, since it was her knee, after all, and she was wearing shorts. A sound alerted her and she glanced up as Dr. Steve came in, festive in his robin's egg blue golf shirt and Bermuda shorts. "So, how bad is it?"

"Dar, why do you always think the worst?" Dr. Steve shook a finger at her. "You are such a pessimist, and where is this lovely paragon of virtue of yours?"

Dar studied her hands. "If you expect the worst, when less happens you're pleasantly surprised." She informed the doctor. "And Kerry'll be here any minute. She just had to pick up a few things." Dr. Steve chuckled. "Didn't want her to see you shivering on my table, huh?"

Dar scowled at him.

"Mm hmm, well." He stuck two of the x-rays up and flicked the light on. "Now, tell me again how you did this?" He traced the area with his pen. "You have compression on the joint here, and here, and stretched tendons here and here. It looks like you kicked a car. You didn't do that, did you?"

Dar sighed. "No, we got caught when a sinkhole collapsed. I fell about fifty feet, I guess, and landed wrong." She eased off the couch and limped over. "Anything break?"

The doctor studied the film carefully. "Doesn't look like it, my friend." He patted Dar's arm. "You got lucky. That could have been a bad one, might have needed reconstruction."

Dar winced. "Mm. So what do I do? Just take aspirin until it stops hurting?" She limped back over to the couch and hoisted herself up onto it, to get her weight off the leg.

"Oh no, you don't get that lucky, Dar." Dr. Steve chuckled. "I'm going to put a restrictive brace on you and give you a pair of crutches."

"Uh uh, no crutches," Dar immediately objected. "I hate those things."

"Dar."

They both turned as a light knock came on the door. "Come on in," Dr. Steve called out, smiling as the door eased open and Kerry poked her fair head in. "Well, hello there." He beamed at her. "Come in, come in."

Kerry stepped inside and gave him a tentative smile in return, as her eyes flicked to Dar's face.

"How's it going?"

Dar exhaled. "Kerry, this is Dr. Steve." She lifted a hand and waved at the doctor. "Steve, this is Kerry."

"Nice to meet you." Kerry extended a hand, and returned the doctor's firm grip.

"Ah, it's nice for me to meet you, Kerry. I cannot tell you how much," the doctor returned her greeting. "Now, perhaps the person who puts a smile on this stubborn cat's face will help me convince her to use a simple pair of crutches, eh?"

"Hey." Dar's brows knit.

"Dar, are you being difficult?" Kerry chuckled softly and moved over to her lover, leaning against the couch and letting a hand rest on Dar's thigh. "What is it you want her to do?" She asked the doctor.

"Well, there's a lot of swelling in there, and fluid," Dr. Steve explained briskly. "I can get rid of it one of two ways; either we wait, and let Dar here rest and see if her body reabsorbs it, or..." he held up a long, hollow needle.

Dar's eyes widened, but she didn't say anything.

"So I wanted to put a brace on it, to hold all the bits and pieces together, and convince my good friend here to keep off the darn thing and give it a chance to heal."

Kerry peered at him, then at Dar. "So, what's the problem with that?"

Her lover sighed. "I hate crutches." She growled.

"I had a broken leg when I was in college and got stuck on the damn things for four months--drove me nuts."

"Ah, well, Dar, we're asking for a week here, hmm?" Dr. Steve coaxed her. "Come on now. It's either that or stay in bed."

A faint, elfin smile wrinkled Kerry's face and brought a twinkle to her eyes. "Hmm..." Then she chuckled. "Think of it as a strategic plus, Dar. If you show up on crutches at work, it's going to throw everyone way off their game."

Blue eyes regarded her glumly.

Kerry sighed. "Okay, then look at it this way. If you show up on crutches and they annoy you, you can bap them over the head with them in the executive meeting." She paused to see the effect her words were having and saw a grudging grin start to edge Dar's face. "It's just a week."

Dar exhaled. "Well, it'll give me an excuse to dress casual at work. I'm not wearing a damn skirt and jacket with a brace and crutches." She finally relented. "They can just cope with it, since it happened on their damn field trip."

"See? There you go." Kerry turned and winked at Dr. Steve. "Now what?"

The doctor chuckled. "Lie down, Dar. I'm going to get that brace on, and give you a minute to get used to it." He went out, then came back with a sturdy looking white cotton brace, sliding it onto his reluctant patient's leg and positioning it over the injury. "Lucky thing you keep these in good shape." He thumped his knuckles on her thigh. "I think that's what kept your leg in one piece." He tightened the straps and fastened the Velcro tabs, adjusting tiny laces on the side to make the fit right. "There, how's that?"

Dar flexed her thigh muscles and lifted the leg up, then let it drop and swung to a seated position, bending the stiff supports with difficulty. "Tight."

"It's supposed to be," Steve told her cheerfully. "All right, let me get some crutches. You like wood, or aluminum?"

"Wood," Dar replied absently, as she fussed with the brace. She glanced after him as he left, then her eyes met Kerry's. "I'm being an ass, aren't I?"

"Umm, no, well..." Kerry cleared her throat. "I think admitting to weakness is really tough for you, Dar." She traced a tiny line along the fine, soft hairs on Dar's arm. "I know that bothers you, especially at work, and especially this week."

She was right, on all counts, Dar acknowledged silently. "Well, I'd better get used to the damn things a little. Can I interest you in some lunch and a short walk out on the beach?" She offered.

Kerry's eyes lit. "Sure. How about brunch at Joe's, then we can walk on the boardwalk a little."

She'd developed a strong preference for fresh seafood since she'd started living with Dar and now

her mouth watered a little, as she imagined the buffet at Joe's. And, she virtuously decided, it was healthy for you.

"Sounds good to me," Dar agreed, as Dr. Steve came back with two wooden crutches, which he handed to his victim. "Let me adjust these first." She reversed the crutches, and loosened the wing nut that held the bolt adjusting their height, and lengthened them. "Okay." She put the tips on the ground and stood up, fitting them under her arms. "Anything else, Dr. Steve?"

He studied her. "You want something for the pain?" he offered.

Dar thought about it. "No," she finally decided, with a pensive sigh. "I tend to rely on it too much, not a good idea," she replied honestly. "I'll stick with the aspirin."

Steve patted her side. "Good girl." He then tugged on Kerry's blonde hair "You take care of her, okay?" He took her hand, then stopped, peering at it. "And what did you do?" He glanced up.

"You fall in that hole too?"

"Um, not exactly." Kerry rubbed her ear. "I, um, hit it on something."

"She slugged someone," Dar supplied helpfully.

Dr. Steve's eyebrows lifted. "Did you?" He laughed in surprise, tugging her over to the light.

"Here, let me take a look."

Dar's direct stare dared Kerry to protest and the blonde woman merely sighed and went along, wincing as the doctor's probing hit very sore spots. "Ow."

"Can you close your hand?" He asked.

"Um, not really," Kerry confessed, moving her fingers as far as she could. "Just that much. It really hurts past that." She found herself being led over to the x-ray platform and heard Dar's soft chuckle. "At least I'm not arguing," she called back over her shoulder as Dr. Steve positioned the machine.

They finally exited out onto the sunny street, with Dar maneuvering carefully with her crutches, and Kerry cradling a hand that now bore a thin, compression bandage. "I had no idea a bone bruise hurt that much," she complained. "It didn't feel that bad yesterday."

"It's nothing." Dar mimicked, teasing her with a grin.

"Yeah, yeah yeah," Kerry sighed, examining the bandage. "You have to wrap it, though. It's the first one I've ever had." She wiggled her fingers. "I'm glad it was just a little bruise." She dismissed her annoyance and glanced ahead. "C'mon, there are some nice, big shrimp over there calling my name."

They moved down the street slowly, evading the Sunday crowds, a definitely mixed bag that ranged from gawking tourists to throngs of locals in a colorful, eclectic show.

Kerry watched the people around her, stepping aside as two very young and very athletic men sped by on roller blades, their short shorts almost revealing what religion they were. Kerry chuckled softly and shook her head, then excused herself as she almost collided with two women strolling through the crowd. They smiled back at her, then let their eyes linger and Kerry blushed a little at the approving looks, as she glanced down.

"Something wrong?" Dar inquired glancing at the retreating pair.

"Um, no, no, I just..." Kerry tugged at her snug white t-shirt and adjusted the buckle on her neatly pressed shorts. "They, um..."

"They were looking at you?" Dar's eyes twinkled, as she lowered her voice. "Don't blame them, you look very cute." She let her eyes roam over her companion's body, and up to her braided hair, pulled back from her face.

Kerry straightened her shoulders a bit under the regard and eyed her friend. "So why aren't they all staring at you?" She indicated Dar's faded denim cutoffs and tucked in crimson polo. Dar had

also donned a favorite baseball cap, which was holding her dark hair off her forehead, and directing the loosely caught pony tail out the back of it.

"Ah ah, staring at a cripple's in bad taste," Dar smugly told her. "Relax. Looking's a hobby down here. Don't let it bother you." She maneuvered around a sidewalk café. "These things aren't as bad as I thought they'd be."

"The crutches?" Kerry asked.

"Mm." Dar flexed her fingers on the handles.

"Hey, you guys." A strange voice caught their attention and they both stopped to avoid crashing into a tall redhead accompanied by a shorter, ash blonde woman. "How's it going?"

Ah, Dar shuffled her mental deck and placed them. The choir leader and her friend from the church. "Not bad, and you?" she replied politely. "We got the newsletter the other day. Thanks for sending it."

"No problem," The redhead grinned. "What happened to you guys?" She pointed at Dar's leg. "Car accident or something?"

"Or something." Kerry smiled easily. "Hi, Anne. That's a nice shirt."

Anne grinned back. "Thanks. Where are you two off to? Just browsing?" She edged out of the stream of traffic. Both women were wearing jeans and t-shirts from the Arts Festival the prior month, and seemed in good spirits.

"We're headed over to Joe's for lunch, then for a walk. Dar's trying to get used to her crutches," Kerry explained, glancing around. "What about you?"

Anne shrugged. "We were just wandering. Mind if we join you?" She poked her companion. "Liz here was just saying she was hungry."

Kerry glanced up at Dar's face, trying to judge her feelings on the subject. The taller woman's expression was mildly interested, and she sensed no violent objection. "Sure, that'd be great. You can tell me about that arts program the newsletter mentioned."

They walked slowly, in deference to Dar's knee, until they reached the restaurant, and sat down at a table near the window with a nice view of the water. "You hang out here." Kerry put a hand on Dar's arm. "I'll get you a plate, okay?"

It went against Dar's grain, but even she acknowledged that trying to juggle a plate on crutches would be stupid at best. "Okay," she agreed, leaning back and stretching out back muscles strained by the unusual pressure.

She gazed out the window until the other three returned, Kerry setting a plate down in front of her, then trotting off to get one for herself. Anne and Liz sat down, and settled napkins on their laps. "So, Dar, what did happen to your leg?" Anne asked, taking a forkful of shrimp pasta.

"We were hiking and got into a little problem with a sinkhole." Dar answered briefly, selecting a bit of cold crab and dipping it in mustard sauce. "How's the choir doing?" She asked Liz politely.

"Mm, it'd do better if I could talk you into joining," Liz remarked, taking a sip of her sweetened tea.

Dar smiled briefly, acknowledging the compliment. "My job prevents me from committing to that kind of thing," she explained, "and I get sent out of town a lot." She glanced up as Kerry returned, settling into the chair next to her with a nicely loaded down plate. "Got enough shrimp there?" she teased gently, grinning when Kerry stuck her tongue out briefly at her.

"So." Kerry took a bite of garlic bread. "Tell me about this arts program of yours. There were some classes there I'd love to take, that oil painting one, for instance."

Anne launched into an enthusiastic explanation and Liz threw in comments, leaving Dar to listen and consume the plate Kerry had provided. Kerry laughed at some of the comments and reached

over to touch Dar's arm frequently as she replied. Dar was content to offer brief nods and short answers to the two other women.

"Ah, Dar, I've got to get you some of these," Kerry interrupted, waving a crawfish at her. "You'd really like them. Here." She pulled a tail out and dipped it in butter, then offered it to her lover. Dar smiled amiably and leaned over, taking it between her teeth neatly and chewing it judiciously. "Right?"

"Right," Dar agreed, as they all laughed. A motion caught her eye and she turned her head to see a photographer focusing on one of the tables outside, measuring angles and taking a picture. Probably looking for celebrities, Dar mused, with a silent chuckle as she dismissed the man in khakis and returned to her lunch.

Chapter Ten

"THIS IS GOING to be a circus." Dar made her way up towards the office, with Kerry pacing alongside. "I think I'll make a sign saying what happened and hang it around my damn neck to save me some time." The cold wind accompanying a weather front that had come through that morning fluttered against her leather jacket, which she was wearing over a pleated, cotton shirt tucked into very comfortable cargo pants. It had been one of the few bright spots of the morning, aside from Kerry's insistence on 'helping' her shower, and she was actually looking forward to appearing in the executive committee meeting so she could watch her co-workers fidget in their wool suits.

They went past the security guard, who waved, then did a double take at Dar, who just rolled her eyes and headed for the elevator. "I'm damn glad it's early," the executive commented dryly. The trip up was quiet as Dar leaned against the wall, and Kerry fussed a bit with her lapel, which bore a pretty, filigreed rose pin, with delicately traced leaves. "Did I mention how much I like this?" she murmured.

"About six times." Dar allowed a grin to cross her face. "You're welcome." They exited the elevator and proceeded down the hall, with Kerry getting a pace ahead to open the door as they reached Dar's office. "Well, here we go."

Maria glanced up as they entered. "Buenos Dias. Dios Mio, Dar!" The secretary stood up and stared at her boss as Dar maneuvered into the office. "What happened?"

Kerry walked ahead and opened the inner office door, leaving it open. "Rough weekend," she joked faintly, holding her casted hand up. "Ended up shorter than expected, as a matter of fact."

Dar exhaled. "Long story, Maria. Let's just say be ready for all kinds of crap to hit all kinds of rotary air movement devices today." She paused in the doorway and half turned. "In addition to the usual Monday disasters, I'm sure Mariana will be in here as soon as she gets in. We made a mess of things." She turned back around and moved towards her desk, sitting down in her comfortable chair with a sense of relief and setting her crutches down on the floor next to her. She flipped on the computer and leaned back, hearing Kerry's low voice in the outer room as she filled in Maria on the weekend. Her mail program came up and she winced, watching the new messages scroll rapidly down the screen.

It used to be fun, she recalled. She used to even look forward to Mondays, when most of the really interesting disasters lifted their ugly heads. Now, she had other priorities. One ear focused on Kerry and she sighed. Her phone rang and she punched the button. "Yeah?"

"Dar."

"Mariana. Good morning," Dar replied, lacing her fingers together and leaning back.

"Not very, it isn't. We've got real trouble," the personnel VP stated quietly. "The police are on their way here. Fabricini pressed charges."

Dar sat up and leaned on her elbows. "Pressed charges? For what? I didn't touch him!"

"Not against you," Mariana replied, "against Kerry, for assault. She broke his nose."

"Oh, you've got to be kidding," Dar snapped back disgustedly. "He can't be serious."

"Dar, I'm not kidding, and he is serious. I've already talked to him and he's not backing down.

He's going to press charges for assault and file suit against her for pain and suffering." Mariana's voice was very tense. "I don't know what he's after, but..."

Dar gazed across the office quietly. "I do," she answered. "I know what he's after." She exhaled, then nodded once. "All right, thanks Mari. I'll tell Kerry what's coming." She disconnected the call, holding the knowledge inside her as Kerry poked her head into the office.

"I'm going to run downstairs for coffee, want some?"

"Sure." Dar mustered a smile. "I'd love some." She watched Kerry leave, then she studied the top of her desk for a few moments. Fifteen years. Her eyes strayed to the gilded clock resting on the shelf across the room, her ten year marker. Fifteen years. She took a breath and dialed a number, waiting for an answer. "Get up here," she stated quietly when it was answered, then hung up, and simply waited.

It didn't take long. Fabricini walked into her office, his face half obscured by a white bandage and his skin covered with blotches and smears of lotion. He sat down without being asked and tossed a folder on her desk, with a quietly triumphant air.

Dar opened it, regarding the contents with an expressionless face, then glanced at him. "What do you want?"

He didn't even pretend not to understand her. "You out of here," he answered with vicious satisfaction.

Dar gazed quietly at him. "All right," she answered, very simply. "You call the cops and withdraw your charges, and you've got it."

"Oh no, Dar. I want my pound of flesh out of that whore of yours," Steve replied, with a smile.

"You withdraw the charges, or no deal," Dar answered, "and you get countersued for sexual harassment."

He kept her waiting for a long moment. "Do you know how sweet this is?" he purred. "It's perfect. You're sitting there, completely helpless and I'm loving every second of it." He paused.

"All right, Dar.

I'll leave your little piece alone, but I want you out of here today."

Dar glanced aside at her mail, which had just finished downloading four hundred new messages.

"All right," She agreed, handing him the handset of her phone. "Call."

She listened to him speak charmingly to the police, then hang up. "Goodbye, Dar. It's been a pleasure working with you." He got up and left.

Dar closed her eyes briefly. Now came the hard part. She picked up the phone and dialed Mari's extension. The personnel VP answered immediately. "Mari."

"Dar, oh, good, glad it's you. Listen, I was brainstorming with Duks, maybe we can find a way to--"

"I fixed it," Dar interrupted her. "He dropped the charges."

Silence. "Oh." Mari was obviously startled. "Well, I...I didn't think he'd back down, Dar. I..."

"He didn't," Dar stated quietly. "I just gave him what he wanted." She took a breath. "I'm resigning." A soft sound made her look up to see Kerry standing in the doorway, staring at her in shock. "I'm going to put the paperwork in, just get it through, Mari," Dar finished, then hung up. "Shut the door."

Kerry did, then she came right around the desk and put the coffee down, kneeling at Dar's side and putting a hand on her arm. "What do you mean you're resigning?" she asked in utter confusion. "Dar, what's going on?"

Sad blue eyes regarded her. "The police were coming here, Kerry. He filed charges against you for assault and battery and filed a lawsuit for pain and suffering against you."

"So?" Kerry sputtered. "Let him! Dar, don't you tell me you resigned because of that. I'll...I'll... How much trouble would I get into for punching him anyway? What are they going to do, sentence me to prison time for that? In Dade County? I don't think so. You have to kill someone to even be booked in jail here."

"Kerry, I'm not going to have that on your record, have you go through all that crap with the police and being charged, and taken down there, and go to court. God knows he could probably get a jury to award him who knows what in damages." She cupped Kerry's cheek. "No, I can't stand by and watch that, knowing it was my fault and I could have stopped it."

"Dar, you can't let him win like this." Kerry argued fiercely. "I'm not going to let you do it." Dar sighed and pushed the folder over to her. "We don't have a choice." She nudged the folder. "One of us would have had to leave anyway."

Kerry stared at her, then she opened the folder, her eyes falling on a stack of 8" x 10" pictures. Her and Dar. Walking, shopping, standing on the boardwalk with their arms around each other. Her feeding Dar crawfish.

One striking photo that had caught her looking at her lover, with an expression even Kerry couldn't explain away as anything other than adoration. "Oh." She closed the folder. "Well, then, I'll leave, Dar. Come on now, you're a lot more important to the company than I am. That's ridiculous." She looked up at Dar. "Can't you call Alastair? Can't you do anything?"

Dar studied her interlaced fingertips. "I'm not sure I want to do anything," she admitted.

Kerry stared at her. "So you're giving up?" She waved a hand. "After fifteen years, just like that?" She shook her head. "I don't believe it."

"C'mon, Kerry. I don't regret my time here, but maybe it's time to move on. It's getting harder and harder for me to keep the hard edge I need to do this." Dar pleaded with her for understanding.

"Not without carrying that over into my personal life, and I really don't want to do that."

Kerry remained silent for a moment. "What am I supposed to do?" She asked, finally. "You don't think I'm going to stay in this hellhole without you, do you?" She stood and raked a hand through her hair. "I can't believe you're giving up and letting him win," she repeated softly. "I..." She shook her head and walked to the inner door, opened it, and passed through without another word.

Dar was quietly stunned. "Well shit," she muttered. Here she'd been, being rather noble, she'd thought, in putting herself between Kerry and a bad situation. But Kerry didn't see it that way at all and rather than be grateful, she was disappointed.

Disappointed and angry.

Dar felt very confused, but didn't have time to consider her options before her door slammed open and Mariana came in, her face upset and angry. "You coming in here to yell too?" she snapped defensively.

Mariana stopped and looked at her. "I'm here to try and talk some sense into you, Dar, you can't just leave."

"Why not?" Dar propped her chin up on one hand. "Am I indentured?"

"No, no, Dar, you know what I mean." Mariana took a seat.

"No, I don't." She shook her head. "This is an at will state. I have no signed contract, the company doesn't own me, and there is no reason why I can't just walk out that damn door." Dar stood, grabbing her crutches and pacing around. "It's what he wants, it's what José wants, it's what Eleanor wants. Maybe I am standing in their way."

"What? Of course you are, you--" Mariana spluttered. "Someone has to stand up to them, Dar, or else they'd wreck the company. You and I both know that."

"Why me?" Dar whirled, and poked a thumb at her chest. "That's all I am is a target, Mari. No matter what I do, no matter how many fucking rabbits I pull out of my ass, no matter how many accounts I save, or how many points I made the stock rise, it's always still 'that damn bitch, Dar Roberts.' Don't you think I get sick and fucking tired of it sometimes?" Her voice rose to a yell. "Now I've got this buttfuck asshole you hired who does nothing but give me a damn hard time, and I don't hear you saying a goddamned word to him, now do I?"

Mariana stared at her.

"No no, let's leave that to that bitch. She'll just give as good as he does, and shut him up, right?"

Dar rounded on her. "Right? I have to stand by and put up with a blatant, personal attack by another employee, and you're telling me I can't walk away? Screw you, Mari!" Now Dar's temper snapped. "Why the hell didn't you bring him up on harassment charges? Or fucking insubordination?" She leaned over her desk. "Let me tell you something, he's goddamned lucky it was Kerry that hit him, because if it'd been me, he'd have more than a broken fucking nose for it."

"Okay, okay, Dar, calm down." Mariana held her hands out cautiously. "You have a point there, I know..."

Dar turned and went to the window, leaning against it with one hand. "I know I do. I've been fighting all the battles here for so long, everyone else has forgotten how," she stated softly. "Well, you'll have to find someone else to fight for you." She let her head rest against the sun warmed glass. "I'm tired of it."

Silence. "So this is just an excuse, isn't it?" Mariana asked, quietly.

Dar regarded the blue and green waves. "Maybe."

A soft exhalation. "What happened to you, Dar?"

It was almost funny. "I found out there was more to life than the next email, Mari." Dar snorted softly. "Unfortunately for the company." She turned. "I'm not going to stand by while that bastard attacks Kerry, and since you won't do anything about it, I will." A pause. "I have."

Mariana leaned back in her chair and exhaled. "I know you think this is all my fault, Dar, and I'm sorry you think that." She looked up, but Dar wouldn't meet her eyes. "Maybe you have a point. I should have jumped on him sooner, stopped some of that stuff when it first started. I just thought you had it under control, and if I interfered, it'd just get worse." She paused, to give Dar a chance to speak. When the other woman didn't, she sighed. "By that gauge, I should have also stepped in and separated you and Kerry when I found out you were seeing each other."

Still no answer.

"But then, you should have done that yourself," Mariana continued, "and if you had, we wouldn't be sitting here."

Dar's face didn't change expression. "Go on. Put the blame all on me," the dark haired woman muttered quietly. "I'm used to it." She turned her head towards Mari. "It's my fault I fell in love with someone. So it's my choice to leave."

"Dar," Mari exhaled. "For pete's sake no one holds that against you."

"Everyone holds that against me," Dar cut her off. "Didn't you just say you should have stopped it when it happened?" She shoved the pictures across the desk. "That's what he wanted put in the papers, that's what Michelle sent to Alastair. Every goddamned person within a hundred miles of here wants a piece of my personal life, so screw it."

She turned back to the window. "It's my life. You don't own me anymore," Dar exhaled. "So put the damn paperwork through and find someone else who gives a damn."

"You trying to convince me or yourself that you don't?" Mari asked, in quiet voice.

She didn't get a chance to answer because the door opened and José barged in. "What is this I hear? You are quitting?" José asked, his voice incredulous.

"Yeah," Dar answered, turning and going back to her desk. "You can cater the party, José.

Congratulations. You won." She typed a message into her mail program and sent it. "There, I just told Alastair; that should make it final." She stood and picked up her briefcase, slid her laptop out and left it on the desk. "I don't have many personal items here." She picked up her dolphins and glanced at her fighting fish. "I'll see if Maria wants those." She dropped her badge on the laptop, and her pager with it.

"Wait, wait." José held up a hand. "What do you mean, I won?"

Dar gazed at him. "Isn't this what you wanted? You hired a man you knew was an old enemy of mine and gave him explicit instructions to find my weaknesses, and exploit them. He did. I'm gone, you won." Her tone was cold and mocking. "Congratulations and good luck. I hope you screw up the company so badly, they have to recall the entire office."

"I did not do..."

"You certainly did," Dar shot back. "Want to see the email you sent him?"

The phone beeped. "Dar, Mark on line numero uno," Maria's voice floated in.

"Thanks, Maria. Can you call a cab for me, please," Dar asked, crisply.

"Si," the secretary sounded puzzled.

"Thanks." Dar hit the button. "What is it, Mark."

"Northeastern backbone's down," the MIS chief stated. "They can't locate the problem."

Dar drew in a breath. "Find someone else to deal with it, Mark. It's not my problem anymore," she replied evenly. "Give 'em about an hour to choose someone to replace me."

Silence for almost thirty whole seconds. "Fuck," Mark finally replied, then hung up.

Dar shouldered her briefcase and glanced around. "Well, I'm going home," she stated flatly.

"Have fun." She limped over to the door and opened it, then went through. Maria was standing near her desk, her face ruffled in concern. "Maria..."

The Cuban woman came around the desk and approached her. "You are leaving? For good?" she asked, visibly upset.

"Fraid so," Dar replied gently. "Thank you, for everything, Maria. You're a good person, and I appreciate all you did."

Maria wrung her hands, then she stepped forward and gave Dar a hug. "God bless you, Dar. This place doesn't deserve you." She glared at José, who was just coming out of Dar's former office.

"And you are a piece of caca. I hope God strikes you outside with a bus." She went to her desk and picked up her purse, then walked out, slamming the door behind her.

Dar quietly followed, moving down the silent corridor towards the elevator, which slid open as she approached. She got in and turned, leaning against the back wall as the doors closed and it started to move.

KERRY GOT BACK to her office and sat down, staring at her desk for a long time without moving. "I can't believe she did that," she finally muttered. "I can't believe she did it without even talking to me about it, like I was some kind of kid that needed protection or something." She stood and began pacing back and forth.

"I can't let her do that."

Pace, pace, pace.

"I know she thinks she's doing it for the right reasons," Kerry sighed. "I know she wants to protect me from all that legal crap, but what she doesn't realize is that I'm a lot more politically savvy than she thinks I am. She forgets who my father is."

Green eyes regarded the window. "Right, so what in the hell am I going to do?" She drummed her fingers on her desk. "The first thing I need is an ally." She regarded the phone, and then dialed a number. It rang several times, then went into voice mail. "Damn it, Mark. Where are you?"

She was answered in a very unexpected way when her door opened and Polenti slipped in, an angry look on his face. "Oh, you heard."

"What the hell is going on?" Mark asked, putting his hands on his hips. "Did she just quit?"

Kerry sat on her desk. "It's complicated, but essentially, yes, she did." She crossed her arms. "The question is what are we going to do about it?"

"Hold on, can we start with why?" Mark held up a hand. "Not that I'm not with you in doing something, but I'd kinda like to know what book I'm reading, much less what page we're on."

Kerry pursed her lips. "Bottom line? She did it because Steven Fabricini was going to make big trouble for me and she traded that for her job."

Mark looked at her curiously.

"I know, but I'm not going to let her get away with it," Kerry acknowledged. "So, first off, how much trouble can you cause him?"

Mark sat down and put his hands between his knees. "Trouble? Well, I can boot him off the network, or reroute his mapping so he can't find his files."

Kerry leaned forward and caught his gaze. "No, Mark, not that kind of trouble. The real kind." Her green eyes glinted. "The kind I know you're really good at."

He cleared his throat, blinking at her in surprise. "I didn't think you-- Well, okay, I can cause him a lot of trouble, why?"

Kerry smiled. "I would like you to cause him as much trouble as you humanly can, okay?" She ticked off points on her fingers. "I'm talking credit cards, taxes, driver's license, legal, utilities, everything."

Mark's jaw dropped. "You're serious."

She nodded. "Damn right I'm serious."

"Wow." He rubbed his nose. "You're nasty." He glanced up with a rakish grin. "I like that." He got up. "What are you going to do?"

Kerry's face hardened and her eyes went cool and calculating. "I'm going to start by finding out if this company's worth working for or not," she told him, as she circled her desk and looked

something up on her screen. "Let's see, where was, oh, okay...yeah, there it is." She dialed a number on the phone, which was answered on two rings. "Yes, this is Kerry Stuart in Miami Ops. I need to speak with Alastair McLean, please." She paused. "It's urgent." She put the call on mute. "Start with turning off his electricity, Mark. I like the idea of him walking into sentient mildew."

Mark grinned. "Yes, ma'am." He trotted out the door, closing it behind him.

Kerry nodded at the door grimly. "Mess with me, will you? You pitiful little excuse for half baked dog poo."

"Excuse me?" a male voice asked from the phone. "Didn't quite catch that--is this Ms. Stuart?"

"Sorry, I was talking to someone else." Kerry bit off an embarrassed grin. "Yes, it is, Mr. McLean. I think we need to talk."

"Well, ah, sure." Alastair sounded somewhat uncertain. "This wouldn't be about the email I just got, would it?"

"Probably." Kerry leaned her elbows on her desk, fighting to get her head into a political space she never really liked being in. "Listen, Mr. McLean."

"Alastair, please," the voice on the other end interrupted. "Anyone Dar thinks so highly of deserves that, at the least."

Kerry was caught by surprise at that. "Thanks," she murmured. "Are you really going to let this happen?" she asked. "I know Dar has a lot of respect for you, and that sure must be based on something."

Alastair cleared his throat. "Nice riposte," he said. "Tell me why, no, tell me what happened, Ms. Stuart. All I have is some rather rambling telephone messages, and Dar's note. I'm a bit at sea, so to speak."

"No one told you about this weekend?"

"Not in so many words, no." Alastair responded a touch apologetically. "I understood it went badly. I heard there were some problems, but I thought..."

"Where do I start?" Kerry sighed. "And please, call me Kerry," she added. "Let me tell you what it's been like here."

"Since this morning?"

"Since I started."

"Ah." Alastair sighed. "Hold on, let me sit down then. I've got a feeling we'll be a while."

A LONE SEAGULL circled over the beach, riding the warm air drafts. The soft hush and whisper of the waves was the only sound that came to Dar's ears, as she sat quietly on the porch with her knee elevated on the nearby chair. Her head was resting against the glass as she gazed, eyes half lidded at the gull.

On the table, a half finished bottle of sweet wine rested with a glass next to it. Dar lifted an arm and filled the glass again, then took a sip, rolling it around in her mouth before she swallowed it. Chino was sleeping on the tile near her feet, the puppy exhausted from her delighted antics at Dar's unexpected arrival.

The phone had rung several times inside, but Dar had decided to ignore it, preferring instead to gaze across the horizon and evaluate her options.

It felt strange not to be working. It felt even stranger not to be sure that the decision she'd made had been a good one, and not just a half assed one based on a knee jerk reaction.

"I should have beaten the crap out of him myself." Dar tilted her head back and regarded the sky.

"Bet the little bastard wouldn't have said a word about it."

She took another sip of wine and swallowed it, then glanced up as her cell phone rang. "Ah, I wonder who that is, Chino." She picked up the phone and flipped it open. "Yes?"

"Hi."

Dar felt a gentle wave of relief pass over her. "Hi." Kerry's voice was quiet and lacking the angry snap it had earlier. "Sorry I took off without talking to you."

"Mm, yeah, that was kinda disappointing," Kerry told her gently.

Dar didn't know what to say to that, so she kept silent.

"You at home?" Kerry asked.

"Yeah."

"You're not answering the phone there."

"I know. I'm outside on the porch with Chino," Dar replied. "So, they give you my office yet?"

A soft laugh answered her. "Well, since I just got out of a meeting where I told two senior VP's to kiss my ass, that's probably not in my cards today."

"Mm." Obscurely, that pleased Dar. "Which two?"

"José and Eleanor, Mariana went home," Kerry replied. "And I'm out of here too. Since the entire division is on strike, there's no real need for me to be here."

"Mm, that's nice. Wait." Dar sat up. "What?"

"Must have been something in the cafeteria. Fifty two people in operations, coincidentally, all got sick and had to go home," Kerry told her, blithely.

Dar sighed. "Kerry, it's a nice gesture, but that's just going to get everyone in trouble," she informed her lover.

"Dar, I didn't ask them to do that," Kerry's voice came back. "I don't think you quite realize just how much these people respect you. Maria tendered her resignation, there are ten more of those pending including Mark's, and Personnel's been bombarded with official letters of censure against Fabricini alluding to everything from pick pocketing to attempted rape."

"Oh," Dar murmured.

"And his car got keyed."

"Oh," A different emphasis.

"And his tires got slashed."

"Ah, Kerry--"

"And his electricity, phones, gas, and water got turned off."

"Kerry." Alarm now.

"And his credit cards got canceled."

"Hey!"

"His auto deposit got rerouted into the Women's and Children's fund."

"Kerry!"

"Just kidding about that one." Kerry chuckled. "Though I thought about it."

"Come on now, you're going to get yourself in a lot of trouble," Dar told her, in an aggravated tone.

"Yes, and I'm perfectly capable of getting myself in and out of that, Dar. I don't need you throwing yourself in front of situations for me," Kerry responded, just as seriously. "I'm really pissed off that you quit because of me, you know that?"

She had no answer for that.

"Dar?"

"Yeah," Dar replied quietly. "I'm sorry. I guess I managed to screw this up pretty badly." She regarded the gull glumly. "Maybe I should have just stayed home today."

"Dar?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

A faint smile twitched at Dar's lips. "I love you too." She paused. "Sorry if I overreacted."

"Apology accepted, if you forgive me in advance for trying to get you to change your mind."

Dar smiled a little sadly. "I don't think it's my choice now, love."

Kerry chuckled.

"What was that for?" Dar inquired, curiously.

"I'll see you in a few minutes," her lover replied. "Bye."

Dar regarded the phone. "Now, what's she up to?" she asked a sleepy Chino, who wagged her tail.

Chapter Eleven

KERRY SLID HER laptop into her bag and closed her desk drawer, locking it and the laptop inside it away securely. She paused to shake a few aspirin from a bottle on her desk and washed them down with a swig of cold tea as the sounds of the day wound down around her.

"Crappy day." She set the cup down and shouldered her bag, then she headed for the elevator hoping she'd have a lonely ride down.

She didn't want to make small talk or suffer the fourteen story ride in uncomfortable silence, everyone's eyes watching her and knowing all the gossip that had traveled through the building all day long.

They all knew Dar had quit. She punched the down button, and was surprised when the doors slid open almost immediately. They all knew why Dar had quit. Not because Dar had told everyone, but because Fabracini had, boasting of his victory to anyone who would listen. She stepped inside and paused. "Well, screw it." She removed her badge and held it to the reader inside, then keyed emergency service. The device beeped obediently at her, and she punched the ground floor. "Had to use that at least once, didn't I?"

In solitary splendor, the car descended without pause to the ground and opened as she swallowed to clear her ears. She emerged and was happy to find herself almost alone in the lobby, the rays of sunset coming in through the glass panes as the cleaning staff was moving towards the elevators, getting ready to start work for the night.

Kerry walked quietly across the marble floor and approached the doors, giving the guard a small wave.

He waved back, and their eyes met, then he edged over closer to her as she was about to exit.

"Ms. Kerry?"

Kerry paused and waited for him to come over. "Yes, John?"

"Is it true, Ms. Roberts is leaving?" the man asked. "I'd hate to see that. She's good people."

Kerry felt a smile tugging at her tired face. "Not if I can help it, John," she said. "Thanks for the thought." She patted his arm and walked through the doors into the cool dusk air, seeing a few people around in her peripheral vision.

Not unusual. There was a bus stop nearby, after all. She passed a small group of men and headed towards her car, tucked on one side of the lot near the street.

The streetlights were just starting to come on as she unlocked her doors, moving her seat forward to toss her laptop bag into the back seat, and turning back around to get in only to find a dark, menacing figure on the other side of the door.

Her heart nearly came out of her chest and she inhaled sharply, her eyes flicking to the front doors of the building as she got ready to yell for help.

The dark figure held both hands up, palms out. "Easy thar."

Kerry was close to panic. The man was much taller than she was and even the words didn't really reassure her. "What do you want?" She asked after a second.

"I ain't gonna hurtcha," the man said. "Just want to ask you all a question, is all."

There was something about his voice. Kerry relaxed the grip she had on her keys, the edge of them biting into her palm. He had a Southern accent, and there was something about the timber that seemed just a little familiar to her. "Okay. Go ahead."

He lowered his hands and stayed where he was, the setting sun to his back. He had a hooded sweatshirt on and the hood was up, obscuring his features in the shadows. "Got a friend you know, just want to make sure all's right with them." He said. "Name's Paladar."

Kerry felt a jolt of surprise. "What about her?" she asked, wondering who this was who knew her partner's real name. "Who are you?"

The man hesitated. "Just someone that knows her," he answered. "She okay?"

Fear eased and Kerry leaned forward, resting her arms on the frame of her car door as she struggled to make out his features. "Why are you asking me?" she countered. "A lot of people work in that building over there."

Was it just my imagination, or did I see a motion that might have been a smile.

"Ah know you know her right well," the man said. "You ain't got to tell me, but ah heard them people talking about her and I'd like to know." He tilted his head just slightly, waiting for her answer.

That tilt. "Some bad things happened today."

"T'her?"

Kerry was being driven half crazy with curiosity. *Who is this?* "Yes, but she's okay. She's just at home," she said. "Who are you? Why do you care about her? Do I know you?" She eased the door closed and started to approach him.

He backed up a step. "Easy now."

"No." Kerry continued coming closer. "I won't be easy. I've had a really bad day, my head hurts, I had a lousy weekend and I want to know who you are, and why you think you've got a right to ask me about my partner."

He stopped moving and let her approach, lowering his hands again. "Feisty thing, ain't you?" he drawled. "Careful, there, I ain't something you want to mess with." He half turned into the streetlight and she got a glimpse of his face.

Scars. Kerry inhaled again. Scars upon scars, in a lean, rugged outline but immediately her startled gaze was drawn past that to the pale blue eyes that stood out like marbles in all that ruin.

"Now, you can just answer or I'll go on my way, just asking a question," the man said. "Don't want no trouble with you, little gal."

"Who are you?" Kerry ignored his words.

"Nobody you know," he answered.

"Who are you to her?" Kerry clarified her question. "And if you tell me you're not, you're lying." Her heart started to hammer in her chest as suspicions peppered her mind. She knew Dar had no one close to her.

She had distant family she never spoke to. She'd mentioned her mother only once, and the tone of voice she'd had indicated it would likely be the last time. Kerry knew of only one of Dar's relatives she'd ever mentioned with any kind of affection and that one person was dead.

So who was this?

He looked around, but the lot was now pretty much empty, only an isolated car or two left from the cleaners and security guards. The other men in the lot had also left, having taken their bus or otherwise moved on and they were alone together. "Think I should just move on, let you be. "

"I don't." Kerry screwed up her courage and moved quickly, reaching out and clasping his arm before he could leave. "You got this close. Don't run."

Even in the shadows, she could see his eyebrows hike. A flash of yellow lamplight lit up his eyes again and she got a good look at his expression with most of the scars obscured by the flat lamp.

"Run? I ain't much for that."

Kerry put her hand in his and squeezed it. "My name's Kerry," she said. "And if you are a friend of Dar's, today's a good day for her to find that out because she gave up on something today that was very important to her and she could use all the friends she has right now."

He studied her, then tilted his head and peered at their clasped hands. "Well, then, Kerry." He said. "Mah name's Andrew."

Kerry felt like she'd stuck her finger in an electric socket. "Oh my god," she whispered, staring up at him. "Are you her father? You are, aren't you?"

"Yes," he answered softly.

The entire world was spinning. Kerry wasn't sure if she should yell or cry. "But...I thought..."

"Ever'body did. Even me." Andrew said, briefly. "Anyhow, that's why I want to know about her. Dar's mah kid," he added, in an awkward tone. "Ah been through some hell, just getting caught back up with it all and..."

Kerry was at a complete loss for words. She gazed up at him while a thousand different thoughts whirled through her mind, and the day's events suddenly became painfully irrelevant. "My god," she finally whispered. "My god."

DAR HEARD THE sound of Kerry's car pulling up outside and she closed the sliding glass door, limping over to the entrance and getting to the latch just as it worked and started inward. "Hey." Kerry came in and shut the door and Dar's heart jumped as she saw her face. "What's wrong?" Kerry took her hand. "Come over here and sit down. I need to tell you something." She led Dar over to the couch. "Oh honey."

Dar felt lightheaded. Her heart was beating so fast she couldn't count the thumps and she had to sit down or risk passing out. "W...what?" she asked, this new fear coming out of a blind corner and closing her throat.

Was Kerry pissed off after all? Had something else happened?

Kerry knelt in front of her, terrifyingly, and took both hands in her own. "Right as I was leaving, something happened. In the parking lot."

"Did you get in an accident? Are you okay?" Dar started speaking.

"Yes, no, I..." Kerry paused. "Dar, before you freak out and freak me out, this is a good thing."

She watched the panic fade a little, in the pale blue eyes. "I just don't know how to tell you this."

Dar waited in silence for a few beats. "You ran over Fabracini?" She hazarded a guess. "I'll

smuggle you out of the country, sweetheart. We can go live on some island off the Bahamas."

"No, I," Kerry paused. "Dar, a man came up to me in the lot and started asking me about you."

It wasn't what she'd expected. Dar's brows creased. "What?"

Kerry gave up. "Just come with me." She decided. "Outside." She stood, keeping hold of Dar's hands as she awkwardly straightened, keeping her weight on her good leg. Kerry got her arm around her partner and supported her as they made their way to the door, Chino snuffling curiously at their heels.

"I don't know what's going on here, Ker," Dar said, as she got the door open. "But I don't know if I'm up to surprises tonight."

Kerry squeezed out the door next to her and quickly searched the parking slots, relieved when she saw the dark figure leaning against her car. "It's okay, hon. Trust me," she murmured as they started down the stairs. "It's going to make today not matter."

"What?" Dar half turned. "What's that supposed to mean? Ker, what's going on here?" She had to swing around as Kerry urged her down the steps, and her head turned in the direction of the car.

"I don't know what..."

Her eyes fastened on the tall, silent figure that now straightened up and faced her, and she stopped moving. The height, and the shape and the movement struck sudden chords of memory in her she'd thought long dead and her vision blurred as she watched him.

She almost stopped breathing. Her hands clenched around Kerry's suddenly. "Ker who is that?" she whispered. "Near your car?"

Kerry found herself in the oddest position of her life and it was hard to think straight. "Come on." She helped Dar down the last few steps, then she released her as they came even with their visitor and Dar could, at last, see his features.

Dar stiffened, then she half extended a hand, her eyes fastened on the tall man who carefully took a step forward towards her. "Ohh."

"Hey there, Dardar," the man rasped, very gently. "Damn good to see ya."

It had been the worst of days. Now, in the light from the porch lamp over her shoulder, Kerry found herself watching it become the best of days before her very eyes.

To hell with the company. "Go on." She put her hand on Dar's hip. "It's real." She watched Dar's face light up with wonder like a child's, as she moved towards her father. Kerry followed a step behind, but held up when she reached the edge of the sidewalk, and stayed back as they met.

Dar felt the world become utterly unreal. She faced the hooded figure on legs shaking so badly she wasn't sure she could remain upright. "Daddy?" she managed to get out. "Is that really you?" He took a step forward. "What's left," he said. "Been to hell and back, though." He stood there awkwardly until Dar finally just half walked, half fell towards him and then they were hugging each other. "Hell and back."

Dar couldn't believe it. It was impossible, and yet, she could feel the long arms around her and hear her father's heartbeat under her ear and she had to believe.

Had to believe. "Oh, Daddy," she whispered.

She could smell salt air on his clothes, and wool, and he seemed thinner than she remembered, but there was no doubt when she heard that voice echoing from her earliest memories.

"Dar. Dar." Andrew hugged her, rocking back and forth a little. "Damn it all." He patted her back. "What'd ya do t'your laig?" He released her and they looked at each other again.

For a moment, Dar had no idea what he was talking about. Then she shifted her weight and remembered, gritting her teeth as she grabbed for the edge of the car. "L...long story," she said.

"Um, would you please come inside?"

Andrew paused, then he nodded and joined Dar at the steps, and they walked upward in silence, broken when they reached the top step and were met by Chino, who barked in surprise at seeing a stranger.

Kerry gathered the puppy in her arms as she followed Dar and her father inside.

DAR SIGHED. "WHAT a damned day." She perched on the back of the couch, looking around a little self-consciously. "So, this is our place." Her eyes were fixed on her father, who was quietly looking around.

It was strange and surreal. She felt like she was in a waking dream that would surely end any second with the buzz of the alarm, or a gentle hug from Kerry. It couldn't be real. That couldn't really be her father standing there.

Maybe the whole day was just a hallucination. Dar sighed and rubbed the back of her neck, caught between the extremes of the moment.

Kerry let the puppy go and she swarmed up Dar's leg, whining and squeaking until Dar picked her up. "All right, all right."

Andrew gazed at her, the hood shifting as he moved his head. "Finally got you a dog, huh?"

Dar was vainly trying to keep Chino from licking the inside of her mouth. "She's Kerry's," She explained sheepishly. "Jack Easton's Christmas present to her. You remember Alabaster?"

"Gerry Easton's big old dog?" Her father's brows hiked. "I surely do. I know you always wanted one." He watched Chino's antics. "You sure that dog ain't yours?"

Kerry chuckled. "Chino really was my present, but I keep telling Dar she's her dog."

"Not my dog. Your dog...augh." Dar extracted a needle like tooth from her earlobe.

"Our dog," Kerry concluded, going over to rescue her partner from their pet. "C'mere, Cheebles. Stop chewing on mommy Dar." She gave the puppy a hug, then put her down on the tile and watched her scramble around.

Andrew chuckled softly. He finished his examination of the living room and turned to face his daughter. "This is damn nice, Dar. I'm glad you got a good place to hang your hat up in."

Dar leaned against the back of the loveseat, her insides in turmoil. "Yeah," she said. "It was bigger than I needed but," She paused. "It's quiet out here."

Kerry slipped past Dar, giving her a pat on the back. "I'm going to get some dinner ordered," she said. "Mr. Roberts, can I order you something?"

His head turned her way and blue eyes framed in the forest green hood focused on her. "Who in the hell are you talking to?"

Kerry blinked at him. "Um, you?"

"There ain't no such person as Mr. Roberts," he told her. "There's Commander Roberts, or Andy, or shithead." He paused. "Take yer pick."

Dar smiled a little at Kerry's expression.

But Kerry rallied. "How about Dad?" she countered quietly, meeting his eyes with gentle acceptance.

Now it was Andrew's turn to blink. He turned to his daughter. "Gutsy little thing, ain't she?" He marveled. "All right, that'll do," he exhaled. "And if they got something normal as a hamburger in this crazy place, I'll have one of those."

Kerry smiled at him. "Okay, Dad." Her green eyes twinkled. "One hamburger, coming up."

"Hm," he grunted, then he looked up. "They got any ice cream?" Bewildered, he stared as Kerry burst into laughter, and had to hold onto the chair for support. "What in hell's wrong with her?" he asked plaintively.

Dar just shook her head. She waited for Kerry to disappear into the kitchen before she peeked back at the miracle in her lobby. "Want to sit down?" she asked, tentatively.

"Think maybe you should." Her father walked slowly over to the entertainment center, studying the pictures in silence for a long moment.

Dar stayed where she was, her arms braced on the back of the couch.

He picked up the big picture, the one of her and Kerry, and half turned. "She live here, too?"

Dar nodded.

Andrew put the picture down and went around the edge of the couch, sitting down on the larger sofa as Dar swiveled to face him. "What'd ya do to your laig?"

Dar glanced at it. "I don't really care about my leg right now," she said. "I'm trying to get my head around you being here."

Her father looked up at her with a somber expression. "Yeap. I know," he said. "Sorry bout that, Dar. I wasn't thinking about showing up here, but..." He glanced at the kitchen entrance. "Just worked out that way."

Dar looked at him in silence, then she came around the side of the couch and sat down, afraid her shaking legs were going to give out on her and drop her to the floor.

KERRY LEANED AGAINST the counter, gazing out the window as she thought about things.

Outside, she could just barely hear the roar of the ocean breakers and the churn of the water matched pretty closely the churn of her guts as she tried to let go of the day.

She couldn't even imagine what Dar was feeling. For one thing, she'd never lost anyone close in her family. For another, she wasn't entirely sure she'd be as devastated as Dar had been if she had.

It hurt thinking that. Kerry gazed down at the countertop, its glossy surface cold against her skin. She wanted to love her parents and maybe part of her still did, but the memory of what her father had done to her was very fresh.

Is Dar's father like that?

She doubted it. The few times her lover had spoken of her father, she'd heard nothing but love in her voice and she could barely remember ever feeling like that about her parents.

Kerry dropped her head into her hands and rubbed the back of her neck, hoping to ease the throbbing brought on by the stress of the day, when something occurred to her and she lifted her head again.

What would Dar's father think about them? Her eyes widened and she realized she'd never even considered what his reaction would be on finding out.

He knew Dar was gay, didn't he? Her brow creased and she tried to remember their conversations about that, relaxing when she recalled that Dar had said her parents both knew.

"Phew." She rubbed her eyes. "I don't need to deal with that tonight and I know she doesn't either."

To one side, the monitor mounted on the cabinet beeped softly. Kerry looked up at it, resisting the urge to simply punch the device. Instead, she keyed it, glancing at the screen as it flickered to life.

She studied the emails, then she just shut it off and turned, sliding down and sitting on the kitchen floor, resting her elbows on her knees and closing her eyes.

"SO WE WERE out in the woods," Dar said, "Doing this damn fool thing and a sinkhole opened up under us."

Andrew straightened. "Mah god."

"Yeah," Dar agreed. "Anyway, things got worse from there and," she paused. "just went downhill, I guess." She looked across the living room for the nth time, unable to believe what she was seeing. "Daddy, I can't believe you're here."

Her father got up and crossed over to her, sitting down on the loveseat next to Dar and putting a gentle hand on her knee. "S'allright, I can't neither," he said. "Had me a real rough time and it's hard being here and seeing ever'thing."

Dar studied his face, so seamed with scars anyone who knew him less well than she did might even have passed him by in the street. She could see pain there, and a haunting she could only guess at, but the eyes, the pale eyes she saw in the mirror every morning hadn't changed at all. Her Daddy. Dar found a smile somewhere and exhaled. "Have you called Mom?"

Her father's eyes shifted, and went past her. "No."

The door bell chimed softly and Dar hesitated, then relaxed as Kerry appeared from the kitchen and crossed behind her to answer it. "Thanks."

Kerry ruffled her hair as she went past, but didn't answer.

Andrew got up and resumed his seat on the other couch, clasping his hands as Kerry returned from the door with a tray and set it on the table between them. She knelt beside the table and started sorting things out, one hand lifting briefly to tuck a bit of hair behind her ear.

"Kerry had a tough day." Dar broke the silence. "I walked out and she had to clean up the mess I left behind."

"That's not really true." Kerry offered Andrew a burger and fries on a plate, and handed Dar one just like it. "I left too." She put a hand on her own plate. "Why don't I, um..." She started to get up and move towards the kitchen.

"Sit down." Dar grabbed the back of her waistband and yanked her backwards onto the loveseat without ceremony. "I thought you got lost in there. I was going to send Chino after you."

"Um, okay. I guess I will." Kerry pulled her plate over and settled it onto her knees, keeping a little distance between herself and Dar and taking her fork to her broiled salmon. "I thought maybe you two would want to talk," she said. "Alone, I mean."

Andrew looked up from his plate. "Ah look like the kind of man who'd chase a gal from her own place and make her chow by herself?"

Kerry blinked at him. "Um." She cleared her throat gently. "I just met you." She glanced at Dar for support, but her partner had her eyes firmly fixed on her fries. "But if you're half as chivalrous as your daughter, no."

Dar blushed visibly. Andrew smiled, as much as his scars would allow.

A silence fell, as they concentrated on eating, and keeping their plates out of Chino's range.

KERRY EMPTIED THE remains of their dinner into the trash, setting the plates into the sink for later washing. She turned as she heard a sound behind her to find Dar entering on her crutches, a tired but happy look on her face. "Hey."

"Hey." Dar moved forward and stopped next to her. "What a night."

Kerry leaned over and gave Dar a kiss on the arm. "Incredible."

Dar fiddled with her crutch grips. "It's late," she said. "I'm going to see if he wants to stay over." Her eyes lifted to Kerry's. "If that's okay with you."

"Dar." Kerry looked at her. "You've got to be kidding me if you're seriously asking me that."

Her partner shrugged. "I'm too tired to think straight," she admitted. "I need to take a few aspirin and sack out." She leaned against the counter. "Brain overload."

"Yeah." Bed sounded almost impossibly good. Kerry hesitated though. "Listen." She glanced past Dar, then up at her face. "Want me to sleep upstairs?"

Dar's brows creased. "Huh?"

"I know you said your folks were okay with you being gay, Dar, but...you know." Kerry hesitated. "Saying something and being hit in the face with it are two different things."

Dar started chuckling. "Uh, no. It's okay," she said. "He knows you live here...with me."

"Well, sure but..." She glanced at the floor. "We could be roommates."

"My father's..." Dar paused, shaking her head a little. "Talking about him in the present again. Damn.

"A gentle smile appeared. "This is so incredible."

Kerry leaned against her and grinned. "I am so happy for you," she whispered.

"Anyway." Dar cleared his throat. "My father's definitely a man of the world." She gave her partner a kiss on the head. "He saw the picture on the TV stand," she said. "Honest, Ker, it doesn't matter to him. Never did."

Kerry felt a little foolish. "Oh. Right." She rubbed her temple. "I think I'm a little overtired too," she murmured, "and after everything that happened today, I'm on spin cycle. I don't know what to feel or think right now."

Dar kissed the top of her head. "C'mon," she said. "I think this just put tomorrow into perspective."

True, Kerry had to admit, finding herself almost at the point where she'd stopped caring. "If I quit tomorrow, can we go somewhere?" she asked. "Camping or something?"

"Hell yeah." Dar followed her out into the living room. "Anywhere you want."

DAR SAT DOWN on the edge of the waterbed, studying the bruised flesh under her just removed brace. She rested both hands on the rail and exhaled, listening to Kerry pattering around in the bathroom, getting ready for bed.

The bedroom was dim and she slowly swung her legs over and laid down flat, resting her head on the pillow and letting her body relax at last, with a tiny groan as her muscles unlocked and she could close her eyes.

It felt unspeakably good to be lying still, with her weight off her leg and her mind able to step back from all that had happened and just think for a little while.

A swirl of emotion went through her and she rested her arm over her eyes as she felt the bed move a little, and then the space next to her warmed up with Kerry's presence. "Ugh."

"Ugh," Kerry repeated. "How are you doing?" She rubbed Dar's belly lightly.

Dar let her arm drop and she turned her head, studying Kerry's dimly lit profile. "Damned if I know," she sighed.

"Likewise," her partner admitted. "But at least we had a fantastic night."

"Yeah," Dar whispered, after a pause. "It's so damn hard to believe."

Kerry propped her head up on one hand and reached over to run her fingers through Dar's hair with the other. "I like your father." She watched Dar's lips twitch into a smile. "He reminds me a lot of you."

Dar nodded slowly. "Everyone always said that," she murmured. "It was hard when he..." She fell silent. "I felt like I lost the only person who ever really understood me."

Kerry laid her hand along Dar's cheek.

"Just figures the day he shows up I walk out on my job huh?" Dar reached up and rubbed her eyes impatiently. "Nice."

Kerry could hear the pain in her voice. "Hey, sweetie. I'm sure he doesn't give a damn."

"I give a damn," Dar admitted softly. "I feel like such a jerk."

Kerry squirmed a little closer and put her arm around her lover, hugging her. "Honey you're not a jerk. There were a lot of other people in that whole thing that were jerks. Not you. Me maybe."

Dar buried her face against Kerry's neck, turning onto her side and returning the hug.

Kerry could feel her shaking, a little. She put further words aside and just gave what comfort she could, rubbing Dar's back with light fingers.

With a faint snuffle, Dar shifted and wrapped herself around Kerry. "You're not a damn jerk."

Kerry sighed.

"Just an impulsive hothead."

Kerry's brows twitched. She was momentarily silent, then she cleared her throat. "I'm pretty sure no one's ever said that about me before," she admitted. "Is that good or bad?"

"I like impulsive hotheads." Dar seemed to have regained a bit of her humor. "In fact, I love them."

Kerry nuzzled her ear, then blew lightly in it. "I love you too," she said, as they both smiled and exhaled, at the same time.

The darkness of the room settled over them, and the fractious day finally came to its end.

KERRY BEAT THE clock awake, and she carefully reached over and turned the alarm off before she half turned and regarded her lover. Dar was normally a very light sleeper, but this morning she was still deeply asleep, her face totally relaxed and unresponsive. It had been the same the day before and Kerry wondered if her injury had anything to do with it.

Or, maybe all the stress. Kerry eased back down into the waterbed and admitted to feeling pretty stressed herself, the specter of the coming day making her want to burrow back under the covers and stay there.

She had a few minutes, so she indulged herself in merely watching Dar doze peacefully, her face outlined faintly in the early morning gloom, only a faint, irregular twitching moving the soft, tanned skin. Kerry twirled a lock of dark hair idly around her fingers and brushed it against her lips, absorbing the peace of the moment.

Finally she sighed and edged carefully out of bed, tucking the comforter back around Dar's body before she padded out into the living room, heading for her bedroom upstairs. She stopped short when she almost collided with a seated form on the floor. "Oh."

Despite Dar's reassurance, she felt awkward getting caught coming out of the bedroom, and she felt a blush warming her skin as she backed up a step. "L...hi. Good morning."

"Hey there, Kerry," Andrew Roberts uttered, in a low voice. He had Chino between his knees and was playing with her, the delighted puppy rolling around on her back as he rubbed her belly.

"Thought I'd catch a ride out early with ya."

Kerry collected her wits and settled herself cross legged on the cold tiles next to him, pushing her hair back behind one ear absently. "Um, I don't suppose I could convince you to stick around here today, huh?"

He glanced up and studied her face. "Why?" He asked, warily. "Something wrong with Dar?"

Kerry exhaled. "Well, I have to go into work," she stated quietly. "I don't want to. It's going to be a mess. I'd rather stay here and keep Dar company, but I can't."

"Uh huh."

"And if I leave Dar here all alone, she's going to go crazy between being bored, and wondering what's going on," Kerry continued. "I think she's pretty shook up about all of this, and..." She peeked at him. "Seeing you again."

"Uh huh." Andrew glanced away. "Lot to get used to."

"Yeah," Kerry murmured.

He looked back at her, and in his expression she saw Dar so clearly it was almost startling.

"Listen," he started, then hesitated.

"And I'll be a nervous wreck all day, wondering what's going on with her," came the soft words.

"But if you're here, she won't be bored, and I won't have to worry." Kerry finished, her eyes settling on him in silent appeal. "Please?"

"Ya ever think of going into diplomacy, young lady?" Andrew Roberts queried wryly.

Kerry tasted the irony. "Last thing I'd ever do," she replied. "But it's the truth, isn't it? You know Dar better than I do."

Andrew's scarred lips twitched a trifle. "Lay yer a bet on that one," he said. "All right, young lady. I'll do yer baby sitting." He relented. "Got me a few things to say to her anyhow."

Kerry squeezed his hand. "Thank you. I won't be all day. I promise."

He nodded and tickled the puppy. "She's a cute little thing," he commented.

"Mm, yes, she is," Kerry replied. "I think she likes you." She laughed softly as the puppy squirmed happily against his foot.

He scowled at her. "Don't you have to get dressed to go on into that place, or do you work in yer jammies?"

Kerry stood up and grinned at him. "I get the hint." She trotted towards the stairs, trying to psych herself up for the day to come.

A HAND ON her shoulder. Dar felt the shake, but her body didn't want to budge.

"Dar."

Part of her brain acknowledged the deep, raspy voice and recognized it, but there was still a dark, heavy pall over her consciousness, and she fought the desire to slip back down into peaceful oblivion.

"Paladar, get yer butt up or I'm gonna slap it."

Uh oh. One blue eye slid open in startlement, and regarded him, then the other joined it as Dar rolled half onto her back, her heart pumping in erratic rhythm. "Dad?" She cleared her throat of its hoarseness, and rubbed her eyes, trying to push the fog back. "Wh..."

"C'mon now, it's past ten hundred, and I've about cleaned every inch of this place." Andrew reached out a hand and gently tipped her chin back, regarding her face intently. "You hit your head or your laig?"

Dar felt her thoughts go skittering off and she took several deep breaths. "Both," she admitted, lifting her hand to touch the lump behind her ear. "Didn't mention that part to the doc."

Andrew managed a wry chuckle. "Lord you ain't changed."

Dar gazed up at him. "You like doctors now?"

"Hell no."

His daughter shrugged a little. "You didn't change. Why should I have?"

Andrew's battered face twitched into a painful smile. "All right," he said. "Got me there, Dardar," he conceded. "You getting out of that there bed?"

"Urmph." Dar struggled to sit up. "What are you doing here? I thought you were going to get a ride out this morning?"

Andrew sat down on the waterbed railing and folded his arms across his chest. "I was until your little kumquat turned those pretty eyes of hers on me and asked me to stick around for a bit," he snorted. "Damn tricky kid."

Dar grinned a little, as she stifled a yawn. "Yeah, well, she has the same effect on me. Don't feel bad."

Her father chuckled softly. "I noticed."

Dar found a smile winding its way onto her face. "All right, let me go dump some water on my head." She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and reached for the brace. "Stupid thing."

"Here, gimee that." Andrew took the brace and slipped it on with experienced hands. "Think I still remember how, seeing as how I spent half yer damn childhood sticking some kinda bandage on you." He adjusted the straps.

Dar leaned back and watched him. "Swelling's almost gone, at least that's working out." She sighed, lifting her leg as he finished and pushing herself upright. "Thanks." She stood up and almost fell as a wave of dizziness washed over her. "Damn."

"Aw hell." Andrew grabbed her hastily. "Hang on." He got an arm around her and lifted her up, cradling her like a child. "All right, take it easy, rugrat."

Dar blinked as her head finally cleared, and she sucked in a breath. "Okay. I'm all right." She rubbed her temples irritably. "You can put me down."

Her father snorted. "Yeah, yeah." He walked out of her bedroom ignoring her protests, and finally let her down on the couch. "Quit yer bitchin, will ya? I've had to carry a lot heavier things'n you a hell of a lot farther than that," he reminded her. "You remember Moose?"

Dar settled back against the couch and caught her breath. "Yeah, I sure do. I used to think he was an alien, never saw a human being eat as much as he did."

"Yeah, well, I had to carry his butt out three miles a couple years back. Damn near killed me. I made him eat Christly granola bars for three months after that." He sat down next to her and patted her thigh. "So don't you fuss at me."

"Okay." Dar capitulated meekly.

He rubbed his hands together. "Hungry?"

"A little."

"Got me some aigs inside," Andrew said. "Fancy kitchen setup you got there."

Dar managed a wry smile. "Kerry's touch," she said. "I never did learn to cook."

"Sa'llright." Her father chuckled. "Neither did I." He stood. "I'll bring in what I scabbled up. It probably won't kill you."

Dar stifled a yawn, and nodded, pensively staring at the table as he disappeared.

Chapter Twelve

KERRY FELT LIKE she had a huge, red, white and black target painted right on her chest as she walked into the building. She already had a stomach ache, and she hadn't even hit the elevator yet. She nodded nervously at the guard as she moved past him.

"Ms. Stuart?" The man said, leaning towards her a little.

"Yes?" She paused, wondering if he had orders to stop her or something.

He walked around the desk and came closer. "Is Ms. Roberts doing okay?" He shuffled his feet nervously, and looked around. "I know you guys usually come in together, so..."

Kerry smiled warmly at him. "She's fine, thanks for asking," she reassured him. "Did anyone else from fourteen come through here yet?"

He knew what she was asking. "No, ma'am. You're the very first."

Kerry nodded. "Okay, thanks. I'll tell Dar you were asking for her." Her green eyes twinkled.

"Wish me luck today."

He licked his lips. "Are you..." He left the statement unfinished.

"Oh no." Kerry shook her head firmly. "But someone has to hold the paper bag up while everyone else jumps through it, you know?" She knew the word would spread within minutes.

"Dar asked me to."

He nodded. "Gotcha." He sketched a salute at her. "Good luck, ma'am."

Kerry continued on, riding in solitary splendor up to her floor, and exiting into a very empty corridor. Her steps took her to Dar's office first, and she used her key for the first time, letting herself in to where Maria would usually already be working. The outer office was somberly silent. The secretary's desk was neat as a pin, but missing the usual personal items Maria had kept there. Her cube of pictures, for instance, and the intriguing prism that scattered light over the room, a gift from Dar.

Kerry felt irrationally sad at the sight and she ran a hand over the wood of the desk, swallowing down a surge of frustration. "This is so senseless." She picked up the contents of the in box, then she moved into the inner office, feeling her lover's absence like a physical blow. She noticed that Dar had left everything the way it was. Even the fish were sitting forlornly on the clean surface of the desk, the light from the window catching them in flashes of blue and crimson. The only thing she'd taken, Kerry realized, were the dolphins she'd given her.

"Oh, Dar," Kerry exhaled, feeling sick. The laptop sat on her desk in silence, giving mute testimony of its owner's abandonment. She wondered what had gone through Dar's mind as she'd given that up. It was the tangible badge of her office, really, giving her access into the heart of the company. Giving her the authority, which now, albeit briefly, rested in Kerry's hands. With a sigh, she collected what was in Dar's inbox as well, and then stepped around the desk, and headed for the back entrance to her own office.

She could, she knew, boot up the computer in Dar's office and work from there, but she had no intention of sending that particular message. She even had Dar's passwords, the ultimate expression of her lover's trust in her, and if she'd wanted to, she could have brought down mainframes all across the world with Dar's top clearance and access. But she had no intention of sending that message either.

She entered her office and put the papers down, reaching over and booting up her computer, then grabbing her coffee cup and trudging across the hallway to get some coffee.

Her back was to the door, and she didn't see who entered, but it also gave her a moment to decide on her response when the newcomer greeted her.

"Kerry." Mariana's voice sounded very tired.

The blonde woman turned, and took a breath. "Hi."

"I didn't expect to see you here," the Personnel VP told her honestly. "How's Dar?"

Kerry took a sip of her coffee. "She's all right, taking it easy at home." She paused. "She tried to call you last night."

The other woman sighed, and leaned back against the wall. "I went out and got drunk," Mariana admitted. "I saw her number on the caller ID. I was going to call her back today." She looked at Kerry. "You know Alastair has put a hold on her resignation."

"Yes, I know," Kerry answered quietly. "I spoke to him," she exhaled, "Let's go into my office a minute." She followed Mari into the room and closed the door. "Look, I don't know what's going to happen..." she began.

"He's on his way here, Kerry," Mariana told her wearily. "And he's very upset."

"I know," Kerry responded. "I talked to him for about an hour yesterday. I told him everything, about José, about Eleanor, and about that pig bastard." She sat on the edge of her desk. "And I told him it was all my fault."

"Your fault?" Mariana started forward. "Kerry, what in blazes are you talking about? What do you mean it's your fault?"

"I lost it." Kerry gazed at her. "I...lost...it. Dar went all that time without giving in to his harassment, not a word from her, and she could have wiped the camp with him," she told Mari, "and I blew it. I blew it because I couldn't keep the lid on when he needled me." She put her coffee down and got up to pace. "Without that, he's got nothing...nothing, Mari. Even with those stupid pictures, he still has nothing, but with that, he had enough to..." she stopped, and leaned on the window's cool glass. "He hit Dar in her one weak spot," she concluded softly. "Me." Mariana slowly sat down in one of the visitor's chairs. "No," she disagreed quietly. "Oh, yes, I mean sure, you're right, but he never should have gotten that far, Kerry." She leaned on her elbows. "Dar was right. I should have stopped it."

The woman looked like a truck had driven over her. Kerry sighed. "Well, no sense crying over spilled milk, they always say." She turned and regarded her mail, wincing at the pages and pages of urgent marked messages. "Let's see what happens when Alastair gets here. I know he considers Dar a very valuable employee."

"That he does," Mariana agreed. "She's really come through for him on a number of occasions. She's really come through for all of us, and that's why this whole thing is so stupid."

Kerry regarded her hands, folded on the desk. "You said you should have stopped it. Why didn't you?"

The older woman glanced at the carpet. "I spent half the night thinking about that," she admitted. "And the conclusion I came to was that we're all so used to Dar doing the dirty work, taking the hits and drawing the fire to herself that we've all gotten to be..." she paused. "It was easier just to stand back and let her go at him. I never thought for a minute he'd ever get even a step up on her. He's so out of her league."

Kerry nodded, accepting that. "I was hoping that was the case." she said softly. "I was hoping it wasn't just that everyone was standing back and letting her take a fall." She glanced up at Mariana's startled expression. "She once told me that everyone she'd ever trusted in business had turned on her, and last night, before we went to sleep, she told me if I...if it turned out that I saw everyone here celebrating her leaving, that I shouldn't feel bad about it."

A soft exhale. "Kerry, I think you know that's not true." Mari spread her hand out. "You've got a dozen empty offices to prove it," she stated. "You've got a division in pieces, the CEO headed out on the first flight. Duks wouldn't even come in today. Hell, I only came in because I can't avoid it. All the stuff that's going to hit the fan is going to hit my fan. For god's sake, most people don't hate her."

"I know," Kerry acknowledged softly. "But, I guess the few that do are so much more vocal, it seems that way sometimes." She turned a pencil over in her hands. "When I started all I heard for the first few weeks was what a horrible bitch she was."

Mariana sucked on her lower lip.

"I had to find out for myself how wrong they were," Kerry sighed. "But most people don't get that chance."

"She doesn't make it easy," Mari stated quietly. "She keeps everyone at arm's length, Kerry, even Duks and I, and we've been friends for years," she sighed. "Even Mark, who everyone knows is hopelessly in love with her."

Kerry's lips tensed into a faint smile. "You know, I never saw her like that. I mean I knew she had a tough side, because I saw that right off, but there was always something else. I don't know. I could always just see there was more to her than the alpha bitch."

"Well." Mariana gave her a wry look. "You had a mitigating circumstance, as the lawyers like to say." She pondered that. "But I see your point. If this does work out all right, I think we need to change the way some things are handled, do some workgroup things to try and reduce some of the stress and the infighting."

"Too bad we can't do some of that today." Kerry rubbed her temples. "I think I've got a migraine coming on already."

Mari stood. "I'll go talk to them," she stated quietly. "I think they'll be so glad to see you, they won't say peep one, but I'll make sure of that."

Kerry's phone rang, and she watched the keypad indicating it was a forwarded call from Dar's office. "Here we go." She punched the button. "Operations, Stuart."

"This is John Adams in Providence. We've had an order pending for a new circuit for a week. What the hell's going on down there?"

Kerry sighed inwardly, giving Mariana a look. "Just a moment. What's your account ID?" She typed in a number and started to work.

THEY WERE BOTH a little nervous, and a little tongue tied, Dar realized, as they sat quietly, her stretched out on the couch with Chino on her stomach, and him on the love seat, his back to the window and his face thrown into shadows by his sweatsuit hood. Well, neither of them were real conversationalists, but someone had to start things. "You have a place to stay?" she asked, quietly, nursing a tall glass of chocolate milk.

"Couple of 'em," her father answered. "This place, that place, you know." He regarded her in silence for a moment. "I do a few little things here and there. They give me this card." He pulled a small folder from his waist pocket and displayed an innocuous looking silver plate that looked like a credit card. "I just put everything on that and they take care of it."

Dar nodded slowly. "Because of Mom?" She hazarded a guess, remembering the sometimes obscure, sometimes unfathomable ways of the government.

"Yeap." He tucked the folder away. "She's got my pension, the benefits, that's how I want it. They take care of me." His voice seemed to end that line of questioning.

All right, round two. Ding ding. Dar nodded again, playing with one of Chino's soft ears. Then she looked up and studied his face, regarding the scars that twisted the flesh into an almost unrecognizable mask. "What happened?" she paused, "if you can say." Then she just waited. He thought for a long time. "Just a gig that went bad," he finally said, almost emotionlessly. "We went in to check out some stuff we'd heard about, a chemical weapon. It was a setup. Three guys died, and I ended up wishing I'd been one of 'em."

Dar considered that. Talking about emotions and feelings was something they were both just plain bad at, and she knew it, but, "I'm only going to say this one time," she stated, softly. "Mom wouldn't give a damn about what you look like."

He studied his hands in the silence. "I know that," he admitted, falling silent for a bit. "She didn't want me to go this time," he finally added quietly.

"I remember," Dar quietly exhaled. "But I thought..." They'd worked things out, at least, that was how it had appeared to Dar, her mother upset, yes, but supportive as always.

"Yeap, well, she done told me if I went she wouldn't be there when I got back," Andrew replied, flatly. "Said that was my choice." He blinked a few times, his eyes moving restlessly in his scarred face.

Dar was truly shocked. "She wouldn't have left you."

Pained blue orbs lifted to hers. "Wasn't her leaving; it was me, the way she looked at it." He swallowed. "She was right, rugrat. It was my choice, and I chose to go." He took a breath.

"Thought I could work things out when I got back."

Dar absorbed it. "She was just trying to get you to stay," she finally said. "She was afraid for you. She was afraid of losing you," she protested. "She would have been there when you got back, and you know it."

His eyes closed. "I like to think that." His voice was quiet and sad. "It's this little game I play with my head, keeps me from going nuts and just taking a dive off a bridge somewhere." His voice was lightly ragged.

"Dad, why don't you call her?" Dar leaned forward, willing him to listen. "You can go home. She'd understand, I know it."

A very tired sigh. "I can't," he answered softly. "Cause then I'd know y'see? And if she didn't, if she meant that, or if she--" An agonizing pause. "I can't face it, Dar. I can't live with that, you understand me?" he pleaded softly. "I can't face knowing that she doesn't--" He just stopped, his throat working audibly.

Dar let out her held breath in a pained trickle. "Oh, Daddy," she murmured.

He sighed. "Doesn't make much sense to you, I reckon." He rubbed an impatient hand over his eyes. "Damn."

She gazed at him in bleak understanding. "Yes, it does."

Andrew absorbed this for a long, pensive moment, then he looked up at his daughter. "Somebody hurt my little girl?" A hint of cool danger entered his voice. He waited a beat, watching her jaw clench and relax.

Dar shook her head in long remembered pain. "Water under the bridge, Daddy. Let's just say I went after what you and Mom had, and I thought I'd found it," she told him quietly. "And I was wrong." Her first time, all bright eyed, and bushy tailed, and so sure she'd put her heart in the right place.

Her senior year in college, and everything had looked wonderful, good grades, good prospects in the company she'd been working for then for four years, and a delirious, exciting dive into love that had left her giddy and sure she'd found her one and only.

Yeah.

Four months of happiness, followed by two of hell as it all unraveled, and her nightmares were filled with a mocking voice which told her just how inadequate she was. She had no real recollection of even graduating, though brute, raw talent and intelligence had allowed her to maintain an honors grade level. "You're an uncultured, crude, mediocre person who'll spend their whole life as a middle manager dreaming about would have beens."

*And a raw, newly exposed part of her had almost believed that.
A nightmare of depression and alcohol and hopelessness had followed that, leading to a night under a bridge and a gun, and a moment of self-hatred so intense she could still feel it.
She still didn't know what had stopped her. Only that she'd woken up under the bridge the next morning, and looked out onto a new day, and decided she wasn't quite finished with living yet.
There was revenge to be had.
It had taken a few years, but she'd felt oh, so very satisfied when all the pieces had fallen into place, and the company had acquired a prestigious consulting firm. And newly made regional manager Dar Roberts had wielded the decision knife and neatly sliced off the design and research wing, calling it--
Mediocre.*

Headed up by her former lover.

Dar had signed the termination papers personally, and she'd enjoyed it immensely. Just like she had enjoyed the expression on Shari's face when she handed them over.

Along with her card.

Have a nice day.

"I kinda gave up on it after that." Dar dismissed her memories.

"Um," her father grunted. "Till now." He glanced up shrewdly at her. "Cause I don't know how you feel about her, but that little green eyed gal's done lost her mind for you, rugrat."

Dar smiled, wistfully. "Until now," she acknowledged. "When I met Kerry, I realized I finally really had found the real thing." Her eyes found her father's. "So I do understand, Daddy."

He walked over and sat down next to her, and they regarded each other in comfortable silence.

THE PHONE BUZZED, for the thousandth time it seemed, and Kerry looked up at it, as she rested her head on one hand. "No, no, I don't know, no, it's not ready yet, I have no idea, no, she didn't tell me, no, and no," she muttered, then pressed it. "Operations, Stuart."

"Hi."

It was like a tongue full of ambrosia. Kerry found a smile working its way onto her face before the syllables even faded and she let out a soft sigh. "You have no idea how good it feels to hear a friendly voice."

"Mm, rough, huh?" Dar rumbled softly through the speaker. "How's it going?"

"Sucks." Kerry rubbed her eyes. "I feel like I've been dragged behind a dump truck hauling chicken poop all day," she replied. "Alastair is here. He's been in meetings with Mari, and the others for a couple of hours," she paused. "How are you feeling?"

"Eh," Dar answered. "I slept late, felt washed out all day. Dad and I talked for a while then we had some lunch. Now we're watching Crocodile Hunter."

She hesitated. "Thanks, by the way, for asking him to stick around."

Kerry smiled and tapped a pencil against her upper lip. "Thought you might like the company," she replied quietly, then glanced up as her phone buzzed. "Hold on a minute." She put Dar on hold, and picked up her other line. "Operations."

"Ms. Stuart." Alastair's voice sounded quiet, and rather grim.

"Yes, that's me," Kerry answered, feeling her stomach drop. "What can I do for you?"

"We're having a meeting in the executive conference room. Could you come over, please?"

"Sure," Kerry replied evenly. "Be right there." She hung up, then took a breath before she picked up the other line. "Hi."

"Bad news?" Dar inquired.

"Don't know. That was Alastair. They want me up in the big conference room," Kerry told her.

"Look, the worst they could do is fire me, Dar, and like, whoop, you know?" She shook her head a little. "After today, I'd probably thank him."

"Mm." Dar considered that. "Relax, be honest, and don't let him rattle you," she instructed Kerry gently. "Keep your head up. You've only ever done good for the company, Kerry."

She felt herself calm with the words. "All right, I think I can do that," she answered. "But if he or anyone else starts trashing you, they're toast."

A soft chuckle answered her. "That's my Kerry."

The blonde woman grinned. "You bet your boots I am." She stood up and straightened her collar, then donned her jacket. "Wish me luck," she sighed. "I'll call you one way or the other when I get out of there."

"Good luck," Dar answered, obediently. "I'm with you."

Green eyes twinkled gently in the afternoon sunlight. "I know," she replied. "Talk to you later."

She hung up and ran a hand through her hair. "All right, let's go."

It was a short walk to the conference room, and she gathered her wits, along with the knowledge of Dar's confidence in her as she reached the door, and knocked lightly on it.

"Come," the voice inside sounded, and she pushed the handle down, pulling the door towards her and walking inside, to a room where the hostility was so thick, it was almost like a smoke pall. José, Eleanor, and Steven were there, as was Mariana, and of course, Alastair. Kerry lifted her chin a bit, then walked across the carpet to the end chair, directly across from the CEO, resting her hands on the back of it and regarding them coolly.

"Sit down, Ms. Stuart," Alastair told her, courteously, his eyes regarding her with interest.

Kerry took the end chair, the one Dar usually sat in, and settled into it, folding her hands on the table and cocking her head in a listening attitude.

She waited, patiently. Make them talk first, Dar had advised her. Let them lay their end on the line before you do.

"Well. We've got quite a mess here," Alastair cleared his throat and started.

"Yes, we do," Kerry agreed mildly. "I've done pretty much all I can, considering the circumstances."

"That's bullshit!" Steven stood up. "You haven't done squat except for screw things up."

"Shut up," Kerry snapped at him. "You clueless, spineless, useless piece of wannabee macho pissant." She caught Alastair's gray eyebrow rising across the table, and she stood up, feeling the blood pump through her. "In fact, I haven't seen a more useless collection of people in my life."

"Hey, you can't." José stood and challenged her.

"Sure I can," Kerry responded hotly. "You people couldn't find your way out of a paper bag unless Dar wrote directions on the inside of it, and you've got the balls to be in here criticizing a situation that's your own damn fault." Her voice rose to a yell, all the anger she'd been holding in for two days boiling out.

"We didn't ask her to quit!" José responded.

"Oh, but isn't that what you were after?" Kerry countered, leaning forward on her hands. "Or else why hire someone with the specific intent to go against her?" She pointed at Steven, who was seething at his side. "Someone who had written instructions from you." She pointed at José. "To 'find that bitch's weak spot and put a knife into it', wasn't that the quote?"

Silence.

"Well. You got what you wanted," Kerry continued. "And now the problem is everyone knows the only thing that kept the damn company running was her. You sure can't." A long pause. "I

can't. After one day, I can't imagine how in the hell she managed to put up with all this for so long."

José stared at Mariana, who was chewing on a pencil. "You're going to let her get away with that?"

The Personnel VP shrugged. "EEOC, José. I let Mr. Fabricini get away with saying worse about Dar to her face. I have no leg to stand on to stop Ms. Stuart from speaking her mind."

"That's just because you and she are thick as thieves." Eleanor stated hotly. "No wonder we can't get anything done."

"Yeah, you can say that again!" Steven broke in. "What a bunch of bullcrap!"

"I've got news for you, lady!" José stood up. "You know what I think? I think--"

"Excuse me!" Alastair barked suddenly, in a voice that was quite surprisingly angry coming from his somewhat benign appearance. "I'd really like you all to shut the hell up."

Everyone looked at him in silence. "Thank you."

He adjusted his tie. "I would like everyone to excuse themselves with the exception of Ms. Stuart," he paused, "Now."

In silence they filed out, avoiding Kerry's gaze with the exception of Mariana, who patted her shoulder as she passed.

The sound of the door closing behind them sounded unbelievably loud to Kerry, but she didn't react to it, sitting down instead and folding her hands on the table.

Alastair regarded her across the entire length of the conference table, then he stood up, and walked around to where she was, perching on the edge of the wooden surface and crossing his arms over his chest. "That was gross insubordination, Ms. Stuart," he remarked coolly.

"I know," Kerry replied, looking up at him. "I hear that runs in my department."

Alastair McLean had grayish blue eyes, almost as striking as Dar's. Right now, they were regarding her with the faintest hint of, something. "Your former boss was not known for a being a team player."

Former. Kerry felt a little sad. "No, it's just that she refuses to play on a losing team," she replied. He nodded a little. "I have her position to fill, Ms. Stuart. You're smart, and you're sharp. I think you'd do well in it."

Kerry gazed at him. "Respectfully, sir, I wouldn't work for someone who allowed someone like her to leave without just cause."

He cocked his head. "I believe that's the most politely put 'kiss my ass' I've ever heard, Ms. Stuart," Alastair remarked. "So you don't want the job? It comes with a nice raise, good perks, a big advancement for someone your age and experience level."

The green eyes glinted dangerously. "I guess I didn't explain myself." Kerry cleared her throat. "Kiss my ass," she paused, "Sir."

The CEO rubbed his jaw, then got up off the desk and pulled the chair next to her out, sitting down in it so they were knee to knee. "You know, Ms. Stuart, when you first got brought on board, I thought Dar was nuts." He twiddled his fingers together. "I had no idea what she was up to, but I let her go ahead with it because I trust her judgment." He paused reflectively. "She's earned that trust."

Kerry remained quiet, merely watching his face intently.

"She's earned that trust with fifteen years of yanking my Brooks Brothers covered ass out of some of the toughest situations you could hope to find in this bastardized business we're in,"

Alastair continued. "I wouldn't trade her for three billion dollar contracts and a bottle of hundred dollar scotch."

Kerry cocked her head just slightly to one side. "Me either."

"You think you can get me an audience with her?" Now the blue gray eyes took on the faintest hint of a twinkle.

Kerry glanced down at the table, hiding a smile, then looked up. "Yes, I can do that," she answered softly. "She's at home."

Alastair smiled at her. "Good."

Kerry took a breath. "That was a test, wasn't it?" She hazarded warily. "Offering me her job?" The eyes twinkled visibly now.

"Did I pass?" she dared.

"Like a champ," he replied, with a chuckle. "You've proven a true disciple of Dar, Ms. Stuart, so take it easy."

Kerry exhaled. "Sorry, it's been a really long day," she admitted, as she got up and walked across to where a phone rested on a wall side credenza. "Hang on." She dialed a number, unsurprised when it was picked up before it even rang once. "Hi."

"Hey." Dar's voice was worried. "Everything okay?"

"I think so," Kerry told her, in a low voice. "Alastair wants to come see you."

"Ah." Her lover mulled this over. "Yeah, sure, why not?" she replied. "You can bring him over then run Dad back over to the mainland; give us a few minutes to duke it out."

"Gotcha." Kerry felt a quiet sense of relief flood over her. "See you in a few." She hung up and returned to the conference table. "I'll give you a ride over there if you want," she told the CEO.

"Best offer I've had all day," Alastair replied, cheerfully. "Let's go."

DAR PUT THE phone down, and glanced at her father. "Well." She scrubbed her face. "I guess I'd better go take a shower and put some clothes on. My boss is coming over."

Andrew put his hands behind his head and stretched out his body, stiff from a long afternoon of crocodile watching. "He all right?"

"More or less, yeah." Dar hoisted herself to her feet and grabbed her crutches, moving towards her bedroom. "Be right back."

Her father scratched Chino's head and crossed his ankles. "Be careful now, Dardar. Don't be slipping up in there."

She stopped, unseen, at the doorway and gazed at him with quiet affection. Then she shook her head and moved into the bathroom, stripping off her pajamas and starting the water running. Dar waited for a moment as she removed the leg brace, then carefully moved into the stall shower.

Her leg hurt a little, but nothing like it had the other day, and she was cautiously optimistic as she limped under the warm water.

It felt great. She gingerly scrubbed her body, avoiding the scratches from the trip, and carefully washed her hair around the still tender bump above her ear. It seemed to have gone down, though, and she stood under the force of the water for several minutes, just letting the pressure ease some of the tension out of her.

Dar reluctantly shut the water off, and stepped out of the shower, grabbing one of the long, fluffy beach towels she kept in the bathroom for drying off. She wrapped it around her, then took a second and roughly dried her hair before she exited the bathroom and moved gingerly through the bedroom without her crutches.

Hmm. She tested the leg cautiously, pleased with the response. Not bad. She considered, then shrugged and pulled on a polo shirt and a pair of jeans, tucking the shirt inside and giving herself

a cursory glance in the mirror. "Gonna have to do." She made a wry face at herself, and ran a brush through her hair quickly.

"Hey, Dardar?" her father called from the other room.

"Yeah?" She limped to the door and went through it, finding him near the sliding glass doors.

"What's up?"

He turned. "Hey where's them damn crutches?"

"In the room. It's okay. Leg feels a lot better" Dar remarked, putting a hand against the glass.

"Uh huh." He sounded skeptical. "I'd believe you 'cept that if it were me saying that, I'd be lying a blue streak."

Dar glanced at him, then chuckled wryly, waggling her hand. "It hurts, but my back is killing me from using those damn things. I need a break," she admitted. "I'm gonna go sit down anyway.

Did you want to show me something?"

Andrew seemed nervous all of a sudden. "Naw, well." He cleared his throat. "You still go out there?" His head indicated the sea.

Dar nodded. "I stopped for a while," she admitted quietly. "But Kerry loves it. She got certified and we go out almost every weekend."

"Good fer her," Andrew stated.

A soft chuckle. "She's got me back involved in a lot of things." Dar sighed. "I was..." she hesitated, "considering getting back into competition."

Her father's eyes lit up. "Were ya?" He studied her seriously. "Looks like you could." He poked her experimentally. "Better'n some of the pups they sent out with me the last time, I tell ya that."

Dar laughed, a touch embarrassed. "Yeah, I kept that up," she murmured. "You're responsible for that. I always thought you'd be disappointed if I hadn't."

Andrew remained silent for a moment, then he put a gentle hand on her arm. "Rugrat, I could never be disappointed with you." His voice was sincere. "Doesn't matter what you ended up doing, who you ended up being. You're my kid, and ain't nothing gonna ever change that."

Dar found herself unable to answer, and she swallowed a lump in her throat.

"Nuff of that mushy stuff." Andrew cleared his throat. "You go back into that stuff, you let me know, hear?" He fumbled a white card from his pocket and handed it to her. "That'll get me."

A pager number. Dar smiled at it, and tucked it into her shirt pocket. Then she limped over to her briefcase, resting on a chair nearby and removed one of her own cards. She scribbled the home phone at the condo on the back and handed it to him. "Fair's fair," she told him. "Give us a call sometimes."

He stared at the card, turning it over in his fingers. Then he tucked it away carefully without a word.

They both heard the sound of a car outside.

"Guess that's them," Dar stated quietly. "Thanks for sticking around today."

"You can thank the kumquat for that. It was her idea," Andrew mumbled. "Well, I'll go round back and wait for her. You take care of yourself, you hear, rugrat?"

Dar hugged him, feeling him tense for a moment, then relax and return the hug. "I love you, Daddy," she whispered. "I missed you."

He took a shaky breath, and patted her side. "Same here." He broke off and cleared his throat.

"Be good." He gave her arm another pat, then slipped out the back door and into the darkness.

Dar watched until his shadow blended into the foliage, not turning until she heard footsteps outside the front door.

KERRY PARKED THE Mustang next to Dar's Lexus, and glanced at her passenger. Alastair had been looking around with great interest, and it gave her a chance to study him in return.

He looked like a kindly grandfather, she decided. Except that he was deceptively shrewd and she suspected he could make the tough decisions when he really needed to. Certainly he had Dar's respect and she knew just how much that counted for. "Here we are."

"Nice place," he commented, looking around. "Wasn't aware we'd have to take a boat trip out here. I never realized this was where Dar lived."

Kerry nodded. "Okay, well, that's the condo, so." She opened the door and got out, waiting for him to join her before she led the way down the walk and up the stairs. As she approached the door she hesitated, lifting her hand to knock, then made a quiet decision and let her fingers drop to the keypad instead, keying in her code and unlocking the door.

Alastair made no comment. His eyebrows didn't even twitch.

Kerry suspected he knew more about them than Dar figured. "After you." She opened the door and held it, gesturing with the other hand.

A quick peek inside showed her Dar was leaning casually against the back of the love seat, regarding them. There was no sign of Andrew. "Hi."

Dar's eyes flicked to hers, and she gave her a tiny wink. "Hi." Then her attention turned to Alastair. "Hello Alastair, c'mon in."

Kerry lifted a hand and moved a step back. "Later."

Dar lifted a hand in response, and watched the door close behind her lover, then she turned her gaze on her boss.

They regarded each other in silence for a moment, then Dar exhaled and stood up. "Siddown. You want a drink?"

"I think I need one," Alastair replied wryly, as he took the invitation and settled on the couch, leaning back and glancing around. "Nice place, Dar."

The dark haired woman nodded. "Thanks." She limped over to the cabinet against the wall and took out a bottle, pulling the top off and pouring a portion of honey golden liquor into two glasses. Then she put the top back on and made her way back, handing Alastair his, and settling in the easy chair across from him.

"So." He took a sip, eyebrows rising at the taste. "Very nice," he added approvingly.

"Thought I remembered you liked scotch," Dar commented, taking a sip of her own glass. The smooth twenty year old alcohol burned warmly on the way down.

"That I do," Alastair agreed. "That I do." He looked around. "You know Dar, not that I spent a whole lot of time thinking about it, but I never pictured you in a place like this." His eyes fell on the space scape. "High tech apartment in a high rise off Brickell, sure, but..."

Dar smiled briefly. "An aunt of mine willed it to me."

An awkward silence fell.

"So," Alastair said again. "Where do we go from here, Dar?" He sipped his scotch and watched her over the rim of his glass. "I think you probably realize I've got someone real hefty sitting on that resignation request of yours."

Dar considered that. "Flattering," she commented briefly.

"Let's not bullshit each other," Alastair advised her. "We both know I consider you an essential part of my management team, and it would kill me to lose you." He paused. "Especially over something as ridiculous as this."

He waited, but she didn't comment. "So, what really happened here, Dar? I've heard Mari's side, and José's side, and I just don't get it. What made you up and decide to throw up your hands and walk out?"

Dar regarded him in silence for a moment, then she exhaled. "Good question." She paused, and gave a little shake of her head. "It's gotten to the point in the last month where I've been attacked more by my own company than any of our competitors, and maybe I started to wonder what in the hell I was doing here."

Alastair thought about that, sipping his drink slowly "You're a high profile kinda gal, Dar. You've always attracted slings and arrows, you know that," he ventured. "Was this guy really that much of a needle in your shorts?"

A shrug. "Maybe." Dar regarded the table. "Maybe because it was personal, not professional, maybe because I knew a colleague had brought him in deliberately to attack me." She shifted the glass in her hands. "But I think I could have dealt with that."

Alastair nodded twice. "But?"

"But he went after my people," Dar concluded. "And I'd just had enough." She looked up at Alastair. "I'd had enough of being the whore bitch from hell until someone needed something." Alastair leaned forward. "Dar, the fact that most of the operation is at a complete standstill, and I have over fifty empty desks should tell you not everyone feels that way," he replied, seriously.

"And I think you know that I don't feel that way either, or I wouldn't be sitting here right now. I'd be home in Houston, watching a ball game, considering who I was going to promote to VP Ops." Dar cleared her throat a little. "I should have called you first," she admitted. "I owed you that." She hesitated. "I'm sorry, Alastair."

A tiny smile crossed Alastair's face. "An apology from Dar Roberts. Thank God I'm sitting down." He kidded her gently. "I think that's a first."

She studied her clasped hands. "Probably," she agreed, in a mild tone.

Alastair watched her for a minute. "For that matter, I think I owe you an apology," he said. "Next time I'll eat the cost and save myself a boatload of heartache."

Dar leaned back and relaxed a trifle. "You know what the worst part was, Alastair?"

He shook his head.

"I've worked for you for fifteen years," Dar said. "And I didn't even get a phone call asking me what the hell was going on before I was carted off to the boondocks like I was a bad kid."

Alastair considered that in silence for a while, his bushy brows contracting. "Well," he finally said. "Y'know, I just didn't think it was that big a deal, to be honest with you." His eyes searched her face. "Knee jerk, actually. If I'd really put two cents into what he was pitching, I think I would have called."

"Mm."

"It would have saved me a flight," he added. "I think."

Dar hesitated, then she half shrugged and nodded. "Probably."

"But I'm glad I came anyway, just to see things first hand." He leaned back. "You have problems here, I'll grant you. And I wanted to meet this mysterious assistant of yours who seems to be causing problems far out of proportion to her size."

"She doesn't cause problems," Dar snapped. "She solves them."

Alastair chuckled softly. "I realize that. It's why I offered her your job."

It took all of Dar's self-control to keep a look of mild interest on her face, and to not tense up.

"And?" she asked, forcing a lazy smile onto her face. "She'd be good at it."

The CEO watched her intently, then he nodded a little. "That's what I told her, and I got told to kiss her ass." He remarked dryly. "Which seems to be a departmental tradition of yours."

The sense of relief almost choked her. Dar had to take a few breaths, masking it by sipping her drink, before she could answer. "Part of the orientation," she drawled. "She picked it up faster than most." *Bless you, Kerry. I followed my heart when it came to you, and you're the first person who didn't stab me in it.* "So who's your second choice?"

Alastair exhaled, regarding his hands thoughtfully. "I have none. I was hoping I could convince you to stay." He paused. "I just wanted to see what Ms. Stuart would say, and she basically said exactly what I expected her to." He paused again, and looked up at her. "I knew you trusted her, and I wanted to see why."

Dar's expression softened a little. "And did you?"

He nodded. "Yes, I did." He waited for her to go on, but she remained silent. "So, how about it, Dar? I'd offer you more money, but I don't think that's really of interest to you."

Dar cleared her throat. "No, you're right." She lifted a hand and let it fall. "I need two things."

Alastair leaned forward expectantly. His eyes sharpened, and he waited.

"My organizational structure stays intact," Dar enunciated carefully. "Completely intact."

The CEO pursed his lips. "Policy wise, that's murder," he advised her. "The board's going to roast me if it gets known."

"I know," Dar responded. "But I need it that way." She paused. "It's my price, Alastair. I found something I'm not going to let go of, no matter what it costs me professionally."

He drummed his fingers. "We're going to have to line out the reviews and all that," he murmured.

"All right, it's a personnel nightmare, but I'll do it." He paused. "What else?"

"José gets a new assistant."

Alastair laughed. "Saw that coming." He leaned back, obviously relieved. "My problem is, I need a way to bounce him legitimately." he told Dar. "Otherwise, the little bastard is going to sue for wrongful dismissal, and I don't want the publicity."

Dar leaned forward. "I'll find a way," she said. "Leave it in my hands."

Alastair gazed at her, then let out a breath. "Does that mean you'll stay?" he countered. "I had a long talk with Mariana. She feels a lot of this is her fault that things went on she should have put a stop to."

Dar let him wait a minute, then she nodded. "All right, but I'll tell you right now, I'm not putting up with any more bullshit from them," she warned softly. "Not on my behalf or on anyone in my staff's."

Alastair nibbled his lip. "It's going to be a rocky few weeks. There's a lot of hard feelings in there," he replied. "But I have a lot of confidence in you. I'm not worried." He finished off his scotch. "You free for dinner? I never get to see you anymore, Dar. It's been, what, two years?"

Dar's lips twitched. "Actually, I had plans, but you're welcome to join us," she stated blandly.

"There's a great little Italian place over on the other side of the island, and it's casual."

His eyes twinkled a little. "Well, I did enjoy my conversation with the enigmatic Ms. Stuart. Sure she won't mind?"

Dar was outraged to find herself blushing, and she was glad the fading twilight hid it. "I'm sure she'll be fine." She got up and limped towards the kitchen. "In fact, let me page her."

"She could have stayed." Alastair relaxed, extending his legs and crossing them at the ankles.

"After all, she lives here, doesn't she?"

"Really want me to answer that?" Dar answered from the kitchen. "Ever hear of don't ask don't tell?"

"Give me a break, Dar." Alastair studied the ceiling. "I've known you as long as my children. Did you really think I didn't catch on something was up after I got those pictures from whatshername, the redhead?"

"We were just on a goddamn rollercoaster."

Alastair chuckled wryly. "If you looked at me like you were looking at her on that damn rollercoaster there'd actually be something to those hoary old rumors José used to spread about us."

Dar peered around the edge of the kitchen entrance. "You bucking for Dr. Ruth's job?"

"I just call 'em as I see 'em." Her boss said. "Y'know Bea didn't know what the hell those pictures were and she asked me if that was your new girlfriend."

Dar pulled her head back behind the edge of the door as she felt a blush warm her skin. "Glad to know what the company time and attendance dollars are paying for over there in Houston."

"What'd you do to your leg?" He called after her, ignoring the jibe.

"Popped the joint out when we fell into that damn sinkhole," Dar replied, coming back with the portable phone and dialing it. "You owe me big time for that little trip, Alastair."

He laughed. "I heard about you and the snake, after I had Beatrice call up the president of that half assed company and threw the words negligent and lawsuit around."

Dar chuckled as she put the phone to her ear, listening to it ring. "Hey," she called softly, as it was answered. "Where are you?"

Kerry's voice sounded relieved. "Down by Southpoint, just about to get out and go walking on the beach, why?" she asked. "I just got here. I figured you guys would be a while."

"Nope," Dar informed her. "We're waiting on you for dinner, so c'mon back over here."

"Really?" Kerry asked.

"Really," Dar assured her.

A faint pause. "You going back?"

"Yep."

"You still my boss?"

"Yep."

"Awesome." Kerry's voice lightened immensely. "You are just awesome, Dar. You have no idea how glad I am to hear that." Sounds of scuffing. "I was sitting here in my car trying to think of who I wanted to apply to, see if I could get any decent offers from around here."

"Well, they can't have you." Dar half turned and lowered her voice. "You're mine."

"Oo." Kerry laughed in utter delight. "You just gave me chills."

Dar smiled, feeling her upset world start to settle back down around her. "Besides, I hear you turned down a good offer." She watched Alastair as he got up and roamed around the living room, stopping to examine the pictures on the shelves.

"What of... oh," Kerry snorted. "That. Yeah right. As if." She cleared her throat a little, changing the subject. "Your father is such a sweetheart. He gave me a present for you. Said he was too embarrassed to give it to you directly."

"A present? For what?" Dar queried curiously.

"Um, your birthday?" Kerry reminded her. "You remember that party we had?"

"Oh," Dar muttered, "that." She paused, glancing at Alastair. "What is it?"

Kerry giggled softly. "A box." She teased.

"Kerrryyyyy," Dar growled softly.

"Well, it is!" Her lover retorted. "I don't have x-ray vision, you know."

Dar sighed, "Just hurry up and get back here."

"Jesus, Dar. I'm getting to the ferry. You want me to get out and paddle?" Kerry protested. "I will, but the deckhands are going to have a fit. You know how they get." She paused, hearing the gentle sound of Dar's breathing against the receiver. "I love you," she murmured. "You don't have to answer that, I know Alastair is right there," she added.

"I love you too," Dar replied, not missing a beat. "See you in a few minutes." She put the phone on the hook and set it on the table, then she sat back down on the couch. "So."

"So." Alastair repeated. "Aside from all that, Mrs. Lincoln how was the play?" He watched Dar's face. "Long day?"

"Long week," Dar admitted. "Crappy weekend." She propped her head up on her fist, leaning her elbow against the couch arm.

Her boss grunted. "Want to take a few days off?" he asked, eyeing her shrewdly. "Might be a good idea--give everyone a chance to cool down."

Dar nibbled the inside of her lip, then she shook her head with true regret. "I'd love to, but I can't do that to Kerry," she said. "Those idiots are driving her crazy."

Alastair snorted. "Are you kidding me? She told every damn one of them where to get off the bus right in front of me. That's no hothouse flower you picked there, lady," he said. "Didn't Bea tell me she hauled off and slugged Fabracini? That's what caused the whole damn thing to come to a head?"

"She did," Dar admitted. "She's got guts."

"She took you on. She has to have." Her boss chuckled wryly. "But y'know, I thought you weren't going to go down that road again, Dar. Tough situation, the last time."

Dar felt another blush warm her skin, even though she knew Alastair had known about Elana. "I wasn't," she muttered. "Road came to me."

"And knocked you on your ass," Alastair said, bluntly. "Take a few days off, Dar. I won't order it, but please, just this once take my advice, huh?"

"I'll see," Dar replied stubbornly. "I'll think about it, okay?" Alastair chuckled and shook his head.

DAR LOOKED AT her watch as they entered the condo. "Jesus, it's past midnight," she commented in surprise. "Didn't think it was that late."

"Uh huh." Kerry yawned, trudging inside and collapsing on the couch. "That was a nice dinner, though. He's sort of an interesting person." She picked up Chino, who had bolted out of the utility room when Dar opened the door. "Hey honey, whoa, whoa, don't chew up mommy's fingers, okay?"

Dar limped back in with two tall glasses of chocolate milk, one of which she set down on the table. "Here." She eased down on the couch next to her lover, and slid back, extending her legs out and groaning. "Ouch."

"I told you to use those crutches," Kerry scolded, patting Dar's leg. "I saw you trying not to limp in front of Alastair."

"It's not that." Dar took a swallow of milk. "It's the rest of my body trying to compensate for it. My back's killing me," she complained.

"Ah, I get it." Kerry slid a hand behind Dar's back and probed gently. "Wow, you are all tensed up." She rested her cheek against Dar's upper arm. "How about a few minutes in the hot tub?"

Blue eyes turned to her and brightened. "Now that's a great idea," Dar complimented her. "It's a beautiful night out, c'mon." She allowed Kerry to support her as they wandered into the bedroom, and exchanged jeans for bathing suits.

"I like that one on you." Dar had snuck up behind Kerry, and slid both arms around her middle, hugging her gently. "It's the color of your eyes." Kerry's suit, a shimmering, almost translucent green blue glittered in the low light, accenting her toned body.

Kerry leaned back against her and folded her arms over Dar's. "Thanks." She turned, picking up a small box. "We almost forgot this from your dad." She handed it over.

"Oh." Dar took it, examining it carefully as though she were afraid it would spring open. She slowly unwrapped the plain paper and revealed a closed, clamshell container, which she opened gently. "Whoa."

Inside, on the dark gray crushed velvet, nestled two black pearls, opalescence winking at her. They were the size of dried chickpeas, and were a well matched pair.

"Wow," Kerry breathed, peering at them. "Those are gorgeous."

"Yeah," Dar breathed. "They sure are." She gently closed the box and held it, giving her head a little shake. "His presents were always like that. You never knew when one was coming, but when it did, it was always..." She glanced at the box. "Always something special."

"You could have them made into earrings." Kerry suggested. "They'd look awesome on you."

Dar put the box down on the dresser, and tapped it with one long finger. "Maybe," she agreed.

"C'mon, let's go soak for a little while."

They went outside, taking their glasses with them, and Kerry held them both as Dar eased into the water.

"Ungh." Dar stretched her arms out, and took the milk. "This feels great." She watched as Kerry joined her, nestling up against her immediately. "I'll put these down." Dar advised her, setting them on the coping, then putting an arm around Kerry's shoulders.

For a few minutes they just sat there, absorbing the sensation of the water, a mist of warm, chlorinated water drifting across their faces. The ocean was at high tide, and beating against the seawall, and off in the distance they could hear the buoy bells ringing.

"It's beautiful out here," Kerry murmured, tipping her head back and regarding the starry sky, scattered with the odd, occasionally puffy cloud.

Dar turned her head and regarded the moonlit profile next to her. "It sure is."

Kerry caught the glance and smiled a little, blushing slightly. "So." She cleared her throat. "Now tell me how all this worked out."

"Mmm." Dar wiggled her toes contentedly. "Alastair asked me to reconsider, I told him I had two conditions, he met them, presto. That was it." She stifled a yawn. "You were one condition, Steven was the other."

Kerry mulled that over. "So, did he know about us, or..." She left the thought hanging.

"He knew." Dar chuckled softly. "He said he knew when he saw those first sets of pictures from Orlando, but I guess he decided to ignore it."

"Isn't that a problem?" Kerry queried. "I mean, we've been doing this cat and mouse thing for months, because it was this big rule. So?"

Dar shrugged. "It comes down to what's more important? Company rules or profits?" She advised her lover. "He can make exceptions, and yes, it's a problem, but it's not like it's never happened before, Kerry, and what the rule is for is mostly to protect the junior of the two employees."

"Protect?" Kerry cocked her head. "Oh, from harassment, that kind of thing?"

A nod. "Exactly. It's so bosses don't take advantage of their subordinates, and it's a good rule."

She reached over and brushed a droplet of water off Kerry's cheek. "But I told him I needed you,

and he's satisfied you're not being pressured, or coerced in any way, so he's going to just work around it."

"Oh." Kerry thought about that. "That's going to be strange after all this time."

"Mm."

"I guess I can bring you lunch up now though, huh?"

Pale blue eyes shifted her way. "And I can wander down the back corridor a couple times a day and not feel conspicuous," Dar replied dryly. "I mean, it's just like anything else. We treat each other professionally at the office. We just don't have to worry about people finding out what we do outside of it."

"Hmm." Kerry nodded a little. "So, can I call the rest of the staff and tell them to come back in tomorrow?" she asked, wistfully. "Because I don't think I can handle a few more days like today."

Dar hesitated. "I, um, I could call them in the morning," she ventured.

One sea green eyeball rotated and fixed on her. "You could if you were going into work." Kerry blinked at her. "Are you? I thought Alastair said for you to take a couple days off."

Dar drummed her fingers on the coping. "I thought about it. But it'd be a lot more relaxing for me to get started on stuff than sit around here and worry about you." She pushed the damp hair off Kerry's forehead.

Kerry sighed. "I wish you'd stay home." She ran her fingers along Dar's scalp, and brushed lightly over the bump. It was, she was forced to admit, almost gone. "But I won't lie and say I want to go through another day like I did today. My god, Dar. How in the hell do you deal with that place?"

"Practice."

Kerry sighed again. "Can we leave early?"

A slow smile. "I promise you dinner at sunset out on the water," Dar offered, one eyebrow lifting in invitation. "You, me, the boat, a few seagulls. How about it?" She leaned over and stole a kiss.

"Hmm?"

Kerry nibbled her way up Dar's neck. "All right," she agreed, breathing the words right into Dar's ear. "You're on."

"Good." Dar ducked her head again and found Kerry's wandering lips, and she pulled her over onto her lap, sliding an arm around her waist securely. She felt Kerry's hands glide down her shoulders, and her eyes closed in reflex as their bodies pressed against each other in knowing familiarity.

They'd deal with all that trouble tomorrow. That was another day. Right now, all that mattered was the rich, night breeze, and the stars, and each other.

KERRY STIFLED A yawn as she trudged across the kitchen, headed for the coffee machine. She mechanically portioned the Irish crème flavored grounds into the basket, and started the coffee going, blinking a little as she leaned against the counter.

She could hear Dar's voice as a low murmur coming from her office, and she guessed her lover was making the promised phone calls to their stubbornly missing staff. "Any luck?" she called in, as she heard the phone disconnect.

"Oh yeah." Dar moved to the doorway of the office, stretching and catching the edges of the sill with her fingers as she rocked her head back and forth to loosen her neck muscles. "I got Mark. He cursed me out because he was planning on working over one of his bikes, but he said he'd be in, and that he'd call the rest of his staff in so I didn't have to do it." The tall, dark haired woman

released the door, and walked across to where Kerry was standing. "Now I have to do the tough one, Maria."

"Ouch." Kerry slid a hand up Dar's belly, feeling the warmth of her skin under the fabric. "You're hardly limping," she commented.

"Mm, yeah, it feels a lot better," Dar agreed, with a smile. "I think I'll use the crutches to get away with dressing down again today, though."

Kerry snorted. "Dar, after having the CEO come and beg you to reconsider last night, you think anyone would say a word if you came dressed in shorts and a t-shirt?" she paused. "Wait a minute, forget I suggested that. They'd say words, all right, and I'd have to slap them all silly."

Dar laughed. "Thank you for flattering my ego." She gently kissed Kerry's head. "Excuse me." She moved into the kitchen, retrieving a bowl and her Frosted Flakes from the cabinet. "Want some?"

A sigh. "Dar, do you think you could make me feel better by at least putting a little banana in that?" Kerry asked, mournfully. "And no thanks, they crunch too loud and hurt my ears this early in the morning." She bumped Dar out of the way and opened the refrigerator, snagging a fruit and cheese Danish from a neatly packed box. "I prefer a quieter, gentler breakfast."

Dar grinned, munching away noisily, and pressed a key on the kitchen console. "Dar Roberts, 656 new messages, 234 Urgent," the computer responded promptly.

"Oh, Jesus." Dar almost inhaled a flake. "Delete all unmarked," she told the computer. "Forget it. They can resend the damn things."

"Deleted. Dar Roberts. 234 new messages, 234 Urgent."

"Delete all messages, duplicate subjects," Dar instructed. "That also have same sender." She glanced at Kerry who was chewing her Danish and had padded over to pull out two large mugs. "That should get rid of half of those."

"Deleted. Dar Roberts 155 new messages, 155 Urgent."

Dar sighed. "Well, that's better than 600 plus, I guess." She examined the list. "Let's see, oh, read 143."

Sookis, Mariana Sent 7:32am Dar I just got this cryptic note from Alastair, which basically states: "She's back, leave her alone. She's got my authority to take care of whatever business needs taking care of."

What is he talking about? I'm assuming he's referring to you, because he left your resignation letter marked "Rescinded" on my desk. I tried calling you last night, but there wasn't any answer. I'd like to talk to you. I know we've got some issues to discuss."

Mari

"He's such a pain in my ass sometimes." Dar rolled her eyes, and picked up the phone, dialing a number. She waited. "Good morning, Mari," she remarked into the receiver, keeping her voice more or less neutral.

A pause. "Oh, Dar. God, yes, good morning," the Personnel VP answered, somewhat hesitantly.

"I just sent you that email, I didn't know if you were picking up or..."

"I didn't until this morning," Dar replied. "Alastair was here last night."

Longer pause. "Oh." Mariana thought about that. "So, you're back with us, I take it?" she asked hopefully. "I kind of assumed from his note."

"Looks like it," Dar responded. "I had a few conditions, and he met them, so..." She shrugged, then smiled at Kerry as she handed her a cup. "I just called Mark. He's calling his staff, and I'll see if I can get the rest of operations back in." She sipped her coffee contentedly. "I'm going to have them put their time in as worked."

Mari hesitated. "Okay," she murmured. "What about the whole situation with Fabricini. I inferred from Alastair that you're handling it?" she asked, cautiously.

"Yep," Dar informed her. "I told him I'd take care of it."

"Okay," Mariana said again. "So, you're coming in? I thought Kerry told me the doctor sent you home to rest?" she gingerly asked. "I mean, Dar, this can wait a day or two. I really don't want to see you hurt yourself."

Dar smiled wryly. "It's okay. I promised Kerry I'd make it a half day, and take her out sailing for dinner," she told her. "And I don't break promises like that." She ran a hand through Kerry's disheveled hair and scratched the back of her neck gently, causing the smaller woman to close her eyes and hum blissfully.

A soft sigh. "All right. I guess I'll see you in a little while...and, Dar?"

"Mm?" Dar took a swallow of coffee.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Dar asked quietly.

"You were right. We did all stand back and let you get hit," Mari replied, just as quietly. "I don't feel very good about that."

Dar let her eyes flick to Kerry's face, as Kerry regarded her, the sun coming in the window dusting her face with golden light. "It's all right," she finally answered, lifting her hand to gently stroke the soft skin. "It wouldn't have mattered before. I wouldn't have cared, but I think I've been just a little off balance lately, and you had no way of knowing that," she told Mariana. "You assumed I'd just react like I always did before."

"Mm," Mari murmured. "Well, it's not going to happen again," she vowed. "I've set up meetings with both José and Eleanor today, and we're going to have some straight talk here."

Kerry turned her head, and kissed the palm brushing her cheek. "I'm going to go take a shower," she mouthed, rubbing Dar's belly.

Dar smiled and nodded. "All right, let me finish making my calls, Mari, and I'll see you in a little while." She paused. "How's Duks?"

"Grumpy," Mari chuckled ruefully. "I woke him up and told him you were coming back, and now he has to get out of his bathing suit and actually come to work." She paused. "That was quite a tribute to you, by the way," she added. "It's the first day he called in sick in five years." She sighed. "All right. Let's get this place back to normal. Drive safely, my friend."

"I'm not driving, but I'll pass that on," Dar told her dryly. "See you, Mari. Listen, we'll have dinner, talk things out, all right?"

"All right." Mariana sounded relieved. "See you, Dar."

Dar put the phone down and wandered over to the sliding glass door, pushing it back and moving out onto the stone balcony, letting the early morning sun warm her skin after the cool of the air conditioning inside. The sea was at low tide and very green to her eyes, and she leaned on the railing, gazing out as the breeze blew her hair back.

She had, she realized, mixed feelings about going back to work. Part of her was glad, needing the excitement and the challenge. There was another part, though, a guilty, hidden part that had been secretly hoping the resignation would stick, hoping that she and Kerry could then take a few weeks off and just...

Dar's eyes found the horizon. She'd found herself wanting very much to take time out of life and spend it getting to know her lover better, taking her places Dar liked, maybe even out skiing, down to Key West, all the things they didn't have time to do now.

She sighed, and nibbled her lip. *Well, one thing, if Alastair knew about them, and they decided to take off the same week, it would be all right. In fact, she decided, that's exactly what we're going to do. She straightened and went back inside. Pick a week, and take off. To hell with the company.* She exhaled and headed for her own shower.

Hearing the sound of water running as she entered her bedroom and spotting the naked, patiently waiting figure leaning against the door, arms crossed, darkened green eyes watching her with seductive intent.

Oh yeah. Dar sucked in a breath as a sensual jolt hit her right in the groin. *To hell with the company.* "Well, well, what do we have here?" she inquired, moving closer and sweeping across the lithe body in front of her. Kerry's appearance had changed quite a bit since she'd met her three months prior.

Her indoor pallor had deepened into a golden tan, and the painful thinness had disappeared. Dar had always found her attractive, but the changes had also brought Kerry a new self-confidence that seemed to glow inside her, rendering her almost mesmerizing to Dar's appreciative eyes.

"Gotta make sure you don't slip and fall in the shower, Dar," Kerry informed her cheerfully, reaching up and unbuttoning the top button on her shirt. "I just got my boss back. I don't want to lose her again." She unbuttoned the second button. "Do you mind sharing a shower?"

"Heh." Dar slid both hands down her sides and traced the now barely visible ribs with gentle thumbs. "Oh, I think I could suffer through that all right." She ducked her head and kissed her. "Somehow."

"Mm." Kerry unbuttoned the third and fourth buttons, sliding the shirt up and over Dar's shoulders and letting it fall to the ground. Then she traced a gentle pattern down the tall body and got to the shorts, sliding those down as well. "I bet you could" She nibbled the soft skin over Dar's jugular and stepped forward, brushing their bodies together. "You taste so good," she murmured.

Dar felt her heart jerk and start pounding. "Do I?" She moved closer and slipped her arms around Kerry, feeling her shoulder blades move as she reciprocated and the warmth of the contact between them surged. She ducked her head and captured an ear, tracing its curve with the tip of her tongue. "So do you," she purred softly, hearing the gentle intake of air as Kerry's breathing caught.

Slowly they moved into the shower, trading the chill air for warm mist, and the spicy scent of the soap Dar preferred flowed around them. Dar squeezed a little of the gel onto her hands and began to lather Kerry's back, moving her fingers over the strong shoulders and down across her hips.

A soft sound escaped Kerry, who had started spreading soap down Dar's sides. She pushed away a little, allowing the taller woman's hands to continue their motion up her belly as she let her fingers trail down along Dar's thighs. "My pastor always taught me," she murmured, moving back against Dar's soapy body. "That cleanliness is next to godliness."

"Oh yeah?" Dar inclined her head and nipped the skin on Kerry's shoulder.

"Mm. I gotta send him a card sometime and let him know how right he was," Kerry uttered, starting a slow, tantalizing progression right down the center of Dar's body, with a few east and west detours.

Dar just chuckled.

Chapter Thirteen

IT WAS A very weird experience. Kerry paced quietly alongside Dar's crutch assisted steps, carrying her lover's briefcase along with her own. Usually they split up when they entered the building, but today, no. Today she kept her head up and regarded the people around them, knowing they were without a doubt the center of attention.

"Morning, Ms. Roberts, Ms. Stuart," the guard greeted them, giving Kerry a wink.

"Morning," Dar answered, as she moved past him and towards the elevator. Fortunately, everyone else seemed to have gone upstairs already, and they were alone in the elevator. "So," Dar eyed her. "You ready?"

Kerry studied the mirrored doors of the elevator and took a deep breath. "More or less. I'm going to go to my office and just see what I have on my desk. You going to call a meeting?"

"Of operations?" Dar inquired. "I'd better, probably around ten or so. You want to send out a note?" Dar eased out the door as they got to their floor, and waited for Kerry to join her. "That should give me enough time to get a few things settled." They walked down the corridor and Kerry opened the door for her, waiting for Dar to enter.

Dar paused in the doorway and looked back at her, a gentle smile crossing her face. "Thanks," she commented simply, before she turned and continued on into the room.

Maria was there, seated precisely behind her desk, her hands folded on the top of it. She stood when Dar entered and took a breath. "Buenos Dios, Dar."

The executive stopped and leaned on her crutches. "Good morning, Maria. Thanks for coming in." She gave the secretary a smile. "Did you have a nice day off?"

Maria beamed back at her. "Si, si. My daughter took me out on the Sea Escape. I play the arm machines and win fifty dollars," she stated. "But I am glad you called me, glad you come back." Dar laughed. "Now, that's the way to spend your time." She looked at Kerry. "We've got to try that one weekend." Her eyes went back to Maria's, seeing the faint look of startlement. "I'm glad you agreed to come back. I'd have really hated to have had to replace you, Maria." She moved into her office, leaving her secretary and her lover looking at each other.

Kerry felt herself blushing, as Maria gave her a knowing smile. "Um, I think I'd better go get some work done." She cleared her throat. "I'm, going to, uh, get some coffee. You want any?" she asked, rubbing the side of her face and feeling the heat against her fingertips.

Maria walked over, and took her hands. "Kerrisita."

Sea green eyes peeked at her uncertainly. "Yes?"

"You have been such a gift to her," Maria told her softly. "God bless you."

Kerry dropped her eyes and felt her blush intensify, almost making her light headed. She sucked in a few breaths and finally looked back up. "Thanks," she whispered. "I think this feeling is God's greatest gift to anyone," she managed to get out. "I'm glad I was in the right place at the right time."

"Si." Maria smiled. "Go to your office. I am going to the downstairs. I will bring up you some coffee and some of the little pastries." She released Kerry's hands and gave her a little push. "Go. I make faces like this." She poked her tongue out. "At all the other secretaritis."

Kerry laughed. "Okay." She surrendered. "Thank you." She ducked out into the hallway and started towards her office, only to be stopped by Mark. "Oh, hey."

"Hey." He cuffed her lightly on the arm. "I hear you kicked ass yesterday. Way to go." His face was tinged with sunburn, and he bore a faintly smug look. "I take it the boss is here?"

She exhaled. "Yep, just got to her office. I'm sure we'll be a week just straightening out the email bombs." This sudden, casual recognition of her and Dar's attachment was, she had to admit, a little unsettling.

But kind of nice, too. It sort of relaxed a tension she'd hardly been aware of. "Thanks for coming in so fast."

Mark chuckled. "Yeah, well, I guess the bike'll have to wait on the weekend. I've got so much crap piled up on my desk, I have to go hire Mel Fisher to find it." He patted Kerry's arm again. "See you later."

Kerry lifted a hand in goodbye and walked down the hallway, going into her office and dropping into her chair, as she flipped the power switch on her computer and waited for it to boot.

What would Dar do, she wondered. She knew it would end up with Steven Fabricini leaving, but, how?

Hmm. She turned her attention to her email, which had spawned frighteningly overnight. Parent email now had multiple child email, some of which had died and left the original subjects lonely orphans. "Jesus." She paged through them. "I wonder if I could just kill them all?"

Her phone buzzed and she hit the answer button. "Operations, Stuart."

A panicked voice answered. "Oh, great, uh, Ms. Stuart, this is Roger, in Charlotte. Uh, we've got a problem."

"Okay." Kerry leaned forward, kicking her problem solving brain cells into gear. "What is it?"

A loud sound of splashing came through the phone. "Uh, ow!" Roger yelped. "Um, the sprinkler system went off over here, and umm. Yeeoww!" The phone fumbled and clattered, then was picked up. "Damn chair hit me in the, uh, well, anyway, we're flooded."

"Flooded," Kerry repeated carefully. "As in underwater?"

"Shit!" he yelped. "Uh, sorry. Yeah, the control room's three feet deep, and it's not getting any-- Wow!" A loud popping and snapping was heard. "Yow, I think that was the main breaker panel going--"

"Roger?" Kerry spoke loudly into the phone.

"Yeah?" he answered. "Oh, wait I gotta get up onto the desk."

"Get out of there!" Kerry yelled, then put him on hold and dialed Dar's extension, waiting for her boss to pick up. "Help!" she barked into the phone, then switched back to the other line.

"Roger?"

"Uh, I've got a problem, Ms. Stuart." the man answered nervously.

"More than one," Kerry told him. "What is it?"

"I can't swim," he answered. "And I think I just saw a 3270 float by." The phone suddenly disconnected.

"Shit." Kerry glanced up as she heard running steps, then half stood as her inner door burst open and Dar pounced inside, her pale blue eyes snapping, and every inch of her bristling with unreleased energy.

"What's wrong?" she snapped.

Kerry drew in a breath. "God, you look sexy when you do that."

Dar was obviously knocked off stride. "Wh...buh..." she exhaled. "Kerry, you yelled for help, what in the hell's going on?"

"Oh, right. Charlotte's been flooded out," Kerry quickly explained. "Sorry about that but they're in big trouble." She walked over and put an arm around her lover. "Sorry, Dar. I didn't mean for you to think that I was, um..." She rooted around for a phrase.

"In mortal danger?" Dar relaxed a little. "You know I just knocked a Xerox repairman so far back onto his butt they're probably going to have to remove the toner drum from his throat surgically." She sighed, and rubbed her face. "Okay, so we've got a potential disaster here. That's our routing hub."

"Mm, the guy from Netops just told me he thought he saw a 3270 terminal floating in the control room," Kerry advised her.

"Anyone check to see if they're burning hemp around there again?" Dar snorted. "3270's don't float." She exhaled. "Okay, let me go start working the problem. Try to get them back on the phone, or call the cells," she muttered as she walked back out, shaking her head.

Kerry smiled a little as she heard the interested, but muted excitement in Dar's tone. With a soft chuckle, she turned back to her desk and called up a network schematic, wincing at the flashing red dots that indicated down sections. "Oh, that bites." She started dialing emergency numbers.

"LOOK, I DON'T give a damn about what you have to do to release that," Dar growled into the phone. "I need your damn president on this phone in five minutes, or the next call is from our legal department. Your choice." She glanced up as Maria stuck her head in and waved a small cardboard tray. One hand lifted and waved her forward. "I'll hold."

Maria came over with the pastalitos and offered them to her. "I have three of those little queso ones," the secretary whispered. "I know you like them."

Dar's eyes twinkled gently as she nodded, and put her hand over the receiver. "Thanks," she mouthed as she accepted the pastries and the steaming cup of creamy looking coffee, glancing up and meeting Maria's eyes.

It was an odd feeling, somewhat naked, somewhat embarrassing, and Dar found herself blushing a little. She was glad her tan hid most of it, but she knew that probably the tips of her ears had turned red by the little chuckle Maria gave before she backed mercifully out of the room.

Not that Maria hadn't known before, but... Dar sighed and took a bite out of one of the pastries. She was used to keeping her private life private, even her brief interlude with Elana had been under wraps, until that last, very public, scathingly sarcastic encounter.

Maybe that's why she was feeling a little skittish, hmm? It had taken her a long time to get to the point where she could think about that and not cringe inside, though outwardly she'd shown as much emotion as if Elana had merely been turning over a report.

Stoneface. Duks had told her later that it had pretty well cemented her reputation as the company's premier iceberg, the way she'd brushed off Elana's pointed reprimand with a mere lift of a brow, and a twitch of the lips.

Oh god if they'd only known.

Dar regarded her desktop for a moment in silence, then looked up as a voice came back on the line. "Well?" She snapped.

"Ms. Roberts, we have a team of people heading out that way. I'm not sure..." the voice hesitated.

"Look," Dar growled, sending her voice down to its lowest pitch. "I need to know what chemicals were in that sprinkler mixture and I need to know NOW!" She punched up the volume, feeling the sound reverberate in her chest. "Or you're going to take responsibility for the bill when I have to fly a chemical hazard team in there on a goddamned Learjet!" The insurance company was refusing to allow any employees to enter the networking office, until the dangers were evaluated, and they had fully three quarters of the domestic network down, three hours after the accident had happened.

"Dar. " Maria poked her head in. "Mariana on line numero dos," she called, in a low voice.

"Not now," Dar muted her current call. "I'm in the middle of a disaster." She watched as Maria disappeared, then she propped her head up on one hand and released the mute button with the other. "Do I get that, or do I call my legal department? I'm done screwing around with you people."

Rustling papers and low mutters. "Where do you need the information sent?" the voice stiffly answered. "We can pass along our usual information, but you have to understand that the composition will vary depending on local water quality, and the types of pipes, and--"

"Just send it," Dar interrupted him, and repeated the fax number at their insurance company's branch office in North Carolina. She looked up as Kerry entered, suppressing a smile. "And I'd like to know why that system discharged."

Kerry circled her and picked up a pastry, nibbling it as she perched on the corner of Dar's desk, listening to the agitated muttering coming from the phone. "Everyone's screaming," she mouthed.

Dar lifted her hands and let them drop. "Bite me," she mouthed back. "I didn't set off the goddamned sprinklers."

Kerry obligingly put her pastry down and captured Dar's fingers, lifting them and nibbling on a thumb instead. "Okay."

"Ms. Roberts, we just don't know what caused it yet," the hapless voice came through the phone. "It could have been a false heat reading, it could have been a mechanical error. There's no sense in speculating since we don't really have any data. My team is on their way there. As soon as they get there and figure out what happened, believe me, I'll call you."

Dar felt an enjoyable tickle as the neat white teeth scraped lightly across the sensitive skin on the side of her finger. "All right," she agreed. "But I have an entire data center down, and they can't even get in there to start cleaning up. So they'd better move their asses." She hung up, then noticed the other line was still lit. She punched it. "Mari?"

A loud argument filtered through. "Oh, what? Dar, yes." Mari cleared her throat. "Listen, you said you were going to handle a certain situation...well, I think..." Steven's loud voice was heard in the background, demanding something.

"Send him up here," Dar spoke quietly, but forcefully into the phone.

"What?" Mariana asked.

"I'll take care of it. Send him up here," Dar repeated, a slow, dangerous smile crossing her face.

"After this morning, I'll enjoy it."

A hesitation. "All right," the Personnel VP agreed, reluctantly. "But--"

"Dar." Kerry regarded her quietly. "What are you going to do?"

Pale blue eyes lanced into her. "Fire him," Dar answered, coolly. "And watch him squirm his little ass right out of this office between two nice, big security guards."

Kerry exhaled, as she studied her lover in silence for a moment. "Dar listen to me a minute." She slipped off the desk and knelt, resting her hand on Dar's thigh for balance. "He still holds a grudge from ten years ago, right?" she asked. "That's what started this whole stupid thing."

Dar's brows knit. "Yeah, so?" She leaned closer to the phone. "Mari, hang on a minute, okay?"

"Sure," the Personnel VP sighed as she was put on hold.

Kerry gently traced an idle pattern against the cotton fabric. "Isn't there some way you could do this so it didn't perpetuate the hatefulness?"

"What?" Dar stared at her.

A sigh. "He hates you because of a thing that happened half a lifetime ago, that's a long time to keep that anger inside. Now this. It's just more anger, and more hate, and more need for revenge."

"Who cares?" Dar asked. "Kerry, there's no way we're going to ever not hate each other, and frankly, I don't give a damn if he does. I just want him out of here," she told Kerry. "You'd better scoot before he shows up. No sense in getting you involved in it."

Kerry took a breath. "Dar, I am involved in it," she told her lover firmly. "If he hates you, then he hates me." She looked right up into Dar's eyes. "And I don't like being hated." A pause. "Even by someone like him. My family's enough for me to handle right now."

Dar blinked at her.

"You're so smart, can't you find a way to get him out without escalating this?" The green eyes gazed sadly at her, reading the stunned look on Dar's face. "So it doesn't come back at us someday?"

"Kerry, that's how business works," Dar said. "You can't be everyone's friend."

Kerry rubbed her temples. "I know that," she said. "But what's he going to do if you fire him, Dar? He's going to do his best to get back at you, and at us. Do you really want those pictures in the Miami Herald because you know he's going to do it."

Dar crossed her arms over her chest and frowned.

"Besides, didn't Alastair say he wanted it done so he couldn't sue us, at least?" Kerry went on, gently. "Dar, I'm not trying to be a jerk, I just want things not to get worse here."

"Goddamn it," Dar muttered. "Alastair was right." She relaxed her posture and leaned an elbow on her desk, resting her head on her hand. "I should have taken a few days off and let this defuse." She reached over and punched the hold button. "Mari?"

"I'm here," Mariana answered.

"It's going to have to wait. I've got an operational crisis here. That takes precedence," Dar told her. "Just tell the stupid bastard to go do what we pay him to do and leave you alone for right now."

"Right." Surprisingly, Mariana sounded more relieved than upset. "I stonewalled him and told him if he had an issue with personnel policies he could go talk to Alastair," she said. "And I warned him he should walk softly, since it was very obviously Alastair who was involved yesterday." She hesitated. "But I thought you--"

"Has to be done right," Dar cut her off. "That needs some time to arrange, and right now I don't have any."

"Gotcha," Mariana's voice turned brisk. "I'll get off your line now. Thanks, Dar."

"Yeah." Dar cut the phone off and turned to regard Kerry.

Kerry gently brushed the side of Dar's head, where a slight bump could still be felt, then she got up off the desk and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I love you," she whispered in the perfect, curved ear, then turned and left quietly.

Dar sat in a puddle of filtered sunlight, the slanted rays dusting her cotton pants in warm ochre panels as she stared at the empty place where Kerry had knelt mere moments before. Her cheek tingled with the soft pressure, and she could still smell Kerry's distinctive scent lingering in the air that surrounded her.

Her savage resolve of just five minutes prior was gone, dissipated into a somber confusion that knitted her brow as she slowly turned in her chair, resting her elbows on her desk and surrounding her coffee cup with a pair of loosely interlaced sets of fingers. It had been so easy. So cut and dried. What did she care what he thought about it?

She didn't, Dar sighed and shook her head. She didn't give a rat's ass what he thought or what he'd do about it. "But I do care what she thinks," she spoke aloud to the sunlight. "And I do have better things to do."

The phone lit up again and she put aside the issue to deal with this far more urgent one. "Probably easier to solve anyway."

KERRY FOUND HER way out to the back balcony, around the back behind the copier room where there was a tiny patio that overlooked the water. She liked to come out here sometimes and just think in the quiet peace the altitude afforded. It was a beautiful day out, and she wistfully realized that the current crisis was probably going to take precedence over leaving early, which was kind of depressing.

She'd been looking forward to some quiet time out on the water, where they could just watch the sunset together, and get in some twilight diving in the shallow, warm waters.

Only a few minutes, she promised, knowing she had to go back inside and resume dealing with the problem. Just a few minutes to lean against the heated metal of the railing, and feel the warm, fresh sea air against her face, and drink in the sunlight.

She wished Dar was beside her, and she wondered what her lover had thought about her request. The stunned look hadn't really indicated if she'd considered it, or if the idea was palatable or not, but Kerry had the feeling she'd at least gotten her to think about it. *That had to be good, right?*

With a sigh, she closed her eyes, and turned her face up to the sun, feeling the brightness against her eyelids.

The door opened behind her, and she turned, blinking in surprise as she recognized Steven's slim figure sauntering out towards her. Warily, she leaned against the railing and watched him approach.

"So." He studied her. "Here we have the Queen bitch's little collared pet. Is this your private space?" He walked to the railing and leaned on it.

Kerry regarded him thoughtfully. "Sorry about your nose," she remarked.

He stared at her. "So, what's it like screwing the boss?"

She felt a deep jolt of anger erupt in her gut. "Wouldn't you like to know?" she responded. "But she wouldn't give your ugly butt a second glance." Inwardly, she sighed. *What was that you were saying to Dar, about not liking being hated? Smooth, Kerry, very smooth. What is it about this dork that brings out the hyperbitch from hell in you anyway?* "And I take that back; I'm not sorry at all," she added. "Excuse me." She turned and headed for the door.

"I should have guessed it before," he yelled after her. "But Dick McMasters is a buddy of mine. He told me you didn't put out."

Kerry turned, with her hand on the doorknob, and looked back at him, the ugly memories flooding over her.

"Ah, I see you remember him," Steven's voice took on a savage satisfaction. "Yeah, he told me all about you, the straight laced, stuck up aristocrat. He's gonna laugh his ass off when I tell him what a pathetic little loser you turned out to be."

It took several breaths, to force the nausea down, and shove aside the familiar sensation of sickening dread she'd felt for those long, dark months. "You're the one without a life, morals, or integrity," she told him finally. "So which one of us is the loser?"

"Listen, you--"

Kerry cut him off, "I hope someday you start taking responsibility for what happens to you, and not just blame everyone else. Maybe you'll end up a happier person." She opened the door and

got through it, closing it behind her and moving away from it as quickly as she could, blindly finding her way towards the break room. She ducked inside, and leaned against the counter, looking up as a hand touched her arm. "Wh-- oh, hi Duks."

The gentle brown eyes regarded her. "Hello there, Kerry. Are you doing all right?"

Kerry sucked in a breath and released it. "Yeah, yeah." She put a hand over her stomach. "I think that meat pastalito I had didn't agree with me." She forced herself to settle down. "Hey, you got a sunburn."

Duk's face creased into a wry smile. "Yes, yes, I put on my bathing suit and went down to the pool for the first time since I moved into that damned place," he told her, releasing her arm and walking over to the coffee pot. He poured a cup, then glanced over his shoulder. "And how are you after all the excitement of yesterday?"

Kerry regarded the floor for a moment. "Doing a lot better today," she admitted. "I've, got to get back to work." She gave Duks a brief smile. "See you later."

The hall seemed wider than normal, and she was glad to get inside her office with the door shut. She stood for a long moment, leaning back against the cool wood, then she shoved away from it and crossed to her desk, settling into the cool leather of her chair and folding her hands on the wooden surface. A soft knock came on the inner door, and she sighed. "Come on in."

Dar entered, her blue eyes holding a touch of concern. "Hey."

Kerry gathered herself together and half turned to gaze up at the taller woman. "Hey." She pursed her lips. "How goes it?"

"Mmph." Dar slid a hand over hers. "You're cold, you feeling okay?" she asked hesitantly, seeing the pallor under her lover's normally golden skin tone. "Ker?" she added softly, when Kerry didn't answer.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I--" Kerry suddenly had to resist the almost overwhelming urge to simply put her head down on Dar's thigh and let Dar pet her like a cat. "Last couple of days catching up to me, I think." She gave her lover a wry look. "And I just bumped into our friend out on the balcony."

Dar's brows lifted and she tilted her head a trifle. "And?"

"Turns out we had a mutual acquaintance and he..." Kerry hesitated. "Anyway, he was just being a jerk."

"A jerk how?" Dar persisted.

Kerry's phone rang and both of their pagers went off simultaneously. "We can talk later." Kerry gave her a wry grimace. "This is going to hell in a handbasket." She reached for the phone.

"Operations, Stuart."

A harried voice answered her. "Kerry, this is John Collins. I've got the New York office breathing down my neck, and I can't get hold of Dar. You gotta give me something to tell them."

"John?" Dar interrupted smoothly. "Hold on a minute." She put the call on hold, then faced her assistant, placing two fingers on her chin and lifting it up so their eyes met. "We can talk now, if you need to," she said. "What did the stupid bastard say to you?"

A peaceful silence settled over them, as they merely sat and looked at one another. Kerry's lashes finally fluttered closed, and a faint smile twitched the corners of her mouth. "When I first joined Associated, I had a supervisor named Richard McMasters," she stated. "And he didn't quite subscribe to EEOC."

"Ah." Dar's brows contracted, and a gray tone entered her eyes. "Did he mouth off to you?"

Kerry exhaled. "Oh yes, and he took every opportunity to touch me, and to comment on my appearance, until I couldn't look at him without my hands shaking, wondering what was coming

out of his mouth next." She stopped momentarily. "And then one night he bumped into me at the library, and told me he wanted to...get to know me better, and if I didn't cooperate, he'd fire me." The hum of the computer was very loud in the silence, a soft blooping noise coming from the screen saver which had sprung into life.

"Did..." Dar hesitated. "I...I mean, did he..." She was honestly shocked, and a little hurt that Kerry hadn't confided in her before.

"He cornered me in the back room two days later, and I told him if he didn't leave me alone, I'd have my father sic the IRS on him." Kerry's face tensed into a grim smile. "In a way, that made it worse. He kept after me in other ways, slamming my work, spreading rumors, until one day, some nice person over at Arthur Anderson hired him away."

She paused. "He said it was a boss's prerogative to get the most out of his employees." Her eyes searched Dar's face. "I think you can see why I never mentioned it," she concluded, a little wistfully. "Figures he and Steven are friends. Same mind set."

"B..." Dar could hardly articulate the emotions. "I'd...nev..."

Kerry curled her hand around the suddenly nerveless fingers still resting against her face. "I know that," she replied warmly. "Believe me, I know that, Dar. It's just, I felt strange talking about it with you." She let out a breath, some of the tension dissipating. "I mean, you are my boss, after all."

Dar was dismayed. She'd never thought to ask Kerry if staying in her current position was what she wanted to do. She'd only thought of herself, and how she felt about it. But when she opened her mouth to do just that, nothing came out.

She cleared her throat and tried again. "Are you... Kerry, if you're not comfortable with this, we could, I mean, there are plenty of places in the company. I just...I..."

Kerry felt the tension build under her casually draped arm resting against Dar's thigh. "You said you needed me where I was," she stated softly.

"I did. I do, Kerry, I...I mean, of course I do, but if it's going to make you upset, I..." Dar felt herself stuttering, which hadn't happened to her since the fourth grade. She clamped her jaw shut, and swallowed a few times. "We can make arrangements if you're not comfortable with this."

There, she managed in a calmer, more even tone. "I survived without an assistant for years. I can manage on my own again."

"At what price?" Kerry stood and laid a hand alongside her neck, feeling the rapidly beating pulse under her fingertips. "You said yourself the pressure was getting to you," she reminded her lover, whose eyes dropped to the desk. "I'm fine. I love this job. I love working for you, and I don't want to go anywhere, okay?" She leaned forward and touched her forehead to Dar's. "I just had some nasty flashbacks, that's all. He's a jerk, and maybe he reminds me of Dick, the way he gets on my nerves all the time."

Jesus, when did I get this insecure? Dar wondered, as she felt her heartbeat start to calm. *What the hell is wrong with me lately, anyway. It's like I'm a kid again, going back to being a damn teenager.* "Okay." She managed a smile. "You can tell me more about it later if it bothers you, all right?"

Kerry smiled back. "All right." She spared a glance for the phone, still flashing. "Now, what in blazes do I tell him, Dar?"

"Huh?" Dar's brow creased as she followed Kerry's eyes. "Oh, right." She rubbed her temples.

"Um, tell him we're sending an executive team to North Carolina to take charge, and get the systems back up as soon as possible."

Kerry reached for the button, then hesitated. "We are?" she asked, curiously.

A sneaky, seductive grin tugged at one side of Dar's mouth. "Yeah. I figure eight hours to get their asses in gear, and a couple days for us in a little cabin I happen to know about near there." She hesitated, both brows lifting hopefully. "Sound okay?"

Sea green eyes blinked. "You mean us?" She pointed at Dar's chest, then at her own. "You and me, we're going up there?"

Dar simply nodded.

"Awesome," Kerry pronounced, then hit the button. "Hello, John?" She muted the mic for a moment. "They don't have any horseback riding up there, do they?" She released the mic. "John, we know it's really bad. You can tell them that Dar's going up there to take charge personally." Pause. "No shit?" the man replied, clearly impressed. "That'll get them off my ass. Thanks Kerry. You're the best."

"It's my pleasure," she assured him cheerfully, all thoughts of Steven dissolved. She disconnected the line and turned to Dar. "Now, we were discussing horses, right?"

A chuckle. "Yeah, they've got some trail riding, figured we could do a little hiking while we're up there," she offered. "If we leave tonight, we'll have tomorrow and Friday to get the network office back up, then the whole weekend to play." The idea had come to her right before she'd started over, and she'd put the plan in action before she'd left her office. "I've got Maria making reservations."

Kerry smiled. "Want me to go home and pick up our bags?" she offered. "When's the flight?"

"Seven, and that would be a great idea." Dar praised her. "Make sure you pack some warm stuff, it's chilly up there." Her brows lifted seductively. "A little too much for any scanty lingerie, unfortunately."

Kerry stood and slid a fingertip down the buttoned closure of Dar's silk shirt. "I don't know, I think you look really sexy in just that old jersey of yours," she whispered.

A soft chuckle. "Oh, you do, do you?"

"Mm hmm," Kerry lowered her voice even more. "But then you're gorgeous, Dar. You'd look sexy in a burlap sack," she confided, brushing her lips against her lover's. "I'm going to go get our stuff. I need some fresh air anyway." She patted Dar's leg, then stepped around her desk, pulling her jacket off her chair and swinging it over her shoulders as she headed for the door. Dar watched her go, then let out a long, slow breath. "Wow." She ran a hand through her hair. "I think I need a little fresh air myself."

The sunlight winked merrily at her feet in cheerful agreement, but at that moment her phone buzzed. She glanced up to see her private line ringing and the incoming tie line indicator. "Ah." She pressed the button. "Yes?"

"Dar." Alastair's voice sounded harassed. "What in the hell's going on there? I've got the presidents of a dozen companies crawling up my backside with backhoes right now."

Dar winced at the visual. "Environmental systems blew up at the data center in the Carolinas," she said.

"It's a mess."

"A mess?" her boss repeated. "Dar, we've busted service levels all over the region there. This is more than a mess," he said. "What are we doing about it? What's the plan?"

"Thanks for assuming I had one," she said. "I don't goddamn know what we're going to do about it, Alastair. They won't give us access to the facility to find out what we even can do."

He was momentarily silent. "B..."

Dar waited. "You asked."

Alastair made an exasperated sound. "Dar, I have to be able to tell these people something. I'm getting roasted here. I've already got a half dozen talking breach of contract and the rest of them mentioned legal."

Was it her fault? Dar frowned. "Tell them we're looking at options, Alastair," she replied a little testily. "I'm not going to promise to pull something out of thin air. I've got to get up there and see what the situation is and..."

"You're going?" Alastair interrupted her sharply.

"I've got a flight in a few hours yeah and..."

"Good enough." Her boss sounded much happier. "I'll tell 'em that. They can't say I didn't put the best resources on it. But Dar," he hesitated, "if we don't fix this, we'll end up with a big loss I'm going to have to explain to the board."

"Shit happens sometimes, Alastair. You know that. We're a technology company and this stuff breaks," Dar said.

"I know," her boss replied. "But shit happening right after there's a major ruckus down there gets sticky," he reminded her. "And if people are looking for leverage it'll hand it to them nice and neat."

Dar gazed at her desktop. "Yeah," she said. "I'll do what I can, Alastair."

"Keep me advised," Alastair said. "I'll go tap dance for you and break out the mirrors."

"YEAH, THAT'S RIGHT, Col." Kerry stretched her legs out and closed her eyes, sucking in a deep breath of the sun warmed air coming in the window of the Mustang. "We're going to North Carolina. We've got a big mess there to take care of."

"Oh, right, yeah, I heard about that," Colleen advised her. "My boss was screaming that the interbank transfers won't go through." She cleared her throat. "No problem, Ker, staying out there isn't any kinda hardship, you know? Breakfast on the ocean, little tuxedoed mannequins pattering about, no problem at all."

"Great." Kerry sighed. "I never thought I'd be glad of a disaster, but I can't say I regret this one." She stifled a yawn. "After we fix things, we're going up to a place Dar knows near there for a little R and R."

"Oh?" Colleen sounded more interested. "Well now, me lassie, you didn't tell me that. So you and the tall dark one are finally taking some time off together. That's great."

"Yeah." Kerry smiled. "That'll be a first for us, even over Christmas we had so much going on, we hardly had time to breathe, much less relax. I'm really looking forward to a few days alone with her." And wasn't that the truth. Kerry found herself impatiently wishing the crisis was well over and solved, freeing them to leave the technical problems behind and concentrate on each other.

She knew instinctively that after the past few days, they needed that. There were too many thorn pricks in both of them. Too many tiny, loose ends caused by the trauma and the tension. She felt a little shaky, and she suspected Dar did as well.

A weekend hiking up in the quiet of the wilderness was very, very appealing, and it would give Dar time to really recuperate from her bumps and bruises. "You think they'll have a hot tub?" she mused.

Colleen laughed. "Well, if it's the kinda place I think Dar likes, I'm sure it will have one. You can do some lovely skiing up in the mountains y'know," she commented. "Get yourself a nice fireplace, and toast you up some marshmallows, girl."

"Mm." Kerry could taste the warm, slightly burned morsels in her imagination. Then she imagined sharing them messily with Dar, and grinned, feeling the skin around her eyes crinkling up in amusement. "Sounds good to me."

"Heh, your eating habits surely have changed," Colleen teased. "And then there's the food, as well."

Kerry almost swallowed her tongue. "Colleen!"

"Ah, ah, don't you be Colleen me, little Miss Michigan snowballs wouldn't melt in me mouth," her friend laughed. "I'm just joshing, Kerry. Honestly, I think Dar's the best thing that ever happened to you."

"Oh yeah, she's turning me into a pleasure loving little butterball, that's what," Kerry laughed. "But thanks," she added quietly. "I'm glad you ended up liking her." She put her car into gear as the ferry docked. "I'm going to get our stuff packed, talk to you later, Col. Thanks for staying over again."

She hung up the phone and steered carefully onto the island, pausing for the spray down before she turned onto the perimeter road and headed to the condo. The sprinklers were on in the center of the island, making an interesting chatter, and sending a whiff of mineral laden moist air to Kerry's nose.

She pulled into her parking spot, then paused, backing up a little. "Aww." She found herself grinning stupidly. The maintenance department had painted her name on the concrete bumper. "K. Stuart, check that out." She got out of the car and examined it, the neat black letters crisp against the white concrete, matching the "D. Roberts" right next to it half hidden behind Dar's tires.

It was such a tiny, insignificant thing, but it touched something deep inside Kerry, reinforcing her sense that this was, indeed, home. She gave the Lexus a little pat, then shouldered her briefcase and headed up the stairs, plucking the mail from the mailbox before keying in the lock code. Chino started whining the minute the door opened, and she dropped her case on the loveseat as she headed towards the kitchen. "Okay, okay honey, I hear you." She ambled across the tile floor and opened the gate, letting the puppy out to attack her feet fiercely. "Hey...hey, careful." She put the mail down and crouched, petting Chino's soft fur. "Okay, okay, I know. I'm glad to see you too."

Chino whined ecstatically, her whole body wriggling with joy as she chewed on Kerry's fingers. Then she cocked her head, and looked past Kerry expectantly. She scratched the puppy's ears. "I know she's your buddy, huh?"

Chino blinked, then apparently gave up on Dar, and concentrated on attacking Kerry's shoes. "Raowr." The puppy tugged on a lace, dropping it and barking in outrage when the thing persisted in remaining attached to Kerry, and all the animal's pulling couldn't budge her. "Okay, why don't you go out while I get some stuff done, huh?" Kerry opened the back door, allowing the puppy to scamper down into the tiny, walled garden.

It was safe for her there, since Dar had spent most of one weekend puppy proofing it. That included making sure there were no gaps under the fence, and taking out the tiny pebbles the animal would surely try to consume. She watched Chino sniff around for a minute, then she went inside and started getting together two bags, starting with Dar's. which was easy. Jeans, soft, neatly pressed polo's, two sweaters which were all she owned, her one flannel shirt, the sweatshirt Kerry loved on her, and nice warm socks. And underwear, of course. Kerry had fun picking out her favorite ones of those, including the really cute ones with tiny pictures of Dogbert on them. Oh, and the baseball jersey and shorts, and her bathroom kit, which held

shampoo, soap, her toothbrush and the small bottle of interestingly spicy smelling talc powder Kerry loved to sprinkle over her. She sniffed it and closed her eyes, a tiny humming noise erupting from her throat that almost startled her.

"Jesus." She clapped a hand on her forehead. "I'm turning into such a hedonist," she muttered, putting the bag away and zipping up the carry on duffel Dar always used. But that's how Dar made her feel, she reflected, all sexy and sensual, like she was taking a bath in pheromones most of the time. Everything seemed more intense, the smell of her, the deep, rich color of her eyes... "Oh boy." Kerry stopped and took several breaths. "Okay, I think I need a drink of water." She carried the bag to the couch and let it drop, then continued on into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of peach flavored ice tea, which slid down her throat in a cool, nicely sweetened wave. She leaned against the counter and sipped it, thinking about TCP/IP routing tables until her body had settled down again, and she could head upstairs to her own room.

Her bag was a little tougher, mostly because she actually had winter clothes to choose from. She threw in a few pairs of jeans, though, since they were more comfortable than the heavy corduroy that were her other choice. Dar having informed her she really liked the way Kerry looked in jeans having nothing to do with the decision, of course.

Kerry smiled, as she flipped through her collection of soft wool sweaters, selecting two that were favorites of hers, and one whose color reminded her of Dar's eyes. That one was a gift from her brother, and it hugged her curves, bringing out an appreciative smile on Dar's face the last time she'd had the occasion to wear it. She tucked it inside her tan leather bag, alongside a couple of long sleeved shirts she could wear under them. She also added a pair of mittens, and her own warm socks and bath kit, glad she wasn't due for her period until late the week after.

Once she had everything packed, she started to go down, then stopped, setting the bag on her bed and going to the dresser where she tugged the drawer open, and pulled out a small, velvet case. Pensively she opened it, her eyes tracing the now familiar outlines of the beautifully made, filigreed ring inside. *Was it time?*

Kerry sighed and closed the case, putting it back in the drawer. Part of her wanted to just push through the insecurities and go ahead with the gift, but another part of her hesitated, caught between the fear that Dar wouldn't want that kind of commitment, and the inner knowledge that she, Kerry, needed it in some deep, almost uncomfortable way.

Maybe. She chewed her lip. *Maybe on Valentines' Day? It was only two weeks.* A nervous ball formed in her stomach. Maybe she could sort of feel Dar out this weekend, just to make sure she wasn't going to make a total fool out of herself when she did it.

Oh, come on, Kerry, you know she loves you. She chastised herself. *Jesus, she's not going to laugh or anything.*

Right? Kerry drummed her fingers on one thigh, then snatched the case up and tucked it into her bag, zipping it up and hitching the strap up onto her shoulder. Maybe she'd practice, she decided, going downstairs and putting her bag on the couch next to Dar's, then sitting down and leafing through the mail. "Oh."

She pulled out the three or four pieces that were hers, forwarded from the Kendall address. Two were bills, a third was an offer to beta test the new Microsoft applications suite, and the fourth..." Haven't heard from her in a while." Kerry turned the letter from her great aunt over in her fingers before she lifted the flap and pulled out the creamy, soft stationary, faintly scented with the smell of dust and memories. She opened it, and spread the paper out on her knees, studying the thin, spidery script.

Dear Kerrison,

My dear, word has come to me that you are estranged from your parents--and this troubles me greatly. Not for their sake, as you know well that I never did get on with your father, but for your sake, as I know how much family means to you.

Your sister tells me you are well, and living there in Miami with a person she tells me you are quite fond of. With her usual feckless nattering, she managed to talk all around the subject, but I am going to assume this person is another woman, and while you think my aged nerves can't take this, I will gladly inform you that this is not the case.

Splendid for you, my dear. I would love to meet this person, and I want to assure you that regardless of what your parents seem to think, your extended family is not cut off from you in anyway. You are welcome in my home, and I know Mitchell would love to see you. Please do call me, when you get a chance, since I also would like to get the real story, as opposed to the bowdlerized version your sister saw fit to grace my supposedly tender ears with.

With great affection, Aunt Penny.

Kerry grinned, as she reread the letter. "Good old Aunt Penny." She shook her head, remembering the old, but sharp woman whom she'd last seen before she'd moved to Miami. When she'd given her the ring and laughed, making Kerry turn around in the light, watching her with twinkling eyes the same shade as Kerry's own. Who had been one of the only people in Kerry's life who had told her, point blank, that she was pretty, displacing years of her mother's continual harping on her looks.

Kerry would have cherished her for that alone, but she'd always gotten a sense of warm affection from her aunt and she was glad even this latest disaster hadn't broken that tie.

She made a mental note to call her aunt after the weekend, and, on a whim, went back up to her room and got a small box of writing paper, tucking it inside her bag along with a couple of her favorite pens. "That's what I'll do, Chino. I'll write her a note. She'd like that," she told the puppy, who had curled up contentedly at her feet. "I bet she'd like you. She had a Scottish terrier. I mean, terrier who used to eat my shoes when I went over there."

Chino looked up, then settled her chin on Kerry's foot and sighed.

Kerry sighed too, and leaned back against the couch's soft leather, drinking in the peace of the place. She picked up Chino and cuddled her, smiling when the puppy sprawled across her chest, the warm breath sneaking between the buttons on her shirt.

Shed just relax here for a minute, then head on back to the office.

"HERE YOU GO, Dar." Maria bustled in, handing over two sets of airline ticket folders. "I have you both booked on the plane, and your hotel room is okay." The secretary gave her an impish smile. "They have only rooms with, how you say, a jaguar in them."

Dar stopped what she was doing, and looked up, startled. "What?" She glanced at the tickets. "A jaguar?"

"Si, with the bubbles." Maria made a circling motion with her hand. "In the water."

"Oh, oh, a Jacuzzi." Dar chuckled, and gave her a stern look. "It's strictly business, Maria."

"Si, si, but you know how important is it to stay very clean, Dar," Maria replied, virtuously. "You know, it is bad if you come back with the germs."

Slowly, pale blue eyes lifted and regarded her, a mischievous grin tugging at Dar's lips. "Maria, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were encouraging me to do something against company policy."

Maria blinked at her. "Oh, si." She nodded seriously. "I will see you Monday, Dar. Have a good time."

She trotted out, leaving a very bemused, and somewhat taken aback boss sitting behind her desk. "A jaguar, huh?" She tucked the folders inside her jacket and glanced at her watch. "And speaking of Kerry..." She picked up the phone and dialed Kerry's cellular number. "Where the heck is she?"

It took four rings before there was an answer, and the voice sounded a little dazed. "Oh shit." Dar regarded the phone with some amusement. "And a good afternoon to you, too, Kerrison," she drawled. "What's up?"

"Shit, shit, shit." Kerry sighed. "I'm sorry, Dar. got things packed, then sat down and played with Chino for a minute and I fell asleep." Sounds of rustling came from the phone. "I'm on my way back. I don't know what in the heck came over me." She sounded disgusted. "God."

"Hey, take it easy." Dar laughed. "We got up early, we didn't get too much sleep last night, and if you're tired, it makes sense to take a damn nap. You didn't miss anything." She reached over and took a sip of coffee from her cup. "The center's still down, they still need our help, I've got our tickets, and Maria booked us in a hotel room complete with a Jacuzzi."

Momentary silence. "Oh really?" Kerry had closed the car door, and the sound of the engine starting up was heard. "A Jacuzzi, huh? She's subtle." A pause. "Sounds good, though. Colleen was tempting me with visions of you, me, a fire and some marshmallows."

"Oo," Dar purred. "I could go for that. I love marshmallows." She stood up and started packing up her laptop. "I'll be waiting downstairs. We can pick up a quick snack at the airport before we get on the plane."

"Okay." Kerry stifled a yawn. "See you in a few minutes."

Chapter Fourteen

DAR SHUT THE door to her inner office behind her just as the outer door opened and three figures barged inside and headed in her direction. "What in the hell do you want?" she snapped. "What do we want?" José spluttered. "Half the company is down and what the hell are you doing about it?" he said. "That's what we want!" He indicated Steven and Eleanor, who were behind him. "You're not going to blow us off again."

"Sure I am." Dar headed for the door, which they were standing in front of. "I'd advise you moving your asses out of my way."

"Hold on, Dar." Eleanor held a hand up, her voice serious. "Come on now. You owe us some kind of explanation as to what's going on. We have customers to answer to."

Addressed reasonably, Dar paused and regarded her. "Charlotte data center's down," she said.

"They have no access to the building. I'm going up there to find out what can be done to restore service."

"So you have no backup for those customers?" Steven spoke up.

"We have no backup for those customers," Dar replied evenly. "Joint budgetary decision." She flexed her hands on her crutches. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a plane to catch."

"And if you can't do anything?" Steven stood in her way. "Then what? Maybe your dear buddy in Houston won't be able to protect you any more?" He stared steadily at her. "Trust me. I'll use that. You should have stayed gone."

"You should have been aborted at birth. Guess the world's just full of little pitfalls like that," Dar replied. "Now get out of my way or I'll call security and have you thrown out."

José had the grace to look uncomfortable. "Hey, come on," he said. "Let's not be animals to each other. This is a serious thing."

"I am serious," Dar said. "You want something done? Fine. I'm doing something. Now get the hell out of the way or else do it yourself." She started for the door. "I'm not standing here arguing with you."

For a moment, she thought she was going to have to fight her way out of her office. It was stupid, and insane, and Dar was suddenly very tired thinking about it. But they moved aside and let her go by, and she headed down the hallway with them trailing after her.

She wondered if they realized how much she wished she'd stayed gone now too, the hostility beating at her back bringing her to question again whether staying here, going through this again, and again and again was a good decision for any of them.

Maybe she could convince Kerry they should go somewhere else, after they got the current problem sorted out. *Fix this one last thing, and then give the company the finger?* Dar keyed the elevator.

Having Alastair fly out had been great for her ego, but in the long run, what was the point? She turned and regarded the three sales and marketing executives fuming silently behind her and wondered aloud. "What in the hell do you want from me?"

"What do we want?" Eleanor blurted. "What does that mean? We want the company to run right, and to make money. What in the hell do you want?"

"To screw her little staff whore," Steven said. "Glad the company pays for it. What else is in your budget the stockholders don't know about?"

Dar could hear her heartbeat thunder in her ears suddenly, and she was forcibly reminded of the temper she'd inherited along with her height and looks from her father as her body tensed and she felt the blood rush to her skin.

Then she thought about having him restored in her life, and what priority that should have, and about the lessons he'd taught her while she was growing up a scrappy, wild kid.

Never hit somebody cause you're mad, Dar. Andrew's voice echoed softly as they waited in silence for her response. *Hit 'em cause hurting 'em's gonna get you something back.* "My budget's public knowledge with the rest of the filing," she said in a voice that was strangely calm even to her own ears. "But we'll discuss it when I get back."

"Dar." Eleanor now looked a trifle uncomfortable.

"Fuck you." The door opened and Dar entered the elevator, pressing the close button, and keying her badge at the same time to force them shut before the rest of them could react, leaving her in silence for the ride down to the bottom floor.

THE PLANE WAS quiet, being only half full, and Dar took the opportunity to relax in her comfortable seat, a glass of white wine balanced on the console between herself and Kerry. The blonde woman was curled up half on her side, a soft, blue blanket tucked around her as she idly watched Dar's profile. "We'll have to go out to the office as soon as we get there," Dar commented, laying a casual hand over Kerry's. "It's going to be a long night."

"Okay," Kerry mumbled, shifting over and curling her fingers around Dar's. "As long as I can spend it with you, I don't care how long it is." She closed her eyes and exhaled.

Dar gazed at her quietly, absorbing the unexpected compliment. "Thanks," she finally said, softly. A sea green orb appeared, and studied her. "That was a really sweet thing to say."

Kerry blushed gently, and closed her eye again, giving the fingers held in hers a little squeeze. "You bring out the poet in me," she admitted softly. "It's the weirdest thing."
"Oh really?" Dar rolled half onto her side, facing Kerry. "Got any handy?"
Alarmed green eyeball. "Any what handy?"
"Poems," her lover replied, a wicked twinkle in her eyes. "You said I brought that out in you. I know you're writing them. I'd love to hear one."
"B..." Kerry's brain ran around in circles for a minute. "I, b..."
"Well, that sort of rhymes, yeah," Dar mused. "Doesn't have much emotional impact, though."
She took a sip of her wine. "Is that one of those haiku things?"
Kerry laughed softly. "For Pete's sake, Dar. Most of my poems are so corny." Lips very gently brushed against hers, and she tasted their sweetness.
"They're not corny," Dar rumbled into her ear. "I think they're incredible." She kissed Kerry again, glad of the dimmed cabin lighting. "Just like you."
"Mm..." Kerry found her hands moving irresistibly towards the warm body next to her. "Now which one of us is the poet?"

IT WAS A dark and stormy night. Kerry rolled the words around inside her head, as she peered through the darkness surrounding them. They'd gotten to the airport safely, and retrieved a rental car, then headed out to the networking office.

"Pretty remote out here," Dar commented, the small muscles on the sides of her face tensing as she tried to see through the rain. The road was a two lane blacktop, bordered by trees and rolling up and down hills. Only the very occasional street lamp appeared out of the gloom, and the rain was so hard it reflected Dar's headlights into a blurring glare.

"You said it," Kerry agreed. "Something like the area I'm from, but more hilly." She hung onto the strap as Dar took an unexpected curve, then blinked as the road banked down and to the left. "Whoa."

"Yeah." Dar nibbled her lower lip. "I don't do hills very much, sorry." She consciously slowed down, and ran a hand through her hair, wishing it was light out. "It's not that much further, though-- Whoa!" The car slid out from under her control, and she instinctively steered with it, resisting the desire to slam on the breaks. They did a three hundred sixty degree turn, and almost went off the road before Dar wrestled the car around straight, and slowed down almost to a crawl. "What in the hell was that?"

Kerry put a gentle hand on her arm. "Ice." She exhaled. "Um, you want me to drive? I think I'm a lot more used to it than you are. They probably don't have icy roads much in Miami."

Dar considered that, then prudently pulled off the road and stopped, tugging her jacket up before she opened the door. "Okay. Yeah, we get rain slicks, but nothing like this." She exited out into the frosty rain tinged with sleet, and exchanged places, settling into a cloth seat still warm from Kerry's body.

It was a surprisingly sensual moment, especially since she caught her lover's scent still clinging to the fabric. She sat back, a little bemused, and watched Kerry adjust the seat so her booted toes could reach the pedals. "Sorry. I should have moved that."

Sea green eyes suddenly glanced up, a hint of mischief in them. "Or you could have just stayed there, and I could have sat in your lap."

A dark eyebrow crawled up Dar's face almost into her hairline. "Oh really?" She was tempted, then sighed. "Maybe after we get outta there. It'd be a little conspicuous pulling up to the site like that."

Kerry finished her adjustments, then put the car in drive and slowly pulled out. "Mm, yeah, I guess." She studied the road. "Straight ahead?"

Dar nodded. "Yeah, turn right onto the next major cross road. It has a state highway sign." She let her head rest against the seat back and stretched her legs out, giving Kerry a look as she reached down and adjusted the passenger seat all the way back. She decided she liked being a passenger, because it gave her the opportunity to study her lover's profile at her leisure, admiring the slightly upturned nose, and the smooth line of her jaw, the muscles shifting a little as she concentrated on the road.

Kerry was painfully aware of the eyes on her, and she fought the instinct to fuss with her hair nervously, which was a habit of hers. "Um..." She tried to think of something to distract Dar. "So, what are we going to do when we get there?"

"Well." Dar folded her arms across her chest, pulling the leather of her jacket tight around her body. "It depends on what the situation is. Probably we'll have to push a few people around, kick a little ass, get nasty... Hey, Kerry?"

"Kick ass, take names, be nasty, huh?" Kerry flicked a glance her way. "What?"

"You're really cute." Dar grinned.

The car slid sideways with Kerry hanging on and cursing for several very long moments before she regained control of it. "Dar, don't do that," she pleaded, willing her blush to recede. "We're going to end up in a ditch."

Dar chuckled softly. "Sorry." She fell silent, and let her companion concentrate on navigating the slick roads.

The dark countryside passed slowly, broken only by the occasional car or truck going in the other direction. It was another hour before Dar nodded towards a half hidden driveway. "In there, see where the arc lights are set up?"

Kerry nodded. "Yeah. Wait...oh, yeah, I see the road. Okay." She steered the car into the parking lot, seeing several trucks hazily in view through the rain. "Looks like a circus." Groups of people were milling around, and she parked near a large clump of them, putting on the parking brake carefully and unbuckling her seat belt. "Well boss, now it's your turn." She glanced at Dar, who was watching the activity with sharp, shifting eyes.

"Right," Dar murmured, letting the warmer side of her personality slip away, and calling up the cool aggressiveness she knew she'd need to deal with the situation. "Okay, you got your cell and the laptop, right?"

Kerry nodded, watching her in uneasy fascination. "Yes."

"Right. Let's go." Dar zipped up her jacket and opened the car door, slipping outside into the rain and closing it behind her.

"Okay then," Kerry murmured, tucking her phone into the pocket of her jacket and picking up her briefcase. She ducked out the driver side door and closed it, keying the lock and striding after her boss, who was already halfway to the building.

"ALL RIGHT, SO when can we get in there," Dar said, standing under a dripping tarp in the very center of the building's front lawn. Two men were opposite her, clearly uncomfortable.

"Ms. Roberts," one said, with a sigh. "Look, the environmental people won't clear us, because that chemical has been confirmed to be toxic." He gave her a look that indicated the last thing he'd expected was to have a VP Ops drop into his tent, where they'd been having a pizza and beer.

Dar's face tensed. "How long?" she snapped.

He shook his head. "I don't know. The regulator told me an hour ago she wouldn't even have a team here until tomorrow noon."

Pale eyes almost silver in the glaring lights studied him thoughtfully. "Where is she?" Dar's voice dropped a bit, taking on a predatory burr.

The man glanced at her nervously. "Well, she's over there, by that van of theirs, but let me tell you, ma'am, she doesn't take any bullshit. I've worked with her before. "

"What's her name?" the burr deepened.

"Anne Simmonds," the man answered. "But, I mean, really ma'am, if she decides to get tough on us, we could be here for weeks."

Dar turned and stalked out without a word, letting the rain drive against her in freezing darts, conscious of Kerry's quiet form a pace behind her. She was met by a young man who was dressed in a white coverall as she approached the van. "I'd like to see whoever is in charge," she told him quietly.

He cleared his throat and pushed a pair of glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Well, Dr. Simmonds is inside, but she's busy. Can I help you?"

Dar stepped up closer and stared him down, her eyes inches above his own. She let the silence grow for a moment, watching him swallow a few times in reflex. "No," she finally told him. "I'd like to speak to Dr. Simmonds, please."

"Uh. " He looked past her to Kerry's damp head. She smiled briefly at him. "Uh, well, I...I can ask her, but, um... Okay, are you from this company or..."

Dar cocked her head and pinned him with a stare. "I'd appreciate that, my name's Dar Roberts, and I'm from our Miami office."

"Okay." He nodded. "Okay, um, wait here. I'll be right back." He turned and walked towards the van, startled to find Dar pacing next to him. "Oh, we, we're doing some experiments, I..."

"I'd like to get out of the rain," Dar overrode him. "I won't break anything, I promise."

He looked past her.

"Me either." Kerry smiled kindly at him. "Really. My mother used to take me into china shops when I was a child."

Dar hurriedly wiped a hand across her face, muffling a laugh, then cleared her throat as they approached the van, which had a tarp extending from its passenger side, shielding several work tables with people busy over them. The young man went over to a figure bent over a microscope and touched her arm.

"What?" the woman snapped, not looking up. "You just shook this whole slide. I'm trying to take pictures, Michael." She was very short, shorter than Kerry even, and slim, with dark auburn hair that was pulled tightly back under a close fitting cap. Her bearing was powerful though, and exuded impatience.

"Um, yes, doctor, I know, but there are two people here from Miami. They wanted to talk to you, and I..."

"Tell 'em to go the hell back to Miami. I'm not having some stuffed suits smelling of Cuban cigars hanging around my neck asking stupid questions," the doctor snapped back. "Nothing doing, Michael, so you march your lily white butt back out there and..." She glanced past his shoulder, where two shadowy, strange forms were standing. "Get rid of them."

"Actually," Dar's low voice spoke clearly, and concisely, as she strode forward, coming into the light with startling impact. "I don't think I'm going anywhere." She stopped precisely in the center of the tent, letting the garish light outline her in stark detail. "And I've never been partial to cigars."

The doctor was surprised. Kerry decided, watching the smaller woman's eyes flick warily over her boss's truculent form.

An uncomfortable silence dropped over them, until Dar took a step forward and offered a hand. "Dr. Simmonds? My name is Dar Roberts." She waited impassively as the doctor studied her for a long time before extending her own hand. "I need some answers."

It was the charisma. Kerry gave the doctor a brief smile as Dar released her hand and half turned. "This is my assistant, Kerry Stuart."

"I don't have answers." The smaller woman recovered her composure and scowled, giving Kerry a brisk nod. "I told you people that hours ago. That damn extinguisher company put so much toxin in that system, it's a damn good thing your folks evacuated, or they'd have been glowing like fireflies."

Dar exhaled. "What is it?"

"I have no goddamned clue, and those people won't say," the doctor stated, disgustedly. "So damn scared of a lawsuit they won't even admit to having first and last names."

Dar glanced at Kerry, who handed her the cell phone without a word. She dialed a number and waited. "Evening, Alastair."

"Jesus, Dar, it's..." A yawn. "Midnight. What in bl...are you in North Carolina?" He cleared his throat. "Listen, we've got twelve accounts set to cancel if we're not back up by tomorrow morning."

"Thanks. Needed the extra pressure," Dar grunted. "Damn it."

"I wasn't worried. I heard you were on your way. In fact, I went to bed," the CEO told her cheerfully. "You know I've got all the confidence in the world in you, Dar."

The responsibility slammed down on her shoulders with an almost audible crunch. "How much business are we talking about?" Dar asked, cautiously. "It doesn't look good here, Alastair."

"Well..." he paused. "It's not good, Dar." His cheerfulness vanished. "I've had a few calls from the board. Apparently some of them know some of the companies affected and they're getting pressure too.

They think for some reason I'm shielding them from what's going on." He paused. "Or shielding you."

Dar's eyes drifted out to the rainy ground. "I see." A dull throbbing started in the back of her skull. "Nice."

"Didn't know until after six, you'd already left for the airport," Alastair told her. "And anyway, what more could I do? You're the best we have, Dar. If you can't solve it, no one can."

Dar rubbed her temples. "All right. I need someone from Legal to call whoever's in charge of that damn extinguisher company and threaten them with a full liability lawsuit, naming the officers as personal respondents if they don't give the people here the name of the stuff they put in that goddamned system."

"Hell with Legal. I'll call him. I know him. He's my second wife's third ex-husband's brother-in-law," Alastair advised her. "Call you right back."

"Right." Dar disconnected, studying the building thoughtfully. Then she dialed again, glancing over her shoulder "Call Bellsouth. I'm going to need someone very high up in their provisioning department." Her voice had taken on a grim tone.

"Okay." Kerry got out her own phone, and her palmtop, and checked the number, then dialed, sensing the sudden change in her lover, and feeling a sick gnawing in her guts.

Dar listened for a minute, then heard Mark's voice. "Evening."

"Ah, Dar, hi." Mark's voice sounded blurry. "Um... I was just... uh... "

"Sleeping at your desk," Dar remarked dryly. "Listen, I need an inventory check. Can we duplicate the setup in NC?"

Momentary silence. "You're kidding, right?" Mark answered, faintly. "You know we can't do that."

"Thought so, call up Cisco and find out what they have on hand." Dar sighed. "We're locked out of here." She hung up and faced the doctor. "I need to get in there and get equipment out."

"No way," The woman answered instantly.

"Look," Dar started.

"Hey, I said, no way." Anne put a hand up. "So don't try it, lady. I've said no to a lot worse than you."

Kerry put her hand over the mic on her phone and stepped artfully between the two women, seeing the sudden icy glare settle over her boss's face. "Here Dar, it's some Executive VP of something or other. Was that high enough?" She passed her the phone, watching the flare of Dar's nostrils as she took the instrument.

"Yeah. That's fine," she muttered, taking a breath before half turning away to talk.

"So." Kerry gave the doctor a grim smile. "Any coffee around here?"

"WELL, THAT'S IT." Anne Simmonds closed up her cell phone. "All right, guys, pack it up," she yelled to her team, then turned to a waiting Dar. "Sorry. They're going to have to bring in a team to scrub the place. Thanks for getting me an answer, though."

Kerry shot a glance at her boss. "What does that mean?" she asked.

"Means the stuff is so toxic we can't go in there without environmental suits." The doctor answered succinctly. "And I'll be glad to get out of this weather. You might as well do the same."

"How long?" Dar spoke for the first time, her voice sharp.

The doctor shrugged. "Who knows? Take the team a day, maybe two to get here, then probably a week or so." She packed up her kit.

"I can't keep this facility closed a week," Dar stated flatly.

"Well, that's just too bad," Simmonds replied. "Because I'm leaving a trooper here to keep everyone out." She gave Dar a grim smile. "Have a nice day." She shouldered her bag. "Oh, and Ms. Roberts?"

Cold blue eyes watched her silently.

"My boss, Shari, says have a nice day too." She turned and walked off, joining her group as they got into their van and closed the door, driving off and leaving them in the fitful, freezing weather. Kerry watched them, then turned and studied her boss's face, which had gone dark and cold, with a glittering anger in the pale blue eyes that sent a chill down her back. "What was that all about?"

Dar felt the sour taste in the back of her mouth. "Old history," she replied, then returned her attention to the building. "All right. C'mon, we're going to have to do this the hard way." She started towards the tarp the rest of their assembled group was huddled under at a brisk pace.

"But." Kerry caught up to her, tugging her collar up a little. "Dar, I don't, um."

"Okay, folks," Dar stated, as she ducked under the blue plastic. "Bad news. We don't get in for a week, at the least." She pointed to the Bellsouth regional service coordinator who had just arrived. "I need all the circuits in that building stripped and redropped, and I need them tonight." His jaw dropped. "You're joking, right?"

"No." Dar stared him down. "Just get started. I'll let you know where I need them dropped." She turned and faced the building manager. "I have seventy Cisco 7200's headed here on a charter, find someone to go pick them up."

His jaw dropped too. "What in the hell are you doing, Dar? You make it sound like we're rebuilding the goddamn complex."

A dark brow lifted. "We are."

"That's impossible," he told her flatly. "There is no way this facility is going to be duplicated overnight."

"Have you ever tried it?" Dar countered her temper building. "No? Then how do you know it can't be done?" She pointed. "Just get moving, and get me someone here with a truck, who knows the area, and you," she pointed at another woman who was muffled in a large mackinaw, "start getting your people back in here." The staff had been sent home earlier.

"Look, Dar," the regional manager objected.

She whirled on him and jabbed a finger into his chest. "You want a job tomorrow morning?" Silence.

"Then start moving your ass," she snarled. "All of you!"

A low muttering sprang up as people started to move, more than one whisper of "crazy" leaking back to Dar's ears. She turned her back on them and walked to the edge of the tarp, staring out into the darkness and trying to calm the churning tension in her guts.

Kerry took a breath, then stepped up next to her. "Hey, look Dar. I think he's right, this is really crazy."

The back facing her stiffened, and it was a long moment before Dar turned her head and looked right at Kerry. Her face was an unreadable mask, but the turmoil in her eyes was unmistakable.

"If you don't want to help out just go back to the car and wait," Dar spoke with low intensity.

"But don't stand here and tell me what I can't do. I don't need that from you."

Kerry felt her knees start to shake and she sucked in a shocked breath, having not expected the response. She tried to think of something to say, but before she could, Dar simply turned and walked away, out into the darkness.

THE FREEZING RAIN now matched her mood completely. Dar stared into it, hardly even feeling the sting against her face as the last warm spot inside her dissolved, replaced by a damp bleakness that already regretted her words to Kerry.

Damn it. She tucked her hands under her arms, ignoring the pain the cold was inserting in her joints, and took a quick glance over her shoulder. Kerry had disappeared. The knowledge sank into Dar's guts, and she felt a long moment of just wishing she could scrap the entire night, and go after her.

And say what? Sorry for being an asshole. It's just something you have to get used to? Wasn't it good old Shari who had told her she'd never have a successful relationship, because she always put everything else ahead of it?

Yeah. Funny she should turn up right at that moment. She let the freezing rain drive against her, numbing her face until heavy footsteps ran up and she turned, to see the Bellsouth supervisor pulling his yellow rain suit tight against him.

"All right, we've got the pairs pulled out," he told her, scrubbing his face. "Now what? I can't keep those guys up on those poles, Ms. Roberts. You need to give us some direction here. We're pulling all the stops out, but I'm not putting my guys in danger, and it's icing up."

More than you know. Dar rubbed her arms, then exhaled. "Okay, let's see where everyone else is." She led him back to the tarp, ignoring the angry looks she was getting by the rest of the team, channeling her focus only on the goal. "What's the status?"

"Plane just landed with the routers," one man grudgingly admitted, blowing on his hands. "I got a truck. We were about to leave to go pick them up."

"Good." Dar nodded. "Take off."

"Staff's headed back in, those I could reach," the older woman told her. "But I had to get pretty tough.

No one's happy and a few flat out refused."

"Fine," Dar told her. "Okay, now we just need a..."

"The warehouse next door is empty," Kerry's voice quietly interrupted her. "They have a Telco punch down and the landlord's on his way with a key."

The flapping of the tarp was suddenly loud as everyone turned to look at her, and Dar felt an irrational jolt deep in her guts. She studied the set, serious face for a moment. "Thank you, Kerry, good work."

Kerry nodded and glanced down at the churned, half frozen mud they were standing in, folding her arms over her chest and exhaling.

"All right, let's move everything over there. We'll get inside as soon as they open it up. It'll be warmer and drier at least," Dar stated quietly. "John, that's where we'll need the lines dropped. I think I spotted a block on the back end of that building."

"Right you are," the Bellsouth manager nodded briskly, pulling out a walkie-talkie and speaking into it. "That's an easy swing. They might even be wired for it already as that used to be a telemarketing operation."

Kerry listened to the conversation, letting it roll over her, until she was aware of footsteps leaving, and then silence. With a sigh she lifted her head, almost jumping when pale blue eyes met hers. "Oh." She'd thought Dar had gone with them.

They studied each other for a long, pensive moment.

"Sorry about that I..." Kerry started.

"Sorry I snapped at you. I..." Dar rumbled at the same time.

Silence fell again, then Dar released a breath and wiped a weary hand across her face. "You didn't deserve that."

Kerry stepped closer. "No, I shouldn't have questioned you, Dar." She put out a hesitant hand and touched Dar's arm, as though reassuring herself. "You needed my support right then, and I blew it."

Dar dropped her eyes to the ground. "I don't want you to think that," she said, after a moment's thought. "Sometimes you need to question me, Kerry. I don't know all the answers and sometimes I push too hard, and the result doesn't end up justifying the means." Her eyes swept up in startling honesty. "You should know that." She sighed and looked around. "I don't know if this is the right thing to do, but I don't know what else to try, and I have to try something."

Kerry nodded, and moved another step closer. "I know. I went over to the truck there and sat down, and I thought about it." She paused. "That's why I called about that warehouse. I knew that's where you had to go next."

Dar lifted a hand and gently laid it alongside her cheek. "Thank you," she murmured, sincerely.

"That really was well done. How'd you know about the punch down?"

Kerry smiled, feeling her cold stiffened facial muscles protest. "Modern technology. I linked up to the local real estate page and did a search on available commercial property in this area, listed my specifications, and it popped right up." Her eyes twinkled gravely at the widening of Dar's eyes. "Even had the landlord's number there," she added. "He wasn't happy about me calling him

at two a.m., but since I offered twenty percent more than what he was asking, he made an exception, and said he'd get right over here. He lives about ten minutes away."

Dar gave a little shake of the head, then she impulsively pulled Kerry into a hug, reveling in the warmth as the smaller woman wound her arms around her and squeezed really hard. "You're the best."

Kerry smiled in pure relief, ignoring the dampness of Dar's jacket. Then she released her boss and patted her gently on the side. "And, hey Dar?"

"Mm?" The now warm blue eyes regarded her.

Kerry lifted her chin. "If and when you want to talk about the old history, I'm here."

Dar's eyelids fluttered as she ducked her head for a moment, then raised it. "Thanks," She replied quietly. "Maybe we'll have time this weekend."

"Okay," Kerry exhaled. "Well, I think that's our landlord over there. I guess we'd better get started, but Dar, I have to ask you. We're replacing the routers, but what about the mainframes? We can't duplicate those, not even if you commandeer half the air force."

Dar slipped an arm over her shoulders and started to walk towards the now lit building behind the operations center. "No, but the mainframes are in a separate room. They connect over a fiber optic LAN bridge." She pointed. "And the access block for that is on the roof."

Kerry stared at the roof, then her eyes shifted to a new truck that had just pulled up, bearing the fiber optics division insignia of the telephone company. "Oh, you're just too good." She turned an admiring gaze on her boss. "That's slick, Dar, but do we know they have power and are turned on in there? I thought those environmental people turned everything off."

Dar let out a breath. "We'll find out, but we've got a lot to do before then and it's going to be a race."

Kerry lifted her head and regarded the growing crowd they were heading towards. "I have a feeling I'm going to be present at yet another Dar Roberts legend in the making."

"Hmm, let's just hope it's not my swan song," Dar muttered. "I've got a feeling a lot of things are lining up against me on this one."

Chapter Fifteen

KERRY STOOD BACK and watched the group disperse inside the large, ill lit warehouse, scattering out from the door and trying to avoid the tumbleweed size dust bunnies that were rolling languidly across the stained carpet. It smelled like a cross between a dirty shed and a mildewed garage, and Kerry wrinkled her nose in pure reaction.

But at least it was warm, sort of, and not raining inside. Dar was standing in the center of the room, her hands on her hips and her eyes regarding the space they had to work with, and Kerry noticed the rain dripping off her jacket with a frown.

"All right," the tall, dark haired woman finally said. "Truck here yet?" She turned to the facility manager. "Thought I heard the engine outside."

He nodded. "Just got here. I'll have them stack the boxes over there and start unpacking things."

"Right. There should be racks with them, and a spool of Cat 5," Dar told him. "Better start having people make the jumper cables. I'll work with Telco to get the lines dropped in."

"Okay." He rubbed his eyes. "Damn, wish we had an urn of coffee in here." He moved off towards a clump of grumpy looking technicians.

Coffee. Dar wished he hadn't said that. She could feel the day's exhaustion catching up with her and she had to make a conscious effort to jump start her brain, turning it to the stuff still undone. The cold had stiffened up her muscles as well, and her half healed knee had been aching for hours, since she'd been standing and walking on it. With a sigh, she turned, almost slamming right into Kerry. "Wh... oh, sorry."

Kerry pushed a bundle of clothes into her hands. "Here, go change. You're making my teeth chatter."

Dar put her hands up in reflex and found them filled with warm, dry clothes.

"Whe...um...thanks." She gave Kerry a grateful smile. "Where's yours?"

Kerry showed her the bag slung over her shoulder. "I'm going to make a quick run out with Ruth." She indicated the day manager who had called in the staff. "When I get back, I'll change. They're offloading the routers now."

Dar nodded. "I know. Okay, I'm going to start getting the T1's punched down."

"After you change" Kerry persisted. "Right?"

A soft chuckle. "Right." Dar followed the hastily lettered signs which indicated the rest rooms, and ducked inside the one marked Women, wincing at the smell of rotted grout. "Oh god."

She debated holding her breath, then decided passing out would be a bad idea and simply turned her mind to more pleasant thoughts as she quickly stripped out of her soaked clothing. It was almost a sensual experience pulling on the clean, dry denim over her chilled legs, and she quickly tucked the flannel shirt Kerry had retrieved into them, buttoning the jeans closed and tugging on her sweatshirt as well.

"Damn, that feels good," she commented to the empty room, gathering up her dripping shirt and pants, and draping them over a stall divider, tucking her drenched underthings into the pants pockets.

Then she sat on the edge of a water basin, tugging on a pair of thick, warm socks and her dry sneakers, letting her hands fall as she finished and reveling in the simple pleasure of being warm and dry after so many hours of damp misery.

She wondered briefly how long it would have taken her to do this on her own, feeling a little guilty about having Kerry nudge her into it. With a sigh, she stood, wishing she'd thought to bring some analgesic for her knee. She gazed at her damp reflection, flicking her fingers through her hair to order it somewhat. "Drowned rat," she told the reflection, which looked wryly back at her. "No wonder everyone thinks you're nuts."

She trudged back out into the open warehouse and paused, trying to figure out where to start. Watching the chaos, she shook her head a little. "Roberts, you are nuts."

"OKAY." KERRY PEERED out of the windshield. "We need to find a place to get sandwiches or something for everyone. They must be hungry." Of course, she had a personal motive for asking, but it seemed much nobler to think of the group first. "Any 24 hour groceries around here?"

Ruth looked at her. "You're joking, right?"

"Come on. We even had one in Saugatuck." Kerry eyed her. "Okay, a Seven Eleven, a Wal-Mart, anything?"

"How about a Big Fat Boy's Eat 'Em All?" Ruth asked, with a perfectly serious face. "They've got some good pie."

Kerry held her breath to keep from giggling nervously. "Oh, okay, sure."

"And there's a Stop and Shop, if you want," the woman added.

"Both," Kerry nodded firmly. "Um, the restaurant first. Do they take credit cards?"

Ruth just laughed.

"Okay then, the stop and shop first, maybe they have an ATM." Kerry sighed.

The other woman put the car in gear and headed out, driving the dark back roads for twenty minutes before pulling into a lonely looking, but fairly well lit convenience store. They got out and entered, and Kerry wasn't surprised to find they were the only patrons.

She went to the obviously brand new ATM, standing in a place of pride near the Slurpee machine and selected her corporate card, swiping it and keying in her ID number. She considered a moment, then entered an amount, idly imagining an electronic gasp from the machine as it thought about her request. Finally it grudgingly gave up the cash, and she tucked her card away, turning around and prowling the aisles thoughtfully.

What a selection. She sighed, going up to the cashier, who was watching her with sleepy eyes.

"May I have a box, please?" The man gave her a puzzled look, but went into a back room and came out with a cardboard carton, which he handed to her wordlessly. "Thank you." Kerry took it over to the shelf and scooped the meager choices of Twinkies and other goods into it.

She stuck to recognizable items, leaving some dubiously packaged sweet rolls behind, and lugged the box up to the front. "Ring that up, please," she told the man, before she went to the freezer case and studied it.

A brief grin crossed her lips, and she tugged the case open, retrieving an item and bringing it back to the cashier. "Okay." She paid the man, then claimed her box and followed Ruth outside.

"I can't believe you're doing this," the woman commented, opening the trunk for her and watching as she put the box inside.

"Why?" Kerry straightened. "Those people are going to be working all night. They don't run on batteries."

"Most people your level just give orders and don't care," Ruth said bluntly, as they got back into the car. "And from what I heard about your boss, I didn't think she did either."

Kerry leaned her arm against the door and rested her head against her hand. "She cares," She said, simply. "Way too much sometimes, I think."

"DID THEY SEND an Ethernet hub?" Dar leaned on the newly assembled racks, and watched as yet another box was unpacked. The musty smell of the warehouse was almost completely overrun with the scent of newly opened electronics, and the worn and dirty carpet was covered with tired looking techs busy making cables and assembling wiring harnesses.

"Yeah, it's over there." The man she was addressing pointed without looking up, busy on his task and oblivious to the asker.

Dar didn't mind. She went over to the box he'd indicated and stuck her head inside spotting the item she was looking for and tugging it out, pulling it free of the bubble wrap packing and dusting the top off. "Great."

She limped over to a hastily set up table and set the box down, pulling a small pocket knife out of her jeans pocket and slitting the tape on the top of the container. Her eyes scanned the device, then she lifted it from its nest of packing and carried it over to the first rack, sliding it into place above the first of the routers and screwing it down. "There, if the patches are ready, we can start hooking these damn things up."

"Right," The facility manager agreed wearily, plugging the hub into power. "At least they sent surge suppressors, but I'm glad we found those extension cords in the basement here."

"Mm," Dar agreed, flipping the switches on the installed routers. "Oh shit." She rubbed her temples. "I need a damn straight through serial cable and 9-pin to program these damn things." John cursed softly. "Christ, all right. Let me see what we have. Maybe I can have someone wire a piece of Cat 5 in serial."

Dar leaned against the rack for a moment, then straightened and moved over to where the Telco technicians were screwing down two huge blocks and wiring. "How's it going?" she asked, examining the jacks. "Nice."

The nearer tech looked up. "Just about done. Ya got lucky, lady. This is the only multi jack in this part of the Carolinas. I got no idea how you got inventory to give it up to us."

Dar's nostrils flared. "I'd tell you, but I'd have to kill you," she joked faintly, recalling a twenty minute, top of her lungs, cursing in two languages conversation with a mid-level infrastructure manager at the phone company. "Can we start plugging in?"

He finished one last screw into the peeling paint on the punch down board. "Yeah, you got drop cables?" He looked up as Dar lifted a handful of the requested items. "Oh, right." He took the handful and started plugging them in while Dar connected the other end to the equipment. "What time is it, anyhow?"

Dar checked her watch. "Four thirty." She winced. "All right, is the fiber drop in?"

"Almost," the man remarked, moving towards the door.

Dar finished her task, then she stepped back and regarded the assembly of equipment. "What a mess." There were wires everywhere, connecting the routers and the interconnecting hubs, not to mention the power cables running everywhere. Green and red LEDs were beginning to blink on the routers, and she ran a hand through her hair, trying to shove back the exhaustion as she figured out what needed to happen next. Oh. Right. She pulled her cell phone out and dialed.

"MIS," the voice answered.

"Mark, okay, we've got the..." Dar started.

"Circuits up, yeah, I see them, but they aren't terminated yet," Mark replied, amidst a rattle of keys. "Shit, that was fast, Dar. What did you do, coerce the entire phone company?"

Dar sighed. "We got lucky. There were already terminator blocks in this damn warehouse. They just had to assign the pairs." She found a box to sit down on and took a deep breath. "That was the easy part. Now I have to configure the routers, and get the fiber line in, and hope to god those damn mainframes are still running off the generator, or we're doing this for shit."

"You sound beat," Mark commented quietly.

"Been a long day," Dar acknowledged, letting her elbows rest on her knees and allowing her eyes to close momentarily. "Wish I had some..." She stopped talking, and looked up as the smell of fresh coffee hit her nose, and found warm green eyes gazing back at her. "Oh, are you a sight for sore eyes," she murmured.

Mark chuckled in her ear. "Tell Kerry I said hi," he remarked wryly

Kerry handed her the large cup of coffee and took the phone from her. "Hi Mark, can we call you back?" She waited for the answer, then hung up. "Sorry it took so long. You have no idea how hard it is to find open places up here at this time of day." She looked around. "Wow."

Dar sucked on her coffee without comment, feeling some life come back into her as the warm, sweet liquid hit her stomach. "I was about to send out a search party," she advised her lover.

"We've got the circuits up, but..." Dar let a tendril of doubt in. "Damn, Kerry, I don't know if we can do this. There's just so much to get done." She cast a glance over her shoulder at the half assembled system. "Maybe I was crazy to try."

Kerry gazed at her in concern. Dar's face and arms were covered with smudges of dust and dirt from the equipment, and there were dark circles under her eyes, visible even in the dim light. "Dar, if you didn't believe this was going to work you wouldn't have done it." She sat down next to her boss. "I brought back food for everyone, that should help, and I can program the routers, if you give me a chance to change first."

The bloodshot blue eyes lifted and regarded her. "That's right. You are Cisco certified, aren't you?" Dar let a reluctant smile tug her lips. "Go change. I have them making up cables for the laptops. If we both work on it, we can get enough done so that the other techs can get in and start downloading the routing tables."

"You got it." Kerry slung her bag over her shoulders and headed for the rest room, changing quickly and hanging her wet clothing next to Dar's. She returned to find her boss hunched over a box, studying the screen on her laptop.

The silvery reflection flickered over her tanned features, which shifted as Kerry put her own laptop down next to her. "Okay." Kerry smiled as a tech handed her a cable. "Thanks." She plugged it in, then ran the other end to one of the routers. "Oh. I'll be right back."

Dar nodded, absorbed in her screen. "Let's hope I remember how to do this," she muttered, shoving down her annoyance that they'd been unable to locate the hardware group for the facility, meaning that only she and Kerry really knew how to get in and program the complicated devices. "It's been a while."

The scent of cooked food spread through the room and most of the techs had wandered over to where Kerry had left the boxes, leaving Dar in relative isolation as she puzzled through the software.

The screen started to fuzz out and she stopped after what seemed like the twentieth screen, leaning back and rubbing her eyes, as her back protested against her hunched posture. "I think that's it," she commented to Kerry, who knelt at her side. "Wh..."

"Open wide," Kerry instructed, capturing her gaze.

Dar stared, uncomprehending, then hesitantly opened her mouth, startled when a spoonful of cold, chocolate ice cream was deposited into it. She blinked a few times. "Mm." She swallowed the rich cream. "Was that Haagen Daz?"

"Yes," Kerry informed her, offering up another spoonful. "And don't you ask me where I found chocolate Haagen Daz in the middle of backwoods North Carolina, okay?" She watched Dar's whole attitude perk up, and was convinced if the dark haired woman had possessed a tail, it would have wagged enthusiastically. "It's amazing what ice cream does to you, did you know that?"

Dar licked her lips. "Hey, it beats recreational drugs," she remarked wryly. "What did you bring the rest of these guys?"

Kerry glanced over her shoulder. "The best of Big Fat Boy's Eat 'Em All buffet," she told her boss, taking a spoon of ice cream for herself. "And a box of Twinkies, Snowballs, Ring Dings, and Mallomars."

Dar covered her mouth quickly and stifled an almost hysterical laugh. "Did you get some buffet?" she managed to ask. "Damn, I thought it was more, uh..."

"You're joking, right?" Kerry fed her more ice cream. "I'd like to live to get back to Miami, thanks, and I got the lecture that yes, during the day, it's much more sophisticated around here, but those places roll up the sidewalks at night, because all the workers go home."

"Well." Dar accepted another spoon and chewed it contentedly. "It was a good idea, though. It might give everyone enough energy to get through the morning." She paused, and regarded her lover. "So, no buffet for you?"

Kerry sucked on the spoon. "Um, no, actually, I..." She made a tiny face. "I have a weakness for Snowballs," she admitted, a touch embarrassed. "That was enough sugar to get me going."

Dar laughed. "Ah! I see." She teased gently. "Those white ones with the chocolate insides?"

Green eyes batted their golden lashes at her. "Yeah," she confessed, a little shamefacedly.

"Wanna share a pack?" Dar inquired, one brow lifting.

Kerry cleared her throat. "Oh no, I'm okay. I..." Then she glanced up. "Well, maybe one."

Dar grinned, finding the energy to stand up, and stretch. She could feel her own determination returning, and she glanced out over the room, planning her next move.

DAWN BROKE, TURNING the darkness outside to a dull gray as the rain continued. Inside the warehouse it was marked only by a break for coffee, from the multitude of thermos bottles that littered the worktable.

"All right, Mark." Dar leaned against the wall, crossing her ankles and taking the weight off her knee. "Can you see them?"

Clicking. "No. No, wait." More clicking. "Ah, yep, there they are."

Dar closed her eyes in utter relief. "All of them?"

"Wait, I'm getting Unicenter booted," the MIS chief muttered. "Hang on. Hang on, okay, yeah," he confirmed. "I'm seeing all the gateways and both backbones." A beat. "Wow, tremendous work, boss, that kicks ass."

Dar let her head rest against the wall. "I had a lot of help," she muttered. "Okay, now I'm going to boot the fiber hub." She reached over and flipped a switch.

Across the room bodies were slumped on the carpet or leaning against the far walls, and the door kept opening fitfully, letting in cold, damp air.

"I don't see it," Mark's voice cut through her exhaustion.

"Shit." Dar shoved her body off the wall and examined the piece of equipment. "I don't, it's connected, let me..."

"Did you set the IP?" Mark asked, gently.

Dar thought about it. "I don't remember." She glanced up as Kerry came over. "Mark sees the backbones and the routers, but not this box. Did we program it?"

Kerry brought the laptop over and connected it, then ran through a few screens. "Nope." She typed in a few commands, then reset the unit. "Try now."

Mark clicked a bit, then grunted. "Got it." He entered several commands rapidly. "Needs the secondary table though. Hang on, I'm in there. I can download it from here. Wait, okay." He sighed. "Got it, got it. You're going to have to IPL the mainframes, though."

Dar and Kerry exchanged glances. "What?" Dar asked. "I thought they were up?"

"They are," Mark said. "But the ports shut down when you don't have activity after a certain point. It's a bug or something. You need to reset them."

Dar let out an explosive breath. "Son of a fucking bitch. Mark, we can't get in there," she told him. "Can't you remote IPL?"

"Has to be a hardware reset," the MIS chief responded. "God, Dar. I'm sorry. I knew that in the back of my head, I should have told you before. I didn't realize..."

No. Dar let her head smack against the wall and she cursed softly under her breath.

Kerry chewed her lip in thought, watching her lover anxiously. "What if we cut the building generator off and on?" she asked suddenly. "It's outside."

Dar stared at her, then dropped the phone onto the fiber rack and took hold of Kerry, kissing her soundly in full view of the room. "I love you." She patted Kerry's cheek, as she headed past her towards the door.

Kerry stood rooted in place, stunned beyond speech. She had her back to everyone and could almost feel the eyes beating against the back of her head. Finally, she picked up the cell phone and cleared her throat. "Um, hi."

Mark also cleared his throat. "Hi," he responded. "Guess she liked that idea, huh?"

"Uh, yeah." Kerry winced as she slowly turned, relieved to see most of the techs still passed out and paying no attention to her. There were a handful of bemused faces, though, and she mustered a weak smile for them. "I just hope it works."

"Hey, that sure beats Q bucks," one tech laughed. "I think I'll move down to Miami, they got a better bonus plan." A round of tired laughter followed.

Kerry scrubbed a hand across her reddening face and sighed. "I'm gonna kill her for that," she muttered, then glanced up as Dar reentered the building.

"All right folks, we've got fifteen minutes, and we'll know if this has all been worth it," Dar announced. "And if it is, or isn't, I'd like to say thanks to all of you who hung in there. I know we asked a lot."

A weary silence fell over them and everyone settled in to watch the routers, whose traffic LEDs were dark. Dar walked over to where Kerry was standing and slid down the wall, clasping her hands lightly in front of her.

Waiting.

Kerry sat down next to her and fiddled with the phone, sitting cross legged and resting her elbows on her knees.

Fifteen minutes passed and there was no change in the lights. Dar closed her eyes and let her head drop in defeat, hardly feeling Kerry's hand on her arm. Of all the times to fail, she had to pick this one. She refused to hear the disappointed murmur that echoed around the ill lit room, as the tired waves finally crashed over her.

"It was a damn good try." Kerry rested her head against Dar's shoulder.

"Not good enough," came the whispered reply.

Kerry moved closer, accidentally jerking the power plug of the fiber hub from the wall. "Oh, crap." She shoved it back in with an annoyed grimace. "For all the good that'll do," she muttered, turning her attention to her lover. "Hey, c'mon, no one could have done any more, Dar."

"Hey!" A tinny voice distracted her, and she lifted the phone.

"What is it, Mark? It didn't work," Kerry admitted.

"Bullshit. Yes it did!" The MIS chief yelled. "I'm getting packets!"

Dar's head jerked up on hearing that and they both stared at the router racks, where LEDs were coming alive in an electronic dance. "Son of a bitch."

Yells were now coming from the techs, who were pointing at the routers.

"Wow!" Kerry let out a surprised and delighted laugh. "I guess it just took a few minutes longer."

"No." Dar looked up at the hub over her head. "You did it. You reset the optics hub." She grabbed Kerry and hugged her. "You did it!"

Dumbfounded, Kerry stared at her. "I did it?" She jerked around and looked at the plug. "It was an accident!"

"Waaahoo!" Mark yodeled through the phone.

"Infrigginglecredible, Dar! Give that woman a kiss for me."

Blue eyes now alive with mischief fastened on Kerry's face. "Oh, I think I can do that." She stood up and pulled Kerry up with her, as a round of tired cheers went up around the room.

"Uh, Dar?" Kerry whispered frantically. "Um, you know, I love when you kiss me. I really, really do, but um, could we just kinda..." She jerked her head in the direction of the watching technicians. "I feel like a video game."

Dar chuckled. "All right," she relented, draping an arm over Kerry's shoulder instead, and walking towards the now excitedly talking group. She took the phone from Kerry. "So, everything coming online?"

"Oh, yes." Mark chuckled. "Oh wait, there's the hotline, figures, sun just started coming up." He rustled around. "MIS Ops, Polenti." A pause. "Hmm? Oh, yeah, we're up, no problem." Another pause. "Yep, that too. The whole network's online." A longer pause. "Yeah, I've got her on the other line. Wh...ok...I'll relay that, thanks." He hung up. "Hey Dar?"

"Yeah?" Dar replied, accepting the cries of congratulations from the crowd.

"Alastair said to tell you he slept like a baby," the MIS chief related. "He said you'd understand." She let a brief, humorless smile cross her face. "Yeah, I understand," she replied. "All right, let me get off this thing. I'm going to make sure this is stable, then go get some sleep." The thought of a warm bed and snuggling with Kerry was suddenly overwhelmingly attractive. "Later." She hung up and tucked the phone into her pocket.

Fresh staff was entering the building, cautiously peering around the doorframe until they spotted familiar faces. A supervisor was busy making a schedule, and two other new faces were pulling out monitoring consoles from boxes and setting them up. "We did it," Dar stated, in a wondering tone. "I don't believe it."

Kerry exhaled. "We sure did," she confirmed.

They both looked up as someone called out Dar's name. A man trotted towards them, pulling up as he reached their sides.

"Ms. Roberts?" he asked. "There are some people outside. I think it's the environmental people. They want to see you."

Dar went very still. "Same people as last night?" she asked cautiously.

He nodded. "Yeah, that same doctor, but she said her boss is here, wants to talk to you." He made a face. "They were kinda rude about it," he added, then turned as someone called him, and moved off.

Kerry looked up at Dar's face, seeing the confusion and reluctance there. "You want me to take care of this?" she asked bluntly.

Pale blue eyes flicked to hers. "Thanks, but, um, I'd better go," Dar told her heavily. "You wait here. It shouldn't take long, since I don't really care when they clear the other building now, as long as we keep the generators going."

Kerry didn't back off. "Sure you don't want company?" She had no idea what was spooking Dar so badly, but she was damned if she wasn't going to find out. "Two of them, only fair if there are two of us."

Dar hesitated. "Her boss and I have a history," she finally admitted.

"I gathered," Kerry answered quietly. "That was the old history, right?"

A nod. "Yes."

"Dar, it's been a really long night. You're tired, let me go take care of them for you," Kerry pleaded gently, seeing the stark indecision in Dar's eyes. "Or at least let me come, too."

She gave in. "All right." Dar ran a hand through her hair. "Let's get it over with, I want to get out of here." She picked up Kerry's duffel, and slung it over her shoulder. "We can just go after that." They walked out, side by side, into a gray drizzle.

IT WAS ALMOST like her stomach was twisting into knots. Kerry paced alongside her boss, watching the jaw muscles bunch and relax on the side of her face as they moved around to where the networking office was. Two figures were standing under the overhang out of the rain, and Kerry almost felt Dar bristle as she spotted them.

This was potentially very ugly, she realized, studying the two people. One was Dr. Simmonds, she knew. The other, a taller, stockier woman with sun streaked chestnut hair was standing quietly, watching Dar like a hawk as they approached. Kerry had an immediate, very visceral desire to kick her in the shins, and had to wonder about her newly found physical nature.

"Hey, Dar!" A voice interrupted them, and they stopped, turning to let a jogging figure catch up. It was the Bellsouth regional manager, who held a hand out to Dar as he came up to them. "Hear it worked, congratulations!"

Dar mustered a smile, and took his hand. "You made it happen," she amiably told him. "You guys really came through for us, don't think I'll forget that."

They were close enough for the two women to overhear, Kerry realized, and she saw their faces fall. A grin worked its way onto her face. "Yes, it really was great working with you," she added, shaking his hand as well. "Your techs were wonderful. They got us back up with no problem." She made sure her voice was a little louder than necessary.

"Well, thanks." he grinned. "Can I treat you ladies to an old fashioned country breakfast?"

Dar regretfully declined. "We've got things to take care of, but thanks for the offer." She nodded towards the waiting women. "I think the scientists have something to tell us."

"Right, well, you take care." He waved, then trotted off, hailing one of the techs nearby.

"You know, Dar, " Kerry fell into step beside her as they resumed their stroll. "If I didn't know better. I'd say those people were disappointed to hear things worked out." Her eyes flicked to their targets.

"Mm," Dar murmured. "You could be right." She swallowed to get the cotton out of her mouth, and tried to ignore the pounding of her heartbeat, very aware of Shari's eyes on her. She summoned her coldest, fiercest outer persona, and wrestled it into place.

"Dar?" Kerry's voice dropped to a low murmur.

"Hmm?" She ducked her head a little, nervously clenching and unclenching her fists.

"I love you."

Dar blinked, then looked up as they came even with the two women. *Shari who?* "You needed to speak with me?" she asked amiably, feeling the dread fall away, nudged aside by the living, breathing acknowledgement that Shari had been wrong, all those years ago. Her eyes met her old lover's, and she gave her a small nod of acknowledgement. "Hello, Shari."

"Dar," the woman answered, in a low, musical voice. Her eyes flicked to Kerry's face, then an eyebrow rose.

"Sorry." Dar felt a smile edging her lips. "This is my associate, Kerrison Stuart. Kerry, this is Shari Englewood. "

"Pleased to meet you," Kerry responded politely, extending a hand, and returning the firm grip with one of her own.

An awkward silence fell. "Would you two please excuse us," Shari finally said. "I'd like to speak with Ms. Roberts in private."

Dr. Simmonds ducked away immediately, seemingly glad to get out of the situation, but Kerry paused for a long moment, gazing at the chestnut haired woman steadily before she took the duffle from Dar and gave her boss a quick grin. "See you at the car."

Dar half turned her face, and winked at her. "Won't be long." She watched Kerry stride off towards the vehicle, ducking her head against the still falling rain. Then she turned back and folded her arms over her chest.

And waited. The cool gray eyes studied her, and she returned the look without flinching, keeping her expression noncommittal. Shari hadn't changed much, save that she'd gotten a bit heavier, and her face had taken on a colder, more predatory expression. She was, Dar acknowledged, still very attractive, and the look of those familiar eyes brought up old and painful memories she tried to shove back down.

"You haven't changed much," Shari finally said. "You still running around doing their dirty work?"

Dar refused to take offense. "Sure," she drawled. "Only now they pay me more to do it, and I've got an office in the penthouse." It gave her quite a bit of satisfaction to say that, and a tiny smirk caught the edge of her lip as the jibe registered. "And incidentally, if the chemical team finds no trace of your dangerous substance, you'll find the bill for this sitting on your desk."

"Oh, they'll find it," she responded. "I wouldn't have bothered making that up. I was just so happy to hear it was going to screw you up, that I had to come see for myself." Her eyes wandered over Dar's body.

"But you pulled the fucking rabbit out of your ass again, didn't you?" She snorted. "That sucks, Dar. I should have come over last night, when Anne told me you were tearing your hair out."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Dar replied. "Now, unless you actually have something to say, I have a Jacuzzi and a nice warm bed waiting." She let a frank grin shape her lips, watching the minute reaction in Shari's pale eyes.

A tiny shake of her head followed. "I'd forgotten how different you look when you smile," the other woman mused. "You going to be in town long, Dar?"

Uh oh. "Just until tonight, then I'm heading up into the mountains for a few days," she replied, cautiously. "Why?"

A shrug. "Thought maybe we could just sit down and talk for a few minutes." She paused. "You seeing anyone?"

Dar could hardly believe what she was hearing, and she felt a cool anger start to brew. "Yes," she answered quietly. "Despite your prediction."

A soft snort. "I'd love to meet her?" she wrinkled her nose in question.

Dar caught her balance. "You just did," she answered mildly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to be going." She gave Shari a nod, then turned and started back towards the car.

"I hope she knows what she's getting into," Shari yelled after her.

Dar stopped, and turned. "You were right about something." She gazed at her through the icy drizzle. "I had no idea what love was." She watched in savage satisfaction as the comment was understood, then she turned her back and walked off.

Chapter Sixteen

KERRY WAS GLAD it was light out. She was tired, and she knew her reflexes were suffering, but the traffic was very light. "Right turn up there?" She asked softly, her eyes flicking to her companion.

Dar nodded.

Kerry was worried. Dar had been withdrawn since she'd gotten back into the car, allowing her head to rest against the glass of the window, her reflection bleakly evident to Kerry's watching eyes. A little hesitantly, she reached over and folded her hand over Dar's, encouraged when the long fingers tightened over hers immediately. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Dar sighed. "Just tired." She turned her head and studied Kerry's profile. "I think I need a nap."

Kerry glanced at her. "Me too," she confessed. "My hand's aching from this cold. How's your knee?"

Dar waggled her free hand and grimaced.

Kerry waited a beat, then took a breath. "That woman still bothering you?"

The jaw muscles along Dar's face clenched, then relaxed. "It...she just brought up some old, bad memories, that's all."

"Mm." Kerry waited, but nothing else came. "Anything you want to share?"

Dar thought about that a long time, as rows of damp, gray shadowed trees went past them. "I..."

She stopped, then cleared her throat. "I never...I've never really talked about any of that with anyone before. Maybe a pair of friendly ears would help."

The corners of Kerry's mouth crinkled up, as she guided the car carefully across the slick road and up a long driveway, where a sign announced the presence of the hotel where they were staying. "I think that could be arranged." She pulled the car up under the valet parking overhang, and put it in park. "C'mon."

Dar willingly followed her up the stairs, shouldering her overnight bag and giving the valet a brief smile as Kerry turned the keys over to him. They approached the desk, and Dar gave her name quietly to the desk clerk. "We were supposed to check in last night, but..."

"Yes, Ms. Roberts. Your office called and told us." The woman smiled at her. "We held the room. It's no problem, and um..." she chuckled a little, "I think you have a little surprise waiting up there."

Dar and Kerry exchanged wary glances. "A surprise?" Dar asked. "What kind of surprise?"

The woman smiled cheerfully at her. "Now, if I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise, but don't worry. It's nothing bad." She handed over the room keys. "Here you go. We have room service available twenty four hours, and you're on the concierge floor, so you can just ask as you get off the elevator if you need anything."

Dar sighed. "Thanks." She took the key and gave Kerry hers, then followed the smaller woman as they went to the elevator. "I hate surprises," she grouched.

Kerry patted her belly tolerantly. "C'mon, Dar. It's probably a fruit basket," she scolded her boss. "Would you relax? All the hotels do that for VIP's nowadays."

"Mmph." Dar leaned back against the elevator wall and tried to stifle a yawn. "Yeah, I guess."

She waited for the doors to open then pushed off the back wall and trudged through them, giving the wide eyed concierge a nod before moving past his desk.

Their room was on a corner, and Dar pushed the keycard in, then pulled it out, turning the handle when the light flashed. She shoved the door open.

The scent of chocolate hit them and stopped them both in their tracks. "Whoa," Dar got out, as she flipped the lights on.

It was a large room, with a wide window and one big, comfortable looking bed. A door to one side led to a bathroom, and one on the other side to a tiled Jacuzzi. In front of them was a round table, which was currently covered with a huge, completely stuffed, overflowing basket of assorted things of the species chocolate. Dar found herself staring at it with a stupid grin. "Oo." Kerry peeked past her. "Thought you didn't like surprises?" she commented, giving her boss a slap on the behind as she moved past her to put her bag down.

"Tell you what, anytime you want to surprise me with fifty pounds of chocolate, you go right ahead," Dar responded, plucking the card from the ornate holder and examining it. "It's from Alastair."

"Gee." Kerry grinned. "What a surprise." She came over and peeked at the card. "That's really sweet of him."

"Well." Dar poked into the basket's contents. "Considering we just saved his gray flannel butt, it's not unprecedented." She glanced at Kerry. "There were twelve major accounts on the line if we hadn't gotten that stuff working this morning."

Kerry stopped dead, and stared at her. "Why didn't you tell me that?" she asked, stung.

Dar glanced at the table top, and fiddled with the card. "No sense in both of us being worried sick, I guess. I don't know. I should have." She gave Kerry a contrite look. "Not that you could have done more than you were doing." She paused awkwardly. "I'm sorry."

Kerry gave her a vexed look. "No, but it would explain why you were so damned tense." She started to go on, then saw the almost imperceptible flinch in Dar's face. *Not now, Kerry.* Her mind warned her. *Not now. She's tired, you're tired, and she apologized for not saying anything. Just drop it.* "Jesus, Dar, tell me next time, huh? So I can chew my nails along with you?" She gave her boss a lopsided grin.

Dar relaxed a little. "I will," she promised, stripping off her jacket and hanging it up in the small closet. "Wonder how long it'll take us to get through that basket." She turned a grin of her own on Kerry.

The blonde woman gazed at the huge thing in trepidation. "I think we'll get sick to our stomachs if we try," she commented wryly, taking off her own jacket and tugging her shirt out from her jeans. "He must have worked pretty fast. It's not even nine o'clock."

"Well." Dar pulled off her sneakers and tossed them near her bag, then slipped her sweatshirt over her head, dropping it neatly on the chair before unbuttoning her flannel shirt and removing it. "If I could get seventy T1 circuits and routers installed before dawn, I guess he could handle a basket of chocolate."

She leaned back and stretched, wincing as both shoulders popped before she straightened and ran her fingers through her hair, rubbing the back of her neck. "God, I'm tired," she admitted. "I'm glad that's over. We can rest here until dinnertime, then drive up to the cabin. It's about an hour from here, and it looked like the weather's clearing a little."

"Sounds good to me." Kerry ambled over to her, already having shed her pants and half unbuttoned her shirt, while she worked on unfastening Dar's jeans. Her fingers slid easily under the waistband, and she unhooked the first button, letting her thumbs trace the ripple of muscles just under the skin. She leaned forward and gently kissed the soft skin, feeling the ribs move under her lips in an uneven breath.

The room's air was cool against her skin as Dar peeled her shirt off. Dar's hands slid slowly down her arms, then released them and moved across her ribcage, causing a jolt of pure sensation as the wandering fingers brushed over her breasts. "Thought you were tired," Kerry burred, nuzzling her face against a soft curve.

"The smell of all that chocolate must have woken me up," Dar replied, catching a thin fold of skin between her teeth and nibbling it gently. "Thought you were tired?"

Kerry undid the second button and moved lower, tracing the edge of her lover's navel, then working up to the tip of her breastbone. "I wish I could blame it on the chocolate," she murmured, inhaling greedily. "But it's not that smell that's giving me these goose bumps."

"Mm, yeah, lookit that." Dar's fingertip made a lazy trail across her shoulder, then her lips traced the same path, as her body woke fully, forgetting about the long night and the frustrations of the day. Even the last, haunting echoes of the past caused by Shari's appearance faded, replaced by the solid, comforting present now wrapped around her body. She stepped out of her jeans, finding herself being tugged towards the bed, and she gladly tumbled into it, her arms full of warm, bare skin.

Kerry rolled her over, and pounced on top of her, ending up with Dar's earlobe lightly caught between neat white teeth. "You let me know," she whispered in a muffled tone, "when I start squashing you, okay?"

Dar chuckled low in her throat, and gave her a pat on the butt. "Not a problem. I hardly feel it." Which wasn't quite true, but close enough. She stretched and wrapped her legs around Kerry's, and surrendered herself to a pleasant wave of passion.

THE PHONE RANG, dragging Kerry out of a sound sleep. She fumbled the receiver off the hook, managing to get it somewhere near her ear. "Yeah?"

she cleared her throat. "I'm sorry. I mean hello?"

"Hey," Mark's voice echoed weirdly. "Kerry?"

She pulled her wits around her, gently moving away from Dar's warm body. "Eyah. I'm here. Go on," she paused. "Mark?" A glance at the clock told her it was close to four p.m., and she rubbed her eyes, having been startled out of a weird, but interesting dream.

"Dar there?" Mark inquired.

Kerry glanced down at the long, powerful arm circling her stomach and grinned quirkily. "She's here. She's sleeping. What's up?"

"Oh, nothing really. Um, she should probably, uh, check her email when she gets a chance,

"Mark said, innocently. "You know, nothing urgent."

"Actually, I was going to ship the laptops back to Miami. I was hoping for a few days without them," Kerry admitted. "Is it something important, Mark?"

He chuckled softly "Nah, Sunday night'll be fine. She just might want to check it before Monday morning, though." A rattle of keystrokes. "By the way, you guys are furking big time no shit heroes around here today."

"I bet." Kerry let herself back down onto the pillow, and snuggled back against Dar, who immediately hugged her closer. "Mm."

"What was that?" Mark asked.

"Uh, I was just agreeing." Kerry mentally slapped herself. "Well, I'm glad everyone's happy about it. I guess there'll be one huge meeting on Monday, though, huh?" She sighed. "That'll be a trip. I can just imagine the arguments."

Mark chuckled. "Uh, well, yeah. It's certainly going to be quite a Monday," he agreed. "Listen, you guys have a great time up there, okay? Relax, take it easy, unwind a little."

Kerry yawned. "Will do. I'll bring you back some maple syrup or pecans or whatever the heck they have up here." She listened to the laughter, then hung up, and allowed her body to sink back

down into the warm pit she'd been resting in, while she sleepily regarded the quiet, peaceful room.

Dar was really out, she knew, glancing back over her shoulder. Dar had fallen asleep after they'd made love, and had hardly moved an inch in the intervening hours. Kerry debated going back to sleep herself, then realized they'd have to start moving around shortly if they wanted to get up to the cabin.

"First things first," she decided, reaching for the phone. "The only thing we've both eaten in the last twenty four hours just about is a half dozen Snowballs and a gallon of coffee. Even Dar can't live on that."

"Sure I can," the soft mumble tickled her ear. "That's, what, two of the food groups, right?"

"Shh." Kerry dialed the phone, after checking a card on the dresser. "Hi, this is, oh, you know what my room number is, great," she said, as someone answered. "I see you've got pizzas? Okay, can I have two small." She got a poke in the ribs. "Um, sorry, two medium pizzas, one a vegetable combo, the other with..." She gave Dar a look. "sausage, and pepperoni on it." Another poke. Kerry sighed. "And extra cheese."

Dar grinned, and nuzzled the back of her neck.

"Thanks, and a pitcher of iced tea, please. Excuse me? Oh, yes, no, that'll be fine." Kerry finished ordering and hung up, then squirmed around in Dar's arms and regarded her fondly. "Mark says we're heroes."

"I bet," Dar responded sleepily, her eyes still closed. "Guess we gotta get moving, huh?"

"Mm." Kerry idly traced a tiny scar on her lover's chin. "You said you wanted to get up there before dark." She watched as Dar's eyelids fluttered open, revealing her startlingly blue eyes, and allowing Kerry to gaze into them.

To drown in them. Slowly, she leaned forward and kissed Dar lightly on the forehead, then hugged her, unable to either define, or explain the suddenly overwhelming sense of devotion and connection she felt.

This was just so precious, she wanted to cradle it gently in her hands, and never let it go. Dar's hand smoothed the back of her hair in a familiar gesture, and she let herself sink into the embrace, feeling a resonance chime deep inside her.

"Hey," Dar whispered softly, a worried tone in her voice. "You all right?"

Kerry nodded mutely, breathing in the scent of Dar's skin. The feeling subsided, leaving her only conscious of a pervasive warmth that she could almost feel running between them, leaving her body and entering Dar's, and coming back again. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine " She took a deep breath and let it out, aware of the beating heart under her ear. "Just felt like hugging you, that's all."

The long fingers slid down the side of her neck and lifted her chin, and she had no choice but to look up at Dar, knowing she was wide open to her, and helpless, tears edging wetly around her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Dar asked softly, capturing a tear with one thumb, and gazing at her anxiously.

"Did something happen? Did...wh... "

She felt Dar's heartbeat pick up under the fingers she had pressed against her chest. "N...nothing. I...I don't know. I just, it got really intense there for a minute. I'm not really sure why, maybe I'm just overtired." She put her head back down and stroked Dar's side gently, needing the touch.

"Felt so weird."

Blue eyes now alert flicked over her, as Dar took in a careful breath and released it. "Well, I mean, it felt kinda nice," she offered, hesitantly. "Kinda warm," She started stroking Kerry's hair again, and felt the smaller woman relax against her completely, her body going totally limp.

They stayed like that for almost a half an hour more, until Dar glanced at the clock and stirred, regretfully. "Better put a shirt on, don't want to shock the room service person when they get here."

Kerry's eyes drifted open, pale green in the late afternoon light. "Hmm, you're right," she agreed peacefully, rolling onto her back and stretching her body out lazily, humming low in her throat as Dar took the opportunity to trace a gentle path from her neck to her groin. "Thought you said we have to get up," she drawled softly, giving Dar a look from half closed eyes.

Dar released a half grin, and inclined her head in agreement. "We'll have plenty of time later," she conceded, then she planted a hand on either side of Kerry and pressed her body over her lover's, landing neatly on the carpeted floor, straightening with a fluid motion. "Guess I get to open the door," she commented, as a soft knock was heard.

Kerry was too busy getting her eyeballs around her lover's sunset lit body to hear. "Uh, what?" She blinked, then tugged the covers up as Dar slipped into her shirt, buttoning it up and managing to be decent by about two inches. "Uh, Dar, don't bend over to pick anything up, okay?"

Pale blue eyes glanced over one tanned shoulder at her, and one of them winked. "Okay." "Unless you're facing away from me, of course," Kerry added impishly, just as Dar opened the door.

That got her an over the shoulder look, complete with an elegantly raised eyebrow.

"Hi." Kerry smiled at the short, tow haired, frazzled looking room service waiter. "You can just put that down next to the fifty pounds of chocolate we're going to have for dessert, thanks."

Muddy brown eyes went to her, then to the table, then back to her. The scraggly moustache drooped as he chewed it nervously. "Uhm, ma'am, ah don't think I can put this tray down."

"Here." Dar slipped up behind him and lifted the basket out of the way, coming perilously close to breaking several county ordinances. "G'wan, put it down," she drawled, low in her throat.

He would have been all right if he hadn't tried to pull up his trousers and put down his tray at the same time. Dar managed to save the pizza, by hastily dropping the basket and making a grab, but the ice tea evaded her, and it smacked the hapless waiter in the chest, sending ice cubes flying across the room. The waiter juggled the carafe, sending himself off balance until Dar braced a muscular thigh up against the chair and pinned him in place with her knee.

"You all right?" the executive demanded, setting the pizza trays down.

The man's eyes dropped slowly down her to where the long, sinewy length of her leg was braced against him, then they rolled peacefully back up into his head as he dropped like a rock.

Stunned silence fell for an instant. "What in the hell?" Dar complained.

Kerry pulled the covers up over her head and burst into laughter.

IT WAS JUST getting dark when they pulled up a long, sloping road to the quiet retreat Dar had chosen. It was off the main streets, and up into the mountains away from city lights. Dar pulled the car up to the low roofed main building, and turned the engine off. "Well, we made it."

Kerry was peering out the window, studying the peaceful scene with interest. Scattered up and down the hilly ground, tucked into alcoves and shrouded with trees were small cabins, neatly cedared paths leading the way towards each one. "Yep, we sure did, though I was wondering there for a minute, after we had to revive your liveried friend at the hotel."

"Hey, it's not my fault he couldn't take the sight of a little skin," Dar objected, mildly.

"A little?" Kerry giggled. "Your leg was longer than his body, Dar. I'm glad we tipped him all right, though." She returned her attention to the outside. "Mm."

In the distance, she could see larger buildings and the lodge they were parked in front of, where yellow light poured from the windows and painted gilded stripes across the lightly frosted ground. "Wow, this is nice," she finally said, giving her companion a smile. "C'mon." She opened the car door, starting a little as the cold, pine laden air hit her in the face. "Brr."

Dar smiled and popped the trunk, then exited the driver's side and closed the door, walking around to the back to get their bags. A warmly jacketed valet appeared, and she tossed the keys to him, then shouldered the two bags and evaded Kerry's attempt to retrieve hers. "Ah, ah, I got it." She waved Kerry on and chuckled as the blonde woman swept the door open, and bowed her inside. "Why thank you, ma'am."

They entered the lodge, which was a long building that dog legged to the right past the reception desk. Sounds from the other side of the building indicated some kind of restaurant, and Kerry could see a dimly lit bar just ahead, half filled with shadowy forms. They walked up to the desk, and Dar quietly gave her name to the clerk.

"Ah yes, Ms. Roberts. My goodness, we haven't seen you here in a long time." The clerk smiled and looked up, pushing a pair of half glasses up onto her nose. "I swear, you haven't changed a bit."

Dar smiled politely at the compliment. "Thanks, Millie. Hard to believe you remembered me." A salt and pepper eyebrow lifted at her. "You're pretty memorable, I'll have you know. We reserved the far cabin for you, since you said you wanted some quiet space." She glanced up at Kerry. "And you've brought a guest this time, how wonderful. Welcome. Ms. Stuart, is it?" "Kerry." She extended a hand across the counter. "Nice to meet you. This place looks fantastic." Millie laughed. "Well, we like to think so. We've been here for over fifty years." She folded a packet together, then handed Dar a pair of keys. "Here you go. Do you remember the way, or do you want me to have Charles take you over?"

Dar paused, then exhaled. "I remember the way, thanks Millie." She looked over towards the back of the room. "What's the special tonight?"

The gray haired woman laughed. "Just your luck. It's roast beef."

Dar chuckled. "Just my luck," she repeated, then gently bumped Kerry. "C'mon, let's go change, then I'll show you around. They've got a nice fireplace just inside."

"Lead on," Kerry remarked cheerfully, as she followed, her eyes watching everything with interest. This, she considered, was going to be great. Dar knew the place, and it held some good memories, Kerry decided, just from the childlike grin that kept trying to break through on her companion's face.

They'd have time to relax, and just talk, something that had been rare since... Jesus. Kerry thought about it. They hadn't really had time away without any distractions since that trip to Disney World. Even at home, there was always work, and the calls in the middle of the night, and complications.

But not here. They'd left their laptops locked in the trunk, and after a bit of convincing on her part, both pagers as well. "Colleen has the number up here in an emergency," she'd argued. And so does Mark, but they both know not to use it unless the world is coming to an end."

Dar had thought a moment, then shrugged, and relinquished the electronic device. "Okay."

Now, Kerry tugged up her collar as she followed Dar out the front door and down a path which sloped a little downward, her sneakers crunching softly on the cedar chips that lined it. "Mm." The air was sweet and rich with the scent of cold and pine, and the wood she was walking on. "This is great."

In the semi darkness, the sudden glitter of Dar's eyes was startling. "Glad you like it," she drawled. "I used to spend semester breaks up here. It's not an expensive place, but it's family run. Millie's husband is ex navy."

Kerry nodded, looking around. "It looks like it's well cared for," she commented. "They seem to know you pretty well." She glanced up, seeing the quiet smile on Dar's face. "When was the last time you were here?"

The smile vanished. "Christmas, a few years back," came the quiet answer. "I'd just broken up with Elana. I guess I needed some time out."

Kerry tucked a hand around her arm as she walked along. "Well, I hope you'll have better memories from this visit," She commented mildly. "We had a place out off the lake we used to go to in the summers, it was a little like this." She took a breath, aware of Dar's intense concentration on her words. "It was supposed to be a family vacation, but it was usually a circus. I mean, people coming and going, deals, the press, you know."

"Mm," Dar agreed, leading her down a fork in the path.

"Sailing was my favorite thing to do, but as we got older, my mother made sure there really wasn't much time for that. She had parties and whatever, kept us going from summer estate to summer estate, talking to people I didn't have much in common with, even then." She sighed. "And dressing up, that was always a trial. Me and Angie paraded in front of her and usually my aunt, to make sure we looked all right."

"Doesn't sound like much fun, " Dar remarked, as they came up to a small, tree shrouded cabin with a wooden porch. "Closest I ever came to that was my mother making sure the rips in my jeans weren't going to get me arrested in some of the more rural counties down there." She put a hand on Kerry's back as they mounted the three low stairs, the wood echoing lightly under their steps. "I always liked this one." She turned and nodded. "Nice view."

Kerry also turned, and gasped a little, faced with a beautiful moonlit lake, reflecting a canopy of brilliant stars. "Oh my god, yes." She let out a delighted laugh. "It's wonderful, Dar." She turned and poked her companion. "Very romantic. Is this where you always bring special friends?"

Dar gazed at her, a little sadly. "No, you're the first." She turned and continued across the porch, opening the door and gesturing her inside. "I always used this as a very private retreat. I never considered bringing anyone else here before."

"Mm." Kerry ducked inside without further comment, flipping the light switch found just inside the door. "Oh." She blinked in surprise. "This is really nice." The cabin was mostly one large room, with a neatly made bed against the far wall under a window, covered in a thick comforter in shades of crimson and navy. There were Indian patterned throw rugs on the floor, and one, a thick sheepskin, resided in front of the small fireplace. A garment press stood against the wall, and a doorway led to a luxurious bathroom, complete with a sunken hot tub surrounded by warmly weathered wood. "Oh, I think I like this."

Dar chuckled softly. "Oh yeah, that comes in handy after a day of horseback riding, especially if you're not used to it. Trust me." She put their bags down on the bed, and looked around. Hadn't changed, she mused, walking over to the window and peering out at the silent, gently murmuring lake.

"Ah..." Kerry was exploring the counter against the back wall. "I see we have the essentials, coffee, cookies, and hot chocolate. " She investigated the supplies. "Cups and, let's see, tea bags, oh, and little muffins. This is really cute, Dar."

The dark haired woman tossed a stuffed bag down next to her. "Well, we can add our little stash here." She grinned, her good humor restored. "Never thought we'd fit all that chocolate in there."

Kerry snorted, and lifted the bag up. "I can't believe we brought it all. We're going to get sick on it." She sniffed at the bag. "Mm. On the other hand..." The rich scent was alluring, and she sighed. "Later. Dinner first?"

"Sounds good to me," Dar agreed. "Those pizzas were tiny."

"What pizzas, oh, those. Right." Kerry slipped out of her sweatshirt and pulled a heavier sweater over her head, settling the edge over her jeans. "Yeah, good thing I didn't order smalls. We could have used them as drink coasters."

"Could have used them as that anyway," Dar complained, changing into a thick sweater of her own, and rubbing her hands. "It's cold here, Kerry."

The blonde woman turned, putting down the brush she'd been pulling through her hair. She walked over, took Dar's hands into hers and pressed them against her body. "Aw, my poor little hothouse flower." She giggled at the blue eyes widened in outrage. "You Southerners. Talk about thin blooded. We'll have to get you some mittens." She gently kissed Dar's fingers. "Thank you for inviting me up here, by the way."

Dar smiled at her, obviously charmed. "I'm glad you like it."

"Here, bend down." Kerry released one hand and recaptured her brush, running it through Dar's dark locks to bring some order to them. The silky strands crackled with the dry air, and clung to the brush, winding themselves around her hands as well. "Ack, one nice thing about Miami, you don't get this much." She patiently untangled herself, meeting the watching blue eyes with a grin as she fluffed the usually disheveled bangs. "Your hair would look pretty in braids. Want to try them tomorrow?"

Dar blinked at her, obviously surprised at the question. "Um, sure." She straightened as Kerry finished. "If I can do yours." She gently tucked the blonde hair back into a tail, studying the effect.

Kerry smiled, loving the feel of Dar's fingers in her hair, as they brushed against her sensitive scalp. "You're on," she agreed happily. "It's a vacation, right? We can do whatever we want."

"Yep." Dar put an arm over her shoulder, and nudged her towards the door. "C'mon, they've got some really good roast beef."

"Oh yeah?" Kerry obligingly slipped an arm around her waist. "With gravy?"

"Uh huh, and killer mashed potatoes," Dar promised. "And homemade ice cream for dessert."

Kerry let out a little moan. "Uh oh. I'm in trouble," she lamented. "I'm a sucker for homemade ice cream."

"Yeah, me too," Dar agreed sheepishly. "But it's vacation, remember?"

"Mm, good point. How much trouble can we get into in two days, anyway?"

"DAR?" KERRY'S VOICE floated out of the darkness, as they made their way back after dinner. It had gotten colder, and the sky seemed razor sharp, the inky blackness drenched in pinpoints of light so numerous you could hardly see the constellations.

"Yeah?" The taller woman ambled along contentedly, sucking on a mint.

"If I explode, is that covered under worker's comp?" Kerry asked idly. "God, that was good. That chef is positively dangerous."

"Don't explode," Dar objected. "Do you have any idea the amount of paperwork I'd have to fill out if I had an employee explode on a business trip? I'd have to spend hours and hours in CAS." She paused, and moved her mint from one side of her mouth to the other. "Not to mention having to explain to Mari how I, a responsible corporate officer, allowed such a thing to happen."

"Allowed?" Kerry snorted. "You were feeding me maraschino cherries, you fink. You aided and abetted."

A soft chuckle. "Hmm, that's true. Maybe I could claim I was performing research and development." She slipped an arm around Kerry and ducked her head, kissing her gently. "So, we've got a couple of choices. We can take a run up the mountain for some skiing, or hike, or go out on the lake, or do a little riding. What's your poison?"

"Well." Kerry steered her up the steps to their cabin. "I think we'd better give your knee a rest from skiing." She patted the body part in question. "And that kinda goes for hiking too. So maybe we can ride in the morning, and go out on the lake in the afternoon?"

That would work. Dar opened the door and exhaled. "Sounds good to me." She'd always mostly gone on solitary hikes up here to small caves just up range for some pensive solitude. It would be strange to have Kerry along.

They went inside and Dar spent a few minutes in the bathroom before coming out to find Kerry efficiently stacking wood in the fireplace. "Whatcha doing?"

On one knee, Kerry turned and regarded her. "Making a fire." She put another log in place, then tucked some tinder inside it. "I know that's an alien concept for you, Dar, but it can be very cozy."

"It's not alien," Dar protested. "I've been outside Miami, remember?" She studied what Kerry was doing. "I've just never had to actually, um..." She waved her hands a bit descriptively. "Make one." She knelt. "What's that?"

"Moss." Kerry packed it between the logs. "It makes the logs burn." She looked around. "Do you see any matches?"

"Um, no, but I think you use this." Dar took down a flint and striker from over the mantel, and offered it to her. "Right?"

Kerry giggled. "Not in this century, Dar." She stood, and put her hands on her hips. "I think I've got some, hey!"

Dar had studied the items, then cocked her head, and positioned the striker, smacking the flint against it with devastating efficiency, and sending a shower of sparks down onto the neatly packed tinder. It obligingly caught fire, and started to burn, little tendrils of smoke wafting up. Dar spread her hands out, and looked insufferably pleased with herself. "Like that?"

"Son of a bitch." Kerry marveled. "I've never seen a twentieth century human being actually do that before." She regarded her boss. "What other hidden skills do you have?"

Dar chuckled, returning the tools to their place, and getting out of the way as Kerry gently blew on the flames, and shepherded them into a crackling blaze. It was nice, she decided, regarding the flickering light and holding her hands out to the warmth as it grew. Behind her there was a low couch, covered in colorful throws, and she settled into one corner. She wriggled into a comfortable spot and looked up as Kerry joined her, the blonde woman tucking one leg under her as she seated herself.

They both watched the fire grow, in a friendly silence that was broken when Kerry shifted, taking a breath and studying her hands, before she looked up at Dar. "I think we're going to have fun this weekend," she started, tentatively, planning her words with care.

A smile pulled Dar's lips. "I hope so. It's been a long week, huh?"

"Yes, yes it has," her lover agreed quietly. "A lot's happened."

"Mm," a very soft murmur.

"I want to have a fun weekend. I think we both need it." Kerry felt the words getting out of her control a little. "I mean, well. I've got something I wanted to talk to you about before we... I..."

She stopped, sensing something, and looked up, seeing an unguarded look of quickly veiled fear in Dar's eyes. Her train of thought derailed in reflex. "Why do you do that?" she asked, instead. "Do what?" Dar replied, with forced nonchalance.

"Expect the worst all the time?" Kerry asked.

A quick head shake. "I don't. What do you mean?"

"You do. I saw it in your face just then. You don't know what I'm going to tell you, but you think it's something bad. Why, Dar?" Kerry asked, very gently. "Have I done something that makes you worry about that?"

Dar looked trapped. She turned her head and knitted her fingers, long digits twisting around each other in upset. She hadn't expected Kerry to ask. Not like this, not...

Not so soon. "I...you didn't do anything, Kerry," she finally muttered. "It's my hang-up. It has nothing to do with you."

"Of course it does." Kerry felt her way gingerly, putting a casual hand on Dar's knee. "If it's part of you, it has everything to do with me." She could sense Dar withdrawing and the dark haired woman exhaled unhappily, and folded her arms, tucking her hands against her sides. "Please talk to me," she asked, simply. "I want to understand. I don't want to hurt you."

It took a long moment, as Dar stared into the flames, their flickering light outlining her sharply planed features in exotic detail. Then she apparently made a decision, as she nodded slightly. Her head turned, and the ambered blue eyes regarded Kerry seriously. "There's no really simple answer to that, I guess." She sighed. "I'm not very good at discussing myself. I try not to think about why I do what I do most of the time, it just gets too strange."

"Mm," Kerry murmured encouragingly, hoping by the time Dar finished telling her whatever it was, she'd have the guts to go ahead with her own issue.

"I guess you know I haven't been really successful in relationships," Dar continued, awkwardly. "I don't know, it's probably my fault. I get so driven. I get so caught up in work, and..." She stopped, and shrugged a little. "Anyway, I was in my senior year at college. I'd just figured out my orientation. That was a shock." She exchanged grim little smiles with Kerry. "At any rate, I don't know, I guess I must have been a dreamer when I was a kid, always expecting things to be like the books. I guess I..." She stopped, trying to find words.

Kerry just stroked her leg, gently.

"I, um, I guess I fell in love." Dar said it as though she wasn't sure. "And, I was this idealistic kid, and I'd read about fairy tales. Mostly, I guess I thought that's what it was going to be like. I threw everything I had into it. I figured I'd found my future." She thought back to that golden fall wistfully. "I remember being deliriously happy." A pause. "Stupid. I know."

Kerry's eyes closed in empathic understanding.

"Anyway, I um, it went along great for a while. She was older than I was, really pretty successful in school. I couldn't believe it. I felt like I belonged to something, to someone for the first time ever." Dar's voice was gentle, almost abstract. "I figured she felt the same way I did, so one day, I remember it was a Saturday, we were supposed to go to the movies."

Kerry picked up a walnut from the dish, and fingered it, her body tensing against what she knew was coming. "Yeah?"

Dar shrugged. "I told her how I felt, how I wanted to spend my life with her."

Kerry looked up, reading a long lost pain in her lover's face. "And?"

The answer was almost spoken casually. "She laughed."

The sharp crack startled them both, making Dar jump a little. She stared at Kerry, who blinked, and looked at her hand, where shards of walnut were tumbling down. She opened her clenched fist to reveal the cracked nut and sighed. "Sorry."

A tense little smile caught Dar's lips. "Anyway, she proceeded to tell me just how deficient I was in all aspects, and how she wouldn't have been caught dead with me at any place other than one of our local pool halls." Dar looked down at her hands. "She said I was unsophisticated, which I was, and uncultured, which was also true, and that I'd never have a relationship based on anything other than mutual bed sports because I just wasn't emotionally capable of it." This last with a wry grimace. "And she was right."

"She was not," Kerry shot back angrily. "She was a stuck up piece of horse's ass without the sense that god gave a dead hedgehog, Dar."

The taller woman laughed gently. "I know that, now," Dar stated softly. "But the kid I was then didn't." She looked lost, and very bleak. "And I believed her. I think some parts of me still do," She admitted lowly. "So that's where that reaction comes from, Kerry. There is a part of me that remembers what she said, and what she told me about nothing being permanent, and how people really just use each other until they're ready to move on."

A pause. "I guess intellectually I know better, but emotionally, I'm still waiting for the other shoe to fall," she finished, regarding the flames quietly. She decided she wouldn't tell Kerry about the little prayer she said every night, as they were falling asleep. "So, what's bugging you?" she asked, quietly.

At least she talks about it, Dar mused. At least she'll give me a chance to try and fix things, if that's what's wrong. She watched Kerry pluck at her sleeve, and noticed the slight tremor in her hands. If it's that simple.

"Dar." Kerry picked up her hand, feeling the chill in it, and kissed it gently. "I guess that brings me to my little problem." She cleared her throat nervously. "I, um, I've been really thinking about things, and about what I, about what I need in order for me to live my life, I guess."

Dar gazed at her, with an open, haunted expression. "Yeah?" Her voice cracked, and she wondered what was coming.

"And, see, I've got this--I'm not really sure what you would call it--maybe it was the way I was brought up. I don't really know." She sucked in a breath again. "God, I'm having such a problem with this. I don't know what's wrong with me. You'd think I could just spit it out." She stood, and paced back and forth, visibly trying to relax. "Okay." She turned and saw blue eyes round with apprehension. "Oh Dar, don't look at me like that. You'd think I was going to tell you I was a cross dresser, or something."

It broke the tension, and Dar muffled a relieved laugh. "Sorry, but the way you're pacing, Jesus, Kerry, you're putting me all in knots just watching you. What is it?" She swallowed once. "I thought maybe, I thought you were maybe still mad about last week, or--"

"Last we...oh." Kerry exhaled, thinking about that. "Do you know what I was upset about?" she asked, seriously. "You didn't ask me."

Dar blinked. "Didn't ask you. About what?"

"You quit. You just quit, and you did it because of me, and you didn't ask me about that," Kerry told her, poking her in the chest with each word. "That pissed me off."

"It did?"

"Yeah, it sure did," Kerry assured her. "We're partners, right?"

A nod.

"Stuff you do affects me, Dar, and that surely affected me. I should have had a part in the decision," Kerry told her. "Or, at least you could have given me a chance to try and talk you out of it."

Dar remained silent, thinking about her lover's words. Bringing Kerry into the decision had truthfully never even crossed her mind. She'd considered it hers to make, just like it had always been every time before. It was her job, and her career, after all, right? She couldn't be expected to make decisions by committee, even by as close, and as intimate a committee between herself and Kerry.

That would be unthinkable. She looked up at the serious green eyes regarding her. "It was a spur of the moment decision, Kerry. I had the facts, I knew my options, and I made it." She watched the hint of disappointment color Kerry's gaze. "I can't guarantee I won't do the same thing again, given the same circumstances." She paused a moment, then exhaled. "But I'll try to keep in mind that I have a responsibility to you, and that you've got a right to a say in what happens to me." Another pause. "To us."

I can live with that, for now. Kerry decided. "Okay." She rearranged the unruly hair scattered over Dar's forehead. "That's hard for you, isn't it?"

Dar nodded. "Very." She exhaled. "But I'll try." A pause. "So, was that what was bothering you?" "Um, no." Kerry stopped and turned, facing her. *Now or never, just suck it up, Kerry, and do it!* She hesitated, then she took two steps forward and knelt at Dar's feet, resting one hand on Dar's knee for balance. "I have this thing about commitment."

A double thump of the heart. Dar's eyes scanned her face alertly, then a brow edged up a little. "You do?" she murmured softly. "Um, I mean, well, yeah. I know you're a very, um, you seem to be a very loyal and committed kind of per... Kerry, what exactly is this about? Just level with me."

Kerry scratched her jaw. "Um." Now that she was right down to it, the whole thing started to seem really silly to her and she hesitated, torn between continuing and just... "This is going to sound maybe a little crazy to you," she temporized. "And, I just want you to know it's just something that I..." She stopped, and dug in her pocket, pulling something out and focusing her attention on the tiny, embroidered fir trees that were dancing across Dar's chest. "Okay, look." She put her closed fist against Dar's stomach, still staring intently at her sweater. "I tried to find a way just to let you know how important you are to me, and how important our relationship is to me."

"Okay," Dar responded, obviously deeply at sea. "Well, Kerry, it's very important to me, too. I hope you know that. It's changed my whole life."

Kerry regarded the sweater. "Is it a good change?" she whispered.

Long fingers gently grasped her chin and tilted her head back, so that she had no choice but to meet Dar's now very serious eyes. "Is that an honest question?" Dar replied. "I hope not. I hope you know the answer to that already." She paused. "Yes, it's been the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Kerry managed a nod. "Good," she stammered softly, folding Dar's fingers around the small box she'd taken from her pocket. "Because for me, it's this all my life thing and I want you to know that. I want you to understand that even if we can't go into a clerk's office and say this, I want this to be forever Dar, that whole in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer, in good times, and bad, and have death never part us." Her words fell into a shocked silence. "Kind of thing." A long pause. "Okay?"

Well. That was the stupidest proposal in the history of the lesbian world, wasn't it? Maybe I should have downloaded those practice scripts from the Internet. She eyed her lover unhappily. There was a soft, almost incoherent sound as Dar started breathing again. "K." Her voice disappeared into a soundless squeak, and she self-consciously cleared her throat and tried again. "K...Kerry did...did you just..." Another sucking in of air, "p...propose to me?"

Kerry chewed her lip, trying desperately to gauge the response. "Um, yeah, I did." She glanced down. "On the bended knee thing and all." At least she realized that's what it was. There's a point, Kerry. She watched her lover's face trying to process several different emotions at once. "I...what I really wanted you to know, Dar is that...you're not going to roll over one morning and find me not there."

Dar very slowly lifted a hand and slid it across Kerry's cheek, cupping the back of her head in an almost hesitant gentleness. "I'm not sure what in the hell I ever did to deserve this, but I can't think of any single thing in the world that would make me happier than to accept it." She pulled Kerry towards her.

"C'mere." She wrapped her arms around the utterly relieved woman, who practically climbed up into her lap and threw a bear hug around her. "You know you didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did," Kerry mumbled into the wool of her sweater. "Yes, I did, because I want you to understand you're stuck with me, Dar. You're not going to be able to get rid of me, okay? Not unless you, I don't know, toss me off a cliff or something."

Dar let out a pained laugh, trying to ignore the tear that tracked its way down her face. "There aren't any cliffs in Miami, Kerry," she replied softly. "But if there were and you fell, I'd jump right off after you." She cradled the younger woman's head, stroking her hair and pressing her cheek against its softness. "Thank god you had the guts to do this. It would have taken me either half a lifetime, or half a bottle to have done it."

Kerry peeked up at her, seeing the dampness glinting in the firelight. "Really?"

A hesitant nod. "I made myself a promise that I'd never let myself risk what I felt when I was that poor, stupid kid back then ever again." Another tear spilled out. "I never realized that when it happened, I wouldn't have a choice." Dar regarded her wistfully. "I've never been so scared in my life."

Kerry gently wiped away the tears, feeling a sense of almost overwhelming relief go through her. It was what she'd been scared of, that Dar wouldn't, or couldn't allow herself to accept the risk of the commitment Kerry was offering. But maybe she was right; maybe she didn't even have a choice.

Maybe Kerry didn't either.

She wasn't sure she wanted one. "Are you going to even look at it?" she asked, shyly. "It took me forever to pick out. I kinda wanted one like that old one I have, but they don't make those anymore."

Dar slipped her hand around in front of her and offered it. "Open?"

Kerry leaned against her, her legs sprawled over Dar's, as she sat quietly in her lap. "Okay." She took the box and opened it, watching Dar's eyes pick up the glints of the fire off the ring. "It was kinda, I mean you're sort of tough to pick a ring out for, you know that?"

Dar gazed at the item, her eyes following the Celtic interlace that surrounded a square cut, understated diamond. "It's beautiful," she managed to get out. "Dear god, Kerry. You didn't have to, that must have cost a..."

"I have no idea," Kerry replied, simply. "I didn't look at the prices, and it hasn't hit my credit card statement yet."

Dar stared at her, her jaw dropping a little.

"Well, it was less than the card's limit, Dar," she replied, putting a finger on her lover's chin and closing her mouth. "Stop looking like I bought Pro Player stadium."

"W...what was the limit on that card?" Dar spluttered. "Good grief."

"Um." Kerry was enjoying herself, now that she knew Dar's feelings. "Well, I don't really know.

It might have been the platinum. I'll have to check." She almost giggled when the blue eyes widened even further. "Oh, calm down." She leaned over and gave Dar a light kiss on the lips. "It wasn't that bad." A pause, while a hesitant smile claimed Dar's mouth. "I think."

"Kerry." Dar realized she was being tweaked. "Well," she drawled softly. "At least you won't have anything to say when I give you yours, then." A slow, sexy smile appeared. "Because I didn't look at price tags either, but I know I got a bouquet of twenty four red roses from the guy who sold it to me at the office the next day."

Kerry's mouth dropped open. "Uh." She glanced up guiltily. "So that's where those came from."

"Yeah, I guess he--" Dar stopped and stared closely at her lover, who was showing a slow flush up along her neck. "Were you wondering?"

Kerry didn't know where to look, so she just dropped her head and didn't answer.

"Kerrison," the gentle voice recalled her, and she peeked up, reluctantly. "You could have asked me." She paused. "Though explaining them would have been a little tough, now that I think about it."

Kerry sighed. "Jealousy is a very embarrassing, not to mention generally icky emotion," she admitted. "I wasn't very proud of how I felt."

Dar lifted their linked hands, and brushed her lips across Kerry's knuckles. "No, I know, but..." She rubbed the unresisting hand against her cheek. "It's very flattering," she offered. "From my perspective, I mean."

Kerry's eyes softened and misted over. "So you were thinking of making this more formal, huh?"

Dar dropped her gaze, her fingers tracing a light, idle pattern "I have this thing about commitment, too," she finally answered, her throat working. "I think I discovered I really like being a part of someone else's life." She paused, then indicated her carry sack. "Hand me that?"

Kerry handed it over, watching her as she dug inside and pulled out a small, velvet bag. "You carry it," she stumbled. "With you?"

Dar stared at the bag, then looked up and nodded. "Yeah. If I ever found the courage to do it I wanted to be ready." She held out her hand. "Go on," she added, simply. "I'm not very good at picking things out for other people. Shopping for this was an interesting experience."

Kerry took the bag, startled a little at its weight, and opened the velvet cord, shaking the bag gently over her hand until a ring tumbled out.

The room went very still. "Oh," Kerry sighed softly, finding it hard to catch her breath. It was so pretty. It sat in her hand, winking at her, a sturdy, yet elegant band which cupped up into a rose, whose delicate petals framed a brilliant, round cut diamond stone. She tipped it up a little and looked at the inner band, where she spotted some engraving. "Dar, wh..." She looked up as the skin under her arm grew very warm, and she was shocked to see the profound blush on her lover's face. The blue eyes were fixed firmly on the fire, and Dar's nostrils were flared slightly. She looked back down at the ring, then bent her head closer.

Yours Forever.

With the words, something clicked home in Kerry's awareness with a certainty that made her lightheaded. "Dar," she managed to whisper.

"Yes," the response was clearly, and precisely enunciated.

"I think I'm going to pass out." Kerry felt a strong grip take hold of her, and she let herself go limp, one hand closing loosely over the ring. She floated in a pleasant haze for a moment, hearing in the back of her mind a soft, affectionate chuckle. "That is so beautiful."

"The ring?" Dar murmured, into her nearby ear.

"The words," Kerry corrected her.

"Oh."

"The ring's gorgeous too."

"So, you like it?" Dar asked, hopefully.

"I love it." Kerry closed her eyes and buried her face into Dar's shoulder. "But not nearly as much as I love you."

Chapter Seventeen

IT WAS TOO quiet. Dar cocked her head as a tree branch brushed against the window, making a soft scraping noise. She'd forgotten how quiet it really was out here, without the ever-present sound of traffic or airplanes.

Or air conditioning. She glanced at the ceiling in mild amusement. The AC provided a white noise that most Floridians were subliminally used to. Its absence was almost uncomfortable, as the silence beat down on her ears broken only by Kerry's soft breathing.

Her soft, adorable breathing, which was warming the skin right above Dar's heart, since Kerry was nestled against her right side, with her head pillowed on Dar's shoulder, and one arm wrapped securely around her stomach.

It was nice and cozy, and she'd discovered, much to her own personal amazement, that she really, really enjoyed all this cuddling stuff.

A revelation. Her parents had been anything but physically affectionate, even with each other, Dar had only seen the occasional hug. A pat on the back, sure. A gentle slap on the leg, her father's favorite attention getter, yes. But hugs?

Hell no. In fact, she honestly couldn't remember the last time her mother had touched her. Oh, no, maybe she could. Dar reflected quietly. Yeah. The first, no, second time she'd broken her arm--the bad one--when the bones had been sticking out of her arm, and had left the thin, straight scars Kerry always liked to trace.

Mom had held her then, while she tried so hard not to scream.

But then her father had come in and she'd bitten her lip almost through to keep the crying inside, her efforts rewarded by a brief pat on her cheek and his approving. "That's my tough girl."

Dar chewed her bottom lip reflectively. It had been an ever-present argument between them, she knew, until her mother had just given up and allowed her to follow in his footsteps as far as she was able.

It couldn't have been easy to watch, she realized. She hadn't been a pleasant child. Going through adolescence had been one long string of fights, and trips to the principal's office, and threats of reform school. She'd had one principal who wanted her out in the worst way, with only one thing blocking his case - she'd been a straight A student.

Musta driven them all nuts. Honors everything, advanced placement, the whole nine yards. She'd gotten into college on an academic scholarship and frustrated her friends, what few there were, by her ability to breeze through classes with little studying, and less preparation.

She'd graduated in the top two percent of her class, with honors, but at that point in her life, she hadn't cared. She'd tossed her rolled up diploma into a basket in her room at her parent's house, and spent an entire weekend so drunk she still had no recollection of it.

Then she'd gone out into CAS and found the first job that would pay her enough to cover the monthly payments on a car, rather than just her junk food budget, and spent her free hours under water, away from everything.

Alone.

Kerry stirred, shifting a little. She lifted her head and looked up. "Hey?"

Dar exhaled, and gave her a fond look. "Hmm?"

"Why are you still up?" Kerry rested her chin on Dar's breastbone. "Do you want some hot milk?" Her dreams had nudged her uneasily awake.

A quiet smile, as Dar rubbed her arm lightly. "No, I was just thinking, that's all."

"Mm, 'bout what?"

Dar hesitated, then shrugged, pursing her lips a bit. "Nothing really concrete, my folks, a little bit about school." She moved a stray lock of hair out of Kerry's eyes. "Go on back to sleep, you looked so peaceful."

Kerry considered her words. "I wasn't really fond of school," she commented. "I wasn't that good at it, except stuff like English," she admitted. "I belonged to a lot of clubs, Key club, Young Republicans, that kind of thing."

Dar smiled. "You were a Young Republican?" she queried. "I think the only club I ever joined was um..." She thought. "Some jock club or other. I was on a lot of sports teams in high school."

"Oh, gee, there's a surprise." Kerry grinned at her, then her expression faltered. "Not me. I wanted to play softball, but..." She paused in memory, then sighed. "I probably would have sucked at it anyway." Her mother had been horrified at the very thought. "I got stuck with golf." "I'm sure you wouldn't have," Dar objected, mildly. "You've got good eye hand coordination, and a nice running style. You'd have been fine," she analyzed. "I never had the damn patience for golf. How in the hell did you stand it?"

Kerry peered at her in silence, then she let out a quiet breath. "Do you know something, Dar?" she stated softly. "Do you want to know when the very first time was that I was told I was capable and intelligent?"

The blue eyes peered at her in puzzlement. "Sure."

"You should know," Kerry told her. "You wrote it, in an email."

Dar stared at her in shocked silence.

"And you hardly knew me. You'd met me for what, a half an hour?" Kerry shifted, propping her head up on her fist. "Even the bosses at Associated, I mean, sure, I was always spoken of as a hard worker, a nice girl, always on time, but despite what Robert said, the only reason I got that job was because the guy in there before me left with the accountant's wife in the middle of the night, and they needed someone real fast, and real accessible."

"That's not true, Kerry. You were an excellent director. Your personnel record carried the highest recommendations in it," Dar argued. "You're highly skilled, highly motivated, very intelligent, and...and..."

Kerry gazed at her wistfully.

"And adorable," Dar finished, having run out of professional descriptives. "Don't tell me that's why you decided to come work for me, because I stated the obvious?"

A soft sigh. "It might have been obvious to you, but it sure wasn't obvious to me," Kerry admitted. "I had a mental note somewhere to say thank you for that, by the way. I think you were the first person in my life who just took me at face value, and didn't assume I was some fluffball muffinhead who got the job because of my father."

She reflected. "Even Robert, who liked me, when he put me in as manager, he told me he didn't expect much, just that I should try to keep things going until he could find a real director."

Dar watched her, stunned. "You're serious," she muttered.

A slow nod. "What did you see in me Dar, that no one else did?" Kerry wondered aloud.

Dar actually reached up and slapped her own head. "Okay, for starters, you had guts," she spluttered. "And, and you held yourself together in a very stressful situation, and you came up with some very good, and very intelligent plans for the takeover, and, and you told me to go to hell, for chrissake. Do you know how many people have done that and gotten away with it?"

"Not many, huh?" Kerry was guiltily soaking up the praise like a sponge.

"Try one." Dar hitched herself up and regarded her lover. "Listen, I know talent when I see it. It's part of my job, Kerry, and believe me, my talent meter went off the scale when I saw you," she sighed, perplexed. "Good grief, Ker. You'd think I hired you because I had the hots for you or something."

An awkward silence fell, as Kerry's eyes dropped to the comforter, the sudden strike at her own hidden insecurities going home with a vengeance. "I..."

Dar felt her heart drop. "You didn't think that," she questioned softly. "Kerry? Look at me."

Fearful green eyes slowly lifted to hers.

"Kerry, I hired you because I thought you would be a tremendous asset to me, and an excellent assistant," Dar told her gently. "And I was very, very right. What would make you think otherwise?" She felt a little bewildered.

Kerry's eyes dropped again. "I, I don't know," she confessed softly. "Maybe because I've been told all my life that's how things work." Her eyes crept up Dar's still body. "You don't get things because you work hard, or because you deserve them. You get them because someone pays for them, or because someone wants something from you."

Dar looked stricken. "Kerry."

"I know." Kerry let her head fall and rest against Dar's skin. "I know. My head knows, and god, my heart knows differently, Dar, but sometimes, sometimes I look in the mirror, and I can't help thinking, why me?" She lifted her head. "It's like I'm in a fairy tale, and one day a wicked witch is going to wave her wand, and I'll be back home, or you'll get t...tired of me, or..." She blinked her eyes, and tears hit Dar's shoulder. "I can't help it."

Dar exhaled in dismay, understanding a little more about her lover. "Kerry." She cupped the smaller woman's cheek, seeing the glittering tears. "I meant those words, and I promise you, I promise you, I'll always be here for you, no matter what," she reassured her. "I will never leave you."

"What if I screw up at work?" Kerry asked. "What if I can't do this?"

"Sweetheart, I don't give a damn," Dar told her. "If you want to quit, and do nothing but sell seashell futures over the Internet from the condo, that's more than okay by me. Are you really worried about it? You do a fantastic job."

"I don't want to ever disappoint you," Kerry whispered.

Dar tucked the blonde head against her chest and hugged her. "You won't."

Kerry rested there for a moment. "Sorry," she finally muttered. "I'm not sure where that little bout of insecurity came from." She played with the edge of Dar's sleep shirt. "In the middle of the damn night, too."

"It's all right." Dar rubbed gentle circles against her back, willing her pounding heart to slow.

"We've both been through some rough times."

Kerry nodded. "I know. It makes it very hard to trust this doesn't it?" She gently returned to her position, curling an arm back around Dar's belly.

"Yes, it does," Dar admitted, circling her with both arms and pulling her closer. "But we'll get through it."

Kerry relaxed against her. "Together," she added quietly.

"Always," Dar confirmed.

"BRR." DAR SNUGGLED further down into the covers, giving the early morning light an evil look.

"It's cold out there." She glanced at the thermostat, then back at her trying not to giggle bedmate.

"We forgot to turn the heater on."

"You are such a wuss." Kerry butted her head into Dar's chest, then she rolled onto her back. "All right. I guess I have to prove my northern roots and get up to turn the heat on." She ducked out from under the covers and winced as her feet hit the cold floor. "Yow." She scampered across the surface and got to the thermostat, tossing it up into the broil range, then bounded back and hopped into bed like a large, blonde kangaroo. "Yikes, that is cold."

"Hah hah." Dar grinned. Then she relented and tossed the covers around Kerry, pulling her back into a pocket of wonderfully Dar smelling warmth. "Thanks."

"Ungh." Kerry ducked her head under the blanket and deliberately snuck her chilled hands under Dar's shirt, grinning as she felt the taller woman's gasp. "Heh, you're nice and warm." She gently tweaked the skin under her fingertips.

"Yeah, except for these blocks of ice up against my stomach." Dar gave her a mock glare, now very wide awake. "How did you get so cold in that short a time?"

Kerry shrugged, snuggling closer. "Heat all rushed to my brain, I guess, to keep me from plowing into the window." She yawned, making a soft, squeaking noise. "So, a little riding, then some sailing, right?" She found herself really looking forward to the day.

"Breakfast first," Dar corrected. "Millie makes the best cheese grits I've ever had."

"Cheese grits," Kerry sighed. "That ranks where on the health meter, between munching on a solid stick of butter and swallowing chocolate syrup?" Sometimes she seriously wondered how Dar had actually lived as long as she had, and was in the physical condition she obviously was. Maybe her chemistry burned things differently or something. "Jesus."

Dar chuckled softly, used to the woebegone protests by now. "I think they serve a sprig of parsley with them if it makes you feel better," she replied innocently. "Besides, you like them," she reminded her lover.

Green eyes peeked warily up from the dark recesses of the comforter. "You are a bad influence," Kerry informed her. "You tricked me into liking them."

"You're the one who brought home Snowballs for dinner the other night," Dar teased Kerry, who tickled her in revenge. "Hey!"

"Like I had a choice?" Kerry persisted, finding a good spot just under Dar's ribcage that was making her squirm. "It was either that, or eat 'The Eggs from the Black Lagoon', and 'Son of

Maybe it Once was Bacon, but now, who knows?" she shuddered. "Believe me, the mystery crème in the snowballs was much safer."

Dar was laughing helplessly. "Okay, okay, I give up, you win." She draped her arms over Kerry's body and exhaled, watching the rising sun inch its way into the window. The gentle, pink beams were broken by the leaves outside, and they laid an intricate pattern over the blankets. "Nice day out."

Kerry burrowed up a little, and peeked at the window. "Mm, yeah, this is going to be fun." She looked up at Dar with a frank, happy grin. "I haven't been riding for years. I hope I remember how."

Dar gave her a squeeze. "Don't worry, it comes back to you," she promised. "They've got a nice string of horses here, only one or two meanies."

"One or two, huh?" Kerry eyed her speculatively. "Let's see." She raised a hand to her head and pressed her fingers to her temple, then closed her eyes. "My psychic ability is telling me those are the ones you pick." One green orb opened, and its brow tilted up. "Yes?"

Dar let out a low, throaty chuckle, and rewarded her with a sexy grin. "Very good, Madame Poo Poo." She inclined her head in agreement. "Hey, I can get you a 900 number for the office, make you a profit center. How about it?"

Kerry laughed. "Oh yeah. I can see that." Operations and Prognostication, Stuart speaking," she mimicked herself, rolling her eyes when Dar started laughing too. "I'd be a real hit in Sales meetings."

"Nah," Dar disagreed. "What would they do with their Ouija board, and the eight ball José keeps stuffed up his butt?"

"Oh god, that's bad. What a visual picture." Kerry winced, covering her eyes. "Ewww...ew... Dar, gross. I need to flush my cache."

"Here." Dar fished her out of the covers, and pulled her up, kissing her soundly. The contact continued past where she'd intended, and after a long moment they broke off and looked at each other, panting a little. "Better?" Dar asked, on an irregular breath.

"Than what?" Kerry wondered, gazing at her in goofy adoration. "Is it just my opinion that you're such an awesome kisser?" She reached up and traced Dar's lower lip with a finger, shaking her head a little. "Or is it that everything you do takes on such a deeper meaning for me?"

Dar cocked her head and thought about that. "I don't know," she finally answered, honestly. "I've never had anyone tell me that before, but I've noticed that just about everything I do with you is, um." She pursed her lips and rocked her head from side to side. "Right, if you know what I mean."

"Mm." Kerry waggled her eyebrows. "I know what you mean," she stated, then blushed a little and tucked her head into Dar's shoulder. *God, Kerry, you are turning into a wanton little hussy, aren't you?* "Shall we go and find you some cheese grits, boss?" She gave Dar a squeeze.

"Maybe you'll humor me and have a nice chicken sandwich for lunch, hmm?"

"Sure," Dar agreed amiably, remembering Millie's chicken sandwiches, which consisted of a deep fried breast, covered in gravy, on a toasted, buttery roll. "No problem."

Kerry eyed her suspiciously, but the blue eyes peered back with devastating innocence. "You know I'm just doing this for your own good, right?" she queried. "Not just to be a pain in the neck."

Dar touched her forehead to Kerry's. "Yes, I know that." She paused and thought. "It's actually kind of nice to have someone be worried about me. My parents gave up on that a long, long time ago."

"Really?" Kerry murmured.

"Yeah," her lover admitted. "My mom told me when I was, I guess sixteen or so, that if I did whatever I wanted, and had my body fall apart at age thirty, don't come back and complain about her being right all those years."

Kerry peeked under the blanket, then gazed at her. "Dar?"

"Hmm?"

"She was wrong."

"I know. My father always said his genes could beat the pants off of a diet that would kill just about anyone else." Dar laughed a little self-consciously. "I guess I'm just lucky I take after him."

"Hey Dar, I was just wondering." Kerry wrapped a thick lock of dark hair around one finger, and gave her a wistful smile. "Do you think we're best friends?"

The silence of the cabin lengthened as Dar regarded the covers pensively. "I have no idea what that means," she finally admitted, looking up at Kerry. "I have nothing to judge it against, really."

"Mm." Kerry let out a small breath.

"I do know I feel closer to you than I have to anyone else in my life before," Dar offered, a touch hesitantly. "I've told you things about myself that I've never said to anybody else," she paused.

"Or wanted to." She searched Kerry's face. "Does that count?"

"It's hard to remember." Kerry rolled out of bed and paced across the floor, running her hands through her hair. "It's been a long time for me." She walked over to the built in hot water dispenser, and picked up a cup, dropping a fragrant peach scented teabag into a cup and pouring water over it.

After a moment, she pulled down another cup, and riffled among the assortment of teas, choosing a blackberry one for Dar and steeping it. "Angie and I were always pretty close," she commented. "But it was a sister thing. I had friends in grade school, but they kinda got fewer as I got older."

Dar had gotten out of bed and came up behind her, putting her hands on Kerry's shoulders and gently squeezing them. "That happens," she said. "People grow apart."

Kerry nodded, stirring sugar into the cups. "I know. I had a best friend in high school," she answered. "Peggy. Her parents and my parents were friends, so we saw each other a lot." She turned, and handed Dar her cup. "We had sleepovers, went to movies, shared our crushes, you know."

Dar studied her. "Yeah," she finally nodded.

Kerry took a sip of her tea. "You don't know, do you?"

Surprisingly, Dar chuckled. "Kerry, I was the girl your mother told you to stay away from," she admitted. "The one who ran with the guys, got into trouble, picked fights, and raised hell." She sighed. "No, there weren't many sleepovers in my checkered youth. The movies were mostly R and X rated ones we snuck into, and crushes..." A faint shake of her head. "I didn't have time for those." She glanced up. "You still talk to Peggy?"

A quiet, sad look crossed Kerry's face. "No." Her gaze dropped to the floor. "In our senior year, she got into trouble. A guy she'd been dating got a little frisky, and she didn't know enough to say no. She got pregnant." A quiet pause. "They sent her away somewhere. I got a letter from her, twice. The second time she told me she'd had her baby, a little girl."

A silence fell. "And?" Dar gently prodded. "What happened?"

Kerry looked up. "I don't know. I never heard from her again. When my folks found out about the letters, they were furious. They told me if they caught me with her anymore, I'd be punished." She exhaled slowly. "I never got close to anyone again after that. It was just too complicated."

"You're friends with Colleen, though," Dar objected, a little concerned at her lover's pensive air. "Kerry, everyone loves you. I haven't met a person yet who doesn't, unless it was a total asshole who even his own mother would hate." She spread a hand out. "You could have hundreds of friends. You know that."

"Too many people to worry about," Kerry responded seriously. "I've tried to keep my life simple since then."

"Until now," Dar stated quietly.

"Mm," her companion wryly agreed.

"Kerry?"

"Yeah?"

Dar put a hand on her cheek. "I think we are best friends." She leaned over and kissed her forehead. "C'mon, let's go get some breakfast."

Kerry smiled, then raised herself on her toes and claimed a proper kiss. She could taste the blackberry on Dar's lips, and decided it went well with her peach. "Okay, you're on."

They washed and dressed quickly, but not so quickly that a sponge fight was missed. Then they headed across the dew scattered ground in the brisk early morning air.

"So." Kerry linked an arm through her companions' "You were a hellraiser, huh?"

"Oh yeah," Dar confirmed. "First class. I even had a switchblade."

"Did you really?" Kerry gazed at her, in bemused surprise.

"Yeah, of course, the one time I almost had to use it I opened it backwards and nearly cut my own finger off, but..."

They both started laughing, as their steps scattered the rising mist.

Chapter Eighteen

IT WAS A very, tall horse, Kerry reflected, as she collected her reins, and gently nudged her chestnut mare in the ribs with hesitant knees. *Wow, has it ever been a long time.* She sighed, watching Dar enviously as the taller woman vaulted up on just the snazziest looking gray stallion, with neat black hooves, and a beautiful black mane and tail.

The horse was restive, but Dar settled into her seat as though she was used to doing this on a daily basis, her calves pressing against the sleek gray sides, and calming the agitated horse down. It figures she's good at this too. Kerry sighed. She tried to remember exactly how she was supposed to direct the horse, sorting memories from her early high school days, when her mother had grudgingly allowed her English riding lessons from a local stable.

She'd loved the horses themselves, really, more than riding them. The feel of the sleek, hard bodies under her hands as she learned how to clean them, and the soft feel of the tiny hairs on their muzzles as they lipped corn from her palm. They were simple, and undemanding, wanting only good grass and clean water, and from her, nothing but corn, and the odd apple if she felt so inclined.

Dominick had been her favorite, a stocky brown hunter, whose back she'd spent hours on learning to balance without holding on. She'd been so excited the first time she'd done the entire circuit without once grabbing for the front of the saddle, or the reins, or Dominick's clipped mane.

Kerry smiled in memory, and patted her mare's neck, comforted when the sedate animal craned her head around, and snorted a little at her. "Hey there, girl. We're gonna be good friends, right?" The mare tossed her head, then looked up suspiciously as the gray stallion closed in, picking up his feet meticulously. "Hey, you ready to move out?" Dar asked, reaching around to adjust the pack she carried behind her, which was full of a neatly wrapped picnic lunch. "We can go up a nice trail just north of here. It ends up on a small plateau overlooking a little spring. It's a nice place, and about a two hour ride."

"Sounds great to me," Kerry agreed, tipping her head back and drinking in the sunlight. The weather had cleared nicely, and it was cold with a light breeze. She was wearing a thick sweater and her heaviest jeans, complimented by a pair of boots Dar had insisted on buying for her, saying she couldn't ride all that way in sneakers.

Sure I could, Kerry reasoned, glancing down at the soft, creamy tan leather that snugly covered her calves. *Just glad I don't have to.*

She settled her heels contentedly and glanced over at Dar, who was resplendent in the very cheerful, heavy red sweater Kerry had insisted on reciprocating with. It contrasted nicely with her dark hair and tanned skin. Kerry decided she very much liked Dar in that color.

Her own hair was also neatly braided, and tucked into a knot at the back of her neck. She enjoyed the warmth of the sun on her skin and the cool touch of the wind which unexpectedly brushed across the bared back of her neck. She nudged her horse into a walk, following Dar's stallion towards the start of a half hidden path going upward.

It was a wonderful day for a ride, and she nudged her horse a little faster, until she was side by side with Dar as they ambled up the path together. The trees, pines mostly, rustled over head, and she became aware of the small sounds of the forest around her.

Dead leaves rattling softly down.

The wind moving branches.

The soft, rhythmic footfalls of the horses.

Her breathing and the rustle of wool as Dar turned, and glanced at her.

"It's beautiful," she murmured, glancing back. "God, it's been so long since I've done this."

Dar adjusted her hold on the reins, settling into her saddle with a feeling of quiet contentment. She'd managed to keep up her riding skills mostly due to a friend in the Redlands, who had a stable full of retired racers and half broken mustangs he'd let her rope and ride on during the odd weekend she could escape from the city.

It had been a while for her, though. The last time she'd gotten down there had been in early October, and she suspected her legs were going to remind her of that when the day was over. She watched Kerry out of the corner of her eye, and speculated they might be spending the evening giving each other massages.

A grin took over Dar's face. "Good boy." She patted her stallion's neck enthusiastically, finding nothing wrong with that prospective thought. "Yeah, it is nice up here. I've been up here when the leaves are changing colors. That's a sight," she commented to Kerry.

"I know." Kerry laughed. "I've seen them. That was one of the weirdest things to get used to about living down there in Miami, no seasons."

"Tch, there are too seasons." Dar gave her a mock scowl. "Summer's different than winter."

"Oh, right, eighty-eight degrees and one hundred percent humidity, versus eighty-eight degrees and seventy percent humidity." Kerry grinned at her. "I forgot." She straightened a little, then relaxed into her mare's walk.

"This type of saddle's more comfortable than the one I learned on."

"English?" Dar inquired, receiving a nod in response. "I learned bareback."

"Figures." Kerry laughed. "I bet you open cans with your teeth, too."

Dar laughed with her. "Not these pearly whites, thanks," she disagreed cheerfully, then she pressed her knees into her mount's sides, and urged him into a faster pace. "C'mon, let's see if these guys can move."

"Oh, um, er." Kerry frantically tried to remember how to balance as her mare followed the now cantering stallion. "I think I, oh--" She leaned forward a little and caught her balance over the horse's stride. "Okay, that's better." The mare was apparently encouraged, and she sped up, matching her stable mate's pace. "Good girl, yeah, that's it." She gripped hard with her knees and leaned forward, as the mare caught up to Dar's horse and she came even with her lover, who was grinning happily. "Very nice Dar, very nice. I like this," she shouted.

"You do?" The blue eyes twinkled merrily. "Great!" With that, she leaned forward and gave the stallion a nudge, pushing him from a canter into a full gallop, as the path opened up into a long, narrow grassy area. "C'mon!"

"Oh boy." Kerry settled down and hung on, as her mare sped up doggedly to match the gray horse, her pace moving into a gallop that whipped the wind past Kerry's ears and made her eyes tear up. It was very shaky for a moment, then she relaxed a little and began to enjoy it. "Yeah!" She urged the mare forward. "Go get 'em."

The two horses raced alongside each other, the grass whipping against their legs, and the wind tearing across their laughing riders' forms.

Dar let the race continue until she knew they were coming to a narrowing in the path. She gently pulled the stallion up, and allowed Kerry to thunder past her. Kerry quickly started to slow when she saw Dar do so. She half stood in her stirrups and pulled back on the reins as the mare reluctantly slowed. They cantered down the narrowing path and up into a steepening slope for the next part of the ride. "Wow, that was fun." Kerry grinned. "Brings back a lot of good memories." She exhaled and caught her breath.

Dar gazed at her, smiling at the way the activity had brought a ready flush to her face. "Yeah? For me too." She slowed her mount to a walk, patting the warm neck with an idle hand. "Here." She handed over a water bottle.

"Thanks." Kerry gratefully accepted it, and sucked down a mouthful, tasting the mineral tang of the local water as she swallowed. "Oo, do you see that squirrel, Dar?" She pointed with the bottle at a bushy brownish red animal, who was clutching to the far side of a tree near the path, peering at them suspiciously.

"Sure do." Dar slowed her horse and stopped him, then carefully fished a handful of nuts from her pouch, and tossed one at the ground under the squirrel's tree.

Then she waited, sitting in perfect silence, the wind blowing stray tendrils of dark hair about her face.

The squirrel peered at her, then slowly inched down the tree and scampered across the leaves, sniffing at her offering warily.

Kerry watched her lover, the angular face quietly intent, pale blue eyes flicking minutely as she watched the squirrel pick up the nut and nibble it. A smile pulled at Dar's lips as she tossed another nut down, and the squirrel scampered right over to snatch it, apparently assured of her harmlessness.

Too bad I didn't bring my camera, Kerry mused. *Dar Roberts feeding squirrels. No one would believe it. I'd put it on my desktop as a wallpaper.* "He's cute," she commented softly, getting a suspicious glance from their tiny friend. "Yeah, you," she told him.

Dar shifted her eyes to Kerry, then she held a nut up at about shoulder level, near the tree the squirrel had been perching on. Obliging, the animal scuttled up the bark, edging around until his head was level with hers, and they could see his earnest brown eyes.

"Here you go," Dar murmured softly, holding it closer.

"D..." Kerry held her breath, watching the creature's sharp teeth get closer to her lover's hand. One clawed foot worked itself loose and made a grab for the nut, brushing Dar's fingers as she released it. The squirrel darted around the back of the tree, and onto a branch, where he sat, nibbling the nut and chittering at her impudently.

One long finger pointed at him. "Watch it, buddy. There are Fortune 500 CEO's who've gotten less from me with a whole lot more trouble." She warned the animal, then pressed her knees into her horse's side and moved away from the tree.

Kerry joined her, glancing back at the squirrel, who was watching her with a vaguely disappointed air. "That was pretty amazing."

Dar glanced at her. "What, that he ate nuts?" She raised an eyebrow. "No it wasn't."

A gentle laugh. "Okay, if you say so," Kerry agreed amiably. "But I know you wouldn't have caught me getting my hands that close to something with teeth that sharp."

Dar just laughed, and led the way upward.

It was a pleasant ride, mostly in the shade, mostly passing quiet trees and soft mossy rocks. The scent of the forest was strong around them, and the cold air brushed against their skin. Finally, the climb let out on a small plateau, which sloped to a rock surrounded spring. It was sunny, and Kerry found a smile crossing her face as they pulled the horses to a halt and she leaned back in the saddle. "Wow. This is nice."

"Thanks. Glad you like it." Dar shook her boots free of her stirrups and swung her leg over her stallion's neck, dropping down off his back and landing with a little thump. "Whoa." She stretched cautiously, moderately pleased at the relative lack of stiffness. "You up for some lunch?" She laid a hand on the mare's neck. "There's a nice spot over there. I used to come up here and just spend some time, listening to the water and," she paused, "mostly just thinking." "Sure." Kerry got off her mare in a more conventional manner, getting her boots on the ground and easing her knees straight. "Oh brother." She rubbed her thigh. "I'm going to feel this, that's for sure."

Dar took the mare's reins. "Come over here. I'll get the lunch and try to work the kinks out of you, okay?" She felt a little guilty about dragging Kerry out on a ride this long. "You could have said you wanted to do something shorter."

"No, no. I'm fine." Kerry tensed and relaxed her quadriceps. "Really." She walked gingerly after her lover, feeling the cramping ease as she kept moving. "It was great. It was definitely worth it, Dar."

"Uh huh." Dar tied the horses under a tree, where there was a patch of mostly dried but still edible grass. She removed the lunch pack, carrying it with her as she guided Kerry up to a sunny spot near the spring. She set the pack down and dropped to the ground next to it, patting the earth. "Siddown."

Kerry did so, cautiously stretching her legs out in front of her and leaning back on her hands. "I feel bowlegged. That horse is a lot bigger than the ones I rode." She studied her mare. "A lot chunkier, too."

Dar chuckled, and eased down with one knee between her lover's calves. "Okay just relax." She began to work on the tense muscles under the snug denim.

"Ungh." Kerry closed her eyes in pleasure and exhaled. "You are sooo good at that." She relaxed as the long fingers worked their magic, easing the tight cramping.

"Better?" Dar finished, patting her leg lightly.

"Uh huh," Kerry agreed, gazing at her through half closed eyes. "Do I get a repeat when we get back?"

Dar settled on the ground cross legged, tucking her boots under her knees and pulling the pack over. "Sure," she answered with a chuckle. "That hot Jacuzzi sounds good, doesn't it?"

"Mmmmm." Kerry sat up and gingerly crossed her legs. "You bet. Whacha got?"

Dar pulled out packages containing sandwiches. "Chicken sandwiches," she told her companion innocently, handing Kerry hers. "Just like you asked for."

Kerry peeked under the wrapping and burst into laughter. "Dar, you are just a...a..." She slapped the taller woman on the leg. "You're so bad." She smoothed the paper out and sighed. "Smells good, though," she admitted, as the scent of the crispy fried chicken sandwich rose to her. "What else?"

Dar pulled out two padded cases and handed one to Kerry. "Newest gadget, keeps things warm for over three hours." She opened up a large napkin onto the ground and set her case on it, then pulled out small dispensers of salt, pepper, and three small jars.

"What in th..." Kerry unzipped the container, and was surprised when steam escaped, bathing her face in a gentle, familiar scent. "You brought Mr. Potato Head on a wilderness picnic?"

Dar peered inside. "Yep." She indicated her own container. "I have salt, butter, pepper, chives, sour cream, and bacon bits for them, too," she announced in a satisfied tone, as she speared a mini carrot with a toothpick and stuck it in Kerry's potato. "There. I even brought you a carrot." She pointed. "Look, Mr. Potato Head has a nose."

Kerry removed it and stuck it in her mouth. "Not anymore," she disagreed, munching the carrot. "What about an ear?" Dar next poked a bit of cold broccoli in place, and then evaded Kerry's hands and added a slice of melon as a mouth. "There."

"Stop it." Kerry slapped her. "Stop playing with my food, Dar, or I'll turn Mr. Potato Head into Mashed Potatoes ala Dar's shirt."

Dar took the hint and chuckled, then broke open her own potato and applied everything to it she could get her hands on. "Steven sort of reminded me of a Mr. Potato Head." She commented wryly. "Must have been those ears."

Kerry laughed, as she neatly sliced up her lunch and ate it. "Yeah, maybe. I'll have to get you one of those to keep in your office."

A dark brow cocked. "So when I say 'off with his head' I can demonstrate?" she inquired wryly.

"No thanks. It sends a very mixed message." She finished up her sandwich and scooted back a little, leaning against a sun warmed rock and stretching her legs out. Kerry tucked her wrappers away as well and crawled over to her, snuggling up against her chest and relaxing as Dar wound an arm around her waist and she leaned back.

Dar felt the warmth of the rock at her back, and the warmth of her lover against her, and decided it was about the most pleasant feeling she'd ever had. She gazed over Kerry's shoulder, watching the running spring with a peaceful sense of contentment.

And familiarity. Her brow creased. No, she and Kerry had never done this before, that she was pretty sure of, and yet...

She gave Kerry a little squeeze, and Kerry reciprocated by pressing a hand against hers, and laying her other hand on Dar's leg, stroking it gently.

Dar could smell the clean scent of shampoo, where Kerry's head was resting just under her chin. Dar let her cheek drop a little, to rest against it, feeling a sudden wash of strong familiarity that brought a faint, pained smile to her face.

It was her dream, one of them. One of those strange ones, where she clearly remembered resting in a quiet glade not too different from this one, with the soft sound of water and the smell of the forest around them. She'd been leaning on a rock, her arm wrapped around a warm, somnolent body, whose fingers had gently traced across her thigh just...

Exactly...

As they were now.

Dar shivered in pure reflex, her eyes opening, as a silver hued image of the dream flashed through her mind.

"Hey?" Kerry turned to look up at her. "What's wrong?"

A soft exhale. "Just a bit of, I don't know, déjà vu, I guess." She forced a laugh. "Or something from a dream I--"

Kerry's eyebrows knit. "You know, I get that a lot around you," she commented casually. "Or, I have these weird dreams where you and I are doing really strange stuff."

Dar gazed at her. "Me too," she admitted softly. "Like just now." Her eyes shifted. "I think I had a dream a lot like this, trees, water, you and I lying like this. I was holding onto you." She paused, considering. "Weird."

Kerry shrugged. "It happens. I used to have dreams like that when I was in school, about stuff going on there. It's just your brain cleaning house."

"Yeah," Dar agreed, feeling a sense of relief. "You're right. Hey." She picked up a flat stone and flipped it towards the spring. "Can you do that?"

"Oh god, I've always wanted to, figures you can."

Kerry dug into the ground next to them and came up with a couple more relatively flat stones.

"Here, teach me."

With a tender smile, Dar reached and arm around her and guided her arm, feeling a sweet echo in her words. "Okay, like this, sideways."

They spent a very pleasant hour just tossing rocks and snuggling in the sun, as the horses contentedly cropped grass, and the sun rose over head. Finally Dar patted her leg. "You ready to head back?"

"Mm." Kerry had her head pillowed in Dar's lap, and was stretching her legs out in lazy bliss.

"At least we get to sit down this afternoon. Are you up for some sailing?"

"Sure," Dar agreed readily. "I've never been on one of those small boats. The big ones you just keep out of the way of the crew. I'm looking forward to it." She tickled Kerry's ear. "C'mon, let's get going."

They stood and gathered their things, with Dar packing everything neatly back inside the lunch pack while Kerry wandered over to the spring and tasted its water. "Hey that's not bad." She grinned at Dar. "It's sweet."

Dar glanced over. "Yeah, watch it. Looks like there's a beehive over there. Be careful."

Kerry blinked. "Oh, thanks." She carefully skirted the spot and walked over to where her mare was, untying her and gathering up the reins. "Okay, girl. What's your name again? Cookie?"

"Brownie," Dar supplied wryly. "But you were close." She got up into her saddle and settled her knees, tucking her reins in one hand as she half turned the stallion towards Kerry's horse.

"Yeah, yeah, what's his name, Silver?" Kerry put a foot in the stirrup and hoisted herself up, feeling the mare shift under her. "Ah ah, none of that."

"Smokey," Dar replied amiably. "Careful."

Kerry slid forward a little in the saddle and tried to find a comfortable place for her knees to grip. They were still a little sore and she shifted, then half turned. "Do yo...whoa!"

The mare had stepped sideways, and one hoof caught on a root. With a snort, the horse crab hopped sideways, bucking a little and almost throwing Kerry off. "Whoa!" The blonde woman hung on, though, and pulled the mare's head around, grabbing tight as she jumped up out of the little hollow she'd moved into and bolted towards the stream for a few steps.

Enough to bring her right up against the bush with the beehive, her hindquarters brushing its outer leaves, and disturbing the sluggish insects.

"Kerry, uh." Dar's eyes widened a little. " Be careful there. I..."

"I am being careful," Kerry complained, trying to get the mare straightened out. "C'mon, you... a...holy-- Whoa,whoa! Shit!"

The mare snorted as several bees settled and stung her, then she squealed and bolted, jerking the reins out of Kerry's hands as she headed out and down the long, sloping path. "Hey! Hey! Slow down!"

"Son of --" Dar slapped her stallion on the side, kicking him into a run as she gave chase.

"Kerry!"

I'M IN TROUBLE. Kerry hung on to the front of the saddle, watching the reins fly uselessly near the ground. *Shit.* "Hey, c'mon, c'mon slow down!" She called to the mare, who was snorting.

Both back heels kicked up, almost tossing Kerry over the horse's head, and she gripped the saddle frantically. "Okay, okay."

The mare whinnied, and bucked, then chose a cedared path down the hillside, shaking her head as the reins irritated her. Kerry heard hoof beats catching up, and she half turned to see the gray stallion bearing down on her, Dar's body pressed to his back, one hand free, the other clenching leather reins.

Cursing, she turned around, and leaned forward, trying to grab one of the flapping pieces of leather, which flicked annoyingly just out of her reach.

"Hang on, Kerry," Dar yelled as she closed in, her horse snorting as his nose neared the mare's flying tail.

Unfortunately, this only scared the already terrified mare, who redoubled her pace, slipping a little in the cedar chips. "Whoa, whoa!" Kerry yelled, her eyes widening as she saw a bend coming up. "Whoa, take it easy, wh--" The horse spun, and kicked, and she lost her grip, her body going the opposite direction and flying through the air.

The mare got around the bend and took off running, as her former rider slammed unceremoniously against a tree trunk, then dropped to the ground with a leaf scattering thump.

Oh my god. Kerry just lay there for a long moment trying to get air back into her lungs, almost not hearing the rapidly slowing hoof beats, and the thump as something large hit the ground running, scattering cedar chips all over her as the steps came skidding to a halt at her side.

Hands touched her, and then Dar's urgent voice reached her ears. "Don't move."

"Couldn't if I wanted to," she murmured, counting the stars circling her head. "Ow. Damn that hurt."

"Where did you hit?" the low voice asked. "You got any shooting pain anywhere? How about your neck?"

Kerry had to think about it. "My shoulder." She flexed her hands a little. "Fortunately it was my butt that hit the ground. I'm sure I didn't take any damage there." The numbness was wearing off, replaced by aching. "Whoa."

"Can you feel everything?" Dar asked nervously.

"Your hands, feet, no numbness?"

Fingers, toes, eyelashes." Yeah, " Kerry sighed, moving her head a little. "It's all there. It just hurts. I think I just got the wind knocked out of me," she told her companion. "We weren't going that fast."

Dar sat down heavily next to her. "Jesus." She gently eased Kerry back from her curled up position, examining her carefully. Her sweater and heavy jeans had protected her from the tree bark and she appeared relatively unharmed. "You scared the hell out of me."

Kerry managed a grin. "Me too. What on earth happened?" She moved her arms and legs, shifting her feet to a more comfortable position, and took a deep breath. "Did that horse go nuts, or what?"

"I think she got stung," Dar explained, slipping an arm over Kerry's shoulders and supporting her solicitously. "You sure you're okay?"

Kerry leaned her head against the convenient shoulder and sighed. "I'm shaking like a leaf, but yeah." She glanced off down the path. "Looks like I'm walking home, though." She exhaled as the throbbing receded.

"You most certainly are not," Dar snapped, her adrenaline still surging, making her hands shake almost uncontrollably. She took a few deep breaths, willing her heart to calm.

Surprised green eyes glanced at her, reading the ghosts of recent terror there. "Hey, it's okay," she added gently. "I'm all right. I'm not the first person who ever fell off a horse." She laid a hand on Dar's chest in comfort, then inhaled, as she felt the racing heartbeat under her fingers. "Take it easy there, tiger."

"I'm fine," Dar replied, a little shortly. "You can ride my horse. I'll lead him."

Kerry put a hand on her lover's knee. "No, you forgot to wear your brace, Dar. You're not going to walk five miles back to the cabin. Now, just relax. I'm fine. I just got shook up a little."

Stubborn blue eyes glared at her. "We'll both ride then. He's a big horse," she replied. "We'll take it real slow."

Kerry considered arguing, then saw the set jaw, and the tensed muscles, and decided to let this one go. "Okay," she agreed. "Poor horsie. You better get him some apples when we get back."

"He'll survive." Dar relaxed a little. "We're still under the weight limit," she added, letting a slight grin cross her lips now that the crisis was over.

Kerry poked her. "Not by that much," she teased. "You still owe him apples." She allowed Dar to lift her up to her feet, though, and she stood gingerly, testing her body out before she nodded.

"Okay. I'm all right. Let's go."

Smokey stood, watching them suspiciously as Dar collected his reins, and studied him. "I'll drive," she decided, putting a foot in the stirrup and pulling herself up, then neatly sidestepping the horse over to where Kerry was standing, and extending an arm down. "Grab on. I'll pull you up."

Kerry felt herself smiling for no apparent reason, and as she reached up, her hand slid past Dar's to grip the taller woman's arm above the elbow, giving her a handle as she also reached for the back of the saddle.

The sensation of being lifted was so familiar, she almost laughed, as she threw her leg over the horse's hindquarters, and settled in behind Dar in the large saddle. "I'm going to squish you," she warned.

"No problem," Dar advised her, feeling the warm pressure as Kerry's body melded into hers.

"Just hang on."

A gentle laugh bubbled its way up through her lips as Kerry wrapped her arms around Dar's body, squeezing her a little. "Absolutely no problem there," she assured her lover. "Where you go, I go, buddy."

Dar stopped, and half turned, gazing back at her with one eyebrow lifted. "Buddy?"

Kerry grinned charmingly at her. "Aren't you my buddy?"

A shake of the dark head, then Dar turned back around and nudged her mount down the trail.

"Okay, Smokey, nice and easy. I don't want any road bumps."

The silence dropped around them again, and Kerry was able to put her aching shoulder aside, as she leaned against the warm body in front of her. The smell of sun warmed wool tickled her senses and she let her chin rest against Dar's shoulder blades, feeling the bones move a little as Dar shifted.

"Mm." She rubbed her cheek against the soft fabric, then blinked as it reminded her of her dream a while back. "Hey."

"What?" Dar whirled, almost unseating her, glancing back anxiously. "Are you okay? You're not starting to feel dizzy or anything, right? How's your shoulder."

Kerry cleared her throat, and resettled her legs, finding the contact with Dar both familiar and comforting. "Well, it'd be a lot better if you'd stop jerking around like that," she admonished her companion. "Would you relax already? I just wanted to mention that this whole thing reminded me of that dream I had."

Dar faced forward, feeling a little embarrassed. "What dream?" she asked gruffly.

"The one with you in the armor," Kerry placidly answered. "You remember?"

"Oh yeah," Dar grunted. "Me in armor, silliest thing I ever heard."

Kerry closed her eyes, trying to remember the sensations. "And no pants."

The horse stopped stock still. "What?" Dar looked cautiously around at her.

"Your legs were bare," Kerry replied, opening her eyes and patting her companion's thigh. "So were mine for that matter," she giggled. "Half naked horseback riding. I'm quite the wild thing in my dreams, huh?"

Dar started laughing. "Doesn't say much for me. What kind of idiot would wear armor and no pants?"

"Hmm, there must be something deep and Freudian in that," Kerry mused.

"Kerry?" Dar hesitated.

"Hmm?"

"Don't go there."

"Mm, yeah, okay."

THEY GOT IN an hour later than they expected to, since Dar insisted on keeping poor Smokey to a pace somewhere between a turtle and a turtle. The stable man ran out to greet them and took Smokey's reins, while Dar jumped down, then solicitously caught Kerry as she tried to follow, and let her down gently to the ground. "The mare got bee stung, threw her and took off," she explained tersely.

"We figured," the man nodded. "Had to pull four or five stingers out of her butt. Sorry about that. You all right, ma'am?" His eyes turned anxiously to Kerry.

"I'm just peachy, thanks," Kerry assured him, as she looked up at Dar. "You can let me go now, I think." She straightened her legs with a wince, but they held.

"Oh. Sorry." Dar gave her a little pat on the back and cleared her throat. "Listen, let's save the sailing for tomorrow, okay?" Her eyes flicked to the stable man's. "Anything going on here tonight?"

He considered. "We've got a hay ride scheduled," he offered. "Out to the big fire pit after dinner." "That sounds wonderful," Kerry spoke up, with a grin. "I love hayrides. C'mon, Dar, I bet they'll have marshmallows."

"Yes, ma'am, we do. The riders make s'mores, in fact." The man smiled back at her. "And we've got a couple folks who play guitar, and some that tell stories, too."

Kerry gave Dar a wishful look, and was rewarded with a tolerantly knowing grin. "Sure," Dar agreed. "C'mon, let's go change into something that smells less like horses, and relax before dinner." She put her arm around Kerry's shoulders and they headed off towards the cabin, pausing as they noticed a large group clustered around the tailgate of a work worn blue pickup truck.

"What's up?" Dar inquired, as they neared it.

Millie turned, and shook her head. "Poor people, they've had an awful rain out in Arizona, just look at it," she pointed.

In the back of the truck was a portable television, running off the truck's engine. A grainy picture showed a hapless man in a blue poncho, standing with his microphone in a complete downpour as bits of trees and small animals floated by in the background. A caption at the bottom was labeled Channel 12 News. "Man, look at that," one of the workers whistled softly. "And that damn storm's heading our way, too."

Dar and Kerry exchanged glances. "When?" they both asked together.

The worker blinked, surprised, and glanced at them. "Um, Monday night, Tuesday morning. Why?"

"Thanks, we were just curious." Kerry smiled at him. "C'mon, Dar. I hear a Jacuzzi calling my name."

"Right," Dar agreed, shaking her head at the screen as cactus floated by past the reporter. "I wonder if that's causing us any problems?"

Kerry tugged her forward. "I'm sure they'd call if it was," she assured her lover.

"Right," Dar murmured again, as they walked away.

THE WARM WATER felt absolutely wonderful, Kerry decided, as she squirmed around to let the jets rush against her ribs. She watched Dar approach bearing a couple of nicely chilled glasses. Not that she noticed the glasses, especially, since her eyes were mostly fully engaged by her hormones due to the fact that her lover was jaunting around the cabin buck naked.

"Here." Dar sighed, handing her a glass and seating herself, stretching her long legs out and letting her head rest against the edge of the tub. "Boy, that feels great." She paused, expecting an answer, then glanced over when all she got was silence. "Kerry?"

"Sorry." Kerry took a sip of the chilled champagne and swallowed it. "Just thinking." She wiggled her toes contentedly and exhaled. "I suppose it could have been worse. We could have gone skiing."

"Probably would have been me that slammed into a tree then," Dar remarked. "How's your shoulder?" She peered worriedly at the muscled body part in question, examining the bruise that covered Kerry's arm. "You sure nothing else hurts?"

"Dar, can I ask you a question?" Kerry peered at her. "How can a person so oblivious of their own physical well being be so damned solicitous of mine?"

Dar stopped, and drew back in silence. "Sorry," she muttered. "Didn't realize I was bothering you."

Kerry studied her, a little bewildered. "No, it doesn't bother me. I just didn't expect that of you." Dar gave a little nod, and took a sip of her drink. Truth be told, she hardly knew why she was so damned concerned herself. The woman was obviously all right, so she should just back off and let her be.

After all, that's exactly what she'd want in Kerry's place, right?

Right. She hated when people fussed over her, and here she was being the biggest fussy spot this side of an old fashioned nursery nanny. No wonder Kerry was annoyed. With an effort, she relaxed, and closed her eyes, trying to recapture the good mood she'd been in at lunch.

She was surprised when a warm body fit itself around hers unexpectedly, and her eyes popped open in startlement, to see two pale green ones peering back at her from a very close distance. "Uh, hi."

"Hi," Kerry answered, with a quietly apologetic look. "Sorry. I assumed that because you hate people pawing over you that you naturally would just expect everyone else to buck up and pretend gaping head wounds are nothing."

"No," Dar acknowledged quietly. "I don't expect that at all."

"Good. Then could you give me a hug, please? I really feel like crap. My legs are killing me, and my entire back feels like an accordion," Kerry sighed. "And what kind of good drugs did you bring that might help?"

Dar felt a curious smile crossing her face as she put her glass down and folded her arms around her lover, then lifted her, gently cradling her in the frothy water. "Let me take some tension off your back, then," she replied, as Kerry nestled her head against one of Dar's shoulders. "Just put your arms around my...yeah." She gently stretched Kerry's body out, working the stiffened muscles with one hand while supporting her with the other. "I've got some Percogesic. It's a pain killer and a muscle relaxant. How does that sound?"

"It sounds great," Kerry mumbled. "But I feel much better already. I think you're one kick ass drug yourself, Dar." She snuggled closer, absorbing the clean, chlorine tinted warmth of the water, and the even warmer silkiness of the skin she was nestled against.

Dar felt a sincere, thorough sense of relief. "Well, I doubt it.," she joked. "The AMA would never approve me, that's for sure. Let's get you out of here and comfortable, okay?"

"Sure," Kerry agreed amiably. "Wh-- Dar!" She grabbed a tighter hold as she was lifted out of the Jacuzzi. "Stop that, you'll hurt you knee!"

"Nah." Dar stepped carefully out of the tub. "Grab that towel," she instructed, then carried Kerry out into the nicely warmed cabin, and set her on the bed. Taking the towel, she knelt. "Hold still. This won't hurt."

"Bu..." Kerry spluttered, then subsided, slowly relaxing as Dar dried her gently.

It was remarkably erotic and she had a hard time keeping her hands still, as the towel brushed against suddenly sensitized skin. She had to force herself not to react, force herself to let Dar take complete control.

To trust completely.

Her breathing slowed, and she let herself become aware of Dar's close presence, to feel the warmth as her still damp skin brushed by Kerry's hand. She could hear the soft breaths, and the whispery sounds of Dar's hair as it slipped over her bare shoulders. She could smell her, that inimitable faintly spicy musk that clung to her lover's skin, along with the chlorine scent of the water. Her world stilled for a perfect instant.

And then lips touched hers, and the towel's rough warmth was replaced by knowing fingertips that traced a path across her skin leaving a shiver of anticipation in their wake. She let her eyes slide open, to see Dar's looking back at her, a teasing grin moving her lips. One long finger came up and balanced itself on her nose. "Don't go away," Dar told her softly, as she stood and went to their baggage, coming back with a bottle and a cup of water. She knelt down again and shook out two pills, handing them to Kerry. "Here."

Kerry gazed at her, mesmerized. "Do I need these?" she asked softly. "It doesn't hurt anymore." She reached out and bypassed the pills, resting her hand on Dar's cheek. "I just need you."

Dar put the bottle down without breaking eye contact, and eased down on the bed, stretching her body out next to Kerry's and laying a hand on her stomach. She felt the muscles contract under her fingers, and watched as the pale green eyes darkened at no more than that light touch. "All right." She leaned over and brushed her lips against the soft curve of a breast. "I can't guarantee it's going to be relaxing, though." She moved up, feeling the sudden intake of breath as Kerry felt the teasing pressure. "You sure you're up to it?"

Kerry finally let her hands loose, and they greedily reached for Dar's close presence, tugging her closer as her body growled with desire.

"Guess that answered that," Dar chuckled low in her throat, and succumbed to the insistent tug, feeling a warmth of connection between them that was pulling her closer, and closer, until she could swear...

That they were simply two halves of a whole.

Of course you are. Her mind whispered at her, as she let go and allowed the passion to take her, hearing a faint, knowing chuckle somewhere deep in the back of her mind.

Chapter Nineteen

"YOU'RE BEING QUIET." Kerry commented, glancing over at Dar as they mounted the steps to the lodge. Her hands were tucked firmly in her pockets against the chill air, and her breath escaped as puffy clouds of vapor.

Dar also had her hands hidden, and she sniffled a little against the cold. "I'm not, generally speaking, a noisy person," she responded mildly. "I was just thinking, that's all." She reached out and pulled the heavy door open, then inclined her head for Kerry to precede her.

"You always do that," Kerry commented. "Open doors."

"Well, you need to, Kerry or you crash into them and get a lot of splinters in your face," Dar responded drolly. "How's your shoulder doing?"

"It's a little stiff, but okay," Kerry replied. "Actually." She blushed a little, and moved closer.

"My butt hurts more."

The blue eyes twinkled a little. "You probably bruised your tailbone." She patted the spot gently.

"I'll have to get you a pillow for the office for a week or so."

They went into the dining room, already half full with guests at the scattering of tables. A table near the window was made available and they settled into it, gazing out at the view of the last rays of sunset over the lake. The room was fairly dim, wall sconces made to look like candelabra and torches were the motif, and they spread a warm, reddish glow around rather than a harsh brilliance. A fireplace in the rear crackled merrily, and leant to the rustic atmosphere.

"It smells great in here, " Kerry commented, as their server arrived, bearing a basket of warm, fresh biscuits and a bowl of sweet butter. "Is it the wood they're using in the fire?"

Dar glanced over at it, as she snagged a yeast biscuit and broke it open. "Um, that might be hickory, so yeah." A tiny hint of a smile appeared. "You know, this winter stuff isn't all bad." She tugged on her collar. "Except that this wool's driving me nuts."

Kerry laughed. "Well, you look really nice in that sweater, even if it's tickling your chin." The turtleneck, a rich, solid electric blue brought out the color of her eyes like nobody's business, and framed her angular face wonderfully.

Dar looked pleased at the compliment. "You look very nice, yourself," she returned it, eyeing Kerry's layered flannel and sweatshirt combination. Kerry's face had a gentle tinge of color from the wind they'd ridden through, and her pale hair was pulled back into a ponytail, with a few wisps escaping around her pink ears.

Which grew a touch pinker at the words, something Dar found eminently adorable. "I'm glad our flight's not until eight tomorrow night--gives us the whole day," she remarked. "You're going to teach me to sail in the morning, right?"

"Teach you? Dar you've been on the ocean all your life. What do you mean teach you?" Kerry protested, smiling a thank you at the server as he put a cup of frothy local ale in front of her, and a similar one in front of Dar.

"Mmm. " Dar took a sip, and raised her brows. "Not bad, um, I can drive about anything on the water that uses petroleum products, and I even got to sit at the controls of something that uses..." She paused, and waggled her head. "A more esoteric form of fuel, shall we say, but I've never sailed."

"Really?" Kerry thought about that. "Esoteric? I don't--" She remembered what branch of the service Dar's father had been in. "Oh, oh, I get it, right." Pause. "They didn't let you drive a submarine, did they?"

Dar held up a finger to her lips. "Sshhhh. I didn't even have a driver's license at the time."

Kerry covered her eyes. "Oh, I suddenly feel so, sooo, safe," she sighed.

"I didn't hit anything," Dar objected mildly. "And I'm a safe driver, you know that."

Their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a large family, who took a table not far from them. The father was an older man, gray haired and stocky, dressed in a flannel shirt and corduroys. He directed the three assorted children to sit down while his wife pulled the waiter aside. The children were all slimly built and meticulously dressed, and the mother had, incongruously, a mink stole around her shoulders.

Dar snorted as she took a sip of her ale, then glanced over and saw the pensive look on Kerry's face. She reached over and covered Kerry's hand with her own, chafing the fingers of it lightly.

"Hey."

Green eyes flicked her way, then held.

"Memories?" Dar guessed.

"Something like that," Kerry acknowledged softly. "When we were younger, we used to go to a Christian retreat up in the north lake area. It was a little like this, except that the focus was bible teaching, and family building." She let out a faint, bitter laugh. "Family building, what a joke. It

was just one big excuse to get us all together in one place so we could be preached at for a week, and told our faults."

Dar winced. "Not all families are like that," she told Kerry, giving the nervously moving fingers a squeeze.

Kerry dropped her gaze to their hands. "I know." She looked up. "But I see kids like that," she jerked her head towards the family. "And I always wonder."

Dar studied the children quietly, noting the almost furtive glances as they looked around. The eldest girl was probably about sixteen, and the youngest about ten, she reckoned. As she pondered, the oldest happened to look her way, and their eyes met briefly. The girl immediately dropped her eyes, and a blush made itself evident on her face.

A dark brow lifted, as Dar wondered what had garnered that reaction, then she realized she and Kerry were still holding hands. Ah. She drummed the fingers of her free hand on the table. Well well. "So." She casually pulled Kerry's knuckles over and brushed them with her lips, then released them. "What were we talking about, sailing, wasn't it?"

"Um..." Kerry looked a little flustered. "Dar, you know, we are in North Carolina."

Dar blinked at her. "I know that."

Green eyes flicked around the room, then back to her face. "Don't they still lynch adulterers here?"

The dark brows knit for a long moment. "Wha-- oh." Dar sat back, nonplused. "I..." She looked around in a startled manner. "B..."

Kerry hid a smile behind one hand. "Dar, Dar, relax I didn't mean..." She covered her eyes, and felt her skin warm. "I just, I sort of had you pegged, I thought, as someone who didn't do PDA's." She peeked at her lover hesitantly. The angular face was very still, as Dar processed her words, then an indescribable look took it over. "Dar?"

"I..." Dar released a breath. "I didn't think I did either." She folded her hands and studied them. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was bothering you," her voice was steady, and casual.

But Kerry had learned something about her companion over the months. Sometimes she said what she thought the person she was talking to wanted to hear, rather than what she was feeling in her heart, and it usually showed in subtle shifts in her body language.

Like when her neck muscles relaxed, and it dropped her shoulders a little. It wasn't quite slumping, but Kerry could see it nonetheless. "No, it doesn't bother me," she hesitated, choosing her words carefully. "I love when you touch me. You have no idea how special that makes me feel." She watched the dark head lift, and wary blue eyes peeked out at her. "I guess I'm just not used to being conspicuous."

"Conspicuous?" Dar repeated.

"Yeah, I um. " Kerry twiddled her thumbs. "I made it a practice to attract as little attention to myself as possible. It was sort of a survival reflex."

"Oh," Dar murmured. "I never thought of that." She played with her roll. "I never really cared if I attracted attention or not."

Kerry rested her chin in her hand, and gazed at her magnetically attractive companion. "No, I bet you didn't," she remarked wryly. "But it's going to take me a little while to get over that."

Dar bit her lip, looking for all the world like a scolded child being denied dessert. "Sorry. I... I wasn't doing it on purpose, I just..." *Damn it, I should have realized. What in the hell is wrong with me?* "I'll try to keep my hands to myself from now on."

Kerry felt a definite pang hit her in the chest, just hearing that self-disgust in Dar's otherwise even tone.

It was a quiet dinner, and Kerry noticed neither of them ate much. She zipped up her jacket and followed Dar as she made her way out the front of the lodge, towards where the hayride was forming up, a soft round of laughter coming from the people who were waiting. A large wagon really full with hay was standing there, with two large work horses hitched to it, their placid, gentle eyes regarding the crowd with little or no interest.

The family had decided to go, and so did six or seven other couples, two of them with children. Kerry bounced on her feet a little in the chill, as she watched them all mill around, waiting for the lodge worker to allow them to climb up onto the wagon.

Dar stood quietly nearby, her hands tucked into her pockets, a look of polite interest on her face. Her breath showed as a gentle stream of vapor, and as Kerry kept an unobtrusive eye on her, the stream doubled, as she let out a long sigh.

"All right, folks, let's get aboard. We want to get over to that campfire real soon, cause this weather ain't getting any warmer," the cheerful driver told them, as he unhooked the chain and let the back gate down, then put a set of stairs in place. "Up you go."

Dar and Kerry were the fourth set of people to get into the hay wagon, and they settled themselves in one of the front corners, out of the way of the giggling children who were burrowing in the hay, tossing bits of it around. Dar drew her knees up and put her arm against them, resting her chin on one forearm.

She thought about what Kerry had said, and found herself resenting the other couples there, who were free to hug and kiss each other, with no fear of any adverse reaction. In fact, the two older couples were watching one pair of lovebirds with an indulgent look on their faces.

She felt, in that moment, as though something very important had been taken away from her, and it was making her mad. So was Kerry's assumption that she wouldn't like public displays. So was the annoying cold, that was making her throat dry out and giving her a headache.

She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back, letting herself slide into a full fledged, self-acknowledged really bad mood. Part of it was at herself, since she really should have guessed that Kerry wouldn't be comfortable announcing their sexual partnership to the world, especially here in what she assumed was a bastion of conservatism. Another part of it was because she hadn't even realized she was doing it, which made her kick herself for being so damned self-absorbed.

The cold pressed in on her, and she dropped her head a little and let it in, remembering the last time she'd been here. Living through the hurt, and rebuilding her defenses, determined to go back out there, and never, never let anyone get close enough to make her feel that lousy ever again. So what the hell was she doing here now?

Then the other half of her slapped her upside the head. *Get a grip, Dar. She didn't blow you off, she just asked for some time to adjust. So just chill out.*

Well, at least that was easy enough. She glared morosely at her visible breath, bracing her feet as the wagon started, and the other occupants laughed in delight. The horses started to pull them down the road, their hoof beats making a regular pattern in the still, cold air. *Stop behaving like a spoiled brat, already. Jesus, Dar, what would Dad say? He'd kick your ass for acting like this.*

"Pretty night out, huh?" She forced her bad mood down, and turned to Kerry, shocked at the effort it took not to reach out and gently move aside the soft blonde hair obscuring her face. Kerry's jaw was working, and her brow was knit. She turned her head towards her lover in almost slow motion. "Yes, it is," she responded thoughtfully. "It's cold, though."

"Yeah," Dar agreed softly, as she rubbed her arms with her hands.

Kerry studied the wagon's occupants, noting the huddled duos with a speculative eye. Then she took in a breath, and expelled it. "Dar?"

"Hmm?"

Kerry chewed her lower lip a minute. "I'm over it," she announced. "I guess the world'll just have to expand its horizons."

Startled blue eyes regarded her. "What exactly do you mean?"

The smaller woman shifted, then crawled the short distance between them and wrapped herself around Dar's body, tucking her head into the hollow of her lover's shoulder and exhaling. "Is this explicit enough, or do I need to suck your tongue?"

Dar felt a surge of heat erupt, as a flush colored her skin, warming her rapidly. "Uh, no, no, this is fine. I get the idea," she blurted, knocked off balance by Kerry's sudden change of heart. She put her arms around Kerry and settled back, letting their conjoined body heat chase away the chill of the air. "What made you change your mind?"

Amazing, how fast a bad mood could vanish, whisked away on the cold wind.

Kerry thought about the question for a while, as she regarded the people around them. After a few initial, startled glances, they were being mostly ignored, which was fine with her. "Well." She picked up a stalk of hay and chewed it. "I thought about how uncomfortable I felt about everyone staring at me, and then I weighed that against how comfortable I knew I'd feel if I was snuggling with you, and snuggling won."

"Just like that?" Dar asked, in mild disbelief.

"Essentially, yeah," Kerry replied. "Oh, there was more to it, and I'm still wrestling with stuff, but I realized when I thought about it that you've been doing all that stuff ever since we, um..."

"Yeah."

"So, just because we're in a strange place, why should that matter? I know I joked about them lynching people, but then I figured out if anyone's got a problem here, you could probably kick their ass, so..." Kerry shrugged. "What the hell? I never rebelled as a teenager, maybe it's time."

"Oh."

"Maybe I'll get a tattoo."

"Uh..." Dar peered at her. "Don't get all drastic on me, okay? How about we start with a rainbow sticker for your bumper."

"I don't know, Dar," Kerry mused. "A nice knot work design, around your name, right on my, um..." She glanced down.

"Uh, Kerry." Blue eyes glanced at their neighbors, one of the older couples who were watching them with interest.

"Shoulder blade," Kerry finished, with a twinkle in her eyes. "I bet that guy at the desk knows where I could get one around here."

"All right." Dar gave her a look. "Now you listen here, Kerrison Stuart. I am not going to stand by while you get my name tattooed on any part of your body in some hack shop in the backwoods, you hear me?"

Kerry's nose wrinkled up as she grinned. "Would you do it?"

"Get your name tattooed on me?" Dar countered.

The blonde nodded, but said nothing.

The angular face went serious, suddenly intense as Dar met Kerry's eyes and held them. "I already have that," she whispered, touching her chest above her heart with a finger. "Written so deep there, nothing could ever remove it."

Kerry just looked at her, forgetting their watchers, her eyes softening and carrying the sudden glitter of unshed tears. She started to speak, then shook her head, and buried her face in Dar's shoulder.

Hmm. Dar rested her cheek against Kerry's pale hair. Not bad, from a hard bitten, cold and ruthless bitch from hell, huh?

Up ahead she could see the brightening glow of the campfire, sending crackling sparks up towards the bright stars winking over them.

DAR FLOATED BLISSFULLY in a pocket of warm comfort, her arms wrapped securely around Kerry's peacefully snoozing body. The air outside the blanket felt chilly, but she had no intention of going out into it, at least until the sun took it upon itself to come up.

Funny, though. She could have sworn they'd left the heat on last night. She edged one blue eye open and surveyed the cabin. It was a dull gray from the light coming in the window, and very, very quiet. Too quiet, Dar realized, as she missed the faint, but just perceptible mechanical sounds of the heating unit. Her eyes flicked to the clock, which showed a depressingly early time.

Great. She chewed her lip for a moment, then decided the only way they were going to get heat in the place was if she got up and turned the heat on, then started up that fire again. *C'mon Dar, buck up, you made Kerry get up yesterday, it's your turn.* She told herself firmly, as she eased away from Kerry's warmth, and scooted out the other side of the bed. Shit. The chill made her start shivering, and she quickly trotted over to her bag, flipping on the heat along the way. Tugging out a warm sweatshirt, she pulled it on over her head and rubbed her arms. "Brr," she commented softly. "This cold stuff is for the birds." But there was a good stock of wood, at least, and she quietly stacked some in the fireplace, remembering how Kerry had arranged it the day before. She packed the moss into the crevices, then she grabbed some matches they'd gotten from the lodge the day before and lit a few, making sure the fire starter caught in several places. "Hey, not bad." She sat down in front of the fireplace on the rug and warmed her hands on the growing flames, quite pleased with herself. "Okay, we've got heat going. I got a pot here I can heat up some water with, and we've got fresh coffee." She counted off silently, giving a tiny nod. "That'll do."

On the way to the sink to get some water, she stopped and simply stood, watching Kerry sleep for a long moment. The blonde woman was curled on her side, with one hand tucked under her head, and the other resting on the blanket, and her face was peacefully relaxed in the early hint of dawn. Her breathing was slowly moving the fabric, and Dar felt herself breathing in the same rhythm, as she leaned against the doorway in pensive silence.

Funny. She sighed, and continued on, getting the water and bringing it over to the fireplace, putting the pot on a small shelf evidently for that purpose. A soft hiss went up as the flames evaporated a few droplets on the outside, and she settled into the comfortable chair, tucking her feet up under her and gazing into the fire.

The light caught with a flash of brilliance on the unfamiliar band around her finger, and she found herself staring at it, almost mesmerized by its friendly twinkle. She rubbed her thumb against the inner band and exhaled, finding it hard to believe she was seeing it.

She'd spent so long the last time she was here, just sitting, and watching the water, and wondering what in the hell she'd done so wrong in her life to earn the repeated disappointments dealt to her where her heart was involved.

Now, here she was, sitting here wondering what in the hell she'd done so right in her life to deserve this. She leaned her head against the chair back. And it wasn't just the ring. It was what was behind it. It was the equal commitment she'd been searching for almost all of her life. It was what her parents had, and something she'd simply assumed everyone else was entitled to. *Jesus, if I'd known how damn rare that is, maybe I'd have entered a convent.* She closed her eyes. The last time she'd been here, she'd made the decision to leave her dreams behind. This time she found the sudden gift so overwhelming, she hardly knew what to do with herself. Slowly, she lifted the ring to her lips and pressed them against it, feeling a single tear wind its way down her cheek.

There was no doubt this was messing her up. She knew it. She knew damn well this was going to make doing her job the way she'd become accustomed to it difficult to the point of impossible. Kerry's gentle, loving influence had already wrecked her emotional shields, breaking down icy barriers she'd kept in place almost effortlessly for years. Now she was left with the same responsibilities, the same goals, but without the single minded, cold purpose that allowed her to achieve them.

Damn right she wished the resignation had stuck. Especially now. She let her eyes slide open, and blinked them, to clear the moisture out. Right now, she felt a distinct urge to chuck her whole damn career, and take off with Kerry to someplace quiet, someplace small and sleepy. Maybe she'd open up a little corner computer shop where the most exciting thing that happened in a day was someone catching a boot sector virus.

Her eyes found her lover's face. But that wasn't fair to Kerry, either. She'd just gotten started, and besides, she liked Miami.

Dar sighed. She'd just have to see how things worked out, that was all. Maybe she could change the way she did things.

Yeah. Maybe pigs would grow jet engines and take off from an onramp of Interstate 95.

A rattle broke her out of her musing, and she looked up to see the water pot shivering against the shelf, evidently quite well heated. Dar stood up and retrieved it, yelping a little as the heated plastic stung her fingers. "Ow." She put it down quickly, then got two cups ready, and set plastic cone filters on top of them, adding scoops of the fragrant ground beans and pouring the water over it. It smelled great, and she took an appreciative sniff, letting her worries go for the time being.

No point in worrying about it now anyway, right?

She fixed the coffee with lots of cream and sugar, then she picked up Kerry's cup and wandered over to the bed, now gently bathed in early dawn's peach colored light. As she neared, sleepy green eyes fluttered open and blinked at her, picking up the light in their depths and highlighting the golden specks that floated in the misty color. "Hey," Kerry burred softly, her voice slightly hoarsened from sleep. She cleared her throat. "What are you doing up?"

Dar smiled, and sat down on the bed, offering her the cup. "I had to uphold Miami's reputation for tough natives. I got up to turn the heat on," she admitted.

Kerry sat up, crossing her legs and accepting the coffee. She pushed her sleep disheveled hair out of her face with an idle hand as she yawned. "Mm." She sipped the beverage. "Thank you, Dar. I really appreciate this." Her eyes flicked to the quietly pensive look on her lover's face. "Where's yours?"

"Hmm?" Dar started, then smiled. "Oh, it's over there. I was just sitting by the fire waiting for the water to heat up."

"Mm, sounds nice." Kerry slid her legs out from under the covers, and stood, taking Dar's hand in hers. "C'mon, let's go back over there." She clung to the long fingers as they crossed the cabin, and didn't let go as they seated themselves by the fire. "I had a dream about you."

Dar almost inhaled a bit of her coffee. "Um, yeah?" she replied. "Good or bad?"

Kerry chuckled as she took another sip. "Oh, awful. You turned into a bug eyed giant rabbit and went bouncing all over the place, drooling." She glanced over, to see wide, round blue eyes staring at her. "I'm joking."

She put a hand on Dar's leg, stroking it gently. "It was a wonderful dream. It didn't make much sense, but you were in it, and so was I, and a white horse, and it was summer. and there was a really beautiful grassy meadow." Kerry exhaled happily. "And we were laughing, and running through the grass, chasing after the horse."

Dar smiled. "Sounds like fun. Did we catch it?"

"Yes." Kerry lifted their still linked hands and kissed Dar's fingers. "And we rode off together, just like we were riding yesterday."

A faint twinge reminded her. "How're the legs?" Dar asked her. "Still sore?"

Kerry flexed her thighs and considered. "Just a little, but they're okay. My shoulder's okay too," she added, before she could be asked. "C'mon, let's grab a shower, and get dressed. I can't wait to get out on the water."

"You got it." Dar grinned. "I can pick up a basket of pastries and a thermos. We could have breakfast out there. How about it?"

"I like it." Kerry released her, and stood, stretching luxuriously, then giving a little yelp of surprise as Dar enfolded her in a bear hug. "Urp." She felt herself lifted up off the ground. "Whoa."

The grip gently straightened her spine, though, and she threw her arms around Dar's neck with a soft laugh. She could almost feel the emotion going through her lover, and she exhaled, as Dar finally released her back to her own feet. "Boy, that felt great."

Dar rubbed her back and gently kissed her head. "Yes, it did." She playfully scooped a handful of sunlight, letting it sparkle off her ring and send tiny flashes darting around the room. "C'mon, let's go."

THE SUN Poured down on ruffled blue waters, unobstructed by a single cloud, and warm enough to offset the chill of the wind that coasted over the lake. Kerry expertly turned the small boat and filled the sails, sending them over the waves, and causing a cold spray to dust their skin. Dar was seated in the bow, her long body sprawled over a padded seat, and her face turned into the breeze as they plowed through the waves. "This is great," she sighed.

Kerry smiled, as she moved the tiller, and checked the tension on the sail. "It sure is," she agreed, her body dredging up old memories of many hours spent out on Lake Michigan in boats not much larger than this one. "The best day of my young life was the day I got qualified in a sunfish, and I didn't have to have anyone with me when I went out."

Dar reached out and touched the canvas sail, as she watched Kerry's smooth, and precise motions. "You're good at this," she commented, enjoying the sight of her lover's wind whipped figure. "And you look really cute doing it too."

"Oh sure. I probably look like an afghan hound with his head out the window of a car going down US 1." Kerry laughed. "Glad the sun's pretty strong, though, or it'd be really cold out here." She tied down the sail, then balanced herself and pulled off her heavy sweatshirt, leaving herself only her collared rugby top over her jeans. "Whoo, that's better."

Dar followed suit, taking off her tan sweater and tucking it under the seat, and pushing the sleeves up on the bright red shirt she was wearing underneath. "You ready for some breakfast?" she inquired.

"You bet. I'm starving," Kerry informed her, as she edged the boat towards one of the small islands that dotted the lake's wide surface. "I figure we can shelter on the lee of that land there, until we're ready to go back." She studied the wind. "I'll have to tack back, but that's okay. We've got all the time in the world. Right?"

The words brought a smile to Dar's face. "Right." She edged closer to where Kerry was sitting, and broke a freshly baked blueberry muffin in half, offering a portion to Kerry. "Here, take a nibble of this."

"Mmm. " Kerry captured it in her teeth and chewed. "Oo, you have more of those?"

"I have more of those," Dar informed her. "And I have those ones with all the nuts in them you liked, and I have cornbread."

Kerry stopped chewing. "Cornbread? I don't get it."

"Northerner," Dar snorted softly. "Here." She took out a miniature loaf of the corn bread, and spread some soft, sweet butter on it. Then she drizzled a touch of honey over that, and broke off a piece, putting it in Kerry's open and waiting mouth. "Try that."

Kerry closed her mouth and chewed. "Mmm." It was a rougher texture than the almost cake like muffin, and the butter and honey made a nice counterpoint to the earthy taste of the corn. "Oh, I like it. Now I know why the South lost the Civil War; they were too busy cooking."

Dar laughed in pure reflex. "I don't think that's why, but we definitely go in for comfort foods in the South." She moved down the padded seat while Kerry skillfully moved around one of the small islands, blocking the wind. She took down the sail and tossed over the small anchor, then squirmed over to where Dar was, leaning against her as they rocked gently in the waves.

She let her eyes roam the skies overhead, watching a hawk circle lazily. Dar reclined next to her, breaking off mouthfuls of her assorted goodies and popping them in Kerry's mouth as they shared companionably. "Jesus, this has been such a long week," Kerry commented.

"Uh huh." Dar fed her another bit of cornbread. "I'm glad we had a few days up here just to relax." She paused. "Well, sort of," she chuckled. "Barring a fall from a horse or two." She brought out a large thermos and uncapped it, releasing an intoxicating scent of chocolate into the air.

Kerry accepted the cup of hot chocolate, and gave Dar a gentle kiss. "It's been wonderful despite the horse." She gazed into the blue eyes. "We'll have to come up here again when we can spend more time." They were sitting in the bottom of the boat, with their heads resting against the padded back seat, and Dar shifted, slipping an arm behind Kerry and drawing her closer.

Kerry put the cup down, and half turned, sliding her hands over Dar's shirt and tangling her fingers in the fabric, as she willingly met the lips searching for hers. They tasted each other for a breathless moment, then backed off a little, as Dar reached up and stroked Kerry's face. "I wish we didn't have to go back."

Kerry studied her face, evaluating the statement. "You mean that."

The blue eyes dropped. "Yes." Dar exhaled, as she regarded the rippling water. "I keep trying to dredge up interest in going back into that office on Monday, and I just can't," she confessed. "I don't know if I can just go back to business as usual."

Kerry's blonde head cocked to one side. "Dar, I don't understand. I thought you'd worked things out with Alastair. Did something else happen?" She put a hand on her lover's arm in concern.

A soft laugh. "Sort of." Dar's lips twisted into a wry smile. "We happened," she stated quietly. "I don't think I can put that aside, when I have to be the company bastard anymore." She glanced up at Kerry honestly. "There are things I've done that I couldn't do now, not and look you in the eye at the end of the day."

Kerry felt a little shocked. She hadn't expected that, hadn't even considered it, really. "Dar, you don't know that. I mean we've hardly had a chance to--"

"I do know it," Dar interrupted gently. "I knew it that afternoon up at Disney." She picked up Kerry's hand. "When I wouldn't trade a roll in the sack for a contract just because you were there."

A slow intake of breath. An exhale. "Oh."

"Yeah," Dar murmured. "What you think of me matters, Kerry. I've never had to worry about that before." She tangled her fingers with her lover's. "I can't do things the old way."

Kerry tried to jump start her brain into action. "Find another way then," she offered, faintly. "We can do it, you and I."

A long pause, as the hawk called overhead, lonely and regal.

Finally, Dar blinked. "Maybe," she murmured. "I guess we'll find out."

Kerry studied her lover's body language, often a far more accurate guide to her feelings than her speech was. "Are you tired of doing what you're doing, Dar?"

The sound of the waves floated over them for a few minutes. "I..." Dar paused. "I think I'm just tired of it never ending," she admitted. "It never gets any better. It's just one fight after another, one crisis after another. I'm just over it."

"Wow," Kerry murmured.

"I've been doing this a long time," Dar went on. "I was just thinking it would be damn nice to just take a few weeks off and, I don't know, just do nothing."

"Funny," her partner mused. "I couldn't wait to start working because I felt like I was finally doing something useful with my life." She nudged the sail a bit with one foot. "The one thing I knew I didn't want to be was someone who just stayed home and did nothing."

Dar looked at her. "Wow," she echoed.

"But you know what?" Kerry continued. "It would be okay to do that if it was with you. I could spend the rest of my life just doing nothing with you and be happy." She looked at Dar's profile. "And no, I'm not just saying that because it's romantic and goopy and it would make you feel better."

Dar's lips twitched, as she bit off exactly that accusation. "Well," she sighed. "Now that Alastair's okay with us maybe we can work together to change things back there," she said. "At least I'll have success to go back with. Maybe that'll help."

Kerry traced Dar's cheekbone with her finger. "If not, we'll make a change," she said. "Now we can be partners all the time, and I know that's going to make a difference to a lot of people in how they treat me."

"Good or bad?" Dar wondered.

"Both," Kerry acknowledged. "But you take your advantages where you find them. I learned that the hard way growing up."

"Mm. We'll see," Dar said. "What the hell. Let's give it a try. What's another challenge anyway?" Kerry nodded, profoundly relieved. "Right." She rubbed Dar's hand against her face. "Speaking of challenges, you ready to learn to sail?"

A smile spread across Dar's face. "Yeah." She cupped Kerry's cheek affectionately. "Teach me."

Chapter Twenty

"WHEW." KERRY ADJUSTED the strap on her laptop case and handed over her suitcase to the skycap, as Dar bent her head to listen to his mate, who was processing their boarding passes.

"We've got time for a cup of coffee, Dar. You interested?"

Dar glanced over her shoulder and smiled. "You bet." She accepted the boarding passes from the porter, and rejoined her companion, zipping up her jacket a little as they moved along the concourse towards the door. "I think we're getting outta here just in time. Did you see those clouds?"

Kerry peered back the way they came, where lowering, gray clouds obscured the sunset, and nodded. "Yeah, I think you're right, partner." She patted Dar on the back. "Unless I'm really mistaken, you're going to miss a snowstorm."

Dar's ears perked up. "A snowstorm?" She grinned, and bumped into Kerry's shoulder with her elbow. "That wouldn't be so bad. I always wanted to have a snowball fight with someone." She let out a breath, and paused before they entered the terminal. "Maybe next time."

"You want a snowball fight? You got it, but let me warn you it's only fun for about the first ten minutes." Kerry smiled, her eyes crinkling up all the way. "After that, you just want dry towels and hot chocolate."

"Problem with that?"

"Nope." She tucked a hand into the crook of Dar's elbow and walked her inside, dodging a moving cart as they moved towards the security station. "Whoops, time for the strip search." She released Dar, and put her laptop case and purse on the belt, then shrugged out of her jacket and added that, since it had her cell phone and pager in the pockets. Then she stepped through the security gate and smiled at the guard as she went to pick up her things.

"Excuse me, we need you to open this," the young woman behind the table stated, holding onto Kerry's laptop firmly.

Kerry sighed. "Sure." She unzipped the case and laid it open, exposing the slate gray top of her computer. She was aware of Dar's close presence, as the taller woman was also being asked to open her bag. "Why don't we have this much trouble at Miami," she muttered under her breath. Dar chuckled softly, unzipping the case and opening it. "I'm not carrying Cuban cigars, that's why."

"Could you turn them on, please?" the woman asked, implacably.

Blue eyes and green met in wry exasperation. "Sure." Dar flipped her power switch on, then reached over and got Kerry's. "I have Pinball loaded on there if you're interested." She remarked to the guard.

The woman looked frostily at her. "Thank you. Could you turn on your phones and pagers, please?"

One dark eyebrow rose. "You don't want me to do that," Dar drawled.

"Yes ma'am, I do, unless you'd rather do it in the security offices," the guard answered.

Dar shrugged, and flipped the devices on, then counted under her breath to ten. On six, both pagers went off, and both phones started beeping, indicating voice mail.

The guard backed away from the desk, with a frightened look.

"I told you," Dar sighed, picking up her pager, and glancing at it. "Damn it, there must be three dozen pages on this stupid thing."

"Yikes." Kerry picked hers up, and pressed the button. "Oh, gee, I'm glad I'm just your assistant. I've only got two dozen." She shook her head. "I mean, didn't they figure out we were together?" She glanced up at the guard, who had been joined by two others. "We've been on vacation for two days," she explained. "Our office tends to freak out."

Dar was muttering, and cursing under her breath as she reviewed her pages, then she looked up at the silent guards. "Oh, for god's sake, they're pagers, not grenades." She tugged her identification out of a pocket of her laptop and tossed it over to them. "There." She tugged her jacket back on, and shoved her phone in the pocket, then took her ID back. "Excuse me." She started down towards the gate, still muttering.

Kerry found herself facing them. "Um, it's been a long week," she explained, zipping up her laptop and shouldering it. "May I?" She held out her hand, and was given back her pager.

"Thanks. Have a great day."

She walked off, resisting the urge to look back over her shoulder, and hurried to catch up with Dar. "Hey, wait up."

The long strides shortened and slowed, and Dar glanced at her as she came along side. "Idiots." "C'mon, Dar, they're just doing their job," Kerry admonished her. "It's for everyone's safety."

Dar held up her pager. "I meant this. I got pages from half the office. Duks, Mari, what the hell did they all want, a personal explanation of what happened?"

She tossed it up, then caught it and stuffed it in a pocket again. "There's the gate. You want to keep hold of these?" She indicated the laptop. "I'll go get some coffee." She settled Kerry in a padded seat near the gate window, then put down her laptop. "Be right back."

"Grab a paper, too," Kerry requested, as she leaned back and watched her companion walk off. A grin wound its way onto her face as she enjoyed the little rhythm in Dar's walk, too slight to be a swagger, but definite nonetheless. She was wearing a pair of worn, black stone washed jeans with her high top sneakers, and Kerry found herself wishing the company would allow casual dress in the office.

Not that Dar didn't look good in a business suit, oh no, she certainly did, Kerry reflected. But she got the feeling Dar was most comfortable just like she was right now.

And so are you, wise guy. Kerry stretched out her feet and crossed her ankles, regarding her tan hiking boots wryly. She had her most comfortable pair of really nice, faded, soft jeans on, almost white from washing, with spots a little worn around her knees, and brass buttons with the letters rubbed right off them.

Her thick, warm flannel shirt was tucked in neatly, and she folded her arms across her chest, letting her head lean back against the chilly glass of the window.

It had been a good weekend, she decided. Despite the bumps, and the little moments of doubt, it still had brought them closer together, and put some truths on the table. They'd come out of it rested and pretty much relaxed, and, Kerry wiggled her fingers and regarded the ring on her hand. "And pretty much committed to each other, I think." She took a moment out and allowed the joy she was feeling to bubble up, making her skin tingle.

"Kerry?" Dar's hesitant voice broke her out of her dreamy state.

"Uh, sorry." She pushed herself upright and took the cup her lover was holding out. "I was just thinking."

"Uh huh." Dar dropped down in the chair next to her. "I'm not going to ask about what, but based on that look you had, I hope it wasn't the coffee." She handed her the requested paper. "Here, it's tomorrow's edition of USA Today."

Kerry took it, and laid it down in her lap, then gave Dar a look over the rim of her cup. "It wasn't the coffee," she admitted, taking a sip. "I have this little ball of happy inside me, and I was just playing with it."

Dar bit down on her cup edge, and her eyelashes fluttered in surprise. "That's an interesting way to put that," she chuckled. "Very poetic."

Green eyes twinkled gently. "I said you bring that out in me, didn't I?"

Her companion grinned frankly. "Funny. Why do I bring out the worst in everyone except for you?" She leaned on the chair arm and pressed her shoulder against Kerry's, glancing down at the paper. "Anything interesting?"

Kerry flipped through the pages as Dar relaxed, closing her eyes and taking slow, idle sips of her coffee.

"Hey Dar?"

"Mm?"

"What's a CIO?"

Dar regarded the popcorn ceiling reflectively. "Chief Information Officer; it's a person who sits on the board of directors of a company, charts strategy for IS, sets policy, that kind of thing." She sucked down a mouthful of the mocha. "Why?"

"We didn't have one of those," Kerry remarked.

"Nope. Alastair has been waffling on that for two years, since the last guy threw up his hands in disgust and walked off. He's got to give up control for that, and he just can't stand it." Dar crossed her ankles. "It's worked for me, because it takes out a layer of pretty useless management between us."

"Mm." Kerry slid closer, and put her arm around Dar's shoulders, putting the paper in front of her half closed eyes. "We do have one now."

"What's that..." Dar's brow scrunched. "Oh shit, he finally found someone? Damn it. Who in the hell...why didn't he say something?" Her eyes flicked to the page, and took in the headlines, scanning them impatiently. "Who is it?"

"You."

Dar went absolutely still, her eyes wide and staring for a long moment, before she shot upright, and grabbed the paper, bending her head to read the text. Her jaw dropped open, and she took in and released several breaths before any intelligible words came out. "That son of a bitch. I'm gonna kill him," she managed to squeak out.

"Dar, honey, the usual response to a promotion is 'thank you', isn't it?" Kerry murmured, rubbing her back soothingly. "Not 'you son of a bitch, I'm going to kill you.'" She watched Dar's nostrils flare, and her jaw muscles work. "Hey?"

Blue eyes pivoted and met hers. "He's toast."

Kerry touched her cheek. "Why? If anyone in the world deserves that, it's you, Dar. We both know it." She rubbed the soft skin gently. "Why are you so upset?"

"He promised me nothing would change," Dar snarled. "Bastard."

"Dar..." Kerry leaned closer, catching her eyes. "Weren't you just telling me this morning you didn't want to go back to the same old thing? This gives you a chance to change things, doesn't it? It makes you rank higher than everyone else?"

The long hands gripped the chair arms with convulsive strength, as Dar's gaze turned inward, thinking. Finally her body relaxed, and she took a deep breath, returning her eyes to Kerry's face. "If he thinks I'm moving to Texas, he's got a surprise coming."

Kerry felt the tension drain from her. "I'm willing to bet you won't even have to change offices, Dar. He just saw a way to fix a problem, and you were it." She gave her lover a smile. "He put you in charge of everything, and everybody, didn't he?"

The pale blue eyes blinked, considering.

"I just wonder why he didn't do it before," Kerry sighed.

Slowly, a grin started to twitch Dar's lips. "He knew he never had anyone who could step into my Ops job before," She drawled softly, putting a finger on the very tip of Kerry's nose.

"Oh no, no. I'm not...um..." Kerry held up a hand. "No Dar, I've only been here for a few months. No, I-- No, Dar, no. Stop looking at me like that."

A dark brow lifted in question.

"Dar, don't be silly. I can't do your job," Kerry wailed softly.

"No." Now Dar's gaze was sharp, and appraising, and reminded Kerry very much of the cool judging she'd received on that very first day. "You can't do what I did the way I did it, but I bet you could find a way to do it your way."

"I can't."

"Then I can't accept this," Dar stated quietly. "Because you're the only one I trust to replace me."

Kerry felt breathless. "Dar, that's not fair."

"No, it's not." Her lover replied. "Life sometimes isn't."

They looked at each other in silence. Dar sighed. "At least think about it," she asked quietly.

"Please?"

Kerry glanced down at her boots, kicking the carpet a little, then she looked up. "All right, I'll think about it." She nibbled her lower lip. "Give me a day or so, huh?"

Dar looked like she wanted to argue, but she nodded. "Sure, take your time." She settled back in her chair and shook her head. "I'm gonna kill him."

Kerry poked her lip out. "So am I," she muttered.

Slowly, they turned, and regarded each other seriously. Then Dar started to laugh, and after a moment, Kerry joined her. They wound down, then started up again, until Kerry just buried her face in Dar's shoulder, and curled a hand around her arm, helpless with giggles.

"I got an idea." Dar pulled her sneakered feet up and tucked an arm around her knees. "Why don't we change our tickets, and go to Houston, and show up at his house with rubber hatchets?"

Kerry peered up at her. "You really are a brat, aren't you?" She laughed.

A wicked, sexy smile answered her. "You bring that out in me," Dar told her, shaking a long finger at her. She looked up as the boarding agent was clearing her throat, and picking up her microphone. "Ah, looks like it's time to go."

Kerry finished off her coffee and stood, flexing her arms and wincing as her shoulder popped into place. "Ow." She reached down for her laptop, but found it taken from her fingers, and a warm hand touching her back. "Dar, I can carry my own bag."

"Yes, I know," Dar told her, lowering her voice. "But it's my privilege to do it for you."

"Ah. I see," Kerry mused, allowing herself to be gently steered towards the airplane ramp.

"Privilege," she murmured very softly, almost under her breath, as she handed over her boarding pass to the smiling agent. "Thank you."

She took back her stub, and entered the long boarding tunnel, along with a straggling of the few other passengers on the evening flight. She slid in to the window seat in the first row of the

airplane, and watched as Dar put their bags in the overhead bin, then sat down next to her, letting her hands rest on her thighs.

"Be glad to get home," Dar sighed.

"How's your knee doing?" Kerry asked, as she leaned on the console between them. "I noticed you weren't limping anymore."

Dar nodded a little. "Fine, it doesn't hurt. It was a little bit stiff this morning, but it feels great now." She gazed at the joint, hidden under stonewashed fabric. "Find out tomorrow when I run on it, I guess."

A blonde brow lifted at her. "And if it hurts?" She knew better than to argue about the running. Dar took a breath to answer, then found intense green eyes watching her. "I can worry about myself, you know."

A smile. "I know." Kerry wrinkled her nose. "But it's my privilege to do it, too," she told her lover. "It works both ways, Dar. We're responsible for each other, okay?"

"Okay." Dar snuggled back in the leather seat, and accepted a glass of wine from the steward, passing it to Kerry then taking one for herself. She took a sip and rolled it around her mouth a few times before she swallowed it.

Someone else being responsible for her. What a weird thought. It'd been a very, very long time since anyone had wanted to do that.

But you know, Dar considered it seriously. I think I like that idea.

KERRY KEYED THE door open, and entered, smiling as she heard the raucous yipping from Chino's room as she flipped the light on. "Okay, honey, hang on." She pushed the door back and let Dar move past her, then closed the door and plopped her laptop case down on the couch as Dar set the suitcases on the floor. "I'll go let her out, and I sure could use some coffee. You?" "Uh huh," Dar agreed, straightening. "Damn weather, we must have circled over Tampa for an hour," she complained, rubbing her neck. "Thank god we had seats in the front." She shouldered her laptop and moved into her office, turning on the light as she dropped the case on the desk. She moved around the other side, flipping her pc on and sitting down in the comfortable leather chair with a sigh. "Let's see, it's nine o'clock, it's Sunday, he's home." She cracked her knuckles, then wiggled her fingers before she punched a phone number on her speaker phone.

It rang once.

Twice.

A voice picked up. "Hello?"

Dar smiled, and steepled her fingers. "Hi."

Momentary silence. "Oh, oh, hello, Dar!" A pause. "Heh heh, so how was your little vacation?"

Dar let him wait a beat. "It was great until I picked up a goddamned newspaper at the airport a few hours ago," she growled intimidatingly. "And read my freaking name in it."

"Now, Dar," Alastair's voice turned soothing. "Let me explain."

"Explain?" Dar barked. "No no. It was perfectly clear to me, in black and white, in fact with a goddamned picture the size of a watermelon on top of it!"

"Dar...Dar...now listen." Alastair cleared his throat. "I tried to call you. I tried to page you several times, but you never answered me."

"I was on vacation," Dar reminded him. "You knew that." She looked up as Kerry entered, carrying a steaming cup, and dressed in a soft, brief cotton t-shirt which just barely covered her thighs. She grinned at her lover, almost forgetting the man on the phone.

"All right, well...but I tried to get you, Dar. I had to make a decision, and you know, when I've got to do it, I've got to do it. I can't just wait around for things to happen." He cleared his throat. "It was the right time. I needed something to boost things, and it worked!"

"What worked?" Dar asked, taking the cup with one hand, and tracing the soft curve of Kerry's leg muscles with her other.

"Stock went up five damned dollars!" Alastair chortled. "Now c'mon, you can't be that mad at me," he chided her. "Good grief, Dar, you'd think I'd asked you to go off and become a missionary. It was a promotion, in case you hadn't gotten that part down."

"What if I don't want it?" Dar asked, mildly. "I'm not moving my ass to Houston, Alastair, so forget it. Find some other dog out there to wag their tail for you."

Silence.

"Alastair?"

"Hmm?? Oh, sorry, Dar. I was just contemplating the image of you wagging your tail at me," the CEO remarked cheerfully. "Hell, I'd move to Miami for that, never mind bringing you out here." Dar sighed. "Alastair..."

"I know, I know, EEOC, but listen, Dar I never considered you coming out here. I've got a nice, peaceful office. I don't need Hurricane Dar coming in and blowing everyone through the windows out here. No, that's not why I did it." He paused. "I just thought it would make things easier there. Some of the problem seems to be from the committee mentality. I just made you a committee of one."

"That's a lot of added responsibility." Dar slid her hand up a bit, twitching the edge of the t-shirt, and getting her hand slapped. She looked up at Kerry with a wicked grin.

"Well I gave you a raise with it." Alastair sounded insulted. "I mean, Jesus, Dar, give me a break, willya? I made the package with the works, even keys to the executive bathrooms."

"In Houston," Dar remarked dryly. "Nifty, just what I needed Alastair. I don't need more crap, all right? The money's not the issue."

He sighed. "I thought you'd be flattered."

"Don't whine," Dar told him, testily. "Maybe I just like to be asked first, before I have to read about it in the goddamned daily news!" She glanced up as Kerry unfolded the business section of the paper she'd picked up outside the condo. "Oh shit." She covered her eyes.

"It's a nice picture of you," Kerry remarked, diplomatically. "I like your hair."

"Is that Kerry?" Alastair asked, brightly. "Hello there."

"Hi, Mr. M... Alastair," Kerry responded. "There's a big story on the front page of Business Monday in the Herald about Dar." She patted her lover, who had covered her eyes, and was moaning on her shoulder. "It looks great."

Alastair chuckled. "Oh yeah, they called up here for copy and a photo. I think they gave them the one from that company picnic last year." He cleared his throat. "So, what about it, Dar? I'll concede I should have asked you, but I really didn't think you'd mind."

Dar sighed, and studied her hands. "I need a few days to think about it, Alastair," she told the CEO, her eyes meeting Kerry's. "I'll let you know."

"Dar, I hate waiting," the CEO complained. "Besides, what am I supposed to tell the board?"

A soft chuckle, almost unheard. "Tell them I said to kiss my ass," Dar drawled in reply. "I'll let you know in a few days, Alastair." She paused. "Goodnight." She hit the release, then took a sip of her coffee, regarding her computer screen in pensive silence. "I wonder how much my raise was?"

Kerry flicked her fingers through the dark hair, then glanced at the phone when it rang. She picked it up. "Hello?"

A low, raspy voice responded, causing her to smile. "Oh, hi-- ...yeah-- ...yeah, that's your kid in the paper, all right." She watched Dar's whole demeanor perk up when her words registered.

"Here, say hello." She handed the phone to her lover and kissed her head. "I'm going to put my stuff away," she whispered, then eased out of the room.

Chino trotted over to her, licking her chops from the snack Kerry had provided the puppy and attempted to catch her feet. "Hey, cut that out." She laughed, reaching down and picking the animal up, then carrying her upstairs. "You leave your mom alone for a few minutes, okay? She's talking to her daddy."

"Woo?" Chino yawned at her. "Yeep."

"Yeah, I know." Kerry entered her room, and put the puppy down on the bed, then sat down herself, laying back onto the soft surface and regarding the ceiling. Chino curled up by her side, and she stroked the puppy gently as she thought.

"Chino, I'm twenty seven years old," she told the animal. "I'm not ready to be a vice president of anything more vital than the condo association here."

"Yeep." Chino licked her chops again.

"I mean, it's ridiculous. I can't do her job," Kerry argued, waving a hand. "I can't even begin to do it. Look what happened in only one day without her there?" She shook her head. "I don't know what she thinks she's doing by even suggesting it. She's just being nice, Chino. She can't be seriously thinking I can do that."

She played with the puppy's ears. "I can't do it. I'm not good enough, Chino." She felt a little sad. "I'm no match for her capabilities. Even though she says she put me in here because she thought I was, I'm not."

"That's not true," the low, vibrant voice came from the doorway.

Kerry sighed. "Dar..."

"It's not true, Kerry." Dar crossed the room and settled onto the bed. "I know you believe that, because you've had assholes telling you you're not capable half your life, but it's not goddamned true." Her voice deepened with anger. "And you do me a disservice by thinking I'd put someone into a job unless I believed in their ability." A pause. "Unless I believed in them."

"Dar--"

"I have to live with my decisions, Kerry. Do you really think I'd open myself, not to mention you, to the embarrassment of that kind of failure?"

Kerry had no answer for that, so she simply closed her eyes. They sat in silence for a moment, then she opened them. "I can't do it Dar. Please don't ask that of me." She put out a hand and captured one of her lover's. "All my life I've had to fight to make people believe I earned what I got. I'd never be able to fight hard enough on this one."

"But--"

"Dar." Kerry gazed up at her, heartsick. "You know it's true. No matter what I did, nine out of ten people in that company would believe I got that job because we're lovers."

Dar's shoulders slumped, as she exhaled in resignation. "But it's not true. I swear it, Kerry, I swear it. If I didn't even know your first name, but I'd worked with you as much as I have, I swear you're the best choice." She got up and paced to the French doors, opening them and going outside onto the breeze licked balcony, leaning on it and gazing out over the water.

The soft sound of the waves breaking came to her ears, as Kerry just lay there, unable to come up with even a ghost of a possible plan, one that would get both of them what they wanted. Or didn't want, as it happened.

"Okay." Dar had returned, and was standing in the doorway, arms crossed, jaw shifting lightly as she thought. "What about this--"

"Dar--"

"Just listen to me, will you?" Dar insisted. "Just listen a minute. How about, I don't fill the position." She moved forward, holding a hand up. "I just leave it empty because you're right, you've only been with us for a few months, and frankly, there isn't anyone in the immediate chain I'd be able to put in there anyway."

Kerry regarded her warily. "Yeah?"

"Okay, and you...you can take on a little bit at a time. No, wait...wait--just listen--" Another hand. "Just try things out, see if you think you can handle things." She paused, and waited, aware of the cautious, green eyes regarding her now in silence. "No pressure, you just fill in for me here and there, just to see how you like it."

"What if I don't?" Kerry asked, hesitantly.

"Then you stop, and after six or eight months, you'll know if you can do the job or not. If you can, great. You get it, and by that time you'll have proven yourself so thoroughly, everyone will be slamming my ass for not promoting you earlier. If you decide you can't then you can help me pick someone who can." Dar stopped again, and raised a brow at her. "What do you think?"

Kerry got up and paced around the area near the bed, her hands behind her in a classic pose, while a sleepy Chino watched curiously from the bed. Finally she stopped, and regarded her lover dourly. "I think you're too smart for your own good, Paladar."

A cautious twinkle appeared. "So, is that a yes?" Funny how nice that name sounded, coming off those lips.

Kerry ran the idea through her head again a few times, looking for pitfalls. It did make sense, and it gave her an excellent, fairly low pressure way to really find out if she had what it took, without putting herself, or Dar, or their relationship at risk. "I can just back off at any time?" she questioned closely. "If I get in over my head?"

"Anytime." Dar reassured her. "You just come and say, 'I can't do this.'"

Hmm. And by waiting, Dar would defuse the sure charges of nepotism that would start flying. In fact, by not acting immediately, she would put everyone else off balance. "All right," she finally said, putting her hands on her hips and exhaling. "I think I can cope with that."

Dar's head cocked gently to one side. "You sure?"

Kerry's brows lifted. "Now you're asking me that?" she demanded. "And don't give me those puppy dog eyes."

Dar's gaze dropped guiltily. "I... Kerry, I don't want you to think you're being forced into this. If you really don't want to do it, just tell me," she replied, in a steady voice. "I mean that."

The smaller woman let out a breath, then she walked over to where Dar was standing. She felt the soft carpet under her feet, and the cool breeze coming in the open doors. She stopped right next to Dar and looked up. She could see the tension in her lover's body, and the effort it was taking for Dar to keep a cool, calm facade.

Her choice.

What the hell. Life is short. "It's all right." She put a hand against Dar's belly, and gave her a tiny, friendly shove. "I can live with the compromise." She leaned forward and placed a kiss on Dar's collarbone. "I think it's a really smart idea."

Dar wrapped her arms around her partner, and pulled her close into a hug, tucking her head in against one shoulder and pressing her lips to the pale hair. "Thanks." She felt Kerry's body shift under the light cotton shirt and press warmly against her, and she rocked them both gently for a few quiet moments.

"Does that mean you'll be saying yes, then?" Kerry asked finally, in a murmur.

"I guess," Dar shrugged. "What the hell. It'll make for a damn fun meeting tomorrow anyway."

"Mm." Kerry listened to her heartbeat for a moment. "What did your dad have to say?"

Dar laughed a little, then cleared her throat. "Let me tell yah, rugrat," she imitated. "Was a fine thing me walking into the dad blasted govnmnet center station, jest to see my kid plastered all over the damn place. Made me spit my coffee halfway to Tampa."

Kerry burst into giggles. "Oh god, you sound just like him," she gasped, thumping her head against Dar's sturdy frame. "But," She quieted, and looked up. "I bet he was so proud of you, wasn't he?"

Dar shrugged nonchalantly. "He's not much into status stuff." She dismissed the idea. "I doubt it."

"Dar." Kerry took hold of her lapels and tugged them. "That is so bogus, and we both know it. I bet he was ready to explode he was so proud of his kid," she scolded her lover.

A hesitant smile. "Well, actually he did say he was going around and collecting copies of the paper to find the one with the best picture," she admitted sheepishly.

"Why don't we just give him an original?" Kerry asked gently. "We can go get your picture taken at one of those places in the mall. I bet he'd like that."

"No, no, I..." Dar hesitated. "Only if you're in it too." She changed her mind. "I'd...um... I'd kinda like one of those for my desk."

A startled, but giddy grin split Kerry's face. "You're on," she agreed enthusiastically. "This weekend."

Dar nodded, apparently satisfied. Then she glanced over her shoulder. "Hey, it's a pretty night out, wanna go for a little walk?" Chino's ears perked up at the sound of the word, and Dar smiled at the puppy. "And you too."

Kerry chuckled. "Sure, let me just throw some real clothes on. It's a little chilly for just a T-shirt."

"And nothing else," Dar teased, sliding a hand down her back and giving her a pinch on the behind.

"Eek." Kerry jumped a little, grabbing for Dar's fingers. "No fair!"

"Arf." Chino sat up and barked a puppy bark at her.

DAR WATCHED THE panes beyond the shutters slowly change from black to a dark gray, heralding the coming dawn. Kerry was sound asleep, her arms and legs wrapped around Dar like a blonde octopus, with her face buried against the taller woman's shoulder.

Well, she still had a few minutes, anyway. Dar reasoned, as she settled her arms around Kerry's warm body and exhaled. I could get used to this. She mused, resting her cheek against the soft, blonde hair.

She considered that a moment, listening to her own heartbeat in it's slow, even rhythm. *Who am I kidding?* She finally admitted. *I am used to it. I'm so used to it I don't know what I'd do without it anymore.*

It seemed so damned strange. She'd been so incredibly self-reliant all her life. She hadn't depended on anyone for anything for a very, very long time, and now, when you'd think she knew better, here she was willingly becoming dependent on something so intangible as love.

Wasn't that just the most screwed up thing you ever heard? Dar pulled Kerry a tiny bit closer, and was rewarded by a softly incoherent mumble and a tightening of Kerry's already snug hold. *But it feels so good.* Her most self-indulgent, hedonistic instincts whined for attention.

Admit it, Dar. She faced herself. *You've been starved for this for a damn long time, and now you're finally getting a good, strong dose of it, no wonder everything's going crazy in there.* She produced a contented sigh, and gave up worrying about it, turning her thoughts to the coming day instead.

Monday. Her brow creased. *Hmm. Monday with her the senior executive in charge. It could be fun.*

She wondered if she could get away with firing José. *Nah,* she decided, *probably not, but...* A grin. It would be fun to let him think she could. She gave the steadily lightening window a glance, then sighed. Time to get up, and get back into her routine, before her body got used to all this lazing around. With a silent chuckle, Dar stretched, then slowly started to untangle herself from her partner.

"Mm..." Kerry complained softly, tightening her grip. "No..."

"C'mon, cutie pie. I gotta go pay the piper," Dar murmured, pausing when she realized what she was saying. *Cutie pie? Oh Jesus, Dar.* She sighed, as Kerry burrowed closer, letting out a tiny mewling noise. "Hey..." She patted Kerry's cheek very softly. "C'mon now. I gotta get up."

An uneven intake of breath, then Kerry opened her eyes dazedly, peering up at her through half lidded and mostly unfocused orbs. "D...Dar... Wh..."

"Hey...it's okay. I'm going to go run, you go back to sleep," Dar told her soothingly, as she combed Kerry's hair back out of her eyes.

Kerry slowly let her go, and rubbed a hand across her face. "Oh god...I was having this dream...and there were gerbils everywhere. It was so strange," she murmured, obviously disoriented.

"Gerbils?" Dar repeated, in a puzzled tone.

"Yeah, lots of them, little brown gerbils in tiny green hospital scrubs, jogging," Kerry responded.

"It was really bizarre."

Dar regarded her bemusedly. "No more chocolate covered bananas for you before bed," she pronounced gravely, giving Kerry a little pat on the belly. "Not with dreams like that."

Kerry rolled over onto her back. "Ungh, yeah, I think you've got a point." She stifled a yawn.

"Give me a second to shake out the cobwebs and I'll go with you," she offered. "I could use some salt air."

Dar contemplated telling her lover she didn't have to, then reflected on how much more pleasant it was to have company during her run.

She kept her mouth shut, and merely rolled onto her side, reaching over and gently rubbing Kerry's arms and legs to get her blood flowing. "Couple of laps and a quick breakfast at the beach club?" she suggested, with a grin. "It's Monday. They've got those black walnut pancakes you like."

"Doesn't that defeat the purpose?" Kerry laughed, as she rolled out of bed and stood, arching her back and running her hands through her hair.

Dar blinked appreciatively as the pearly dawn light outlined her lover's lithe body. "What purpose?" she asked, her own body now fully, interestedly awake. *Amazing how fast blood can rise from the groin to the brain.* She mused wryly. *Or maybe it was the other way around.* She thought about that for a while, then realized Kerry was standing, hands on hips, watching her with uplifted eyebrows.

And other things.

Dar gave herself a mental slap. "Uh, sorry. Let me get outta here." She hauled herself out of the warm bed and trudged towards the bathroom, glad, at least, that her knee seemed to be holding up just fine. She flipped on the light and winced at the brightness, hearing the low moan of protest from Kerry who was behind her, nuzzling her back.

Whoa. Another rush of blood. Definitely in the wrong direction. "Um..." She felt a pair of hands slip around her waist and clasp in front of her, and a light nibble along her shoulder blades.

"Kerry?"

"Mm?" The blonde head poked past her elbow, and peered up at her, half obscured by Dar's own body. "Problem?"

With a rueful grin, Dar put the tip of her finger against Kerry's nose. "Work before pleasure," she reminded her.

"Hmm." Kerry nibbled a rib, licking it delicately. "You sure?"

Dar felt her heart double its pace, and her breathing pick up. Well, it could be considered an aerobic exercise, right? She turned inside the circle of Kerry's arms, and cupped her chin, drawing her head up and surrendering to the insistent surge of sexual feeling. Her fingers brushed over warm skin as she reached blindly for the light, dousing it and throwing them back into the murky shadows.

Not that they needed light, of course. Dar slid her hands down and got a grip on Kerry's waist, half lifting, half gently tossing her back into the waterbed, as she followed, finding herself being rolled over and straddled as a soft, lazy chuckle trickled from Kerry's chest.

Whoa. Dar felt the tingle as it spread across her skin. *Definitely aerobic.* She took the opportunity to start at her lover's knees, and slid her hands up the muscular thighs, then inward, and across Kerry's abdomen, which tightened in reflex as she spread her fingers and left little trails of goose bumps after her touch. Then she pushed up, lifting Kerry a little before settling her in a more comfortable position. *Hmm...a little weight training, too.* She chuckled, as Kerry's lips started a progression down her neck. *Maybe we can put out a video.*

She sucked in a breath in reaction as Kerry's lips moved lower, and their bodies slid together.

Then again, maybe not.

THEY ENDED UP making their laps, but skipping breakfast, resulting in their crossing only one ferry later than usual after a hurried, shared shower. "Whew." Kerry checked her hair in the mirror on her side of the Lexus. "That was the most entertaining Monday morning I've had in a while." She gave Dar a look, her body still tinglingly aware of her partner's close presence. Dar chuckled and sighed. "Oh yeah." She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, enjoying her relaxed, good mood. "Sure beats a staff meeting." She glanced at Kerry, and they both laughed. "Okay, let's see what's going on." Dar punched a number into the cell phone strapped to the dashboard.

"Good Morning, Operations, Maria is speaking." The voice came back, a tad more official sounding than usual, given that it was eight o'clock in the morning.

"Morning, Maria," Dar drawled.

"AEEEEIII!" the secretary squealed, startling Kerry who jumped. "Dar! Dios Mio! You are higher than el presidente now!!!"

"Well, yeah, sort of." Dar laughed.

"Oye, Dar. Have you seen the paper this morning?" Maria inquired.

"What paper?" Dar asked, innocently.

"You mean the one with her picture in it?" Kerry interrupted helpfully. Maria laughed. "Si, si-- Mark has put the picture into the computer, and we all have it as our screens."

"What?" Dar barked.

"Oh, that's wild," Kerry chortled. "Did he get it on mine?"

"Don't you start in," Dar warned her, shaking a finger. "Maria, you tell him I want that off the desktops by the time I get in there, or he'll be wearing one of those monitors."

"Aww, c'mon, Dar, " Kerry objected. "I think it's great."

"It's not your picture, is it now?" her boss shot back. "Maria, get Mark on the phone."

"Dar," Kerry turned gently pleading eyes on her. "I wanna see it. I bet he did a great job. It was a fantastic picture of you."

Frustrated blue eyes fixed on her face. "Absolu..." Dar felt herself melting at the sight of those beseeching orbs, and sighed. "All right, just until we get there. But then, off it goes!"

Kerry blew her a kiss and smiled, getting an aggrieved look in response. "Did you have a nice weekend, Maria?" She directed her attention to the phone.

"Oh, si, Kerrisita, and you?" The secretary sounded pleased.

"Yeah. We had a lot of fun. We went horseback riding and sailing," Kerry told her.

"Kerry fell off her horse," Dar added sweetly. "Then dumped me in the lake."

"You jumped overboard," Kerry objected. "That wasn't my fault."

"You could have told me it was fifty degrees. Water isn't supposed to be that cold," Dar grouched.

"Maria, we'll be there in about ten minutes." She started up the Lexus and drove it off the ferry, turning onto the causeway and heading for the office. "Picture on the desktop...I swear."

Kerry snickered, half covering her eyes as she watched the busy streets go by.

Chapter Twenty-One

ENTERING THE BUILDING was an odd experience. Kerry felt her eyes flickering around, as she tried to catch the few other occupants looking at Dar. She knew they were, but they really didn't get the true impact until they both got on the elevator, and the conversation cut off as though the other riders had suddenly contracted acute, spontaneous laryngitis.

It was deafening. "So," Dar finally said, making everyone jump. "How's the weather been here?"

"Fine."

"Great."

"Warm."

"Raining."

"Lousy."

Dar nodded. "I see." She leaned back against the wall as the elevator seemed to take forever in its upward motion. "Good to hear."

A cleared throat. "How was...the...um...weather in North Carolina?" This was Miles, a senior auditor of Duks.

"Cold," Dar replied, succinctly. "Rained the first couple of days, but after that it got kind of nice."

"Ah." Miles rubbed his earlobe. "Well, it rained here." He cleared his throat.

"Um...congratulations."

A murmur of agreement rose quickly, and several very grateful eyes fastened on the auditor's face.

Fortunately, the doors slid open, allowing them to escape. "Thanks," Dar commented wryly, as they scooted out, leaving her and Kerry to continue up another two floors. "Think I was the topic of conversation before we got on?"

"Oh, yeah." Kerry nodded firmly, as the doors opened and they got out. "Wait. I'll go down to the cafeteria for coffee, see how fast a hush falls over that room, despite the fact that most of the conversation is in Spanish, and I know about six words of it," she remarked wryly. "You want some?"

"Oh, god, yes," Dar murmured pathetically, as they reached the outer door to her office. "And all the cheese pastalitos they have." She pushed the door open, and smiled at Maria. "Morning." The secretary beamed at her. "Buenos Dias, jefa." She waggled her fingers at Kerry. "Buenos Dias, Kerrisita."

Kerry grinned at her. "I'm going down for some café, would you like some, Maria?" She accepted the secretary's nod, then gave Dar a little pat on the back. "See you in a bit." She slipped out the door, leaving her boss and Maria in the outer office.

"Any mail?" Dar crossed to the desk, shifting the strap on her laptop case a little. "I was expecting the new batch of contracts in." She reached down to pick up the stack in the in box, when her hand was captured.

"Mi Madre." Maria's eyes widened. "Dar, that is so beautiful."

The executive found herself suddenly speechless, as her brain frantically rooted around for some kind of coherent response. She'd forgotten she was wearing the damn thing, and on 'that' finger, and that surely someone would notice.

"Um...thanks," she finally replied, taking her hand back and flexing the fingers a touch nervously. "Listen, I'll be inside, trying to catch up." She clutched her papers, and headed for her office, ducking inside the door and closing it behind her with a sigh.

Then she looked up, stopping short as she caught sight of her desk. "Holy shit."

KERRY PUT HER hands behind her back as she leaned on the wall, gazing with total lack of interest at the buff weave on the inside of the elevator. It would be a weird day, she knew, and as if to confirm that, the elevator stopped on the ninth floor and two of the marketing secretaries got on. Their chatter stopped the minute they saw her, and they lapsed into silence.

I could get tired of this real quick, Kerry decided. "Hi," she remarked casually.

They exchanged glances. "Oh, hi, Kerry," the older one said, a fake smile plastered across her face. "So, how are things?"

"Great," Kerry replied. "How about you?"

"Oh...great...great." She turned to her companion. "Right?"

The shorter of the two women nodded. "Except that it's Monday, yep, everything's terrific."

An awkward silence proceeded to fall. Fortunately, the elevator reached the bottom floor, and they could all escape, right into a crowd of people just getting there.

A crowd that included Steven Fabracini. Kerry met his eyes squarely as she exited, unable to resist giving him a smile as people edged aside to get out of the way. "Morning."

His nostrils twitched. "Morning," he replied quite stiffly. "Congratulations."

Her breeding held, surprisingly. "Thank you," Kerry responded without artifice. "Excuse me." She edged past him and cleared the throng, half expecting him to follow her.

"Hey, Kerry!" Mary Lou hailed her. "Well done!" she said, in a voice a little louder than probably was necessary.

"Thanks." Kerry waved a hand casually at her. "It was all Dar. I just held the scalpel tray."

The accountant sidled up to her. "Not what I heard," she said, in a lower tone. "My brother-in-law works in the data center up there. He said you guys were incredible."

"We got the job done. That's what mattered." Kerry headed off towards the cafeteria, shaking her head a little. At the entrance, she almost collided with Mark, who was just coming out. "Oh. Hey."

"Hey!" Mark gave her a big grin. "Great, that means the big kahuna's here too, right?"

Kerry muffled a smile. "If you mean Dar, yes. She's upstairs. We just got here." It was so nice just to have someone be normal, she reflected. "Just trying to get things settled down. It's a little weird today."

"Today?" Mark took her elbow and steered her inside the café, where they settled on two of the padded stools. "You shoulda been here on Friday. Man, after you guys brought the network back up, everyone was going nuts. Then all off a sudden all the suits get called into a video conference call, and the next thing I know, we got an email saying Dar'd been promoted."

"Wow." Kerry laughed softly, then gave the waitress her order. "I think we slept through all that. Was that when you called?"

"Uh huh." Mark sipped his coffee, regarding her. "Word's out about you guys," he added, lowering his voice quite a bit. "I mean, like big time."

Kerry picked up a napkin, looking around and seeing the eyes dart off of her. "I figured," she replied. "After that whole thing with Steven, I knew he'd spread that around." She exhaled. "We'd pretty much decided to just be open about it anyway. After all, Alastair doesn't care."

"Mm," Mark grunted. "Kinda rough on you, though, isn't it?" He gave her a sympathetic look. "People assume shit."

Yeah. Well. "They can bite me," Kerry responded. "They assumed all kinds of things anyway, Mark. The hell with them." She glanced up as her order arrived. "Thank you." She reached out and took the bag. "Let me get back upstairs. I know it's going to be a zoo today."

"Hey." Mark touched her hand, giving her a hesitant grin. "Nice ring ya got there."

Kerry paused, flexing her fingers a little. "Thanks. Yeah...um..." She felt herself blush. "Dar gave it to me."

"She's got good taste." The MIS chief admired it. "But then, we kinda knew that." He winked at her, chuckling as her blush deepened. "Listen, don't let all the crap bother you, Kerry. You do a great job, and most everyone knows that. A lot of the shit's just jealousy. There're people that have wanted to get inside that office, and if you'll excuse the disgusting comment, inside Dar's skirt for years." He shrugged. "It drives 'em nuts that you just walked in here, and shazam." He snapped his fingers. "You got the job, the perks, and the hottest looking VP this company ever had all in one, bigass fell swoop."

Kerry took the cover off her coffee and took a swallow. "Thanks, Mark. I know it's kinda hard to believe. In fact, sometimes I find it kinda hard to believe myself," she added, in a low tone. "It's like magic, you know?" She glanced up at him. "I feel like a little kid at the circus sometimes." He gazed at her, a little disconcerted. "I don't know, that's kinda beyond me, Kerry. I don't know about a lot of that stuff, but I do know Dar's been through a lot of shit, and if she finally found someone she really likes, fuck the company, you know?"

That got a smile from Kerry. "Yeah, I do know," she agreed quietly. "We'll work it out. Its just going to take some time for everything to settle down again. " She leaned forward, changing the subject firmly. "Did you really put her picture up on everyone's desktop?"

He grinned. "You friggen betcha." He stood, and indicated that she precede him. "C'mon, I've been hiding cause I know she's gonna kick my ass when she sees it, but it was too good a shot to pass up."

Kerry laughed, and held the door for him. "Oh yeah, she was having a fit, but I convinced her to leave it until we got in, because I wanted to see it."

They walked outside and almost crashed into Eleanor and José, who were entering. Both executives backed up, and gave them dirty looks. "Good morning." Kerry smiled at them.

"Good morning," José replied gruffly, circling her as though she were some kind of dangerous animal. Eleanor followed him without a word.

Kerry and Mark exchanged looks. "Ooo." The MIS manager winced. "Gonna be some meeting this morning."

Yeah. Kerry watched the reactions as they got back into the elevator, and noticed a subtle, but distinct edging away from her. *Is there such a thing as a scarlet L,* she mused. *Or do they think it's contagious?* She leaned back, trying to wash the thought out of her mind.

"Hey, Kerry."

She looked up, to see Elaine, one of the data entry supervisors actually coming closer to her.

"Morning."

"I hear you guys did a kick ass job up in NC, way cool," Elaine commented, with a grin. "You going to meet with the climbing group Wednesday?"

Kerry smiled, relaxing a little. "Yes, I think so. My hand's a little sore but I think it'll be okay."

She gave Elaine a grateful look. "I missed going this past week; be nice to get back to it." Her eyes moved to where they were getting a disgusted look from one of the administrative assistants. "Do you have a problem?" she asked the woman directly.

Only the squeak of the elevator was heard for a long moment. Kerry held the woman's gaze, her own unamused and stony. "You can say yes, ma'am, or no ma'am, take your pick," she added, icily.

The woman sucked in a breath. "No, ma'am. I have no problem."

The doors slid open on the eighth floor and the two younger women escaped hastily, leaving the doors to close after them. Kerry settled back against the wall and sighed. "Jerks."

Elaine rolled her eyes. "Phobes." She shook her head, then glanced at Kerry. "Don't let them get to you."

Them. Kerry considered, as the elevator went to the fourteenth floor. "So it's us and them," she mused. "Are there a lot of us?" she asked Elaine curiously.

An enigmatic smile crossed the tall blonde's face. "I'll send you an email," she remarked, as the doors slid open, and they got out. "You'd be surprised."

Kerry inhaled, as she watched Elaine and Mark saunter off down the hall. "Would I?" She shook her head and trotted towards Dar's office, opening the outer door and slipping in. "Hi Maria. I'm back," The secretary glanced over, and smiled at her. "I got you some coffee."

"Muchas Gracias, Kerrisita." She pointed at the door. "I think el jefa is still in the shock, you better go see."

Puzzled, Kerry set down Maria's little cup of cafacito, then took her bag and entered Dar's office.

The scent of roses almost bowled her over. "Jesus." She blinked, trying to find her lover behind a huge arrangement of three colors of the flowers, which dwarfed her desktop. "Hello? Dar? Do I need to go get a machete?"

Blue eyes peeked out from behind a creamy, peach colored rose. "Hi." It was Dar, at her most sheepish. "It's a little big, huh?"

Kerry edged around the desk, to find her lover slouched in her chair, regarding her flowers with some trepidation. "Dar, it's gorgeous. Who sent it?" There must have been three dozen blooms, a dozen in red, in peach, and in yellow. The scent was almost overwhelming.

Wordlessly, Dar handed her the card she'd found on it.

"Awww..." Kerry bit her lip, giving her companion a delighted look. "That is sooo sweet, Dar. I told you he was proud of you." She examined the huge bouquet and smiled a touch wistfully.

"What a nice thought."

Dar leaned back in her chair, bracing one foot against her desk and fiddling with her pencil, looking oddly adolescent. "Guess so," she replied gruffly, almost but not quite masking the little grin that trembled around her lips.

Kerry leaned over and kissed her on the head. "You're daddy's little girl, all right." She watched as Dar struggled with what was evidently an overload of emotion, then finally sighed, and gave into a broad grin. "Here." She handed over the coffee, then gently cupped a rose in her hand and sniffed it. "Oh god, these are incredible. I love that smell."

"Mm." Dar buried her muzzle in the cup and regained her composure. "Guess we can take them home and put them on the dining room table for a few days, hmm?"

Kerry giggled. "Thank god you're driving, not me. I can't imagine trying to get us and these flowers into the Mustang." She looked past Dar to the monitor, and laughed. "Oh wow. He did a great job with that!"

Dar sighed, peeking at the screen. Mark had taken the shot from the newspaper, and scanned it in, then composed a nice looking scroll background, with little dancing Dogberts all over it. "I'm gonna kill him for this," she groused, then sighed. "I have thirty two pages of mail to get through, six inches of inbox, three meetings, and I can't even get to my desk because there's a jungle on it." She paused melodramatically. "Can't I just go home?"

Kerry divided her inbox stack. "I'll take half." She carefully moved the floral arrangement, carrying it over to the side credenza, where she set it down and arranged the flowers carefully.

"There." Then she crossed back over and headed towards the door to her office. "Forward me any stuff you don't want to deal with. I'm going to get started on my own avalanche." She looked back over her shoulder, regarding a happily munching Dar. "Dar, at least save a few for after lunch. You're going to get sick if you eat all of those."

Dar licked a flake of pastry off her lips, and took a sip of coffee, then poked her tongue out at her lover.

Kerry sighed, and shook her head. "What a little punk." She opened the door and slipped through it, heading for her own office.

DAR RECKONED SHE would not have drawn more attention walking down the hall into Personnel if she'd been stark naked. She could feel the eyeballs following her, and if she'd wanted to, heard the comments that followed.

Deliberately she ignored them, rapping lightly on Mariana's door.

"Come."

She unlatched the lock and walked inside, closing the door behind her as she faced the woman behind the desk. "Morning."

Mari leaned back. "Morning" she replied wryly. "How's it feel to be queen?"

Dar chuckled and took a seat facing her across the desk. "Thanks for the warning."

Mariana threw up her hands. "You don't think we all tried to call you? What did you think those pages were, us asking what to order you for lunch or something? Good grief, Dar!"

"I know." Dar leaned on the chair arm. "We turned everything off for a few days. Serves me right."

The Personnel VP pulled a packet from her desk and tossed it across to her visitor. "That's for you," she advised. "Explains your new benefits, and obligations being a member of the board, and so on."

"Mm." Dar observed the packet but didn't reach for it. "Keys to the private baths in there too?"

Mari chuckled. "The keycodes. We are a technology company, after all," she said. "It really was unexpected, Dar. We were all thrilled when everything started working again--I mean..." She gave a self-deprecating hand wave. "Most of us really didn't understand what was going on but hearing the ops people cheering was great."

"Long night," Dar agreed. "Lot of hard work for a lot of people."

"A lot of brilliant improvisation, from what we heard," Mariana said. "From both of you."

Dar nodded. "Couldn't have done it without Kerry," she said. "She definitely proved why she's where she is."

They both were quiet for a minute, as the multiple level of meanings filtered through.

"Alastair sent me a policy memo," Mari went on. "You have hire/fire for the whole operation here, complete." She picked up a folder from her inbox and dropped it on top of Dar's packet.

"Want that to be the first one? I've got enough sworn statements of pretty much everything that if he sues, we'll win."

Dar leaned over and picked the folder up, opening it to find Fabracini's personnel records inside. She glanced up. "José should fire him," she said. "He hasn't done anything but screw him over too."

"He should," Mari agreed. "But he won't." She leaned back. "He had the afternoon to spread his poison around before you saved the day. Damage was done."

Dar shrugged. "You mean about me and Kerry?"

"That too."

"I don't care. Kerry doesn't care. Alastair doesn't care. Everyone else doesn't matter." Dar stood up. "I'll take a look at this and let you know what I decide to do." She picked up the other packet.

"See you at the staff meeting."

"That should be fun."

Dar paused at the door and peered back at her. "For me." Finally, she grinned, and winked at Mari, before she left and let the door close behind her.

Mariana gazed at the door, then she sighed and leaned back again. "This is either going to be the best or the worst decision he's ever made," she mused. "Talk about no guts, no glory. Alastair McLean, I hope you end up swimming in glory because otherwise I'm going to find someone else's nightmare to be part of."

"I'LL BE RIGHT IN." Dar gave Mariana a wave, as she ducked into the bathroom. Fortunately, it was empty, so she spent a moment just twitching at her clothes, and giving herself dire looks in

the mirror. She was wearing the gunmetal gray suit today, with a black silk shirt, the only splash of color the pin Kerry had gotten her down on the boardwalk.

Okay, Paladar. Her jaw muscle twitched. *They're all in there, waiting on you. This isn't an executive committee meeting anymore. This is a staff meeting. They're your staff now.*

You are their leader.

Dar winced, and her face wrinkled up into a grimace. Ugh. The slightly widened blue eyes gazed back at her mournfully. *I'm too young for this.* With a sigh, she reached up and ran her fingers through her dark hair, arranging it in some kind of order, then she took a deep breath, and let it out, settling the neatly pressed fabric over her broad shoulders. *Okay. How do we do the 'tude. Grumpy? Casual? Bitchy? Annoyed? Hey-- I could say I was PMSing.* She considered that for a moment, then discarded the idea. *Nah. They'd never be able to tell the difference.*

She lifted a brow experimentally. *How about...* She let a sardonic grin edge across her face, to join the brow. *Amused. Okay, I can do amused. I'll just think of them all in their underwear.*

The grin widened. *And I've seen some of them like that, too.* With one last look, she left the bathroom and headed into the executive conference center, where the rest of the upper management staff was waiting.

"Where in the hell is she?" Duks whispered, nudging Mariana with one knee.

The Personnel VP glanced at him. "She'll be here in a minute. Would you calm down?" she whispered back, eyeing the restless group. José and Eleanor were seated next to each other, with frosty looks on, and the rest of the staff was a mixture of excited, annoyed, scared, or just plain bored.

The door opened, and everyone stopped talking, as Dar let herself in. All eyes fastened on their new CIO, who strode across the room with a smooth, powerful stride, and took her end chair in a blizzard of self-confidence that simply rolled down the table at them.

In silence, Dar let her icy blue gaze go from face to face, then a slow, lazy, amused grin pulled her lips upward just slightly. "Morning." Her low, richly toned voice echoed slightly in the silence. "Let's get started, shall we?"

Everyone swallowed, Mariana noted, astounded at the amount and quality of sheer presence Dar could produce when she was in the mood to.

"For...obvious...reasons we didn't have a meeting last week." Dar put her fingertips on the table, and leaned on them slightly, the fabric of her jacket tensing across her shoulders. "And since I've got crap piled up on my desk six feet tall, this is going to be a short one."

Silence.

"First item on the agenda." The tall, dark haired woman gazed down the table at them. "Every department gets a fifteen percent operating budget cut. Effective today."

Jaws dropped.

Dar waited.

"Hold on a goddamned minute." José stood up. "What in the hell, Dar?"

A chorus of protest rose after him, belatedly courageous once the Sales VP had broken ice, so to speak.

Dar waited. Silently. Blue eyes roving from face to face, her attitude one of quiet menace.

The voices trailed off, until they were left again in uneasy silence.

"I'm going to take that budget, and duplicate the networking hub," Dar continued, as if nothing had been said. "Because, let me tell you, ladies and gentlemen, I am not spending another night out freezing my ass off in North Carolina jury rigging some goddamned patch panel to run this company off of."

Duks chewed on his pencil. "Budgets are already figured for the quarter, Dar," he commented quietly.

"Rework them," she answered back, inflexibly. "Or, sell your damn desk chairs, I don't care, but I'm going to go ahead with the facilities regardless."

José was still standing. He put his hands on his hips. "I think we should consider the options, here Dar, and I--"

She pointed at him. "This...is...not...a...committee anymore." Each word was spoken sharply, with fierce enunciation. "There are no options."

Silence. Dar watched them. "All right, we're going to go around the table, you bring up what you think you need to, but be quick about it. I've got a ton of things to do." She finally sat down, and took a sip of water from the glass in front of her, then leaned back and gazed at Duks, who was closest to her. A brow lifted at him.

Impudently, he poked the very tip of his tongue out, where only she could see it.

"Congratulations, my friend."

Her eyes twinkled soberly at him, the faintest hint of a grin pulling at the corners of her mouth.

"Thank you."

"I have some good news," Duks went on. "The retirement fund had an investment in a group of technicals, and we made a killing last week. We're thirty percent over expectations in the fund."

Murmurs went around the room.

"Nice," Dar commented. "Who picked those?"

Duks named one of his assistants. "Damn good job of analyzing," he added. "I put a commendation in his file."

"Put a little commendation in his paycheck," Dar suggested wryly. "Before Merrill Lynch steals him."

A faint, nervous chuckle skittled across the table. "That it for you?" Dar inquired.

Duks nodded, then turned, to where Mariana was seated next to him. "Next?"

They went around the room, receiving clipped replies from José and nothing from Eleanor, and everyone left when she closed the meeting, save Duks and Mari. Dar waited for the door to close, then glanced at them. "So."

Duks leaned on his elbows. "That was different," he commented. "Giving notice that your reign is not going to be business as usual, my friend?"

"Give me a break," Dar snorted, leaning back and allowing herself to relax from the almost painful tension of the meeting. Her entire body ached from it, and she exhaled in relief. "You know it won't last. Next week they'll all be in here bitching again."

Mariana laughed softly. "I don't know about that, Dar. You made quite an impression. You have a very powerful presence, you know."

Dar gave her a wry grimace. "Well, I don't hold out a lot of hope, but at least we didn't spend five hours going over crap we've been through for the last two years." She sighed, and studied her pen, which she turned over and over in her fingers. "I'm going to need to pull a project team on that new facility."

Mariana nodded. "I gathered. You want to put in a new orgid for you? We can slot them in there, and charge them off against the operating budget."

"Sounds good," Dar agreed mildly. "Well, I've got two phone conferences, four client briefings, and a major proposal to review, so... You two going to be around later? Maybe we can all have dinner or something."

Duks and Mari exchanged looks. "I hear you know a good Thai restaurant down on Biscayne. Sound good?" Mari asked. "We can save all our chitchat for there. Will you be able to unbury Kerry from her desk by then?"

Dar chuckled. "Yeah, I think so." She caught their eyes and realized where they were looking. Just barely keeping herself from sticking her hands in her pockets, she merely flexed her fingers instead. "I'm not going to fill my position right away."

Silence, as they digested that. "Good idea," Mariana nodded approvingly. "You slowly going to shift responsibilities to Kerry?"

"Yes."

"Smart." Duks nodded also. "Give everyone a chance to see what she can do."

Silence again. Mariana cleared her throat gently. "Are you going to um..." she considered, fishing for a way to ask delicately. "Change your beneficiary information in CAS?"

Dar almost laughed, as she kept her eyes on her pen. "Yeeahh...it looks like it," she admitted, glancing up to see a twinkle in Mari's eyes. "Talk about an obscure way of asking."

Duks chuckled. "C'mon, Mari, we've got things to do, and so does the grand poobah, here. Let's be getting a move on." He stood, then leaned over and clapped Dar on the shoulder. "Good job, Dar."

"Likewise," Mari added, as they pushed their chairs into place. "I think it's going to turn out for the best for everyone."

Dar felt her pager go off as she watched them leave, then she sighed, looking around the empty conference room. "I sure hope so." She stood and went to the phone nearby and rang the office.

"Maria, what's up?"

"Ah... Dar. I was not going to bother you, but it has been some time now, and I...that Michelle Graver person is here."

"Oh." Dar winced. "Great, is she down there waiting? I'll come down. We're done here."

"Aie. No, no, Dar. She came a half an hour ago. She was upset at something, but Kerry took her away to fix things."

Kerry? Oh. Great. Dar tried to remember if she had a first aid kit in her office. "Um...did she say where they were going?"

"No, but I think they were in her office." Maria supplied helpfully. "Is good I called you? I don't like that woman, Dar. She is very sneaky looking."

Yeah. "Okay, yeah, that was good, Maria. I'll take care of it." Dar sighed. "Talk to you later." She hung up, then grabbed her portfolio and headed purposefully out the door.

KERRY NIBBLED HER lip in thought, then added a couple of lines to her email, clicking on the send once she'd reread it for the fifth or sixth time. She checked her watch, and paused, wondering how Dar's meeting was going, before she punched a few numbers on the speakerphone. "Hi, Maria?"

"Si...si...uno momento, senora." The secretary sounded harried, and Kerry could hear an angry voice in the background.

A vaguely familiar voice. "Maria, what's going on?"

"Ah--we have a Ms. Graver here, she is looking to be speaking with Dar, but I am telling her she is in a meeting." Maria answered. "Is problems, I think."

Kerry drummed her fingers on her desk. *Michelle Graver; huh?* A grim smile crossed Kerry's face. "Let me see if I can help her, Maria. Bring her down here," she suggested. "Who knows how long Dar's going to be."

Maria sounded very grateful. "Gracias, Kerrisita. We'll be right down." She hung up, leaving Kerry to run a quick eye over her desk, and straighten the stack of papers in her outbox with a push. Then she turned her monitor slightly and checked her reflection, trying on one of Dar's arched eye browed looks for size.

"Uck. I can't do that." She chuckled a little. "I look too weird." A gentle tug on her sleeves got her shirt straight, then she took a breath and settled herself, as a soft knock came on the door. "C'mon in."

Maria opened the door and entered, holding it for Michelle Graver to enter behind her. The short Disney executive brushed past her, and stalked across the carpet, tossing a folder down on Kerry's desk. "I doubt you can help."

Kerry held her eyes for a moment, then she pulled the folder towards her and flipped it open.

"Please, have a seat," she murmured, as she studied the contents. "Maria, here are the reports so far, and the project Dar was working on." She reached out and lifted the stack of papers and offered them. "I think she wanted these requisitions cleared before lunchtime."

"Si." Maria took the stack. "We are making special order today for lunch, the Chinese food, you want?"

Kerry paused. "Sure. Yeah, that would be great." She pulled a paper out, and keyed up one of her sessions. "Hang on a minute. I need to request these real-time." She rattled her keys, then turned. "Um...I'll take a beef with snow peas, and you can order Dar a Szechwan shrimp." She took a guilty bit of satisfaction in saying that while Michelle was sitting there, and she didn't miss the narrowing of those little beady eyes.

"Is good." Maria scribbled a note, then left, abandoning a tense silence behind her.

Kerry returned her attention to the screen. "This utilization report shows you're losing packets." Michelle clapped her hands twice. "Very good," she remarked sarcastically. "I'm impressed. Did she train you on all the little blinking lights, or just the most important ones?"

Kerry felt an insidious urge to make an inappropriate gesture, and stifled it. "No, actually, I learned that in college," she answered the question at face value. "Have you made any changes to your internal network?" she asked, politely.

"No," Michelle answered. "It's not on our end, and my people have been complaining about it for two weeks, and nothing's been done. I want it cleared up, or you can tell your...boss...the next contact will be from our legal department to terminate the contract."

Briefly, Kerry wondered why Michelle had found it necessary to fly all the way from Orlando to tell her that, then figured it was probably just an excuse. "Hold on." She started a routine running, watching the results and ignoring the impatient woman across the desk.

Well, Kerry, if you're going to even think about doing Dar's job, better start here. She watched a gauge, then dialed a number. "Mark?"

"Yessup?" The ever-present sound of rattling keys came through clearly. "And what can I do for you, Ms. K?"

"Um--" She gave him a circuit number. "Can you sniff that for me, please? They're losing one out of every three or four packets."

"Sure." Mark busied himself for a moment. "Okay, it'll take about ten minutes to run the analyzer over it. I'll get back to you."

"Thanks." *Ten minutes. Ho boy.* She glanced up, meeting Michelle's eyes. "Would you like some coffee?"

"I'd like my problem solved," the executive answered shortly.

"I'm working on that," Kerry told her. "And if you don't mind, could I have the name of the person your group talked to in support? I'd like to follow up to find out why this wasn't handled." "You should have a record of that," Michelle replied. "It's not my job to keep track of your people."

Kerry checked a screen. "That's true, but we don't have a record of anyone calling in from your operations center, and I'd really like to check on what happened." She waited, but Michelle didn't answer her. "Look, Ms. Graver, you obviously came here for some answers, and I'd like to give them to you, but I need some help."

"And I don't want excuses, just fix the problem," the other woman answered. "I'm not here to help you fix your internal screw ups."

Stupid, stuck up, obnoxious bitch. "Okay." Kerry reviewed the data, then typed in a request and waited for it to come back. *You're just jealous because Dar won't give you the time of day, aren'tcha? Not even way back when, before we were even that close. Nyah nyah.* She punched a number into the phone, and waited. "Hello, this is Kerry Stuart in Operations. Can I speak with a supervisor, please?"

A moment of rustling, then a voice. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I need to know who there's been troubleshooting with the Disney Orlando account," she requested quietly.

Keys rattled. "Um--there's no record of them calling in, ma'am."

"I know," Kerry replied. "But they say they have, so I need to know who's handling the problem they reported."

The man sounded confused. "Okay. I'll get the leads to ask each tech, can I call you back?"

"Sure." Kerry hung up the phone, then she folded her hands on her desk and regarded Michelle in pensive silence. "You sure you wouldn't like some coffee?"

Graver didn't answer at once. She stood, and wandered around the office instead peering out Kerry's window at the placid Atlantic, then she turned and leaned her back against it, studying the back of Kerry's head.

It took everything she had not to turn around, but she did it, examining the next thing in her inbox instead.

"You're not just a bit of good looking fluff, are you?" Michelle finally asked, in a speculative voice.

Now she turned, and crossed her legs, leaning on the arm of her chair. "I'm not sure I understand the question," she replied. "I'm here to do a job, Ms.

Graver, not for any other reason."

Michelle laughed. "Oh, come on now. You're not going to deny it at this late stage, are you? Your whole little building here is talking about you and your boss, honey. Wake up."

Kerry stood up and walked over, making the most of her two inch height advantage, a complete luxury for her. "I'm not denying anything," she replied softly. "But my relationship with Dar has no bearing on whether or not I can do my job." She paused. "And while we're at it, don't you think you'd better take a look at your own motives, Ms. Graver?"

"What?"

She'd caught the woman off guard, she could see. Good. "You know, when I met you that first time, I really admired you, because I saw how you looked past the surface bullshit in those meetings, and I appreciated how you made your decisions based on what was good for your company, not on a personal agenda."

The gray eyes watched her warily. "Thank you. I do try to do that," she replied, a little uncertainly. "I just don't like to be jerked around." A pause. "So to speak."

Kerry mentally flipped a coin, and took the plunge. "You weren't being jerked around," she replied quietly. "We were just starting to become friends, in Orlando. She was my boss, nothing more than that."

Michelle's brows lifted. "You're joking. Honey, have you seen those pictures?"

Kerry folded her arms. "Yeah, I have, and I look at them and it seems so obvious, but it wasn't obvious to me." She pursed her lips. "And I think Dar was going along business as usual, except she got to a certain point and she just couldn't go any further, because of me. Because she didn't want me to think badly of her." She looked up "Don't hate her for that."

Now, Michelle looked a little amused. "You poor kid." She shook her head slowly. "You had no idea what you were getting into, did you?"

Kerry glanced at the carpet. "Not really, no," she replied, frankly. "But I don't regret a minute of it." She lifted her eyes and gave Michelle a direct look. "And to answer your original question, no. I'm not just a piece of fluff. I'm a professional who does this for a living. I didn't get this job by sleeping with Dar."

"I see," Michelle drawled. "Well, well."

The phone beeped, and Kerry crossed back over to it, hitting the answer button and trying not to let her shaking hands show. "Yes?"

"Port's crapping out," Mark replied succinctly.

"Thanks." Kerry hung up and dialed the networking office. "John, here is a router name. "She rattled it off. "Serial port 0 is intermittently bad...can you hot swap it, please?"

"Yes, Ms. Stuart. We can do that," the man answered. "We're still researching that trouble call for you, should have an answer back shortly."

"Thanks...bye." Kerry hung up, then turned to face Michelle. "That should solve your problem." She was glad they'd isolated it, but really, really ticked off that she'd had to do it. It was a basic step anyone should have done in the networking group. Someone was going to hear about it that was for sure. "Sorry you had to bring it to this level."

"I'm not." The older woman chuckled, then shook her head. "Sometimes it's good just to clear the air." She sauntered over and picked up her folder, then she slapped Kerry lightly on the shoulder with it. "And don't bother trying to track down that trouble call, there wasn't one."

Kerry blinked at her. "What?"

"We thought it was us," Michelle told her cheerfully. "Thanks, kid." She strolled out, leaving Kerry standing there with her jaw slack.

"Son of a bitch." She exhaled, sitting down hard in her seat. "You little Wienerschnitzel."

PACE, PACE, PACE.

Dar paused near the far wall, and regarded the credenza with an evil look. Even the pretty flowers didn't help her mood.

Pace, pace, pace.

Now she was on the near wall, and contemplating the closed door for the hundredth time.

Pace, pace, pace.

Her initial charge had lead her right up to Kerry's door, and she'd actually had her hand on the knob, ready to fling the door open and barrel in, when her conscience had stopped her cold.

Kerry was supposed to be thinking about doing her former job. What message would her rushing in there like some goddamned half assed knight in frigging rusted armor send? That she didn't

trust Kerry, that's what. That she figured she couldn't handle one measly little Michelle Graver, without big, bad Dar coming in and taking over.

Pace, pace, pace.

So she'd come back here, to her office, and decided to wait and see what happened.

Unfortunately, she'd forgotten just how much she hated waiting for anything. "Guess I'm just an instant gratification kinda gal," she muttered to her reflection in the window. She'd tried to concentrate on her email, but had found herself reading the same one six times, and that was a personnel advisory from Mariana.

She sighed. *Maybe I should go take a walk.* Pace, pace, pace. *I am walking. It's not helping.* She drummed her fingers on her thigh, curiosity almost driving her

insane as she wondered what was going on down the hall. *Damn it, Kerry. You've got sense enough to yell for help if you need it, right?*

Right. Yeah, sure.

Pace, pace, pace.

What if Michelle was making a play for her? Dar stopped in her tracks, and pressed her fingertips against the glass of the window, her breathing suddenly tight. *What if Kerry...* She shut the thought down savagely. *Don't be stupid, Dar. Don't start that crap. Don't even insult her by thinking it. She loves you.* Dar let her head rest briefly against the sun warmed glass. *Just go over there and sit down before you drive yourself crazy.*

But she didn't move. Instead, she just watched the waves for a few minutes, letting the calm blue of the sea soothe her.

Until her hearing picked up a soft, rhythmic footfall in the back corridor. About damn time, she cursed, bounding across the room and getting into her chair moments before the gentle knock came. She took a deep breath, and leaned her chin on her fist, picking up a report at random and studying it. "C'mon in."

The door opened, and Kerry entered. "Hey."

Dar forced herself to wait a few seconds before she looked up, drinking in the sight of her lover with quiet relief. "Hey, yourself." Kerry appeared calm, and unflustered, definitely a good sign.

Kerry crossed to her desk, and took her favorite perch on the corner, laying a hand flat on the wooden surface and leaning on it. "I ordered you lunch. Maria's doing a Chinese run."

"Mm, wondered where she went," Dar mused, putting her report down and giving Kerry a smile. "Thanks."

Kerry smiled back. "Anytime. Listen, Michelle Graver was here."

Dar nodded. "I know, Maria told me," she replied casually. "But she said you were handling her so I figured it was under control."

"Oh." Kerry felt a quick jolt of surprised pride. "Well, yeah, it was," she confirmed. "I mean, she had a problem, but I figured it out, and we got it fixed, so everything's great." She gave a satisfied sigh. "I was worrying about dealing with her a little, but things turned out okay, and it all, um...it's fine now."

Dar smiled back. "Good job." She patted Kerry's knee. "I knew you could handle her."

Kerry nodded a little, folding her arms across her chest. "Yeah, it was...it felt good," she confessed. "And I think we sort of came to an understanding. Maybe she won't be so nasty now." A dark brow lifted. "Really?"

"Yeah. I talked things out with her, straightened out a few misconceptions she had," Kerry replied.

"You did?" Dar asked, curiously. "Like what?"

"Uh." Kerry scratched her jaw. "Well, that whole Orlando thing, you know," she replied offhandedly.

"Oh...right...that," Dar replied, at sea. "Well, I'm sure you cleared everything up."

Kerry remained contentedly silent for a moment, drinking in the warm confidence. "Thanks for trusting me. I was half expecting you to come in at some point just to make sure she was behaving herself."

Wide, innocent blue eyes gazed up at her, as Dar nibbled her lower lip. "The idea never crossed my mind," she told her, sincerely. "I just came back here, and studied my reports without a care in the world."

Kerry's eyes dropped to her paper. "Really?"

"Yep." Dar smiled.

Kerry gently reached down and turned the paper right way up, then she affectionately patted Dar's cheek. "You are so busted."

Dar glanced down, then back up at her, like a six year old caught in the cookie jar. "Uh oh." Then she laughed, leaning back and relaxing in her chair, shrugging her shoulders with a look of endearing helplessness. "But I stayed right here, doesn't that count?"

Kerry tried to hold her scolding look, but lost it, and started laughing as well. "Yes, that counts." She leaned over and kissed Dar lightly. "And, thank you."

Dar sighed, giving her a sheepish glance over dark eyelashes. "For being a nervous worry wart?" she replied. "Even though I know better?"

Kerry put a hand on her cheek. "For caring," she answered. "You weren't worried I couldn't solve the problem, were you?" She waited for the head shake no. "You were worried she'd be nasty to me." Now the head nodded yes. "Well, she sort of was, but we got things worked out."

Dar scowled. "Bitch."

"Dar, she thought you were playing with her," Kerry told her. "I'd have been a bitch, too."

"Mmph." A grunt of grudging agreement. "Yeah, all right. I can see her point." Dar sighed. "I kicked everyone's ass in the meeting."

"I heard." Kerry smiled. "Sometimes you end up in a stall in the ladies room at just the right time to hear people bitching."

"Ahhhh." Dar chuckled wryly. "You know what? I decided if Alastair wants a bastard in charge here, I might as well give him a bastard in charge. Wait until I throw a request for a multimillion dollar network upgrade on his desk. He'll choke on his tie."

Kerry nodded. "Well, let me go get back to work." She stood up. "I'm glad Maria went for lunch. I wasn't looking forward to being the main course in the café today."

"People talking?" Dar watched her expression intently.

"Yeah."

"Bother you?"

Kerry put her hands in her pockets and looked out the window at the bright, sunny day. "I thought it would," she admitted. "But you know I realized they all thought it anyway, Dar. We weren't fooling many people."

Dar chuckled softly.

"So what the heck." Kerry shrugged. "I'll deal with it." She turned. "It's worth it to be able to order lunch for you and walk in together without feeling like a felon. That was really starting to get to me."

Her partner nodded pensively. "Trade-offs," she said, briefly. "I have my first board meeting tonight. I sent Alastair my acceptance and he didn't waste any time."

"I'll get a ride home." Kerry patted her on the shoulder and headed for the hallway door. "See you later."

"Mm." Dar slouched back in her chair, watching her partner leave until the door closed behind her, then she pulled over the two packets she'd taken from Mariana and flipped open the first one. "Stevie." Her eyes flicked over the contents. "What in the hell am I going to do with you." She glanced through the stack of employment papers, running a cursory eye over the last sheet before she stopped, and reread it more carefully.

DAR LEANED BACK in her chair and closed her eyes, letting the argument over the speakerphone travel past her. The moon shone in her window, and she half turned to regard it, as she lifted a hand and rubbed the back of her neck.

Board meetings, when your board was international, were a pain in the ass. But Dar hadn't been able to wiggle out of this one, since Alastair was using the opportunity to introduce her to the rest of the board members.

She sighed. Kerry had gone home hours ago, dropped off by a cooperative Mark, and she wished she could just hang up on the group and go join her lover.

"Don't worry about it," Kerry had said.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Dar grumbled silently, closing her eyes and wishing she had some aspirin. She tried to put the headache out of her mind, and think about something more pleasant instead. Hot tubs, for instance. Kerry had definitely mentioned hot tubs for tonight, and a spicy chicken stir fry with noodles that was very, very tasty.

"Dar? What do you think about that?" Alastair's voice interrupted her daydreaming.

Oh shit. "What I think about that is...that it's ten o'clock here in Miami, and we're going rapidly nowhere. Why not schedule a meeting when everyone has their acts together?" There. Throw a few insults; see if that gets things moving. "That's what I think," Dar added, for good measure. She took a contented sip of chocolate milk as the soft hiss from the phone indicated a shocked worldwide silence. *Another Dar Roberts legend in the making, I bet.* She rolled her eyes, regarding her bare feet resting on her desk, crossed neatly at the ankles. "Regretting your decision already, Alastair? Next time, you'll ask first, huh?"

A gentle clearing of the throat. "Well," Alastair responded. "That would be a novel idea." He sighed. "Okay, so Monday after a disaster was a bad choice of times. Let's reschedule for Friday, same time?"

Fine. She'd call in from her cell phone, while floating on the Atlantic. "Sounds good to me," she agreed, stifling a grin. "I'll have the proposal for the new networking center by then."

"Good...good...all right then, good night, ladies and gentlemen." He paused. "And Dar."

It hit her unexpectedly, and she burst out laughing, hearing a rustle of sound as the rest of the group belatedly joined in. "Good night." She sighed, hitting the release button, and shaking her head. So much for my first board meeting, but at least it was more productive and less antagonistic than their usual staff gatherings. So maybe that was a good sign.

It was very quiet in the office, with only the soft hum of the air conditioning, and the gentle, sporadic clatter of her hard drive to break the silence. With a sigh, she slipped her shoes back on and stood up, pulling her jacket over her arms and shouldering her briefcase.

The elevator ride was quiet also, and she was conscious of her own footsteps as she crossed the long, empty lobby and headed for the door. The security guard met her and opened it, touching his head in a military type of manner.

"G'night, Ms. Roberts," he remarked, politely. "Late night, eh?"

"Night, Pete." Dar gave him a smile. "Same old, same old. You know how it is."

"Yes, ma'am, but we haven't seen you here at night for a while. I was wondering if you'd changed offices."

No, just priorities. "I've been here...just not late," she commented. "Take care."

She walked across the parking lot and unlocked the Lexus, dumping her briefcase inside and getting in, exhaling as the cool, soft leather surrounded her. She closed the door and sat for a moment, resting her hands on the wheel, before she started the car up and pulled out of the parking lot.

KERRY WAS CURLED up contentedly on the couch, her head resting on the arm, and Chino tucked up in a ball against her belly. She let her eyes follow the action on the television screen, though she found herself watching the clock almost as much.

Oh well. She snuggled down further into the couch and watched the crocodile man try to trap a crocodile. He was just stringing his net up when the phone rang. She picked it up immediately.

"Hello?"

"Hey." Dar's voice sounded quiet over the dull roar of boat engines. "I'm on the ferry."

"So I hear," Kerry responded. "How'd the meeting go?"

"Bullshit," the executive replied. "It was mostly Alastair just blowing hot air across three continents. I finally called him on it, and he rescheduled for Friday."

"Ew," Kerry replied. "That's not fair."

"Nah, we'll be out on the boat. That's why god made cell phones," Dar chuckled. "How'd your night go?"

Kerry rolled over, and let her head rest on the sofa arm. "Well, I got home, and put together a little dinner for us, then I stuck that in the frig and took Chino for a nice long walk."

"I could live on Frosted Flakes. You didn't have to do that," Dar protested gently.

"You cannot live on Frosted Flakes, Dar Roberts, so hush," Kerry shot back. "So, then I went over to the gym and worked out for a couple of hours. You know, I like that gym, Dar."

"Yeah, I haven't seen much of it lately," her lover responded ruefully. "But it's pretty well stocked. They've got a circuit there I really like. The gym by work doesn't have it."

"Mm...yeah...then I got home and took a shower, and now I'm just watching Steve Irwin, and waiting for you," Kerry concluded.

Dar couldn't help the silly little grin that crossed her face at Kerry's words. "Waiting for me?"

"Yep," Kerry confirmed. "Chino and I are right here, watching the door."

A soft laugh. "Well, I'm pulling into the parking space right now, so guess I'll see you in a minute." She hung up and got out of the car, closing and locking it and heading for the condo entrance. At the door she paused, reflecting.

How many times had she come home, just like this, to a quiet emptiness? How many years had it been? The idea that someone was in there--god.

Thoughtfully, she keyed in the lock and opened the door, stepping inside as a scrambling puppy and a smiling blonde greeted her. "Hey guys." Dar dropped her briefcase and knelt, playing with Chino for a moment before she stood and faced Kerry.

"Hey, here, let me take your jacket. You look wiped." Kerry reached for it, only to have her hands caught and held, as Dar stepped closer to her. "Wh--"

Dar released her hands, and let her arms rest on Kerry's shoulders, gently interlacing her fingers behind the smaller woman's neck. She gazed into the puzzled green eyes, and wished she had the

words to fit the emotion she could feel balling up inside her. She tried, but nothing would come out, so she merely drew Kerry's head forward and gently kissed it. "Thank you."

"Dar?" Kerry asked softly, pulling back a little and giving her a worried look. "Are you okay?" There was really no way she could explain. "Yeah." She managed a smile. "Just been a long day, that's all. "Awkwardly, she dropped her hands, then backed off a step. "I'm going to go change. I think I need some coffee." She rubbed the back of her neck wearily. "Haven't had a headache like this in a while."

Kerry cocked her head to one side. "Mm...let me help." She gently drew Dar into her bedroom, and peeled off her jacket, draping it neatly over the back of the chair near the dresser.

"I am capable of taking my own clothes off," Dar protested mildly, finding herself intrigued by the absorbed look of concentration on her lover's face.

"Well, sure, I know, but it's a lot more fun for me if I do it," Kerry replied, working the buckle loose on the thin, ornate belt then reaching around to unbutton Dar's skirt. "Because if you do it it's just like...well, you know, changing. But if I do it..." She slid the zipper down, and removed the skirt, leaving Dar in her silk blouse.

"If you do it..." Dar repeated softly, tracing the line of her jaw. "It becomes a lot more interesting."

"Right," Kerry agreed, slowly unbuttoning the shirt and letting it fall open, releasing a scent that was mostly Dar, and a touch of perfume. She slid her hands under the fabric and let her fingers slide up the smooth, powerful back, clucking softly at the tension she felt there. "C'mon, lie down." She gently peeled the shirt back, and Dar let it fall down her arms to the floor, feeling the slight chill as the conditioned air brushed her skin.

It felt like a dream, really, but Dar couldn't find it in her to protest. She allowed herself to be led over to the waterbed and gently pushed down onto it, feeling the surface give under her weight. She rolled over and spread her arms out a little, feeling the cool air suddenly warm on her back as Kerry settled over her, straddling her hips.

Fingers slipped under the hooks of her bra and released it, then smoothly rubbed the area. Kerry's hands were warm, and strong, and Dar felt the stiffness relax almost immediately as her companion started to work, kneading her shoulders and wringing tiny murmurs of appreciation from her. "Ungh."

"God, you really are tense," Kerry commented softly, sliding her hands up Dar's back to her neck and shoulders, which eased grudgingly under her touch. "We've got to get you a recliner for your office or something." She felt Dar chuckle, the vibration felt through her fingertips as they eased around Dar's ribs.

"Hey." Dar chuckled again.

"Whoops, sorry, forgot you were ticklish there," Kerry teased, hitting the spot again on purpose, just to hear the laugh. She reached over and got a small bottle of oil from the night stand and uncapped it, putting a little on her fingertips and rubbing them together before she started back to work. "How does that feel?"

The oil left warm traces across her skin, and Dar let out a long, satisfied breath. "You're the best." Kerry regarded the smooth, tanned back with a distinct feeling of pleasure. "I am?" she queried. "The best what?"

"Everything," Dar mumbled. "The best assistant, the best cook, you give the best massages..." Kerry chuckled delightedly. "That's really cool. I've never been the best at something before, except debating," she amended. "But that doesn't really count. All it means is I can win arguments."

Dar folded her arms, and rested her chin on them, glancing back quietly. "You're my best friend," she added, with a touch of wistfulness. "I never thought about having one of those until I met you."

Kerry gazed down at her, then she leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on the center of Dar's back. "I'm glad you feel that way." She moved up and put another kiss a little higher. "Because you're my best friend. And the best thing that's ever happened to me in my life," she uttered softly, right into Dar's ear.

A gentle smile in return. She rubbed Dar's shoulders lightly. "Turn over so I can get the front." That got her a saucily raised eye brow, as Dar twisted under her, and she was suddenly face to face with those amazing blue eyes, and a bare, powerful body trapped neatly under her own. *Whoa.* Kerry put her hands down lightly on the flat belly, spreading her fingers out and starting a gentle, rhythmic massage. *God, Dar is so strong.* She could feel it, as she moved up across her collarbone to her shoulders, feel the thick, powerful muscles just under the skin that flowed into her upper arms. Kerry leaned forward to get enough pressure, and found herself looking almost straight down at those twinkling, amused blue eyes. "You know..." She paused, holding Dar down, and feeling the faint motion under her fingertips. It was almost scary. Almost intimidating. "What?" Dar asked, watching her face.

"I think I know how Steve Irwin feels when he's on top of a crocodile," Kerry told her.

Both dark brows shot up. "Gee, thanks," Dar drawled. "I love you too, honey."

"No, no, no. I don't mean you look like a crocodile, Dar." Kerry laughed. "It's just that they're always so much stronger than he is, and you get the feeling that at any moment, the croc might-- Whoa-- yeow!"

Kerry felt the room whirl, then a heavy, warm weight settled over her. She cracked one eye open to see a blue orb inches from her. "Uh oh."

"Might turn the tables?" Dar asked, with a seductive grin, as she leaned forward and pinned her lover down, taking a gentle nibble at her neck. "Like that?"

Kerry felt her breathing go ragged. "I'm pretty sure a croc nibbling his neck doesn't make old Steve feel like this," she responded, swallowing a few times. "But yeah."

Dar rolled back over, and allowed Kerry to resume her place. "I kinda liked it this way." She reached a hand down and stroked Kerry's calf. "Where were we?"

Kerry slid up and found her lips. "Right here." She felt Dar's hands start to roam, lifting up the light t-shirt she was wearing and letting the cool air brush against her skin. "I was just about to say..." She tasted Dar's lips again, then slowly lowered herself down, feeling the instant heat as their skin touched. "That I love you."

Dar soaked the feeling up in quiet wonder. "I love you too," she responded, on an irregular breath. "And I always will."

DAR AWOKE ABRUPTLY, disoriented for a minute as she caught her bearings, and shook the sleep out of her eyes. "Wh--" The bed next to her was empty, though she could still, faintly, catch Kerry's scent on the sheets, and she put her head back down, wondering what had woken her up so violently.

The fragments of a dream faded out of her consciousness, something dark and vaguely frightening, and she thought she remembered walking down a long, dusty road at night, all alone, in tears.

Ugh...what was that? Dar shook her head to clear it, then put the thought aside. *Can't blame it on dinner, since we skipped it, just one of those weird ones, I guess.* She exhaled.

Then she cocked her head, and listened, expecting to hear Kerry moving around in the bathroom, or maybe coming back from the kitchen. She heard neither, and her brows contracted. *She's a big girl, Dar. She can probably handle getting milk by herself.* She sternly told the niggling anxiety. It didn't help. An uneasy tension in her guts sent the covers flying back, and Dar rolled out of the waterbed and padded off in search. The bathroom was empty, and so was the quiet, dark living room. She stuck her head in the kitchen, then she exhaled, and made her way up the stairs to the second floor. Kerry's door was partially ajar, and she poked her head in, spotting her lover curled up in the large bed, her arms wrapped around her pillow.

For a long moment, Dar froze, unsure of what to do. Surely Kerry had the right to sleep wherever she wanted to, without being questioned on it, right? Dar nibbled a fingernail, running her mind over the evening's course, and trying to figure out if she'd done something wrong.

No. Not unless her understanding of right and wrong when it came to Kerry was way the hell off base. Kerry had been in a very good mood when they'd dropped off to sleep, so...

Just then, the figure on the bed shifted and Dar heard a sharp intake of breath, and a tiny sound of pain. Without further thought, she bolted across the floor and knelt at the bedside, putting a hand on Kerry's tense arm. "Hey."

Green eyes gone silver in the moonlight blinked at her. "Wh-- Oh, Dar, god you startled me."

"What's wrong?" Dar asked, softly. "Are you okay?"

"Oh," Kerry sighed. "Yeah...it's...I've got cramps, really, really bad." She gave Dar a wry look. "I was expecting it this week, but it just got me a lot worse than usual." She curled her fingers around Dar's hand. "I didn't want to wake you up."

"Mm." Dar gazed at her. "Sorry about that. Did you take something?"

"Yeah, a handful of Advil," Kerry muttered. "They'll work, eventually." She reached over and pushed a lock of dark hair out of Dar's eyes. "Go back to sleep. I'll be fine."

Dar hesitated, finding herself unwilling to leave Kerry, but not having any good reason to stay.

"Um...all right. I guess." She paused. "Can I get you something? Hot tea, maybe?"

"No. I'm fine. Really, Dar, go on, you need to get some sleep," Kerry told her.

Reluctantly, Dar stood up. "All right," she agreed, unhappily. "Call me if you need anything, okay? I've got some muscle relaxants left, if those Advil's don't help after a while." She stroked Kerry's upper arm in attempted comfort. "Or maybe a hot water bottle--that usually helps me." Kerry smiled at her. "All right, Dr. Roberts," she teased her companion gently, feeling a little better just to have her nearby. She wished she could just ask Dar to stay with her, but that would be totally irresponsible, since the poor woman had to work tomorrow, and there was no sense in both of them being zombies. Right? "I'll call you if I--" She stopped, seeing the worried look in Dar's eyes. "Boy, that's so stupid."

"What is?" Her lover knelt again, and rested a forearm on the bed.

"Like I ever stop needing you," Kerry admitted, with a smile.

Dar's face, though thrown into shadows, appeared quite pleased with that. "Actually," She cleared her throat a little, embarrassed. "Waking up downstairs was um..." she paused, searching for the proper word. "Strange."

"Alone, you mean," Kerry clarified.

"Mm." The dark head nodded.

Kerry considered that. "Big bed." She indicated the surface she was resting on. "It's kinda empty and cold up here," she added. "I'd go back downstairs, but I sort of have to move around a little, because of the pain, and...and I didn't want to bother you," she sighed. "Which is kind of pointless, I realize, because here you are."

"Right," Dar agreed. "Mind some company?"

"No." Kerry curled up a little tighter as a spasm hit her. "Ugh."

A solid weight settled behind her. "Here," Dar spoke quietly. "Let me try something."

Kerry felt fingers touch her back, and start a slow kneading rhythm down her spine. Maybe it was the warmth, or just Dar's presence distracting her, but the cramps paused, and seemed to lessen a little, and she stretched her body out to allow her partner better access. "Ooooo--you have magic fingers."

Dar chuckled softly. "No I don't. I've just been here, and done this. I had to find a way to get rid of the pain before competition, because taking a lot of aspirin when you're doing contact sports is not a good idea."

"Really?" Kerry murmured. "I thought--"

"It's a blood thinner," Dar explained. "I used to get a lot of bruises."

"Oh." Kerry nodded. "Right. That makes sense. They made us use contact analgesic when I was doing gymnastics, but the serious girls played around with the pill so they wouldn't get it during meets."

"Mm...yeah, I tried that." Dar worked her hands lower, getting to the tense knot she could feel right along the end of Kerry's spine. "But the stuff made me sick. I had to quit using it."

"Ummm..." Kerry let her head drop to the pillow. "You are so good."

A dark brow lifted saucily, unseen in the murky darkness. "Oh really?"

"Oh yeah. Your hands are poetry in motion," Kerry murmured. "Spreading little bolts of wonderful all over me."

Dar's eyes widened at the phrase. "Little bolts of what?" She leaned over and nibbled Kerry's ear.

"You're the poetic one, kiddo." She rubbed her thumbs in little circles above Kerry's kidneys, then slid an arm around her waist, and began a slow massage of her belly.

"Ohhh--" Kerry felt the tension slowly relaxing, and she leaned back against Dar's warm body in utter relief. She wasn't sure if it was the Advil finally kicking in, or her lover's attentions, but she frankly really didn't care, since she'd been tied up in knots for over an hour and a half, and it was just nice to not be in agony for a while. She felt guilty about bothering Dar, but not guilty enough to make her leave, especially since Dar didn't seem to be minding too much. "Sorry I wo-- Wait, I didn't wake you up, Dar. What are you doing awake anyway?"

Dar put aside the memory of the nightmare. "I dunno. I just woke up, maybe the AC clanked or something," she temporized. "You weren't there, but I figured you went to get a drink or whatever. I couldn't hear you, so I decided to go see what was going on." She glanced at the bedside clock. "It's almost four. How long have you been up?"

Kerry sighed. "Since two, I was having trouble sleeping anyway." She exhaled, blinking a little as the gentle massage continued. "So I thought it would be better if I just came up here. I usually don't get it this bad."

"I know." Dar pulled her a little closer, and felt Kerry's body relax against hers. "You're one of the luckier ones, doesn't last long for you, either."

"Mm-- We're both lucky that way," Kerry remarked, biting her lip to stifle a yawn. "Though I was contemplating the other day how choosing an alternative lifestyle ought to bring a magic pill to eliminate this stuff at the same time."

"Heh, if we advertised that, the one in ten would be two out of three," Dar snickered. "Besides, lots of gay women want, and have kids, Kerry."

The blonde woman sighed. "Yeah, I know, but they can be selectively fertile, if you know what I mean. They don't have to worry about accidents." She couldn't stifle the yawn this time, and gave into it. "Mm--think those pills are getting to me now."

Dar rocked her gently, and watched the pale green eyes flutter closed. "Good, get some sleep," she told her lover, as she settled her arms around Kerry's body, feeling the breathing deepen as she did so. "Atta girl."

"Mm," Kerry mumbled sleepily. "You're the best."

Dar sighed happily, and put her head down, gazing out over her now sleeping companion through the window. The stars winked solemnly at her, and the trees outside swayed in a silent wind, as she reflected on a simple change in her viewpoint.

She'd never wanted to be responsible for anyone. That's why she'd never considered kids, never gotten a pet. She'd been very, very damn sure she didn't want the hassle, or the headaches of all that.

So how come taking care of Kerry feels so damn good?

She rested her cheek against the soft, pale hair and peered out at the lapping waves. *Tell me it's a long suppressed, deeply skewed maternal instinct surfacing, right?* She glanced down as Kerry stirred a bit, then snuggled closer to her with a contented little sigh. *God, what in the hell is happening to me?* Dar felt a surge of protectiveness wash over her. *I don't even recognize myself anymore.*

Another sigh. *But is that good, or bad?* Dar considered thoughtfully. *Well, something that feels this good can't be bad, and not be illegal. So I guess it's good.* She yawned, and closed her eyes, letting a peaceful sleep take her.

KERRY PULLED HER pale blue terrycloth bathrobe around her and sipped at her tea, trying to muster up the energy to go and take a shower. The drugs had worn off after she'd woken, and even taking more wasn't really helping at the moment. The ache was making her cranky and tired, and she wished she could just crawl back into bed. "Well, no time for that, Chino. I'd better get moving."

Bare footsteps made her look up to see Dar ambling into the kitchen, a towel tucked neatly around her damp body. "Hey." Dar glanced at her, then put the cup down she'd been reaching for and stepped closer. "You still feeling lousy?" she inquired.

Kerry shrugged. "I'm okay, just a little sore. Give me a minute and I'll get going." She eased off the stool in the kitchen, then paused, biting back a grimace. "Jesus."

Dar took her cup out of her hand and grasped her by the shoulders. "I think you better stay home," she decided, speaking in a firm voice.

Kerry straightened, and shook her head. "C'mon, Dar, don't be goofy. I'm not calling in sick for a dumb stomach ache. That's crazy." A cramp hit her, and she leaned on the counter. "I'll be fine."

Dar put her hands on her terrycloth covered hips and gave her a look. "You listen here, Kerrison Stuart. You are not going to develop all of my damn bad habits, just because we live together, got me?"

Kerry peeked up at her, speechless.

"You are staying right here, in that cute little bathrobe, and watching Oprah all day," Dar stated.

"That's an order."

"B--"

"Ah ah!" Dar put a hand over her mouth. "You can logon from here if you have to, that's why I have a damn ISDN in the house."

Kerry kissed the palm of her hand, and smiled as it was withdrawn. "Okay." She felt a huge wave of relief, knowing she didn't have to wrestle into her business clothes and put up with how that would feel all day. "Thanks, boss," she added, gratefully.

That got a frank, open grin from Dar. "That's better." She leaned over and kissed Kerry's forehead. "Play with Chino, munch on ice cream, and relax. All right?"

"Nice prescription." She stuck her hands in the pockets of her robe. "And I do have some things I need to take care of so maybe it's a good idea anyway." She butted Dar's arm with her head.

"G'wan, you're going to be late."

With a satisfied chuckle, Dar turned, and walked out, humming lightly under her breath.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE SUN POURED into Dar's office, painting the carpeted floor and warming her back. She took the paper she'd been reviewing and marked on it, then tossed it into her outbox and flipped the pen she'd used in her hands. "I may be a quarter of the way through this crap," she commented to her fish, who wiggled their fins at her. "Oh, that's right. I have to feed you today, huh? Your best buddy's not here."

Her phone buzzed. "Yes?"

"Dar, I have Richard Edgerton for you on numero dos."

Dar glanced at the phone in surprise. "Really? Okay. I'll take it." She hesitated before picking up the line, wondering what her family's lawyer wanted. "Richard?"

"Hello Dar, long time no talk to," the cheerful voice echoed slightly. "Haven't seen you in quite some time. How are you?"

Ten thousand answers to that question. "Fine thanks, and you?" Dar replied, recalling a mental image of the forty something lawyer, a former college football tackle who still retained his bulldog physique and almost military crew cut. "Yeah, it's been a while." Her father's funeral, to be exact.

"Oh, doing all right. Listen, it's a small thing, but seems your aunt May had a lock box over at People's First National that nobody knew about."

"Yeah?" Dar leaned back in her chair and nibbled her pen. "And?"

"There's a trunk and two boxes of stuff in there, and by the terms of her will, it goes to you," Jason advised her. "The bank's closing down and they called to tell us, since we were her executors of record."

"Oh." The dark brows knitted. "All right, have it sent down. I guess I'll sort through it. If it's stuff that can be donated somewhere, I'll do that in her name."

"Great, great. So, how've you been, Dar? I saw your mother last week. She's doing okay. Her stuff's being shown at a gallery up here in a little bit."

Dar exhaled, feeling the usual stab of pain thoughts of her mother brought. "I'm doing just fine, Richard, glad she is too," she got out civilly. Then an idea struck her. "Listen, I'm glad you called. I need to ask a question."

"Shoot," the lawyer responded briskly.

"First off, I um...I need to modify my will." Dar interlaced her fingers and regarded them. "And second, I need to know what kind of--I'm not sure what you call it, but something that would legally give someone the right to make certain decisions for me, if I wasn't able to, for instance."

"Uh," Edgerton stuttered. "Is everything all right Dar? I mean, with you? You're not sick or..."

The executive chuckled. "No, no. I'm fine, never felt better, in fact." How true that was. "Just send me over the draft of the will, and I'll amend it. I need to leave everything to someone other than the Humane Society."

"Oh." He sounded relieved. "Well, sure, and the other thing, there's a couple ways you can go with that, depending on how much power you want the person to have." He paused. "How much you want to trust them, that sort of thing."

"All the way," Dar replied softly. "What do you need from me?"

"Just their name," Richard answered. "Dar, are you sure about this?"

A slow smile appeared. "If I've ever been sure of anything in my life, it's this," she confirmed, giving him Kerry's name. "Make sure you spell it right."

"Okay, but listen, Dar, it's awful sudden of you, and you've got quite an estate here, are you really sure about this? You're sure it's not someone looking for treasure, or anything like that?"

Dar regarded the mantel for a long moment, considering his words. "I'm sure," she finally said.

"She has no idea of the size, or that I'm doing this."

"Okay," Richard surrendered amiably. "Just keeping your best interests in mind, Dar." He cleared his throat. "I'll draw up the papers and send them down to you, end of the week okay?"

"Perfect." Dar smiled. "Thanks, Rich."

"Anytime Dar, and watch for those cases," the lawyer added. "Knowing May, it could be anything."

Dar acknowledged that, and hung up, feeling a quiet satisfaction. Yeah. It was time. She turned to her computer and called up a session, then entered into the employee files, and called up her own records.

A few keystrokes, and the contact information was changed for emergencies, and then a few more, and her insurance beneficiary was likewise edited. She paused, watching the blinking cursor for a moment, then she hit send.

Update Complete, it said. Dar nodded and retrieved a cashew from her trail mix, munching it contentedly.

"COMPUTERS ARE GREAT things, Chino," Kerry mused, as she reviewed her screen. She was curled up in her leather office chair, her robe tucked around her and soft, fluffy pink booties on her feet. "Online banking really does make life a lot easier." She clicked on a screen, then typed in an amount. "Okay, that's the last of the bills to pay. I got my car, the credit cards, all set." She made a tick mark on a piece of paper sitting next to her keyboard. "Let's not let mommy Dar see that one, hmm?"

The puppy glanced up at her and licked her chops.

"Yeah, that's the bill for the ring, and she'd have my head on a platter, I think." Kerry laughed gently, picking it up and looking at it. "But it was worth it, and they said you should budget two month's salary for that kinda thing, right?"

"Yawp." Chino yawned.

"Well, it's just our secret." She tucked the bill away. "Okay, let's see where we are." She reviewed her bank balance, pleased with the result. "Hey, that's not bad, Chino." She glanced at her payments. "Okay, I think it's time to reduce one part of this." She picked up the phone and

hesitated, then took a deep breath and dialed. She waited through three rings. "Hi, Mr. Mahoney?"

A low, pleasant voice answered her.

"It's Kerry Stuart... yeah-- ...I know, the lease is up next month. I won't be renewing it." The words felt so strange, and had taken her so long to decide to say. "No, no, it's great, I just...well, I'm living with someone, and I wanted to make sure it worked out...you know."

The landlord was very understanding. "You've been a great tenant, Ms. Stuart. Anytime you need a referral, you let me know, okay?"

"Thanks," Kerry responded. "I'll be by to pick up the few things I've got there, but there's nothing valuable--you can show the apartment if you want to."

"Right you are, and I know it's in great condition. Thanks for letting me know, Ms. Stuart. I really appreciate it." He paused. "And best of luck to you. I hope things go really smooth."

"Me too," Kerry responded. "Talk to you later." She hung up, and regarded the phone. "Well, Chino, that's that." She glanced at the puppy. "I mean it's not like I haven't been really living here before, but..." It was a line crossed, and she knew it. "She's stuck with me now."

"Grrrr...yawp." Chino rolled over, and put her head down, peering up at Kerry sleepily.

"Hmm..." Kerry turned her attention back to the screen. "Okay, now let's order some groceries." She switched over to the internal Island site that allowed her to pick and choose what she wanted from an extensive list, and have it delivered. "Let me check...oooo... Dar, you little piggy wonk. I'm gonna hurt you." She shook a finger at the screen, as she clicked into the personal options, and changed the credit card the groceries were billed to back to her own. "Damn it, I can afford this, Dar. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

Irritated, she clicked over to her email, and whipped off a short, scolding note to her lover, and sent it. "Bad girl."

Chino lifted her head and whined.

"Not you," Kerry reassured the puppy. "Now, let's see..." She selected a variety of fresh produce and some staples, then drummed her fingers, and went over to the goodies section and clicked on a number of Dar's favorites. "By all rights, I should restrict you to Brussels sprouts for that trick, but..." A mental image of the little puppy dog eyes Dar was capable of when the mood struck her surfaced, and caused a grin to appear on Kerry's face. "I can't resist that pout and you know it." She finished her shopping, which she'd discovered one night while roaming around the Island website, and which Dar had no idea existed. "Not surprising," Kerry snorted softly "Coming from Ms. I can live on Frosted Flakes." She reached over and took a sip of her ginger peach tea, breathing in the fragrant steam with a sense of quiet pleasure. The drugs had kicked in again, and she only felt a gentle ache, which was better than the spasms of the morning. Still, she was glad she was curled up here in her robe with a heating pad nearby if she needed it.

She set about balancing her checkbook, and putting things in order. "Hmm...we've got a little extra here this month, Chino. Let's see if we can find a treat or two." She clicked over to an online computer store. "Ooo...digital camera. What do you say, hmm? Does that sound good? Is that a treat?"

The puppy heard the word "treat" and immediately got up and trotted over, standing up on her hind legs and putting her small paws up on Kerry's thigh. "Rgrro?"

"Oh, you want a treat?" Kerry laughed, and fished a puppy biscuit from her pocket, giving it to the animal. "Here you go." She watched Chino chew for a minute, then she returned her attention to her browser. "Yeah, that would be cool...gimme." She glanced down as her mail icon flashed. "Hmm?" She clicked it, and smiled as she saw the sender.

Roberts, Dar

Sent 11:22 A.M.

All right - consider me chastised. I switched it so I could take care of the boat charges, and forgot to switch it back. We could just get a joint card or something.

Dar

PS. how are you feeling? I didn't want to call in case I woke you up.

Kerry studied the note, feeling a little prickle of recklessness. She hit reply, typed in a few words, and hit send. "Let's see what your answer is to that, Paladar." She grinned, and then resumed her surfing.

DAR PAUSED OUTSIDE the conference room, running her fingers through her hair before she put a hand on the latch and pushed it down. She entered the long room and let the door close behind her, aware of the several pairs of eyes that fastened themselves on her. "Good afternoon," she remarked, as she moved around to the head of the table and sat down. The rest of the room contained representatives from two companies they'd just signed alliances with, along with representatives from sales and marketing and one of Duks's people.

"All right. We're here to discuss the potential acquiring of the statewide benefits contract in Idaho." Dar pulled out a folder, and flipped it open. "Suppose you people fill me in on what progress you've made with the state government so far?" She flicked a cool glance at the company representatives from that state. "You want to start?"

They glanced at each other, then the older man cleared his throat. "Well, all right."

It was a long meeting, and Dar was slightly frustrated by the time it ended, sensing a communication problem but unable to pinpoint exactly what it was. She kept trying to get information from the newcomers, but she could tell the older man, at least, was being evasive, and they all seemed to want to keep their strategies under their hats, and keep her company around just to pump cash into things.

That wasn't going to happen. Dar fiddled with a pen as they filed out, and scowled a little. "Elle, hang on." The marketing representative paused, then walked back across the now empty conference room and stood, visibly uneasy. "Relax. Sit down a minute."

The woman did, folding her hands on the table and waiting.

"What did you think about them?" Dar inquired.

"Me?" Elle's brows lifted. "Um...I don't know."

They were okay, I guess, a little on the quiet side." She sniffed, and pushed her thin, wire framed glasses up on her nose. "I took them on a tour before the meeting. They were kind of prickly, if you know what I mean."

Dar nodded, pursing her lips. "Yeah...I got that feeling myself. Well, okay. Thanks."

Elle blinked at her. "Um...you're welcome." She stood, and ducked her head a little awkwardly, then she turned and left.

Dar sighed, then stood and gathered her things, walking back to her office in time to see Maria returning with a large, white bag. "Hello, Maria."

"Is your meeting over, Dar?" The secretary held the door for her, and followed her inside. "I brought you back some arroz con pollo...from my trip outside."

Dar smiled at her. "Thanks. Yeah, it just ended. I've got another one after lunch, then a conference call after that."

Maria bustled over to her desk, and put her bag down. "And how is Kerrisita doing?" She asked, pulling out a Styrofoam container and handing it to Dar. "I stopped at the farmacia, and you take this home to her, yes?" She handed Dar a bag. "Is to make tea...is good for her."

Dar held the bag. "I...I don't know, I haven't spoken to her since I left the house. I'm sure she's fine, and thanks, she likes tea."

Maria gave her a severe look. "Poor Kerrisita is home so sick, and you don't call her?" she scolded her boss.

"Uh." Dar was caught flat footed by the older woman. "It's just some cramps, Maria. She's not a baby, you know."

"That is not the point, jefa," Maria stated. "Is good she knows you are concerned, no?"

"Uh..." Dar gave up. "Yep. You're right. I'll go call her." She fled the outer office, and escaped into her own, putting her lunch down and circling her desk. "Jesus, you'd think she was an infant or something. I bet she's napping, or she doesn't want me calling every five minutes." With a sigh, she sat down and dialed her home number. It rang several times, and she was about to hang up when it was answered. "Hey."

"Hey!" Kerry's voice perked up audibly as she recognized the caller. "Wow. I was just thinking about you."

Dar settled her chin on her fist. "I was just thinking about you too. I just got out of a meeting I wish you'd been at. Maybe you could have given me some insight into a few new associates." She sighed. "How're you feeling?"

"I answered that in the email," Kerry told her dryly. "Which I guess you haven't seen yet."

"Um." Dar sat down and rolled her trackball to check her mail. "Ah...no. I just got back, let's see. Oh." She started laughing. "Oh." She felt a blush coming on. "Well, I'm glad you liked the service last night."

Kerry chuckled as well. "It's on and off. I take drugs, it gets better, then they wear off, and I feel like a manure pile. I don't know what's with me this time," she sighed. "Chino's keeping me company, though, and I've been surfing."

"Uh oh," Dar uttered. "That could be dangerous."

"Mm... Yes, it certainly could. Did you know Victoria's Secret has a great website?" Kerry asked, innocently.

Dar's blue eyes widened. "Any particular reason you're letting me in on this little tidbit of news?" she inquired, hesitantly.

"You like blue, right?" Kerry asked, ignoring the question.

"Um...yes...why?" Dar felt her curiosity crawl up her spine and perch on her shoulders, almost making her lean forward towards the phone. "Kerry?"

"Yes?" the blonde woman purred. "Something wrong?"

Dar chewed her lip. "Um...no." She felt a little thrill of excitement, almost of danger. "Nothing." Her intercom buzzed. "Hang on." She pressed a button. "Yes, Maria?"

"Dar, I have a Mr. Evans, from Interlock, he is wanting to talk to you?"

Ah. Her reluctant associate. "All right, give me a minute, Maria, then show him in." Dar pressed her other line. "If you're done teasing me, I've got a potato farmer that wants in here."

"Teasing? I'm not teasing you, Dar," Kerry objected, with a chuckle. "Can I interest you in a couple of burgers with the works for dinner? The Beach club just updated their menu, and they've got some new ones."

Dar smiled at the phone affectionately. "Sounds great to me. See you in a bit."

"Right, have fun." Kerry hung up, and Dar exhaled, glad she'd taken Maria's advice. She glanced up as the door opened, and the tall, gray haired man entered. "Come in, Mr. Evans. Maria, thank you for reminding me of that pending issue."

The secretary looked blank for a moment, then she smiled, and shook a finger at her boss, but said nothing as she closed the door behind her.

Dar motioned to her visitor chair. "Sit down, Mr. Evans. I hope you won't mind if I catch up on my lunch while we talk." She didn't give him a chance to answer, as she pulled her Styrofoam container over, and popped it open, releasing the scent of saffron and garlic into the air. "What can I do for you?" she asked, pulling a fork out of the wrapped set of silverware that came with the lunch.

He seated himself and crossed his legs, resting his hands on his knee and studying her. Dar maintained the eye contact, while she speared a piece of chicken and munched it. One brow lifted in question at him.

"Ms. Roberts, I'm not quite sure how to broach this," he spoke the words carefully. "I've spoken with my colleagues, and they feel as I do, and I'm afraid we have difficulty with you...ah...your corporate culture."

Dar took a mouthful of rice and chewed it, while she considered the words. "Our corporate culture?" she repeated, then waved her fork at the walls. "You don't like oak paneling and maroon carpet?" she queried, honestly puzzled. "What corporate culture are you referring to?" He hesitated. "It seems to us that your company has a very...open policy on personal behavior," he stated. "As well as a great deal of diversity in your employee base."

One of Dar's brows rose. "Most people consider that a corporate asset," she informed him. "But what exactly are you getting at?" She paused, and chewed another piece of chicken. "Whose personal behavior are you getting offended by?"

He cleared his throat, obviously discomfited. "Yours, actually."

Dar stopped chewing, and just stared at him. Then she swallowed and took a sip of water from the glass on her desk. "Excuse me?" She almost laughed. "What is it you find offensive...my tendency to doodle in meetings, or my eating lunch in front of you without offering you any?" He looked at her. "We spent some time in your cafeteria this morning, and heard of a situation between you and your assistant."

It stopped being funny. Dar felt a cold wave sweep over her, and she knew it must have showed in her face, because she saw his reaction. She put her fork down slowly and precisely, then folded her hands on her desk. "And your problem with that is what?" She heard the drop in her voice, and felt the dark anger stir in her guts.

Dead silence for a dozen heartbeats. "We come from a God fearing part of the country, Ms. Roberts...and I, personally, find that kind of behavior disgusting." He looked right at her, lifting his chin a little. "And my colleagues feel the same."

A dozen nasty retorts crossed Dar's mind, and she discarded them. "Well, Mr. Evans, our company's official policy is one of non-discrimination, and I'm pretty damn proud of that. I'm sorry you don't feel the same." She paused. "Let me make sure I understand, though...you've got a problem with me because I'm gay, right?"

His face twitched at the word. "I accept God's word on his views about that, so yes."

"Let's not get into a debate on religion," Dar replied. "You won't like my views on that, either, I'm sure." She took several deep breaths, to bleed off the angry tension. "All right. Well, Mr. Evans, in the first place, my personal life is no business of yours."

"I don't think we'll be comfortable dealing with you," he interrupted. "And even if that were not so, your bowing to foreign culture here is something we find very upsetting. Ms. Roberts, do you realize a good portion of your employees do not speak English in the workplace?"

Dar felt her nostrils flare. "Mr. Evans, fifty percent of our employees have something other than English as their native language, based on the fact that they are citizens of another country," she reminded him. "We are an international organization, in case that slipped your mind."

"We find that--" He never got to finish. Dar stood up and came around the desk, cold sparks flashing in her pale eyes.

"Do you know what I find offensive?" she growled, leaning on her desk. "I find your small mindedness offensive, Mr. Evans. So I'll tell you what, I'll call down to our marketing group, and we'll just call this little arrangement off, all right?"

"That was my objective, yes." He stood stiffly. "I'm sorry you cannot understand our feelings in the matter."

"I'm not." Dar let out a short laugh. "But let me tell you. I'm going to have the publicity group release a statement saying we cut you loose because you were too prejudiced for us to deal with." He drew himself up. "It's not prejudice, Ms. Roberts. It has nothing to do with that. It's just how we see ourselves, and who we prefer to deal with."

Dar just shook her head. "Then you'll find yourself on the inside of a circle growing smaller day by day, mister...and you know what?" She leaned closer, watching him edge back. "We'll go in there and take all the business away from you anyway."

"Not after we talk to those clients, and let them know what kind of people you are," he told her, smugly. "The rest of the country isn't like this place, Ms. Roberts."

Dar smiled at him. "Mr. Evans, when I'm done cutting a deal for them, they won't care if I'm a cross dressing transgendered muskrat." She dropped her voice to a low growl. "Now, get out of here, before I have you thrown out."

He walked to the door, and looked back at her, his hand on the latch. "You are an abomination in the eyes of God, Ms. Roberts."

"Any god I believe in doesn't know what the word hate is, Mr. Evans," Dar replied mildly. "I pity you." She watched the door close after him, and let her held breath out. "Shit."

Damn it all to hell. Stupid piece of shit righteousness stuffed up his butt son of a-- Dar walked around her desk and dropped into her chair, shaking her head in disgust, as she considered what to tell José. What a way to start out her new job.

"TWO OF THESE divisions aren't showing much profit." Duks pointed to a line on the page. "I think some changes need to be made there. Perhaps you could take a look."

Dar regarded the paper, and nodded. "They're not writing good contracts." She shook her head.

"They're just putting in new business, and not really adding to the bottom line." The late afternoon sunlight reflected into the office, and warmed her back. "I'll have their new stuff put under technical review."

"Good." Duks stretched. "So, how's it feel?"

Blue eyes regarded him in puzzlement. "How does what feel?"

"Being the master of all you survey?" the Finance VP replied, with a twinkle. "Did I hear a rumor you were going to cancel the Interlock agreement? What happened?"

Dar regarded her desktop. "Mr. Evans didn't think he could do business with us," she replied evenly.

Her phone buzzed. "Dar, is Mr. José on numero uno for you."

Dar sighed. "Okay." She hit the button. "Yeah?"

"What is this I hear, you cut loose Interlock?" José's voice came through, thick with outrage.

"What's this shit, Dar?"

"That's right, I did," Dar replied flatly. "He said he couldn't work with us, so I cut him loose. Got a problem?"

"Hell yes, I have a problem with that!" José shot back. "What do you think you're doing? We had a business plan in Idaho. I am having seven major contracts going in there."

"Not with his cooperation. Try something else," Dar answered. "Go around him."

"Merde. That's a load of-- What was his problem?" José demanded.

Dar hesitated, then her jaw clenched. "I was."

Dead silence. "You?" José spluttered. "Jesu, it figures. Did you tell him off or...no, I bet he found out you're sleeping with that little slut of yours, and I tell you..."

Duks got around the desk and grabbed Dar's hand, slamming his own down on the mute button.

"Dar!" He called urgently, seeing the pale blue eyes go gray with fury. "Hold it.. "

"Let me go, Louis." Dar felt the tremors start. "I'm gonna fire his ass."

"Come on...listen to me." The Finance VP stood his ground, speaking softly. "He's an ignorant jerk, but life's full of them, and so's the company. You can't fire them all, my friend."

Dar sucked in a breath, and released it, trying to keep a lid on the anger. "I can fire this one, and maybe the others will get the message," she finally said, in a low voice. "I am not going to put up with it, Louis."

"Okay. Okay...but, please, please, my friend...give him one warning. Just one. Keep our asses out of the courts, all right?" Duks asked, reasonably. "You know he'll do it again, Dar...please."

The CIO let her hands fall to the desk, and she leaned on them. For a long minute she stared at the wood surface, then hit the mute button. "José?"

"Si? I knew this was going to get us into trouble, and I tell you."

"Shut up."

Silence.

"I want you to listen to me, all right?" Dar enunciated her words carefully.

"Si?"

"If you ever make a statement like that about anyone who works here ever again, I'm not only going to personally fire you, I am going to come down to your office, pick you up, carry you outside, and beat the living daylight out of you in front of the entire company," Dar stated softly.

"Do you understand me?"

Long silence.

"I asked, do you understand me?" Dar requested softly.

"Si." Came back, very subdued.

Dar exhaled. "Good. Now he had two issues. My being gay and you're being Cuban. I didn't figure either of us was going to change any time soon, so I told him to take a hike."

Long pause. "That puta had a problem with me?" José's voice rose. "My father came over to this country with nothing but a cigar wrapper and six banana leaves, and ended up owning half the real estate in Hialeah, so he can kiss my Cuban ass."

"Yeah, well... So find another way up there." Dar repeated, then disconnected the call. She stared at the fighting fish as her blood pressure slowly dropped, aware of Duks's close presence. "I think he owes you a thank you."

"Mm," Duks murmured.

Dar glanced up. "I think I do too," she added, quietly.

The accountant shifted a little. "My friend, it's hard, I know. I understand."

"Somehow I doubt the majority of the company considers you and Mari an abomination in the eyes of God, Lou," Dar replied, as she sat down, and rested her hands on the desk. "You try not to care, but it gets a bit much sometimes."

Duks turned and sat on the edge of the desk, regarding her. "You know, Dar, I'm sure there are people who feel that way, but I don't think it's the majority."

"No." Dar had to laugh shortly. "The rest of them just hate me because I'm a bitch." She gave Duks a wry look. "They don't really care who I sleep with."

Duks sighed, and patted her on the shoulder. "Some of us are just pathetically glad you're here, and as good as you are, my friend. I think there are more of us than you would ever have imagined." He paused. "Come, let's take a walk downstairs, get some coffee, hmm?"

Dar studied her hands. "Go on down, I'll meet you there in a minute."

Reluctantly, the accountant left, closing the door softly behind him. Dar rubbed her face and leaned back, as her stomach slowly untied itself from its knots. "What a completely sucky day," she informed the ceiling. "A few more like this and I'm going to chuck it all and become a diving boat captain."

A moment later, a soft knock came on the door, and she tilted her head towards it. "Yeah?"

The door opened, and Maria came in, carrying a tall mug, a faint curl of steam visible over its edge. "Jefa, I know this is so bad for you, but today is not good." She put down the mug, and Dar caught a scent of hot chocolate.

It made her smile. "Thanks, Maria." She sighed. "Yeah, today's been a bitch all right." She watched the secretary settle in the visitor's chair. "I'm sure the stories are flying."

"Si." The woman nodded. "They have been, is true." She straightened a little. "You know, Dar, when I came here from my country, in my country I was in the office, the numero uno, you know? And when I came over to this country, all the people looked at me, and it was..." She made a tiny, discrete spitting noise. "Immigrante."

Dar watched her curiously. "Hmm."

"It did not matter that I was good in church, or that I was running this big law office, or that I raise my children. No, it was just..." She made the spitting sound again. "Immigrante."

Dar steepled her fingers. "That must have been hard for you. We take our citizenship for granted, a lot of the time."

"Si," the secretary agreed. "You do. I had to be studying many hours before I passed this test, you know? And you do not have to take it, but any the way, what I learned from this, Dar, is that what is important is what is on the inside of people, not on the outside."

Dar gazed quietly at her desktop. "A lot of people never quite get that, Maria."

"Si, you are right, they do not," Maria agreed. "Even in my church, which is writing that all people must love each other, still, they think that God makes this kind or that kind better than the other." She folded her hands. "Dar, you are a good person."

The dark haired woman smiled. "Thanks. I think you're a very good person yourself."

"Gracias." Maria smiled. "Kerrisita is a very good person."

"Yes, she is," Dar agreed, softly.

"When two good people love each other, Dar, God smiles on them, and he does not care what they are looking like," Maria said, gently. "That is what I believe...that you have been very blessed."

It was like a warm blanket settling over her, coming from the most unexpected source imaginable. "Thank you, Maria," Dar replied softly. "That means a lot to me."

Maria looked pleased. "You are welcome, Dar." She hesitated. "One more thing, my youngest daughter, Conchita, is having her quinces next month. I would very much be honored if you and Kerrisita would come, and celebrate this with my family."

It was a shock. Dar knew enough about traditional Cuban culture to be honestly surprised at the request, but she also knew enough not to refuse. "We'd be honored," she replied, simply. "Thank you."

"Gracias," Maria said, in a dignified tone, as she stood, and brushed off her skirt. "How is Kerrisita?"

"She's doing all right," Dar answered, quietly, taking a long sip of her hot chocolate.

The secretary glanced at the window. "It is five o'clock, I am to be leaving. Do you not think those herbs would do better if Kerrisita gets them soon?"

Dar chuckled softly. "Are you telling me to get out of here, Maria?"

"Si," the secretary smiled. "I think I am doing that. It is very bold of me, no?"

Dar stood up and turned her monitor off. "Sounds like a good idea to me." She grabbed her keys and shouldered her laptop. "It's been a long day."

"And there will always be tomorrow," Maria added. "For new problems."

Dar followed Maria out the door, and shook her head. "Isn't that the truth?"

KERRY WATCHED THE late afternoon light come in the front windows, and pour across the tile floor, painting golden stripes across the table. She was curled up on the couch, with Chino tucked in next to her, and a cup of hot tea resting on the end table near her head.

She felt pretty good. The drugs had mostly taken care of the pain, though she was feeling a little lightheaded from having to take so much. She'd gotten quite a few things done, so she wasn't feeling any guilt about simply lounging around, watching cartoons all afternoon.

It was nice just to have a day off, she reflected, and spend the time mindlessly relaxing, not having to worry about lines going down, or people yelling, or things like that.

She was a little worried though, since she hadn't heard from Dar since the morning, and a recent call to the office had gone to voice mail. She felt a little uneasy about Dar, in a vague, unsettled way, but resisted the urge to use her pager, or the cell phone, because if there was something going on, surely Dar would have called.

Right?

Kerry sighed, and put her head down on the soft couch arm, breathing in the scent of the leather as she tugged a soft quilt around her body. Her eyes closed, and she let the warm comfort lull her into sleep.

It was a strange dream, full of children's laughter, and the smell of hickory smoke. She was snoozing in what felt like a hammock, wrapped in a soft blanket that bore a hint of woods and leather.

Footsteps came close, and she felt a nearby presence, a warmth that brought a smile to her face, even as gentle fingers brushed her hair back, and she felt a kiss touch her lips. Her eyes fluttered open, to see familiar blue ones looking back at her, framed by a face a little tanner, and a little older than she'd expected.

She reached up and hooked an arm around a powerful neck and drew that face down, kissing her again. She reveled in the sweetness, and the passion, and the sense of belonging to each other that had no match in anything else she'd ever known.

And as she did, the children's laughter faded, and the hickory scent shifted to the tang of wood polish, and she opened her eyes to see those same blue ones looking down curiously at her, as a faint smile played about Dar's lips.

"Oh." A little fuzzy, she reached up and brushed her fingers across Dar's cheek, where a tiny scar had shown in her dream, and now was gone. "You're home." Chino was wiggling up against her and nibbling her fingers.

The lips moved into a gentle smile. "Yes, I am." Dar seated herself on the edge of the couch.

"How are you feeling?" She scratched the puppy behind the ears.

Kerry glanced at the window, which was darkening into twilight. "Um...better...thanks. was...I was watching TV, and I guess I dozed off. How long have you been here?" She peered up at her lover. "You look beat."

Dar sighed. "I am. I had a tough day," she admitted softly. "I've got a headache you wouldn't believe, and I gotta tell you, it's just nice to see a friendly face."

"Aww..." Kerry tugged her down and pulled her into a hug, feeling the long breath Dar released as she did so. She rubbed her lover's back, feeling the warm skin beneath the silk shirt. "I missed you. What happened?"

Dar allowed herself a few more seconds of bliss, before she reluctantly straightened, and tucked the quilt back around Kerry's t-shirt covered body. She'd been debating with herself since she'd left the office as to whether or not to tell Kerry. Then she figured that Kerry was probably going to hear sooner or later, so it would be best to come from her.

"Nasty stuff. I had to terminate a contract today because the company we contracted with felt they couldn't do business with us." She pushed Kerry's very disheveled hair out of her eyes, and reflected on how cute she was when she just woke up. "They didn't like our diversity."

Kerry cocked her head to one side. "Diversity. I don't... What do you mean?"

No way to soften it. "They heard about you and me, and spent some time in the lunchroom and heard the different languages. They didn't like that."

Kerry stared at her. One blonde brow rose up to her hairline. "What jerks. Tell them to go contract with the KKK."

Dar felt a smile coming on. She should have known better than to worry about Kerry's reaction.

"It was a pretty ugly scene, and then I had to explain to everyone, and that got pretty ugly too.

Duks kept me from firing José outright."

"Wow," Kerry murmured. "What did he do?"

Dar bit her lip. "He said something about you I didn't like."

"Oh." Kerry considered that. "I'm glad you didn't fire him for that." She stroked Dar's face.

"Sticks and stones, and all that stuff." She felt bad, but not as bad as if Dar had fired him. "I'm sure you handled it in a very professional manner."

Blue eyes glinted in the soft twilight at her. "Um...actually...I told him if he ever said anything like that again, I'd take him outside and beat him silly in front of everyone."

Kerry clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh." She muffled a laugh. "Jesus, Dar. To a Cuban man that was worse than firing him."

"Mm," Dar agreed softly. "On the bright side, we got invited to Maria's daughter's quinces."

"We did?" Kerry was surprised. "I mean...we, as in you and I, did?"

Dar nodded. "We--definitely we--got invited," she confirmed. "Maria said some really nice things to me after everything happened. She's really a sweetheart."

She tugged on Kerry's t-shirt. "We'll have to go shopping for some really snazzy gowns."

"Uerrg. I haven't worn a gown since my prom, Dar." Kerry made a face. "And you don't want to know what I looked like for that."

"Sure I would." Dar objected, with a grin. "You haven't shown me all your embarrassing pictures yet. Tell you what. How about we get dinner sent over, and we can trade photos. I was a really dorky looking kid."

"Eek." Kerry rested a cheek on her shoulder, and bit her lip. "Okay, but you have to promise not to laugh. I tried to perm my hair for the occasion."

"I promise." Dar crossed a finger over her heart. "But you can't ever admit to seeing the ones from my grade school play."

Mischief filled the green eyes. "Ooo...you got a deal," Kerry agreed, curling her fingers around Dar's. "Go get into your jammies. I'll call the beach club."

Dar smiled. "Okay." She stood up and walked towards the bedroom, then glanced over her shoulder. "Could you have them send--"

"A chocolate milkshake?" Kerry supplied, dialing the phone. "Sure."

Dar's eyes twinkled, as she disappeared. Once she was in the bedroom, she could hear Kerry's low voice, and looked down to see Chino tugging on her shoe, and it made her smile.

Home had such a different meaning now. Dar tossed her jacket over the chair near the mirror, then quickly changed out of her suit, feeling a sense of relief as the soft cotton of her favorite sleep shirt draped over her shoulders. She sat down for a minute on the edge of the waterbed, and picked Chino up to play with her. "Hey there girl. Whatcha up to?"

The puppy nibbled at her chin, then licked her face. Her brown eyes gazed adoringly up at Dar as her paws scrabbled for a good hold on her neck. Dar glanced around, then hugged the puppy to her, feeling a silly grin take over her face. Then she stood, and tucked Chino under her arm, as she made her way back out into the living room.

Kerry was standing by the coffee table, having just lit two sturdy, scented candles and dimmed the lights. Her blonde lashes caught the candlelight, which threw interesting shadows up her body as she turned towards Dar and smiled. "Dinner's on its way."

Dar gazed at her, imagining what it would have been like, to come home from a day like today, and not have Kerry or Chino there. A sigh trickled out of her, and she put the puppy down, then went over and enfolded Kerry in a hug that came right from her heart.

"Urk." Kerry was surprised, but obligingly slid her arms around her lover and hugged her back, loving the feel of the strong body pressed hard against her own. "Mm. What was that for?"

"I'm just glad you're a part of my life," Dar answered, with a sigh.

"Really?" Kerry murmured.

"Of course." Dar released her, and leaned back a little.

"Funny you should say that." Kerry sat down on the love seat, and pulled her down as well.

"I've...um...I've got something to ask you, and before I do, I want you to know it's okay for you to say no."

"It is?" Dar responded faintly, unsure of what to expect.

"Yes." Kerry took both her hands and held them. "I got a call today." She took a breath. "It was from Pastor Robert. I told you about him, remember?"

"Yes," Dar answered.

"He's in town," Kerry told her.

"Oh. That's nice...you...um...want to have him here for dinner?" Dar offered, hesitantly.

"No. Well, I mean, sure, but that's not the question." Kerry squared her shoulders. "He offered to um..." She stopped, then took a breath. "He said he'd perform a ceremony for us, if I wanted...I mean, if we wanted him to."

Dar blinked at her.

"Listen, I know you're not into that, Dar. I know it's not been something you had growing up, and I know it doesn't really mean...oh." Kerry shut up as Dar pulled her hands loose, and cupped her cheeks, bringing her closer for a passionate kiss.

They broke apart. "I'd love that," Dar stated sincerely. "I mean, you're right. I don't know much about it, and I've never been into stuff like that, but I know it's important to you, and that makes it important to me."

Kerry smiled gently at her. "Wow." It felt wonderful. "Great. Now you can figure out a place to do it, because I don't know if I want to have it inside a church down here, even the one on South Beach."

Dar grinned. "I know a place." She cradled Kerry's face in her hands, stroking her cheeks with gentle thumbs. "It's a little short on amenities, but it's got a killer sunrise." Kerry's request had delighted her in ways she'd hardly expected, but she couldn't pretend she hadn't been considering the same sort of thing lately. In fact, a dawn run out to that little spot had been on her list of Valentine's Day things anyway. "Thank you for asking me."

Kerry found herself smiling, just because Dar was. "Sorry you had such a lousy day."

Dark brows knit. "Huh?" Dar asked, honestly puzzled. "What day? Oh--" She laughed softly at herself. "Yeah. Right...that...ah..." She studied Kerry's face. "Maria was right."

Kerry leaned into the touch, simply feeling the love. "Mm?"

"I have been blessed," Dar stated softly. "I've found my soul mate."

Breathe. Kerry heard a voice, remotely resembling her own reminding her. *Breathe, Kerry.* Her chest moved, and sucked in air, making a soft, almost sob. She was crying, and she had no idea why, except that just that word made her feel so...

Complete.

Kerry smiled. "Yes, you have." She reached up and curled her fingers around Dar's hand, then turned it a little and kissed the palm. After all this time. The thought echoed gently.

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get that," Dar said, softly.

"I'll get the pictures," Kerry answered.

"We've got a lot of catching up to enjoy," Dar said, with a smile.

Her soul mate smiled back. "Yes, we do."

DAR SLOWLY LET her eyes open, aware of the early morning hour even in the strange place she found herself.

Well, not really strange, it was, after all, her couch, but strange enough to jog her lightly out of her sleep, as Kerry shifted and burrowed closer to her. It was still dark out, and as such, she couldn't see anything but vague shadows in the living room, where books of pictures and scattered memories surrounded them.

She hadn't been able to prevent Kerry from kidnapping the one of her dressed as Tigger, and she just knew that was going to come back and bite her in the butt someday. Oh well, could have been worse. She could have been Pooh.

And that was okay, because she'd snatched not one, but two pictures of Kerry--one of her as a wide eyed, beruffled cherub, and another of her taken off guard, as a teenager with her back

against a tree trunk, and a book open on her knees. In the second, there was something so gentle, and so wistful in her expression, with her hand spread across the page, and her head resting against the bark, it tugged at Dar's heartstrings irresistibly. Her soul mate. Dar smiled, and stroked the soft pale hair. The word had delighted Kerry, and it really did fit how she felt towards Kerry, as though they really were part of each other. Maybe they were. Dar pulled Kerry a little closer. They certainly fit together, like a well made wooden puzzle, despite their different heights. Kerry was nestled up against her left side, with one arm wrapped around Dar's stomach and her knees between the taller woman's. Dar could feel Kerry's warm breath against her collarbone, and Dar smiled. They were breathing in the same rhythm.

It was a nice feeling.

Loving Kerry was a nice feeling. Dar smiled contentedly, and relaxed, thinking about the weekend. More specifically, early Saturday morning, when they'd go out and greet the sun, and tell each other...

Pale blue eyes popped open in mild alarm. *Tell each other what? Could they use the standard vows?*

Uh...no.

Dar's mind started working. *What in the hell could they--okay, okay...how about something simple like--I'll love you forever.*

She winced. *Not that it wasn't true, but--*

Hmm--

You are the light of my life? Augh, Dar, you sound like a bad seventies hit parade. You make my life worth living?

Well, that was true too. You came into my world, and turned it upside down? Not so flattering, but--

"Dar?" Kerry's sleepy voice interrupted her studied musing. She glanced down, where Kerry was still nestled against her.

"Hmm?"

"What are you muttering?"

Dar sighed. "Sorry. I didn't realize I was."

"Mm...so...what was it?" Kerry persisted, curiously.

"Umm...nothing, really." Dar cleared her throat gently, and snuggled back down. "G'back to sleep." She firmly closed her eyes.

"Okay," Kerry murmured obediently.

Peaceful silence fell.

"Am I really the light of your life?"

Dar made a noise halfway between a groan and a whine.

"I'm not?"

"Of course you are," Dar spluttered hastily. "You weren't supposed to hear that."

"Oh." Kerry's voice seemed disappointed. "Okay, sorry."

Dar gazed down at her, unhappily. "Kerry, you're all those things, and so much more I can't even begin to tell you. I was just trying to figure out what I was going to say to you on Saturday morning."

"Oh." The inflection was totally different. "You don't have to say anything," Kerry told her softly.

"Just your being there's enough for me."

"Oh," Dar's turn to murmur.

"I thought...maybe...I could just...sort of, um...I mean, I have this poem that I wrote. I thought maybe I could have Pastor Robert use that."

Dar exhaled in relief. "That'd be perfect." She kissed Kerry's head gently. "Thank you."

Silence fell.

"I turned everything upside down, huh?"

Dar rolled over onto her back, pulling Kerry up on top of her. "Yep."

"Awk, Dar, c'mon. You're gonna be squished." Kerry laughed.

Dar rubbed her back, working the strong muscles with her fingers. "Nope, I like this feeling."

"You like not being able to breathe. Dar, you're demented." But Kerry's body slowly relaxed completely against her, melding with her own in boneless completeness.

"Mm..." Dar savored the feeling.

"Goofball." Kerry nuzzled her neck, nibbling the underside of her jaw. "I love you." She felt the muscles of Dar's face move as she smiled. "It's almost time to get up."

"Uh huh," Dar agreed lazily. "How are you feeling?"

Kerry considered the question. "Like I don't want to get my lazy butt up and go running, but I don't have a good excuse not to," she admitted. "So, c'mon, tiger, let's hit the Frosted Flakes and get moving."

Dar laughed softly, and pinched her on the specified body part. "I'll put the coffee up, you let the puppy out?"

It was just the start of another day.

Chapter Twenty-Three

DAR OPENED THE door to her outer office, then she paused, as she spotted the workmen blocking the way further. "What's going on here?"

Maria was off to one side, supervising. She turned and spotted Dar and circled back around her desk. "Oh, jefa. Look. They are bringing your new name."

For a second, Dar wondered if they meant she was taking on Kerry's. She blinked and edged over to where the workmen were busy replacing the plaque on her door, relieved when all it showed was her new title. "Ah."

It would have been funny if it'd been the other. Dar managed to squeeze past the men and into her office, deciding if it had been, she'd have left it. "Confuse the hell out of everyone. That's my motto."

She took her seat and booted up her PC, resting her hands on the desk as the machine chimed softly and started up.

Her intercom buzzed. "Yes?"

"Jefa, Mr. José is here to see you."

Despite the absolute politeness of Maria's tone, what she thought of Dar's visitor was evident.

"Thanks, Maria. Send him in." She glanced at the folder, still in her in box, and sighed. "Can you grab me some coffee? I think I'm gonna need it."

"Surely." Maria closed the connection and she was left in a moment's peace before the door opened and José entered.

Her erstwhile nemesis in Sales crossed the room and took one of her visitor's chairs, seating himself in it and hiking one ankle up on the opposite knee.

Dar didn't truly dislike José. She knew he was if not the best, one of the best salespeople she'd ever met, and his aggressive style had won them more accounts than she had time to count over the years.

They fought like they did mostly because they were both up front, take them as you see them kind of people, and at her core, Dar really did have a level of respect for the man. "Yes?" she drawled, after he got himself comfortable. "If you're here to bitch at me, take a hike. It's too early for that."

José studied her. He opened his mouth to answer, but they both turned as knock sounded on the inside corridor door.

"C'mon in," Dar said.

Kerry entered, carrying a Styrofoam cup. "Brought extra back. Want some?" she said, after a pause when she saw who was sitting there.

"Sure."

Kerry brought the cup over and handed it to her, glancing over at José. "Good morning."

José cocked his head and regarded her. "Buenas dias," He replied. "Is that café cubano?"

"Yes," Kerry said. "I'm convinced we run on this, not electricity in this building." She gave Dar a wink, then retreated to the door. "Sorry to interrupt." She slipped through the door and left them alone again.

Dar sipped the thick, sugary rocket fuel. "So where were we?"

José blew his breath out. "I have come to say this," he said. "Either we learn not to eat each other, or we go nowhere." He laced his fingers together. "No matter what you think, I did not look for you to leave this company."

Dar grunted.

"You do not sell things," José went on. "I do not fix things," he said. "The company needs the both of us to do well and make money."

"That's true."

He leaned forward. "I do not like people who threaten me." He stared evenly at Dar. "I do not care who they think they are."

She sensed the raw challenge. But between that and her visceral response there now floated this cushion of introspection brought on by everything she'd been through in the past two weeks. Dar rested her chin on her fist. "Let me ask you something," she said. "What would you have done if I called your wife a whore?"

José looked at her. "That is not your wife." He pointed at the door. "Do not make it the same thing."

"But to me it is." Dar got up and circled her desk, not missing the flinch as she closed in on him, only to settle herself on the edge of the flat surface. "Kerry is everything to me your family is to you, José. So I ask you again, if I'd have called your wife a whore, what would you have done?"

The salesman was briefly silent. Then he got up and paced to the wall and back. "I would not have liked it," he finally admitted. "But you..."

"Had no right to talk to you like that? Sure I did." Dar shrugged. "José, I am who I am. I'm not changing."

He put his hands on his hips. "You threatened me." He pointed his thumb at his chest. "This is not right."

"I didn't threaten you," Dar objected. "I told you what I was going to do if you said something like that again and I will do just that." She got up, putting her hands on her desk and leaning back instead. "You want to be fired? I think it would stink for the company if I had to do it, but trust me. I will."

José folded his arms over his chest. "You are impossible."

"Sometimes," Dar agreed. "But tell me this, José, who else can you depend on when everything's absolutely shit?"

He grunted.

"Besides." Dar circled her desk and sat down again. "Stop blaming me for all this crap. You're the one who decided to bring in someone to attack me."

She dropped the folder on the desk. "So now you're gonna go back to your office and fire his ass."

José came to the front of her desk and leaned on it. "I will not," he said. "This is-- Yes, he is a troublemaker, but all his ideas are good ideas. He is right in the things we need to do."

"Fire him." Dar opened the folder. "Or, I will. He falsified his employment documents." She shoved the folder over. "He wants your job. Now that he failed to get me out, you're his next target. You really want that, José?"

The VP of Sales was studying the paper. "What is this?" he said. "This was not true? He told us of his successes at this company."

"He lied."

José sat down. "You are telling me this now?"

Dar held her hands up and let them fall. "For Christssake, José. I'm not responsible for vetting your damn personnel records! Mari just gave this to me because Alastair asked me to take care of the problem. That's what he views this guy as. A problem." She stared at him meaningfully.

"Your problem. Now are you going to get rid of him, or do you want me to do it?"

José fingered the folder. "You say he's after my job?" he queried. "How is it you know so much about this?"

Dar met his gaze. "You really want to know?"

"No," José said, in a disgusted tone. "You have all the power. I see it." He got up. "But it hurts us to do this. His ideas, they are correct."

Dar steepled her fingers and regarded him. "I didn't say they weren't," she said, quietly. "I think we do need changes. I think we do need to alter how we do business."

José looked surprised. "You say that?"

"Yeah. Now that I have the power to make that happen without all of you getting in my way,"

Dar replied, with a grim smile. "You want change? You'll get it. But it'll happen how I want it to."

"What does that mean?" José came back and sat down. "Explain to me, what you intend, Dar." He eyed her shrewdly. "Or do you want me to just get rid of this man because he does not like you."

"You hired him because he doesn't like me," Dar retorted. "He hasn't said anything you haven't told me for the last year, José. Think about it."

The sales exec leaned back in his seat. "That is true," he acknowledged, after a minute. "He just said them louder and was in your face with them."

"But if he's here, and changes are made now, who gets credit?"

José was silent for a moment, then he pulled his ankle up on his knee and regarded Dar with a wry expression. "Ah," he grunted. "So what are these changes? Or, is that just a trick to get me out of your face too?"

Dar went around behind her desk and sat down, giving herself a moment to consider. She naturally didn't want to share the nascent plans that had started budding in her head over the last day or so, but instinct told her she'd get a payoff by throwing her adversary a bone.

Sometimes you had to take a risk. "Okay." She leaned her elbows on her desk. "The biggest problem I see is that we don't have control over most of what we offer."

José tilted his head, but didn't interrupt.

"We're too dependent on vendors, on long haul providers. It's too expensive in the long run to over provision, and we can't ever get fast enough response when we do need an increase."

"Exactly," the Sales VP nodded. "That is exactly the problem. It is why we cannot sell the way we need to, because it's always a hedge, yes?" He waved the hand holding the folder. "We can give so much, but it always has to be paid for and plus."

Dar nodded. "To make the budget."

"Si."

"What if we had our own network?" Dar asked him. "Everything belonging to us. No circuits. Just a slice of bandwidth you could sell however you wanted."

José went very still for a long moment. "Madre dios. Are you kidding me?" he asked, finally. "Is this serious?"

"It's serious," Dar said. "I've wanted to do it for a while, I just couldn't." She tapped her thumbs together. "I warned the board already," she said. "Capital expenditure. Outside the budgets."

José tapped the folder against the side of his neck. He studied her face in silence, his eyes flicking back and forth as he considered. "This is something we have all been looking for," he said. "We will all win with this. I like it."

He stood up. "I will get rid of this man." He held the curled folder up. "This is not something he should get credit for. Who is he? A liar, as you say?" The sales VP shrugged. "All right. I will say I did bring him here after I learned he knew you to chew your face. I am an asshole sometimes."

Dar smiled at him. "Me too," she agreed. "But we do have a common cause."

"Si. That we do." José looked a lot happier. "Was he really after my job?" he asked, turning back to her. "Or, was that the bullshit to make me loco?"

"His admin told her uncle the janitor supervisor, who told my admin," Dar related honestly. "He's a good friend of her husband's."

José threw his head back and laughed. "Now that I completely believe." He slapped the folder on his leg. "Enough of this caca. Let's get back to business." He waved his hand at her and headed for the door. "Hasta la vista. Dar."

"Later." Dar sat back in her chair and felt a sense of rare victory.

"OH, I GET it." Kerry finished slicing up the fresh chicken breast. "I'm cooking, so now I'm your favorite, right?" She gave the patiently waiting Chino a droll look. "Don't you look at me like that. Go find your friend, the cookie monster."

"Yawp." Chino yawned, then poked her small tongue out and panted.

Kerry laughed, and turned her attention back to her task. She checked the steamer full of brown rice, and started a fire under the wok, pouring in a little peanut oil and waiting for it to heat.

"Shh... You keep quiet now, Chino. Don't tell Dar I put all these nice vegetables in here, okay? After I finish making the sauce, she'll never know."

Chino sniffed her ankle, then she curled up on Kerry's foot and closed her eyes.

"Oh, great. What am I, a puppy bed?" Kerry sighed. "You're just hoping I drop something." One brown eye opened and peeked at her.

Kerry smiled, as she tossed thinly sliced red, green and yellow bell peppers into the oil, and listened to the sizzling. She stirred them around, then added bamboo shoots, peanuts, and Szechwan peppers. "Oo, that smells good, huh?" She got the vegetables nice and crisp, then she slid the two pounds of chicken breast into the vegetables, and quickly stir fried it.

"Almost ready," she murmured, adding the sauce, which coated the contents of the wok a nice, honey brown. She added a handful of sesame seeds, then she turned the fire off. She scooped mounds of fragrant brown rice into each of two comfortably sized bowls, and topped it with the stir fry. "Hey, Dar?"

"Mmm?"

The nearby voice nearly scared the bejesus out of her. "Yeeow!" She almost dropped the bowls.

"Dar, don't do that!"

"You called me," Dar protested, taking both bowls.

"Well, yeah, but I didn't realize you were standing in my back pocket." Kerry laughed, as she grabbed two glasses and a bottle of plum wine. She followed Dar into the living room, and joined her as she settled onto the loveseat, putting the bowls down on the end table.

"So." Kerry curled up with her legs tucked under her and accepted the bowl Dar handed over.

"That's some chest." She indicated the trunk which had been delivered. It was a curious item, bound in leather that was carved with intricate, interlocking squares. "It's gorgeous."

"Mm," Dar agreed around a mouthful of rice and chicken. She'd changed into a pair of cutoff sweatpants and a t-shirt, and was wearing a thick pair of very white socks which were intriguing Chino immensely. "Good stuff, Ker." She indicated the bowl.

"Thank you." Kerry's nose wrinkled up as she smiled happily. "It's a new recipe."

Dar's eyes twinkled. "I can feel the healthy vibes coming off of it." She used her chopsticks to retrieve a sneakily hidden vegetable and waved it at her lover. "But you could put this sauce on shoelaces and I'd eat them."

Kerry laughed. "I was counting on that." She took a mouthful and chewed it. "Do you really mind the veggies?"

Dar made her wait for an answer for a moment, then she smiled. "Nah." She took a cheerful bite.

"Besides, what right do I have to complain? You're cooking."

"Well..." Kerry nibbled a bamboo shoot. "It makes me feel better about having chocolate chip ice cream for dessert." She paused, almost laughing at the way Dar's ears perked up. "Double chocolate chip, in fact." She scooped up a bit of rice. "Which reminds me, we're going to have to take separate cars tomorrow. I have my annual checkup scheduled. I almost forgot about it."

"Mm." Dar took a few mouthfuls and chewed them. "Kerry, can I ask you a personal question?"

Kerry stopped eating, and stared. "Uh...sure."

One dark brow lifted, then dropped. "Why does chocolate chip ice cream remind you of your doctor?"

"Oh," Kerry laughed, blushing a little. "Yeah, I guess that came out a little weird, huh? No, it's because she gave me such a hard time last year. Apparently I was too skinny for her tastes. She started giving me lectures and pamphlets on eating disorders." She gave Dar a wry look. "I was imagining her reaction this year."

"Ah. I see." Dar nodded in understanding. "Do you think she was right?"

Kerry slowly chewed a mouthful. "I think I'm a lot happier now than I was then, but there's a lot that goes into that." Her eyes searched Dar's face. "I think the biggest influence in getting me to change my mind was the opinion of someone I really respected."

"Mm." Dar didn't quite know how to respond to that, so she merely murmured an agreement, scooping the last of her rice up. "Well, let's see what we have here, huh?" She put the bowl down and eased herself down onto the floor, where Chino immediately tried to crawl into her lap.

"Hey!"

Kerry laughed, as she put her own bowl aside, and joined her lover on the floor, taking the puppy out of her way. "Oo...look at that hasp."

"Yeah." Dar took the key that had come with the trunk and fitted it to the old fashioned lock, then turned it. The metal protested, but released, and she removed the rusted object and set it on the floor. "Okay," she murmured, then she carefully unlatched the two catches, and released them, tugging the top of the trunk open and tipping it back.

The scent that came out was the oddest mixture of dust, age, and mystery, and Kerry squirmed closer, so she could peek inside. "Ohhh."

"Wow." Dar leaned on her crossed knees, and just looked. "What a mess."

Inside the truck was a tangled conglomeration of...stuff. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to the contents, just a random assortment of odd items, ranging from small wooden boxes, to pieces of metal, to very old clothing. "What in the hell is all this stuff. Looks like the leftovers from a bad touring theatre troupe."

"Or a hard up for cash Girl Scout troop," Kerry murmured, lifting out a metal pan, resembling a camping cup. "Wow." She turned it over, peering at a set of scratches in the bottom. "Initials."

"Uh huh." Dar reached in and pulled out a small wooden box, flat and smooth as satin with age. She gently opened it, revealing an old fashioned writing pen, its tip stained with purpled ink.

"Oh." Kerry took it from Dar's proffered hands and examined it. "Wow, that's really old." She ran a fingertip down the brass surface. "Was she a writer?"

"I..." Dar thought about it. "I don't think so, but I didn't know her really well, Kerry. We were... It was strange. I wasn't really ever sure why she left me all this. We weren't close." She paused.

"Why? Do you think she was?"

"Mm... This pen meant something to her. Usually you keep the things you use the most, Dar." Kerry lifted the pen out carefully, and curled her fingers around it, It...fit...comfortably, in the oddest way. "Oh, what a nice feeling," she murmured, flexing her hand.

Dar watched her curiously. "Are you into calligraphy?"

"A little," Kerry responded. "I used to write my poetry longhand, until I figured out it was a lot safer to put them in my computer." She sighed. "They always seemed more intense when I wrote them out, but I knew my parents, or Kyle couldn't find their way through my hard drive."

Dar closed her hand over Kerry's. "Why don't you keep hold of that, then, because if you've ever seen my handwriting, you'll know I will never, ever have use for it." A wry grin edged her face.

"There's a reason I type everything, and I have, since grade school."

Kerry gazed at the pen, then up at her. "Oh, yeah. I heard Mariana moaning about some evaluations you wrote out. She said she was going to have to call in a Greek scholar to translate," she teased gently. "Thank you. I don't know if I could bear to try and use it, but I like just holding this."

Blue eyes glinted suddenly, with an inner light. "Write me a poem with it." The low voice took on a momentarily deeper tone.

A warmth traveled up her spine, and Kerry smiled in reflex. "All right." She carefully put the antique pen down on the table. "What's next?" She reached a hand in, and collided with a large, heavy metal piece. "Ouch, what the heck is that? A machete? Did she wander the Amazon jungle or something?" Kerry carefully tugged her find free. "Oh."

It was a rusted, rotting, half disintegrated sword. "Good grief." Kerry got her other hand under the rotted leather of what once might have been a scabbard and lifted it clear. "Would you look at that?"

Dar had stilled, and now she exhaled a long breath. "Let me see that," she asked softly, holding out her hands as Kerry gently placed the ancient artifact in them.

The first thing she felt was a slow, faint wash of sadness, gentle, but profound enough to prick the back of her eyes with tears. "Bet there's a story behind this old thing," she commented to Kerry quietly. "You can almost feel the history in it." She gazed down at the ruined sword, noting the plain, worn brass hilt, its surface encrusted in green, and the unraveling tatters of rotted leather that fell away from her fingers as she touched it.

Dar wrapped her fingers around the hilt, and pulled the crumbling leather away from it, revealing a scarred, pitted steel blade, broken halfway down, its remaining length gouged with deep, asymmetrical grooves. She twisted her wrist, closing her eyes and feeling a faint, clear bell of familiarity ring deep down, as the weight of it hit her forearm muscles. "Damn, this brings back memories," she murmured, opening her eyes and regarding Kerry thoughtfully.

"It does?" Kerry had been watching her in mild fascination.

"Yeah, we used to study a couple different types of sword handling when I was really into the martial arts." There are several forms that focus on allowing the artist to become proficient at a lot of different weapons, Dar mused, turning her hand around and letting a faint smile touch her lips. "I gave it up, mostly because it doesn't have a lot of practical application in today's world." "Mm, bet you were good at it," Kerry observed, cupping her chin in one hand.

A shrug. "I was all right." Dar gently put the broken sword down. "I'll clean that up. It's a nice conversation piece."

"Right." Kerry reached in, and pulled out another small wooden box, this one a heavier, almost petrified looking wood with a brass band around it fastening it shut. "Care to give a guess? Let's see...a centuries old brass faucet."

Dar leaned on the edge of the trunk. "Okay...um...a petrified dog biscuit," she hazarded, the word biscuit immediately getting Chino's attention.

Green eyes rolled, then Kerry carefully undid the clever latch, and worked the box open, the wooden edges having warped tightly shut. "Ugh. This is kinda...whoops." The box fell out of her hands as it popped open, and onto the tile floor, spilling its contents. "Oh, damn. Did it break? God, Dar...I..."

"Shh...no." Slowly, Dar put down her hand, and touched the grayish black stones gingerly. Each was attached to the remains of a silver chain, and she picked one up and examined it. "What in the hell is that?" She picked up the other stone and looked at it, then she rotated it and gingerly put both stones together. "Hey, they match."

Kerry leaned close. "They fit together." Her throat felt funny when she said it. "How unusual." Dar's finger pushed the two stones around in her palm, their edges fitting snugly together. "They sure do," she mused thoughtfully. "Too bad they're so beat up. It might be kinda fun to...um..." Kerry gently picked the stones up and separated them. "Let me see if I can clean them up. I've got some jewelry cleaner upstairs." She glanced up at Dar's face, which was painted in tones of interest and curiosity. "Would you wear half if I can?"

A strange, almost dreamy smile crossed Dar's face. "Yeah. Would you?"
A laugh bubbled up from deep inside her, and Kerry released it into the air. "Sure."
In her palm, the stones nestled together, in obscure, gray contentment.

KERRY TOOK THE small bowl out onto the patio with her, seating herself in the early morning sun and propping her bare feet up against the railing. Dar had left a little while ago, and she'd found herself with some time before her nine a.m. appointment.

So she'd decided to clean the rocks they'd found, before she got dressed and took the short drive over to her doctor's office. She shifted a little and flexed her thighs, a little heavy feeling still from her running that morning, but she'd made eight laps for the first time, keeping up with Dar in a small piece of personal triumph.

Of course, she suspected her lover had cooperatively kept her pace to something Kerry could handle, but still, eight was eight, and it felt pretty damn good.

Add that to the fact that she'd finally...finally gotten the hang of that over the shoulder throw last night, and had managed to down Dar with it not once, but twice.

Yeah. She could sit here in the sun with her rocks and her solution, and feel darn proud and pleased with herself. "Heh, heh, heh," Kerry chortled softly, dipping the rocks carefully in the very mild liquid. She was actually feeling pretty smug, to tell the truth, and she was more than a little looking forward to going in for her checkup for a change.

What she hadn't told Dar was that her doctor, Marie Simpson was a gym rat. She'd not only delighted in chastising Kerry for being so skinny, she'd spent thirty minutes during every appointment trying to browbeat her into joining a gym and starting an aerobics program. She'd also been, to Kerry's mild discomfort, romantically interested in her.

Marie had made it clear that she wasn't looking for anything serious, just some light hearted fun, and they'd gone out a few times together. Kerry had enjoyed herself, still very tentative in adjusting to her sexuality, but she and Marie just hadn't had that much in common. The doctor's interests tended to violent sports, poker, and frank leering at passing bodies.

Marie also like to drink, which Kerry had deliberately turned away from, and she loved to party. Kerry had gone with her to one, thrown by a professional women's group Marie belonged to. She'd been all right, until she was cornered near the bar by a couple of very drunk and very amorous paralegals.

That had been a little ugly. But she'd gotten out of it with the help of a very sweet and very friendly bartender, who let her slip by behind the bar and through the hotel's kitchen, where she exited and called a cab.

It hadn't been Marie's fault, though the woman had apologized profusely, but Kerry had decided after that she wasn't quite the party animal. "Kerry," Marie had said. "You're sweet, but you need to get a life."

Kerry swished the rocks around in the solution, and looked around her, with a grin. "Guess I found a life, huh?" She watched a seagull float overhead, and savored the sunlight warming her skin in a moment of pure, animal happiness. "Mm."

"Okay, let's see what we've got here." She gently fished the first stone out and laid it on a soft cloth, then rubbed it carefully. A layer of the dark surface came off onto the rag, and she examined it, then dipped it again. Three or four more dips, and a careful cleaning with the rag, and she was sitting in some amazement, as the sun poured down and sent fractures of colored light through the pure, clear crystal in the palm of her hand. "Wow," she whistled under her breath. "Check that out."

An idea occurred to her, and she carefully dried off the two pieces of crystal, untangling the ruined chains from them. "I think I remember a jeweler close by Marie's office." She grinned, as she stood up and reentered the condo, heading for her bedroom to change.

THE WAITING ROOM was quiet this early in the morning, and Kerry had only been seated for perhaps five minutes before the receptionist slid her glass window to one side, and motioned her in.

"Good morning." Kerry smiled at the nurse who met her.

The woman glanced quickly at the folder she was carrying. "Oh, good morning, Ms. Stuart. Gosh, we haven't seen you here in quite a while, have we?"

"Not for a quite a few months, no," Kerry confirmed cheerfully.

"You must be nice and healthy, then." The nurse tucked her folder under her arm. "Right this way...in room three." She guided Kerry down the corridor, and into the examination room. "Go on and slip into the gown, and I'll be in to take your blood. This is just a regular physical, right?"

"Yep." Kerry put her purse down and shrugged out of her jacket, draping it over the back of the chair. She'd worn a fairly casual, but neatly pressed polo shirt under it, chiefly because she knew she'd be taking it off, and travel irons weren't really her style. She unzipped her skirt and slipped out of it, then pulled her shirt off and left them folded precisely as she pulled on the thin fabric of the examination gown.

Then she walked over to the counter and examined the various jars and containers, wishing this part of the trial was already over. She didn't hate doctors like Dar did, but like any normal person, she found the waiting, and the wondering, uncomfortable.

She didn't have long to wait, though. The nurse came back in, and put her folder down. "Okay, let's get you weighed and then I have to take two blood samples, okay?"

"Sure." Kerry stepped amiably over to the scale and stood on it, watching as the nurse adjusted the weights until the bar balanced perfectly.

"One hundred twenty one--okay." The nurse marked it down. "That's a change from last year." From ninety four? Yes. "I took a job delivering pizzas; it's made all the difference." Kerry told her solemnly. "You know you have to eat all the ones you can't deliver."

"Oh my." The nurse gazed at her, concerned. "Is that healthy?"

Kerry kept a straight face. "I work with a partner. I only eat the vegetable ones."

"Ah, that's really smart." The nurse smiled. "Okay, go on and sit up on the table there, and I'll get what I need to draw blood."

Kerry obediently went and hopped up onto the table, dangling her bare legs over the edge, and resting her elbows on her thighs. She lifted an arm as the nurse came over, and submitted to the short, chunky woman's touch as she probed for a vein.

"Do you work out?" the nurse asked, in idle curiosity, as Kerry flexed her arm and caused the newly defined biceps in her upper arm to bulge.

"No. Why?" Kerry asked, with devastating innocence.

The nurse peeked at her, then went back to her task. "Oh, well, nothing. I was just asking." She took her blood and then checked Kerry's pulse and pressure, and wrote those down. "Okay, the doctor will be in shortly."

Kerry rubbed her arm, where the needle had extracted blood and stifled a yawn. She'd deliberately skipped coffee that morning, not wanting to send her blood pressure skyrocketing. "Musta worked," she murmured to herself, recalling the 115 over 72 that the nurse had recited.

She hopped off the table and wandered over to the frosted window, standing up on her toes to peer out the top, where green leaves moved across a blue sky. She spotted a blue bird outside, and she watched, fascinated, as the bird hopped to a nest nearby and started feeding small chicks. In February. Kerry shook her head in mild amazement, then turned, as the door opened, and Marie Simpson walked in, letting it close behind her as she stood, and studied her patient.

"Who are you, and what have you done with Kerry Stuart?" the slim, frosted haired woman asked, with a laugh. "Holy Jesus came to town, kid. What's up with you?"

Kerry chuckled, as she turned, and leaned casually against the wall. "Hi, Marie."

The doctor put her folder down and walked over. "When I heard Nancy talking about this buff blonde in room three, who was smart mouthing her, I had to come see for myself."

"I was just messing with her." Kerry felt a blush coming on. "So, how've you been?"

Marie took her wrists, and moved her arms out, examining her. "Not a patch on you, kid. Did my lectures finally sink in or something?" She gave Kerry a slap on the shoulder. "Go sit down on the table, let's check you out."

Kerry did so, laying down on the table and stretching out, as Marie set her stethoscope into her ears and listened to Kerry's heart, then moved it down to her abdomen. "So, did it?"

"Did what?" Kerry asked.

"My lectures sink in?" Marie asked, probing with gentle, sure hands.

"Not exactly," Kerry told her. "But I took your advice. I got a life."

"Really?" The doctor laughed. "That wasn't all I told you to get," she teased. "I think I recall saying 'Kerry, you're sweet, but you need a life, and a good lay.'"

Kerry cleared her throat, ignoring the flush of blood going to her skin. "I got one of those, too," she muttered, hardly able to believe she was saying it.

"Ooh...did you?" Marie gave her a pat on the belly. "Sit up." She waited for Kerry to comply, then set the stethoscope against her back. "Breathe."

Kerry sucked in a breath obediently, glad of the chance to regain her composure.

"Breathe."

Another breath.

"Sounds good in there. You had any more bronchitis?" Dr. Simpson studied her. "Those dizzy spells come back?"

Kerry shook her head. "No coughing since that last time, and the dizzy spells kinda tapered off in the fall."

The doctor picked up a metal bar and tested her reflexes, then peered interestedly into the side of her head. Kerry sat quietly, looking straight ahead and trying to think of something other than how much that thing was tickling her.

"So, you lifting weights?" Marie asked, casually.

"Um...a bit...not that much really, mostly light stuff." Kerry resisted the urge to bat the woman's hand away from her sensitive ears. "Wall climbing, a lot of running, some diving, a little martial arts, that sort of thing." She glanced up as the doctor stepped back. "I feel great."

Marie put a hand on her shoulder. "You look great." She smiled. "I can hardly believe it." She indicated Kerry's clothes. "Get dressed and c'mon into my office. We can chit chat for a minute or two." She paused. "Did you want me to schedule you for a mammogram? No, wait, we did that last summer, right?"

Kerry nodded. "Yes. That's hard to forget. I still get chilly thinking of it." She grinned wryly.

"I...um..." She chewed her lip. "Check regularly."

Possibly more regularly than strictly necessary, since she and Dar had invented a sort of mutual, gently sensual game to it, when she'd found that her stubborn lover had never bothered to check herself even once.

"Good deal," the doctor nodded. "Okay then, meet you down the hall. I'm going to grab a bottle of carrot juice. Want some?"

"Uh, no thanks." Kerry ignored the growling in her stomach. "I'm going to pick up some breakfast on the way into work." A Cuban egg McMuffin, she'd decided, and a nice big café con leche.

And one for Dar, of course.

Marie left her to change, and she did, tucking her shirt into her waistband and zipping it, then settling her metallic green jacket over her shoulders. She picked up her purse and went down to the doctor's office, settling into the comfortable chair across from the desk, where the older woman was busy scribbling into her files. "So, everything look okay?"

"Hang on," Marie muttered, still scribbling. "I want to get...okay." She looked up, and folded her hands. "It'll take a while for the blood work to come back, but everything looks good to me." Her eyes twinkled. "And your health does too."

Kerry allowed a smile to cross her face, acknowledging the compliment. "It's been quite a change for me. I moved. I have a new job..." She paused, considering. "Someone in my life. I guess that's been the biggest change. Dar's gotten me into a lot of that physical stuff."

Marie cocked her head. "Dar, that's an unusual name. You don't mean Dar Roberts, do you?"

Kerry blinked, truly startled. "Um...yes."

The doctor whistled. "Wow. I never met her, but I've heard stories." She leaned forward. "You got pictures?"

She'd heard of Dar? That made no sense, given the separate circles they traveled in. "Uh, yeah, I do." Kerry pulled out her wallet, and opened it, selecting one of her favorite pictures of the two of them, standing near an old oak outside the condo, Dar's arms wrapped loosely around her neck.

"Wow," Marie said again, looking up and giving Kerry a very respectful glance. "My ex was at the bar downtown the night she took out those two robbers. She said she never saw anything quite like it, just like in the movies."

Kerry's blonde brow edged up. "Hah. I haven't heard that story, but that's Dar. She hates making herself out to be a hero."

Marie handed the picture back, with a frank grin. "She definitely saved a few butts that night, and put one guy in the hospital for three months." A faint shake of her head. "You picked a wild one, Kerry, but if you're happy..." She let the thought drift off. "Listen, we're having a party next Saturday night at the club. Why don't you guys stop by, hmm? I'd love to meet your friend."

Kerry hesitated. "Sure, I mean, I don't think we have anything planned. I'll check with Dar when I get to the office." She didn't want to refuse outright, since she did like Marie, but she wondered if Dar would want to make an appearance at what was, apparently, old stomping grounds.

Marie stood up. "Okay, great, maybe we'll see you then." She smiled, and held a hand out. "Great seeing you, Kerry. I'll give you a call if anything unusual comes back in your tests, but in my considered opinion, just keep doing what you're doing, okay?"

Kerry also stood, and gripped her hand. "Thanks, Marie. I'll be seeing you."

"Yeah." The doctor gave her a speculative look. "I hope so."

DAR WAS SEATED at her desk, her head propped up on one hand and her mouse in the other. She was clicking through a series of spreadsheets, checking their contents, then flipping back to others in a blur of white with pale blue lines. A soft knock interrupted her, and she leaned back, welcoming it. "C'mon in."

Maria pushed the door opened and entered, closing it behind her. She was carrying several folders, which she put neatly on Dar's desk. "Is the three new companies we bring in, Dar," the secretary said. "And Kerrisita just poked her head in, to say she is here now."

"Oh?" Dar visibly perked up. "That didn't take long, guess everything's okay then." You never knew with doctors, after all, though Kerry certainly appeared extremely healthy, you just never knew. "Great. I had a lunch meeting sprung on me that I wanted her to attend."

As if on cue, a popup appeared on her window.

"Hey, my doctor wants to meet you."

Dar blinked, and glanced at Maria, then leaned forward and typed back.

"Oh really? Everything go okay then?"

"Remember what Maria thought of me? With the trail mix? That's what my doctor thinks of you."

Dar smiled. "C'mon over." She turned and put her hands on the desk. "So, we have three new acquisitions, eh?"

"Si," Maria agreed.

Dar drummed her fingers on the desk. "Um...so...what did you have planned for the weekend, Maria?"

The secretary gave her a curious look. "Aye...well...nothing really, just some work in the garden, and my husband is going to paint the bathroom," she answered, a little puzzled.

"Ah. That sounds nice...um..." Dar glanced up as the inner door opened and Kerry ambled in, her green eyes twinkling as they found her lover's face. "We were going to have a little get together on Saturday morning...I'd...um... Dar regarded her pencil, then looked over at Kerry. "We'd like you to be there." Kerry put a paper bag down on the desk and smiled at Maria.

Maria folded her hands, and looked from one to the other. "It is a party?"

Dar looked at Kerry in silent appeal. Kerry rolled her eyes.

"Sort of." Kerry perched on one corner of the desk. "My former pastor from Michigan is in Miami for a visit, and he offered to perform a commitment ceremony for us."

She does that so smoothly. Dar marveled.

"Como?" Maria took a step forward towards them. "Do you mean to be saying you are getting married?"

Kerry felt the strangeness of the word. "Um...yes, I think you could say that." She turned and looked at Dar in question. The woman was chewing the end of her pen so studiously you'd have thought she had a plastic deficiency. "Right?"

Blue eyes shifted to her face, and then to Maria. "Uh...yes." Dar swallowed, having never really expected to be saying that. "We are."

Maria put her hands on her hips, and gave Dar a very severe look. "Jefe, that is not nice."

Dar was startled. "Wh--" *Could she have read Maria all wrong? No.* "What isn't nice?" Kerry was also regarding the secretary in some puzzlement.

"You cannot just be doing this without warning. To not give me a chance to get a nice present. That is not fair, Dar. I must get a dress, and..."

"Whoa, whoa, no, no. It's very casual, Maria." Dar stood up hastily. "You don't need to get us anything. We just want you to be there."

"Right," Kerry nodded. "Really, it's very...we just decided to do this the other day, Maria."

"Casual?" Maria repeated. "How you mean, casual, Dar?"

"Um, well, we're going to take my boat out there." Dar scratched her jaw. "And it's on a little island...before dawn."

Maria stared at her for a long moment. "Dios Mio." She shook her head. "Dar, you are too much."

Dar exhaled softly. "It's all right if you don't want to, Maria. I know it's very short notice, and it's not--"

"Pardon? I do not think so, Dar. I would not miss this for all the how you say, coffee in India,"

Maria stated. "I will get my pair of shorts out, just for you." She beamed at them, then turned and bustled out, shutting the door behind her.

"Well," Kerry remarked, turning and giving her lover a smile. Then she walked around and leaned on the desk next to Dar, her blonde hair brushing the edges of the wood surface. "Hi."

Dar glanced at the door, then nuzzled her. "Mm, you smell like café con leche."

"Oh yeah?" Kerry leaned her way and kissed her lightly. "Imagine that."

Dar's eyes gentled. "Everything okay?" she asked.

"Mm hmm," Kerry told her. "Marie tells me I'm very healthy, and that I look great, and that she wants me to bring you to a party down there so they can all meet the infamous Dar Roberts."

Blue eyes flickered. "Infamous?"

"Mm, something about a robber, or maybe it was two of them...or six."

Dar dropped her head. "Ah." She nodded. "That. Damn. Are they still telling that old story?" She looked a bit abashed. "Talk about stale news."

Kerry slipped her arm across Dar's shoulders. "Tell you what, partner; I've got some meatballs in the crock pot cooking nice and slow. How about you and me share a big bowl of them and some spaghetti later on, and you tell me that old story, okay?"

Dar smiled quietly at the desktop. "All right." She paused, reflectively. "You know, I remember going out to the beach after that whole thing happened, and watching the sun rise." She let out a breath. "It was one of the only times I felt...proud of who I was, and the fact that I'd had a positive effect in someone's life."

Kerry studied her profile for a moment, then she reached over and gently tilted her chin up, until their eyes met. "Until now."

A calm silence fell, as they stared into each other's eyes, bathed in the warm sunlight pouring into the room, and spilling over them like a golden blanket.

Abruptly the phone buzzed, and broke the spell. "Dar, I have the Singapore on uno," Maria's voice entered the room.

Dar took Kerry's hand, and kissed it. "All right, I've got it, Maria."

Kerry stroked her cheek, then straightened, and nodded. "See you for lunch." She motioned towards the bag. "Enjoy."

"Thanks." Dar smiled, as she reached for the phone button. "Yeah?"

"Dar, we've got SITA problems again," the harried voice sounded. "The overseas net is down in the Far East. Can you help?"

Dar glanced at her assistant. "Actually, you need to talk to our operations Director, Kerry Stuart. I'll transfer you over. I'm sure she can get your issue resolved."

"B--"

"Hang on." Dar cocked her head at Kerry, and lifted her brows. "Ready?"

Kerry took a breath, and nodded. "If I can't fix it, can we go there too?" she quipped. "I bet Singapore's way more interesting than backwoods North Carolina."
Dar shook her finger at her, but grinned.
"Give me a minute, then transfer it." Kerry moved to the door, and waved, then disappeared.

Chapter Twenty-Four

TWILIGHT WAS DIMMING her office by the time Kerry looked up from her inbox, glad to have waded out of the worst of it before the end of the day.
The last thing she wanted was to have to catch up over the weekend, especially since they had very important plans tomorrow morning.
She got up and went to the windows, gazing out at the cool, blue sea that stretched the horizon. "I'm getting married," she said to her dimly seen reflection. "It's so weird and unreal."
Shaking her head, she turned and picked up her mug, carrying it with her as she crossed the carpet to her door and opened it up into the hallway. It was quiet on the floor--Friday afternoon after all--and she enjoyed the sense of peacefulness as she went over into the small kitchen. Footsteps sounded behind her, and she turned, then smiled as Mark entered. "Hey."
"Hey, poquito boss," Mark greeted her. "TGIF, huh?"
"TGIF," Kerry agreed. She glanced around as three of the marketing reps entered, with Eleanor right behind them. "And it's about that time, ain't it?" she added, as she took in the frosty looks. "Thanks for getting those guys in Singapore to play ball." Mark was stirring sugar into his coffee, or maybe was pouring some coffee into his sugar, given the quantities involved. "That would have sucked if we had to work it all night."
"Anytime." Kerry sipped her tea. "They weren't that bad. I just had to talk them into going outside their boundaries a little."
"You must be good at that." Eleanor sniped from the corner.
Kerry smiled. "Thanks. I think I am," she responded in a mild tone.
José entered, whistling under his breath and rubbing his hands together. "It is Friday. This weekend, I am looking forward to it." He glanced at Kerry, and to her surprise, he gave her a nod. "Better than that crazy place we were at, no?"
"Absolutely," Kerry agreed without hesitation.
"You got that right." Mark chimed in. "Man that was skanky."
"What the hell are you so cheerful about?" Eleanor asked José. "I thought you were screaming about your budget cuts a half hour ago."
José went to the espresso machine and started making himself a cafecito with quick, expert gestures. "That was last hour," he said. "I have figured it out, and we are good," he added. "Not so hard after all. I just stopped the new desks, and got rid of some extra, and so it's done."
Eleanor rolled her eyes. "Give me a break," she said. "What extra, you told them not to print the sales reports twice?"
José looked around at her. "I got rid of Fabracini," he said. "Piece of garbage he turned out, yes? Lied on his resumé. I called that Fortune 500 Company where he said he did so much and they kicked his ass out after a week."
Kerry blinked.

Mark blinked.

"No kidding!" Eleanor's finely crafted eyebrows almost hiked up to meet her exquisite hairline. "So you fired him?"

José turned, picking up his cup. "Si," he said. "Of course! You cannot keep someone after you find out something like that. Terrible." He shook his head. "Just think if one of our competitors found out, and said to the papers."

"Well." The Marketing VP shook her head. "Can't really say I'll miss him." She glanced past José. "And I know you won't," she said to Kerry. "You lucked out there. I'd have pressed charges no matter what Dar did."

Kerry took a swallow of her tea, and pondered her response.

"Eleanor!" José snorted. "Don't be such an asshole," he told his colleague. "All we do is fight. Leave it."

Eleanor stared at him. "What?"

"Leave it!" José told her. "What does it get any of us? A headache! Just shut up and go home and get screwed and leave it." He put his cup down and walked out, shaking his head.

A stunned silence fell over the kitchen. Then Kerry pushed off from the counter and started for her office. "Sounds like a good plan to me." She dropped the words into the awkwardness.

"Mark, see you tomorrow morning."

Mark scurried to follow her. "You got it, boss."

Kerry turned, just at the door. "And Eleanor?" She gave the woman a direct look. "I treat people with the same respect they treat me with. Do you really want to keep on like this?"

The Marketing VP held up a hand. "Truce," she agreed readily. "It's too late and I'm too tired," she said. "Let's start fresh on Monday."

"Have a good weekend." Kerry smiled, then left, with Mark at her heels.

Eleanor sighed. "What the hell," she said. "How long can it last, anyway?" She sipped her coffee and relaxed.

IT WAS COOL out on the patio. Dar stood, leaning against the stone wall, her elbows resting on it's top as she gazed out over the water. The salty wind blew her hair back, and she caught a whiff of wood smoke, from the barbeque they were having down at the beach club.

If she turned her head, she knew she'd see Kerry sprawled in the loveseat, busy with her ancient pen and a piece of parchment, writing something she refused to let Dar see. "Tomorrow's soon enough," she'd told her lover, huddling over it.

Tomorrow. Dar looked down and regarded her hands quietly, absently fingering the golden band around her finger. She wasn't nervous, exactly. After all, it was just a few words spoken by someone she didn't even know. She would have preferred that it were just the three of them, but she couldn't grudge Kerry's wish to have people there.

Grumpy old antisocial beach bum. She chastised herself, semi humorously. *C'mon, it's not that big a step, and it's only Duks, Mari, Maria, and Colleen. Get over it.*

Her page to her father had gone unanswered, and though part of her was concerned at that, another part was secretly relieved, and that was warring with the big slice battling off disappointment.

Well, they'd take pictures. He'd like that. Dar sighed, and straightened. The Jacuzzi caught her eye, and she decided a nice warm soak was a good idea. A thought occurred to her. *Bet Kerry would like that too.* Another thought. *We have fresh raspberries and whipped cream.*

Brightening, Dar went back inside.

KERRY PUT THE last touches on her poem, then untangled herself from a snoozing Chino and trotted upstairs to put the parchment carefully away. Then she examined the white, casual outfit she'd icked out for the morning, cutoff denim shorts, and the soft white shirt that tied across her ribcage, exposing her belly.

Casual, yeah. Kerry faced her reflection in the mirror and smiled. Dar had picked a worn, stonewashed pair of short overalls, with a white shirt underneath it. It was impossibly cute on her, especially with her tan, and the fact that she intended to remain barefoot.

Kerry laughed gently, then opened her top drawer, and pulled out a wooden box, neatly carved and purchased at Bayside just the day before. She opened it, and exposed the soft, plushly velvet interior, where the two crystals were nestled, the soft lamp light glistening against both them and the brand new golden chains draped about them. The jewelers had polished the stones, causing them to reflect the light in brilliant prisms, and she smiled as she imagined giving Dar hers the next morning.

Soft footfalls alerted her, and she tucked the box away, just in time to turn and greet her wind disheveled lover as she peeked inside the room. "Hey."

Dar entered, riffling her hair with a negligent hand. "I was wondering if you'd like to share a bowl of raspberries and a hot tub with me."

Kerry grinned hugely. "Would I? What kind of a silly question is that? You betcha." She grabbed her bathing suit from the rack and gave Dar a gentle shove. "Meet you out there?" Dar's eyes twinkled, as she nodded, and ambled out, Chino stumbling at her heels.

Kerry pulled her shirt off, and tugged on her suit, pulling at the straps to settle the thin fabric. Then she grabbed a towel and trotted downstairs, in time to meet Dar coming out of the kitchen with two plastic containers and a smudge of whipped cream on her face. "Mm." Kerry stood on tiptoes and licked it off, getting a startled squawk from her taller companion. "Who needs berries?"

They went outside, and eased into the bubbling Jacuzzi, as Dar put the containers on the edge of the pool. "Mm." She stretched out long legs and leaned back. "Nice night."

"Beautiful," Kerry agreed. "Mark said TGIF, but boy, today really is TGIF for me. I am so looking forward to this weekend."

"Me too," Dar agreed. "Did you hear about Fabracini?" She watched Kerry's face as her partner settled down in the water. "José fired him."

"I did," Kerry said, seeing the twinkle in Dar's eyes. "Did you have something to do with that?" she asked. "He sounded like he was totally in charge of that."

"I did," Dar mimicked her tone. "I promised you I'd try another way, didn't I?"

Kerry gazed at her. "Wow," she said. "Thank you." She leaned over and gave Dar a kiss on the lips. "I know this is going to be a tough transition. I appreciate you making it a little easier for me though."

"Anytime." Dar smiled. "I think it might make things easier for me too," she admitted. "I think I have to learn not to run roughshod over everyone all the time."

"Learn something new every day." Kerry kissed her again, then pressed her forehead against Dar's as she looked into her eyes. "I'm so looking forward to spending my life with you."

Dar's face lit up with delight.

Kerry rubbed noses with her and then she settled back down in the water, extending her arms out and sighing in complete contentment.

Dar wiggled her toes in the water and cleared her throat. "That was quite a workout tonight. I'm not sure what got into Ken and I. We were like wild weasels," she changed the subject.

"It was fun watching you," her partner agreed amiably. "Probably a lot more fun than getting my butt kicked by you like Ken did."

Dar regarded the bright stars. It had all come back, as she'd executed a flickering, almost dazzling move that had dumped poor Ken on his butt so hard he bounced. She'd stood there, blood pumping fiercely, and remembered just how good that felt.

"I told Ken I'd be willing to give a little, local match a try," Dar commented, idly tracing the patterns in the sky with her eyes. "There's one in May. I think I'm gonna enter."

Kerry regarded her speculatively. "Awesome, I think you're going to kick everyone's butt."

A shrug. "Well, I don't know about that, I'm getting a little old for this, but we'll see. It'll be a small thing, maybe I can win a few rounds."

Kerry splashed over and laid her cheek against Dar's shoulder, gazing up at her with puppy like adoration. "Would you win me a trophy?"

Wide, round, blue eyes stared at her. "Um...what?"

"I always wanted someone to win a trophy for me. I used to have Brian try it at the State Fair, but to tell you the truth, he was more uncoordinated than I was, and I'm pretty bad."

Dark lashes blinked. "You're not uncoordinated."

"Not now, no," Kerry agreed. "How about it? Is that too romantically gooshy for you?"

"Romantic?" Dar ran a hand through her hair, confused. "Kerry, it's a flipping karate trophy. I don't know if I can. I mean--I'm sure there'll be better...I..."

Soft, green eyes gazed at her trustingly.

A sigh. "You want a martial arts trophy."

Kerry nodded. "Mm, I really do," she assured her lover. "And I'm going to get a t-shirt with your picture on it so I can cheer you on."

Dar made a noise somewhere between a cluck and a sneeze. "Kerry!" she squeaked, truly alarmed.

Kerry chuckled softly. "Gotcha." She gently nibbled Dar's arm. "Sorry, whenever you go on about how old you are I have this irresistible urge to pull your chain a little."

Dar scowled engagingly.

"Tch, that is such a cute look." Kerry put a fingertip against the pouting lips. "Seriously, Dar, Ken was totally impressed tonight. I heard him talking to that kid you usually work with."

"Mm," Dar grumbled. "I just don't want to..." she hesitated, "I guess I don't want to get my own expectations up." She played with the water a bit. "The last time I did this, I was really good, Ker. I know I can't match that now, and I'm trying to convince myself it doesn't matter."

"It doesn't." Kerry put her arms around her friend. "But you're really competitive, aren't you?"

A rueful nod.

"You'll do fine, Dar. No one's going to expect everything from you after all the time that's gone by. Just have fun." Kerry rubbed her belly comfortingly. "I'm looking forward to being there."

"Hmm." Dar produced a smile. "Yeah, you're right. I guess I'm just being a little bit squirrely tonight."

Kerry rested her head against Dar's arm again. "Mm." She glanced up. "You nervous about tomorrow?"

"No." Dar brushed the thought off. "Oh, well, a little nervous about getting all those people on the boat and out of Government Cut without ramming into Sovereign of the Seas, but other than

that, no." She nuzzled Kerry's hair. "They're going to stock the galley with breakfast for everyone."

"Mmm." Kerry moved closer, sliding her arms around Dar's body. "Did you decide on what you wanted to say?"

An unseen smile lit Dar's face. "Yes."

"Ooo...gonna tell me?" Kerry coaxed, easing an adventurous finger under Dar's bathing suit strap.

"Nope," Dar responded. "You'll find out tomorrow." She bent her head and nipped a line across the back of Kerry's neck, feeling the soft rise of goose bumps on her skin. Playfully, she reached behind her and dipped a finger in the whipped cream, then put a blob on Kerry's damp nose.

The green eyes crossed slightly as Kerry tried to focus. "Yah."

Dar leaned over and removed the blob, then moved down and kissed her, exchanging a bit of the sweet stuff while Kerry giggled. "Like that?"

Kerry went back for another taste, easing over and straddling her lover as she floated in the water. After a moment she paused. "That answer your question?"

A dark brow arched. "Want some berries?"

"Later." Kerry leaned forward and brought their bodies into contact, creating a gentle friction in the water. Dar's hands slid across her back and increased the pressure, as their legs intertwined and she felt a touch wander down her hip and tickle her thigh.

She slid a strap down on Dar's suit, and heard a chuckle as her fingertips brushed against newly uncovered flesh. "Hope no one's got the binoculars out," she breathed into a tanned ear.

Dar got both Kerry's straps off at once, and slid the sheer fabric down, exposing her body to the water's currents, a sensual moment. "They'll just think it's a full moon." She tweaked Kerry's behind with a twinkle in her eyes, then arched her back as Kerry worked her own suit off.

"Bite me." Kerry ducked her head under the water and took a nibble, feeling Dar's whole body jerk in reaction. The combination of subtle touches and the water's stimulation was incredible, and she wanted more of it. Hands slid around her ribcage and pulled her up, and she found Dar's lips waiting. Dar rocked back, and started a slow, teasing expedition that Kerry enthusiastically joined in on.

The stars chuckled overhead.

"YOU READY?" KERRY leaned on the kitchen counter, watching Dar suck a comforting glass of warm milk. The tall, dark haired woman was dressed in her overalls, and had her hair pulled loosely back into a knot outlining her angular profile. The dim light in the room caught her pale eyes, and Kerry could smell the clean scent of the soap Dar used, and a soft hint of sun dried cotton.

"Yep. I called the ferry dock, and left the names," Dar replied, licking a few droplets of milk off her lips. "I told them to escort everyone down to the marina. I figured that was easier than meeting here, then trooping over. Besides, there's parking there." Dar put the glass into the sink and exhaled. "Let's go. I want to get the boat ready."

Kerry picked up a small rope bag, which held the crystals and the parchment, and slung it over her shoulder as she followed Dar out the door.

Almost. "Hey!"

"Yelp!" Chino's head almost got caught in the door, and the puppy complained vigorously.

"C'mon, honey, you stay here, okay? I don't think you'd like boats." Kerry told the animal.

"No." Dar put a hand on her shoulder. "Let her come, she's family."

Kerry gave her a surprised look, but opened the door and let the puppy out, watching as she scampered over to Dar's feet and started chewing them. "Okay, but remember you asked me to do this."

Dar scooped up the dog and tucked her under an arm as she got into the cart. She set the puppy down on the seat between them, and released the brake, starting off in the pre-dawn darkness. It was really quiet, Kerry mused, as they rolled along the road, the sound of their tires on the tarmac seeming very loud. To one side, she could hear the gentle hiss of the surf, and to the other, the rustle of sleeping birds that roosted in the ring of trees around the small, nine hole golf course in the center of the island.

Dar steered around the curve that circled the beach club, and headed down the small path that led directly to the marina. The soft sound of clanking rigging got louder, and as they turned the last curve, Kerry could see the security lights of the harbor lighting the rows of boats. "Beautiful morning."

"Mm," Dar agreed, steering down the dock until she was opposite their slip. The boat rocked gently in the water, and Dar hopped aboard with easy grace. "The club people'll be here shortly." She eyed the front deck, tucking a life preserver away into its bin. "You want to kick the batteries up, make sure we've got plenty of juice?"

"Sure." Kerry ducked down into the cabin and stowed her bag, then checked the boat's electrical system, which was hooked to a portal on the dock. "Looks fine," she yelled up, idly opening the small refrigerator.

"Hey." She peered inside, spotting a small tray, with two splits of Dom Perignon champagne, and a dish of creamy looking truffles. A card rested there, and she plucked it up, peering at it.

"Awww... Hey, Dar!"

"Mm?" A voice sounded right in her ear, almost making her hit the overhead.

"Jesus, would you not do that?" Kerry yelled. "You're going to give me a heart attack one of these days, Dar."

"You called me," Dar complained. "It's not my fault I was right here." She poked her head into the small galley. "What's that?"

Kerry handed her the card, and retrieved the tray.

Dar studied the writing, and felt a smile edge across her face. "It's from Dad. Wow."

"Open wide." Kerry offered her a truffle, which she obediently accepted. "He's such a sweetie."

"Mmm...hf." Dar nodded, chewing.

"Now I know where his daughter gets it from," Kerry teased gently, catching Dar in mid chew as a faint blush colored her skin. "Heh."

Dar sighed. "My reputation's in tatters." She swallowed. "Mmm--that's good." Her eyes brightened, and she sniffed after the tray. "More?"

Kerry poured the champagne, and handed her lover a glass, then produced another truffle, which disappeared immediately. "Hey, chew it, okay?" She took a sip of the alcohol, and nibbled a sweet, enjoying the contrasting tastes. She looked down as a scrabbling of claws indicated Chino's approach, and watched as the puppy stumbled down the stairs, and barked at her. "Hello, honey."

"Yawp!" Chino sniffed around Dar's legs, then sat down on her foot. "Urrr.."

Dar chuckled. "Thanks Chino. I needed a foot warmer." She took a swallow of her drink, and let it trickle down her throat, then she nudged Kerry. "You hoarding those?"

Kerry put a truffle in her mouth, then bit down lightly, and raised her eyebrows. "Srof?"

Dar tilted her head down, and took the proffered half, brushing her lips against Kerry's teasingly. "This is starting out to be a great day already."

Kerry grinned happily, then she turned as she heard voices outside. "Well, I think we're about to get things going...awp."

Dar put her glass down, and laced her fingers through Kerry's hair, drawing her closer and into a heartfelt, passionate kiss. They separated after a long stretch of heartbeats and looked at each other. Dar put a warm hand on Kerry's cheek. "I love you," she said, simply.

"I love you too," Kerry answered, her voice a little hoarse. "Thank you for doing this, Dar. It means a lot to me."

Dar smiled, and rubbed her thumb against Kerry's soft cheek. "I know." Her eyes shifted to the door. "Guess we'd better get going. I think I hear Duks."

Kerry hugged her for a moment, then released her, and followed her up the steps to the deck. Sure enough, familiar figures were lining the dock, weirdly shadowed in the ochre security lights. "Morning." Dar lifted a hand, stifling a grin as Duks put his hands on his hips and glared at her.

"You know, Dar, it's a very good thing I am a forgiving sort." He shook his head. "You could not have had a sunset affair, eh?"

"Wrong ocean for that." Dar put a bridge down and tugged the lines taut as their guests came aboard. "Go on up into the front. We need to take some supplies on board." She gave the waiting staff, carrying insulated coolers a nod. "Thanks for coming. Hello, Maria."

"Buenos Dias, Dar, Kerrisita." Maria gave her vermillion headscarf a tug, and handed Kerry a small box. "I know you are telling me not to get any gifts, but you take this anyhow."

"Thanks, Maria." Kerry took the box, then gave the secretary a hug. "Thanks for coming, We really appreciate it."

"Thank you for asking me." Maria smiled. "My family, they think I am having a, how you say, an affair, to be sneaking away so early."

Kerry walked with her to the bow to join Duks and Mari, who were seated on the cushion, whispering to each other. "They don't really, do they?" Kerry asked, a little embarrassed. "I mean, we didn't think about how annoying it would be for everyone else to drag their butts out here before dawn. It's about the time we usually get up."

"Oh it figures." Mari laughed. "You know, I should have realized if my overachieving, typical type of a friend Dar there found a match, it'd have to be someone who was as much into self-torture as she was."

"What do you do so early in the morning?" Maria asked, curiously, as she seated herself on a cushion.

"Well." Kerry glanced over as Duks and Mari started sniggering. "Actually, we go out running." She stuck her tongue out a little at them.

They both groaned. Maria hid a laugh behind a small hand.

DAR WATCHED THE island staff stow the food, and waited for the two Hispanic waiters to leave before she investigated the contents, snagging a corn muffin and some butter, gaining an instantly attentive Labrador puppy glued to her foot. She split the muffin, then cracked open the hot, insulated dish, and scooped out a bit of the scrambled eggs it contained, and put some on each half. Then she settled down for a moment's peace, glad to let Kerry do the social honors for the time being.

The rocking of the boat soothed her as she chewed, allowing her nerves to settle. It wasn't the ceremony that was bothering her, she realized. It was that she was about to expose a very personal side of herself to someone other than Kerry.

Ugh. Dar sighed. *Well, get a grip rugrat, after this whole thing, they suspected you had a marshmallow center anyway.* She shared her muffin with Chino, then took a breath and went back up on deck, carrying a thermal carafe of coffee and a stack of purple Styrofoam cups. *Purple Styrofoam. Where in the hell did these people get stuff like that?* She'd asked for plain foam, and

gotten a face from Clemente as though she'd asked for paper frigging plates. He'd wanted to provide a china service for the coffee. So this was his compromise, she supposed, shaking her head.

"Hey, Dar."

A voice called from the docks. She turned to see Colleen, dressed in neatly pressed tan walking shorts and a crisp white polo with a tall, heavyset man in a sweatshirt and cutoffs who she guessed was the pastor. "Morning." She waited for them to cross the gangplank, and gave them a reserved smile. "If you want to bring this up front, Colleen, I'll get the engines started." She glanced at the pastor. "Welcome aboard."

The man stuck a hand out, which Dar was now free to grasp since Colleen had helpfully snatched the coffee and cups from her. "Hello, you must be Dar."

Dar inclined her head, favorably impressed with his friendly face and firm handshake. "That's right, is it Pastor Robert?"

He laughed. "Sure, it's better than Pappy Bob, which is what my nephews call me." He cleared his throat a little. "It's a pleasure to meet you. From the way Kerry talks about you, I had a feeling she'd found someone special." He smiled a little at Dar's discomfited look. "I've known Kerry since she was a little girl."

A hint of warmth crept into Dar's eyes. "I bet you know some stories, then." She eased the subject away from herself. "Was she a scamp?"

"Ooohhh, yes, a boat...er...load." He started laughing. "And yes, she certainly was, especially when she was in my Sunday school classes."

"Mm... We should talk." Dar bestowed a grin on him, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "G'wan up front. I'm going to take us out." She paused. "Thanks for making it out here. I can't tell you how much this means to Kerry," she hesitated, "and me."

He beamed. "It's my pleasure, and I'm an early riser anyway. The thought of doing this as the sun came up out on the beautiful Atlantic under God's own canopy, it's perfect."

Oh, Dar decided instantly. I like him. "Great." She walked over and untied the lines, setting the ship free of the dock. Then she walked to the bridge, and started the two diesel engines, trimming them expertly and backing the vessel out of its pylon lined slip. She heard a laugh from the bow, and glanced over to see Kerry hugging her former pastor, a look of thinly veiled delight on her face.

Dar smiled to herself as she guided the boat slowly out of the marina, and headed it towards the Cut. The freshening breeze blew her hair back, and she took a breath of the salty air, remembering all the times she'd faced the dawn just like this.

Except, of course, the boat had been a whole lot smaller.

And she'd been the only one on it.

A solid warmth settled onto her foot, and she glanced down to see Chino curled up there.

Definitely different

Duks wound his way over to her and leaned against the railing. "So, my friend, how are things?" Dar glanced at him, then looked back at her gauges. "Weather's great, water's calm, couldn't ask for better. Why?"

Duks scratched his jaw, and regarded the faintly gray horizon. "Is it hard for you, Dar?" he asked, regarding her. "Letting all of us into a private part of your life like this?"

Dar adjusted the throttles, using that as an excuse to delay her answer. Finally she sighed. "Does it matter?"

The accountant snorted softly. "That's answer enough," he advised her. "If it's any consolation, I think it's been good for you."

Pale blue eyes flicked to his face, then went to the water, scanning it. "It's taken some getting used to," she admitted quietly. "I've had to change the way I think about a lot of things."

He nodded. "I gathered." A gentle peal of laughter rose from the bow, and he looked over to see Kerry hopping up and down a little, shaking a finger at Mariana. He looked back and caught Dar watching Kerry, an unconscious smile tugging at her lips. He chuckled softly and shook his head. "All right, so where are we going?" Colleen asked, spreading her arms out against the railing and regarding Kerry. "The Bahamas?"

"No, at least, I hope not." Kerry smiled, as she regarded the horizon. "Dar wouldn't say, or, to be more specific, she gave me a GPS coordinate, which meant to me somewhere in the Florida Straits." She leaned on the railing. "She did say it wasn't that far out, just far enough to lose the city."

They were out of the cut now, and heading across the water, the powerful roar of the boat's engines at full throttle as Dar pushed them through the soft graying light. The ocean was calm, just a faint ruffle moving the dark surface, and the occasional splash as a fish poked their nose up into the dawn, as the horizon went from black to lavender, spreading out a band of faint color across the rim of the world.

After about twenty minutes, the roar lessened, and Kerry moved to the railing, leaning over and spotting a small bit of land in the growing light. "I guess we're here," she announced with a grin. "It's an island."

They all clustered around her and peered out, gazing at the cluster of trees outlined in the dusky light. A tiny ridge of coral, it seemed, with just enough dirt to allow a cluster of sea grapes and mangroves, with a sand edge which sloped up out of the water.

Dar moved the boat in close, and got a rope around an overhanging branch, securing them, then cut the engines, the sudden silence almost startling as the lap of the waves and the soft hiss as the water brushing the shore became very evident.

Everyone peered at the grayish, lapping waters between the boat and the island, then at Dar.

Kerry walked over and put an arm on her shoulder. "Um... Dar?"

"Yes?" Innocent, blue eyes.

Kerry chewed her lip. "Did you, um...think this all out?"

"Yes." Dark lashes batted at her. "Why?"

Kerry leaned close to her. "I don't know if everyone here can swim, sweetheart," she whispered.

"Unless you wanted to have the ceremony on the boat."

"Nah." Dar patted her on the shoulder. "Be right back." Putting her hands on the railing, she vaulted over, landing in the water with a clean splash. The waves came up to her mid thighs, and she waded towards the island with a purposeful stride.

"What is she doing?" Colleen came up next to Kerry at the railing, and peered over. The rest of the group joined her, even Chino poked her head through and sniffed.

"I have no earthly idea," Kerry murmured. "It must be a sand bar, look how shallow it is here." Eyes turned to her. "Hope we don't get stuck," Mari remarked with a grin. "Can you imagine the story that would make?"

Kerry peered out into the slowly growing light, chuckling. "No, she anchored us in a deep enough draft. It slopes up there. I can see the water getting lighter." She leaned over. "Hey Dar, what are you doing?" They could hear splashing noises coming towards them.

The water parted, and then Dar reappeared from around a bend, her overalls damp almost to her groin and a rope over one shoulder. She moved steadily towards the boat and as she came closer, they saw something trailing behind her. The wind tugged at her knotted hair, sending tendrils of it whisking around her face, and a flash of white appeared as she smiled up at them. "Here you go." She handed up the rope. "Pull."

Duks took hold, and tugged, and they watched as a barnacle bedecked wooden platform came towards them. It was old, but seemed to be in one piece, consisting of sun bleached wood on rubber pontoons.

"Dios Mio, it's a sidewalk," Maria said, surprised. "How clever you are, Jefe."

Dar leaned against the boat and pulled the wooden bridge into place, tying it securely to the railing. "Well, actually I made this in my much less clever days." She gave them all a wryly frank look. "High school, to be exact." She used the railing to pull herself up, standing on the bridge and removing a piece of impudent seaweed that had attached itself to her thigh. "Water's nice." Kerry had retrieved the diving ladder from its hooks, and she set it into place, then climbed down onto the bridge. It bobbed under her weight, but held firm, and she bounced up and down on it a few times. "Well, for a high school shop project, it sure feels sturdy." She gave her lover a warm smile. "Okay, let's go, folks."

With some hesitation and muted screams, they did, and landed safely onto the bridge with little incident, moving along it towards the small beach they could see ahead. Dar waited to bring up the rear, and collected Chino, then she followed along, not surprised to find Kerry waiting for her. "Hey."

"Hey." Kerry looked around. "So this is an old haunt of yours, huh?" She smiled. "It's nice out here."

Dar took a deep breath of the familiar air. "You could say that. Most kids have tree houses. This was mine." She stepped off the pontoon bridge onto the soft, sandy beach. "It's too small for anyone to bother with it, and it's about the best place I've ever known to just sit and watch the sun rise." She paused, as they walked towards the small group standing on the beach in the growing light. "Or just to daydream."

Kerry looked up at her. "Bet you had some great parties out here." She nudged her lover in the ribs gently.

Dar regarded the intertwined mangroves reflectively. "You're the first people I've ever brought out with me," she remarked quietly.

Kerry sucked in a surprised breath. "Oh." Then she put an arm around Dar and leaned against her as they walked along in silence.

They joined the small group on the beach, where the waves were rolling gently up and hissing back with almost hypnotic regularity. Seagulls coasted overhead, circling lazily, waiting for the sunrise which was now painting the eastern horizon in bands of coral and a deep russet. Only a thin tracing of clouds obscured the view, and the breeze grew stronger as if in anticipation.

Dar put Chino down, and watched her dash excitedly over the water, almost immediately encountering a startled crab.

"Yawp!" Chino barked, watching the crab skitter backwards. "Yawp!"

The group laughed. "Chino. Don't go there," Colleen warned, shooing the crab down its hole.

"You're gonna get your little nose bitten."

Dar cleared her throat. "Thanks for coming out here, folks."

"Thanks for inviting us," Mari answered promptly. "I can't think of a better way to spend a Saturday morning."

Dar stuck her hands in her pockets and regarded the horizon. "I know sunrise isn't everyone's favorite time of day, but it seemed appropriate to me because I've always regarded dawn as being a time of..." she paused, "a time to start things."

Duks chuckled softly. "I always suspected the reason you were constantly one step ahead of us was because you just woke up earlier, my friend," he stated, with a wry grin. "It is nice to have that confirmed."

Even Dar laughed. "Thanks," she drawled in response, then fell awkwardly silent.

"Well, you can't take the blame for this," Kerry spoke up, as she moved to Dar's side, and they faced the oncoming dawn. "Pastor Robert here was visiting in Miami. He's been my pastor since I was...well, let's say a long time." She paused, sucking in a slightly nervous breath.

Another round of gentle laughter.

"And he offered to preside at a commitment ceremony, and I kinda talked Dar into it. So, it's my fault we're all out here," she continued bravely. "I guess it's time to get started." She actually heard Dar swallow audibly at this, and gave her lover a mildly concerned look.

Pastor Robert stepped in front of them, his plain, black sweatshirt highlighting the polished silver cross on his chest. He drew out a small bible and held it, regarding them with kindly eyes.

Kerry smiled back at him, her hand instinctively finding Dar's, and feeling the faint tremor run through it. She glanced at Dar, and saw the brief tightening of her lips, and the sudden movement as her jaw muscles clenched under the skin. A gentle squeeze of her hand brought a smile to the tense lips, however.

The pastor folded his hands. "My children," he stated, softly, then glanced at Dar. "It's okay to call you that, isn't it?"

Dar nodded. "Sure." She let out a breath, unsure of what to expect from him. Kerry had merely said he had words prepared, but...

"Good." He exhaled, then started speaking, his voice taking on a rounder, more mellow tone.

"My children, we stand here in the eyes of God, beneath his sky, and amongst the waters of life he put upon the earth," he paused, "and as those things are by his mercy, and out of our control, so too is the coming together in love of the two people who stand before me, so this ceremony is not a thing of permission, or of sanction, or of regulation, but rather a simple affirmation of a truth that is one of the greatest gifts our Lord has bestowed on us."

The sky brightened, and the sea eased from gray to a thousand shades of green.

Dar drew in a breath, and released it. Waiting.

"So I will state here, in the name of God, whose servant I am, that no person shall sunder what the Lord has chosen to join together, and may his gentle hand guide you, and watch over you for all the days of your lives. " The pastor turned to Kerry, his eyes twinkling a little. "Kerrison, I have known you since you were a small child running rampant in my classrooms."

Kerry bit back a nervous chuckle, but nodded. "Yes, you have."

"I have never known you to give your word and not mean it, or enter into a thing if you didn't intend to carry it through, so if you say to me you wish to spend your life with this person, she'd

better watch out," Pastor Robert intoned. "Because for you, I know in my heart, that forever means just that."

Kerry felt tears sting her eyes, but she just nodded in affirmation.

Now the pastor's eyes shifted to Dar. "I have just met you." His voice was quiet, and thoughtful. "But the person I see before me is someone I believe would be steadfast, and loyal, and a friend you could depend on above all others."

Startled, the pale blue eyes flicked to his face.

"And I feel that your word, once given, is never taken back," the pastor went on.

Dar hesitated, then nodded quietly.

Robert nodded as well. "Then sit at the side of the Lord, for His hands cup your souls gently together." He held out the book, and took their joined hands, resting them under his own on top of it. "Go with God, and know that where love exists, He is present, now, and forever." A pristine rose light spread over them, as the sun hit the horizon, sending a palette of reds, and golds, and tropical tints across the sky.

The pastor squeezed their hands, then let his drop, watching as they turned towards each other, the sound of the surf suddenly loud as he stopped speaking.

Kerry felt very nervous, conscious of the people watching, and the expectant air. Then she lifted her eyes to meet Dar's, and found herself swallowed into them, sparkling there in the rose light, warm and familiar, and her nerves settled. "Me first, I guess." Screwing up her courage, she took a breath, hoping she'd remember all the words, in all the right places. "I'm not really sure where this came from. I was sitting outside looking out over the water, and thinking of you, and when I looked down, there it was, in my handwriting." She paused, reflectively. "It was like my heart wrote it for me, but anyway..." Kerry cleared her throat. "When I look at you," she stated softly, "I see sunlight and shadows

Deep, still waters, and wild rapids
A fiery heart and a cool, clear mind.

When I look at you,

I see all that I am, and all that I could hope to be.

My past, and my future, My one safe harbor in a terrible world.

When I look at you,

I see my best friend and playmate,

My protector and defender,

The love of my life and the holder of my soul

Losing you, I would also lose myself

And be left in a darkness so deep,

No light could ever find me.

So, where you go..." she finished in an almost whisper. "I go."

The sun's rays now poured over them, throwing part of Dar's face into shadow, and her chest moved suddenly, as she resumed breathing. "That was beautiful," she whispered, unnerved at the familiarity of the words, and the deep, resonant chime they made inside her.

Kerry dropped her eyes, then lifted them again. "Thanks."

A tiny, awkward silence fell. Then Dar closed her eyes, and sucked in a deep breath, visibly straightening. "Well, I'm really not one for speeches."

A soft chuckle rose.

"And I've never really known how to use words to express what I was feeling...so I guess I'll just have to improvise." Her shoulders dropped a tiny bit, then she opened her mouth and started singing.

Kerry stared at her, completely mesmerized, to the point where she almost missed the words.

But not quite

"I feel like I was born today

Like all my life before's only been a dream,

Only touching the surface, never going further

Never being a part of the world

I feel like I was born today

Knowing I have to walk a wider path from now on.

Wide enough for two of us, walking side by side Facing the future together.

The sea is wide,

Our love is wider,

Covering the earth from end to end.

Walk beside me,

Through wind and weather,

For all the years on earth we'll spend.

I feel like I was born today

We leave behind a past of sorrow.

Going forward through the sunlight,

Hand in hand, and soul's united."

Dar let her voice trail off, and she fell silent, uncomfortably aware of the stares focused on her.

What had she been thinking of? She sighed. *At least it was over.* She lifted her eyes to Kerry's face almost furtively, then stilled, seeing the tears running down her lover's cheeks.

In pure reflex, she lifted a hand and brushed them away. "Wasn't that bad, was it?" she joked faintly. "I didn't get a chance to practice it." She paused. "Much."

"Wh..." Kerry's voice broke, and she cleared her throat, then tried again. "It was gorgeous...awesome...where did you find it?" she asked. "The song? And my god, Dar...you should sing more often. You have a beautiful voice."

A murmur agreed with her, causing Dar to glance around self-consciously. "Thanks." She was painfully aware of the deep blush coloring her skin, and was glad of her base tan to cover most of it.

Kerry moved closer and enfolded her in a hug, burying her face into Dar's chest and squeezing her tightly. She returned the hug, looking over Kerry's shoulder to see quietly respectful glances back at her. *Well. That went better than expected.* "So...I um..." Dar realized she was rooted in place by her blonde lover.

"Hope everyone's hungry. They packed enough food to feed half the office."

That broke the reverent tension, and everyone relaxed. Dar smiled as she felt Kerry's hands clench in her shirt.

Yeah. Definitely different.

Kerry sniffed, and backed off a little, lifting her head to peer up at Dar. "Hang on. I've got one more thing."

Everyone turned to watch her, as she pulled the wooden box from her bag, then handed the bag back to Colleen. She opened the case and the sun poured in, sparking brilliance from the crystals.

Dar blinked. "Wow."

Kerry held her hands out. "Hold the box for me?"

Dar did, cradling it in her palms as Kerry pulled the joined crystals out.

"I'm, um...I'm not sure where these came from, originally," Kerry stated softly. "They probably have a history we'll never know, but I really liked the way they're both very unique." She parted the two pieces, holding them up to the light. "But they fit together so perfectly." She mated them with a tiny, satisfying click. "I hope we can do the same."

Dar smiled at her. "I love it. They're beautiful. I can't believe they turned out so nice."

Kerry beamed, then looped one chain over her hand and opened the other, leaning forward, and lifting her arms up.

"Wrong one," Dar stated softly, then she blinked, a little startled.

Kerry looked at her for a long moment, then she nodded, and changed hands, fastening the other necklace around Dar's smoothly tanned neck. She kissed her gently, then stood back, as Dar took the other chain, and fastened it around her, and the crystal nestled itself into the hollow of her throat with a sense of quiet belonging.

Blue eyes met green, in a glance as old as time.

They kissed again, as the sun bathed them, sparkling the waters that surrounded the island as though dancing off crystal walls.

"OH NO." COLLEEN lifted a cup and sucked down a mouthful of the fragrant peach ice tea.

"They say going downtown at night's dangerous, let me tell you, it's got nothing on a drop in at the local library."

They were seated in the shade, sprawled in the soft sand as they lingered over breakfast, the warm sun and the steady breeze making it too comfortable to want to move. Dar was stretched out, her feet half buried in the sand, leaning on a piece of driftwood with Kerry curled up on her side pressed against her.

"C'mon, Colleen, how dangerous can a library be? What did you do, go there at midnight?"

Kerry objected, with a grin. "I've been to the beach branch. It's safe enough." She paused. "Well, except for the creepy guys sequestered back by the periodicals, that is."

Colleen held up a hand. "Oh no, no...it was in barrooooooaaadd daylight. I just went into the main branch, to look up some material for that anthropology class I'm taking."

"What made you pick that?" Mari asked, curiously.

"That Circle stuff." Colleen responded succinctly. "Anyway, so I go in and ask for these reference books, and the desk people look at me like I'm speaking one of the three languages that aren't spoken in Miami, right?"

"Right." Kerry tangled her fingers with Dar's and smiled.

"So, they tell me that's kept in the special research section, and I've got to go back and see the oracle," the redhead stated.

"Oracle?" Duks leaned forward. "M'dear, that's ancient history."

"No joke," Colleen responded. "So, I follow this guy back, and he leads me down about twenty minutes full of winding passageways."

"And you should have exited into the Biscayne Aquifer by then," Dar remarked dryly.

"Shh," Colleen scolded. "It's me story, alright? Anyway, so we finally get there, and it's the weirdest thing. I thought I was trapped in a santeria rite. There was this desk, right? And around it was stacks and stacks of these rough loosleaf notebooks, and shelves, with the weirdest things on them."

Now they were all watching her.

"Candles, lit, mind you, and skulls! Skulls! Heads everywhere, and little bits of armor and leather things I'd rather not think about, and a couple of riding crops that I swear had feather dusters tied to them."

"You're making this up," Kerry stated flatly.

"I am not, and behind the desk, there was this woman wearing this weird mask covered in feathers, typing away at a computer."

"Sounds like a lunatic," Dar offered. "Did you get your research material?"

"What?" Colleen laughed. "Are you kidding? I took one look at the pair of fur lined cuffs on the desk and got my lily white Irish butt right on out of there. Must have set the world land speed record on the way out." She shook her head. "I know some people really get into their job, but Sweet Mary!"

They all laughed. "Well, I suppose it's like us nerds having little stuffed Dogbert dolls on our monitors." Kerry grinned. "Dar has Catbert, though."

They looked at Dar, who shrugged. "Gift from console operations." She glanced up as Chino started barking, somewhere off in the brush to their left. "Chino!"

The puppy just barked harder, then the brush rustled sharply.

"I'll get her." Dar sighed, then hoisted herself to her feet and brushed a layer of sand off her legs. She plowed off through the soft surface, heading towards the sound of the excited puppy.

"Chino!"

She pushed through some brush, then froze, as she heard a low voice. A moment later, a grin spread over her face and she hurried forward.

"Would you shut up ya little bag of mouse squeaks?" the voice was saying, in a loud whisper.

Dar parted the last bushes and peered through. "Hey."

Cantankerous blue eyes glared back at her. "Damn dog."

Andrew Roberts was hunkered down, a light three quarter wetsuit covering part of his body, and a neatly stacked pile of diving equipment just off to one side. In the sharply patterned sunlight, the horrible scars on his face were very evident, but even that couldn't hide the smile as he gazed up at his daughter. "Hey there, rugrat."

Dar ambled over and dropped to her knees next to him. "Thanks for the treats. I'm glad you could make it out here, but how?"

"Ah could just go all military on you and say them is classified information," the older man rasped. "But the truth is your little kumquat got hold of me and batted those pretty green eyes."

Dar smiled, and glanced down. "She's really something else, huh?"

"Ya got that right." Andrew studied his hands, which were petting a contented Chino. "That was a real nice ceremony," he told her. "Who's Grizzly Adams?"

A soft chuckle. "Kerry's pastor from Michigan. He's on vacation."

A little silence fell. "Ya know I always wondered what I'd do if I had to walk you down some long damn aisle," Andrew mused. "I didn't think anyone living could convince me whoever was standing up on the other end was good enough for my kid."

Dar sat down in the sand next to him, and circled her knees with both arms. "I can remember thinking that I wouldn't marry anyone unless I could find someone just like you," she told him quietly, feeling a hand settle on to her shoulder. "Then I realized you're one of kind."

"Paladar, if you make me start crying, I'm gonna whup you," her father growled. "Bad enough I had to listen to all that pretty poetry and you singing and all that...like to have drowned back here. I almost had to get my damn desal kit out."

Dar had to let out a soft laugh. "Sorry." She studied the ground, a soft gray sand mixed with broken seashells. "Thank you for coming. It means a lot to me."

Andrew reached over and awkwardly stroked her hair. "Makes me feel good to see you feel good, rugrat," he murmured. "I think you found a real good one there."

Dar turned her head and gazed up at him. "Thanks. I do too." She paused. "You want some breakfast?"

"You telling me you had that yacht catered?" He laughed.

A sheepish chuckle. "Something like that. C'mon, come sit by us, and join the party."

A quietly sad look colored his eyes. "Naw, you know I'm not one for company, rugrat."

Dar nodded. "Me either, but I found out that sometimes what matters is what's important to other people, and I'd really love to introduce my friends to my father." She kept her gaze even. "Please, Daddy?"

Andrew looked at her for a long, tense moment. A terrible, aching fear was the chief emotion Dar could see in his eyes, which fluttered closed, then opened again as he let out a breath. "You don't know what you're asking me, Paladar."

Dar smiled wistfully. "Yes, I do."

Then she waited, listening to the soft sound of the waves rustling all around them, and the contented breathing of the puppy curled at their feet.

"All right," her father finally said. "If you could get up and sing in front of all them people, I guess I kin do this," he grumbled. "C'mon already, I'm hungry."

Dar pushed herself to her feet and took his hand, ignoring the glare as she lead the way back towards the beach, Chino tucked under one arm.

"WHERE DID SHE go off to?" Kerry worried, getting to her knees. "This is a really small island and that's a really big puppy. She can't have gotten that lost that fast." She peered into the brush, shading her hands, then stopped, as her breath caught. "Oh."

"She got someone with her?" Duks lifted himself up on one elbow. "Where did they come from?" Kerry watched the approaching duo with a sense of wonder. "No, I can't believe it." She got up and trotted over, giving Andrew a big smile and throwing her arms around him. "Dad, this is great."

Dar's father stopped dead, and managed to give the impression he'd been attacked by a large, friendly, talking alligator. "She do that to everyone?" he asked Dar, who was biting her lip to keep from laughing.

"No," Dar told him. "Only people she likes."

Andrew sighed, then hugged Kerry back. "Hi there." He joined them as they walked back to the rest of the group, facing curious eyes which glanced at the tall man, then flicked to Dar in question.

"Folks, say hi to my father," Dar announced quietly. "His name's Andrew. Dad, this is Duks and Mariana, and Maria, who work with us, and Pastor Robert, from Michigan."

Everyone was a touch awkward, but Andrew rose to the occasion and settled down, his wetsuit creaking slightly. "Nice ta meet you," he stated bluntly, then glanced at his daughter. "Were you saying something about eggs?"

"Dios Mio--" Maria said suddenly. "You are the one who is sending those beautiful flowers! I am recognizing your voice."

"Oh, the peach colored roses?" Mariana smiled. "I was wondering..."

Andrew glared at them. "Well, ya plastered her picture all over the city, I had to do somethin."

Dar nodded a little, then went to grab her father a plate. She felt a hand touch her shoulder, and turned, to see gentle sea green eyes looking warmly back at her. "He came."
"Mm hmm," Kerry agreed. "You got him to come out with us, Dar, that's amazing."
Dar added grits to the plate, and drizzled gravy over them. "It's a day of new beginnings." She looked out over the water, then back at Kerry. "Wonder what'll happen next?"
Kerry took the plate from her, and slid an arm around her waist as they walked back over. "I can't wait to find out."

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