

A dramatic tropical sunset scene with a dark, stormy sky. The sun is partially obscured by dark, heavy clouds, creating a bright orange and yellow glow. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a lighter blue near the horizon. In the foreground, the silhouettes of two palm trees are prominent against the bright light of the setting sun. The ocean is visible in the background, with white-capped waves breaking. The overall mood is one of a powerful tropical storm approaching.

Tropical Storm

Melissa Good

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Chapter One

THE ALARM BURRED softly, nudging the somnolent figure sprawled over the waterbed toward wakefulness. One long arm reached over and slapped the snooze bar, then moved back to its resting place, even though the pre-dawn gloom reflected off pale eyes that were already open, and gazing at the dull white of the ceiling.

Tiny clicks and hisses of the ice machine in the kitchen and the soft hum of the central air cycling were the only sounds that stirred the darkness, save for the soft breathing of the occupant of the bed. Finally, that breathing expanded into a sigh, and the waveless mattress rustled as the tall figure rolled up out of bed, and padded across polished teak wood floors into a pale salmon, marble-floored bathroom. The light flicked on, causing an audible groan, then the water ran in the marble sink, splashing loudly as it hit warm skin. The reluctant riser finished wiping off the

excess water with a soft towel, then faced its reflection. "Morning." Pale blue eyes set in an angular, high-cheekboned face looked back, framed in dark, shoulder-length hair that just now was lying in disordered layers above a high, strong forehead. The voice was a warm contralto, slightly hoarse from sleep, and the lips that formed the word quirked into an ironic smile as they got no answer.

The light from the bathroom streamed across the wooden floor, guiding the tall woman's way as she moved through the bedroom and into the living room beyond. She stepped barefoot across the soft Berber rugs scattered over the warm ceramic tiles and ended up in the kitchen.

Another flick and the recessed lighting came on, bringing the rich blue and white room to life, gleaming dully off the royal blue tile countertops and the rippled surface of the white appliances. Only the refrigerator was out of scheme--it was stainless steel, as befitted its commercial origins.

On the countertop, next to a sleek coffee machine and a well-used blender, was a computer terminal, dark except for a blinking box in the lower right corner. "On," she told it. "Mail."

"Mail," it obediently responded. "Dar Roberts, six messages, two urgent."

"Read." She yawned, and moved to the coffee machine, punching the On button and watching as the slow stream of water impacted the grounds she'd prepared the night before. In the background, the computer patiently read her messages.

Urgent Sent by: John Dierhdoh Subject: Associated Synergenics Time: 4:32 AM.

Hey, Dar, the Associated Synergenics deal went through. They passed diligence late last night, so we need to get a pirate squad in there. Lucky for me it's in your neck of the woods. Let me know how the raping and pillaging goes, all right? John D.

"Mmm." Dar turned around, and leaned back against the counter, crossing her arms over her chest. "Not bad...not bad. Next."

Urgent Sent by: Lou Draefus Subject: Preliminary Budgets Time: 2:53 AM.

Dar--

The preliminary budgets are in. We're counting on your talents to make them fit. Call me when you get in the office. Duks.

"Damn." Dar sighed. "Dukky, you know I hate budgets. Just give me a damn number, and I'll fit it in. Don't make me argue all morning over how many pencils to allocate to the damn SBU."

"Do you wish to send reply?" the computer inquired, having

caught her preprogrammed keyword "Dukky." Dar checked the transcript of what it had just recorded. "Send." "Thank you," the computer replied. "Next message..." It continued, going over more ordinary matters while she grabbed a bowl and poured cereal into it, then opened the refrigerator and held the bowl under a milk dispenser, listening to the pleasant crackle as the liquid infiltrated between the dry flakes. She applied a spoon to her breakfast and leaned back against the counter again as the messages finished playing. "Only six. Not bad."

The computer chimed. "Incoming meeting request: Video, Alastair M."

Dar silently cursed under her breath, then sighed. "Go." A light popped on the small egg-shaped camera on the top of the monitor, and a picture window opened up on the screen, displaying a cherubic, round-faced man in his mid-fifties, dressed immaculately in gray pinstripe with a dark blue tie perfectly knotted around his thick neck. His hands were folded on the mahogany desk in front of him. When his eyes shifted to his own screen and saw her, a smile edged onto his fatherly features.

"Now that's the way I like to start *my* morning. Dar Roberts in her underwear," the Chairman of the Board chortled.

Dar continued to eat, merely giving him a look. "You just broke EEOC, Alastair. We're gonna have to do something about you someday." It was a joke and they both knew it. EEOC was strictly adhered to in the company, up to a certain level. Once employees got beyond that, they became "one of the boys" and were expected to develop a thick skin along with it. Dar, as a corporate vice president, was beyond that level, and so had to put up with remarks about her looks from the upper echelon all the time. *Fortunately*, she considered, *at least they're compliments*. She'd heard the cruel remarks directed towards a few of the other senior women execs, especially Ellen Evans in Finance, who was battling a weight problem among other things.

Alastair chuckled. "You can do anything you like to me, sweetheart, anytime. Just call Bea and have her schedule you up here, all right?"

The tall, dark-haired woman crossed her legs. "Careful, Alastair. At your age, you gotta watch your heart. I don't think you could handle me." This kind of verbal sparring was something she frequently enjoyed with the CEO, and she suspected he did as well.

The chairman grinned. "Don't you worry, I'll have a Viagra milkshake beforehand." Then he cleared his throat. "All right, enough fun, though I'm enjoying both the view and the conversation. That Associated deal." Now his hazel eyes went serious, almost predatory. "I need it in at fifty percent, Dar."

Dar stopped chewing for a minute, and stared at him. "Fifty? Do you want to also continue to do business, or just scrap them?"

The company acquired accounts by offering to outsource their business at a lesser cost. When they took over, it was up to Dar, and other execs at her level, to scour the resources they took over and find a way to meet that cost, the usual method being to cut staff, which was always the biggest expense in the IT field. Ten to twenty percent was their average cost reduction, though Dar was famous for pushing the line, and had achieved thirty-five percent in her last two accounts. "If it's scrap, I'll just turn it over to Duk's folks, and forget about it," she said, "I'm not going to waste my time counting pennies out there."

Alastair shook his gray head. "I need it, Dar. We've got the stockholders meeting coming up in two months, and I have to post third quarter before that. With the budget the way it is, and that fiasco with United Telecom, either you give me Associated at fifty percent, or we're not going to show double-digit growth, and you know what that means." He gave her a smile. "C'mon, I know you can do it. And when you do, I've got a little surprise for you."

Dar sighed. "No more surprises, Alastair, huh? The last time you almost killed me when you made me drive that damn Lincoln down here."

"Tch tch...grumpy this morning, aren't we?" The CEO laughed. "No. It's better than that, I promise."

"I'll see what I can do," Dar promised grudgingly.

"Atta girl. You know, Dar, you set such a good example for everyone else." Alastair leaned back and regarded her. "What a poster child you are--beautiful, healthy, crunching on your granola there."

Dar glanced up at the blue cereal box, with the lurid tiger waving a spoon at her, and smiled. "Oh yeah."

"You have to come out to Houston one of these days and teach my wife some of your tricks."

"I hate Houston, Alastair," Dar commented, finishing up her bowl and setting it into the stainless steel sink, then turning and grabbing a cup for her coffee.

The CEO grinned. "I'll forgive you for saying that, just for that nice view, Dar," he teased, "One of the perks of my job, I tell ya."

Dar lifted her cup and gave him a wry look. "Nice seeing you too, Alastair."

"Fifty percent, Dar," the older man stated with a wave. "See ya." The screen went dark.

"End meeting." She sighed and watched the computer close the session down. "Happy Monday," she muttered, as she took her cup and opened the sliding glass door that led out to her second-story balcony. The wind was coming in from the east, blowing back her hair and pressing her T-shirt against her body. She set her cup down on the small stone table and went to the railing, leaning on it and looking out over the rock-filled jetty to the endless expanse of the Atlantic Ocean.

The air was full of salt and thick with moisture, and she breathed it in, letting the familiarity soothe her as she listened to the rhythmic sound of the surf against the coral rocks that made up the base of the island on which she lived. In the east, the horizon displayed a gray, cloud-studded line over the still darkened sea, and it was so quiet she could hear the soft clanging of boat tie downs from the nearby marina. A gull swooped overhead, its feathers whipping the thick air as it soared along the coral, searching for food.

Dar reached behind her and picked up her mug, curling her hands around the ceramic surface and taking a sip of the flavored, pungent beverage. She enjoyed the peace of early morning, and if she didn't turn her head to see the long Miami Beach skyline rising to her left, she could imagine she was out in the Caribbean somewhere, viewing the sunrise.

Her condominium was a split-level townhouse, sharing a cluster with four other residents here on the outer eastern shore of the small island. The outer walls were reinforced steel and concrete, neatly designed and landscaped to simulate quaint adobe, but meeting current hurricane codes as was mandatory in Dade County.

That meant low, sloping roofs and all-concrete block construction, and a challenge for high-class architects to make buildings look less like bunkers, but Dar had spent one Category Five hurricane in the place, and she was glad to skip on the glamour in trade for having the walls stay put around her.

Fisher Island was an exclusive community, offering large oceanfront residences for those who could afford to pay unbelievable prices for them. Dar was thankful that she had inherited hers. She had seen the price tags for them, and found it hard to believe someone would spend five million dollars for what amounted to an apartment. Even a really, really nice apartment, with five bedrooms and three bathrooms, and a gorgeous kitchen, which she seldom used.

She could afford it. Being the VP Ops of the largest computer services company in the world garnered her a very healthy paycheck, but it was the principle of the thing.

"Thanks, Aunt May." She toasted her departed, much-beloved aunt with her coffee. May Roberts had been something of a sensation in the family, marrying four men and burying them all, all the while adding to her considerable bank balance. She'd bought the condo as an investment and occasionally rented it out, but had willed it to her niece on her death, correctly figuring it was better for Dar to live here than in "that horrible Grove."

The little place among the jasmine and ficus was far more Dar's style: a studio, with a hot plate and huge bay windows, and worn real wood floors that had fifty years of dogs' nail marks in them. She'd been able to walk to the waterside and wander through the area's sometimes oddball residents and not feel out of place in her hiking sandals and cutoffs.

No one had to know she was a corporate big shot. She liked it that way. Dar studied the horizon. She could have rented this place out when May died, and kept living where she was, but it had

occurred vaguely to her that she might want to have a party someday and the condo had a lot more space for that.

Plus the view from the porch of the Atlantic to the horizon was priceless.

After several years of residing in the middle of the eclectic artists' community to the south, the change had taken some getting used to, but Dar had finally decided she liked the island. It was accessible only by car ferry. She could get away from the city there and spend some time in quiet solitude without fights, and crime, or even noisy neighbors. Five million dollar apartments had thick walls.

The maintenance fees were outrageous, and accounted for all the island's amenities, but they were less than the rent she'd been paying in the Grove, so it had worked out for her in the end.

She found herself enjoying a lifestyle she'd never considered attempting, and even had fun watching the upper crust socialites who populated the island at their strange social rituals.

The sun turned the horizon coral pink, and before her eyes, the sea slowly moved from inky black, to fluttered dark gray, to a deep, rich green. The offshore current was lightly choppy, breaking the surface up into ripples, and she took a breath of the sea air with a sense of pleasure. Its ever-changing, elemental nature had always appealed to her, and she often spent her early mornings in the peace of its uneven rhythm before she went on with her problem-filled, hectic days.

"Well, time to get moving." She finished her coffee, then slipped inside the glass doors, moving from the warm humidity to chill air conditioning with a tiny shiver. The tile floor was cool against her bare feet, and she went quickly to the walk-in closet, shedding her T-shirt and exchanging it for her workout gear, which consisted of a pair of running shorts and a snug sports top.

She pulled her hair back and put a band around it, then sat down to put on her shoes, tugging the laces and tying them with efficient fingers. "I don't think your wife would like my fitness secrets, Alastair," she remarked to herself wryly. "They involve sweat, and lots of it."

With a sigh, she stood and walked over to the small closet just inside the alcove where the stairs came up. She ducked inside to pull out a set of wrist and ankle weights, which she fastened into place carefully. Then she slipped down the stairs and unlocked the front door, locking it behind her as she emerged onto the small porch outside the condo. A dozen stairs led down to the underground parking. She dodged underneath, ending up on the path that meandered down towards the water.

The island was about a mile across and roughly round in shape. She made it her habit to circle it four times, rain or shine, even in the wicked downpours subtropical Miami sometimes provided.

With a sigh, she began to jog and headed off around the path.

It paralleled the Atlantic, at first, going on in front of clusters of condos much like the one her own was in. The architecture was mellow Mediterranean, with barrel tile roofs and adobe-style walls, and the buildings seemed to blend in to the surroundings. The landscaping, rich with salt-tolerant bushes, was neatly kept and perfectly trimmed, and she could see where beds of winter flowers were being planted to give a bit of variety to the scene.

Artificial variety. Winter had little meaning here, the one or two months of relief from the tropical heat and constant thunderstorms rarely providing more than a day or two of mild sweater weather. Seasons didn't truly exist.

Once past the condos, she was moving in front of the beach club, with its rustic-style restaurant, and the small, if pristine, white sand beach that bordered it. Chaise lounges were already set up,

the beach boys sweeping sand off their surfaces; the workers waved a familiar hello to her as she passed.

Then up onto the coral deck and past the old mansion, once owned by the Vanderbilts, which housed the main restaurant and club bar, its coral-surfaced saltwater pool glinting in the dawn light. Peacocks wandered over the pool deck and ruffled at her as she passed, letting out an occasional startled cry which split the air at odd intervals.

More condos next, then the triple-slipped marina, at this time of year crowded with boats bobbing gently on the waves. Some were sailboats, their sails furled under cover, and some were large motor yachts, ships really, which had multiple decks edged out in polished mahogany. The back side of the island wasn't so glamorous, since it faced the long series of piers that made up the Port of Miami, where trade from all over the Caribbean and South America docked long barges and cargo ships, and the towering rows of unloaders clanked gently in the breeze, as yet inactive.

That led around to the side, which faced Government Cut, the main shipping channel into the Port, where the car ferries had to cross to get to the terminal on McArthur Causeway. It was also the main entrance for all the cruise ships, and as Dar rounded the corner, she found herself passing *Sovereign of the Seas* on its way into port, its green glass windows reflecting the dawn light back at her. A few early risers on deck waved at her, but she kept her eyes forward and didn't acknowledge them.

It was all familiar, all part of her routine. By the time she hit her fourth lap, the sun was peeking over the horizon, painting the sky in peaches and cream as the clouds hung over the ocean, and the humidity was rising as well, drenching her in sweat.

Dar slowed as she ended up where she started, and as she halted and paced slowly around to cool off, a boy with curly blond hair skimmed up in a golf cart, the words *Beach Club* blazoned on its fiberglass front. "Morning, Carlos," she said between breaths.

"Morning, Ms. Roberts." The boy hopped out, straightening his white linen short-sleeved shirt neatly, and lifting a gently steaming cup from a tray on the front seat. "Here you go."

Dar gave him a half grin and took the cup of *café con leche*. "How do you manage to time this just right?"

The boy smiled. "Not me, ma'am, it's you. Like clockwork--sixforty-five, here you are." He paused. "Unless it's raining, of course, and then it's six fifty-five."

She laughed and took a sip of the beverage. "Mm...lots of sugar and cream. Just how I like it," she complimented the server, who sketched a quick bow in response. "Thanks." Dar started up the stairs as he turned and scooted back into his cart. Turning the vehicle deftly, he zipped back up the path. Carlos was a pre-med student, working his way through one of the local colleges by waiting at the *Beach Club* during the early hours and going to afternoon classes. He was a friendly kid, local, as most of the day servers were, and Dar liked him a lot. He took extra effort to find out things his regular customers-- and Dar certainly was that--liked and gave it to them, no questions asked.

She finished the coffee as she padded around the condo, pulling out clothes and starting the shower running. Fifteen minutes later, she was drying her hair and pulling on the tailored gray skirt suit and black blouse she'd chosen to wear, buttoning the cuffs and laying the top button open to expose the thin golden chain holding up a tiny teddy bear, her only jewelry save the diamond studs perched inconspicuously in her ears. Company dress code: no danglies.

Dar gave her reflection a once-over, running her fingers through her neatly cut and feathered hair to settle it, then adding the barest touch of makeup. Her skin was already sun-darkened, a legacy

of a lifetime in the subtropics, and she hated the mess of putting on and taking off the stuff, so it was a bit of gloss, a hint of eye shadow, and that was that. *No one ever notices anyway*, she wryly admitted.

Not these days, anyway. Dar could look back with not quite fondness over a time when she'd played that game in the office and gotten stung by it, but now she took pains to keep everyone at a distance, more fitting in any case to her executive status.

Look, but don't think about touching. Dar met her own gaze and acknowledged the sardonic expression with a wry twist of her lips.

Her most striking features were her pale blue eyes although most people expected hazel or brown to match her coloring. Some people suspected she used colored contacts, others openly speculated about her having Irish or Danish somewhere in a Hispanic ancestry.

Dar wished they'd find something more interesting to speculate on, but everything was fair game in office gossip. She sighed and picked up her briefcase, slung it over her shoulder, then headed for her car.

She waited until they'd loaded the Lexus LX470 onto the ferry before she dialed the office, leaning back in the leather seat and waiting for her secretary to answer.

"Dar Roberts' office, how may I help you?" Maria's precise, Castilian-accented voice issued from the cellular speakerphone mounted in the dash.

"Morning, Maria," Dar responded, watching the waves of Government Cut splash over the low deck of the ferry.

"*Ay!* Good morning, good morning," the middle-aged woman replied. "*Dios mío*, Dar, half of the earth is here looking for you already. Did something happen this weekend?"

"Associated Synergenics happened," the tall woman explained. "The boys in Houston have their rocks in an uproar."

"Tch...*ay*, no wonder." Maria rustled some papers. "I have three folders with tons of things in them, and a stack of phone messages for you."

"Great." Dar sighed. "Schedule me out this afternoon to Synergenics, and call a staff meeting of the prelim account team for ten AM, all right?" That would toss her schedule out the fourteenth floor window her office was on. "This is a hot one; Alastair is sitting on it."

"*Ayeyiyi!*" Maria made some quick notes. "You had a doctor's appointment this afternoon." Her voice held a gently chiding tone.

"Cancel it," Dar replied, getting the expected silence in return. "Can't help it, Maria. A checkup can wait a few days, this can't." The headaches that had prompted the appointment had tapered off during the weekend anyway, and with any luck, it would stay that way for a while. "Don't worry, I took it easy this weekend. I feel great."

"I'll call that *secretarita* of your doctor's and get another appointment," Maria replied stubbornly. Dar relented. "All right, gotta go. I need to call Mark."

"Oy." Even through the phone, Dar could sense her assistant's rolled eyeballs. "You tell him, okay for me, Dar--no more little pink rabbits on my screen, all right?"

The tall executive stifled a chuckle. "All right. Talk to you in a bit." She disconnected and dialed another number, watching idly as the ferry nestled into its dock. The phone rang twice, then a gruff voice answered. "Yeah?"

"Good morning, Mark."

"Who in... Oh, uh, yeah. Right...Monday morning. Who else would be calling me at seven thirty? Hi, Dar."

"I need Synergenics, Mark." Dar released her parking brake and eased the Lexus up the metal gangplank, as the dockers washed the car down with fresh water to remove the salt spray from the ocean. "Now."

"Aw...for chrissake, Dar, it was closed last friggin' night!"

"I have a meeting there this afternoon, and I need the info, Mark.

Get in there and get it, no whining," she crisply told the manager of Information Services. "They have a bullshit system; it shouldn't take you more than fifteen minutes to get in, if your reputation is up to it."

Mark Polenti had been, in his younger years, both a hacker and a cracker. That is, he raided computer systems and cracked security codes in devices such as long distance boxes. Now, he served as part of Dar's advance team, which went in and got information on an acquisition, information that the new account usually didn't want Dar to have. Things like personnel reports, workman's compensation claims, insurance statistics...things she needed to base her slice-and-dice decisions on.

Only good, low-maintenance people would be candidates for transitioning, and that kind of information was usually kept back. For good reason. But Dar's job was to incorporate the new account into the infrastructure as economically as possible, thereby making the account as profitable as possible. It was a simple formula, and relied on her ability to shift work from the new company to existing agencies within the corporation, thereby rendering the newcomers superfluous. They never saw it that way, though. They viewed her swooping in as a shark circling defenseless fish, and tried to hide in any nook and cranny they could to escape her teeth. They never did.

She had the ability to strip resources to the bone and trim down an operation with a lightning speed that had gained her a justifiable reputation for savage, precise decisions. It was what had landed her the VP position, and what kept her as Alastair's favorite girl, the one he handed the tough ones to.

She'd never let him down, and had no intention of starting with this one, especially since Synergenics was local. Their offices were right off Kendall Drive, and she could get to them without having to send the team on ahead by air. "Get going, Mark. I need the prelims by the time I hit the office."

"Where are you?" The MIS chief queried, a rapid-fire clicking transmitting through along with his voice.

"McArthur, about to pass Star Island."

A definite smug tone floated through the airwaves. "Tch tch tch...you're slowing down, Dar. I'm in. I got the database. Which printer you want it at?"

Dar chuckled. "Mark the Shark...you are something else. AdminP2 will be fine."

"Okay, sending. Man, this security is bullshit. No wonder these losers got inhaled." The mutter was interspersed with clicking. "Oh well, no wonder...Novell. Oh, man, and unsecured gateways. Jesus, Dar, they don't even have a frigging firewall!"

"Pathetic," Dar agreed. "Who's responsible for this mess?"

More ticking and then Mark said, "A...well, I'm assuming here, 'cause you never know, but a lady by the name of Kerry Stuart," He continued, "Hmm...hmm, hmm. ...Hmm. ...Ah. ...Yep, bingo assumption. Ooo...hmm. Hey, Dar, she's cute."

Dar rolled her eyes and sighed. "Can it, Mark."

"Mmm-mmm, nice. Blonde hair, pretty green eyes. Jesus, she's just a friggin' kid. Twenty-six, not married, nothing on her medical side. Oh wait, heh...she had a pregnancy test just after Christmas last year. Negative."

"Mark..."

"All right, all right. IT degree from Michigan State. She's from somewhere up there in the boonies. Last job was for Edutech as their regional co-ord up in that neck of the woods. Oh hey, her father's Senator Stuart."

"Hmm...yeah?" Dar inquired, as she turned onto Brickell Avenue and headed south towards the high rise that housed the company. "He's been courting the Troy office for some contribs. I remember hearing Lou complaining about it." She directed the Lexus into the parking lot and up to the security gate, nodding to the guard as he opened it for her. "All right, can you give me a folder on her, too?"

A chuckle sounded from the phone. "Do seagulls crap on your windshield? I'll be nice and add a color picture to it."

"Not necessary, Mark," the executive warned. "That's more your line."

"Who said I was doing it for you?" The MIS chief chortled. "Bye."

Dar chuckled softly as she turned into a spot and shut the car off, grabbing her briefcase, then taking a quick look in the rearview mirror before she got out and locked the car. "Another day, another gutting," she commented to a passing cat, who gave her a look and dashed off.

"THEY'RE GONNA FIRE all of us," Charles stated, for the sixth time in five minutes. "My cousin worked for Allied when they took over, so forget it. We're toast." He was sitting on the small desk in his cubicle, his headset dangling around his neck and a Styrofoam cup in his hand. "You don't know that," Elaine protested, glancing at her phone pad, which showed several lights blinking. "Who knows, maybe it'll be better. Maybe we can get pencils now," she jiggled a small barrel on her desk, full of writing implements, "instead of having to go steal them from banks." The large room was more than usually noisy, most of the staff being occupied in talking about the merger, which was being referred to as a hostile takeover. Associated Synergenics was a company of about two hundred employees, dedicated to providing software and hardware solutions to the hospitality industry.

They had a core of programmers and engineers who designed systems for restaurants and hotels to manage their points of sale, their accounting, and other areas where computers were used for record keeping and analysis. Of course, they also had a group of support staff to answer questions, and a small department of hardware technicians, who installed the equipment and went out to provide service on it.

They were local, in the tri-county area of Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach, which provided enough customers to result in a slowly growing business. Everyone had been very optimistic about this year, especially after they'd landed a huge contract with Publix supermarkets, the major grocery retailer in the state of Florida. Now this.

Everyone was upset. It was like all their hard work was going to be swallowed up by this monolithic company who didn't care about them, and certainly didn't care about the customers they'd been so careful to attract and retain. It didn't seem fair, really.

Charles sucked down the contents of his cup, then sat down with a grunt and put on his headset. "Guess I'd better at least pretend to work. Where the hell is everyone, anyway?"

Lana, a tall, thin brunette who sat on the other side of his cube, looked up. "Big meeting. The brass called all of them up there about an hour ago. I guess to give them the bad news." Her eyes focused on something. "Uh oh, here they come."

They all turned as the doors to the front of the support center opened, and a group of managers filed in, ranging from the support manager, Ray, to the lead programmer, Susan. All of them looked grim. The last one in was Kerry Stuart, who leaned back against the closed door for a minute before she straightened her shoulders and nodded for everyone to move on ahead of her. At twenty-six, Kerry looked hardly old enough to be a junior manager. She was about average height and had a slender build, with lightly tanned skin that contrasted with her blonde hair and green eyes. Her face held a stamp of youthful innocence that belied a certain intensity in her eyes, and she often surprised people both with her insightful knowledge of the business and her skill at handling conflict.

Right now she carefully got up onto the printer table at the end of the huge room and held up a hand. Since everyone there was looking at her anyway, it achieved its intended effect, and calls went on hold immediately. "Okay, folks, listen up." She had a clear voice, but she was shaking a little, and they could all see it.

Silence fell, she paused as one of the programmers loped up to her and handed her a small microphone. "Does this w--oh, I guess it does." Kerry cleared her throat, her voice suddenly magnified. Heads of other curious employees popped out of the offices surrounding the large central area. "Okay, I'm sure you all know by now that as of last night, we were officially bought out." She paused and took a breath. "Some of the people who belong to the company that bought us are going to be around here starting this afternoon, and I think we all know that we're going to see some changes."

A low murmur rose, and Kerry put a hand up to still it. "I don't know what kind of changes, or what they're going to do, or what this really means for any of us; we'll just have to wait and see. What I'm going to ask you to do is just go on and do your jobs; take care of our customers. Let's not overreact until we know what's really going on."

"Get your résumé ready," a voice uttered in a disgusted tone.

"Bet they find some way not to give us benefits for six months," came another. "If they bother to keep anyone."

"All right, come on, people, let's just wait to see what happens," Kerry stated again. "That's all I have. If someone from them comes in here, be nice, answer what they ask, and just keep it cool." She handed the microphone to the programmer and gingerly got off the table, smiling at Ray, who held her elbow to prevent her from falling off. "Thanks."

She moved on towards the end of the big room, passing through the small labyrinth of offices until she reached her own, buried in the back corner. Most of the managers trailed her there, obviously wanting a private word with her, but she put up a hand as she entered her sanctum.

"Give me a few minutes, guys, okay? Go get some coffee, or check your e-mail or something."

"Call my headhunter." Susan snorted, shaking her silvered chestnut head. The short, stocky programmer stalked over to her tiny office, piled to the ceiling with printouts.

Kerry watched them disperse before she entered her own office and circled the desk, sitting down in her chair and putting her head in her hands. "Jesus." *What a mess. And it had all been going so good, too.* With a sigh, she leaned back, letting her hands fall on her denim-covered thighs, the fabric reminding her of yet one more change they'd have to face--dress codes, as Robert Mayabera had warned her when he'd met with her that morning.

"I didn't think we'd done that badly," she'd said in shock when Robert told her the news. "I thought it was just rumors."

The company founder, a short, pugnacious Cuban immigrant, had laid his immaculate hands on his desk. "Chica, you did nothing wrong, okay?" His brown eyes had been a little sad. "It came down to money, that's all. They made me an offer, like you say in the movies, I cannot refuse it." He'd lifted a hand. "I've got six kids, all getting to the age where I have to now do quinces, and cars, and college. I love the company, but the buyout, my friend, the buyout makes me able to do right by my family."

"No, Robert, I don't..." Kerry had sighed. "I don't blame you. I just...we were like a family ourselves, here."

"Chica, I know." Robert had gotten up and crossed around his desk, hitching up his trousers to perch on the arm of her chair, and put a hand on her shoulder. "I tell them how great you are, every chance. You did a fantastic job with everything, really turned it around here the last year, all that. I give them an opportunity to see that."

"I don't care about me," the young director had stated quietly. "Robert, these people work really hard. I don't think those guys are going to care about that. I think they're just going to come in here and tear us apart."

"Hey, come on now, let's wait for the boat to sink before we start thinking of drowning, okay?" He patted her cheek. "Let me see that tough Michigan State warrior thing. What is it, a Trojan?" Kerry smiled a little at that. "A Spartan."

"What kind of a mascot is that for a college? It's ridiculous." He was trying to cheer her up with an old argument.

"Better than an alligator," she replied dutifully, his alma mater having been University of Florida, in Gainesville. Then she sighed and stood. "Okay. I'd better go tell the staff. I'm sure they heard already, though."

And, they had, Kerry thought, as she played with a cup on her desk, glancing around her little office. It wasn't much--a few file cabinets, one plant in each corner which she took obsessive care over, a picture of Michigan in winter on one wall, and her wraparound desk with its recessed computer well.

It was hers, though, earned by dogged determination and her own skills, not bought by her father or given to her as a favor. She was proud of that, and proud of being in charge of this diverse group of people, even if they were sometimes infuriating, and the programmers could never meet their deadlines, and she had to keep nagging the supervisors to keep their answer times down. She'd felt like she was accomplishing something, especially when they'd won the new contract and the reps from Publix had told Robert it was mostly because they felt so comfortable dealing with her.

Wow. That had felt great. She'd gone out with a few friends that night and celebrated, for the first time in a few months, at Dave and Busters, and had ended up winning enough tickets to get herself a huge stuffed panda bear.

Now, she was just one of the hundred thousand employees in the new company. Nothing special. In fact, they'd probably laugh at her credentials, or find something in her performance they didn't like and take her out of her position. And then what? Daddy was only letting her stay down here because she could show him her growing career, pointing to her steadily increasing responsibilities. A slip in that, and he'd call her home.

She took a breath and rubbed her eyes. "Come on now, think positive," she reminded herself.

"Isn't that what you just told everyone out there?"

The phone rang, and she pushed the speakerphone button. "Kerry here."

"Ker, it's Alex." That was Alejandro Cruz, their MIS chief. "I've got some *puta* on the phone demanding I give access."

Kerry closed her eyes. "Don't tell me what that meant, okay?" she pleaded. "If it's someone from them, just give them access; they probably can get it anyway. We don't want to start off being obstructionists."

"*Jefa*, okay, I give them mail server transfer, and got a postbox dial in-going, and I set up an admin account for them. What else?"

"That should keep them busy for a while." Kerry sighed. "I'll try to get some ground rules set when whoever it is that's coming here after lunch arrives. Maybe they'll be reasonable."

"*Mierda*." Alex snorted.

"Don't tell me what that is either, okay?" The director exhaled. "But in Michigan we'd say, 'this sucks.' "

She spent the next few hours putting things in order, studying the latest statistics their reporting system had generated, and clearing her inbox. She had her head bent over the last performance review when a light knock came at the door. She looked up, to see Ray Rameriez standing there, holding up a Coke in one hand. "Oh, hi."

"Lunch?" The tall, lanky technical supervisor raised a dark, inquiring eyebrow. "I hear they have *picadillo* in the café."

Kerry made a face. "Ew." She put her task down and stretched, working a kink out of her back.

"Two years, and you'd think I'd be used to that stuff by now, but every time I eat it, I go right to sleep under my desk." She fiddled with a pencil. "Besides, I'm not really hungry."

"C'mon, c'mon, don't let them get you down, *Kerrisita*. Come, I'll get you some flan, I know you like that," Ray coaxed, waggling his brows invitingly.

She smiled, but shook her head. "No thanks. Maybe tomorrow, okay?" She opened her drawer and pulled out a bag of miniature carrots. "Besides, I brought."

"You'll grow floppy ears one of these fine days." Ray laughed. "You and your little *carrotas*." He sighed. "You sure?"

She nodded. "Yes. Go on; get out of here for a while. I'll probably need you when those guys show up."

He lifted a hand, then let it drop in surrender. "I'll be back soon," he promised, then ducked out the door.

Kerry gazed pensively at the door, then sighed, and tossed her pencil down, bending her eyes towards her evaluation again and

propping her head up on one hand. *What's the use anyway? The evaluations won't be worth anything to the newcomers.*

A soft knock interrupted her again. "Look, Ray, I told you..." She glanced up, slightly annoyed, then stopped.

There was a stranger in her doorway. A tall, golden-skinned woman with midnight dark hair looked back at her, the lean body arranged against her doorway in a posture of confident arrogance. Kerry blinked, looked again, and was captured by the bluest, clearest eyes she'd ever seen. They drilled right through her with a blast of cool intensity, and a strange, almost haunting glimpse of something familiar. "Um...sorry. I thought you were someone else," she managed weakly, getting to her feet.

The woman pushed off the doorframe and entered, putting a thick leather briefcase down on her visitor's chair and extending a hand. "Dar Roberts."

The voice was low, pleasant, and seemed to rumble in her ears. As she moved to take the woman's hand, a soft scent of musky perfume mixed with leather reached her. "Kerry Stuart." She took the taller woman's hand and gripped it, feeling the strength in it as the woman returned the squeeze. "Are you, um..." She hesitated. "I mean, you're from the new headquarters, right? I'm sorry. I must seem kind of daft to you. I wasn't expecting anyone until after lunch." Dar studied her quietly for a moment. "Yes, I am. I suppose my lunch doesn't quite match yours," she answered coolly. "Sorry."

"Oh, right," Kerry answered awkwardly. "Well, that's okay, because I-I finished lunch already myself...but my staff is still out. What...I mean, can I get you some coffee, or something?"

"No thanks, I'm on a tight schedule," the tall woman answered briskly. "Let's just get started; it won't take long." She motioned to the desk. "Sit down." Dar watched the younger woman step back around her desk and seat herself, laying her forearms on the surface and looking back at her with a mixture of trepidation and curiosity.

She'd briefly studied the picture Mark had so kindly provided, but the static personnel print gave no hint of the gentle presence the woman projected, or the clear steadiness of her eyes, whose color uncannily matched the ocean Dar saw out her window every sunny morning. There was also something familiar about her that Dar couldn't quite put her finger on. No time for that, though. She sat down in the visitor's chair. "You know why I'm here, right?"

Kerry's fingers twisted a piece of binding tie. "I know you people are taking over. They really didn't tell us much about what was going to happen, no."

Dar cursed silently, making a mental note to send a mail ripping a new butt hole for whomever was on the account team for this cluster. "They were supp--" She put a hand out. "I'm not going to play games or beat around the bush. Bottom line is, what we purchased was your business." The blonde woman took a breath. "Okay...but what does that mean. We report to different people, or you want things done differently? I have reports..."

A hand silenced her. "It means we're interested in the services you're providing, not in how you provide them, or who does it," she replied firmly. "There's nothing you do here we can't do better, and cheaper, which is the whole point."

Kerry stared at her. "What are you saying?" she asked softly. "You're saying you don't need us, is that it?"

Cool, blue eyes met hers. "Yes."

"You can't just come in here and fire everyone! We've been doing this for years; you can't replace us just like that," the director protested.

"Yes, I can," Dar replied. "It's what we do." She gestured towards the door. "I have a programming group in Huntingdon, a support group just west of the airport that can take your calls, and a hardware installers division--all who already work for me." She stood, and walked around the back of her chair, leaning against it. "Your people are inefficient: they take two sick days apiece every three weeks; half of them are late every day; your programmers haven't met a deadline in two years; and you've had eighteen workman's comp claims in the last four months." Kerry just looked at the surface of her desk and concentrated on breathing. Her chest hurt from the sudden, unexpected attack, and she realized she had no answer for the charges. She knew they were true, but it was a good staff. They were good people, just a little lazy sometimes, like everyone was. Her eyes traveled up to the hawk-like profile watching her, and she felt a quiet despair. Not everyone, not anymore. "I guess John was right," she finally said in quiet defeat. Dar eyed her, slightly disconcerted. The usual reaction to her speech was anger, indignant protests, not...this. "Right about what?"

Those sea-toned eyes lifted. "You are here just to rape us."

The executive flinched visibly. "That's not an appropriate way to refer to it."

Kerry shrugged. "What are you going to do, fire me?" She took a breath. "Is there something else I can do for you, Ms. Roberts? You seem to have all the information you need," she studied the clip in her hands, "and...I've got a lot of paperwork I need to get started on, I guess." She tried, but couldn't keep the hint of hoarseness from entering her voice. Though she could feel Dar hovering, she refused to look up, unwilling to give the older woman the satisfaction of seeing the depth of her pain.

Dar felt a sudden twinge of shame. She could see the anguished tension in the slim shoulders across from her, and she bowed her head for a moment, feeling a sense of confusion very alien to her. She'd done this a dozen times already this year alone. "Look..."

"They're not really that awful," Kerry said softly. "Our customers like us. We do a good job. I don't...see why we need to be thrown away like garbage." She still kept her gaze on her hands.

"What kind of people are you?"

"Look." Dar found herself uncharacteristically at a loss for words. "It's a business. There's nothing personal, understand?" The blonde head moved in a nod, then the manager looked up, her face closed, and wary, green eyes darkened with a quiet anger. "You have a week. I need a list of your senior people, so we can arrange sessions with them to start going over exactly what you do, and when and how you do it."

Kerry swallowed. "You're saying you want us to train the people who are going to take our jobs away."

Dar looked quietly at her. "Yes."

The anger dissolved into something else, and Kerry clenched her jaw. "All right," she got out, her fingers clenching on the pencil that had been sitting on her desk. "I'll see what I can arrange."

Arrange to get every damn one of them out of here before they can tell anyone anything, that is.

"You want to tell me to go to hell." Dar remarked. "Don't you?"

Kerry licked her lower lip. "No, ma'am, I don't. I wasn't raised that way."

Dar sat down in the chair again and leaned forward, tilting her head to gaze into Kerry's lowered face. "Sure you do," she disagreed. "I did...when we were assimilated." Green eyes slowly rose to meet hers.

"These are people, whose livelihoods you're about to take away from them. It's not funny."

"And any one of them would gladly wave you goodbye, if the guy down the street offered a buck more an hour," Dar replied. "This is a business, Ms. Stuart. It's not a charity."

Kerry's chin lifted. "Your people won't be able to do half the job mine do," she stated flatly. "So when you lose all these accounts, I'll be there laughing, Ms...Roberts. Because you know what? Your people probably aren't any better workers than mine are unless you employ robots just like you."

Well, now. Dar leaned back, studying her. She hadn't had this kind of challenge in a long, long time. Most of her accounts were fresh-faced MIS majors who scurried around and tried to get on her good side, just long enough to realize she didn't have one. One of her side tasks, besides stripping companies, was finding new talent for the corporation. *Sometimes*, she reflected, *I find potential in the weirdest places.* "That's not a way to win friends and influence people, Ms. Stuart."

Kerry gazed steadily at her. "Good thing for me I don't need to do either in this case, I guess," she said. "I noticed you didn't deny my statement. Does that mean you agree with me?"

Well, well, well. Dar let the silence lengthen, watching the faint flare of Kerry's nostrils as she too waited. "All right," she said, "tell you what." Her eyes caught the shift in Kerry's expression, a wariness reshaping the slim planes of her face. "I can do this for half the budget you're currently doing it with. Come up with a plan to do it for that, in a week, and I'll look at it."

Kerry's jaw dropped. "Fifty percent? That's impossible!"

Dar shrugged. "Your choice. See, we can leverage out the costs because we use less overhead per account. If we've got someone who needs support, for instance, we just add them to the current load over at the MTC, and we don't have to pay for rent, a phone switch, the consoles, desks, all that crap again." She smiled. "You can't do that." *Will she take the bait?* Dar watched the muscles bunch in her jaw, not sure which way she wanted Kerry to jump.

"No, but that means..." Kerry stopped and exhaled. People would have to go. It was the biggest cost factor, she knew. Looking at the closed, chill face across from her, she knew this damn iceberg woman knew it too. But maybe she could save some of them. It was worth a try. "All right. You'll be hearing from me," she said, her voice quietly icy.

Well, she hates me. Dar sighed. *One among many.* "Fine. You can send it over in e-mail; you should be added to our post office by now." She lifted her cell phone and dialed a single code, holding it to her ear until she heard a gruff voice on the other end. "Mark, you all done?"

A short laugh came through the phone. "Lock, stock, barrels, monkeys, hair dryers, and their accountant's latest lunch list," he advised her. "Mail's up, servers locked down. Anything else I can do for you today?"

"Thanks." Dar folded the phone up. "You're up on mail. Tell your people not to make any administrative changes to your servers, and you can expect a team here tomorrow to start going over procedures."

Kerry folded her hands over her desk. "How did you know all that about our personnel statistics?"

Pale blue eyes lanced into her. "We broke into your server database this morning and extracted it." Dar smiled. "Your security sucks. You might want to start your review there." She felt a sense of quiet triumph, which faded as Kerry returned her look with one of stony dislike. "Nothing personal."

"No." The blonde stated quietly. "I can see that." She stood. "Would you like to look around?"

The last thing Dar needed was the nickel tour. She reminded herself she had six or seven conference calls to take care of back at the office, so she was very surprised when she heard her voice answering "Sure."

Kerry just nodded and stepped around the desk, running a hand through her pale hair and pushing it back off her face. She was wearing a pair of fairly snug jeans and a short-sleeved white lace shirt that displayed an outdoor tan, which tightened against her body as she took a deep breath. "All right, follow me."

She circled the desk and brushed by Dar as she headed for the door to the office. The dark-haired woman caught a hint of clean soap and the faintest hint of apricot as she belatedly stood and headed after Kerry. *Well, well, well, indeed.*

IT HAD, DAR later mused, been a very hostile afternoon. She'd gotten the feeling that word had spread quickly, since they'd only made it to the programmers' nests before she was starting to get those dagger-in-the-eye looks from the inmates. She half expected her car to be keyed by the time they finished up, but apparently no one had figured out which one it was. Not surprising, since an LX470 sport utility truck was hardly what they expected a VP Ops to be driving.

The head programmer had possibilities, she conceded, if you could dig her out of her shell long enough to talk code with her, which Dar had. The support and IS managers were useless, and listening to the calls as she passed through, seemingly oblivious, had allowed her to catch at least two individuals telling customers complete lies, and two others using the opportunity to make social arrangements. Stuart had heard that last one, Dar realized, as she'd seen the look of dismay in the woman's startlingly open face.

Kerry Stuart. Dar leaned back against the leather and allowed herself the luxury of a few minutes of quiet thought. *The kid isn't stupid, and she's gutsy...but damn, is she an innocent. She really wasn't ready for this, but all in all, handled the shock pretty well, considering.*

What Dar couldn't get out of her mind was that nagging sense of familiarity. *Do we shop in the same place or something? Not likely.* Kerry lived in Kendall, just past the Turnpike in one of the mazes of suburban rental clusters frequented by white-collar workers in the area. *Maybe she comes down to the beach a lot?* Not that Dar spent a whole lot of time on South Beach, but she did get down there from time to time, and would stroll along the boardwalk.

She gave up, knowing it would come to her eventually. Her watch meeped softly, and she glanced down, surprised to see how late it was. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, then tapped her console-mounted cell phone. A moment later it was answered by Maria's singsong voice. "Hello, Maria."

"Dar, where are you?" her secretary answered in a lowered voice.

"In my car, on the way back from Associated. Why?" the executive replied, a touch puzzled.

"You knew where I was."

"Stay away. Stay far, far away. ¡Dios mío! A man, he backed a truck into the facilities room downstairs, and took out all the controls for the air conditioning," Maria replied with a groan. "It must be like an oven in here, Dar. My head is roasting."

The executive winced. "Oh boy." She considered. "Did they down the servers, at least?" she asked, then she slapped herself on the head. "What am I thinking? Maria, get out of there before you pass out."

"Ay, I have my little fan, but it is like I am cooking...turning crispy," the secretary told her.

"Thank you very much. I will pack up my things and be on my way."

"Any ETA for restore?" Dar asked with a sigh, as she got off onto State Road 836, which would take her cross-town to the office. "You should have called me."

"No, no. They're arguing who is to blame; that is first." Maria sounded disgusted, unusual for the Spanish woman.

"All right. Call in first tomorrow, Maria. I don't want you coming in if it's still out, it'll only get worse," Dar decided as she rubbed her temples. "Get out of there."

"I don't care what anyone says, Dar, you are an angel," Maria replied warmly. "They can all kiss my...how you call them? Grits."

That got a smile from the executive. "Thanks, Maria. Nice to hear that after getting out of Associated. They don't much like me right now." Her mind conjured up the parting look she'd gotten from Kerry, which had been as full of disgust as any she'd had the misfortune of getting in a while. Normally, she could have cared less, but that kid... "Anyway, good night, Maria."

"Good night, Dar. Drive carefully, please," the secretary reminded her. "There are crazies out there."

Dar smiled quietly. It was nice, sometimes, to have someone be concerned about you, even if they were doing it as part of their job. "I will." She disconnected, and settled back to negotiate

the traffic, putting on a New Age CD and rubbing her neck to try and relieve the nagging soreness that had developed during her drive.

That kid... Dar rested her head against the back of the seat. *Ah well.* She exhaled. The blonde would probably have a better offer by tomorrow, and leave as big as mess as she could for Dar to clean up.

Happened every time.

AFTER WATCHING HER unwelcome guest leave, Kerry walked back into her office and closed the door. She stood silently in the middle of the floor for a minute, then looked around. Pale blue carpet, light gray walls, wood grain desk--it wasn't elegant, given what she'd grown up with, but... *Damn it!*

"I worked so hard for this," she whispered, sitting down in her visitor's chair. "Damn it! This isn't fair." She let her head sink into her hands, bracing her elbows on the chair arms.

There was a soft sound as the door opened behind her. "Ker?"

"Yeah," she replied, not bothering to move.

An arm slipped around her shoulders, and she looked up to see Ray's concerned face. "*Jefa*, don't let it get to you like that. Blow her off, the big bitch." He clucked at her, rubbing her neck. "What a scary person. I think she's related to Cruella DeWhatever from that doggy movie."

A tiny laugh escaped from Kerry. "Ray, John was right. They want to get rid of all of us." She looked up at him. "She's giving me a chance to come up with a plan. If I can cut the budget in half, she'll consider it, and maybe some folks will get to keep their jobs." A faint shake of her head signaled her discouragement. "There's just no way."

Ray put his hands on his hips. "She's giving you a chance to do that?" he repeated, his voice surprised. "That's like...unheard of, from what I understand. How did you manage to get her to do that?" He lowered his tone. "Kerry, from what I was just hearing that big bitch just comes in and," he snapped his fingers, "we all go bye-bye."

Kerry paused and thought. "Is it?" Her brow creased. "I don't know. I just...I guess I wasn't very nice to her. You'd think that would make her mad, but it didn't. Matter of fact, I think she kind of liked it." She made a wry face at him.

He snorted. "Oh yes. She seems that type," he remarked snidely. "I see the leather and the whip cracking around that one, you bet."

The director sighed. "I don't know if I can come up with anything," she admitted. "But I'll give it a try, Ray. Try to save as many people as I can." She gave him a tight smile. "But I think you better give Mona at Alternative Resources a call. Tell her we might have some prospects for her staff pool."

"*Mañana.*" Ray patted her on the shoulder. "Come on. We're going down to Fat Tuesdays and doing the happy hour. Come with us."

A knock sounded on her door. "Ms. Stuart?"

They looked up. "Come on in, Anita." Kerry watched the short, slim accounting clerk bustle over, her arms filled with fanfold printouts. "That the stuff?"

"The budget, yes, and payroll, accounts payable and receivables," the woman replied, setting them on her desk. "Anything else you need right now?" She pushed her horn-rimmed glasses up and sniffed. "I have to reload the line printer if you do."

"No. Thanks, that'll keep me busy for a while." Kerry smiled at her wearily. "Go on, Ray. Let me get started on this stuff."

The tall man blinked at her. "You can't do this all night. Why don't you just get a fresh thing going in the morning?"

"Go on, get out of here," Kerry repeated, rising and going to her desk, where she started pulling the various reports apart. It was going to be a long, long night, she could see that. "Wait. Ray, can you get me a paper box?" No sense in sitting here and doing the initial review. "Might as well make myself miserable in my own apartment."

"Kerry..."

"Shoo," the blonde woman said. "Sooner I get started, sooner we know how bad it's going to be."

THE CAR FERRY was very quiet as Dar sat on it in solitary splendor, her car placed neatly in the center of the deck as the vehicle bobbed over the waves towards the island. The wind was blowing into her face, so the sound of the engines was muted, and she rested her pounding head against the door as the black waters slipped under the keel.

She was hot and exhausted, and more than a little fed up, having spent the preceding ten hours in a high-rise building with no air conditioning, doing what she could to get things fixed. Which was considerable, granted, and when she'd finally browbeaten a contractor into obtaining a replacement panel and installing it at midnight, the few people left in the building had cheered and clapped for her.

All three of them: two cleaners and the security guard, their uniforms sticking to them and drenched with sweat. Just like she was. She'd sent the rest of the staff home, and stayed there, propping the fourteenth floor emergency doors open to get a hint of a humid breeze in the place. Calls to the building managers, to her own facilities department, to infrastructure because the security panel links had been blown...all yielded no results, so she'd finally called the building contractors, and gotten the owner on the phone at ten PM.

Thank god they only had a five-year contract, and it was up for renewal. That had been enough threat leverage to get him off his ass and get a part out, along with five grumbling technicians. Her glare behind them had done the rest, and by one AM, a low shudder passed through the building as the huge roof units hummed to life.

Now it was two AM, and she was finally going home. Business would go on as usual tomorrow, with no interruptions, and that was the important thing, since they couldn't run the huge server cascades unless the air was on. She'd left a note on her desk to find out about a backup air unit for the computer room, for the next time.

She also started coming up with answers as to why there was a this time. Infrastructure was her responsibility and she'd dropped the ball on this one. *Damn it.*

She sighed and closed her eyes, letting the air conditioning in the Lexus hit her full blast.

Another problem solved, and she was fairly sure not one person would thank her for it tomorrow. Save maybe the cleaning ladies, who had timidly appeared at her office door while she was hollering at the contractor, bearing a pitcher of cold, home-brewed ice tea and a plastic cup. It was the only thing that had made her smile all night.

With a gentle clank, the ferry docked, and she waited for the deck hands to remove the chocks around her wheels before she shifted the car into drive and carefully eased it up the sloping ramp and onto the island. A few minutes later she was tucking the Lexus into its spot under the condo, then pulling herself up the stairs and through the door, her fingers tapping in the code all by themselves, the beeps sounding startlingly loud in the quiet of the early morning.

It was just as quiet inside. Dar dropped her briefcase in her office and trudged into her bedroom, the cool blue of the walls blissfully soothing to her tired eyes. She put her jacket back onto its

hanger and kicked off her shoes, then unzipped her skirt and stepped out of the garment. As she unbuttoned and removed her shirt, she could feel the tension of the day between her shoulder blades, and she took a moment to lean against the wall and let the cool surface leech some of the residual warmth from her skin.

Hell of a day. Dar pushed away from the wall and went into the bathroom, reaching in to start the water running in the large, circular glass shower. The scent of the chlorinated water was comfortingly familiar, and she slipped out of her underwear and under the warm spray with a heartfelt sigh.

A kaleidoscope of images flickered through her mind's eye as she stood under the shower, turning up the heat a little as the stiff muscles in her neck grudgingly began to relax under the pounding. She could taste the faint hint of tea on the back of her tongue, and a remembered scent of apricot tickled her senses as she thought about her long night and the unexpected challenges of the day.

After her shower, she was exhausted but not sleepy, so she threw on a pair of old cotton shorts and a T-shirt, and trudged into the kitchen. Its counters were bare, but she ignored them and retrieved a large mug from the cabinet, filling it with milk and adding a spoonful of honey before she put it in the microwave to heat. The machine hummed, and she sat down on the stool nearby to wait, hooking her feet into the rungs and propping her head up on her hand as she leaned against the counter.

The air conditioning cycled on, loud in the otherwise silent condo. Then a soft chime sounded. Dar gave the computer on the counter a glance, and her brow furrowed as she saw the blinking box in the corner. "Thought I cleaned my inbox out before I left the office. Mail?"

"Mail, Dar Roberts, one," the terminal answered, connected via its ISDN link directly to the office.

"Read." Dar crossed her arms and leaned against the counter, waiting for the microwave bell to ring.

Sent by: Kerry Stuart, Time: 1:20 AM

"Well, well." Dar muttered softly to herself. "What do you know?" She saw the length. "Don't read."

The bell went off, but Dar remained near the screen, reading the long, detailed message with interest. It started off with "I need some details clarified." And ended with "Please forward this information as soon as possible due to the deadline you imposed."

"Well, I'll be damned." Instead of being upset, Dar smiled. The questions were literate, and though a touch on the naïve side, intelligent and thoughtful. *Just like that kid is, I guess.* She pulled her stool up next to the computer, retrieving her warm milk and sipping on it as she composed a detailed reply.

"That'll have to do her...at least for now," the tall woman commented, as she paused with her mouse over the Send button. She studied the message, then added a single line to the bottom, and her initials. A click, and it was gone. She took her milk and wandered into the living room, dropping down onto the soft leather couch that faced the floor-to-ceiling glass windows. Her view was of the Atlantic at night, black waters bisected by a silver lance of moonlight, and the tiny, colored lights of the sea buoys. On the horizon, a cruise ship was gliding silently past, a patch of sparkle against the darkness, and briefly, Dar wished she was on it.

KERRY STIFLED A yawn as she checked her front door lock, a habit before going to bed. Her apartment looked like a paper mill had attacked her. Stacks of white sheets lay everywhere, but

she was moderately satisfied with her first night's work. Not that she'd gotten anywhere, but at least she knew what questions to start asking. To prove it, she'd shot off a list of ten of them to Cruella, her pet name for the overbearing and obnoxious Dar Roberts.

"Nice surprise for her in the morning, huh?" she commented to the panda, who was sitting with his arms outstretched on the second of two stuffed chairs in the small living room. The rest of the space was taken up by a cloth couch, a small table that seated four people, two large bookcases overflowing with books, and a small desk that held her computer. The room was bright and cheerful. Pastel fabrics and Indian-style throw rugs brought in a touch of color, and the walls were hung with scenes of her subtropical surroundings. Her favorite, a sunset over Key West, was above the TV stand, and was flanked by two small embroideries: a dolphin her aunt had made her and a teddy bear from an old friend of her mother's.

"Oh...heck." She sighed, remembering she'd forgotten to send mail to the staff regarding the visits by procedures people the next day. She walked over and flipped on her PC again, flopping down in her desk chair and pulling one leg up under her as she waited for it to boot. After her desktop was presented, she went into mail, composed a quick note to the staff, telling them to cooperate nicely with the people coming in, and told the system to send the mail.

It dialed up and connected to their office mail server, and she watched as the message transferred, then blinked in surprise as the system indicated it was downloading a message.

"What idiot is up at this time of the morning, sending mail?" she wondered. The message finished downloading, and popped into her inbox.

Sent by: Dar Roberts Subject: re: Your Questions Time: 2:55 AM

"Oh. *That* idiot," she muttered, hesitating before she clicked on the message, surprised at the nervousness she felt. "Well, that explains things. It's obvious she's an alien who never sleeps, and who has a port in her head she plugs things into," she decided, then took a breath and opened the mail. She read through the sections, noting that the executive hadn't bothered responding to the admittedly snarky comments in her note. "Well, okay. I think she's wrong there, but..." She found another item. "Oh! I hadn't thought of that."

Dar's writing was strong and to the point; she could almost hear the words coming from the older woman, and surprisingly, they were lacking the condescension she'd half expected. Her final point answered, she let her eyes drop to the sign-off and blinked. "What?" She read it again.

Corporate policy states that all personnel achieve a reasonable amount of sleep in every twenty-four hour period. Please adhere to the regulations from now on.

DR

"What's that supposed to mean? What is she, some kind of lunatic? She gives me a crazy deadline of one stupid week to do something in, then says to make sure I sleep?" Kerry let out a vexed sigh, then set up a reply and cut most of the message out, except the header and the last line. "Okay, Ms. Wise Guy Alien from Mars, take that." She highlighted the time on Dar's header and made it boldface, then dropped down below the executive's last line and typed in a comment. "I'll keep that in mind."

With a smirk, she sent the message, then turned off her monitor and trudged over to the lamp, shutting it off and heading into her bedroom. It featured a neatly made double-sized bed covered with a striped comforter in southwestern colors against one wall under the small window, a five-drawer dresser against one wall, and a long, three-drawer dresser with a half-height mirror, all in white wood. The carpet was a pale blue pile, and she wriggled her toes into its softness with a contented sigh as she crossed the floor, then climbed into bed and got under the covers.

She could see the stars from there, and she watched them twinkle, trying to dispel the awful feeling of doom that had sat on her chest since Dar's visit. For her people, sure, she felt horrible, and hoped she could help them. But for herself... She glanced around the neat bedroom and swallowed, remembering how good she'd felt when she finally got things just how she wanted them, and how proud she was of how nice everything looked. She liked it here. Her neighbors were nice and the complex was friendly; there was a mall close by for shopping; and she even had a little grill on the porch for when a few friends came over and barbecued.

It was so nice to be out on her own. No one questioned if she stayed up late or stayed out. No one questioned how she dressed, or who she talked to. She was...very happy here.

Now this.

Part of her hated the corporation. Part of her also wanted to hate Dar Roberts, who applied the corporation's policies with such obvious relish. They felt large, impersonal, and scornful of anything she might try to do. And yet...

Kerry sighed. It was obvious Dar was smart; she had an air about her that made Kerry believe she didn't get crossed much, and when she did, the results were unpredictable. But on the tour, she'd asked some very sharp questions, and those incredible blue eyes hadn't missed much.

Whoa. Incredible? What am I thinking here? Kerry firmly closed her own eyes, and pulled the blanket up around her chin. *The only thing incredible about Dar Roberts is her incredible arrogance. So there.*

Chapter Two

"MORNING." DAR NODDED at her companions on the elevator as the doors slid shut and it started on its way up. She got polite murmurs back from the mostly junior staff who came in at this time of the morning. Eight AM was the start time for most of the data entry clerks and the administrative staff, and they all were somewhat in awe of her and not inclined to chatter in her presence.

She left them at lower levels and proceeded up to the fourteenth floor in solitude, waiting for the doors to open, then stepping out onto the executive level. Her office was on one corner, the windows wrapping around to give her a view of both the ocean and the skyline, and she pushed her way through the door to the outer office with a sigh. "Morning, Maria."

Her secretary turned and smiled. "Good morning, Dar. It is much nicer in here today, let me tell you. I don't know what miracle from Our Lady happened last night, but it is good." She finished sprinkling a little water on the plant near her desk, then went to the small counter nearby. "I'll get you some coffee. I'm glad you weren't here yesterday."

Dar smiled quietly and went into her inner office, setting her briefcase down and powering up her desk system. *After three hours of sleep, coffee is definitely a good idea*, she decided, sitting down with a sigh and running her fingers through her hair. The machine beeped, then requested her logon, which she provided impatiently, pressing the keys with a smooth motion. Her mail came up, and she scrolled through the morning's messages, stopping when she saw a response from a name that was almost familiar by now.

She read it, then smiled. "Short but sweet." *And the kid has a sense of humor too*, she noted, seeing the boldface. She was still smiling when Maria walked in, carrying a small tray and putting it down on Dar's desk. "Ooo...what do we have here?" She arched an eyebrow at the secretary.

Maria looked at her with a severe frown. "Carisita is telling me Gerardo in the cleaning staff is getting these for you special, because you stay here all last night to fix everything. Is that true, Dar?"

Dar deftly snagged one of the brown, layered pastries on the tray and bit into it. "Mmm." She loved *pastelitos*, the Cuban specialties that could contain almost anything, but usually featured flaky layers stuffed with cheese, or meat, or minced ham. These were the latter, but Dar had also spotted some guava and cheese, which were her second favorites.

"Dar?" Maria tapped her neatly manicured and painted a startling shade of red fingernails on the desktop.

"Someone had to, Maria." The executive shrugged, finishing one treat and selecting another.

"Besides, these made it worth it. Where does he get them? They're great."

The Spanish woman sighed. "You are too much, I think." She pushed the tray over. "Here, I have to type up those letters about the service changes." She bustled towards the door, closing it behind her and leaving her boss in private with her treats.

Dar read the rest of her mail while finishing the pastries and draining the large coffee Maria had brought with them. She muttered as she answered most of it, sending back terse replies, and one instance of just a single word, "Bullshit."

The phone buzzed. "Dar, I have Alastair on *numero uno* for you." There was a slight pause, "Oh. *Numero dos*."

The tall woman rolled her eyes. "All right." She punched the button. "How's things in Houston, Alastair?"

"I have no idea," the cheerful voice answered. "I'm in Troy. I hope they're sweating their asses off down there. How's it going with Associated?"

"Not bad. I broke the news to them yesterday, and I'm waiting for the fallout," Dar replied. "I figure a quarter of them will just take off voluntarily and solve half my problem for me."

A low chuckle emerged from the phone. "That's my Dar." He coughed slightly. "I hear we had a problem down there?"

"Minor." Dar shrugged it off. "Some idiot backed a fork loader into the switchroom back entrance and took out six punch-down panels, along with the hardware for controlling the air conditioning." She leaned back, crossing her arms. "I had to raise a little hell."

"I heard," Alastair replied. "I had the president of the building association on my line this morning. He's an old classmate of mine."

Connections. Dar sighed. They never ended. Whatever you did, you eventually had to hear about it somewhere down the line. "And?" She waited for the reprimand.

"And I told him he was lucky you didn't personally come and get him and kick his ass," the CEO told her cheerfully. "You did the right thing, Dar, good work."

Dar absorbed the compliment with a quiet smile. "Thanks." It didn't happen often. In fact, she could remember hearing those words exactly six times in as many years from this man. Alastair was a pain in the ass, but he'd stuck by her all these years, and she felt more than a little quiet affection for him. "I had to do it," she added. "Damn com center doesn't have an AC backup, and it's my budget that wouldn't let that squeak through this year."

"Ah." Alastair grunted. "Well, you've got those diesels on steroids down there, Dar. Reasonable to think that's all you'd need."

"Don't make excuses for me," Dar said. "I fire people for smaller goofs than that."

"Sorry, Dar. Not going to fire you today. I've got enough problems on my plate already," her boss replied. "Go buy yourself a chiller. Put it on my discretionary account, and tell Bea I said so. Okay?"

"Mmm." Dar leaned back in her chair and regarded the phone with a faint smile. "All right." "Now, I got a little problem." Alastair's voice dropped a little. "I need you to go to the DC office, shake them up a little. Peter Weyhousen is botching the contract talks with the Pentagon. Can you take them up for him?"

Damn. "I thought you wanted me to concentrate on Associated?" she objected. "Can't do that from DC."

"Sure you can. You've got the most testosterone-laden laptop in the entire corporation, Dar," Alastair chided her. "National's a great place to get work done while you're waiting...I should know." He shifted the phone, causing it to crackle. "He's going to lose that account, Dar, and we need it. A few days away will give Associated a chance to settle down, anyway."

True. "I've got someone working on a budget plan for them. Might be good to give them a few days to work things out," she conceded. "When are the talks?"

"Can you fly out tonight? They're scheduled for tomorrow early. I'll mail over the pertinent account facts and where I think Weyhousen is screwing up. He doesn't know you're coming, by the way."

Great. "All right." A bag was already packed and kept in the Lexus for just this purpose. Peter Weyhousen was no friend of hers. It would be a wild meeting, that was for sure. "You owe me one for this, Alastair."

The CEO chuckled. "Honey, see me at bonus time, all right?" He sighed. "Gotta go. I'm speaking at the engineers' conference in five minutes."

"Good luck," Dar told him.

"You too," came the reply, before a click indicated the CEO had hung up.

Dar put her arms on the desk and blew out a breath. She pressed the intercom button. "Maria, I need a flight to DC late afternoon today, coming back open."

"Dios mío," the secretary replied. "He doesn't let you live." A rustle of paper. "I will take care of things, Dar."

"Thanks." Dar released the intercom and sat back, nibbling a fingernail. Then she pulled her keyboard over and typed in a request to the database lying open on her desktop. A moment later it came back with a reply, and she picked up the phone again, dialing a number.

"Kerry Stuart."

The voice on the other end of the phone sounded harassed and upset. "Well. Good morning, Ms. Stuart. It was nice exchanging mail with you," Dar replied evenly.

"Oh." After a momentary pause, Kerry cleared her throat. "Hello. I, um...thank you for answering; the information was very helpful." Her tone was guarded and borderline hostile. Dar's brow furrowed. "No problem. What I called for was to tell you I'm going out of town for a few days. If you have any more questions, you can go ahead and mail them, but it might be a few hours before I pick them up and address anything."

There was a long silence and then an explosion. "Why don't you address the bastard you sent over here?" The frustration evident in the woman's voice spilled over into anger. "You know, I don't know who you people think you are, treating human beings as some kind of dirt you can rub under your heels."

"Whoa." Dar's tone was stronger than she'd intended. "Hold on." A ragged breath whispered through the receiver, and Dar could almost feel the emotion. "What's going on?"

There was another silence. "What's going on? What do you think is going on? Your goons are going through here ripping the place apart and disrupting everything. If you wanted to just trash the company, why didn't you just do it?"

"Ms. Stuart..."

"Opening people's personal possessions, locking my network people out of their offices..."

"Ms. Stuart..."

"Telling me I can't have access to my own payroll records?"

"Kerry." Dar spoke forcefully, almost a bark.

There was a breathless pause before Kerry snapped, "Only my friends call me that. And you are definitely not one of them."

It was, Dar realized, ridiculous. She was the vice president of operations for a worldwide major corporation, and here was this two-bit manager of a half-rate single-city service provider telling her off.

What was really surprising, though, she admitted, was how much it hurt. "Let me talk to Brady Evens."

The phone was thrown down on the desk, and she had to wait, counting to a hundred under her breath before she heard two sets of footsteps coming back, and the receiver was picked up.

"Here," she heard Kerry's voice snap, then the phone rustled.

"Brady?"

"Yeah."

"Velvet glove."

"Aw shit! You're kidding my ass."

The growly voice of her security team leader tickled her eardrums. "Nope. I mean it," she stated flatly. "Stuart gets VIP."

"Dar, you don't know what...there's holes in here as big as my butt, and Mark's already put a link in, for god's sake."

"I. Don't. Care." Dar barked. Her voice dropped to a deep snarl. "Just do it!"

"All...all right, okay," Brady answered in a chastened voice. "Okay. Sorry. I didn't know. My papers said a regular sweep."

"Change the papers," Dar replied, her voice still furious.

"Yes, ma'am," the team leader quietly replied. "Hold on." Through the speaker of the phone, Dar heard as he clicked something. "Team lead to crew." A splurt of static answered, along with a soft, muffled clamor of voices. "Stop what you're doing. We need to go to gold mode, over."

A soft cacophony of protest could be heard in the background. "Orders from the top," Brady overrode them. "Just do it." Then he exhaled and spoke into the phone again. "Done."

"Thank you," Dar growled.

The phone rustled softly. "Ms. Stuart, I apologize." Brady's voice had modulated from rough to cultured. "We'll try to stay out of your way." His footsteps receded and the phone jostled, a soft breathing becoming audible.

Dar waited, slowly letting out a breath of air. She still felt the warm rush against her skin from the anger, and she closed her eyes, letting it seep out of her. Her mouth felt dry, and her fingers were twitching faintly on the desk's surface.

Her temper was legendary, and Brady knew it, knew he could push only so far before she'd snap, and he'd be in more trouble than he was capable of dealing with. A story still circulated about a board meeting where a senior VP had challenged her, pushing every one of her buttons at the end

of a very long day, and found himself pressed up against the wall, pinned by Dar's weight while she yelled at the top of her lungs.

It was the reason she spent most evenings at the Island's well-stocked gym, working with the resident martial artist, Teddy, and perfecting several different flavors of black belts. Anger management, the VP of Personnel had called it. Dar sighed. "Hello?"

"Um..." Kerry's voice came on, hesitantly. "Thank you."

Dar took a breath. "Some places, when we come in, you have a lot of people trying to either destroy or make off with proprietary information," she explained quietly. "I know it's hard to think of your co-workers that way, but we do this from experience, not because we just decided to be hardasses."

"I-I understand that," Kerry replied. "It's...it's just so humiliating."

Dar paused, disconcerted. She'd never thought of it that way. "I guess it is. I'm...sorry." She remembered Kerry's eyes, at first willing to trust, then so quickly disillusioned. "But it's..."

"Nothing personal, I know," Kerry replied flatly.

They were both silent for a moment. "Fifteen people gave notice today," Kerry finally said, not really sure why. "The rest said they were going to stick around and see what happens."

Dar stared out her window, hardly seeing the clouds drifting by. "That's pretty good," she murmured. "You've got a loyal staff, there."

"They're depending on me," Kerry said, "to keep you from screwing us all over."

Aw, kid... The tall, dark-haired woman slowly shook her head at the sky. *Don't put that on your shoulders.* "All right," she murmured. "Well..."

"I'm not going to let them down." The voice was very steady. "No matter what you do or say."

Dar sighed. "Ms. Stuart, I'm not your enemy."

"You're not my friend," came the flat reply.

"No." She paused. "I guess I'm not."

Now it was Kerry's turn to be silent. "Well, thank you for telling him to stop, I really appreciate that a lot." She exhaled. "And, um...I'll send any more questions."

"All right." Dar hesitated. "Listen, write this number down." She waited until she got a soft "Go on" from the phone. "305-975-6647."

"I have it," Kerry said.

"If you have any problems with him, just call that number."

"All right." Kerry paused. "Have a...um, have a safe trip." Wishing the corporate VP crashed would be politically incorrect, she supposed, and besides, she had just done Kerry a big favor.

No sense in alienating a woman who could make a six-and-a-half-foot-tall, three-hundred-pound man turn white as Casper's Ghost and practically piddle on the carpet, right? Right.

Dar's voice dropped a pitch as she replied, "Thanks."

It was a warmer tone, that forced an unexpected smile to the younger woman's face. "You're welcome." Kerry answered softly. "Goodbye." She hung up the phone and remained there for a long moment, staring at the instrument and wondering what on earth was going on with her.

Then she sighed and seated herself behind her desk again, rubbing her face wearily. She looked up as a knock on the doorframe alerted her to a new presence. "Come in, Ray."

The support manager glided across the carpet and slipped into her visitor's chair. "What happened?"

"What happened?" Kerry stared at him. "We got taken over by the Merry Mongols Megolithic marching band, remember?"

"*Ay, chica*, no. With the gorillas." Ray looked around, then back at her. "Who put on their leashes? They are being so nice now, it's alarming."

"Oh." Kerry folded her hands. "Well, I kind of complained to, um..."

"To the Cruella?" Ray inquired.

"Yeah." Kerry nodded. "So she talked to that head goon, and he told them to take it easy. I think it will be better now."

"Our hero." He grinned. "You go, girl."

She looked down at her hands and smiled. "Yeah, that was pretty good. I don't know what she said to him, but he looked like a puppy that had just been spanked."

"Tch...he would probably like that." Ray laughed. "Maybe she's his...how you call them...his mistress. You know, with the whips and chains thing. She probably puts on him a collar, with a bell."

Kerry covered her face with one hand and stifled a giggle. She was so tired from her late-night tasks, the picture of the burly, gruff Brady in a belled collar was almost too much for her. "God, Ray, don't do that to me. What a picture."

He stood up. "Teresita is going to Laurenzo's. You want her to bring you back a *colada*?"

The woman blinked. She tended to view Cuban coffee with a wary eye, a cross between black goo and rocket fuel, but the way she felt today, maybe it was worth a try. "Okay, sure. That might be a good idea; I'm pretty tired." She picked up the piece of paper with the phone number, and looked at it curiously, then folded it and tucked it away in her shirt pocket.

She turned back to her computer, rereading the dozen or so questions and clarifications she'd come up with for Cr...for Dar Roberts. "All right, you asked for them." She sat back, reflecting on what had just happened, tapping her pencil on her lower lip. Dar had called, apparently to let her know she could keep sending things, and she'd ended up going off all over the executive. No way around it, that was exactly what she had done. And instead of telling her off, or firing her, which Dar certainly was capable of doing, the corporate VP had fixed her problem.

Weird. Very weird. She certainly hadn't given Dar any reason to be nice to her; in fact, she'd been rude to the point of insubordinate twice now, and the older woman had simply ignored her comments as though she hadn't made them.

No, that wasn't true. That last time she'd said Dar wasn't a friend of hers, she had answered, agreeing with that. *It has almost been...* Kerry drew her denim-covered knee up and circled it with one arm, and sighed. She didn't know what it had almost been, but now she was feeling a little bad about being so rude. She wasn't usually like that, and she had no idea what about Dar Roberts brought it out in her.

She turned to her screen, where a dozen or so more questions and clarifications were typed, and reviewed them. She'd left out the snide comments this time, since she'd gotten such reasonable answers the last time. Now she hesitantly typed a final line on the bottom, then hit the Send key, doing so quickly before she could change her mind.

There. Not much of an apology, but... After all, she was the one being screwed over here, her and the rest of her staff. Dar Roberts could just like it or not, she really didn't care one way or the other. *Right?*

Chapter Three

"RIGHT THIS WAY, Ms. Roberts." The concierge gave her a sketchy half bow and indicated that she follow him. They entered the elevator, and he pressed the button for the top floor, where the

hotel maintained business suites for traveling executives. "Have you come far?" he inquired politely.

Dar tore her attention from the steadily creeping floor numbers. "Miami." She shifted her shoulders inside her brown leather jacket. "It's a little cooler here."

The man chuckled and held the door open as they reached the correct floor. "That it is."

Dar suffered his inane comments for a few more minutes as he put down her small bag, then she gave him a tip and kicked him out. As the door closed behind him, she glanced around and exhaled. Not bad, really. The suite contained a bedroom with a large king-sized bed, a sitting room with a decent-sized TV, a cluster of chairs for guests, and a fully equipped desk with pens, pencils, a dataline hookup, and an electrical outlet conveniently at waist level.

She wandered over to the desk and set down her laptop case, then flipped curiously through the room service menu. The Hyatt usually featured fairly decent food, and this one had a Mexican-themed restaurant downstairs, along with the usual coffee shop and bar. "So far, so good," Dar commented to the empty room as she paged through the rest of the hotel directory. *Ah*. She tapped the plastic with one finger. *Health club, pool, movie, dinner*.

That decided, she pulled open her bag and took out a pair of shorts, sneakers, and a cut-off sweatshirt, then flipped on the TV, checking out the movie selections. She chuckled. "Oh ho, *The Rock*. This is definitely looking up."

A few minutes later, she'd changed and was back by the desk, lifting the phone and dialing room service. She scanned the menu as she waited for an answer. "Combination appetizer, steak fajitas, flan, and a coffee milkshake, please."

"Yes ma'am," the voice answered, after a period of scribbling noises.

"Can I have that at nine thirty, please?" Dar requested, glancing at her watch. An hour and a half should be enough to get through a decent workout and a quick swim. It would also allow her to shrug off her traveling fatigue and probably put her in a better frame of mind than when she'd left Miami.

Anything would be an improvement over that. The rest of the morning and all of the afternoon until her flight left had been taken up with staff meetings, both with her own department and with her peers. It had not been a pleasant experience, and by the time she'd fought her way through Miami International Airport and onto her flight, she'd been about at the edge of her temper.

Fortunately, the flight had been quiet, a commuter with no children and quick service. Dar had relaxed in her first class seat and accepted a single glass of white wine, sipping it slowly as she watched the sun slide below the horizon. The first stars were just coming out as she landed at Washington National, and she'd felt herself unwind a little, knowing she had at least a whole evening before she had to rain on Peter's parade.

An evening she didn't intend to waste. Dar found the gym with little trouble, pushing the door open and getting the expected silence from within. Hotels provided the workout space as an amenity, but she knew from long experience that most business travelers preferred to relax in other ways, most having to do with consuming alcohol and watching sports in the bar.

Dar preferred the solitude of the machines, and she attacked the small, but fairly well-equipped circuit with stolid purpose, setting the weights and performing the reps according to a long-established routine. It was a good workout, and she even surprised herself with a twenty-pound advance on her arm curls which left her shoulders burning. After an hour, she returned the last machine to its resting position and stood, wiping her face off with the small towel she'd tucked into her waistband.

Satisfied, she wandered over to the scale and stepped on it, pushing the weights over with a curious finger. "Mmm," she mused, considering a surprising five-pound drop. "Maybe I'll have two coffee milkshakes." A rakish grin faced her in the mirror as she stepped off the scale, remembering the office Christmas party last year when a drunken contest had started to guess her weight.

No one came close to the actual hundred and sixty pounds. Most guessed twenty or so less, though she wasn't sure if it was the fact that most of it was muscle, and therefore was denser than they thought, or if they were just trying not to piss her off by guessing too high.

"B, with an egg roll," she informed her reflection, then she grabbed her towel and headed for the pool. Thirty minutes later, she was padding back to her room, the towel draped over her shoulders and her workout clothes tucked under one arm. She'd figured the hotel was mostly empty, and her one-piece bathing suit was not exactly an attention-getter; it seemed a reasonable conclusion until she got to the elevator.

Already waiting for the elevator were four guys who looked like lumberjacks. Dar sighed inwardly, as she bore the appreciative stares. They were medium height, Midwestern types, wearing buffalo plaid shirts and Dockers, most of them clean-shaven, but obviously a little drunk. They stared. Dar stared back, leaning against the wall with an air of total nonchalance.

"Hey baby, wanna come party in our room?" the redhead finally asked, with a smirk.

"No," the tall executive replied as she slipped past them into the elevator.

She knew it was a mistake moments later when they followed her, standing between her and the door, which slid closed with a thump. Her heart rate increased and she watched them carefully, shifting her balance so it was over the balls of her feet, putting on her most no-nonsense look. The tallest of them, a bearded man about six feet tall, moved in. "Y'know, ya shouldn't tease people like that." He leered at her. "Pretty thing like you. And then you go and tell us off. That's not nice."

Dar let the anger build and waited. "I was just using the amenities of the hotel. That's not against the law," she warned him, softly. She felt the jerk as the elevator stopped, and realized the man furthest from her had stopped it between floors. She dropped her clothing quietly onto the floor and let her hands curl into fists. "Don't be stupid, boys."

A hand reached for her neck, and the first man closed in, his alcoholic breath blasting her as he pushed her back against the wall.

She grabbed his hand and twisted, then nailed him in the nose with an elbow that caused blood to spurt all over both of them. A savage side kick slammed the second man against the opposite wall, and then she was by the door, ducking under the arm of the third and shoving him headfirst against the railing that lined the elevator car.

The fourth man was eye to eye with her and she snarled at him, grabbing the front of his shirt and lifting as she pushed backwards, throwing him back and away from her. Her hand slammed down on the elevator control, and the car lurched into action. They all stared at her, confused and hurting.

She arched her neck and stared back at them, then grabbed the nearest one and plucked his hotel room key from his pocket, folding her fingers around it. "I want to make sure I know who I'm going to report to the police."

"W-we..." the tall man wiped his nose, staring at the blood in bewilderment, "didn't mean nothing."

"You meant to take out your horny fantasies on some poor, helpless woman," Dar spat. "You picked a bad choice of victims this time."

The elevator stopped on her floor, and she crossed briefly to the other side of the car, watching the men scramble away from her. She snorted as she picked up her workout clothes, then exited into the carpeted hallway, letting the door slide shut behind her.

Then she slowly let out a shaky breath and lifted a trembling hand to her eyes. She waited a minute to make sure her legs weren't going to collapse, then headed toward her room, getting the door open and slipping inside with a sense of utter relief. She sat down in the nearest chair and let her head rest against the back of it, staring up at the white popcorn ceiling until her heart rate began to resemble something more normal. "Bastards."

She got up and ran her fingers through her dark hair, then walked to the desk and pulled out her laptop, plugging it into power and the phone line as she picked up the regular phone and dialed with her free hand. A moment later the front desk clerk picked up. "This is Dar Roberts in 1430. I was just attacked on the elevator by four drunken idiots from room..." She paused and glanced at the key in her hand. "Room 209. I want their names."

There was dead silence for a moment, then, "My god! I'll call the police." The girl's voice was clearly shaken.

"No," Dar spoke slowly and clearly, "I don't want you to do that; I want you to give me their names, and the company they work for."

It took about twenty minutes and two front desk managers, but she got what she wanted. In the middle of it, dinner showed up. She motioned for the tall, slim blonde who delivered it to put the tray down on the table near the bed, and waved the girl over for her signature. A brief glance at the bill, then she scribbled her name, with the appropriate tip on the bottom. "Thanks."

The girl's eyes wandered over her appreciatively. "Anytime." She smiled, then turned to leave. Dar's brow lifted, and a speculative smile crossed her lips, then she sighed as the night manager got back on the phone. *First things first*. "Thank you." She took down the men's names and the corporation who was paying for them to stay there. It caused another smile to appear, this one not pleasant.

"But ma'am, are you sure you don't want us to call the police?" the man protested. "I mean, surely they should be thrown out of here, at least."

"No, no," Dar objected. "I'll take care of it. You just leave them alone."

"Ms. Roberts, are you sure?" The manager sounded worried.

"Yeah, I'm sure," came the quietly confident reply. "Thank you." Dar hung up, then noticed the room service waitress was still at the door.

"Sorry to eavesdrop." The girl didn't look sorry at all. "But are you talking about those creeps on the second floor?" She leaned against the door and regarded Dar. "The four guys who look like overaged football players?"

Dar nodded. "Probably, why?"

A shake of her blonde head. "No one'll go up there except for the older guys from the kitchen. They keep grabbing anything that's capable of wearing a skirt."

The executive smiled quietly. "Oh really?" She had booted her laptop and watched it connect to the system in Miami. She started a terminal session and logged into the corporate database, sending a rapid query and drumming her fingers until it came back. She nodded, then picked up the phone and dialed, aware of the hazel eyes watching her with interest. On the fourth ring, it was picked up. "Gary Sanrichon?"

"That's me. Who is this?" The voice sounded puzzled.

"Dar Roberts." No introduction, no company name. She suspected it wouldn't be needed.

"Oh! Uh..." Sanrichon sounded startled. "My god, it's... What can I do for you, Ms. Roberts?"

She read off the names of her attackers. "They yours?"

"Salesmen, yes," Sanrichon replied warily. "Why?"

"They're drunk and attacking women here in the Hyatt in DC," Dar replied. "You could do me a favor and make them gone. Now." She paused and waited, hearing mostly breathing on the other end of the phone. Her peripheral vision caught the room service attendant listening avidly, and she stifled a smile.

After an obviously shocked silence, he said, "I'll take care of it." Sanrichon's words were hard and clipped. "Don't you worry, Ms. Roberts. I'll take care of that right now for you."

"Thanks." The executive smiled contentedly. "Night." She hung up the phone and glanced at the girl, who was watching her with wide eyes. "Too bad for them they work for a subsidiary of ours, huh?" Dar commented, as she watched the laptop download mail, then wandered over to the tray and picked up her milkshake, sucking at it with a satisfied slurp. She lifted her eyes and looked up under dark lashes at the girl. "What's your name?"

"Sherry," the blonde replied softly. "What's going to happen to those guys?"

Dar shrugged. "Don't worry about them. They'll be out of your hair by the morning; I can guarantee that." She peeked under the domed lid of one of the dishes and captured a jalapeno popper, biting into it and chewing with pleasure. "Maybe they'll learn a lesson."

"Maybe." The girl replied. "I'll...be back to get that tray later on." She motioned toward it.

Dar lifted ice blue eyes to hers and smiled. "Sounds good to me." She watched the girl swallow hard, then slip out, not without a backward glance at her; Dar chuckled wryly as the door closed.

"Oh Dar, you seducer of children. That was awful." She sighed, then got out of her still-damp bathing suit, hanging the thin black fabric over the shower bar in the bathroom to dry.

Her cotton T-shirt felt good after the dampness, and she sprawled out onto the bed, pulling the tray closer and examining its contents, then flicking on the TV and setting it for the movie. She was about to start it when her laptop chimed; she scowled at it. "I know I have mail. I always have mail. I even had mail after the goddamn servers were downed for eight hours, and it was three AM." The laptop chimed again, and she sighed, then slid off the bed and padded over to it, grabbing the machine and taking it back with her to the bed after disconnecting the phone line. She settled back down on the dark blue comforter, and peered at the mail list. "BS, BS, BS, corporate newsletter. Oh, like I need to read that. BS, Dukky, BS... Ah." She clicked on the seventh message down, from fairly early that morning.

Sent by: Kerry Stuart Subject: Clarification Time: 10:32 AM

Ms. Roberts--

There are some additional items that I need clarification on. Firstly, regarding the support issue. If you were to take over the support of these products, you would need to add several skill sets to your existing support center.

These would include hardware support for the POSIX backends, the thermal slip printers, and the touch screens, none of which duplicates existing support environments you currently have.

The training on these items is extensive and ongoing. Your cost center would have to include budget for this training, where we already possess the skill sets.

Likewise, your programming group is concentrated in TPF, and our code is written in C, with a good number of assembler modules custom designed for the service sector. You do not have programmers qualified in this, and would have to acquire ours or provide extensive training to bring your own staff up to speed. Our clients require frequent patches and updates as their environments change, and they are dependent on us to be able to rapidly react to the changing food service world.

Therefore, I believe it is in your best interests to retain the services of the existing groups employed by Associated. My proposal regarding your budgetary demands will be directed accordingly.

Please indicate if you feel this reasoning is incorrect.

K. Stuart

I apologize for my tone and manner this morning--but you can imagine how disturbing the actions of your procedure team was.

Dar munched another popper and took a sip of her milkshake, a smile tugging at her lips. Kerry had obviously put her access to their corporate systems to good use, and she had made some very valid points. "Good girl, Kerry." She paused, remembering the woman's hostile response at having her first name used and some of her good mood evaporated.

Why the hell should I care? The logical answer was, of course, that she shouldn't, but for some reason she found herself intrigued by Kerry Stuart's potential, and her intelligence, and she really didn't want to be the damn woman's enemy.

She sighed. Trouble was, Kerry didn't seem to have a mutual admiration for her. In fact, Dar was hard pressed to recall being spoken to with that much venom by someone she'd just met in quite a while.

Hmm. Dar drummed her fingers on the laptop keyboard. Their first meeting had been a disaster.

Maybe...well, that last line indicates she was at least willing to listen. Perhaps I could mend fences just a little. She stuffed a laden nacho into her mouth, then started a reply.

KERRY ABSENTLY MUNCHEd on a slice of lukewarm pizza as she paged through yet another spreadsheet. She'd been at it for hours, since she'd gotten home, and she realized she was about ready for a break when the screen started to go fuzzy on her.

Coincidentally, a knock rapped on her door at the same time. She stood, hissing as her back protested its tenure in the same position, and limped to the door, peeking through the security hole before pulling it open. "Hey, Colleen." She smiled at the short redhead who bounded inside. Colleen McPherson was the first neighbor she'd met after she moved into the complex, and they'd remained close friends ever since.

"Hey, Kerry, whatcha up to?" Colleen wrinkled her snub nose and looked around. "Whoa. Hold on. Don't tell me *you* are eating pizza? No, no. Must be a pod. I'm calling the FBI."

Kerry laughed a little sheepishly. "I had no choice. I'm doing this project, and I didn't have time to cook. I was starving." She closed the door and walked back over to her desk. "You want some?"

Colleen peered at the box. "*Ohmigod.* You actually ate half of it. I'm going to pass out," she teased her friend. "It's not even a veggie pizza."

Kerry sat down, letting her arms rest on her thighs. "I'm not a vegetarian, Col. You know that," she objected. "I just like to eat healthy. Is that a crime?"

The redhead took a slice and chewed it. "What is a crime is that you hardly eat enough to sustain a rabbit, much less a human being." She plucked at Kerry's shirt, which hung on her. "Now *that* is not healthy."

Kerry shrugged a little. "I'm fine, I just..." She hesitated. "I get a lot of grief at home if I put on weight. It's just easier not to." She shrugged. "You know how it is."

Grief was a mild way of putting it. The first year she'd been down here, things had been hectic, work was very involving, and she really didn't have time to do much other than go to the office, come home, try to get the apartment settled, and study for her networking certifications. It led to

a lot of late nights and take-out food, and an extra twenty pounds that had gotten her nothing but nagging and complaints when she'd gone home for Christmas. Which was a lousy time for that and had caused her to end up spending most of the holiday avoiding people, her father especially. She'd vowed she'd never have to go through that again. So she stuck to carrots, and lots of walking and bike riding, which got things pretty much under control. In fact, Colleen was her walking and Rollerblading buddy, since the short redhead was constantly battling her own tendency to roundness.

Kerry sighed, because she was an admitted chowhound. She loved to eat, and it was so hard to constantly say no to that. But she did, because hearing her father's censorious voice was even worse, and her mother never failed to ask her about it on their weekly phone calls.

Then of course, there was Brian. Her nominal fiancé. His daddy had done a big favor for her daddy, so when he asked to marry her...Daddy had said yes. Kerry didn't dislike Brian. He was a tall, very good-looking young man with impeccable manners, intelligence, and good work ethics, who was just about to graduate law school. By all accounts, a great match, and he was crazy about her. And to be fair, she liked him. They'd been friends for years, and she'd had a lot of fun doing things together.

In fact, they seemed like a natural pair. He'd taken her to their senior prom, and one of her mother's favorite pictures was the two of them posing in front of her parents' house, dressed in formal wear and very serious expressions for that very occasion.

Natural. Hmm... Yeah. Kerry exhaled, then put a smile on. "So, like I said, it's just easier. My folks give me such a hard time; you know how that is."

Colleen rolled her eyes. "Do I ever." She put her hands on her hips. "Colleen Katherine McPherson, if you don't start doing something with yourself, you'll be big as the Queen Mary one of these fine days." Her voice went high and singsong, to imitate her irrepressible Irish mother.

Kerry laughed. "Oh god, that's so like her." Colleen's family lived nearby, and Kerry had been invited over several times for dinner. She liked the feisty redhead and was glad to have someone to just hang out with sometimes. Colleen worked for Barnett Bank as their chief teller and was a few years older than Kerry. She was funny and very outgoing, the legacy of growing up in a large, boisterous family.

"So, what's the project?" Colleen looked around her apartment. "Jesus Mary, Ker, did a paper fairy poop all over here or what?"

The blonde woman leaned back in her desk chair and took another slice of pizza. "No." She sighed. "We got bought out."

"Ew. I heard." The shorter girl made a face. "Are you guys in trouble?"

"Yeah," Kerry admitted. "They'd really like to just get rid of us all and keep the customers, but I'm trying to pitch them a plan where at least some of us keep our jobs." Her shoulders slumped. "I don't think they're going to buy it, though." She spared her computer a glance as her mail indicator lit. "Here's the confirmation, probably." She reached over and clicked on the envelope, bringing the new message to the foreground. "Yep," she confirmed, seeing the name of the sender.

Sent by: Dar Roberts Subject: re: Clarification Time: 10:45 PM

Ms. Stuart,

You bring interesting points to the table. While I have the utmost confidence in the ability of our support teams to assume responsibility for your product line, your personnel do bring a certain level of knowledge that it might be costly for us to duplicate. Please continue with your proposal.

"Oh. Wow." Kerry breathed, as her eyes dropped below to the somewhat longer paragraph underneath.

I know that this is a very difficult process you are attempting, and I appreciate the effort you are putting into it. I think you are talented and intelligent, and I really don't want this to be such an adversarial situation. I realize our initial meeting got started off in the wrong direction, and that I should have assured that our project team had briefed your upper management on what to expect before we began the process. For that, I apologize.

DR

Oddly, Kerry felt lighter all of a sudden. A tiny smile edged her lips, and she sat back with a heartfelt sigh. "What do you know? She bought it. Sort of."

Colleen had been unashamedly reading over her shoulder. "Hey." She poked Kerry in the shoulder. "That's not *the* Dar Roberts, is it?" She whistled under her breath. "They do our ACHTAPE processing. There was a foul-up one day and a whole tape spool got screwed. Our managers were raising hell all over the place, blaming them to high heaven, then this Roberts woman shows up, spends ten minutes in the vault, and finds the problem on our end." She rolled her eyes. "God, we didn't hear the end of that for weeks."

"Well," Kerry shook her head, "I can't imagine there being more than one of her at that company, so I guess it is. Tall, tanned, dark hair?" She paused. "Really blue eyes?"

Colleen gave her a rakish grin. "That'd be her. Rumor says she's a real bitch on wheels." She peered at the e-mail. "Hmm. Looks like she likes you, though." She looked at Kerry, impressed.

"Wow, she thinks you're talented and intelligent. I guess she has a few brain cells after all."

Kerry blushed. "Stop it." She re-read the mail, and try as she would to remind herself of just how angry she'd been at Dar, the typed words made her feel pretty good anyway. Maybe because it was so unexpected. Yeah, that was it. She hadn't figured on getting a positive response from the woman, or even a response at all, so getting this was just...so surprising. "She's probably just patting me on the head." Kerry finally said offhandedly. "You know--don't get the natives restless until you steal all their diamonds, that kind of thing."

"Probably," Colleen agreed cheerfully. "Hey, take a break, and let's go for a walk down to the bakery."

Kerry hesitated. "Um...okay, sure. I could use a break. Listen, why don't you get your bike, and I'll meet you out on the street?" She smiled as Colleen quickly agreed, and watched as the redhead trotted out, closing the door behind her. Then she turned her attention to the screen and tapped her fingers on her keyboard, trying to decide what to reply. *Be nice, be snippy, be formal? What the hell.* The worst old Cruella could do is fire her.

Sent by: Kerry Stuart Subject: re: Clarification

Hello....

Thank you for saying what you did. You're right--this is a tough situation, and I wish I wasn't in it. But I am, and I have to make the best of it, so I'm going to keep on trying.

I know we're just one small piece of a cog in your giant machine, and that you really don't care one way or the other about any of us--and I understand that I'm one more in a series of problems you have to deal with. I guess it must get monotonous for you after a while, but for me, this is a situation I never wanted or dreamed I'd be in. I don't like having my world, and that of everyone around me, torn apart. But I guess you're used to that.

I know you're just doing your job, and I'm glad it's yours and not mine. We did get started off pretty badly, and I think that's partly my fault too, because I took my frustration at what was

happening out on you, and maybe I shouldn't have been so quick to do that. I realized afterward you could have just fired me right there, so it probably wasn't the smartest thing I ever did.

She stared at the screen for a long moment before she continued, debating with herself. Finally she completed the message, then hit Send. "So much for that." She nodded briskly, then dusted her hands off and went to the closet, retrieving her dark purple mountain bike and checking the tires. She glanced at her helmet, on the high shelf above, and decided the short ride down Kendall Drive didn't need it.

Chapter Four

DAR STOOD QUIETLY, her hands behind her back, gazing out the window. She was doing her best to ignore the frustrated ranting and raving of the man behind her, who was pacing up and down and throwing his hands around.

"Look, Peter, just shut up," the tall woman finally said, turning around. "Let me go in there and do my job. We'll argue about it afterward, okay?" She gave the man a look. "I didn't ask to get sent here, I didn't ask to have to break up your little party, and I certainly didn't ask to have you blowing hot air at me for forty-five minutes."

"Everything is under control," the man stated, through clenched teeth. "I'll be damned if you're going to walk in there and take the credit for something I've broken my ass for."

Dar walked over and looked him right in the eye. "You don't have a choice."

"Like hell I don't!" Peter shouted. "I'll call Alastair!"

A brilliant smile slapped him in the face. "Who do you think sent me?"

His breathing was suddenly loud in the silence. "You're lying, you frozen ass bitch."

Ignoring the insult, Dar picked up the nearest phone receiver and held it out to him, her eyebrows raised and a mocking smile on her face. "Come on, call him."

The tall man's nostrils flared, and his lips writhed into a snarl, but he made no move to take the phone.

The receiver dropped back into the cradle with a click. "Now get out of my way and just keep your mouth shut." Dar brushed by him as the door opened; two tall military men stepped into the room. "Hello, General." Her voice dropped a pitch and took on a seductive tone as she stepped up next to the older of the two.

The man's eyes focused on her, and his eyes lit up. "Ms. Roberts. It's always, always a pleasure."

He took her hand and kissed the back of it with a courtly bow, then spread his arm towards the door. "Come on in, let's talk." His eyes drifted to Weyhausen. "Thanks. We'll see you later."

Dar, her face hidden by her position, bit her lip to keep a laugh in, then cleared her throat as the door shut behind them. "That wasn't nice, Gerald."

The elderly general chuckled. "He's an ass, Dar."

She shrugged a little, then took the proffered seat in front of his desk and leaned back, as the military man settled in his thickly stuffed chair. "He's not that bad. He just hasn't been around the big stuff like I have," she explained wryly. "You soldier boys freak him out."

Gerald Easton smiled at her. "Dar, you look good," he mused, studying the tall woman across from him.

She inclined her head. "So do you. How's the Pentagon treating you?"

"Eh." He made a hand gesture. "Biggest pile of horse droppings east of the Potomac. And now they want us to repaint everything. Did you hear that? Some idiot kid came in and did a study, told some damn politician that the camouflage we've been using since nineteen aught eight doesn't work. We gotta paint everything shades of pink and beige."

Dar made a face. "Ugh."

"Yeah, ugh is right." The general turned to his aide, who had been standing quietly watching them. "Eileen, can you get Ms. Roberts and me a pitcher of something cold, please?" The aide nodded briskly and disappeared.

They looked at each other in comfortable silence for a moment. "Dar, you look more and more like your daddy every time I see you." The older man sighed, a gentler expression in his eyes.

"Same nose, same chin... Damn, girl." He paused. "I miss him."

Dar's eyes dropped to his desk, and she exhaled softly. "So do I."

"He'd be proud of you, that's for sure." A gentle twinkle entered the general's eyes. "Imagine him seeing you practically running that joint. I can just imagine his face."

Blue eyes drifted. "I don't know about that, Gerry." Dar shook her head. "I don't think he'd see it as very honorable. You know what we are." She paused. "He was always looking out for the little guy. We make a corporate policy of eating them alive." She gave him a wry look. "But here I am...so what's the score?"

Old eyes studied her for a long moment, then the general pulled a file folder out from his desk drawer and tossed it over to her. "All yours, rugrat." He chuckled fondly at the look on her face.

"Naw, it's not charity. You were pretty close in the bidding, and...let's just say I just felt more comfortable awarding a defense contract this large to someone I trust."

Dar drew the folder over and looked through the contents. Her brows rose.

"Yeah, I threw in a couple others, and that damn IRS website support contract. Please, Dar, get them off my back, will ya? They can't keep that thing running to save their lives."

"I'll do my best," Dar replied, with a shake of her head. Peter was going to go completely insane when he saw this. She hid a smirk. *Arrogant ass.* "I'll make sure you get taken care of."

"I know it," the general said, then hesitated. "Hear from your mother?"

A faint flinch tugged at Dar's face. "No," she replied quietly, with a faint shrug. "Not since the funeral. I don't think I ever will."

"Bitch," Gerry muttered under his breath. "Like it was your fault he decided to put his hand in the field one last time."

Dar stared at the carpet, a sturdy maroon tweed. "They were inseparable, Gerry. I remind her of him too much, I guess." Her voice was quiet and even. "He was her whole world." And all Dar had left, really, was pictures--eight or ten treasured photos of her tall, dark-haired father, mostly in fatigues, one with his arm wrapped around her shoulders, the two of them looking more like brother and sister than father and daughter.

She remembered the solidness of him, the sturdy, powerful body whose shoulder she'd dampened with tears on more than one occasion. She tried not to remember that last goodbye, not often. Not unless she was alone with the stars, or the endless stretch of the water.

The general exhaled, then he got up and moved around the desk, holding his hand out to her.

"Come here, rugrat." He tugged on the hand she extended to him and pulled her up into a hug.

"Your daddy was one of my best friends. You know that, right?"

Dar allowed herself the luxury of accepting the embrace, feeling the scratchy wool of his uniform against her cheek. The smell, a mixture of dry cleaning and leather, brass and starch, was very familiar. "I know that." She gave him a pat on the back as he released her. "He was a good man."

The general leaned back against the desk, studying her. "He was a very good soldier," he acknowledged. "I always half expected you to follow in his footsteps." His hand patted her arm.

"You've got his strength, you know."

Dar let a tiny smile shape her lips. "I save my battles for the boardroom, Gerry." She held up the folder. "It can be just as dangerous, but lacks the bullets."

The aide returned, and handed them each a glass of frosty ice tea, already sweetened. Then at a hand signal from the general, she discreetly left. They silently toasted each other, and Dar felt herself relaxing a little as the cold beverage slid down her throat. It was always hard, seeing Gerald Easton, but it was getting easier with time, and she knew one day she'd see the old general and not think of her father first. "Well, I'd better get going. I need to be on the noon flight back into Miami."

Easton set his glass down and folded his arms across his chest. "Why not spend the night over, Dar? Mary would love to see you, and Jack's in town." His eyes twinkled again. "You know he's madly in love with you."

Dar gave him a rueful grin. Gerald's husky, blond son certainly did flatter her with gentle, almost hesitant attentions when they were together, and she really didn't mind doing things with him.

They'd spent a great time last year touring the Civil War battlefields in the area, and the thought of just relaxing in Jack's peaceful presence was tempting. "Gerry, I have to admit to you, if I was going to marry anyone, it'd be Jack. He's the sweetest guy I know."

Easton beamed. "Welcoming you into my family would be one of the bright points in my life, Dar. You know that." He shook a finger at her. "Don't be so fast to wave off marriage. I know you're tied up with your career, but you should give it a chance sometime." He put a hand on her arm. "Give yourself a chance. C'mon, stay over."

Dar sighed. "Honestly, I wish I could, but I'm right in the middle of a mess down there. I can't afford the time." She gave him an honestly regretful look. "I'll take a near-future rain check, though."

"Hmm." He glanced at her shrewdly, tactician's mind working. "Hey, why don't you come up for Christmas?" He cocked his grizzled head at her. "Have a real holiday...tree, maybe some snow, the works, huh?"

The tall woman was caught off-guard. "Maybe I will," she murmured softly. "Thanks for the invitation, Gerry."

His gray eyebrows waggled, and a smile of mild military triumph crossed his face. "Anytime, rugrat. Now g'wan and get outta here, before your pinch-buttied Norwegian out there throws a shoe."

"He's Dutch," Dar corrected wryly.

"Dutch, Norwegian...I'm a soldier. What in blazes do I know about all those neutral countries?" he countered, with a grin. "I can tell a German from a Frenchman and an Italian from a Jap."

Dar, who could distinguish between Miami's several dozen ethnic Latin groups without difficulty, just smiled back. "Nice seeing you, Gerry. Give my best to Mary and Jack, all right?"

"I sure will," the general promised. "Have a good flight, and take care of yourself, hear?"

"I will." Dar picked up her folder and glided out the door, straightening her shoulders as she spotted Weyhousen approaching from the window where he'd been pacing. Without a word, she handed him the folder, which he almost dropped.

"What is..." His eyes scanned the contents, and his jaw tightened. "That son of a bitch."

Dar exhaled. "Post them. I'm taking off."

The man looked at her bitterly. "What did it take to get this? You do him on top of his desk?" he asked sarcastically. "Easy for you--just go in and show him a little ass, is that it?"

For a frozen moment, Dar struggled with the urge to strike him. It showed in her pale eyes, she knew, because Weyhousen backed off a step, and she concentrated on her breathing, holding

down the fury which threatened to overwhelm her. Finally, she took a breath. "You know, Peter, for someone who has to take twice-weekly impotence drugs, you sure are hung up on sex." Dar had concluded long ago that medical files and ex-hackers were useful things. "Maybe you should get some pointers from the old boy?" Without waiting for an answer from him, she turned and simply left.

Chapter Five

"DAR, WHEN ARE you leaving?" Maria stood in the doorway, her bag slung over her shoulder. It was Friday night, at the end of one of the worst weeks the secretary could remember. She watched her boss with concern. The dark-haired woman was seated behind the large wooden desk with the fading sun behind her. "Dar?"

"Hmm?" The executive glanced up from her monitor, giving the woman a wry look. "I've got to finish up this damn financial report, Maria. It'll be a few more hours yet." Her desk was scattered with fanfold reports, most of them custom, most of them with her login displayed prominently on their top sheets, indicating she'd run them herself. "It's called burying the bodies, Maria. I've got to hide two rank disasters, and still make the numbers come out right. I think I've got one covered, but if Travel and Transportation doesn't come up with their numbers in about an hour, I'm going to have to drive down there and beat them out of them with a baseball bat." She sat back and reviewed the spreadsheets for the dozenth time. It was like building a puzzle that had too many pieces. You had to pick which one you used, and the pickings were getting ugly tonight.

Of course. Dar glanced at the folder containing the Associated files. It would be easier just to claim the entire account as new business in the applicable areas, and de-structure the cost side by disbanding the company. Easier, and it would make the numbers work on top of it, allowing her to go home after almost thirty-six straight hours of working on the project.

She wouldn't need to hide anything else, and T and T's numbers wouldn't matter.

In fact, twice she'd done just that, her fingers hovering over the Submit keys, and then she'd backed off, for reasons she really didn't quite have a handle on. Maybe it was the persistent optimism of Kerry's notes, as the young manager worked and reworked her numbers, getting closer and closer to the goal Dar had set. A goal which was probably irrelevant by now, unless a miracle happened.

She knew she should just call the damn woman, and tell her to give it up...go home, and just reconcile herself to the unpleasant reality of the situation, but every time she punched the Dial button, her eyes fell on the latest of Kerry's plans, and she stopped, and went back to searching her spreadsheets yet again.

The phone buzzed, and she slapped it. "Yeah?"

Duks voice came through the line. "T and T's numbers just processed." He shuffled some papers. "They suck."

Dar closed her eyes as she hit the Refresh on her page, and did not open them until she heard her hard drive stop churning. The bottom line blinked at her, and she felt an overwhelming weariness settle on her shoulders. "We need to fire someone over there," she commented tiredly.

"Mmm," Duks agreed, his voice sounding equally tired. "Too late for this quarter, though. I'll make you a list of my favorite candidates for the Burger King line." The VP Finance, one of Dar's closest allies, was a pragmatist if anyone was.

"Thanks, Ducky," the tall woman replied. "All right. Is Mariana still there?" Mariana Sartis was the VP Personnel, who worked hand in fist with Ducky, and, some said, was sleeping with him. Dar didn't care and thought they made a cute couple, but company rules were company rules.

"She's right here."

"I'm going to have to cut all of Associated loose, Mari," Dar said quietly. "You might as well start setting up the packets. Queue the work lists to me."

"All right, Dar," the lightly accented voice answered. "They never really transitioned, so it's just a matter of W4 notification."

"I know, bastards won't even get two weeks." Dar exhaled. "Let me go finalize this. You'll get an update in a little while."

She hung up the phone and stared at the screen, pulling her alternate plan to the foreground and processing it. The bottom line flickered, then resolved, and she gave it a little nod. "Sorry, kid." She took a deep breath, and picked up the phone, dialing a number and waiting. *Anyone who thinks it's all glamour never had to do this*, she mused, then straightened as the phone was answered, and she heard Kerry's soft voice.

"Associated Synergenics, Kerry Stuart."

"Ms. Stuart." Dar paused to gathered her thoughts.

"Oh, hello." Kerry cleared her throat. "Listen, I know you're getting close to your deadline, but I think I've got it. It took forever but I finally found some slack in the facilities budget."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Stuart. It's just not going to fit in with our plans," Dar said quietly. "It was a good try, and you were on the right track, but it's not going to be possible."

Dead silence stretched out for a moment. "You son of a bitch." Kerry's voice was strangled, with either rage or tears, Dar couldn't tell. "I hope you go straight to hell, because that's exactly where you belong." The phone slammed down, and the line went dead.

Dar quietly replaced her receiver and let her hands fall to her thighs. It certainly wasn't the first time she'd been told that, and probably wouldn't be the last, but after thirty-six hours with no sleep, her emotional defenses were in tatters, and it hurt. It got past her carefully cultivated and hardened attitude, and she let her head rest against the high-backed chair with her eyes closed tight as the silence of the mostly empty building settled over her.

Finally, she got up and opened her top drawer, taking her keys out and throwing her jacket over her shoulders. She had till midnight to close the books. Right now, all she wanted to do was find some empty space, and salt air.

KERRY SLAMMED HER chair back and stood, pacing over to the wall and staring at it. She let her anger build until it was at the breaking point, then she let it loose, slamming her fist against the drywall surface with a crunch. The painful shock raced up her arm, and she pulled her hand back to see a baseball-sized dent in the wall that did little to release her fury.

"Lowdown piece of godforsaken--I can't believe she did that," she fumed, letting her head come to rest against the abused wall. "A whole week of killing myself, for nothing. For *nothing!*" She knew she didn't have to worry about anyone hearing her, as she was alone in the building. She'd sent the rest of the staff home early, hinting that she might have good news for them on Monday. It had been going so well. Her last two drafts had gotten cautious praise from Dar, and she'd allowed herself to hope that she'd actually be able to pull this off. Everyone had left in a good mood, and she'd heard several groups planning get-togethers out in the Grove or at Bayside, which was one of her own favorite spots.

She sat down on the edge of her desk and felt like crying. Then she decided she was just too tired and too mad to do even that. "Might as well get out of here." She picked up her things and left her desk the way it was, covered with draft proposals and stacks of reports, not even looking back as she shut the door.

For a while, she just drove around aimlessly, taking I 95 down past the city center to see the lights come on as dusk dropped over the city. The sun setting in the west sent a wash of tropical orange light across the tall buildings, reflecting off the glass-mirrored surface. The sky was layered with clouds, and each layer took on a different pastel shade--from burnished orange, to pink, to lavender--as they spread across the horizon.

Kerry pulled off to the side near the interchange ramp, ignoring the bustling traffic and opening the top of her Mustang convertible as the warm, damp breeze blew in. The sunset painted its hues as she watched, the dusk in the east causing the lights to emerge while the last rays put stripes across the highway. It smelled like rain, and the breeze cooled, brushing humid tendrils across her arm where it rested on the windowsill. It was beautiful, and now the tears came, and she let them, rolling down her face as a snatch of music blew by, rich with a Caribbean beat.

She sat there until the sky darkened and the orange phosphor lights kicked on, bathing the highway in a surreal light and dimming the stars overhead. Then she reluctantly started her engine and pulled out into traffic, debating a moment, then choosing an exit a few minutes later and turning east.

The lights dimmed as she headed out over Rickenbacker Causeway, crossing Virginia Key and passing the old Dinner Key auditorium. She'd attended a dawn Easter mass here last year, and it held fond memories for her as the rising sun and the fresh spring air had brought new meaning to the holiday.

Kerry traveled across the second long bridge out to Key Biscayne, the first in the long chain of barrier islands which guarded the Florida coastline and extended down to the last one, Key West, which was the southernmost point in the United States. Out here, even the ecology was different, and Kerry had taken a liking to the beachfront Crandon Park, which she now pulled into and got out of her car.

The sand was soft and crunched gently under her shoes as she trudged toward the water, passing a jungle of sea grapes which rustled in the evening air. The ocean made a soft hissing as it ran up onto the shore, the onshore breeze bringing a heavy salt tang to her nose as she found a weathered bench and dropped onto it.

It was so different here. She sighed and took in a deep breath of the thick air. She could see the soft white of the breakers over the sandbar just offshore and the blinking lights of ships coming into the port. A green and red path lined the navigation channel to her north, and right now a cruise ship was making its stately way in, riding across the waves like a well-lit castle. Here there were so many different kinds of people, and attitudes. *You don't like the culture? Wait five minutes*, was a local saying. It was a mixture of Caribbean and South American, native and immigrant, exotic and bedrock Old South. She could, in a drive of an hour, visit a western rodeo, an Indian reservation, Little Havana, Little Haiti, Old Florida, or the glittery vista of Miami Beach.

So different, so much more open and accepting than the closed world she'd grown up in. Her fingers played idly with the rough wood, rubbing large grains of sand between them as the salt air left a perceptibly dry feel on her skin. She stared between her feet, leaning over and picking up a brown and white speckled shell, perfectly shaped, which sat in the palm of her hand, its gently ridged surface rippling under her fingertips.

Maybe she could find another job. If she did it quickly, she could say it was intentional, and by the time her parents figured out what had happened, it would be over with, and she'd be settled into a new position. Who knew? Maybe she'd find something even better than what she had. Robert would give her an excellent recommendation, and Susan had mentioned a recruiter, one she really liked.

But first she had to get through Monday, and she held no illusions that little Ms. Cruella de Bitch would help them out in any way. They'd probably find the goon squad there again in the morning, making sure they didn't steal the pencils on their way out.

Remembering her friends' optimistic voices was a very lonely feeling. She hoped they'd forgive her for raising their hopes and not being able to deliver what she'd promised herself she would. *That final plan would have worked too.* Yes, there were cuts, fifty-one people in fact. But one hundred and seventy two would have been kept, and been productive. She'd made sacrifices everywhere, including training, office furniture, benefits and prospective raises, the new phone switch they'd been planning, and the subsidizing of the snack machines. *It would have been tight, and not as comfortable as it had been, but...*

But.

Kerry threw the shell into the wind, watching as it dropped into the thick, cream-colored sand. *All for nothing.* She walked to the water's edge, letting the lapping tide darken the toes of her shoes and stared out at the uncaring Atlantic until a large, fat raindrop struck her arm. With a sigh, she turned and made her way back to the car, the scent of rain hitting the sun-warmed pavement rising around her as she reached it.

She was all the way across the causeway and had picked up the highway before she glanced down and spotted her gas gauge. A soft curse emerged as the red light winked at her implacably, and she looked around for the nearest exit. "Damn."

Northeast 2nd Street was the closest choice, and she headed down the ramp, turning left as she got to the light and moving down the quiet, back streets on the verge of the city. She had to stop at the next light, and the engine sputtered. She glanced around, then headed through the light as it turned green, but it sputtered again, then died, and she wrestled the car over to the side of the road as she lost power steering.

"Just my day." She sighed and let her head rest against the wheel, listening to the rain drum down on the convertible roof. Outside, dark forms ran to take cover in the overhung doorways of the silent buildings, their occupants gone home for the day. To her right loomed the highway, and she could hear cars rushing by, leaving the city proper to its transient nighttime denizens.

She considered where she was, and realized there were no gas stations within several miles of her. Even those closest would mean a walk through the rain across the tracks, or through downtown, not the best of choices for a young woman alone at night.

Another thought hit her. She'd left the office without her briefcase, which meant she didn't have her wallet, any identification, or her credit and ATM cards. She dug through her change tray and discovered she had exactly three dollars and sixteen cents, sufficient for enough gas to get her back to the office, but not enough for a cab to get to the gas, and her Filofax with numbers for everything, including AAA, was sitting on her desk.

She let out a breath, then dug out her cell phone. A quick try to Colleen's house went unanswered, and the two or three she knew from memory of her work colleagues did the same.

Of course. It was Friday night. They were all out.

She looked at the phone in disgust, then realized a piece of paper was stuck to the clip in the back. She pulled it out and stared at the number written on it, then let it fall to the seat beside her.

She drummed her fingers on the console, then leaned forward and peered through the rain, to where several of the dark figures were standing, seemingly watching her.

Her eyes went to the piece of paper again, and she picked it up. "Well, that bitch owes me a phone call to the auto club, at least," she muttered, then dialed the number. "I'll call her stooge and have him send over a couple of gallons of gas."

It rang four times, and she almost hung up before the ringing stopped, and a crackle indicated an open line.

"Hello." The quiet voice was almost unrecognizable.

Kerry hesitated, startled, and then cleared her throat. *Oh damn. Doesn't it just figure this is her blasted number?* "Hi...um, never mind." Unable to go through with asking for help from a woman she'd just told off an hour and a half ago, she hung up.

The rain drummed harder, and she almost missed the soft sound of her phone ringing. Surprised, she glanced down at it, then pressed the talk key. "Hello?"

"Ms. Stuart?" Dar's voice was more familiar now, and held a cool, questioning tone. "Is there something you wanted?"

Well, Kerry sighed, *at least she's not telling me off.* "This is kind of stupid, and I...well, I didn't know this was your phone, really. I was just looking for someone to make a call for me. I'm...I don't have my phone book with me." It felt very awkward.

Momentary silence from the other end. "So, what's the number?"

Kerry hesitated. "Well, I don't...I don't know, is the problem. I'm kind of stuck, and I need the auto club." She bit the bullet and went on. "Look, I ran out of gas, and I just need them to bring me a few gallons so I can get back to the office."

"Oh." Dar seemed to consider this. "Where are you?" Kerry told her. "That's not a good area," the executive commented.

"I know," Kerry answered. "It's pretty creepy right now." She paused. "Thank you for not hanging up on me."

Another long silence. "Until I process my work list on Monday, you're still an employee of mine. You used my company cell phone. Something happens to you now, and you've got grounds for a pretty big lawsuit."

Kerry was at a loss for words. "Wh-why would you assume I'd do that?"

"You assume the worst of me, I figure I should return the compliment," Dar replied. "Hold on, I'm getting the number." The sound of a second phone was barely audible in the background.

Kerry was too tired to be angry. "All right. Well, thank you for making the call for me," she answered softly. A motion caught her eye, and she glanced out of the windshield, which was fogging a little from her breath. "Um." The group of shadowy forms had switched doorways, and were now just opposite her. "Maybe you better call the police instead."

"Why?" Dar's voice sharpened.

"Oh...my god!" Kerry ducked as the bat hit the glass of the passenger-side window, scattering shards over her body. Hands reached and grabbed her, and the cell phone was torn from her grasp. She twisted, hearing Hispanic curses, and gasped as fingers gripped her upper arm, dragging her toward the shattered window. Her shirt ripped, and she felt rain against the bare skin of her chest, then cruel fingers grabbed her bra strap and yanked it.

A hand entangled itself in her hair and pulled sharply, and she was forced to let go of the steering wheel she'd had a death grip on. Water was now pelting in the open window and she could smell dirt, and alcohol, and old, stale garlic.

The roar of the rain grew louder, and she fought against the hands, her body scraping over broken glass as flashes of lightning suddenly lit up the scene. She heard a crunch, then a scream, and one grip loosened. She twisted hard against the other, and heard an odd cracking noise, then the hands were gone, and she was panting in terror, curling up in a ball in the front seat and covering her head with her arms.

A light hit her closed eyes, and she heard the lock work on her passenger side door. A gust of wind and rain blew in as it opened, and she huddled down further in the seat, biting her lip hard and tasting blood inside her mouth. Then there was a hand on her arm. Gentle, not grasping.

"Hey."

Kerry felt a shock course through her, and she lifted her head, opening her eyes to see pale blue ones gazing back at her, outlined in the light of a powerful hand lamp. "Oh. It's you."

Dar blinked, and removed her hand. "Yes, it is."

"Where..." Kerry glanced around fearfully, searching for her attackers. "Where did they..."

"They're gone," Dar replied quietly. "Maybe they didn't like getting wet."

Kerry let out a shuddering breath. "Oh my god." She slowly uncurled and picked up a piece of the shattered glass, then let it drop. "Perfect end to a perfect day," she murmured softly, exhausted. "But thank you...for coming along and scaring them off."

Dar flexed a hand out of Kerry's line of sight, wincing at the soreness. "No problem." She glanced up at the weather, then at the slumped form across from her. There was glass everywhere, and she could see a lot of scraped skin where Kerry's shirt was ripped open. "You all right?"

Kerry looked up from her shaking hands and their eyes met briefly. "Yeah," she murmured. "That was just an amazingly sucky thing to have happened."

Dar's lips pressed thinly together. "All right, come on over and get in my car. I'll call the cops." She waited for Kerry to open her mouth to protest, and put a hand up when she did. "Look, I'll just wait for them to get here, then I'll be out of your sight. I know I'm not your favorite person right now."

"Don't." Kerry put a hand on her arm. "Please don't call the police." She raked shaking fingers through her damp hair. "I have a friend who can fix this. I don't want reports and all that."

Dar studied the pale fingers curled around her wrist, then lifted her eyes to Kerry's face in mild puzzlement. "All right." She gazed at the smaller woman. "You need to get those cuts taken care of, though."

Kerry gazed down at her arms tiredly. "I'll take care of them." She self-consciously tugged the shreds of her shirt around her, and looked up at Dar. "I guess I just need those couple of gallons of gas."

The tall, dark-haired woman stared pensively at her for a moment, then gave her head a little negative shake. "No. I have a better plan," she announced. "I'll get your car towed wherever you want it, and I'll drive you home."

"I can't ask you to do that," the blonde replied softly. "But thank you for offering."

"You're not asking, and I'm not offering," Dar answered. "You need it done, and I'm insisting." She pulled a cell phone from her back pocket and flipped it on, dialing a number from memory.

"John?" she queried, when a voice answered. "It's Dar. I need a pickup and tow." After a long pause, she said, "No, not me this time. Northeast 2nd and Flagler. A forest green Mustang ragtop." She listened to the query from the other end of the line. "Hang on." She glanced at Kerry. "Where do you want it?"

Kerry debated, then surrendered and gave her address, which Dar repeated into the phone carefully. "Tarp the passenger-side window, it's cracked," she added, then hung up. "Okay, let's go."

"You're not going to take no for an answer, are you?" Kerry said with a sigh.

"I usually don't, so no," Dar told her crisply. "Come on." She eased out of the passenger side and waited for Kerry to gingerly emerge from the driver's side door into a thick blanket of warm rain. Kerry shielded her eyes from the downpour, wincing as she put weight on her left leg. "Ow." She grabbed hold of the doorjamb and gingerly flexed her leg. "Damn."

Dar circled the car. "What?" She reached out, then let her hands drop in some confusion.

"Banged my kneecap on the steering wheel." Kerry grimaced. "Must have twisted something."

She cautiously put weight on the leg again, then threw her arms out in reflex as it threatened to collapse under her. "Son of a--"

Dar grabbed her, holding her steady until she caught her balance again. "Watch it."

"Yeah. Sorry," Kerry muttered in an embarrassed tone. "I'm fine."

Dar sighed and walked her over to the Lexus, which was parked haphazardly facing the Mustang, its lights illuminating the scene. She opened the door and guided Kerry inside, then shut it carefully behind her and walked around to the other side. As she got in, she glanced over at her unwilling passenger. Kerry was huddled against the door, her arms wrapped around her, a shell-shocked look on her pale face. She plucked aimlessly at the torn pieces of her shirt with faintly shaking fingers.

"Here." Dar reached behind her and pulled out a dark blue sweatshirt, which she handed to the younger woman. "Put that on. The air gets a little chilly in here."

Kerry stared at the shirt. "No, it's okay." She moved back a little. "I'm fine."

"Look, pretend you don't hate my guts for about another forty-five minutes, and this'll be over, all right?" Dar snapped, her temper frayed at the edges. "Just put the damn thing on."

Pale green eyes gazed back at her. "I don't."

"What?" Now that the adrenaline had drained out of her, Dar was wishing for a few sweatshirts herself, along with a mug of hot milk and a couple of other creature comforts she hadn't had in a long time.

"Hate you." Kerry reached out and took the clothing from her. "I'm sorry. I'm just a little out of my mind right now." She turned the shirt right way around and pulled it over her head. "Thanks." She looked down at the shirt. It had the word Navy embroidered across it in gold, and was lightly scented with Dar's perfume.

It was strangely comforting. She wrapped her arms around herself, exhaling as the dry cotton warmed her skin, and closed her eyes, wishing it all was just a nightmare she'd eventually wake up from.

Maybe she was in shock. Certainly, her thoughts were going every which way, as the shaking slowly subsided and she tried to reconcile herself to what had just happened. *Jesus, they could have...* Her mind swerved away from the thought, and she glanced over at the car's other occupant, outlined in the luridly orange light of the streetlamp, deep in thought herself.

The profile was strong, and yet there was a surprising vulnerability to it that vanished as Dar felt the attention and straightened up. Kerry reached out instinctively and put a hand on Dar's wrist, waiting for those pale eyes to focus on her. "Thanks," she said again. "Even if you rescued me for legal reasons, I appreciate it."

Dar studied her briefly, her expression unfathomable. Then she blinked, and her gaze shifted a little. "That was really my personal cell phone," she remarked. "But you're welcome."

Kerry stared at her in puzzlement, and after a brief moment, they both sort of half shrugged. Dar started the car in silence and pulled away from the curb.

STILL IN A DAZE, Kerry slowly walked into her office. As they pulled onto the highway, she'd remembered that all her things were still there, so Dar had nodded and driven her there without comment.

Now, Dar entered behind her, and Kerry noticed for the first time that she certainly wasn't in one of her power suits. Water-stained jeans and hightop sneakers, along with a hooded sweatshirt minus its sleeves, painted a very different picture than the one her mind remembered from their previous encounter.

She looks a lot younger, for one thing. Kerry suddenly realized the executive wasn't much older than she was. Her tanned skin seemed to absorb the light, and the pitiless fluorescents revealed nicely toned muscles in her arms and shoulders which rippled softly as she moved around the office.

Dar's eyes stopped as she reached the desk, and she studied the piles of paperwork strewn forlornly across it. A look of regret crossed her face, and she lifted her gaze to meet Kerry's. "I know you did a lot of work on this."

Kerry perched on the edge of her desk, and thumbed through a printout. "I almost wish I hadn't. I felt like I was coming so close..." She let the papers fall and looked up. "Why did you let me do that?"

"You were close." Dar sat down on the chair next to Kerry's and let her forearms rest on her thighs. "It's complicated," she replied quietly. "A lot of things just wouldn't fall into place, and I needed numbers." She shifted. "It was the last thing I threw out." She reached over and nudged the report. "One last set of reports came in, and I just couldn't do it."

Kerry circled her desk and sat in her chair, pushing the overlong sleeves back on the sweatshirt. "So, we just become numbers," she commented softly. "I don't think I understand that very well." A shrug. "It's what we all are."

"Mmm," Kerry murmured. "Even you?"

Dar nodded wearily. "If it's any consolation, I'm very sorry."

Kerry looked at her pensively. Dar had changed in her eyes. She no longer appeared to be the icy cold, practical executive. This was a person. One who under other circumstances she might have liked. "Me too," she replied. "I'll probably end up going home to Michigan. I'll miss a lot of things here."

Dar looked up. "There are other jobs out there. We might even have something you might..."

Kerry shook her head. "No." She took in Dar's puzzled expression. "It's complicated." She played with a pencil on her desk, turning it over and over. "You know, it's really too bad, Ms. Roberts, because in another place...another time, I think you and I might have been friends." She glanced up regretfully, and was captured in blue eyes that unexpectedly swallowed her whole.

But it only lasted an instant, and then Dar was sighing and standing up. "Maybe." She ran a hand through her dark hair. "But right now, we should get you home," the executive stated. "I have to run back by my office and finalize things."

Kerry played with her pencil, biting on the eraser for a moment before looking up. "Can I come look at your numbers?" Her eyes fastened on Dar's face, knowing she'd caught Dar by surprise. "I'm sorry." She managed a half grin. "I don't give up easily."

Dar inhaled sharply at the sudden and unexpected challenge. She was exhausted, they were both drenched, Kerry was injured. It was late. It was insanity to even consider, insanity even for Kerry

to have asked, or more like, presumed. She found those intense green eyes watching her intently and saw those lips twitch into a friendlier shape and... *What the hell.*

"Sure." Dar wasn't sure that voice was even hers. *What the hell am I doing?* Then she thought about it. *Well, what could it hurt? The kid's sharp, and maybe a fresh set of eyes...* "I've got some first aid stuff there for those cuts."

The hint of a smile turned into a full one, if only for a brief moment, and it transformed Kerry's face. "You wouldn't happen to have some coffee there too, would you?"

Dar relaxed a little. "We do." She indicated the door. "I think it may even stop raining." She paused, as thunder rolled overhead. "Okay, maybe not."

Kerry flipped off the lights as they left, and she limped after Dar with her briefcase slung over her shoulder. "How much wetter and more miserable can I possibly get?"

Dar almost chuckled as she shook her head. "Guess we'll find out."

Chapter Six

KERRY SETTLED BACK into the leather seat, refusing to think about what she was doing. That left her mind free to watch the rain lash against the windshield during the drive cross-town, as she listened to the soft music Dar had chosen. Her cuts hurt, but they weren't that bad, and her knee seemed only to be twisted. It wasn't giving her much trouble while she was sitting, though she suspected she'd be limping for a few days. Things could definitely have been a lot worse.

Dar shifted her grip on the wheel, glancing right as she changed lanes, and Kerry noticed an ugly bruise that covered her knuckles. One was even scraped, and a stain of dried blood was visible in the low light from the dashboard. "What happened to your hand?"

Dar glanced down, then returned her eyes to the road. "I banged it into something," she answered absently.

Kerry looked down at her own hand, bruised from her earlier impact with the wall and raised an eyebrow at the similar markings. *Hmm.* She pondered that a moment, then shifted her attention to the weather again. Waves of rain were rippling across the street, moving in and out of the lights and reminding her vaguely of snowstorms back home.

She was running on pure adrenaline, though, and she knew it, and she hoped she was home in her own bed when everything came crashing down on top of her. Because she'd been working on the report, she'd only slept a few hours the previous night, and the long hours were beginning to wear on her. Another look at Dar's profile made her wonder if Dar wasn't having the same problem. There were shadows under her eyes that the dim light revealed, and she was blinking a lot, which was something Kerry did when she was very tired. "Guess you've been working pretty hard on this thing too, huh?"

Blue eyes flicked to her face. "It's been a long week, yes." Dar guided the Lexus into the parking lot of the corporate headquarters and parked under the entrance overhang, ignoring the No Parking signs. She got out and waved at the security guard as he emerged. "Just me, Jack." The man waved back and tucked himself back into his guard station, out of the rain. Dar waited for Kerry to join her, then led the way into the building, swiping her security card at the entrance in a smooth, graceful motion.

Kerry tipped her head back as they entered the lobby, looking up through the atrium which rose the entire length of the building. "Whoa." She hugged the sweatshirt to her, glad of its warmth as the cold air flowed around them. "This is, um..." She tried to find a politically correct term. "Um, it's..."

"Pretentious," Dar commented wryly, as she keyed the elevator. "It's supposed to be." She held the door for her smaller companion, then let it close and punched the fourteenth floor, slipping her keycard in when the elevator beeped a complaint. "Lesser mortals are supposed to stand in awe in the lobby."

Kerry leaned against the wall and stifled a yawn. "Be careful, Ms. Roberts," she warned. "If you keep that up, I might get the idea you have a sense of humor."

Dar looked at her, then, slowly, the faintest hint of a grin twitched her lips. "Sorry, they make you leave that as a deposit when you get issued your keycard." She held up the item, then gestured for Kerry to precede her out of the elevator as it reached its destination.

Dar's office was dimly lit by her twenty-one-inch monitor, and the small desk lamp she usually worked by at night. Her screensaver was on, jungle animals prowling across the dark surface accompanied by soft sounds. As they approached the desk, a macaw cried softly, and Dar reached over and gave her trackball a spin, bringing up the worksheet she'd been looking at before she'd left earlier. "Take a look," she offered. "I'll get some Band-Aids. You mentioned coffee?"

Kerry perched on the edge of Dar's very comfortable leather desk chair and looked around. "So, this is how the other half lives, huh?" she murmured, then turned her attention to the executive. "Um...where are you going to get coffee at this hour?"

Dar looked at her. "The kitchen. Yes or no?"

A blonde brow lifted. "You have a kitchen in here? Let me guess, it comes with a microprocessor that cooks things for you, right?" She saw Dar's lips twitch again and smiled herself. "Okay, okay. Sure. I'd love some coffee."

"Cream and sugar?"

Kerry sighed. "If I'm being good, I should say no and no, but I hate the taste of coffee, so yes and yes."

Dar snorted softly and disappeared.

The blonde turned her attention to the monitor, but not before she looked around, taking in the huge office with wondering eyes. The desk was smooth wood, its surface covered with reports as her own had been. The carpet was a thick burgundy, and there was a long, low-slung couch to the right. The entire back wall was glass, and looked out over the bay to the ocean, right now showing the brilliant flashes of lightning and the thick swaths of rain that lashed against the clear surface.

It smelled of wood polish and wool from the carpet, with a faint hint of the perfume she'd noticed that Dar wore. That the shirt wrapped around her body also bore. She decided she liked it.

Dar came back a moment later, bearing two steaming cups and a small kit tucked under her arm. She put one of the cups down in front of Kerry and perched on the edge of her desk, tucking one leg up under her and leaning forward to point at the monitor. "That's the problem right there." She traced a column. "Watch what happens when I plug in your scenario." She did so, and the numbers changed. "I can't have..." a fingertip pointed at the last field, "...that."

Kerry took a sip of the coffee, then peered at it. "What is this?" She licked her lips. "Mmm."

"Café con leche," Dar answered absently. "Cuban coffee with milk and sugar."

"Hell." Kerry laughed. "If they'd served it to me like this, I'd have drunk it more often."

They spent an hour going over the various approaches, and Kerry got a much better understanding of what it was Dar was trying to do. "Oh, god, you have to show this all as an expense?" She pointed at her section. "But you can't show any of this as a profit, because it's past date?"

"Right." Dar sighed, biting on the edge of her cup.

Kerry sat back, stunned. "But that's not fair!" she protested.

Dar closed her eyes momentarily and rubbed them. "I know," she agreed wearily. "But it's the law."

"What happens if you don't make that number?" Kerry pointed at the last field.

Dar peered at the screen, blinking. "Well, we don't show consistent growth, and the stockholders go ballistic. That means we have to show austerity measures, and that...usually means a minimum level layoff."

Kerry thought about that. "How many people is that?"

"Between five to seven thousand," the executive replied quietly.

Green eyes lifted to hers. "Just like that?" Dar nodded. Kerry absorbed that. "So I guess my piddly little two hundred and thirty people are kind of a minor thing," she commented softly, as she looked up at Dar. "Nothing personal, right?"

Dar's lips tensed, and she looked down. "Usually, yes," she admitted. "You don't like to waste resources, but," one bare shoulder lifted in a shrug, "sometimes you just have to do what you have to do."

Kerry studied the screen, flipping through the twelve different scenarios Dar had been working with. All save one included her solution. She let her hand rest on Dar's knee, searching her face intently. "I didn't understand," she stated quietly. "And I still don't, not really, but thanks for trying."

Dar glanced at her watch. "Eleven thirty. I've got to update this before midnight." She stared at the screen. "Damn, I just wish I could..." She traced a column with one finger. "Some way to put a plus there."

"Mmmm." Kerry examined the fields. "Like you can with that Miami group--because they take on outside stuff, so you can offset their expenses."

Dar froze, only her pale blue eyes darting across the wide screen. "*Mierda*," she whispered. "Can your people do internet support? TCP/IP?"

"Uh...um, what? Yeah, of course." Kerry stared at her. "The entire support group runs on an intranet. We've got three resident webmasters. But what..." She yelped, and hurriedly got out of the way as Dar dove into her seat, her fingers racing across the keyboard in a rattle of keys.

"Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch..." the executive cursed softly. "Where are you... Ah!" She requested a screen and scanned its contents. "Gotcha." One hand reached over and punched a series of numbers into the phone pad. It rang three times, then a voice answered. "Hello, Peter." Frozen silence preceded, "What the hell do you want?"

"I'm taking those two extra contracts," Dar informed him. "Don't bother protesting. Goodnight."

She hung up and hummed under her breath as she recoded the projects, giving them a new classification. A few clicks, then she drummed her fingers, waiting for the mainframe to redraw the columns. "Ahhh..." One hand snaked out, cutting a range out and clicking over to her spreadsheet, then pasting. She recalced the document, then sat back and smiled in triumph.

Kerry just watched her, confused.

Dar pointed at the last field. "I got my number."

The blonde woman studied the sheet. "But that's got our stuff in it."

"Uh hum," Dar agreed. "It sure does."

"How did you do that?" Kerry asked, entranced by the smile that now transformed the executive's face, the smile which now grew broader.

"I made fifty percent of your staff a profit center and awarded them two major government support contracts." Dar folded her arms over her chest in visible satisfaction.

"Really?" Kerry blinked in surprise. "Can you do that?"

A dark brow edged up. "I just did it." Dar grinned, then she sobered. "You'll still have to make those cuts." She made several rapid-fire keystrokes, then hit the Transmit key. "It's done."

Kerry blinked. "But everyone else gets to stay?"

Dar nodded. "I got your list of people to transition. I think it's here..."

"I'm not on it." Kerry said very quietly.

Dar froze, then stared at her. "What?"

Kerry exhaled. "One of me...was worth two of them. I couldn't take two slots." She looked up at Dar.

"One of you is worth a lot more than two of them," Dar blurted indignantly, then almost knocked the phone off the desk when it rang. She punched the button in irritation. "Yeah?"

Kerry slowly sat down on the edge of the desk, watching Dar's profile with an unfathomable expression.

"Just got the update, Dar. Spectacular." Alastair's cheerful voice grated on her like beach sand.

"Great job. What do I owe you for this one? You going to finally take me up on using the chalet and taking a damn vacation for once?"

Dar stared at the phone in frustrated silence. "What do you owe me?" she finally asked. "I'll tell you what, I want fifty-one six-and-sixes, and a head." Alastair was stunned. She could hear him coughing a little.

"Wh..."

"You heard me," the tall woman stated. "Come on, Alastair. That double digit's going to add twenty percent value to the stock. You can afford it."

"Well, sure, Dar. I'll put in the six-and-sixes...but what do you need a head for?" Alastair finally replied, collecting himself. "Whose orgid?"

"Mine," Dar replied quietly. "I've been forty-eight hours without sleep on this one, Alastair. I can't keep doing this. It's killing me. I need an assistant."

The man's attitude changed immediately. "Well, why didn't you just say so, you old pirate? I've been trying to get you to take on an assistant for years now." The sound of a keyboard being accessed came through clearly. "For more than a day, that is. You had me worried there for a minute. Hang on...hang on. What are you, a 54010?"

"Uh huh." Dar replied, playing with pen. "Thanks." "Done." Alastair chuckled. "On your work list, baby. Now I'm gonna go have a glass of champagne. You should too." Dar closed her eyes wearily. "Sure, Alastair." She sighed. "Night." Silence settled over the office. Dar kept her eyes closed.

"Forty-eight hours?" Kerry finally said in disbelief. The dark-haired woman nodded. "That's insane. That isn't a job, that's involuntary servitude," Kerry spluttered. Dar nodded again. "You must have the world's best job security, you know that? Nobody in their right mind would want your job."

A third nod. "Very true." Dar opened her eyes and gazed at Kerry regretfully. "You ready to go home, Ms. Stuart?" she asked quietly. "We can negotiate your headcount on Monday. I'm sure I can squeeze you back in there." She paused. "If you want to stay, that is."

Kerry was perched on the edge of the desk, deep in thought. "I don't know," she replied honestly. "I have to think about it."

"I understand," Dar said, as she pushed herself to her feet.

"Ms. Roberts?"

"Mmm?"

"What is a six-and-six?" Kerry asked curiously.

"Oh." Dar stretched a kink out of her neck. "Severance packages for your people." She sighed.

"Six months' salary and six months' extension on your health benefits." Her eyes searched Kerry's shocked face. "Should make Monday a little easier for you." She stepped around the desk and started out the door. "Come on, let's get out of here."

Kerry was in a daze as she followed Dar out. Six months' salary? If she decided not to stay, it would give her half a year to find something...and six months' health benefits would cover her until she did. Her parents would never have to know, until she was all settled in a new place. Her eyes studied the cloth-covered back of the woman walking before her. She wondered how she had gone from how she'd felt about Dar Roberts before the sunset, to how she felt now. It felt like the night had lasted half a lifetime, to allow her to experience so much in such a short span. She'd gone from despair, to anger, to terror; from a frustrated hatred to a grudging admiration, all in one evening.

Did she want to remain in charge of Associated Synergenics? She'd been doing it for two years, and was just starting to get comfortable. The routine was becoming regular, almost...boring. She suspected life would never be boring around Dar Roberts. And suddenly, she knew that's exactly where she wanted to be. She didn't even stop to wonder why.

"So," she trotted after the tall executive, catching up to her as they reached the door, "what exactly are these other contracts?"

"Oh." Dar pushed the door open. "You'll be supporting the IRS."

Kerry stopped dead. "You're joking."

Pale blue eyes regarded her. "Can't be. I don't have a sense of humor, remember?" Dar replied, deadpan. "Goodnight, Jack." She waved at the security guard. She held the door to the Lexus open. "Ms. Stuart?"

The blonde woman stepped next to her and peered up. "Could you please call me Kerry?" she asked with a wry smile. "You sound like the librarian at my college when you call me by my last name."

Dar's expression softened momentarily, and a quick smile transformed her face. "I thought only your friends called you that," she demurred.

Kerry rubbed her jaw. "Well, friends and people who save my life--you know." She felt herself blushing a little. "I have to make an exception for that sort of thing."

"All right," the executive agreed softly. "But only if you call me Dar."

Kerry smiled. "Deal." She shook her head a little. "You know, you're not really as awful as I thought you were."

"Oh really?" Dar found herself too tired to be aggravated by the words. "I'm losing my touch then. Maybe I should go find some puppies to kick."

"It's a little late for that, isn't it?"

Dar had a feeling it was far too late for a lot of things. "Probably." She indicated the car. "Let's get out of here while we've got a break in the weather."

"Sounds like a good idea to me." Kerry climbed up into the comfort of the leather seat, and waited for Dar to join her on the driver's side. "So," she folded her hands in her lap, "what does your assistant do?"

As she shifted and started to pull out into the rain, Dar shot her a quick look. "I don't know. I never had one before that lasted more than a week." She paused. "It'll probably be a tough, unpleasant, thankless, wild ride."

Kerry sniffed reflectively, then buckled the safety belt securely around herself and settled back, folding her arms over her chest and glancing sideways. She found Dar looking back at her. They drove on into the night.

Chapter Seven

THE ALARM WAS buzzing, an annoying sound in any event, and more so because it was a Saturday morning and she'd forgotten to turn it off. In the dim light, one blue eye appeared, glared at the device, then a hand shot out from the covers and clobbered the clock, sending it flying from the bedside table and unplugging it.

"Yeow." Dar cursed and grabbed her hand, rolling up onto her other elbow and wincing as she examined her knuckles. The entire back of her hand was swollen and discolored, and she dropped back down onto the pillows as she recalled how it got that way. "Forgot about that," she mumbled, closing her eyes again.

She'd forgotten how hard the human skull was, and how much it hurt if a fist without any protection hit it head on. *Not*, she reflected, *that I would have chosen any differently even if I had remembered*. She didn't regret the damage she'd done to that one of Kerry's attackers, or the rest of them, for that matter. She'd used kicks for the rest, though. Infinitely easier on the body. But for now she could barely close her fist, and she knew it was going to be a couple of days before that improved. "Hey, look, Dad," she whispered to the ceiling, holding her hand up. "I'm a half-assed hero again. Imagine that."

It was damn lucky for Kerry that she'd been so close. She'd driven out to Haulover Park to the north and spent a half hour just roaming aimlessly up and down the boardwalk, watching the young kids in their puppy loves go past. She'd actually been getting off on the 2nd street exit when Kerry had called, intent on stopping at Bayside for some ice cream before she headed back to the office to finish up. Instead of ice cream she'd gotten trouble, a sore hand, a last-minute financial brainstorm, and... Her mind conjured up a picture of Kerry's slim form, swaddled in a too-large sweatshirt, standing at her car window as she dropped the younger woman off. She'd put a hand on Dar's arm, and squeezed it.

"I'll bring the shirt back to you on Monday, thanks for letting me borrow it."

Dar had waved her off, a little embarrassed. "Keep it. I've got dozens and dozens of them...believe me." She'd glanced around, seeing the Mustang parked nearby, its window neatly taped. "You going to be all right with that?"

The green eyes had followed hers, and Kerry had sighed. "Yeah, one of the guys here works in an auto body shop. He's a pretty good friend of mine." Then she'd looked up and taken a breath.

"Thanks for coming to my rescue, and I'm glad the whole thing worked out okay."

Dar had smiled. "Me too." She'd patted Kerry's arm. "Get some rest, I'll talk to you on Monday." And that had been that. She'd driven away, checking her rear view mirror a few times just to make sure Kerry had gotten inside okay, and put herself on auto-pilot for the long, rainy drive home.

Now she listened, and heard the patter of rain outside still, and tucked her arm under her pillow with a satisfied grunt. *No running today*. Today was just time to snuggle into the warmth of the waterbed, pull the covers up, and catch up on some much-needed sleep. She was just drifting off again when the phone rang again.

Dar sighed. "No one's home." It continued ringing, and she finally reached over, and hit the speakerphone button. "Yeah?"

"Good morning, Dar." The voice sounded complacently pleased.

"What do you want at six AM Ducky?" Dar muttered. "I sent the updates last night."

"Oh, I know." The smile was audible. "I just wanted to compliment you on some really brilliant financial footwork there."

"At six AM?" Dar sighed. "You could have sent me an e-mail."

"Actually, that's why I'm calling. The word's out you've asked for an assistant for yourself." Duks said. "Mariana has gotten four inquiries already. When you do, um, wake up, would you please send her over exactly what you're looking for before the poor lady gets swamped?"

Dar let her eyes open sleepily. "Duks, it's only been posted for six goddamn hours," she protested. "I didn't think I was that popular."

The VP chuckled wryly. "I hate to break this to you, my friend, but you're not. Everyone's convinced this means you're vacating that corner office, and they want a shot at it." He cleared his throat. "Especially since the posting came from Alastair's personal logon."

"That's *not* what it means, for crying..." Dar groaned. "Jesus, Duks, I just asked for a little help, that's all. I wanted an assistant, not a replacement."

A small silence. "You don't do that often," Duks replied slowly. "You have anyone in particular in mind, Dar?"

Now it was Dar's turn to be silent. "I don't know," she finally said. "Maybe."

"Mmm." The accountant acknowledged the unspoken information. "Be careful, Dar, that could be a dangerous position for you. Pick someone who's not going to immediately stab you in the back." He cleared his throat. "It doesn't pay to let people get on the inside, you know?"

Dar gazed at the dresser, shadowy in the pre-dawn gloom. "I know," she replied softly. "Thanks for the warning, Ducky." There was a click as he hung up. She rolled over and regarded the ceiling soberly. *Complications already.* She'd used her momentary leverage to get the position approved, not really thinking about the consequences, or how it would look.

She hadn't really even considered it. No, that was a lie. She'd been thinking exactly of Kerry when she'd asked for it, and it had seemed like such an ingenious solution at the time. The woman had talent and potential, she was sharp--she'd be a good addition to the team.

But what about Kerry? She's been hurt by the entire situation with her company. Do I want to expose her to the many times more vicious environment inside the upper levels of the corporation? Is that fair to the kid? Was she even really interested? She seemed like she was last night, but...that could have been overtiredness, and a reaction to the day.

The morning surely would bring a more sensible attitude, and Dar quietly hoped the young woman would at least reconsider, and remain with the Associated account. She didn't like to see talent leave the company. *Right?* Dar pulled the covers up over her head and sighed. *Oh Dar, lie to everyone but yourself, remember? You like the little imp.*

There was something about Kerry she found very appealing. Maybe some of the friendly innocence she could remember in herself, a very long time ago.

No. She'd never been that innocent. Dar closed her eyes, picturing Kerry's face.

Now look. Is that what you want for her, too? Leave her where she is, or let her go and find something else--a small place where she doesn't have to be exposed to the way you have to do business. Last thing she needs is to move into a nest of vipers. Inhabited by the queen asp.

Dar swallowed the slight lump in her throat, as the blue walls faded to a somber gray in tune with her mood. It was a quiet depression that she'd been experiencing more and more often lately,

making her question what the point was in doing what she did, in going the places she went. A feeling of hopelessness that made her want to just curl up in a ball here in the dark and never leave.

Her solution so far was to throw herself into yet more work, which usually distracted her enough to make the feeling go away.

With a sigh, she pulled the covers back and slid out of bed, trudging across to the bathroom and flipping on the light. She used the facilities, then splashed a few handfuls of water over her face, stopping to regard her reflection wearily. Bloodshot blue eyes looked back at her, accented by dark shadows which added years to her age.

Hell with it. Might as well get some work done.

She turned and flipped off the light, moving out into the living room to where her briefcase rested on the coffee table. She unzipped it and pulled her laptop out, plugging in the custom cord built specifically for that purpose, and booting it up. Then she went into the kitchen and looked at the coffee machine, bypassing it and going to the refrigerator instead.

She poured a glass of milk from the dispenser, then added three squirts of chocolate syrup and mixed it. She sipped at the beverage as she seated herself on the long, leather couch and punched the buttons that would start a connection to the office.

A flick of the control turned on the large screen TV while she was waiting, and she surfed through the cable channels, bypassing CNN and MSNBC and settling on the Cartoon Network, which was showing *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*.

"Better commentary than Dan Rather," she muttered, as she glanced down, watching her e-mail download. She leaned back against the cushions, then decided to lie down full length and balance the laptop on her stomach. She let her eyes scan down the listings, and her eyes brightened a little when she saw Kerry's name listed.

"Probably wants to say no thanks," Dar murmured after a moment's reflection. "After she slept on it." For a moment, her mouse hovered over the entry, then finally she clicked on the mail, feeling an odd dryness in her mouth as she waited for the contents to appear in her preview pane.

Sent by: Kerry Stuart Subject: Assistant's Job Time: 1:01 AM

Hi.

I know you're thinking "what is this crazy woman doing, sending mail at one AM after a day like today?" Well, I didn't start out to do that. I took a shower, and got changed, and fluffed up my pillows, and answered the two frantic messages on my machine because people saw my car towed back here, and then I was laying there figuring this sleep thing wasn't going to be a problem.

But I kind of got to thinking, that there was something I hadn't done, and it kept bugging me and bugging me until I just gave up and figured out what it was.

It was deciding what I wanted to do, as in, with my life at this point, and I know you're probably sitting there reading this thinking I've flipped my lid, but...I haven't.

I decided if you were serious about that assistant job of yours, then I was going to apply for it. I know there are probably ten thousand other people more qualified, but I have this crazy idea that maybe I can find better ways for people to do things, so that it's not so brutal, and it doesn't hurt people inside just to do business.

That's pretty naïve sounding. I sound like some Midwestern rube just out of certification school, don't I? Yikes.

So anyway, what I did was logon, and I found that posting of yours, and I submitted a formal request for consideration. I also attached my résumé, like it said. Though figuring out where to

click in that CAS application is a real pain in the neck, you know? I feel better now, and I think I'll be able to sleep.

I know I don't have much of a chance at it. It's so weird to think that I was cursing your name before dinner time, and hoping I get to work for you at midnight.

If you can squeeze me back into my old job, though, that would be fantastic. Monday is going to be really crazy, and there's one thing I forgot to thank you for--and that was the severance packages. It changes firing someone from a hateful sentence, to what I can present as a good chance for change, so that these people can find something else, without having the pressure of bills hanging over their heads. You don't know now much that means, especially since four of the people have school age children who were covered under the insurance.

Thank you, Dar. I really mean that. Have a great weekend. Kerry

Dar felt a grin coming on, and she let it, as she read the mail twice over. Then she very deliberately logged into her CAS session and reviewed her work list. An eyebrow went up when she saw the thirty or so responses, and she scanned the names. All qualified, pretty much. Most junior, but a few senior account managers, with lots of experience in what she did. Several candidates, in fact, were already assistants to other VPs. Good, solid employees, with stable backgrounds and excellent references.

She clicked on Kerry's submission and reviewed it. Absolutely no experience in any facet of what she did. Absolutely no experience in multiple markets, no experience overseas, no experience in corporate takeovers. She had absolutely nothing in her favor, in fact, except for guts, and brains, and a beautiful smile.

A reckless, piratical gleam entered Dar's blue eyes. It was so easy. Two clicks and an F3 submit key. "Oh look." Dar did it before she could stop and think better of anything. "I just hired an assistant." She took a deep breath. "Isn't technology wonderful?"

She almost felt lightheaded. Making decisions was second nature to her, but she knew this one was different. Mariana was going to kill her. Company regulations stipulated that she had to interview and evaluate each candidate, and produce written documentation to back up her choice. *Hell with it.* She clicked over to mail.

Sent by: Dar Roberts Subject: New Assistant

Mari--

Just hired Kerry Stuart from the Associated Synergenics account as my assistant. Please process her paperwork. I figured it would be easier on you since she's technically an outside candidate--you can hire and transition her all at once.

Bring her in as a 10, standard package, the works. I'll send her over to fill out forms some time next week.

I know everyone will bitch. Just tell them manager's discretion, and they can see me personally if they have a problem. Dar

A loophole. Dar loved loopholes. Bringing in Kerry as an outside posting would circumvent most of the hysteria, and she could just ignore the rest. Mariana was used to that anyway, manager's discretion was a watchword in the company. A lot of the rules were left deliberately vague, and you had to take responsibility for what you decided.

Dar always had. Even when the decisions had turned out wrong, she still refused to hide behind anyone, and took the brunt of the blame on her own shoulders. It was the one thing that kept everyone at bay, even those people who hated her...and there were a lot of those. She'd made a lot of enemies and few friends in her years at the company, but it was the one thing that everyone respected her for. When Dar Roberts made a decision, she stood behind it, one hundred percent.

With a grin, she rubbed her hands together, then took a long drink of her chocolate milk before she started typing.

Sent by: Dar Roberts Subject: re: Assistant's Job

Kerry, Got your note.

Attached to this e-mail you'll find corporate policies and procedures, including the dress code.

You might want to take a look at that. Jeans are not allowed during normal business hours.

I estimate it should take about a week to get the paperwork completed, and that will give you a chance to settle your current assignment. Call me if you have any questions.

Dar

With a sense of inevitability, she hit Send. She still had some doubts, still had some questions as to whether she was doing the right thing for Kerry, but it was done. Time would tell if this was a good decision, or one of the ones she lived to regret.

With a sigh, she wriggled into a more comfortable position and allowed her attention to be distracted by Space Ghost strangling something with tentacles on the screen. "I love a good violent cartoon," she commented to the empty condo.

The words echoed off the walls, and she turned the sound up a little, a faint grin twitching at her lips as her thoughts drifted, the fingers of her right hand flexing slowly against the couch's soft leather.

"SO, WHAT HAPPENED?" the tall, dark-skinned man asked, his eyes on the broken window.

"Um, a rock," Kerry muttered. "Must have...fallen off the highway overpass, or something."

Brown eyes gave her a disbelieving stare. "C'mon, honey, you got to give me something better than that." Jerry wagged a finger at her. "You have a new boyfriend, maybe? You get in a, how you call, a fight?"

Kerry laughed softly. "Uh, no. No, no new boyfriend. I..." She glanced around. "Jerry, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some guys just decided to take a crack at the car. I got away." She made a face. "I don't want to make a big deal about it. I didn't see them, so..."

"Ah hah." Jerry wagged his fingers at her. "I got you. No problem." He studied the car. "Sixty dollars."

"Great." Kerry smiled and handed over the keys. "You're a lifesaver."

"Cherry, I hope." The man laughed. "My favorite flavor." He patted her on the shoulder. "Hey, did you get cut?" He lifted her hand and studied it. "Looks like you hit something."

"Um..." Kerry ran her fingers through her hair. "An accident."

Jerry looked at her, serious now. He tipped her chin up so she had to look him in the eye.

"Girlfriend, are you in trouble?"

"No." She shook her head positively. "I almost was, last night...but someone showed up, and chased the guys off, and I was fine, really. They even gave me a ride back here."

"Mmm-hmm...was he nice? Was he a gentleman?" Jerry inquired.

Kerry bit off a grin. "He was a she." Her eyes twinkled a little. "And she...was wonderful."

"Ahhh...okay." The mechanic chuckled. "I'll finish this probably tonight, maybe tomorrow, okay?"

She nodded. "Great."

Colleen came up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, girl."

Kerry turned and smiled. "Hey, listen, thanks for calling to check on me last night. Sorry I gave you a scare yesterday." She motioned towards the door to her apartment. "Come on inside, it's wet out here."

The redhead followed her, closing the door behind them, and moving quickly across to where Kerry was stacking printouts she no longer needed on her desk. "So, now tell me everything." Her voice was eager. "I could have killed you last night. Five words and you're gone." Kerry finished her task, then grinned and pulled her friend over to the couch. "Sit, it's a long story." She waited for Colleen to sit down, then she tucked her legs up under her and leaned an arm on the back of the couch. "Well, where do I start?" She told Colleen the whole story, watching Colleen's jaw drop in amazement.

"Whoa. Whoa, whoa... Hold on just a Jesus, Mary and Joseph minute." She held up her hand.

"Let me get this tale straight: you found out you all were gonna be fired; so you drove out to the Key; then you run out of gas on the way back; get stuck near the tracks in downtown; get carjacked; then you get rescued, like a full-blown-caped-crusader-flying-to-the-rescue kind of thing, by Dar Roberts. Am I clear on this so far?" Her voice was incredulous. "The same Dar Roberts that just fired you? That one?"

"Um...essentially, yes." Kerry grinned. "Only she made like it was nothing--like she just sort of happened by, and the guys ran off or something. But I know she had to have done something to them, because her hands were all banged up, and I heard at least one of the guys scream."

"Wow." Colleen squealed. "Is she, like, into karate or something?"

"Mmm." Kerry thought about that. "I don't know, but I think she's into something. She's got all these muscles all up and down her arms...like here." She patted her shoulders. "And when she walks, she kinda...well, you can tell she doesn't just sit around her office all day."

"Ooo..." Colleen giggled. "So, what was she doing, wandering the streets looking for damsels in distress to save?"

"Tch." Kerry slapped her leg. "No, actually. I, um...I called her. No, don't look at me like that, okay? I had this number she told me to use if I had any problems with her goon squad. I figured it was some flunky of hers, so I called it. I thought I could get him to call Triple A for me or something."

"But it wasn't, huh?" Colleen looked fascinated. "This is more and more intriguing."

"No. No, it was her," Kerry admitted. "So I hung up, but she called back. And she asked me where I was. I felt like such an idiot telling her I ran out of gas, but..." She sighed. "Anyway, these guys came at me, and I told her to call the police. Then they hit the car, and it got really scary. Then the next thing I knew, they were gone, and she was there." The blonde woman chuckled a little. "Boy, for someone I was hating a half hour before, I sure was glad to see her."

"So...you're fired, though?" Colleen said, concerned. "What are you going to do?"

"Well, I'm not, actually. See, we went back to her office after the whole thing, and she went over the numbers again, and she finally had a brainstorm or something...and she worked it out so we were okay." Kerry took a breath. "It was pretty amazing. She told some big boss of hers she'd been working on whatever this thing was for forty-eight hours without sleep."

"Jesus!" The redhead snorted. "So, you're not fired."

"No," her friend agreed.

"And your guys are okay?"

Kerry lifted a hand and let it drop to her knee. "As okay as I could work out," she admitted.

"Some of them are going to be let go."

"Figures." Colleen now looked skeptical. "That leopard isn't changing its spots any time soon, I think."

"No. No, it's..." Kerry shook her head. "She made it okay, Col. She's letting me give them six months' severance."

The redhead's jaw dropped wide open, and she goggled at Kerry. "Six?"

"And six months' benefits," Kerry concluded. "I couldn't believe it. That's the part that was so hard, Col. I knew even if I worked it out, I'd still have to face those people."

"Six?" Colleen repeated, seemingly in a daze. "Kerry, nobody does that."

"She did." The blonde woman leaned back. "What a weight off my shoulders. I could have ki..." She fell silent. "Anyway, it'll be a little tough, but we're in."

"Unbelievable," her friend said. "But can you trust her? You sound like you're thinking she's not so bad after all."

"No." Kerry shook her head and smiled. "She's really not. I mean, she's all business, right? And I think she'd fire someone like most other people would just blow their nose or whatever. But towards the end of the night, she was kind of just okay. And, I got the feeling we could actually...sort of get along, if we really wanted to."

Colleen whistled. "My boss wouldn't believe it. You should hear how he talks about her. You'd think she was the daughter of the devil himself."

Kerry looked up as her PC chimed. "Whoops." She got up and checked the screen. "Mail, on Saturday?" But a thrill of anticipation ran up her back as she opened the program, scanning the inbox and letting out a soft breath as she saw the first name on the list. "Well, speaking of Dar Roberts." She clicked on the message, and read it, then read it again. "What in..."

Colleen had stepped up behind her, and peered over her shoulder. "What does that mean?" She puzzled at it. "Why do you need to worry about their dress code? You don't work in that building."

"Uh." Kerry closed the message, then opened a terminal session and thumbed through her notes as she requested a logon to the mainframe. "Okay, I press this, then go here...login, password... Oh, hell! Okay, try it again. Ah." She accessed her own employee files, then stared at the main screen in disbelief. "Oh...sugarbaker."

"What?" Colleen peered at the screen. "What's an ORGID?" she asked. "It sounds disgusting."

"She did it." Kerry breathed, her fingertip tracing the change in her department, location, and her supervisor.

Roberts, D

"She did what?" The redhead poked her. "C'mon, Ker, spill it. What's going on here?"

"She hired me," Kerry mumbled.

"I thought you were already hired?" came the puzzled response. "Did I miss something here?"

"Well, yeah, but she had this...I mean, she hired me to work for her," Kerry responded, dazed.

"She was looking for an assistant."

"Jesus Mary mother of God." Colleen squeaked. "*You* are going to be Dar Roberts' assistant?" She pounded on Kerry's back. "You? Oh my god!"

"Ow!" Kerry ducked out of the way. "Cut that out! I've got scratches from that stupid glass." But she felt exhilarated. "And...yeah. I guess I'm going to work for her. I didn't expect her to make a decision so fast, but now that I think about it, it doesn't surprise me. I don't think she likes to dawdle around stuff." *Whoo-ooo!* Inside, she was jumping up and down. "Wow."

"Okay, girl, tonight we party," Colleen decided. "You need to go out and celebrate. Because let me tell you, from what I hear? You won't get a chance to breathe once you start working for her." She tugged Kerry's sleeve. "Let's do Cocowalk, and hit the Improv, then have a late dinner at Monte's. I'll get Pete and Reggie, and a few other people around here, okay?"

Kerry grinned. "Sure, that sounds fun. I can do that," she agreed. "Tomorrow... Ye gods! I'll have to go clothes shopping. I don't have anything good enough for that mausoleum, it's humongous."

"Ooo...ooo...ooo..." Colleen waved her hands. "I'll go shopping too, I'd love to see you in some fancy power suits for a change. This is gonna be great." She stood up. "I'll be back. You stay right here, Ms. High and Mighty corporate executive."

Kerry rolled her eyes. "Okay, I've got to find out what the rest of this mail is, anyway. It's after two, you want to meet in front of here at five?"

"You betcha," Colleen agreed, then bustled off. "Hey, I'll invite Gary. He really likes you."

The blonde woman waved a hand at her. "Fine, fine. Just tell him not to talk about his job all the time, okay?"

"Kerry, he can't help working at the Water and Sewer plant," the redhead chided her. "He's very excited about it." Green eyes peered over the monitor at her. "Okay, okay. I'm outta here." Colleen laughed. "I'll tell him."

As the door closed, Kerry sat back and re-read her mail for the third time. "Man, oh man, I can't believe it." She eyed the phone. "Guess I'd better let the folks in on this." She picked up the receiver and dialed a number, waiting until she heard a voice answer. "Hi, Mom."

"Oh, hello, Kerrison," her mother's flat, even tone replied. "I wasn't expecting you until tonight. Is there a problem?"

"No, no. I got some good news. I thought I'd pass it along," Kerry answered quietly. "I was promoted."

"That's nice, dear. I thought perhaps you were going to say you'd given up that strange city and were coming home. What kind of promotion was it?"

"Well, we were bought out. I think I told you that was happening last week."

"Oh? Oh yes, you mentioned it," Cynthia Stuart recalled. "Your father was saying he's had dealings with that new company."

"Mmm, yes, they're pretty big. There was an opening there, on the operations team. I applied for it, and they took me," Kerry told her carefully. "I'm...well, I've got to go shopping for some new clothes tomorrow."

A note of concern entered her mother's voice. "You haven't been putting on weight again, have you, dear?"

"Oh, no. No," Kerry reassured her. "No, in fact, I lost a few pounds over the last few days.

Um...no, it's...well, I'm going to be the assistant to one of their Vice Presidents, so I have to dress up."

"Oh?" Now her mother sounded more interested. "Really? That sounds more...well, you have to make sure you make a good impression. You have a Macy's down there, isn't that right?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Excellent. Take my card, dear, and you go pick out some nice new outfits. Something in green, I think, would look good with your hair. Has it gotten lighter? It did last summer. And make sure you get nice shoes, not those awful pumps you usually wear." There was a pause. "Roger? Roger, is that you? It's Kerry on the phone. Dear, she's going to be working for one of their Vice Presidents. Isn't that wonderful?"

A rustle, then her father's deep voice rumbled down the line. "Kerrison?"

"Yes, Father," Kerry answered quietly. "It's true, I got promoted."

"Well, well, that's nice. Glad to see they recognize quality when they see it, not like that little pissant company you worked for. This is good news." He cleared his throat. "Who will you be working for? I know a bunch of their upper echelon people, naturally, since we do bidding for the state, and they're a major contractor."

"Dar Roberts." Kerry tasted the name, rolling it around in her mouth with a kind of pleasure.

A moments' silence and then her father barked, "Jesus. That's not just *one* of their VPs, Kerrison, that's... Well, my god, we've been trying to get a bead on her for..." His voice trailed off. "Well, well, never mind that. This could be of great value to me, though. Good work, Kerrison, very good. I'm very proud of you."

Kerry felt a tense smile edge her lips. "Thank you." She heard her mother's voice in the background.

"I've told her to take my Macy's card, Roger, and get herself dressed to impress these people."

"Good idea, honey," her father's voice returned. "You listen to your mother, you hear? You go out to the store, and you buy stuff that's gonna knock their socks off, all right?"

"I'll...do my best, Father," Kerry replied.

"I want you to send pictures, all right?" came the gruff demand. "I want to make sure you're giving the right impression. This could be very valuable to me." He paused. "I was going to bring you home. We were thinking of having the wedding in the spring, but this...this could be worth the wait."

"I'll send pictures, I promise." Kerry silently blessed Dar, who had provided her, all unknowing, a reprieve from almost unrelenting parental pressure. "I'm really excited. I think I'm really going to like this new job."

"Good. Here, talk to your mother."

"Your father is very excited too, dear." Her mother's voice sounded smug. "I haven't seen him this enthusiastic since that Tripp woman surfaced." She drew a breath. "Your sister's pregnant again, bye the bye. Be sure to congratulate her when you talk to her later."

"I will, thanks. When did she find out?"

"Last week, but we suspected for a while now," her mother responded. "Of course, Richard has such an ugly face. I'm waiting for you and Brian to give me beautiful grandchildren." A rustle.

"Well, I have to go, dear. You run along to the store and have a good time."

"Thanks, mother. I'll try." Kerry sighed as she hung up, and stared at the receiver in mild disgust.

"Glad that's over." She turned her attention back to her mail and sat down, cracking her knuckles as she started a reply to Dar's message.

Sent by: Kerry Stuart Subject: re: Assistant's Job

Dar,

"Wow!" She thought, "I like that name. I wonder what it's short for?"

You move really fast, did anyone ever tell you that? You nearly gave me a heart attack when I checked my status in CAS.

Okay--I got the attachment. I'm kind of lost, though. Can you give me some tips on what is appropriate to wear at the office? I guess a trip to Macy's is in order, but I'd love it if you'd give me a hint, since I know you have no problem in that area.

Well, it's been quite a week, my friends are all taking me out tonight to the Improv, and then Monte's, because they tell me I won't have a chance to breathe once I start working for you.

I hope that's true. I'm really excited. I hope I don't disappoint anyone. Kerry

She hesitated, struck by the informality of the language. Just when did I get so comfortable with this woman? I told her to go to hell yesterday, didn't I? She sat back and pondered the thought.

And now I'm working for her. Is this weird, or what?

Across the room, the panda smiled at her. Kerry looked down at her bruised knuckles and the cuts on her palms, and acknowledged that life was shifting around her, changes happening almost faster than she knew how to adjust to them.

"Dar," she murmured, tasting the name. "Yeah, I like that." She clicked Send on the mail and sat back, feeling a sense of rare, reckless happiness. "This is going to be amazing. I just know it."

Chapter Eight

DAR PULLED INTO the mall parking lot and swung into a spot in the rear of the north end, where not many people parked. She didn't mind the walk, though, and it was worth it to her not to have to struggle with the crowds nearer to the stores. She locked the Lexus, then tucked her keys away into the small pouch she had slung over her shoulder and headed towards the cluster of buildings.

It was weird. She hated shopping. She had no real idea why she'd answered Kerry's mail yesterday with an offer to meet her here and help her pick new clothes. *What in hell was I thinking? Especially up here at Aventura, home of batty socialites, condo commandos, and the snowbird flock from Hell.*

She sighed as she dodged a Lincoln Town Car longer than her office, and watched as its elderly driver simply chose to park the yacht right in front of the store.

Oh well, it won't kill me. Besides, the kid sounded so unsure... She wanted to make a good impression, and that, at least, Dar agreed with. It would be sensational enough that she picked an assistant less than twenty-four hours after posting for one--Kerry would be under some close scrutiny the first few weeks. Might as well make sure the kid felt confident in what she was wearing.

Dar opened the rear entrance to Sears and slipped inside, padding through the hardware section and out through the entrance into the main mall. A cacophony of mall music, the sounds of a fashion show, birds, and a dozen languages surrounded her and she glanced around, getting her bearings before she headed for the escalator to the second floor.

Macy's was in the dead center of the mall, near the busy food court, but Dar had no problem finding her target. Kerry was leaning against the railing, peering down at the fashion show that was going on below, and Dar, as she approached, took the time to study the younger woman. She'd chosen khaki shorts and a crisp white shirt, and had her blonde hair pulled back in a loose braid, one part of which was hanging over her shoulder as she watched. She leaned forward on her elbows to get a better view, and the overhead light cascaded gently around her, highlighting the smooth lines of her face. They shifted as she turned, perhaps sensing eyes on her, and her gaze met Dar's.

Unconsciously, Dar was sure, a smile formed, that extended to her sea green eyes and wrinkled the skin around her nose and mouth. *No, she then realized. That smile's for me. Well, better than the wary, suspicious look I got before, I suppose.* "Hi."

Kerry moved back from the railing, and straightened her shirt with an automatic gesture. "Hi. Listen, thank you for offering to help me do this. I can't believe you took the time out."

Dar shrugged. "Normally, I couldn't. But since we posted quarterly reports yesterday, there's nothing scheduled this weekend." She gestured. "Shall we?"

"Well, thanks." Kerry seemed a bit nervous. "Um...do you shop here a lot? I've been up here a few times. I like some of the little stores. Did you know there was a Warner Brother's shop here? I like Tweety Bird."

Dar chuckled. "No, actually I haven't been up here since they built the addition on. I'll have to go take a look." She paused. "I, um...I've been to the Disney Store, though."

They entered Macy's and moved quickly past the fragrance counter, which tended to be overwhelming. Dar took the lead and slipped between several aisles, arriving in the section that featured understated, classic business clothing.

"Mmm." Kerry fingered a silk blouse. "That's nice."

Dar took a breath and took charge. "Okay, let's see." She wandered the racks and rifled through their offerings, then picked out a skirt and jacket set in a rich blue green. "Something like this would be fine." She paused and her brows creased. "Oh...here, with this kind of shirt." She pulled a cream-colored silk blouse over. "Get the idea?"

Kerry touched the label, then checked the size. She gave Dar a perplexed look. "Did you pick this by chance, or did you guess what size I am?"

The older woman allowed a grin to surface briefly. "Let's just say I have a good three-dimensional spatial sense."

"Ah." Kerry's brow creased. "Is it contagious?"

Dar chuckled. "I know what size I am and calculated down." She relented.

Kerry glanced at the outfit. "Well, let me try this on just to check the size. You can never tell with these designers." She accepted a tag from the fitting room guardian and slipped inside a closet, hanging the outfit up and gazing at it. "Not bad, actually," she mused, liking the color.

It took a moment to pull her clothes off and slip into the skirt, zipping it up and adjusting the waistline a little. It hugged her hips and maintained a fairly straight line, which she preferred to pleats. Then she put on the silk blouse, smiling as the cool fabric warmed against her skin, and tucked it into the skirt, putting on the jacket over both of them. She settled the clothes, then surveyed the results in the mirror.

Hmm. Don't I look stuffy. She made a face at herself in the mirror. *But then that building is pretentious, so...* With a sigh, she poked her head out the door and spotted Dar lounging against the wall, watching the people go by. The executive looked anything but, in her faded jeans and salmon-colored shirt, which was tucked into the braided leather belt clasped around her waist. Her dark hair was loose and uncomplicated, flowing free around her shoulders, and she had on a minimum of make-up, which suited her tanned skin. "Hey," Kerry called softly.

Dar's eyes shifted from the crowd to her, the pale blue startling as always. A dark brow lifted, and a look of approval crossed her face. "Yep, that's the ticket." The executive nodded. "What do you think?"

Kerry walked forward, twitching at the fabric. "Well, I think I feel like a librarian, but..."

Suddenly, startlingly, Dar smiled, showing even, white teeth and the faintest of twinkles in her pale eyes. "Dade County should be that lucky," she remarked wryly. "Literacy would go up, that's for sure."

Kerry smiled back, a little confused. *Am I being complimented? It's hard to tell.* "Okay. Well, I get the idea here. A few more and, um...if you have other things to do, don't bother hanging around. I really appreciate you coming all the way up here, though, Dar."

Dar glanced around, then folded her arms. "Tell you the truth, I had to come up here anyway. There are a few things in Lord and Taylor's I needed to pick up, and I should get one or two new blazers myself." She considered for a moment. "We should probably chat for a few minutes before tomorrow anyway. How about we finish up here, then grab a sandwich over in the new wing, so we can sit down and talk?"

Kerry blinked. "Um..." *Well, sure. She's my new boss, it makes perfect sense.* "Sure, that sounds fine. I've got some questions and things I should ask, and that kind of thing."

"Good." Dar nodded briskly. "Come on then, let's get the rest of your stuff picked out."

KERRY LOOKED AT the menu, then glanced across the table at Dar who was peering up at the ceiling, observing a large stuffed cheetah perched over their heads. A rumble of thunder rolled around them, and she thought it was real, then realized it was part of the ambiance of the restaurant.

The Rainforest Café was definitely different. Small trickles of water were everywhere, and a gentle mist rose from the planter behind her. Off to one side, a trio of colorful birds were being coaxed through tricks by a red-shirted attendant, and they were surrounded by cave-like walls and thick jungle foliage.

Dar reached up and touched the cheetah's tail, and, as if by cue, the animal let out a mechanical roar, causing the executive to jerk her hand back in startlement. She scowled, then looked across at Kerry, who was biting her lip to keep from smiling. "You think it's funny, huh?"

Kerry cleared her throat. "Um. No, no. I make it a point never to laugh at my boss." She kept her eyes on the menu, which was interestingly eclectic and tempted her with a long list of tasty treats she seldom allowed herself to indulge in.

Dar had no such compunctions. She glanced up and folded her hands on the table as a perky young waitress came over. "Do you like iced tea?" she inquired.

Kerry nodded. "Sure."

"Bring a pitcher of iced tea and an appetizer combo to start," the executive instructed the waitress. "Then come back in a few minutes." She waited for the girl to leave. "I figured that was pretty safe. I've never eaten here, but I've heard good things about the food."

Kerry gave in, and decided to just make it up with an extra hour of riding tomorrow. "Yeah, it all looks good." She settled happily on a spicy pasta dish and closed the menu, glancing across at Dar with a fading sense of trepidation. It was hard to believe she'd ever been intimidated by the taller woman, not sitting here across from her here in a fake jungle with soft lights that framed Dar's angular profile nicely.

Her face is very interesting, Kerry thought. It was almost always moving, little muscles shifting under her skin like she was watching things. Her hands moved a lot too, playing with the menu, with the silverware, and with the tiny drink-table tents that announced specials. Kerry wondered if Dar wasn't a little nervous or uncomfortable, because she certainly was, but it was hard to tell. Maybe the woman just naturally fidgeted. She seemed the restless type.

In addition to the swelling and bruising across her right knuckles, her hands had a few little scars on them, and she wasn't wearing any rings. They were fairly good-sized, with long fingers and short, unpolished nails. As someone else who used a keyboard all day, Kerry could appreciate that, and in fact, unless she was going out, she kept hers the same way.

Dar's wrists were thicker in proportion to her own, though, and as the executive moved, even in the low light she could see the shift of muscles just under her skin. It was an impression of strength that intrigued the younger woman, as it was so at odds with the corporate mentality she'd been expecting. Vice presidents were pasty white men who sat in plush offices all day and smoked cigars. They weren't...well, they weren't Dar Roberts. "Excuse me?" Kerry looked up, realizing Dar had spoken to her. "I'm sorry. I missed that?"

Dar cocked her head and regarded her. "What I said was, you can expect a few weeks where you'll need to settle in and get used to things."

Kerry nodded. "All right, I kind of thought that was the case. Besides, I need a week to put someone in my position. I know I was thinking of Ray, but this all happened so fast, I didn't have a chance to talk to him about anything."

Dar nodded. "Good. Spend a day or two there clearing things up while I get paperwork and a place for you to sit straightened out at the office. Maria is going to kill me for dumping a new hire on her plate first thing on a Monday morning."

Kerry wasn't sure what response was required for this information, so she just pursed her lips into a hesitant smile.

"Maria is my secretary," Dar explained, seeing the expression.

"Oh." The green eyes examined the table, which was covered in a tropical shower-curtain material. "She's going to be upset, huh?"

"Just for a minute," the dark-haired woman replied. "Listen, are you sure you want to do this?" The question had come out of the blue, and caused Kerry to jerk her head up and meet Dar's eyes. "I..." She fell silent. "I'm sure," she said after a moment. "I really am."

Dar exhaled. "This isn't an easy job. You have to put up with a lot of stress and a lot of bullshit. I'm not an easy person to be around, or get along with. I want you to know that up front." Her voice was serious. "You're a nice kid, and I don't want you to come back at me two weeks from now saying it's too much for you."

Kerry straightened and looked her in the eye, feeling herself wanting to rise to the challenge apparent in Dar's words. "How nice can I be if I called you a son of a bitch?" she inquired, seeing that sudden, impish glint appear across from her and as quickly disappear. "And I'm not a kid, thanks. I'm twenty-seven."

Dar studied her openly. "You hated what happened to your company. Why do you want to become a part of that?" she asked. "You know what I do, Kerry. You saw the raw side of it."

Kerry studied her back. "I like you."

Both of Dar's dark brows rose. "Excuse me?" Her voice rose in some surprise.

Kerry shrugged. "I like you. I think you're smart, and I think I can learn a lot from you." She paused. "Where I was, that was as high as I was going. I stopped learning things. It was more like my job was maintaining the status quo. There were new accounts, sure, but I didn't get to direct that, only provide the support and solutions. This is something a lot different."

Dar propped her chin up on a fist and regarded her. "I see."

"My turn." Kerry took a sip of the iced tea their server put down and blinked at the tray of appetizers. "Mmm." She picked up a piece of coconut chicken and nibbled it before she continued. "Why me?"

"Hmm?" Dar had taken a stuffed egg roll and was chewing it. Now she looked up and into Kerry's eyes with slightly raised eyebrows.

A shrug. "A hundred and ten thousand people to choose from, why me?"

Dar stopped eating and flashed her a smile. "I like you." A hint of humor appeared. "Not one of the other hundred and ten thousand would have had the guts to call me a son of a bitch or tell me to go to hell."

"Oh." Kerry blushed. "So that was a plus?"

"I think you've got potential, and you aren't dragging around a lot of baggage I have to get rid of before you'll be useful," Dar continued, in a reflective tone. "Besides, you're probably good with people, which is something I'm lousy at." She bit into the egg roll and munched it.

"Mmm. Not always," Kerry replied quietly.

Dar glanced up. "You're not good with people?" Her voice was surprised.

"You're not always bad with them," the blonde corrected, smiling a little at the momentary break in her new boss's composure. "But I know what you mean. I do get along with people most of the

time. I like working out problems, finding different solutions without going head to head, that kind of thing."

Dar chuckled. "I'd rather break the heads and have done with it."

Kerry gently touched the bruised hand laying on the table. "So I see." She removed her fingers when she saw Dar's flinch at the touch. "Sorry, is it sore?"

"A little." Dar flexed her hand a bit. "Must have banged it on the car."

Kerry just looked at her, a hint of a smile playing around her lips. "I had to pay extra for the screaming Mustang model, too. It makes a great car alarm," she drawled. "I especially like the option that makes it holler 'Jesus Christ' in Spanish."

Dar held her blank look for a moment more, then surrendered, relaxing into a smile that took five years off her age. "Ah. So my cover is blown, is that it?" She gave her hand a sheepish glance. "I was trying to figure out what horse's-ass tale I was going to tell the office tomorrow."

Kerry laughed. "To be honest, I didn't even realize what was going on until I thought about it last night. I was too shook up before that." She took a chicken wing and dipped it into a small dish of blue cheese dressing. "It was kind of like living the movie of the week, you know? Here I am, trapped in the bowels of Miami, getting attacked by street punks, when along comes this hero, beating them all up and chasing them away like dogs with their tails caught betw..." She'd looked up and found pale blue eyes staring at her from a very serious face as a hand covered hers with startling warmth. "What?"

Dar leaned forward. "Don't call me that. I've known far too many people who really were." Her voice went a touch deeper. "They just didn't want any witnesses, so they took off."

Kerry gazed at her. "Well, you might know many heroes, but I only know one." Her chin lifted a trifle. "But I won't mention it if it bothers you." The dim lighting made it hard to tell, but the blonde woman thought it was possible her new boss was blushing, just a little.

The waitress arrived, much to both of their relief. "Um, the spicy pasta." Kerry didn't try to pronounce the actual name of it.

Dar cleared her throat. "I'll have the salmon steak."

The waitress scribbled. "Vegetables or garlic mashed potatoes?"

"Potatoes, please," Dar replied. "And some more tea."

They were both silent after she left, and Kerry took the opportunity to sample some of the rest of the appetizers. She waited until her companion did the same, then finally looked up. "So, tell me about those contracts. I'd at least like to give the TCP/IP group a heads up. I know you said it was the IRS, but..."

Dar seemed relieved at the change in subject. "Oh, right. Well, it's their master website. They set up a consumer site to provide tax help and all the forms support. It gets about forty thousand hits a day. The concerns involve mostly bandwidth issues and doc server glitches."

"Mmm." Kerry absorbed this.

"The contract specifies hardware and software. You'll have resources in the local area to dispatch for the hardware. I think we contract out to NCR in that area."

"Sounds good." The blonde woman looked intrigued. "What about the other one?"

"Um..." Dar's brow creased. "Oh yeah. The ATM contract for transmission services for the Navy." She paused. "And the network support for that and for their ship-to-shore microwave network transmissions."

Kerry blinked. "Wow. The WAN guys are going to freak out." She laughed a little. "They were telling me only last month they were getting bored." She relaxed a little and so did Dar. "That'll mean some extra training."

Dar nodded. "I'll give you the number of the training division in Houston. Give them a call and set up what you need. Depending on how many people you have, either they'll go out there, or Houston will send a trainer down here." They continued discussing details until dinner arrived, then talk slowed down as they paid attention to their food.

Kerry enjoyed her pasta and watched curiously as her companion methodically decimated the large salmon steak into neat squares, pairing each square with a forkful of mashed potatoes as she ate it. "That smells great."

"It is," Dar replied, after swallowing. "It's honey and brown sugar glazed." She hesitated, then casually dropped a square on Kerry's plate. "Here."

Kerry obligingly tried it. "Wow, that is good." She nudged a bit of the chicken from her pasta over on to her companion's dish. "Fair is fair."

She chewed the offering. "Wow." Dar chuckled. "You like stuff spicy, huh?"

"Mmm-hmm," Kerry agreed. "It's what I like best about living here. Everything tastes different, it's not all the same." She took a sip of tea. "Do you like Thai food?"

"Anything with peanuts," the executive replied with a grin. "There's a good Thai restaurant right off US 1 near Dadeland. They make really good chicken curry."

Kerry's eyes lit up. "Really? And I never found it? W--" The "we" almost escaped, but she clamped her jaw shut on it. *We should go there? What the heck was I thinking? This is my new boss, who certainly had better things to do than roam around Miami finding new Thai restaurants for me.* "Thanks for telling me about it."

"Sure." Dar smiled at her. "How'd it go with your window?"

"Oh, fine. Fine. It's done already," Kerry assured her, then she dug in a pocket. "Oh yeah. Jerry found this when he was cleaning the glass up. Is it yours?" She held up a woodgrain-cased pen. Dar blinked. "Didn't even realize I lost that." She reached over and claimed it. "Thanks." She looked up as the waitress returned. "We're done, yes. I'd like a large cappuccino, and, um..." Her eyes went to Kerry's face, watching the blonde woman's brows lift as a dessert tray went by.

"Hey, share a cheesecake with me?"

Kerry's eyes widened, then she sighed, and patted her stomach. "I shouldn't."

Dar just waited, sure of her quarry. She was beginning to gather an understanding about her new associate. It was a habit of hers, to try and figure out all the angles, and predict what people would do, and so far, Kerry Stuart was proving quite a challenge.

But not on this subject. Dar enjoyed indulging herself, and she suspected Kerry leaned in that direction as well, however unwilling she appeared on the face of it. "C'mon."

"Oh well, okay." She capitulated, giving Dar a little wry shrug. "Guess I'll just put in extra time on the Rollerblades." And how had the mildly unnerving Dar Roberts known she liked cheesecake? She decided to try another slightly more personal question, though she noticed Dar stiffened up when she'd done so before. "Have you ever tried that?"

"Cheesecake or Rollerblades?" Dar chuckled softly. "Both. I like one, and I'm not too fond of the other. I made close acquaintance with a tree last time I used them." She glanced towards the fake waterfall, which was expelling another cloud of mist. "I stick to running." She noticed Kerry's eyes on the bare, subtly muscular arms emerging from her shirt. "And a little working out." The sea green orbs lifted to hers, and Dar felt uncharacteristically off-balance. Something about the intensity, maybe? "So, you're all ready for tomorrow? Did personnel forward you an electronic packet of forms for all the people you'll be converting?"

Kerry watched as the server put down an enormous piece of cheesecake covered with chocolate, which was flanked by two bananas, equally doused. She sucked in a breath. "Ooo." Then she

realized Dar had asked her a question. "Uh, yes. I got a ton of mail from them, including a three-page instruction list from someone named Mariana, who said something really funny like I was the new duckling?" She waited for Dar to pick up one of the two forks the server offered, then picked up her own and tried a bite. "Wow. I could get to like that way too much."

"Duckling, huh?" Dar murmured as she worked a chunk off and nibbled it. "Mariana is our Director of Personnel. She'll help you get everything straightened out." She took another bite, enjoying the smooth, rich taste. "She has a unique sense of humor."

Is that a company requirement? Kerry wondered, but didn't reply.

They finished up and sauntered through the shop in the front of the restaurant, filled with rainforest-inspired merchandise ranging from T-shirts to tiny rubber geckos to Beanie Babies in the shape of toucans and monkeys. Kerry fingered a tiny Beanie salamander in an interesting shade of greenish blue, then put it down with a sigh. "I have enough stuff on my desk."

Dar, who had been examining the large cockatoo overhead, turned but didn't say anything. They walked out and through the mostly closed mall, the stores shut up tight and only a thin strain of music playing. "Where are you parked?"

"Around by the food court," Kerry answered as she pushed the door open and held it. The thick, moist air hit her, carrying a heavy scent of rain. "Well, thank you, Dar. I really appreciate you coming up here."

The darkness outside hid most of the taller woman's expression. "My car's back here; I'll give you a ride around to the front," she stated. "And don't worry about it. I was glad to get a chance to pick up this stuff." She hefted her bag.

Kerry followed her out into the dark lot, stretching her legs a little to keep up. The breeze off the nearby ocean was warm and sultry and she sighed. "It's hard to get used to the heat sometimes." A soft chuckle answered her. "That's why we all stay inside," Dar replied. "C'mon, it's over here, under that ledge."

Moving shadows surrounded them--cleaners, and workmen, and other, darker, figures. The parking lot was large and mostly empty, and she could see several small groups of what looked like teenagers, lit cigarettes and low laughter coming from them.

Eyes watched as they crossed the gray surface, and unconsciously, Kerry moved a little closer to her tall companion. "Kinda creepy out here."

Dar glanced down. "Just act like you own the place. I guarantee, none of these kids'll come near you," she advised.

Kerry watched as the group they were approaching eyed Dar, then nudged over a little out of her way. "I'll try to keep that in mind," she murmured, feeling quite, quite safe.

The air was thick with humidity, but she took a deep breath of it, tasting a hint of the sea on the edges from the nearby Intercoastal Waterway. She walked alongside Dar in silence, but it wasn't really the uncomfortable kind. "How's your hand doing?" Kerry asked, as they crossed the expanse of mostly empty tarmac.

"It's all right," Dar said. "Wonder what those guys were really after? You didn't have a purse on the seat."

Kerry was silent for a few steps. "No, I don't usually carry one." She glanced up and caught Dar watching her, the faintly raised eyebrow visible even in the shadows. "Just one of those things," she added, with a half shrug.

"Mmm." Dar's eyebrows twitched a little. "Me either," she said in a casual tone. "Interesting coincidence."

Kerry absorbed that as the night became friendlier around her, surprised when she idly wished she'd found a parking spot a lot further out.

Interesting coincidence.

"WHERE HAVE YOU been?" Colleen's voice came from the doorway, as Kerry finished carrying in her packages. "Ooo, I see bags from Macy's." She ducked inside and helped the blonde woman put the bundles down. "How'd it go?"

Kerry sat down on her desk chair and folded her arms across her chest. "It was interesting. I got lots of stuff, as you can see, and...um, it was interesting."

Colleen folded her own arms. "Interesting? Your new boss offers to come over and help you shop for clothes, and you call this interesting? I call it *mysteriously* intriguing." The redhead chuckled.

"So, what's she like when she's not firing people or restructuring companies?"

"It's kind of hard to explain." Kerry exhaled. "I mean, she's really..." She described a box with her hands. "She's very closed, kind of remote, but then once in a while she just kinda opens up just a little bit, enough for you to tell there's a human being in there and not a microprocessor."

"Mmm-hmm." Colleen digested this. "So you two spent all this time shopping?"

A quirk of Kerry's lips. "No, not exactly. We had dinner at the Rainforest." She avoided Colleen's widening eyes. "She wanted to go over next week and what to expect, things like that."

"Did you have fun?"

Kerry thought about that. "It was...Col, it was really, really weird, because half of the time it was very strained, because we don't know each other, and she's my boss, and it's just weird, but the other half of the time, it was..." She struggled to get a grasp on her thoughts. "It was just strange."

Colleen tilted her head to one side and eyed her. "Strangely familiar?"

"Yeah, kinda," Kerry admitted. "I've never had that happen to me before, but I think we're going to be okay."

"You like her." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah, I do," Kerry said, after a moment's thought. "Even after the whole firing thing. I was really mad at her that night, but after she showed me what she did, how she tried..." She fell silent again. "Yeah, I do like her," she repeated in a more positive tone.

"Incredible." Colleen shook her head. "I saw Reynaldo over at Publix, we were getting deli together, and I was telling him about you going to work for her. He was in total shock." She shook her head. "He's the IS manager at the bank. He got chewed, and chewed, and chewed until he had only one quarter of his butt left over that tape disaster. He says she's just the nastiest person he'd ever met."

Kerry lifted her shoulders. "I think she can be. I can see she's got a pretty dark streak in there. Remember I told you about that goon, and how he practically dissolved when she yelled at him? And I remember how she was when we first met in my office. There wasn't much to like. She was pretty mean."

Colleen rubbed her head. "But you like her anyhow?"

It does sound strange, Kerry realized. "I don't know...yeah. I mean, she could have fired my butt several times, right? I was pretty nasty. I told her to go to hell and all of that, and she could have just axed me right then and there, locked me out, had security take me out of the building, but she didn't. In fact, tonight, I kind of got the feeling that she respected me for it."

"Oh, that's twisted, me bucko," her friend warned. "You watch out for her, hear? She can turn on you quick as a whistle." She sighed. "I don't know, Ker, these are pretty uncharted waters you're sailing into here. I hope you know what you're doing."

I hope I do, too. Kerry sighed inwardly. "I can't really explain it. Maybe if I'd taken time to really think about what was happening, I would have chosen to stay where I was, but maybe not. I just thought this would be such a unique opportunity, you know?"

"Unique." Colleen slung an arm across her shoulders. "Me dearie, that's an understatement. But if you have a problem, I talked with Jacob at my office, and he says he'd take you on in an instant, okay?"

Kerry smiled, and leaned against her affectionately. "Thanks, Col, I really appreciate that." She exhaled. "Hey, wanna see what I got?"

"You betcha."

They opened the various packages, and Kerry hung the items off the curtain rod in the living room.

"Ooo, I like this one." The redhead pointed at the blue-green outfit. "Nice pin." She touched the front of the jacket.

Kerry stepped closer and laid a finger on it. "Good grief, my mind must have been all over the place." She laughed in gentle delight. "I didn't even notice that was on there. Yeah, it is nice."

The pin was a pair of silver dolphins frolicking on a gold background, with the waves in the forefront tinged in pink and blue. "Perfect for the color. It does kinda look like the ocean, doesn't it?"

"Mmm-hmm," Colleen agreed readily. "Bet it looks nice on you; it just about matches your eyes." She looked at the row of clothing. "I like all of them, but I like this one the best, though that purple one is nice too."

"Yeah, I like the braid on that. Listen, if I put some of this stuff on, would you take a picture? My parents want to see what I look like dressed up."

"Surely." Her friend laughed. "Though, being fair, you look nice in just about everything, you rat." She poked Kerry in the ribs. "Even those torn-off old denim rags you wear sometimes."

"Hey, they're my favorite pair of jeans," Kerry protested as she pulled the blue-green outfit down. "Be right back."

THE SKY HAD finally cleared, exposing a thick wash of stars which twinkled down over the quiet coral deck. The pool's warm waters rippled around the lone figure floating gently on the surface, head resting on crossed arms and legs propped on a thick Styrofoam raft.

Dar let the peace surround her, concentrating on the gentle sounds of the surf not far away and the rustle of a light breeze which moved the trees around the pool. She was alone, which was not surprising considering the hour, and she was spending a little time just reflecting quietly on her day.

At least it had been more productive than the previous day. After she'd sent out her e-mail, she'd somehow managed to fall asleep again on the couch, with her laptop up and running, the soft leather gathering in her tired body and refusing to give it up until almost dinner time, when she'd groggily woken to see Power Rangers dancing on the screen and 3D pipes patiently creating a plumbing layout on her laptop display.

That was when she'd picked up Kerry's mail, and answered it in a sleepy daze, telling the younger woman she'd join her at the mall. It wasn't until ten minutes or so after she hit the Send key that she blinked and realized what she'd done, and by then, it was too late.

But she hadn't regretted it, not at all. The outing had been...well, sort of fun, in a way. She didn't get many opportunities to just relax and hang around with other people, and Kerry was shaping up to be an interesting person to spend time with. Which was good, because as her assistant, that's exactly what she'd be doing with her.

The dinner had been somewhat of a test. Dar knew if she could stand spending an hour eating dinner with someone without wanting to kill them, it was a good sign. Kerry had passed. In fact--Dar gazed up at the stars in mild surprise--Kerry had more than passed. She'd actually enjoyed herself, to the point where she wished the evening had gone on a little longer, and when was the last time that had happened?

It was nice to just talk to someone who was bright, had a sense of humor, and wasn't intimidated by her. Dar grinned, remembering the crack about the screaming Mustang. Then she flexed her hand, remembering the gentle touch there. So, she'd figured out that old Dar hadn't just shooed the bad guys away, had she? *Clever kid.*

She sighed, and shifted in the water, tilting her head back and blinking as the moon edged out from behind a cloud and lit her in a simple, silver glow. It made the coral around her seem almost white, and if she raised her head, she could see a broad, flickering path that led from where she lay straight to the horizon.

She rolled over and ducked her head under the warm water, kept heated year-round despite the usually hot temperatures in the area. After a few laps more just to loosen up her shoulders, she eased out of the pool, grabbing her towel and drying herself off as she padded quietly back down the stairs and across the waterfront paths to her condo.

The cold air in the hallway chilled her skin, and she quickly ducked in the laundry room, shedding her bathing suit and trading it for a cotton baseball shirt and soft flannel boxers. She headed into the kitchen and claimed a mug, which she filled with milk and chocolate syrup, then popped in the microwave. Two minutes later she pulled it out, observing the New Mail icon on the kitchen terminal. "Mail, read."

"Dar Roberts, seven messages, none urgent." She scanned the headers. "Read All." The warm cocoa slid down her throat as she waited.

Sent by: McLean, Alastair Subject: New Assistant Time: 8:43 PM

Dar--

Next time you want to just transition one of your little finds direct to corporate, just tell me, will you? I really didn't need thirty whining regional directors complaining to me that you're not following procedure.

Her stats don't show much, but if she's good enough for you to pick as your right hand, I guess I'll have to live with it. I hope she's cute, at least. Alastair

"Reply," Dar muttered, and waited for a new message to appear.

Sent by: Dar Roberts Subject: re: New Assistant

Alastair--

Sorry, yes you will, and I really hadn't noticed one way or the other. Dar

"Send." Dar sipped her chocolate, with a smirk. "Next."

Sent by: Mariana Sartis Subject: re: New Assistant Time: 9:01PM DR

You stirred up a hornet's nest, my friend. Watch out--I think at least some of them are going upstairs.

I sent, I processed, I e-mailed. Your new body should have all the paperwork she needs to get things rolling at Synergenics. And by the way, that was a nice piece of power shuffleboard with Peter to get the numbers in. He filed a formal complaint against you, BTW. Alastair's response

(he bcc'd me) was "Do you want me to review this before or after I review the bonus schedule for this quarter, which depends on your making your numbers?"

You know, Dar, you're really lucky you're as good as you are. No one else would get away with the crap that you do. Be careful, my friend. Be very, very careful.

Since I was at the office on Saturday, I processed everything for Ms. Stuart. She's on your payroll starting Monday, so make sure she knows how to turn in things and all that. I have her file from Synergenics. I have to tell you, Dar, until I saw it, I was having some very evil thoughts about you, but in reviewing it, I realized you picked a very qualified candidate. I don't even have to fake things on her profile. I'm attaching the details so you have record of them. Did you know she was the Michigan debating champion one year?

Anyway, see you at the office on Monday. I'll try to soothe some ruffled feathers, but keep low for a while, will you? Just for me?

Mari

Dar bit off a delighted grin. "Debating champion, huh? Damn, I'm in trouble. I shoulda guessed that." She sat on the tall stool.

"Reply."

Sent by: Dar Roberts Subject: re: New Assistant

Mari-- Thanks for the warning. Alastair already mailed me about the dissenters--he's going to handle it. I'm shocked you would think I would pick any candidate based on frivolous reasons. Of course, I knew how qualified Ms. Stuart is for this position. Why do you think I asked for it? The company's best interests come first, this wasn't some knee-jerk reaction based on personality. In point of fact, the lady in question told me to go to hell, so her transfer certainly wasn't done for friendly reasons. I'm sure she'll be an asset to the company, and maybe she'll take some of my people issues, so you get less complaints.

Dar

She chuckled softly. "Send." Then she clicked on the attached file, and read the few short paragraphs with interest. "Hmm, gymnastics, double major in computers and...no, that can't be right. English? What a mix." Kerry's work history showed a steady, even progression from entry level to management, with increasing responsibility and experience moving from job to job, with no job lasting less than two years. *Stability, good work ethics, no gaps...* No wonder Mariana had been impressed.

She checked the personal side. No workman's comp claims, no judgments, good credit, spotless record, not even a speeding ticket. Dar's brows rose. "It's almost too good to be true." The thought caused a frown to edge her features. "New message."

Mark--

I need a class one security inquiry on a new hire: Kerry Stuart, the Associated employee we talked about last week. She's coming on staff in my department, and I want to know everything. Don't cut corners, don't gloss, the works. Dar

"Send." Dar drummed her fingers on the counter, feeling a trifle guilty about checking so thoroughly, but if Kerry was going to be privy to all her little tricks, it was better to be sure about who and what she really was. It wouldn't be the first time a rival had tried to slip someone into the inside.

It's a logical precaution, her mind insisted. But something inside her felt uneasy, as though it bothered her to think she couldn't trust Kerry. She thought about that for a bit. Her gut instinct was solidly in the kid's favor. It hadn't been wrong yet. But it never hurt to be sure.

Dar sighed and turned back to the screen. She went through the next three messages, which were acknowledgments of items she'd taken care of the previous week, then she clicked on the seventh with a odd feeling of anticipation.

Sent by: Stuart, Kerry Subject: re: Assistant's Job Time: 12:32 AM

Hi.

Why does everyone think I'm crazy because I want to work for you? I got four mails from people I barely, or don't even know, warning me that I didn't know what I was getting into. I decided they're just jealous. I sent a list--you can tell me if they're people who applied for the job. If they are, then I feel a lot better.

I wrote them all back thanking them for their concern and hoping I'd get a chance to work with them sometime. I hope that was okay.

Anyway, hope you have a good week, and thanks again for helping me shop. Kerry

"Reply." Dar leaned on the counter and propped her head on her hand.

Sent by: Dar Roberts Subject: re: Assistant's Job

Kerry

Everyone thinks you're crazy because everyone knows I'm a heartless, cruel bitch who drives people to drink and an early grave, and who has no sympathy for anyone or anything. I tried to warn you about that. It's not too late to back out if you want to.

Your list is, as you suspected, disappointed candidates. The reply was appropriate.

I don't get much chance just to go out and be semi- social, so today was very pleasant for me. It also was an indication that we might just be able to work together. My previous attempts at an assistant have lasted one, three, four, and two days respectively. One I threw out, one decided to go back to the job they came from, and the other two ran screaming into the night never to be heard from again.

Please bear all this in mind. Dar

"Send." Dar stifled a yawn and finished off her cocoa, then rinsed the mug out and put it upside-down on the drain board. She turned off the lights as she went through the condo, leaving the space in total darkness. Once in the bedroom, she crawled into the welcoming warmth and shifting motion of the waterbed. One arm curled around her pillow, and the other rested lightly on the surface as she let her eyes close and slipped into sleep.

Chapter Nine

IT WAS A long week, a very hectic week, in which Kerry tied up loose ends she didn't even realize were there, and eased Ray into her position. The first day was a shock, when she'd had good news, and bad news, and important news, all combined, to tell everyone. Letting fifty people go was hard, but when she'd told them about the severance package...

So that turned out okay. The support groups were still reeling over the new contracts, and both support managers spent the week brushing up on every piece of TCP/IP literature they could get their hands on. They were determined to make a good impression, and not let her down.

All of them were. It was so odd. The week before, they'd been cursing the corporation's name, and now...now, they were finding ways to change, and adjust--most of them simply glad to still be employed.

The reaction to her new position was total chaos. It had ranged from, "You are absolutely crazy" to "Jesus, you impressed her *that much*?" and a lot in between. Many people were sorry to see her go, but encouraged because she was going to be "up there" and maybe could influence "her" if things got to be trouble.

Friday, the last day of her employment at Associated, Ray called her in and sat her down. His face was serious, and he asked her straight out if she knew what she was doing with this "shark in a dress suit."

Kerry just kept smiling and telling everyone she viewed this as a great learning experience, no matter what happened. She traded e-mail with Dar most of the week, keeping her updated on the transition progress. As the week went on, the executive's writing style had relaxed a little, not much, but just a little, and Kerry found herself looking forward to seeing Dar again.

SO NOW IT was a week later, and it was Monday morning. It was time for her to start this great new learning experience. Kerry glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror for the sixth time, then took a deep breath and turned off the engine. "Okay, I'm ready," she told her reflection, then shouldered her briefcase and slipped out of the Mustang, careful to pull her skirt straight, odd after not having to wear one for quite some time. She locked the door and squared her shoulders, then headed for the building's main entrance.

She gave her name at the security desk and waited while the agent there looked on a list, then smiled at her. "Ms. Stuart, can you please come with me? We need to badge you."

"Okay," Kerry said amiably as she followed the short, husky man around the corner and into a small suite of rooms. There were banks of monitors along one wall, with a slim, blonde-haired girl watching them. The girl turned as they entered and gave Kerry a polite smile, which she returned.

She got her picture and fingerprints taken, then stood while the agent assembled a security badge much like she'd seen Dar carry the night they'd come back here. The man attached an electronic scan card to the badge, then handed it over to her. "Thank you." She examined the surface.

"Wow, you even take nice pictures." She gave him a grin.

He grinned right back. "Depends entirely on the subject, ma'am."

Kerry blushed. "Thanks, may I go up now?"

"It's the fourteenth floor, Ms. Stuart--up that first bank of elevators, then when you get off, turn left, and it's the second door on your right."

Remembering from her previous visit, Kerry nodded. "Yes, thank you." She slipped out of the security offices and headed towards the elevator, glancing up through the atrium and smiling. It was even more impressive in the daylight, with the sun pouring down through it and catching on the various crystal sculptures which lined the steep walls. It was also busier now, of course, and she dodged several hurrying people as she got into the elevator and punched the button for the fourteenth floor.

That got a side glance from two of the other occupants, and Kerry noticed them looking over, trying to inconspicuously read her name badge. She stuck out her hand instead. "Hi. I'm Kerry Stuart. Nice to meet you."

The first woman shook her hand, then the second. "Enid Perspects," the taller of the two said, hesitantly. "I work in Purchasing."

"Sally Cruz," the second, a shorter, darker woman, added. "In Marketing. Are you Dar Roberts' new assistant?"

"That's me," Kerry replied with a grin.

They looked at her as though she had two heads. "Well, good luck," Enid mumbled, as the door opened, and she and her friend escaped. "You're gonna need it."

That was under her breath, but Kerry heard it anyway. The door slid shut, leaving her with a stocky, dark-haired man of middling height, about her own age. He studied her for a moment, then held out his hand. "So, you're the infamous Kerry Stuart."

Kerry sighed and shook his hand. "Infamous? I hope not. I just got here." She gave him a wary look. "And you are?"

He laughed. "Relax. I'm Mark Polenti, head of MIS and security."

He paused. "I'm a friend of Dar's."

Kerry gave him a friendlier look. "Really? To hear people talk, she doesn't have any of those."

"Nah, she does. Not many, that's true, but the right ones, in the right places, if you know what I mean." The stocky man smiled. "As long as you know your shit, you're all right with Dar. If you don't, you're toast." His eyes met hers. "You must know yours."

"Guess we'll find out." Kerry relaxed a little, then turned as the doors opened onto the floor she'd requested. She and Mark exited, then both headed down the same corridor. Kerry could hear raised voices as she reached the double doors which lead into Dar's office, and she glanced sideways at Mark. "Sounds like a fight."

"Sounds like a Monday." He sighed, and held the door for her. "C'mon, might as well get used to it."

The inside of Dar's outer office was very different in the daytime. Several people were waiting, facing a desk behind which sat a short, round, gray-haired woman, who was pressing the phone against her ear with one hand and covering her other ear with the second. Two of the people waiting were arguing, one waving a set of printouts.

"There is no way we can complete that account, Larry. It's not going to work, so go find another way to do it!" the shorter of the two men shouted.

"We've got no choice, Scott. The account team promised a full support center, and now they're holding us to it!" the other man replied, throwing up his hands. "I hope to hell Dar can figure out how to pull us out of this mess. I'm going to beat the crap out of Sue Kingston on the account team for pulling this crap again!"

Two other women, carrying reams of paper, were trying to get the secretary's attention. She was on the phone with two lines blinking and talking on a third. Barely audible, a buzzer sounded.

The secretary put her caller on hold and punched it. "Yes, Dar."

"I've got half the goddamn domestic network down, three mainframes whose loads were screwed by mids last night, and ILIPC won't answer their phones. Get me someone in Illinois who doesn't have their heads up their asses, right now!"

"Ay, I'm trying, believe me," the harried secretary replied.

"I can't have trying, Maria, I need those people!"

Dar's voice was rough with frustration, and Kerry moved towards it compulsively, easing around and between the throng and ignoring the startled looks. She found herself at the secretary's desk, and gave her a wry smile as the woman looked up. "Hi," she said softly. "Looks like a busy morning, huh?"

The older woman interrupted her boss's further ranting. "Dar?"

"What?" the executive growled.

"Ms. Stuart is here." Maria gazed at the slim blonde appraisingly.

Silence for a moment. "Oh, good. Send her in." Dar's voice had dropped an octave and sounded almost cheerful. "Hello, Kerry. Welcome to Hell."

For a moment, everyone fell silent, watching her. The only sound was the buzzing of Maria's phone. "Thanks," Kerry managed to get out weakly. "I think."

Dar chuckled. Kerry gave the rest of the people in the room a brief smile as she backed away from the desk. "Hello, excuse me." She darted for the door and slipped through it, aware of the avidly watching eyes following her.

"C'mon in."

The door closed behind her, and Kerry was surprised at the silence inside. "Whew." The noise from outside was gone, and she let out a breath as she moved across the carpeted floor towards Dar's desk. The executive was sitting on top of it with her phone, with its blinking lights near the edge, and her arms crossed over her chest. She was wearing a gray silk skirt and jacket, with a forest green shirt and looked casually elegant.

Of course. The look was somewhat offset by the random disorder of her hair, which looked like she'd been running her hands through it. Kerry mentally paused, wondering what that would feel like. She rubbed her fingertips together and dismissed the thought as she continued forward.

"Busy morning?"

"They all are," her new boss acknowledged. "Glad you're here."

"Me too." Kerry could see the frustration in the lines of her body, but Dar managed a smile for her. "So, this is Hell, huh?" Kerry made a show of looking around. "Nice décor."

Dar sighed and lifted a hand to rub one temple. "It's been quite a morning." She ran her fingers through her hair, confirming Kerry's guess, and then let her arm drop. "Not sure where I start explaining."

"So I see," Kerry replied, feeling a little awkward. "Is there...um, stupid question, but is there something I can do to help?"

Dar visibly tried to relax a little. "Lots of things. But first, I think I need to get you settled in a place to sit and all that." She stood. "So, c'mon." She got up off the desk and paused to strip off her jacket, laying it over the back of her chair. "Gonna be one of those days."

Kerry caught the scent of silk and spice as Dar moved past her, rolling up her sleeves as she walked. "Are there a lot of those days?"

Dar snorted, laughing and shaking her head as she motioned Kerry to follow her. "C'mon."

Curious, Kerry followed her toward a small, nondescript door she hadn't even noticed the other night and watched as Dar opened it, then gestured her to go forward. "Go on--believe me, it's faster this way. If I go out in that hallway, it'll take me eight hours to get from this office to the one I picked out for you."

Picked out for me? Kerry entered, finding herself in a narrow, bare hallway with unmarked doors on one side and blank walls on the other. She moved down it uncertainly, until she felt a warm hand on her back. Dar guided her forward about fifty feet, until she came to another unmarked door, which the executive motioned her to open. She pushed the handle down and emerged into a second office.

It was roughly square, with a worktable surrounded by chairs on one side and a wide, woodgrain desk on the other. The carpet and wall coverings were in burgundy, and behind the desk, was a floor to ceiling window sporting the same view as Dar's.

Wow. Kerry took a moment to drink in the seascape, the light winds outside blowing the waves with frosting-like whitecaps. Reluctantly, she turned to view the rest of the room.

On the desk was a computer, a phone, and nothing else, and the office was bare of adornment, so much so that it was apparent that it had never been used. "It's, um..."

Dar leaned back against the door and gave Kerry an apologetic look. "Kinda empty, I know, but it's got the essentials."

Kerry blinked at the desk and at the furniture. "It's great." She turned and looked at the window. "With this view, you could have given me a cardboard box and a tin can on a string, and I'd be happy." She put her briefcase down on the desk. "Look, I know you're up to your neck in problems in there. I'll get settled and logged in, and see if I can find my way around, okay?" Dar smiled and glanced down at her watch. "Actually, give me about an hour to clear this all up, then I'll be back to show you around, and we can talk." She cleared her throat. "If I'm not back in an hour, assume the rest of the network blew up and c'mon over and find me."

Kerry faced her and smiled. "You bet I will."

The dark-haired woman smiled back, then ducked back down the hallway, closing the door behind her and leaving Kerry in her new workplace home.

"Whoa." Kerry sat down in the very comfortable leather desk chair and looked around. "She apologizes. I can't believe this. I could hold an aerobics class in here, and she apologizes because it's a little empty. Good grief." She examined the desk, which was well made, and opened the drawers. Inside were pens and paper, clips and a stapler, the usual. The large drawer held hanging files, which were, of course, empty.

She flipped on the computer, impressed with the large screen which matched the one Dar used. Kerry wondered if it was standard, but was glad, because her eyes tended to hurt after a full day of staring at a smaller screen.

The computer booted to a network login, and she entered her ID and password, a little startled when her usual menu didn't appear, replaced by one with approximately four times as many options. "Uh oh." She made a face at it. "What *is* all this stuff?" ILIPC, PLIPC, NCS...it was an alphabet soup of choices along with the more familiar ones which gave her access to the payroll and personnel sections, and the customer database. Experimentally she chose one. "ILIPC, that was what Dar was having problems with. Let's see what that is."

It connected and she peered at the results. "Oh, Netview. Okay, I know what this is." She logged into the IBM mainframe application and tried a display all command. "Uh oh. Good grief, how huge. Wow, that's really huge."

The internal network was displayed, with lots of items marked as inactive. "Bet that's what Dar's fighting with, huh?" she commented, flicking the screen with a fingertip. "Well, back at home in Michigan, at the university, we used to do an ACT ALL." She typed it in, then hesitated.

"Ah...probably not a good idea. Oh, what the heck, it can't hurt." She hit Enter.

"That'll take forever, so..." She minimized the application and clicked on mail, startled when it opened and she had a mailbox full. "I guess that'll keep me busy for while. Good grief, what are all these things?" A lot of forwarding from Dar, stuff she was involved in apparently that she wanted Kerry to review. "Okay, let's see what we've got here." She started reading. "Jesus, designing Olympic racing bicycles and doing financial transfers for the Bank of New Zealand. Do you think this company can get any more diversified?"

There were all kinds of problems. All kinds of operational issues, like which processors could be assigned to which projects, and whose project took precedence. Kerry found herself becoming fascinated by the patchwork of interrelationships; she suspected she certainly wasn't going to be bored.

She got up and pulled out her few personal items from her briefcase, arranging her desk the way she liked it and prowling around the office to discover all the nooks and crannies. She opened the front door and peeked out, letting a tiny grin edge her lips when she spotted a neat kitchen just down the hall. "I bet there's coffee there," she decided, retrieving a cobalt-blue mug from her briefcase and ambling over.

She glanced around the kitchen and bit off a chuckle. "Wow, This is better equipped than the one in my apartment." There was a refrigerator, of course, with a sign on it. "Don't leave food for more than a week unlabeled or it will be glorped." Kerry shook her head. "I'm not gonna ask." The countertop held not only a regular coffee machine, but an espresso machine as well, and there were containers with various types of milk and cream, and real and fake sugar. As she selected artificial sweetener and poured a cup of coffee, a young girl entered behind her and said a cheerful hello.

"Hi." Kerry turned and leaned against the counter, stirring her coffee. The girl removed a small packet from the freezer and popped it in one of the three large, commercial microwaves in the rack near the door. "Breakfast?"

The girl turned and smiled. "Snackies." She chuckled. "I work for Eduard Castillo. He gets grumpy around this time if I don't feed him." She held out a hand. "Mary Evers."

Kerry took it. "Kerry Stuart."

The girl's eyes widened. "Omigosh. You're Dar Roberts' new assistant!"

The blonde woman forced a laugh. "Okay, are you going to tell me I'm brave, or stupid?"

A smile snuck onto the girl's face, and she leaned closer. "I was going to say lucky." She winked at Kerry, then removed the gently steaming packet from the microwave and set it on a small plate she'd brought with her. "Not everyone thinks Dar's a bad thing, you know."

Kerry was pleasantly surprised. "That's nice to hear, because I happen to like her." She relaxed into a grin. "And it's been murder having everyone look at me like I was out of my mind."

"You do, huh?" Mary bit her lower lip and chuckled softly. "That's interesting. I thought you came from Associated. They were almost axed, you know."

Sea green eyes studied her. "Oh yeah, I know," Kerry replied quietly. "I talked her out of it."

The woman stopped in mid motion and stared at her. "You did?"

Kerry took a sip of her coffee, which she found to be common, garden-variety office bland.

"Well, we debated the issue, and Dar found enough merit in my arguments to find a way around it, let's put it that way."

Mary blinked at her several times. "Holy shit," she blurted.

Kerry shrugged and smiled. "I'm really looking forward to working with her more. It's been a great experience so far."

"Uh, yeah. I can see that." Mary tucked a napkin under the plate hastily and started to back away.

"That's, uh...good to hear. Nice to meet you, Kerry. I've got to get this tamale back to the boss before he breaks all his pencils."

Kerry regarded the packet, which was wrapped in what looked like cornhusks. "Nice to meet you too. See you later." She paused. "Oh, what does your boss do?"

Mary turned as she was leaving. "Marketing for the Caribbean. Be seeing you."

She disappeared down the hall, and Kerry regarded the wall thoughtfully before she took her coffee back into her office. Her office. She grinned, as she just stood with her back against the wall and looked out the window. "Ah well. Back to work." She set down her cup and resumed her reading. She was so absorbed in it, she didn't hear the back door open or someone approach until a hand touched her arm, and she jumped. "Whoa!"

Dar seated herself on the edge of the desk and gazed at her with an enigmatic expression. "Hi."

"Oh, hi. Sorry, I didn't hear you coming. I was..." A little flustered, Kerry gestured at the screen.

"Trying to catch up on all this stuff you forwarded to me. I kind of sorted them into info and action..." She noticed Dar was smiling at her. "What? That wasn't the right thing to do?"

"You know, Kerry, they say it's your first impression that sticks with you in this company." Dar said. "Mine? Well, I told Alastair McLean he could kiss my ass, and that's kind of followed me up all these years."

"Really?" Kerry was intrigued. "Why did you do that?"

"Why did you tell me to go to hell?" Dar asked in a wry voice. "I remember enjoying it at the time. But anyway..."

"Sorry. You were saying...first impressions?" Kerry knew she was blushing, and hoped Dar didn't notice.

"Mmm-hmm. So, do you know what your first impression's going to be here?" Dar inquired, her blue eyes pinning Kerry down into her seat.

"Uh...no," Kerry replied nervously. "But you're going to tell me, right?"

"Oh, yeah. You're going to be known as the new kid who walked in on her first day, sat down, logged in, and brought an entire crashed network up."

Kerry froze and stared at her. "Uh...I didn't do that."

Dar pursed her lips and nodded soberly. "You are KSTUART01, aren't you?"

"Um, yes," she replied hesitantly. "Oh, Christ! That Netview command? Oh, Dar, don't tell me no one else thought of that," Kerry protested. "It's ridiculous. That's basic!"

A gentle sparkle entered Dar's very blue eyes. "Uh huh. Problem with us nerds is, sometimes when things go wrong, we forget to look for the simple things first. We go for the complex, involved crap instead." She grinned at Kerry. "They did a master load last night, and forgot that puts the system in console mode. It inactivates all the logical units so the new programs can get into place without being used."

"You're not a nerd," Kerry objected, aware that she was really blushing badly now. "Are you?"

"Sure I am, and so are you," Dar cheerfully informed her. "Good work, Kerry, you single-handedly validated my choice of assistants, started your own little legend in the making, and I didn't even have to do a thing."

Kerry basked in the warm approval, soaking it in with a shy pleasure. "Thanks, but I didn't mean to." Her face scrunched up in a wry grin. "What a way to start off, huh?"

Dar rubbed the back of her neck and chuckled. "There are worse ways. Listen, it's almost noon. Let's go down and get some lunch, then I'll give you the tour." She peered at Kerry's cup. "I see you found the kitchen all right."

Kerry nodded. "Yeah, nice setup. I like the microwaves because I usually bring in little frozen tray things for lunch."

A dark brow rose. "We have a cafeteria," Dar remarked dryly. "But if you prefer cardboard food, sure, go right ahead. They do ask that you don't overcook fish sticks, though, it takes us weeks to get the smell out of here."

"Do... Is the cafeteria your eating place of choice?" Kerry inquired. "I mean, god, that sounded funny, what I mean is, it is any good? A lot of them aren't." She grimaced. "When I think of cafeterias, I think of the one in college. Ugh."

"Mine too." Dar admitted. "I ended up eating mostly ice cream and cheeseburgers for four years."

Kerry chuckled ruefully as she stood up. "Pizza and sub sandwiches. I still smell textbooks whenever I get delivery pizza." She followed Dar out of the office and over to the elevator. "Guess that's different now, huh?" she commented as the doors slid open and they entered, having the elevator to themselves.

"Nope," Dar confessed a touch sheepishly. "Cheeseburger, fries, and a milkshake is still one of my regular favorites."

Kerry eyed her trim figure and blinked. "You sure don't look it. You must work out like crazy." Exhaling softly, Dar said, "Takes up a good bit of my spare time, yes. It's a way to work off the frustration, too." She waited for the doors to open, stepped through them onto the second floor, then led Kerry to an open set of double doors from which enticing smells emanated.

Dar attracted attention, Kerry noticed immediately. The minute her new boss cleared the door and entered the line, eyes shifted to her and nudges started. Puzzled, she looked at the taller woman, trying to figure out if there was something odd to cause the stir, but aside from Dar having her jacket off and her sleeves still rolled up, exposing tanned arms, she looked... Well, not like everyone else. Kerry picked up a tray and joined the line behind her, setting the puzzle aside for the moment. "Whoa, lot of choices," she commented in some surprise.

"I don't put up with mystery meat," Dar said, reviewing the selection. "And I pick the café vendor."

"Ah." Kerry watched in bemusement as her new boss quietly requested the meatloaf and mashed potatoes, then added a large glass of milk to her tray, along with a piece of cake. She sighed and selected a chef's salad and a glass of grapefruit juice, and followed Dar over to a corner table. "I feel like everyone's watching me," she murmured, as they unwrapped silverware.

"They are," Dar replied blithely. "You're the new kid. Something this exciting hasn't happened here since a Lufthansa 747 flying over dropped a wheel-bay door on top of us and it crashed through the atrium."

"Tch...Dar!" Kerry protested, as she nibbled a bit of ham. "I'm serious."

Blue eyes glanced up at her over a forkful of potatoes. "So am I," she replied honestly. "I'm high profile, everyone knows who I am, so when I take on an assistant, which has never successfully happened before, it's big news." She looked at her assistant. "I did warn you about that, right?"

Kerry sighed. "Yes, you did." She glanced around furtively, catching more than one set of eyes watching them. "But this is like having lunch in the San Diego Zoo if you're the panda."

Dar chuckled wryly. "Hate to say get used to it, but..." She straightened, deliberately swinging her head around and staring at each table. The attention shifted away and the sound around them rose conspicuously. Satisfied, Dar turned her attention back to her table companion. "So." She forked a bit of meatloaf. "What's new in eucalyptus futures?"

Kerry bit her lip to keep from laughing aloud. "Good Lord, you'd think they'd never seen you eat lunch before."

Dar bit down on her fork, thinking. "Well." She glanced up at Kerry. "I don't often. Maria usually brings something up for me."

"Oh." Kerry gave Dar an apologetic look. "Sorry, didn't mean to take your time up."

"Don't be." Dar took a sip of her milk. "I usually don't have anyone to sit with. Anyway, how are you settling in? I see you got to some of the mail. I have a short list of projects I want you to take over."

"Short list?" Kerry sat back and sipped at her grapefruit juice. "That was two pages of mail!"

Dar tipped her glass of milk towards her. "This isn't a research think tank. I think I did tell you."

Kerry reached over and touched her hand. "You warned me." She sat back again. "The diversity of the accounts here is amazing. What I got from the mails was how much you need to juggle resources to cover everything."

"Exactly." Dar nodded. "Ten pounds of gimmes in a three-pound inventory." She met Kerry's gaze squarely. "And I don't have time to babysit you. You find something that needs a decision? Make it."

For a moment, Kerry felt a little overwhelmed, and she slowly chewed a mouthful of her salad to gain some space to think in. At Associated, she'd made her share of decisions, but this was an entirely different animal.

"Scared?" Dar asked, one brow edging up. "Second thoughts?"

Kerry washed her mouthful down with a sip of juice. "No." She lifted her head and returned Dar's gaze. "I like a challenge."

"Fair enough." Her boss seemed pleased. "So do I, matter of fact." She wiped her lips. "I'm sure you'll figure it out fast enough. Everyone'll figure out you're a lot nicer than I am and come running to you first anyway." She leaned back in her seat and rested an elbow on the table, casually glancing around as Kerry finished up her juice. She noticed the way Kerry sat while she ate, upright and with exquisite manners. One hand rested in her lap as the other manipulated her fork, and she quietly chewed small bits of her salad and swallowed without speaking. "That any good?"

Kerry looked up with a slightly startled expression. "What?" She glanced down. "This?" Dar nodded.

Kerry reviewed the remnants of her lunch. "Yeah, it was fine. Why?"

"Just curious." Dar nibbled on her cake, content to relax as Kerry finished up. The crowd had thinned out a little, and the noise had died down, but she knew they were still the center of attention. She lifted a hand and waved as Duks entered, and the Finance VP swerved and moved in their direction. "Afternoon."

"That it is." Duks nodded, cocking his head towards Kerry. "Is this your new acquisition, my friend?"

Kerry's eyebrows hiked.

"Kerry, this is Lou Draefus," Dar said. "Everyone's an acquisition or a depreciation to him."

Kerry extended her hand out. "Nice to meet you, sir." She found her fingers grasped by a strong hold and released. "I've heard a lot about you."

"And the same here," he responded. "I would like to wish you good luck, Ms. Stuart. Don't let this creature scare you off too quickly, eh?"

Dar rolled her eyes.

"I'll try not to," Kerry replied politely, as he raised his hand and retreated back to the food line, where he was joined by Mariana from Personnel. "He's funny."

Dar drained her milk. "More than he realizes sometimes." Her expression was enigmatic. "If you're done, let's get your projects sorted out and throw you into the deep end."

"That could get kind of scary," Kerry murmured as they picked up their trays and deposited them in the washing area. "Better brush up on my dog-paddling, I guess."

A tall man half turned and watched them as they passed, and Kerry couldn't help but notice the animosity in his eyes when he looked at Dar. She waited for the elevator doors to close before she asked, though. "Who was that tall, kind of balding guy?"

"Peter Weyhousen." Dar replied. "He's the government contracts account manager."

"I don't think he likes you," Kerry observed with regret.

"Actually, he hates me," Dar corrected her. "Those two contracts I gave to Associated came from his area."

"I hate to think it's my fault if he got in trouble," Kerry muttered.

Dar surprised her by laughing. "Don't worry about that. Those two contracts were a gift to me, personally, from General Easton. He wouldn't have had them anyway."

She has a nice laugh, Kerry decided. It was low, and more a kind of chuckle deep in her chest than anything else, but it pushed a tiny wicked look into her eyes, and that was interesting to see. Dar gave her the promised tour, introducing her to various department managers, all of whom produced that nice, sickly sweet, "Hello, it's lovely to meet you" kind of smile that you knew would disappear as soon as you turned your back. That was all right, because Dar provided cutting commentary on each of them after they moved on.

A more thorough tour of the fourteenth floor followed. It was a roughly square floor, with large offices like Dar's on each corner. Dar's office was on the northeast corner, and the other three were parceled out to executives of the same level. On the southeast corner was Lou Draefus's office, the VP of Finance Kerry had met at lunch, whom Dar called Duks, then on the southwest corner sat John Dierhdohl, who was the Vice President for new accounts. The northwest corner held the showy space of Eleanor Anastasia, who was head of Marketing and Business Solutions. Since Dar was in charge of operations, her little wing included the MIS group, where Mark Polenti made a home, the security group, the network support and analysis division, and the small army of infrastructure personnel who worked on providing resources both inside and outside the company. Dar was in charge of everything ranging from setting up new circuits for the building, to the maintenance of the facilities (including the air conditioning, it seemed), to overseeing the huge private intranetwork which provided all their customers with connectivity and computing power. If new sales sold an account and promised them seventeen T1 lines with instant fallback, Dar's group handled the purchasing and designing of the circuits and the installation and maintenance of them. If the contract also provided a half dozen AS400 computers, Dar's group purchased, programmed, installed, and maintained those as well. It was, Kerry realized very quickly, the heart of the company, and now she had a good idea why Dar sat in the privileged position she did. Nobody wanted to piss her off, because everyone depended on her to get their job done. She told Dar that as they ended up back in the executive's office, and got a wry smile of acknowledgment in return.

"I knew I made the right decision," Dar said quietly. "There are people who've been working here for years and haven't yet figured that out."

Kerry felt rather proud of herself, on her first day. She thought Dar was pleased with her also, if the smile she'd given Kerry was any indication, and from a shaky beginning, she was feeling pretty good about her new job. She realized something else. What Dar's title was and what she did were two different things. She was in charge of Operations, yes, but what she really functioned as was the company's top troubleshooter. If there was a fire, Dar got sent, because on the bottom line, she simply knew what to do, and just did it, without regards to anyone's feelings, or protocol, or anything else.

No wonder everyone hated her. If you had Dar Roberts descend into your territory, it meant you had really screwed up, and she was there to bail you out. Not a nice feeling, Kerry realized, as she sat at her desk, reviewing the rest of her new projects. It also meant Dar was impossibly overworked, and Kerry suspected that was part of the cause of her reputation too--she simply didn't have time to be nice. She had to get in, make a decision, and get out so she could move on to the next crisis.

Dar had said she'd given Kerry about ten percent of the current projects she, herself, was working on. There were twenty-two projects on Kerry's work list now. *Ten percent. How in the hell does that woman even have time to sleep? I guess I'll find out.*

DAR WATCHED THE stars come out over the ocean through her window and leaned back, glad of a few moments peace at the end of a very long and very aggravating day. Which would have been longer and more aggravating if Kerry hadn't worked her magic that morning and resolved Dar's biggest problem, rendering everything else just bad and not disastrous.

Her purse slung over her shoulder, Maria came in to bid her good night. "You're late, Maria," Dar said quietly.

"Ay, and what should I say for you?" the secretary answered, walking over and standing on the other side of her boss's desk. "The *secretaritas* at your doctor's office had only one slot open, that's Thursday at two PM. I made that time, okay?"

Dar ignored the pounding in her head and smiled. "That's fine. I think I have a meeting in the morning on Thursday, then a lunch with John D. and his team, so that leaves the afternoon free." She could see the fatigue in Maria's face. "Pretty bad day, huh?"

Maria perched on a corner of the desk. "That poor little new *chiquita*. She seems very nice, Dar." Her face looked troubled. "I worry these people will eat her up."

"Nah." The dark-haired woman behind the desk shook her head. "She's tough. Did you see Jack's face when he barged in here and said the network mysteriously came back up? I had to check the logs to see what happened. Telling him my brand-new, wet-behind-the-ears, inexperienced assistant solved the problem his techs had been working on for twelve hours...god." Dar laughed. "That made my day."

Maria gazed at her, the lined face creasing into a faint, puzzled smile. "You like her, this little *chiquita*?"

"I think she's got a lot of talent and potential, yes," Dar answered. "Sure."

"Ah ah ah." Maria wagged a finger. "No, no...you *like* her."

A moment of silence fell as the light outside faded and left Dar mostly in shadows. The executive seemed to be asking herself that very question. "On a personal level..." She hesitated. "Yes, yes, I do like her. Why?"

The older woman sighed. "I been working for you five years, and I've never seen anyone else who makes you smile so much." She added, "Is good."

Dar was mildly stunned by the observation, more so when she realized it was true. "I...I guess it's just nice to have someone who's bright enough to figure things out. Not like the last bunch I tried in that position."

"Ay, right," Maria agreed quietly, still watching her. "Is good. I hope she works out." She waved. "Good night, Dar."

The executive nodded absently. "Good night, Maria. I'll see you in the morning." She waited for the click as the door shut, then she turned around in her chair and leaned back, steeping her fingers and regarding the rising moon. It was huge and hung over the horizon like a summer lantern, sending a rippling river of light across the almost calm ocean. "I hope so, too, Maria...I really do."

Chapter Ten

"I THINK THAT will work, but can we use that processor for something else in slack hours?" Kerry asked as she played with a pencil, pushing it against the surface of her desk and turning it over. "I know the banking group is looking for extra timeslices during their mids. Can we use it there?" She listened to the answer, then smiled and made a note on her pad. "Good, then I'm

going to call them and let them know they can count on you for that." She paused a moment and then continued, "Sure, the chargeback will go towards your budget." A pleased sound came from the phone. "Nice working with you, too ... Yes, that's right, Stuart, from Operations ... Well, thanks. I do try ... Good bye."

Kerry sat back as she cut the phone off. "Well, there's another one off the list." She picked up her cup, strawberry-scented steam wafting from it, and took a sip. "Making a dent."

A soft knock came at her door, and she turned as Dar entered, giving her a wry grin as she came over to perch on a corner of Kerry's desk. *She does that*, Kerry thought, *because it puts us more at a level*. Dar was so tall, she towered over Kerry anyway, and when she was sitting down, it just made it all the worse. *It's a nice touch*, she thought. "Hi. How's it going over there?"

Dar half shrugged. "Like it usually is." She rested her hands on her knee. "Let's talk about Denver."

Kerry felt a little nervous. "Okay."

"Two DS3s?" Dar's brows lifted.

God, I hate butterflies in my stomach. Kerry collected herself. "They just signed the banking account up there."

"And?"

She hated her palms sweating even more than the butterflies, but she kept herself from wiping them. "They're central. If we have dual pipes up there, we can use that as a third leg for the backbone in case of primary failure." Dar studied her in silence. "And I heard a rumor they're close to re-signing the big retail contract and they're going international," Kerry finished. "I didn't want us to get cut short."

Finally, Dar smiled. "Three out of three," she said. "Good decision, Kerry. What you didn't know is that they've been hiding a capacity problem up there from me for two months and that just solved it." She winked. "Nice work."

Kerry exhaled slowly, trying to hide the relief making her knees shiver. "Thanks, I was a little nervous after that screw-up I did in Phoenix."

Dar leaned on the desk. "It's all right. At least you screwed up on the conservative side. Much as I hate to pay for bandwidth we don't use, not having enough is a much bigger bitch for me to deal with."

Whew. Kerry hesitated, then looked up at Dar. "I just don't want to disappoint you, that's all."

Dar's expression gentled. "No chance." She cleared her throat. "Listen, I've got an appointment this afternoon, so I'm taking off. "

"Anything you need me to cover for you on?"

Dar exhaled and reached up to rub the back of her neck. "The Asia office might call. I've been arguing with them all week about getting new mainframes in there. See if you can reason with them."

She looks tired, Kerry realized. "Okay. Oh, listen...um, who can I talk to here about a bank transfer problem?" she asked. "It's mine. I mean, I think my EFT got messed up."

Dar stood up. "Why? Didn't it show up?" Her brow creased in concern as she regarded Kerry.

"That's not very damn funny if it's true."

"N-no. It did, last night, but it was...I think maybe because I transitioned, it got sent twice. Is that possible?"

Dar's expression turned impish, just for an instant. "It's possible," she agreed. "But it's far more likely you actually got paid what you were worth this time." She headed for the door, pausing as

she opened it and turned. "The position," she indicated Kerry's office, "came with a raise. Sorry I forgot to mention it."

Kerry stared at the door until it closed. "Son of a gun!" she finally sputtered after a moment's silence. "Dar, you..." She exhaled, feeling a surge of relief and surprise and something she wasn't quite sure she could identify flood through her. "You're something else." *Something else.*

She clicked on her menu and went into the personnel program, typing in her codes and bringing up her own records. She propped her chin on her fist as she looked at the screen, not quite knowing whether to be proud or apprehensive at the amount showing.

Am I worth it? "Dar seems to think so." She closed the program and leaned back. "I think I'm going nerd-shopping tonight. I'm tired of that old desktop." With a slight laugh that lengthened into a more joyous one, she turned back to her project list and called up the next one, smiling all the while.

DAR HAD LONG ago decided that everyone just naturally hated going to the doctor's office. She knew she wasn't alone in that, and she suspected it had more to do with the loss of personal dignity than anything else. She closed her eyes and tried to call up some patience, while she sat in the examining room in a gown half the size of a cocktail napkin.

The door pushed open and Dr. Steve came in. He was an older man in his sixties, with a kindly, sweet face. "Well, well. Look who we have here."

Dar sighed. "Hi, Dr. Steve." She managed to keep a wry grin off her face. The older man had been her family doctor for years and still treated her as though she were a gawky adolescent.

He assumed his stethoscope and laid it on her back, then moved around to her chest, listening with that annoyingly omniscient manner developed by most doctors. "Breathe."

She obediently did so, flexing her arm a little against the pain from three bouts of blood-drawing.

"Okay, lie down." Dr. Steve proceeded to gently examine her, his fingers steady and professional as they poked and prodded. "You've got a bruise here."

"Just from the gym," Dar said, untruthfully.

"This too?" He picked up her right hand and examined the faded bruises along the knuckles.

"You're not going back to your scary younger days are you, chipmunk?"

Dar chuckled wryly. "I'm long past that, and you know it."

"Mmm." The older man felt up along her neck carefully, rolling her head to one side and then to the other. "Pretty stiff."

"Part of the problem, I think," Dar acknowledged ruefully. "That's where the pain usually starts."

"Uh huh. How've you been sleeping?"

A shrug. "All right. About the same as always."

"So still doing the four or five a night, huh?" Dr. Steve remarked dryly. "You'd do yourself a favor if you'd sneak in an extra hour or two."

Dar exhaled. "I tried. I just can't fall asleep. And if I do, I wake up early."

The older man leaned on his hands and studied her. "No, you never could. Your daddy was the same way." He sighed. "How are you feeling otherwise?" He put his stethoscope against her chest and listened. "Any flutters? You feeling out of breath anytime?"

Dar thought about that. "Not that I noticed," she replied slowly. "When the pain's really bad, I'm more conscious of my heartbeat, feels like it's causing the throbbing."

"That's natural," Dr. Steve told her. "Sit up."

She did so, reaching up and running a hand through her hair. "So, what's the story? Am I dying?" The comment about her heart made her a touch nervous, and it showed. Her mouth went dry, and she swallowed uncomfortably as she waited for him to answer.

The doctor rolled his eyes. "If you are, you're the healthiest dying person I've ever examined."

He leaned back against the wall in the small room. "Your blood work's a mess, Dar. Your white cell count is down, every stress indicator we know of is up, and I'm a little worried about some of the things I see with your pressure. I scheduled you over to Miami Heart for a stress test. No, don't argue with me, all right? Humor me, I'm an old man, Dar. I really think you need it."

Dar let her head drop and exhaled. "I don't have time for that."

He gently reached over and tipped her chin up to face him. "You don't have time not to do it, sweetheart. Come on, they're not busy today. It'll take an hour, and then you can tell me you told me so, okay?"

"An hour, huh?" She hesitated, then surrendered. "All right, but I think you're barking up the wrong tree."

"Uh huh, and you got your medical degree where?" the older man inquired pointedly. "Of course, we could dispense with all this if you'd just take my advice and take a week off, go bum around in the Keys or out on the boat somewhere."

A crafty look entered the pale blue eyes. "Oh, so all I have to do is agree to go on vacation, and I don't have to go over to the Institute?"

Dr. Steve wagged a finger at her. "Oh no, you tricky little girl you. I know you, you'll agree, then you won't go for two years." His voice gentled. "Dar, please. I hate to see you doing this to yourself." He cocked his head. "It's not going to get better, honey. It's just going to get worse, unless you start taking it easier."

Dar was silent for a bit, then she finally nodded. "All right, I get the message. I'll arrange, somehow, to take a few days off." She paused. "Meantime, can you give me something for the damn headaches? I've been taking over the counter, but..."

The older man nodded. "You go to the Institute, I'll give you a scrip for a combination painkiller and muscle relaxant. That should help. Deal?"

Dar hesitated, then capitulated. "Deal. Look, I know I feel lousy. Hey, I even got myself an assistant. How do you like that?"

"Did you?" Dr. Steve glanced up with a surprised smile. "You found someone who could put up with you? Virgin Mary, it's a miracle." He laughed at the look on her face. "He must be a saint." A dark brow lifted. "She." Dar felt her face creasing into an unexpected smile.

His own grizzled eyebrow edged up. "Ah. I see." He patted her knee gently. "You'll have to introduce me to this modern day Job-ette sometime."

Dar snorted. "C'mon, I'm not that bad. Kerry deals with me just fine. She's a nice kid." Another smile.

Dr. Steve leaned back and regarded her wisely. "If she makes you smile like that, she must be nice," he teased, watching a faint blush color her skin. "Now I really want to meet her."

"I'd better get dressed and get outta here if I have to go across town." Dar ignored the prodding. "I've still got stuff to do back at the office." She hopped off the table, grabbed her clothes and the prescription the doctor held out. "Thanks, Dr. Steve."

He stood and patted her arm. "Good seeing you, my friend. I'll call you when I get the results of the stress test, okay?"

"Right." Dar sighed resignedly. "On my way."

"HELLO, MARIA." KERRY slipped in the door and gave the older woman a smile.

The secretary looked up from her task. "Ay, *chica*, come in here." She waved Kerry in and patted the chair next to her desk. "What have you been doing? I heard two people in the lunchroom saying very lovely things about you."

Kerry obligingly dropped into the chair. It had taken a day or two of them gingerly feeling each other out, but she felt that Maria and she had decided to like each other. Apparently Maria had felt Dar needed some help for quite some time, but she resented the usual parade of applicants, who tended to treat the secretary as...well, like a secretary. Kerry had taken her cue from Dar and accorded Maria a high degree of respect, deferring to her whenever possible. "Oh, this and that. Trying to get some of my work list done, you know." She smiled. "Anything hot you need taking care of with the boss out of the office?"

Maria rolled her eyes. "When is there never hot things? You might could take a look at this." She handed Kerry a folder. "Customer Service sent over and put it right on my desk."

"Okay." Kerry took it, then she glanced around. "Is Dar coming back today?"

Maria looked around as well, though they were both quite alone. "*Si*, she's supposed to, but she's at the doctor's."

Green eyes widened. "Just a check-up, or..."

The secretary hesitated, torn between her knowledge of Dar's intensely private nature and her need to share her concerns. "It's the headaches. She gets them so bad, she went to have them check her out," she finally said. "But, shhh, she doesn't like to talk about it."

"Yeah, I noticed she takes a lot of aspirin, but her job's enough to give a rock a headache."

"Ay." Maria sighed. "Is good you help her out. It's terrible the way they expect so much of her."

They both jumped a little as the door opened and Dar slid inside, giving them both a look of mild surprise. "Afternoon," she muttered as she walked through the outer office and pushed her own door open. "Anything going on?"

Kerry and Maria exchanged apprehensive glances. Dar's demeanor was quiet and grim, and her blue eyes lacked their customary sparkle. Kerry stood up and held up the file. "Just some stuff from customer service. I was going to take care of it."

Dar regarded her for a moment, wrestling with her conscience, then gave her assistant a nod.

"Good." She turned and went into her office, putting her briefcase down and dropping into her chair. Instead of glancing at her monitor, though, she turned her seat and gazed out of the window, watching the slow drift of clouds across horizon in the east.

A soft knock made her look around. "Yeah?" The door edged open, and Kerry poked her blonde head in. Dar exhaled and lifted a hand, motioning her in. *No sense in taking out my nerves on the kid, right?* "C'mere."

Kerry obeyed, moving across the carpet and settling in the chair across from Dar's desk, the folder clasped in both hands. She looked uncharacteristically nervous. She took a breath.

"Everything okay?"

Dar spared her a wry smile. "Does everyone in the building know where I went?"

"No, just us, I guess." Kerry obviously meant herself and Maria. "Don't be mad at Maria for telling me, she's just worried about you."

Caught between annoyance and embarrassment, Dar compromised by rolling her eyes.

"Please forget I asked," Kerry stated hastily. "Next topic. I think the whole Tucson thing is going to work out. Infrastructure was able to complete the T3 circuit on time, now they're just waiting for the installers to get there."

"That's good. I was afraid they'd screwed that one up past redemption. Did you sit on them until they finished it?"

"Well, not exactly. I just kind of talked to the client and got some concessions from his building management to make it easier for them to finish," Kerry explained quietly.

"Good work." Dar hesitated. "Kerry?" Green eyes lifted and met hers. "I'm fine, thank you for asking."

Kerry blinked. "I know you don't like people getting into your personal business," she said softly. "I didn't mean to intrude or anything. I'm glad everything's all right."

Dar felt a quiet regret at the woman's apology. "I...I don't mind, not if it's Maria, or if it's you. I just don't like the entire company involved." She gave Kerry a brief smile. "You'd be surprised at what passes for juicy gossip around here."

"That's not something to gossip about." Kerry frowned. "That's rotten."

That got her another brief grin. "I can't say I don't agree, and I'm not one for idle chatter myself, but it's a fact of life here." Dar leaned back in her chair.

Kerry pressed her lips together and nodded. "I understand." She looked up, studying Dar's half shadowed face. "Anyway, I'm glad things are okay." There was the faintest hint of a question in her tone.

Dar leaned forward and rested her arms on her desk. "Mostly," she admitted, "I basically got told I should take a vacation and not work so hard." She shrugged. "Like always. I got some drugs for the headaches, and that was it."

Kerry absorbed the revelation. "So, when was the last time you took a vacation?" She asked curiously. "I know mine was a while ago, so much stuff was going on. I went over to Marco Island for a few days." It had been a fun excursion; she and a few of the folks from Associated had rented a small cabin on the west coast of Florida, and spent some time looking for shells, and bumming around on the beach.

Dar concentrated. "Um, I think mine was...skiing in Colorado," she recalled. "About a week. I ended up meeting most of the trees in Aspen up close and personal." She chuckled softly. "I finally got the hang of it on the last day, but I haven't been back since."

"That sounds like fun. I've been skiing a bunch of times. I'm not that good at it, though," Kerry confessed with a smile. "I ran into a rabbit my last time, and went head over heels. Ended up with a broken wrist."

"Ouch." Dar laughed.

"So, are you going to take the doctor's advice? Take a vacation, I mean?"

Dar looked up. "You trying to get rid of me?" Her tone was light, but wary.

"No," Kerry answered very seriously. "I'm trying to figure out how I'm going to get a machine gun mounted on my desk in time." She held up her hands. "*Rattataataa.*"

Dar couldn't help it. She burst into laughter again, leaning back and feeling her whole body relax from the day's tension. "And here I thought you were the peaceful sort," she teased as she rested her elbows on her chair arms, then leaned her chin against her interlaced fingers. "Machine Gun Stuart, huh?"

Kerry grinned at her. "I was trap shooting champion during high school," she admitted. "Loved nailing those clay ducks."

Surprised once again by the many facets she was discovering in Kerry, Dar asked, "Really?"

"Yeah." Her assistant nodded. "Trap and debating. Bad mix, really."

Dar chuckled at the image. An idea burst into her mind, and she started talking before she really thought about what she was doing. "Listen, I've got to go to the South Miami office for a quick meeting. I think you should come along, so I can introduce you to the guys down there."

"Okay," Kerry agreed amiably, somewhat tickled at being able to make Dar laugh. "Sounds good to me, and it's on my way home, practically, anyway."

"Hey, we could try that Thai restaurant after the meeting. It's right by there. I didn't get any lunch, so..." Dar felt a little awkward but relaxed when she saw Kerry's eyes light up. "Haven't had that in a long time."

"Sure," The younger woman agreed enthusiastically. "I've been waiting for a chance to try it. None of my friends like Thai, so it was wait around for someone who does, or go by myself." She made a face. "I hate doing that."

Dar glanced at her hands. "I've gotten used to it over the years," she commented lightly. "But I know what you mean." She stood up. "Well, then, let's get going. That meeting's set for five o'clock."

"I'll get my things and meet you at the elevator," Kerry agreed, and trotted out.

The room seems so much more empty without her in it, Dar mused. She hardly knew why she'd brought up the restaurant, other than the fact that she was hungry now, and... *And.*

Dar chewed her lip. "And you like spending time with the kid," she told herself wryly. "Come on, just admit it. She's got a fresh perspective, a whole lot different from yours, and for some crazy reason, she likes you." A soft sigh. "Damned if I know why, either." She sat pondering that for a moment more, then gathered her things and headed out.

"SO, HER SECRETARY goes in and gets the cup, then washes it out with vinegar!" Kerry picked up a stuffed shrimp, and took a bite. "Wow, that's great... Where was I? Oh, I'm standing there, getting coffee, and I just looked at her."

"Mmm." Dar nibbled on her own shrimp and listened, getting a kick out of the stories of things she certainly never saw. "Vinegar, huh? That explains a lot about Vi."

"Shhh. Right, so I see she doesn't even rinse the cup, then she pours decaf into it. My curiosity finally got the better of me. I asked her what she was doing, and she just kinda laughed." Kerry cautiously took a sip of the amber fluid in the wine glass that had just been set before her.

"Oh...that is good."

"I don't drink much, but I can take a glass or two of this," Dar admitted. "I keep a bottle of it around the house. Nice to sip out on the balcony sometimes."

"I try not to go over my limit very often," Kerry sighed. "They get me out at a club once in a while though, and I usually regret it in the morning." She took another sip of the plum wine.

"Anyway, so I ask her, and she tells me that she and a few of the other secreta--excuse me, administrative assistants..." They exchanged rolled eyes. "A few of them really want this other coffee vendor to do the building or at least the floor. But this one is the building manager's cousin, or brother-in-law, or whatever. So, they won't change even though they think the coffee's lousy."

Dar bit through another appetizer, which was shrimp stuffed with crabmeat and deep-fried until it was crunchy. It had an orange/ honey/ginger dipping sauce she particularly liked. "Well, it's not the best, but it's not the worst either," she commented of the coffee.

"That's what I thought, too. I mean, it's office coffee, not Starbucks, for Christ's sake." Kerry shook her head. "But they've got this scheme. They put the vinegar in her boss's coffee because

they know she's got a big mouth, and she'll complain all the time. Then if she does that long enough, they'll change."

Dar laughed. "Oh, hell. Vi does complain about that constantly, too. I'm in trouble now! Next time we have an executive committee meeting, and she starts going on about the coffee, I'm going to lose it." She relaxed in her chair. "Why don't they just buy whatever damn coffee they like, and bring it in?"

Kerry eyed the large plate of white rice and the container of chicken curry that had just been set down in front of her. "Uh oh. Looks like I'll have lunch tomorrow out of this."

"Bet you don't." A quick grin edged Dar's face. "It's got a way of disappearing."

"Yeah, into me." Kerry patted her stomach wryly. "Oh, about the coffee. Well, that's what I suggested to her, I mean, they've been doing this for three months, Dar. In that time, they could have hired Juan Valdez as consultant, you know?" Dar snickered. "They looked at me like I was a three-headed dog." She lifted her hands in a shrug. "They made a snarky comment about how not everyone worked for you and got paid megabucks."

A dark brow lifted. "You're not my secretary," Dar stated flatly. "I pay people what they're worth."

Kerry blushed slightly and fiddled with her plate, mixing her rice with the fragrant curried chicken. "I just told them I guess I picked the right boss, then." She lifted her eyes shyly and met Dar's. "And I think that's true, regardless of what I was getting paid."

Dar was silent for a moment, absorbing the unexpected compliment. "So, does that mean I haven't scared you off yet?" Her tone was joking, but there was a serious undercurrent to it.

"I guess that's what it means," Kerry replied. "I really like what I'm doing. I'm learning so much." She exhaled and gave Dar a smile.

"That's a relief," her boss answered quietly. "As of tonight, you've officially lasted the longest ever of my assistants.

Congratulations." Dar lifted her glass and held it up, letting a quiet, almost wistful smile touch twist her lips as Kerry touched her glass to it. "Wasn't quite what you expected two weeks ago, hmm?"

A small laugh. "No, it sure wasn't, but I've learned that sometimes things happen for a reason. I think this is one of those things." Kerry reflected that toasting her new boss with plum wine over very good chicken curry wasn't what she expected either, but she'd take that, too. "No complaints."

Dar was contented. She'd made the right choice and events were proving that out to the point where even Duks had made a comment, nudging her in the ribs and complimenting her on Kerry's handling of some account or other. "Thought you were picking for looks there, my friend. Guess I was wrong." She'd smirked in response. "You're so superficial, Ducky. You gotta learn to look beneath the surface." She'd gotten a good employee, and a smart manager, and...
And.

Their eyes met casually, and Dar felt a gentle warmth in her gut. *Good god, I might have even found a friend, scary as that thought is.* At least someone she could have dinner with once in a while without worrying about being bored. "Glad to hear it."

Kerry sighed happily and chewed her curry. "So..." She swallowed. "In this 'us and them' thing, who, exactly, is *us*, Dar?" She wiped her lips. "Because you need so many score cards in that office, I'm considering putting it in an Access database."

Dar almost inhaled a bit of rice. "Don't make me laugh like that. I'll choke," she protested. "Okay. Well, who is us... That's a hard question, because everyone has their own agenda. You realize that, right?"

Kerry nodded, but didn't speak as she munched.

"Duks--that's Lou Draefus--and Mariana and I usually team up in senior level meetings. That frustrates Sales and Marketing, because between Finance, Personnel, and Ops... Well, they call us Cerberus behind our backs, speaking of the three-headed dog," Dar explained between bites.

"Duks and I go way back. He was an account-level comptroller when I started, and we found out we worked well together, so they teamed us up on a lot of things. It worked for both of us."

"Why do you call him Duks?" Kerry asked curiously.

A smirk edged Dar's face. "It's a long, embarrassing story involving a gym bag, the artificial lake outside, a duck, and me having to have the carpets on the tenth floor dry cleaned. I won't go into it."

"Please don't," Kerry spluttered, holding her napkin to her mouth. "I don't think I could take it. My head may explode." She cleared her throat. "Okay, so, Lou, Mariana, and you are a clique." Dar considered that. "I guess." She shrugged. "We know we can depend on each other--at least in the context of running our divisions." She swallowed. "S and M are natural adversaries. They try to push the boundaries and sell things that sometimes overreach our capacity. It's my job to not let them do that." She took a sip of wine, draining her glass, then motioned for the waiter to refill it. "Duks' number-crunchers have to approve all the contracts. So between us, we have a pretty big stick."

"Mmm." Kerry mulled this over, smiling and nodding as the waiter offered to fill her glass. "You have the most clout though, don't you?"

Dar put a bit of chicken in her mouth and bit down, slicing through it neatly. "I make things happen," she stated bluntly. "Or not. So I guess I do." She considered. "It's a double-edged sword though, because I have to deliver one hundred percent of the time."

"That's a lot of pressure," Kerry acknowledged. "They say Lou and Mariana are lovers. Is that true?"

Silence fell as Dar considered how to answer that. "I've never been invited into their bedrooms." Kerry flushed. "Sorry, that was an inappropriate question," she murmured. "I don't know what I was thinking. I'm sorry, Dar."

"No, gossip is a fact of life in a place that size," Dar sighed. "Any time you have two people who spend a lot of time together, you get that kind of thing spreading around. I've heard the rumors, and they are very good friends, but beyond that, who knows?"

"People spend a lot of time wondering." Kerry shrugged. "Seems kind of counterproductive to me."

Dar chuckled. "You'd be surprised what's fair game for speculation. For instance, I heard yesterday that there was something going on between Maria and the night security chief."

"What?" Kerry's head jerked up. "Maria's married!"

A faint smirk. "And your point is?" Dar archly inquired. "Seems she was seen talking to him in one of the supply rooms in a very low voice."

Kerry snorted. "Bullshit, I was there!" she protested. "She was telling him one of the junior clerks was taking reams of paper out of the building."

"See?" Dar chuckled. "It's insidious."

Kerry's face sobered. "Maria would be very hurt to find out people were talking about her that way," she stated quietly. "She's a very devout woman, and the way she talks about her husband, I think she really loves him."

Dar smiled. "I think you're right, which is why I told the person telling me that if I heard it ever again, I was going to root out who was saying it and fire them on the spot."

"Can you really do that?"

A quietly impish grin transformed Dar's usually sober face. "No, but everyone thinks I can, and they know I've got the guts to."

The green eyes across from her gentled into something very like awe. "I guess that's why I don't hear much gossip about you, huh?" she murmured.

Dar's face went still for a moment, then she tilted her head to one side slightly. "I've had my share," she commented. "Just not lately." She watched Kerry from the corner of her eye, catching the blush visible near her neckline. "I'd like to keep it that way."

Kerry studied her. "My father's a senator," she said. "I grew up knowing how not to tell anyone anything." Her lips tensed into a tiny smile. "Besides, I think you scare people too much."

Dar blushed a little under her gaze and dropped her eyes, fiddling with her fork. "The reputation comes in handy sometimes, yes. And, um...I tend to be very protective of my staff, those that stay on, anyway. Most people know that."

Kerry laughed softly. "Well, I certainly feel safe." She looked up and met pale blue eyes gazing back at her, and a faint, not unpleasant shiver went down her back. "But I'll try not to do anything that gets me talked about."

"Fair enough," Dar replied quietly, glancing up as the waiter removed their plates and set down a warm platter with tiny Thai doughnuts and sweet dipping sauce in the center of the table. "We didn't..."

"No, is come with your dinner," the man hastened to explain with a little bow.

They exchanged wry glances and Dar shrugged. "Thanks." She chuckled and picked one up, dipping it in the sauce and tasting it. "Mmm, these are good."

Watching her enjoyment, Kerry sighed, "I was afraid you were going to say that." She sampled one. "The one downside to working for you--it's dangerous for my waistline. You and all your cookies and things."

Dar stopped and licked her fingers. "I want to make sure you're not going to blow away if they open the doors up there," she said, with a little chuckle. "A justifiable concern, I think...if you don't mind me saying so."

Kerry stared at her, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Suddenly realizing she'd just stepped into dangerous waters, Dar almost slapped herself. "Um. Just...ah, never mind." She waved a hand. "Sorry. Loss of brain moment."

Blonde brows furrowed. "I don't 'never mind' well," she said apologetically. "Now you've got me curious." She leaned forward a little. "What?"

Dar mentally cursed herself out. "Um..." She took a breath. "It's just my opinion, and doesn't count, but I think you should maybe consider not starving yourself quite so much." She reached over and took Kerry's hand, turning it over and putting a thumb against the prominent bones in her wrist. "It's probably why you're so cold all the time."

It took Kerry several seconds before she could sort through the little speech, mostly because she was focusing on the incredible warmth of the fingers curled around her arm. She studied the tanned skin intently, before she looked up and met Dar's pale eyes. "Your opinion counts." She

sighed a little, "And you're probably right. I just get a lot of flak from my folks otherwise, and it's easier not to have to put up with that."

Dar released her. "Well, just a thought." She smiled to ease the tension that had formed. "Maybe I can come up with some healthier snacks upstairs--broccoli brownies or something."

Kerry let out a surprised chuckle. "I bet you hate broccoli." Her eyes twinkled.

A hint of a mischievous look danced across Dar's face. "Someone once told me it stunted your growth." She indicated herself. "I never touched the stuff."

The blonde woman relaxed. "How tall are you, anyway? The other day, when we were in the elevator together with all those mirrors, was the first time I realized just how much taller you are than I am."

"A little over six feet," Dar acknowledged with a rueful grin. "Without heels," she added. "Hey, thanks for indulging in my whim to come and eat here. This place is pretty good."

Kerry sat back with her wine glass and thoughtfully finished off the contents. "Yeah, it really is. I think I can mark it down as a new favorite," she said. "Nice to have a friend who likes Thai, too."

"Definitely." Dar considered a moment, then interlaced her fingers and rested her chin on them.

"Anytime you want to indulge, just give me a call."

A quiet smile crossed Kerry's face. "That's a deal."

KERRY MUSED QUIETLY about her evening as she changed out of her work clothes and into a T-shirt and shorts. She glanced up as a soft knock sounded and sighed. "C'mon in."

Colleen bounded in and put her hands on her hips. "And where have you been, young lady?"

Don't tell me the Gorgon has you working late already. I'm telling you, Ker, you can't let her rope you into those kinda hours."

"Not exactly." Kerry chuckled, pulling out her Rollerblades. "I mean, yes, we had a late meeting, but it was down here, and we...I found someone to go eat Thai with me, so I tried out that new restaurant I was telling you about."

"They sauté cats, y'know," Colleen advised her, plopping down on the couch and removing her own skates from around her neck. They'd planned to go out skating, and she'd been watching for Kerry's car. "Not that you can tell what the hell's in there in any case."

The blonde woman rolled her eyes. "It was chicken, Col. Just chicken, rice, some stuffed shrimp, and these really nice little doughnuts for dessert." She pulled on a skate and tightened the laces.

"And it's Vietnamese that uses cats, not Thai."

"Mmm-hmm. So, should I be jealous? You've got a new friend at work, eh? What's his name?"

Colleen coaxed mischievously. "How'd you con him into dubious restaurants so fast?"

Kerry stopped lacing and rested her hands on her knee before looking up. "Um. It's a her, and it's Dar, and she didn't need any conning. She likes Thai."

Colleen's jaw dropped. "No shit? You were out having dinner with your boss, again?" She clucked under her breath. "If I didn't know you better, I'd be thinking you were doing some first class butt kissing here."

"Tch. You're just pissed because I finally found someone who'll eat that stuff with me." She gave a soft laugh. "Besides, she's kinda fun."

The redhead slapped her hand to her temple. "I didn't hear that." She plugged both ears. "I'm not listening to you tell me that fire-breathing dragon is 'fun.' Kerry, this is the bitch who was going to fire you and everyone at Associated two weeks ago, remember?"

Kerry bristled unexpectedly. "Don't call her that. She was just doing her job."

"That's what the Nazis said," Colleen replied unrepentantly. "I can't believe you're sitting here defending her."

Kerry finished tying her laces, then stood, balancing easily. "It's different now, Colleen. I understand a lot more about what was going on behind all the decisions she was making. She's not a bad person."

"So, it's okay for her to just fire everyone now?" The redhead stared at her. "Is that what you're saying?"

"No. Understanding is not the same as agreeing with. It's just that I can take what she does separate from who she is."

Colleen grabbed her head with both hands. "You're confusing the daylights out of me."

"Well, put on your skates and let's get going." Kerry sighed. "Look, it's simple--I didn't like what she did. It's why I decided to try and join her department, so maybe I could change her mind on things. But I do like who she is, I like her, as a person--regardless of what she does at work. You understand?"

Her friend finished tying off her skates and stood, wobbling a little. "I understand she's charmed the hell out of you, that's for sure." She shook her head. "Just...Kerry, be careful, okay? I don't want to see you throw yourself into this job, only to have it backfire on you, and have her screw you over."

She wouldn't do that. The words came naturally to her lips, without thought, but Kerry clamped her jaw shut on them, realizing it wasn't something she could easily explain knowing. "I'll be careful. I know sometimes things can get ugly, especially at the level she's at. Thanks for being concerned about me."

"Mmph," Colleen grumbled. "Someone's got to be." She followed Kerry out the door and down the sidewalk. "So, how's she treating you up there anyway?"

Kerry swung into an easy rhythm, heading down the paved street. "Pretty good, really. She keeps sabotaging me with cookies. She thinks I don't weigh enough." She gave Colleen a wry look.

"We share a lot of the same tastes in goodies."

"Ah." Her friend nodded. "Okay, she gets a point then." She paused. "But only one, mind you."

She tugged at Kerry's shirt. "*I've* been telling you that for months."

"Yeah, yeah." Kerry rolled her eyes. "Come on, I'll race you to the corner."

Chapter Eleven

KERRY ENTERED THE conference room and gave a smiling nod to the assembled group as she slipped into a chair halfway down the table. It was the first meeting she was going to attend without Dar's comforting presence by her side, and she was a little nervous. She put her PDA down on the table and glanced around, folding her hands together.

The meeting was to coordinate a project to replace the current technology they were using for their huge intranetwork with a more advanced type, and that affected virtually everyone in the company. Dar had meant to attend, but she was in the middle of straightening out a huge problem affecting the entire West Coast and had told Kerry to just go on, take notes, and not to agree to anything.

Easy enough. She was a little worried about Dar, though. The morning had started out fine, but after she'd taken care of the day's urgent morning e-mail, she'd stopped by to check on something and found her boss standing by her window, staring out at the water with a grim expression. Something was bothering her. Even after only two weeks, Kerry could see it plainly. Dar had

given her brief answers, a dismissive attitude that had surprisingly hurt. But there was this meeting, and they had work to do, so there was no time for her to ask any more questions. So she sat here, instead, worrying about someone she barely knew and sitting in a meeting she was barely prepared for. Kerry sighed. *Good thing it's Friday.* She glanced up as a tall, bearded man stepped to the head of the table and sat down, shuffling some papers in front of him, then looking at her with an unpleasant frown.

"Do I understand we're not deemed important enough for Ms. Roberts to be here?"

Kerry bit her tongue for a minute, then cleared her throat. "Actually, she's cleaning up a mess out in the western region. She asked me to sit in for her."

The younger man sitting next to him winced. "Ouch. The Pacific deal?"

Kerry nodded. "She forced Unisys to ship those mainframes a week early, and she was pushing some of the folks out there to get a team out for install."

The bearded man didn't look any happier, but he grunted and focused his attention on his papers.

"Well, all right, let's get started with this." He glanced at his neighbor. "You have a technology presentation?"

Kerry settled in, opening her PDA and scribbling a few notes as the lights dimmed and a circuit diagram flashed on the screen.

DAR TOOK A sip of the water on her desk and focused her attention on the woman sitting in front of her desk. The Marketing VP was busy outlining a new scheme and wanted Dar's input on whether or not their current infrastructure would be able to handle it. She took a breath and swallowed, forcing down the nausea that had added itself to her daily headache, today's being worse than usual, so bad that she suspected what she was suffering was actually a migraine. It had started with a spell of tunnel vision, the edges of her sight becoming a whirling, sparkling blurriness. The pain had started at the base of her skull and was working upward, the throbbing so bad it was making her stomach upset. The Marketing VP's voice wasn't helping. Eleanor had an unfortunate nasal voice, and Dar felt herself losing her concentration, wanting nothing more than to curl up in a dark place and tune the world out.

But she couldn't. There was too much to do, so she grimly sucked down more water, calculating whether she could risk downing another four or five ibuprofen. "Looks good, Eleanor. We can work out the bandwidth, but I'd write in the overhead for additional T3s into those contracts."

The woman scribbled a note, nodding. "Yes, we can do that."

The phone rang, and Dar punched the speakerphone button. "Yes?"

"Dar, we've got a problem." Mark's voice was irritated. "T and T requested Internet access for some of their senior techs, and they've got an open TCP/IP stack on their boxes. I can proxy them, but there's a chance someone can get into them from that damn intranet they support and hit us from the inside."

"Fine. No," Dar uttered, resting her head on her hand. "Tell T and T nothing doing."

"I did," Mark replied. "But Alai's complaining up and down the place and chewing my ass."

Dar took a breath and released it. "Tell him I said no," she answered evenly. "Tell him if he has a problem with that, he can call me directly and I'll tell his little, punky, unintelligible ass no."

Momentary silence. "Okay," Mark answered slowly, drawing out the word.

"And you can tell him from me, if he's so stupid he can't understand a simple concept like network security, we can find him a new position painting stripes outside in the parking lot of the Bank of New Zealand," Dar continued, her voice deepening into a growl.

Longer silence. "I think I'll let you tell him that," the MIS chief finally replied with a hesitant chuckle. "I don't want to deprive you of the pleasure."

The throbbing got worse, and Dar suspected she was near throwing up, the very thought of which made her head hurt even more. "Thanks." She hung up, then looked at Eleanor "Are we done?" The woman blinked at her. "You all right, Dar?" she politely inquired. "Not that you usually aren't in a foul mood, but this seems a bit much, even for you."

Blue eyes pinned her mercilessly. "Are we done?" Dar repeated testily.

The woman stood and shook her head. "Yes. Have a nice...weekend, Dar." She paused. "Or whatever." She walked out, closing the door behind her with an unnecessary force and gave Maria a look. "She's got a bug up her ass today, doesn't she?" Her eyes fell on Kerry, who had just entered the office and was now standing near the secretary's desk. "Oh, sorry, honey, you're still kinda new, aren't you? Haven't gotten sick of her yet? My god, you've lasted six times as long as the others. You must be some kind of saint."

Kerry gazed at her. "I like my job, and my boss," she replied mildly. As the woman just shook her head and walked out, Kerry turned her attention back to Maria. "She has been pretty upset all day; is something up?"

Maria shrugged. "I tell you...something is wrong, but she won't say." The secretary lowered her voice. "I worry. She got a call from the doctor today, early this morning. She's been so quiet since." She nudged Kerry. "You better go in, she was asking where you were."

"Okay." Kerry sighed, then picked up her offering of coffee and gently tapped on the door, pushing it open as she heard the low response. She entered to find Dar seated behind her desk, her arms resting on its surface. "Hey, you looking for me?" As she moved closer, she noticed the pale tinge to her boss's normally tanned skin and she set the coffee down, peering at the taller woman in concern.

"Yeah. " Dar exhaled. "Um...those contracts, the ones Duks wanted reviewed. Did you take them? I can't seem to find them." She rested her head on one hand, her eyes closing briefly.

"Thought I had them in the bin there."

"Dar?" Kerry circled behind the desk and knelt at her side, putting a hand on her arm. "Hey, are you okay?"

Dar's brows creased. "Yeah, I've just got a lousy headache," she admitted. "It's driving me nuts."

"You look terrible." Kerry leaned closer. "Why don't you lie down on the couch?"

"Just..." The older woman drew herself up, taking a long breath. "I'm all right. I need to find those contracts, I told Duks I'd get them back to him this afternoon."

Kerry studied her for a moment. "I was reviewing them, but I thought I brought them back. Let me check my office. I'll see if I can find them."

Dar nodded and let her head rest on one hand again. "Good enough."

Kerry walked toward the small door which led to the back corridor between their offices, then stopped and turned, taking her courage in both hands and returning to the desk. "Dar?"

Blue eyes glanced up at her in minor annoyance. "What?"

Kerry perched on the edge of the polished wood. "Um...listen, why don't you go home?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Kerry," Dar said testily. "There's noth..." She clamped her jaw down tight, as her stomach threatened to rebel and closed her eyes. "Damn it."

"Dar?" Kerry's voice took on a cajoling softness. "Come on, let me take you home, okay? You can lie down. I know you'll feel better."

"I can't." Dar protested wearily. "There's too much to do."

"I'll do it. Come on, I'll drop you off, then I'll come back here and finish stuff up," Kerry coaxed. "Hey, it's Friday afternoon. You can get out of here a few hours early, can't you?"

Dar stared at her. The sea green eyes warmed and gentled as the blonde woman regarded her, and suddenly Dar just wanted to give in. "Well..."

"C'mon, you're white as a sheet." Kerry gave her a worried frown. "Dar, please, I don't want anything to happen to you. I'd have to run screaming from the building if it did."

That, at least, made her smile just a little. "All right." She surrendered, leaning back in her chair and letting her head rest against the cool leather. She kept her eyes closed, listening to Kerry shutting down her computer, and the faint jingle as she captured Dar's car keys from the top drawer. "Teach me to hire a debating champion, huh?"

"Come on," Kerry urged quietly. "Let's get out of here."

"Yeah, all right." Dar pushed herself to her feet, then shouldered her laptop and followed as Kerry lead the way across the room and opened the door. She gave Maria a look as the secretary glanced up, startled. "Maria, I'm, um..."

Kerry held up the car keys behind Dar's back and exchanged worried looks with Maria. "You're...offsite at a meeting," Maria said quietly. "Emergency calls only, *ay?*"

Dar nodded. "That'll do."

Their exit was quiet. Kerry was amazed they managed to escape the building without Dar being stopped a half dozen times, but it seemed they picked the right time--everyone else was either in afternoon meetings or still at lunch. She walked with Dar across the lot, wincing herself at the lurid, bright sunlight that seemed all the odder in contrast to the thunderheads building above them. "Looks like it's going to rain."

Dar glanced briefly up, then shielded her eyes against the sun. "Oh, that was a bad idea."

"Sorry." Kerry put her hand on Dar's back as they approached the Lexus. "You should get in before I do something else that dumb."

"Eh, I'd survive it. How dumb could it be if it's you?" Dar muttered.

Kerry had to smile at the compliment. She got the executive settled in the passenger seat, then walked around and prudently adjusted the driver's side to accommodate her lesser inches.

"Where do you live, anyway?" she inquired hesitantly.

Dar smiled wearily. "Get on McArthur Causeway and go east. It's the last light before you go over the final bridge over to the beach."

Kerry stared at her in confusion. "Dar, that's the Coast Guard terminal."

A faint chuckle. "Not quite. It's a ferry base just to the west of that." She exhaled. "Place called Fisher Island. You gotta take a boat to go there."

Kerry slowly put the Lexus into gear and eased out of the parking lot, turning right and heading for the causeway. "Oh," she mused. "I've heard of that." She shot her companion a worried look. "Do you have something you can take for your headache? I mean, you look like it hurts pretty bad."

"The island pharmacy is filling a prescription I got yesterday," Dar answered quietly. "I think this is a migraine. I've never had one before, but it's really lousy."

"Ouch." Kerry turned onto the causeway and proceeded east. "I've had those a few times. Did it start off with your vision going weird?" A faint nod confirmed her guess. "Stomach ache?" Kerry inquired sympathetically. Another nod acknowledged that as well. "It's a migraine." The blonde made a face. "I usually find a dark place somewhere to sleep it off."

There was silence for a bit. "How'd the meeting go?" Dar finally asked, as Kerry was turning right into the ferry terminal and proceeding cautiously through the cone-marked lanes. The ferry was just pulling up, so Kerry put the car in Park and considered the question.

"All right, I guess. The guy who chaired it, Michael something, he was really nasty. He had a bad attitude, but the presenter for technology was good."

"Michael Districa." Dar nodded. "Hates my guts." She opened an eye and waved at the security guard, who lifted a hand in response. "Just drive onto the ferry. They'll tell you when to stop." Kerry obeyed, edging the Lexus onto the ramp, then into its assigned lane, where a white-shirted deckhand motioned her. She braked when he held up a hand, then she watched as he carefully chocked the wheels. Once all the cars were loaded, the ramp was raised and the ferry chugged away from the dock. Now she had some time to shift her eyes to the right and study her companion. "How'd Pacific go?"

Dar kept her eyes closed and leaned her head against the doorframe, which was cool from the air conditioning. "Done." She murmured. "I had to threaten to close a division, but the bastards finally made it out there."

"Chalk another one up for DR, then." Kerry smiled, watching as the ferry closed with the island terminal. "They were really worried about that one. I heard Mr. Draefus talking about it on the elevator with that person from Marketing."

"Mmm." Dar winced and swallowed hard as her stomach twisted. She was pathetically grateful for Kerry's driving her home. The way she felt, she'd probably have ended up in Biscayne Bay. "Thanks for making me see reason, by the way."

Green eyes regarded her warmly as Kerry just barely kept herself from reaching out and squeezing her boss's arm. "You looked so miserable, I couldn't stand it."

A pale blue orb appeared and regarded her curiously. "You couldn't stand it?"

Kerry took a breath, then released it, unsure of how exactly to explain her comment. She was saved the trouble by the ferry docking, which required her to concentrate on what she was doing. She pulled the Lexus up the ramp, into a welcoming spray of water which rinsed the salt off the car. Then she proceeded down the only road she could see, coming to a T intersection and looking at Dar in question. "Right or left?"

"Right," Dar replied. "Go to the second inset left turn; the sign says 'Seaside.' Drive in, then go into the bay on the end."

Kerry glanced around curiously. The island featured a small golf course in its center, and the apartments surrounded the perimeter. There wasn't much car traffic, but she spotted several golf carts whirring along the road, and the trees which surrounded the course isolated the apartments from it. She turned where Dar indicated and pulled into a condo complex, which held several clusters of homes, each set at right angles to each other. "Down there?" She indicated the underground parking.

Dar nodded. "Yeah, first or second spot on the left. Doesn't matter which one you pick."

"All right." Kerry pulled the car into a spot, then set the parking break. "Here we are."

"So it seems," Dar replied wryly. "We didn't think this out really well, Kerry. If you give me a chance to swallow a few pills, and let this die down, I'll take you back for your car."

"Don't be ridiculous. I can take a cab, thanks. You're here because you don't feel well, remember?" She opened the door and hopped out, literally. "Damn, this is a high car. Listen, I'll just get you settled, then get out of here and out of your way."

Dar dragged herself upright and got out, leaning against the car as she closed the door and breathed in the fresh ocean breeze with a sense of mild relief. She led the way up to her door, plucking the package hanging from her mailbox off and glancing at it. "Ah, the drugs. Good." "They deliver it here?" Kerry was looking around, her fingers trailing against the thick stonework. She followed at Dar's back as the taller woman unlocked the door and pushed it open, a waft of cleanly scented air hitting her in the face.

She walked into a spacious room with a vaulted ceiling. The immediate impression she got was of cool, clean openness, with eggshell-colored walls, two dark leather sofas, and marble floors. Her attention was immediately captured by the huge framed print over the couch, a planetscape in dark, vivid, vibrant colors which seemed to jump out at her in the low light. "Wow."

Dar turned with a puzzled expression, then managed a smile. "You really didn't expect wooden crate furniture, did you? I thought I gave a better impression than that."

Kerry walked over to the picture and stared at it. "That's amazing."

Dar continued toward the kitchen. "Thanks. There's an artist who does those. He makes that spidery tracework with live electricity."

"What?" Kerry caught up with her as she reached the doorway and entered the huge kitchen.

"Whoa!" she yelped, turning in a circle and taking in the square room, with its neatly kept appliances. "You could fit my car in here." She laughed. "I thought my mother's kitchen was big."

Dar took a glass from the cabinet and opened the refrigerator door, pouring milk into it from the dispenser, then ripping open her medication bag impatiently. "If you wait for this stuff to work, I'll give you the nickel tour." She got the bottle open and checked the dosage, taking two pills out and popping them in her mouth, followed by a swallow of milk. "Hope I can keep those down." She grimaced, leaning against the counter as a wave of pain tightened around her skull.

Kerry gently took hold of her companion's elbow. "Come on. Which way is your bedroom?"

Dar took a steadying breath and straightened up. "I can make it, thanks." The warmth around her arm disappeared, and she pulled her jacket off as she made her way into the bedroom.

It hurt to even take her clothes off. She left them draped over the chair and pulled an old T-shirt over her head, leaning against the wall as the pounding made blood red flashes behind her closed eyes. "Ugh." She started to go to the door, then paused and grabbed a pair of shorts. "Think. Think, think, damn it." It had been a long time since she'd had anyone else in the condo who'd care what she was wearing, hadn't it?

"Hey," she called out to Kerry, who poked her head in the room. "Listen, I...I think I'd better lie down until this stuff kicks in." She leaned against the jamb, watching Kerry's face. "There's a terminal in the study, if you wanted to finish up that stuff."

Kerry studied the perceptibly swaying woman and sighed. She stepped forward again and put a hand on her arm. "Come on, don't worry about me. Let's get you settled."

Dar didn't resist the touch this time. She let herself be guided over to the waterbed and sank down into it. "Oh, man." She curled onto her side, clamping her jaw down on another wave of nausea. The pain tightened again and she wrapped an arm over her head, finding it hard to breathe, it hurt so much.

"Here. Roll over." The voice was quiet and familiar and she obeyed, feeling hands gently probing at the ache in her neck. The warmth of the touch was startling, and she inhaled sharply as the strong fingers worked at the tight muscles across her back. It was an intrusion she had no interest in protesting, and she wasn't sure at all where it was all going except that it had been so very long since she'd known this kind of compassion, and it felt wonderful.

"Easy...wow, that's really tight. Hold on." Kerry worked at the tense shoulders, feeling uncertain and very awkward. Dar's skin felt nice and warm through the soft cotton of her shirt, and she was uncomfortably aware of just how inappropriate this all was. She was also uncomfortably aware of how much she was enjoying it. But Dar wasn't protesting. In fact, she buried her face into the crook of her arm and exhaled, groaning a little under her breath. *Definitely not protesting.*

It took a while before she could feel the knots release under her fingers, and by that time, Dar was edging towards sleep. Kerry stopped her massaging and removed one hand, but kept the other there, making gentle circles with just her fingertips, which only stopped when she realized Dar was deeply asleep, her breathing steady and even.

She withdrew her touch, then stood and backed out of the room quietly, not stopping until she was in the center of the living room, where she let out a long-held breath. "Whew." She ran a slightly shaking hand through her hair. "Okay, okay, just settle down, Kerry. It's over now, she's all right. Just relax."

Jesus. She folded her arms across her chest and tried to sort out the churning emotions she felt inside. "Okay," she finally murmured to herself, "you did the woman a favor, so just chill." Just a favor, like anyone would do. *For a friend.* Kerry tipped her head back and studied the plaster-swirled vaulted ceiling, breathing deep and slow, as she'd once taught herself to do before a big debate, to steady down her nerves.

It worked. Curious now, she looked around, taking in the apartment with an appreciative eye. "So this is where you live, huh?" She wandered around the large room, examining the soft leather of the couch. "Ooo, bet that's comfortable to sit on." She stepped up into the dining room and went to the windows, which were covered with slatted blinds. She lifted a blind up to expose the ocean view and sighed. "Man, that's nice."

From there, she wandered into the kitchen, peering at the appliances, which showed little use, and the center food prep island, which showed even less. "You don't spend much time in here, do you?" She peeked inside the refrigerator and shook her head. "Good grief, Dar. Do you expect me to believe you live on milk, chocolate chip cookies, and," she opened the freezer, "frozen pizza?" She slapped her head in disbelief. "I'm not seeing this." She looked again. "Oh, excuse me...and ice cream."

She left the sadly ill-stocked kitchen and made another circuit around the living room. A door led off to the right, and she poked her head in, seeing a large desk complete with computer. "Ah, the study." She glanced up the stairs curiously, then trotted up the carpeted steps, finding three rooms and two bathrooms there, one bedroom apparently meant to be the master bedroom from its size, and a wraparound balcony open to the sea. She wondered why Dar chose to sleep downstairs, then figured it was probably just easier for her to deal with one level, since she...

Kerry looked around again, then went downstairs and took in the quiet living room. Since she lived here alone. Her eyes flicked to the entertainment center, then to the living room table, and she realized that other than the large picture above the couch, there was nothing personal in the room. No pictures. No clothes scattered around. No diplomas or quirky, knick-knack items.

Nothing. It was as though the enigmatic woman who lived here was just visiting, afraid to put a personal stamp on the place.

Kerry thought about that as she wandered into the study and sat down at the large, polished desk. And found at last, a small, framed photograph, which she picked up and brought closer. In it was a younger Dar, dressed in a white karate outfit, one hand resting on a tall trophy, the other arm wrapped around an older man who was grinning proudly at the camera and pointing to her. His

bearded face was strongly reminiscent of Dar's, and his eyes were the same pale blue. She turned the picture over and read the words penciled on the back. "Two of a kind. 1990."

"Hmm." Kerry carefully put the photo back down, then considered what to do. She could just leave--Dar was sleeping, there was no longer a need for her to hang around here. The phone was there, she could call a cab. On the other hand, Dar had sort of said it was okay for her to stay, by telling her where the desk was, and kind of assuming she'd do something with it. On a third hand, the prescription had said to take one pill, and Dar had taken two, and wasn't it dangerous to leave someone sleeping like that?

Two hands to one. Kerry gave a brisk nod, and flipped on the computer. "I can finish up everything from here. In fact..." Her eyes found the HP Laserjet 4Si tucked against one side of the desk. "Heck, I can even reprint those dumb reports."

Satisfied, she waited for the machine to boot, then logged in with her own logon. The system hesitated for quite a while, then obediently gave up her personal menu. She signed into a terminal session, then got to work.

IT HAD TO be a dream, Dar fuzzily realized. She was in a large, open field, with the buzz of crickets all around her, and only the hiss of the wind beyond that. No traffic sounds, no airplanes--just this awesome, beautiful silence that filled her soul with peace. She was lying down with her eyes closed, absorbing the sunlight, and enjoying the soft, cool breeze that stirred the stalks of grass around her. She was naked, but that didn't bother her, and she could feel the solid, warm weight of another human being draped over her, softly breathing against the skin of her neck. It was peaceful. She was happy and contented. It was perfect.

And, as dreams do, it slowly faded, allowing the real world to nudge at her, and she reluctantly obeyed, dragging her consciousness back to the present, which forced her to open her eyes and see the soft light of her bedside clock, which told her it was eight o'clock and very dark.

Dark, she realized, as her ears caught a howl of wind and the patter of rain against the window, *and stormy*. She rolled slowly over, gingerly moving her head, relieved at the lack of pain. Her mouth felt dry, and she blinked at the ceiling, then stiffened as her subliminal senses made her aware that she was not alone in the apartment.

Then she remembered. "Ah." A faint, worried frown edged her face, and she blearily remembered Kerry's gentle touch on her as she went to sleep. For some reason, that called up the memory of her dream, and she shoved it back in irritation. *Aw, chill out, Dar. The kid was just trying to help. She was probably uncomfortable as hell doing that, so remember to thank her.*

For a moment she paused in thought, acknowledging the fact that she was glad Kerry was still there. Then she sighed and smiled a little ruefully. "Ah, Dar, what have you done this time, hmm?"

She rolled out of bed with a yawn and trudged to the bathroom, blinking at her disheveled look with a scowl. She raked her fingers through her hair to order it a little, then gave up and walked quietly into the living room, where she stopped suddenly. A faint smile touched her lips as she surveyed Kerry's sleeping form, tucked into the corner of one of the couches, her hand resting on a pile of papers. Her head was resting on the soft, padded arm, and she'd thrown her jacket over her shoulders for warmth. Asleep, her face was open and innocent as a child's, and Dar felt an irresistible affection brewing in her for the young woman. Silently, she padded back into the bedroom and pulled a soft blanket from the closet, returning to settle it gently over Kerry before she continued into the kitchen.

The weather was lashing against the seaside windows, and Dar glanced out, surprised to see whitecaps traveling up and down the usually calm coastline. The barely visible buoys were bobbing right and left, their red and green signals waving wildly over the sea's surface. "Huh." She reached behind her and turned on the small, cabinet-mounted television, flipping through the channels rapidly. "Let's see. Sensational local news, must be Channel Seven." Seeing a weather map and a concerned-looking badly toupée'd weatherman, she gave the changer a rest. "Uh oh." She turned up the sound a little.

"Rising suddenly in the straits of Florida, the low that had settled just north of Cuba has intensified, and a hurricane hunter plane from NOAA confirms a center of circulation and tropical storm force winds."

"Goddamnpieceofcrapstupid-- It's November, damn it!"

"The National Weather Service in Miami has issued tropical storm warnings for the entire southern coast of Florida, from Cape Sable all the way around up to West Palm Beach. Interests in the area should be making preparations for tropical storm conditions within the next twelve to twenty four hours."

"Aw, nuts." Dar sighed in exasperation. "I thought we were over this for this year." A soft sound behind her made her turn to see Kerry entering the kitchen, the blanket wrapped around her shoulders, and a puzzled, somewhat concerned look on her face.

"What's wrong?"

Dar gestured to the television. "Tropical storm." She exhaled. "Out of nowhere!"

Kerry peered at the screen, then up at her. "What does that mean?"

A dark brow cocked. "Well, for one thing, it means you're stuck here." She picked up the phone and dialed, waiting with drumming fingers until someone picked up. "Hello, Rocky, this is Dar Roberts. What's going on?" She listened. "I figured. Thanks." She hung up. "Yep, the ferries are locked down for the duration. Only emergency runs are being made with the boats if people have to get off or on."

Kerry considered the unexpected development. "Hmm. Sorry. I guess I should have left when I had the chance. I just wanted to get those reports done, then I...I guess I was tired, so I just lay down for a minute..." She gave Dar an apologetic look. "How are you feeling?"

"Well, my head didn't explode," Dar said. "And I can move around without wanting to puke, so I guess I'm better." Her brow creased. "I'd better get candles and flashlights out. No telling how long we might lose power for." She stepped to the edge of the window, and pressed a hidden switch. "Better get the shutters down now."

With a mechanical hum, protective aluminum shutters slid down over the huge, ocean-view windows, clanking down with a rattle and whining to a halt. Dar did the same to the kitchen window, then showed Kerry where the switches were for the other rooms. She left the blonde woman to do that, while she entered the laundry room and pulled out a covered basket, returning to the kitchen and putting it on the island. She opened it and peered down. Inside were neatly packed flashlights, candles, sterno cans, and other supplies. "Hmph."

"Okay, all done." Kerry reported, as she came back into the kitchen. "What else can I do?"

Dar gazed at her, then ducked back into the laundry room and came out, tossing her a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. "They'll be big on you, but a whole lot more comfortable than what you're wearing if the lights go out," she explained wryly. "It gets pretty warm in here without air conditioning."

Kerry had caught the garments and glanced at them, then she gave Dar a wry grin. "Makes sense." She took the clothing with her into the small half bathroom near the study and quickly

changed, stifling a giggle at the ungainly size that made her feel like a child. "Good grief." She removed the belt from her skirt and belted the long T-shirt, then folded her clothing up and returned to the kitchen in her bare feet. The marble tile felt cold and the terra cotta of the living room wasn't much better.

Dar was still in the kitchen, leaning against the counter and studying the basket. She looked up as Kerry entered, and half grinned at her outfit. "Definitely big on you."

Kerry looked down at herself and returned the grin, shrugging her shoulders. "Beats the monkey suit anyway. Thanks." She went over to the basket. "So, is this a hurricane party?"

The dark-haired woman turned her head and regarded her. "More or less," she said. "I...there's canned stuff in the closet for storms. I don't have much around here otherwise." She indicated the refrigerator. "I mostly order in from the island restaurants."

Kerry leaned back on her elbows. "What kind of canned stuff?"

Dar indicated the closet. "I have no idea. I had someone bring an assortment in. I was too busy to do it myself."

"Uh huh." Kerry pushed off from the counter and explored the closet. "Well, I think I can make something interesting out of this." She looked over her shoulder. "You don't cook much, do you?"

Dar shook her head. "Not at all. I have cereal for breakfast, and I can make coffee. That's about it," she admitted. "Why?"

Kerry sighed, selecting some items and putting them on the counter. "Well, I've gotten myself stuck here in your face, so I might as well make myself useful." She went to the refrigerator and studied the contents. "Hmm, I like challenges. Ah..." She pawed in the freezer and retrieved several frosty boxes, which she also set on the counter. "Do you have anything, um, like a pot?" Silently, Dar pointed to the cupboard. "What are you doing?"

Sea green eyes regarded her in mild amusement. "I'm cooking. I can do that, you know." She grinned at Dar's expression. Then she turned to the cabinet. "Let's see, you said you had cereal." She opened the door, then turned, and put her hands on her hips. "Dar Roberts, I am not seeing Tony the Tiger in your closet, am I?"

Dar hung her head, then looked up at Kerry through dark lashes with a sheepish grin. "Corn and sugar are two of the food groups, right?" she inquired hopefully. "Let me guess, you do Grape Nuts."

Kerry glanced around, then tiptoed over to her, and whispered. "Cocoa Krispies, but don't you tell *anyone*."

They shared a conspiratorial grin. Then, unexpectedly, Dar reached out and put a hand on Kerry's shoulder. "Thanks for helping me out, Kerry. Sorry it got you stuck here."

Kerry cocked her head a little, and a gentle smile appeared. "If I helped, then I'm not sorry," she replied. "Besides, I'd rather be stuck here with you than by myself in this. I hate storms."

"Fair enough," Dar answered. "Besides, I learned something new about you." Kerry's brows lifted. "You give killer massages." Dar grinned, catching her by surprise. "Wasn't on your résumé."

Unable to suppress a grin of her own, Kerry said, "Glad my skills got put to good use." They looked at each other in a lengthening silence until Kerry glanced at her culinary selections and cleared her throat. "Right. Well, let me get to it. You must be hungry, I know I am."

"All right, I'm going to log in and make sure they're prepping the building," Dar replied, still gazing at her. "I'll be in the study if you need anything."

Green eyes lifted and met hers for a long, searching moment, then dropped away. "Okay. I finished up a bunch of stuff, and I reprinted those reports you were looking for." Dar nodded and slipped out of the kitchen, leaving her to her thoughts and the seldom-used range.

THE PAGE ON the screen was surely an important e-mail. Dar ran her eyes over it for the sixth time and still didn't read it, her thoughts drifting off into some other realm with disgusting ease. Enticing scents from the kitchen kept distracting her, and she tried to remember the last time someone actually cooked something specifically for her, without her paying for it one way or the other.

It had been her father--cooking eggs and bacon, his one and only specialty, on the morning she'd come home to find him saucily sitting in the living room, his freshly pressed fatigues almost blending into her furniture. "Just stopping through," he'd said, "on my way out."

Out to Saudi Arabia, he meant. Out of life was what it had been. Dar glanced at the picture, and felt a hand clench her heart. It wasn't that they'd even spent that much time with each other over the last several years. It was that he, alone among all the people she'd ever known, had understood her.

Understood the competitiveness, and the fierce will, and the desire to conquer she'd inherited from him--and she had understood him, in all his complexity. His had been the only approval she'd ever needed. *When that picture had been taken--her eyes flicked to the frame--he'd strode up after she'd won the tournament, and put his arm around her, and told anyone who cared to listen that "this is my kid."* It had filled her with a sense of belonging that nothing, and no one, had ever equaled. Then he was gone. And she'd sworn at his graveside she would never let anyone touch her heart like that again. *Never.*

But now, softly, gently, someone was scratching at the door. Someone who was as different from her as anyone she'd ever met. Her mind told her she was crazy to let it happen. Her heart knew she was helpless to prevent it.

The wind rattled against the shutters, sounding like dried bones clattering together. Dar nodded quietly to herself, and this time, read the e-mail.

KERRY TOOK A last taste, then gave her creation a satisfied look. She'd managed to find some frozen chicken strips, frozen shrimp, and two packages of frozen snow peas, all of which she stir-fried, adding spices whose seals she had to break. Then she made a sauce with peanut butter, milk, a little sugar, more spices, and some ginger. She'd steamed a pot of rice from the bag in the cupboard and found Dar's stash of plum wine. "All right..." She took out two plates and washed the dust off them, then went to the study door and peered in.

Dar was studying the screen, the light from it washing her tanned complexion and sparkling off her pale eyes. After a moment, those eyes turned and met hers, and a dark brow edged up in question.

"Dinner's ready," Kerry stated.

She got a genuine smile back. "Smells interesting." Dar stood and stretched, then moved around the desk and followed Kerry into the kitchen like a curious puppy dog. She peered over Kerry's shoulder at the pot and sniffed appreciatively. "Mmm."

They carried their plates into the living room and rather than use the big table, settled on the couch in front of the television. Just for the hell of it, Dar had lit a candle and put it in the center

of the coffee table, and they ate by the flickering light in addition to the TV screen, which Dar flicked on. Quickdraw McGraw was just winning another battle, and she blushed. "Um..." Kerry chuckled. "Don't worry about it. I like *Space Ghost*." She watched as Dar moved through to the Weather Channel, and left it there as warnings and other information scrolled across the screen. She watched it for a moment, making a mental note to call Colleen and make sure her apartment door was closed tight. "Wow."

"They make it sound worse than it is." Dar commented, watching the screen. "See that guy? Idiot. Showing us what the storm's like. Hope it blows his damn toupee off." She accepted the plate Kerry handed her, piled with a nice mound of rice covered in stir-fry. "Thanks."

"Hope you really like spicy." Kerry bit into a piece.

Dar took a bite and chewed, amazed at the result of what appeared to her to be magic from the ingredients Kerry had found. "Wow." She eyed her companion. "Anything you can't do?"

Kerry's blush was readily visible against her fair hair and lashes. "I really suck at bowling," she finally said, with a chuckle. "Glad you like it."

They ate in silence for a few minutes. "Migraines really are the worst," Kerry commented, after taking a sip of wine to clear her mouth. "Last time I had one, I was in college and it was right before finals. I thought I was going to blow an entire semester."

"Well." Dar frowned briefly. "I can live the rest of my life without having another one, that's for sure."

"Do you know what triggered it?" Kerry asked. "Mine were usually some food or drink--smoked ham once, in fact."

Dar didn't answer, her expression growing thoughtful and a little grim. "I don't think it was that," she remarked finally. "I g..." She hesitated. "I don't know what it was."

Kerry watched her from the corner of her eye, a little surprised at the sudden change of mood.

Okay, so we're stuck here with each other, for I don't know how long. Something's bugging her, and she's a very private person. I should keep my nose out of her business. Right? Right. She ate a few more bites, then eyed Dar's silent profile. And bowed to the inevitable. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Startled, Dar paused in mid chew and looked up at her. "Talk about what?"

"About whatever it is that's bothering you," Kerry replied softly. "Look, I know it's none of my business, but here we are, and I'm a pretty good listener." She paused, then went on. "Sometimes it's easier to talk to someone you don't know that well."

Dar chewed slowly and swallowed, considering the offer. Then she took a breath and released it.

"It actually is your business," she said evenly. "I...won't be at work on Tuesday. You'll need to attend the staff meeting for me at ten." She ate another piece of chicken. Thinking about it for a moment, she finally admitted, "I have to check in to the Miami Heart Institute, they're running a bunch of tests on me."

Kerry was at a loss for words. She hadn't expected this at all. "Well...they're just tests. Maybe they won't find anything, you know?"

"I know what they're going to find," Dar replied quietly. "They're going to find that I have a...malfunctioning valve." She kept her eyes on her hands, which rested together. "My father had it." She picked up her fork and took another bite, outwardly very composed.

Kerry took her cue from that. "They can do something about that, right? I know I heard about some stuff they've been doing lately; it's incredible."

Dar pressed her lips together and nodded an acknowledgment. "Probably."

Kerry looked at her. "How can you be so calm? I'd be a nervous wreck."

A slight shrug. "Nothing I can do about it. I'm going to drive down there early on Tuesday, probably have to stay overnight."

Good grief! Kerry felt like the world had just upended itself into her lap. She hardly knew Dar, and yet she was suddenly as concerned for her as she would have been for her own family. Maybe even more so. "Dar?"

"Mmm?"

"I don't want to go to that staff meeting," Kerry said. "I'd rather take the day off and go down there with you."

Dar stared at her in honest surprise. "Why?"

"No one should have to go through that alone," the blonde replied. "Was that what you found out this morning? You looked like you'd gotten bad news. I thought I screwed something up again." With a sputter, the lights went out. They were left staring at each other in the low, golden light of the candle, which painted them in tones of ochre and black. Dar finally dropped her gaze to her plate. "All right," she agreed softly. "It's a long day of mostly waiting. I'd appreciate someone intelligent to talk to."

Kerry felt a sense of relief. "Sounds like a plan," she began, then her eyes widened as a gust of wind shook the condo. "Whoa! Dar, are we safe in here?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. I went through Andrew in this place." Dar waved her fork, her mood improving markedly. "This is just a little tropical storm."

Something slammed against the shutters, and Kerry jumped. "Yow!"

Dar chuckled softly. "Here, come over on this side of me, okay?" They switched places, putting Dar closer to the window. "Better?"

Another bang, and Kerry jumped again, this time right up against her taller companion. "Sorry," she muttered, drawing away. "I hate storms. We were snowed in for two weeks, once, and I..." She hesitated. "I just don't like them," she finished awkwardly.

Dar leaned over and nudged the smaller woman with an elbow. "Don't worry about it."

Kerry eyed her and timidly nudged her back. "Easy for you to say."

They smiled at each other and returned to their plates. Dar was right, Kerry realized. The condo certainly did seem to be getting pretty warm, pretty quickly now that the air conditioning was off. At least she was starting to feel really warm. Maybe it was the chicken.

After they finished, Dar suggested they go into the study, where she'd left the shutters off the north-facing window, a small one, and could open it to get some air in the place. She put a large, faintly cinnamon-scented candle on the desk and sat behind it, while Kerry settled on the small couch against the wall. Dar opened the window and a cool, humid breeze blew in, ruffling her dark hair and stirring the papers on the desk.

It was very quiet, only the wind's howling and the rattle of the shutters coming through over the ceaseless pounding of the surf outside.

"I guess it was a lot worse during Andrew, huh?" Kerry asked quietly, tucking her legs up under her and leaning on the arm of the couch.

Dar nodded. "Oh yeah. They evacuated the island, but a few of us stayed, along with a few security people. They'd always told us how sturdy these places were, so we stupidly believed them. Surprisingly, it was true. We had very little damage--mostly surf damage to the seawalls, and some boats that got slammed up against the dock because their owners were either too stupid or too lazy to secure them."

"Mmm." Kerry put her chin down on her arm. "Do you have a boat here?"

"Yeah. It was my aunt's; it kind of came with this place." Dar leaned back in her chair and put her bare feet up on the desk. "Every once in a long while I take it out, just cruise around the artificial reefs a little, do some shallow diving, that kind of thing."

Kerry nodded slowly. "I like boating. We used to take sailboats, the really big ones, out on Lake Michigan in the summer. I learned to run one of the racing kind. That was a lot of fun." She considered. "You don't do much swimming, though, it's kinda cold up there." She looked up. "Do you enjoy the diving and stuff?"

"I do. Very much so, in fact." Dar fiddled with a pencil that had been on the desktop. "It's not smart to go out by yourself, though, and I..." She hesitated. "I don't have much time nowadays." Kerry soaked it all in, the spoken words and the unspoken ones. "I've always wanted to see what that was like. I used to watch the Jacques Cousteau specials all the time and wonder."

A quick smile chased itself on and off Dar's face. "We can probably arrange that," she commented offhandedly. "It's beautiful out there, on a nice, sunny day. When it's calm, the sun filters down through the water, and you can see all kinds of fish, in every color." She leaned down and pulled open a desk drawer, tugging out a folder and leafing through its contents, then handing it over to Kerry. "Here, see for yourself."

Kerry got up and perched on the desk, tilting the folder towards the candle to get the light. She poured slowly through the pictures, examining them in fascination. Most were of fantastically shaped coral formations, with clouds of fish over them. Kerry wished it was daylight, so she could see the colors better, but one picture was a huge, flat, striped fish that seemed to be staring right into the camera lens. "Oh, wow!" She looked up at the quietly watching Dar. "Did you take these?"

"Mmm-hmm. Most of them at John Pennekamp Park down in the Keys, but this one...and these two were off Bermuda." Dar put a fingertip on the striped fish. "He didn't like me taking his picture. Right after I snapped this, he got right in my face and whacked me with his tail."

Leaning closer to the light, Kerry peered at the fish. "Mmm. I bet that hurt."

A hand lifted and gently pushed the blonde hair back. "Careful, don't want you catching on fire. You can't imagine the paperwork I'd have to fill out."

"Yikes, you're right." Kerry put the endangered locks back behind her ear and smiled. She turned to the next picture, this one of Dar, in a sleek black one-piece swimsuit, a scuba tank propping up one elbow and a huge lobster in her other hand. "Good grief, how much did that thing weigh?" Dar peered over her arm. "Me or the lobster?" She chuckled. "Ten pounds. It was huge. The damn thing dragged me half across the reef before he tired out and I could bag him."

"Mmm." Kerry studied the picture, a faint, curious smile twitching her lips. "Did you have him for dinner?"

"Nah," Dar cheerfully told her. "That big...well, after four pounds or so, the taste starts to go down. No, I took the picture, then let him go."

"Oh, I did that too when we went fishing," Kerry admitted. "It got everyone so mad at me. I'd catch these nice big fish, and the guys would fight them for an hour, finally drag them onboard, and I'd let them go." She lingered over the photo for a moment more, then went on to the next.

"You have a big family?" Dar asked gently.

Kerry kept her focus on the pictures. "Oh well, not really. My mother and father, of course, and I have a younger brother, Michael, he's in law school, and a younger sister Angela, who's married and has one child and another on the way."

"What's it like having siblings?"

Kerry felt her chest tighten. "It's...all right, I guess. There's always some competition." She glanced aside. "You don't have any?"

"No, I always wondered what it would be like. Thought it would be nice to have a sister, or something." She paused. "Is it?"

Kerry pondered the question. "I can't really remember not having any," she confessed, "so it's hard to say. We fought like kids do, but I love my brother and sister." She frowned. "I miss seeing them."

Dar studied her profile. "Your father's a senator, huh?"

The blonde head inclined once. "Yes." Kerry's jaw almost clicked shut audibly.

Hmm. Dar's curiosity was sparked. "That must be a little strange. Everything's kind of public record, huh?"

Kerry's eyes fastened on her hands, clenched lightly around the folder. "More or less, yeah."

A silence fell, lasting until Dar cleared her throat. "You...want to talk about it?"

Green eyes jerked up and met hers, startled, and a little afraid. The flickering candlelight threw her shadow against the far wall with menacing size, and she studied Dar's face for an endless moment, before letting her gaze drop to the desk. "Not really, no."

A little stung, Dar shrugged quietly. "All right."

Kerry dragged her eyes back up at the words, her jaw working a little. "I, um, I guess that sounds harsh, coming from someone who was asking you to do the same thing just a little while ago, huh?"

"It's your life," Dar replied evenly. "You have the right to keep it to yourself."

The silence settled again, and went on longer. Kerry closed her eyes, and listened to the wind whipping the surf outside, and the trees which slapped against the outer wall. "My parents are very...they have very high expectations of us." She slipped off the desk and went back to the couch, curling up into a ball against one end of it "They want a certain life for me."

Dar remained silent, keeping her opinion of both the policy and Kerry's father to herself. ILS had run headlong into the senator more than once, and he was currently trying to oust them from several government contracts in favor of his own choice, a competitor who was, in all likelihood, paying him off. "That's a tough thing to deal with," she said very quietly. "But surely he shouldn't have any complaint about you."

A short, bitter laugh. "I'm not married and barefoot in the kitchen with two kids." Kerry stared at the wall. "I had to pretend to be majoring in something...'fit for me' in college. They didn't want to hear the word 'career' at all."

A realization clicked. "So that explains the English double major," Dar commented softly.

Kerry glanced at her, surprised, then she rubbed her temples. "I forgot you had my résumé." She managed a thin smile. "Yes, by the time I graduated, it was too late for them to protest, and I had my degree." She took a breath. "I took an entry level job with Sperry. God, how they hated that. It was a fight just about every day. The only thing that saved me was that Brian was still going to school."

Knowing that Kerry had spent some years in the IS field, Dar was puzzled. "What happened?"

A wry, cynical smile crossed the younger woman's face. "Bill Clinton happened. Or, more specifically, Al Gore happened." She lifted her chin. "All of a sudden, it was a 'prudent precaution' to have someone in the family who 'knew how those people thought' and was into the technology end."

"Ah." Dar digested that. "But they still give you a hard time," she hazarded.

"Yeah." Kerry sighed, resting her chin on her arm.

"Who's Brian?"

Green eyes lifted to hers. "My theoretical fiancé."

Both of Dar's dark brows shot up to her hairline, giving the taller woman almost a comical air of astonishment. After a moment, she schooled her face into a more casual expression.

"I...um...huh?"

Kerry sighed. "We grew up together. We've been friends forever, since we were in strollers, practically. He's a really sweet guy, nice looking, just graduating from law school. He likes me..."

"But?"

"But when I look at him, he's just a friend," Kerry replied ruefully.

"Ah, no skipping of the heart?" Dar joked gently. "No getting swallowed up in his eyes. That kind of thing?"

Kerry stared at her in silence for a few heartbeats. "N-no," she finally stammered. "Not... It's not like that with him...at...at all." She paused. "What do you mean, skipping of the heart?"

Dar examined her interlaced fingers. "I wouldn't know personally," she glanced up with a wry grin, "but I'm told that when you meet your true love, something like that happens." She chuckled. "You know, um, all that romantic stuff."

"Mmm. Oh, yeah, right. I've heard of that." Kerry pushed her hair back behind an ear. "God, you were right. It is getting pretty warm in here, isn't it?" She glanced up to find hooded blue eyes watching her and a slight, almost puzzled little smile on Dar's face. "So, that's my story I guess. My folks give me a hard time over living down here. They think it's decadent and licentious." She sighed. "When I go home for Christmas, all I hear is plans for the wedding, and where I'll live, and..."

Dar got up and circled the desk, then crouched down next to her, her features almost wholly in shadow as she blocked the light from the candle. "You don't have to do what they want, you know that, right?"

Kerry's eyes held a quiet, shuttered sorrow. "It's easy for you to say that." She laid her cheek against her forearm. "It's a lot harder for me to live it." She blinked a few times. "I feel like I have a responsibility to them."

Dar sat down and leaned back against the couch, facing away from her younger companion. "I used to believe that, too," she murmured. "After my father died, I thought my responsibility was taking care of my mother. I was going to give up this job, move to Richmond..."

Kerry gazed at the dark, sleek head inches from her face. Almost hypnotized, she watched her fingers reach out and tangle themselves in an errant lock. "Why didn't you?" she asked softly.

"She told me she didn't want anything to do with me." Dar's voice was quiet but matter-of-fact. "I reminded her too much of what she'd lost." Feeling a slight tug on her hair, she turned her head and glanced at Kerry. "That's when I figured out the only person I was ever going to be responsible for was myself." She held the younger woman's eyes. "Follow your heart, Kerry, don't live for someone else's dreams."

It was the closest they'd ever been to each other, mere inches separating them, so close they were breathing the same air. So close Kerry could see the faint, almost invisible scar just above Dar's right eye, and the crystal clarity--even in the low light--of her pale blue irises. She became aware of a sound that she only later realized was her own heartbeat, hammering in her ears in irregular rhythm. "I-I'll try to...to keep that in mind," she stuttered.

Dar turned her eyes towards the door and broke the tension. "Can I interest you in more of that peanut stuff?"

Kerry swallowed a few times. "Um, sure. They were small plates."

They exchanged wry glances then laughed in thinly veiled relief.

DAR LEANED HER head out of the window, studying the worsening weather. The trees outside were almost obscured by rain, and the wind was pulling branches from them, slapping the leaves against the building and leaving dark green streaks against the wall's surface.

A wet, cool breeze blew her hair back, and she turned her face into it for some relief. She'd opened a window on the opposite side of the apartment to get a cross-breeze, but it was still very stuffy inside, and scarfing down the spicy stir fry hadn't helped matters. Dar glanced behind her to where Kerry was lying on the floor, her hands folded over her slim waist and her eyes closed. Even from where she was, in the flickering light Dar could see the sheen of sweat on the younger woman's face, and she felt a twinge of sympathy as a droplet trickled down from her own temple. It was well past midnight, but sleeping was almost impossible, at least for Dar, who was used to the air-conditioned peace of her water bed-equipped room. She enjoyed her comforts and didn't mind admitting that--roughing it in the outdoors with bugs and snakes was not her idea of a good time. With a sigh, she rested her chin on the windowsill, and put up with the soft mist of water which drenched her skin.

Still, she was glad Kerry was there. She was getting to feel comfortable with her, too--a slow, insidious relaxation of her usually very stiff and very prickly outer shell, that she was only half-heartedly trying to stop.

"Anything interesting out there?" Kerry's voice floated up softly.

"Rain and wind," Dar replied in a mumble. "It's just a little cooler, though." She felt a warmth at her back, and instinctively moved over to make room as Kerry sidled up next to her, poking her nose out into the darkness. "See?"

Kerry hitched herself up and leaned out, shaking her blonde head as rain dripped on it. "God, you can't see a thing...not even lights from the city." She tipped further forward and felt a sudden, warm pressure against her back as Dar stuck a hand out to make sure she didn't fall over. Despite her overheated state, it felt good, a comfortingly safe sensation that made her bold enough to lean out a little further, to see what she could see.

"Hey, careful," Dar warned, moving a little closer just in case she was needed. Kerry now had her entire head out in the rain, and she was peering around with interest. The wind was blowing her dampened hair back and she looked, for a moment, very much like a cocker spaniel enjoying a drive.

"Wow, look at those palm trees, Dar!" Kerry lifted one hand and pointed, then grabbed the sill again. "They're almost going sideways!"

"You're almost going sideways," Dar protested, tucking her arm securely around Kerry's waist and leaning out on one elbow. "Oh yeah, I see them. Hey, watch it!" She pulled herself backwards, dragging Kerry with her as a coconut slammed against the windowsill, leaving a brown scuff. She could feel laughter under her tensed arm, and she released her companion with a belated start. "You could have gotten beamed in the head, Kerry!"

"What a great story that would have made." Kerry giggled. "Can you imagine? I come in Monday with a bandage on my head, and have to tell everyone I got smacked by a flying coconut whizzing by your window."

Dar chuckled in reaction. "That would be a little hard to explain," she admitted. "This freak storm's going to be hard enough to recover from--Mark had to spend six hours just doing unplanned backups, not to mention transferring operations up to Charlotte."

Kerry shook herself rapidly, scattering droplets of water all over Dar and the carpet. "Oh." She lifted a hand to her mouth in embarrassment. "Sorry, Dar."

The older woman started laughing. "You're more fun than a puppy, you know that?" She shook her head and went to a closet just outside the study, coming back with a fluffy, pale blue towel and handing it to her. "Here."

The towel was soft, and smelled freshly laundered. Kerry buried her face in it, then dried herself off with quiet contentment. She looked up at Dar from under damp eyelashes and even damper bangs. "More fun than a puppy, huh?" There was, she was alert enough to recognize, definitely some chemistry going on between them. A dynamic, shifting feeling that was half playfulness and half something deeper, more serious.

Dar was her boss. She knew she couldn't forget that. But she also knew the tall, dark-haired woman was becoming a friend, and she had no intention of putting a stop to that either. Dar was too interesting, too complex a challenge for her to pass up. She wanted to know more about her, to know why she did what she did. So many people were shallow, so easy for Kerry to read that they were almost boring. Dar...fascinated her. Just being around the woman, she felt a thrill of adventure.

Kerry liked that. Just like she adored roller coasters, and fast racing boats, and steep downhill skiing. She glanced up at Dar through her bangs and grinned. Then she barked like a dog.

Dar just put a hand over her eyes and laughed. "I think this weather's bringing out an unexpected side to you." She picked up the candle and motioned Kerry towards the door. "C'mon, no sense in letting a perfectly good half gallon of ice cream melt."

"Ice cream?" Kerry finished toweling herself off and let the terrycloth drape around her neck as she followed Dar into the dark living room. "Let me guess...another of your food groups?"

Following the candle, she padded into the kitchen and stopped just short of crashing into her companion. Dar had opened the still, quiet freezer and pulled something out, bringing a wave of icy cold air with it. "Ooo, can we just climb in there?"

"No." Dar closed the door and felt around in a nearby drawer, retrieving two spoons. "Here, hold this." She handed Kerry the candle and gave her a nudge back towards the study. "Espresso chip, it's great."

They put the container on the floor and sat down on the carpet facing each other, armed with their spoons. Dar took the first spoonful and sucked on it happily.

Kerry put a bit on her spoon and tasted it, then grinned. "Ooo." They shared in silence for a few moments, then Kerry shifted a little, resting her elbows on her knees. "So, um, the picture up there. Is that a karate kind of thing you were doing?"

"Tae kwan do," Dar replied offhandedly. "Yeah."

Green eyes studied her curiously. "You still do it?"

Dar took another spoonful before she answered. "Yes, among other things. I tried out a few different disciplines. I mostly keep to that, with a little judo and jujitsu mixed in." She chuckled.

"They're old-fashioned and not the trendy stuff, but I like the traditions."

"Must take a lot of practice. My brother was involved in that for a few years. He got up to a..." Kerry thought, "...a brown belt, but he stopped doing it for a year, then tried to go back, didn't work."

"Most every night, I meet a trainer over at the island gym. We work for about two hours, depends on what's been going on that day." A faint smile chased Dar's lips. "Sometimes I'm more in the mood for the rough stuff."

"Oh, I get it--stress relief." Kerry scooped up a spoonful of creamy treat. "That sounds like a good idea," she said.

Dar nodded. "Yeah, it is. I get my frustrations out and it's not so tempting to go over the table at someone in one of those damn meetings." She studied Kerry quietly. "It helps clear your mind, too, and it comes in handy in places like Miami." Her eyes twinkled gravely. "You might want to think about picking up a class around your neck of the woods."

Kerry licked her spoon. "I wanted to, when I was younger. When Mike was taking classes. I begged and begged, but no way, no how would they let me." She considered that long-ago refusal. "I think I would have been better than he was, too. He's shorter than I am, and he's really clumsy." Her eyes lifted to Dar's. "It's a little late for me to be starting that kind of thing. I walk a lot, Rollerblade, that sort of stuff. I used to do aerobics, but I got really bored with it."

"Not challenging enough?" Dar inquired innocently.

"Eyah, something like that. Actually, I just couldn't take the instructors. I just wanted to give them wedgies all the time."

Dar laughed. *Horses, water... Ah.* "Well, you probably haven't had a chance to look through the global discounts page yet, but we just got membership benefits at the new gym right across from the office. They've got a nice indoor climbing wall and a good selection of classes. I was thinking about switching to that one."

"Yeah?" Kerry sucked on her spoon, then removed it and looked at it. "Maybe a gym's a good idea," she remarked. "If I took up boxing, maybe I could get away with having a pint of this every day."

"If you want, I could take you through some of the basics, just to see if you're interested in continuing," Dar commented casually, then she stopped and gazed, unseeing, at the candle.

"Once I find out what's going on Tuesday, I mean."

Kerry caught the change in mood and she went with her instincts, putting her spoon down and reaching over to curl her fingers over Dar's hand. "Everything's going to be okay; I really believe that, Dar. And I'd love to learn from you."

Dar nodded. "All right. We'll start on Wednesday then, okay?" How much difference would it make if she confirmed her fears anyway? She'd lived with the possibility for years, and she'd already made the decision that whatever the results, it wouldn't change the way she lived her life. That was what her father had chosen. It had, in the end, killed him, but it had been on his terms. He'd just forgotten how damn hard it would be on everyone else. *Well, I don't have to worry about that. No one depends on me; I'm not responsible for anyone but myself.* "C'mon, this is melting."

Kerry helped finish off the ice cream, then helped Dar drag a couple of blankets in to lay on the floor, where it was the coolest, and they settled in to try and sleep. The fat candle, in its dish in a safe place, shed golden flickering light over them, and long after Dar had dropped off to an uneasy sleep, Kerry sat quietly awake thinking. Watching a profile no longer strange to her outlined in firelight.

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Chapter Twelve

IT WAS A cool, leafy forest in which she found herself. Conscious of the tickle of grass against her bare thighs, she gazed out over a beautiful lake, its surface marred with gentle ripples. It was mid-afternoon, judging by the sun slanting toward the west as it peeked through the leaves, throwing a pattern of light and shadow over her extended legs.

She felt lazy and relaxed and sublimely conscious of the warm body against which she was leaning, whose arm was wrapped securely around her. She let her head rest back and picked up a pebble, tossing it into the lake and hearing a gentle, low chuckle that rumbled right through her body.

She sucked in a breath of air filled with the tangy scent of moss, and the lake, and the earth around them, and closed her eyes in perfect contentment. Aware of being happy, and relaxed, and surrounded by love.

Kerry jerked awake, her breath catching in her throat as she was thrown out of her dream and into the present, her head pounding as the dim light filtered into the room and revealed Dar's still sleeping form an arm's length from her. With a soft gasp, she let herself back down onto the pillow, curling her arm around it and squeezing it as if that could take her back into that dreamscape even if only for a moment.

So real. She could almost smell the moss again. She rolled over onto her back and rubbed her eyes, trying to get that wonderful feeling of peace out of her mind. It was raining outside, but the howling wind had stopped, or at least subsided, though the power was still off. Kerry felt clammy and shaken, and she took a few breaths to settle herself down. Then she rolled her head to one side, and froze, as she met pale blue eyes looking back at her. "Yah!"

The blue eyes widened and Dar struggled to hide a grin. "S'matter? I grow a horn overnight or something?"

Kerry exhaled. "No, no. Um..." She held up a hand. "I was...I had this dream, and I kind of jumped out of it, and I wasn't... Bah, my brain's not working yet." She put her arm over her eyes and closed them.

Dar yawned, then stretched her body out, wincing at the stiffness from sleeping on the floor. "People who say sleeping on the floor is good for you are nuts," she commented, getting to her feet and rubbing her eyes. She wandered through the dark living room and into the kitchen, switching on the battery-powered radio to get the latest information.

The storm is dissipating, its remnants moving out over the Gulf of Mexico. Meanwhile, South Florida wakes up to a half million people without power, and downed trees everywhere.

"Yippee," Dar commented dryly. She grabbed the manual crank from under the sink and unlocked the patio door, poking her head out into the fitful weather with a sniff. The rain was tapering off, and the seas, though choppy, lacked the whitecaps that had stirred them the day before. Dar set the crank into its catch, and rolled up the shutters, allowing light into the apartment. Then she went back inside, and opened the latched, hardwood-lined glass doors, letting in the fresh sea breeze. "Ah. That's better." She walked out onto the porch and put her hands on the balcony, taking in a deep breath of the clean air, tasting salt on the back of her tongue. She was surprised at how good she felt, given the uncomfortable night, and she stretched again, feeling the pleasant pull of the muscles across her back as she extended her arms and flexed her fists.

A hand touched her elbow and Kerry ducked under her arm, peering curiously out at the sea, her disheveled blonde hair whipping back in the breeze. "Mmm. That feels good."

Dar settled her elbows on the railing and leaned on them. "Sure does." She glanced around. "Power's still down in a lot of places."

Kerry sighed. "I'd better call my place, see what's happening." She ducked inside and picked up one of two analog phones Dar had plugged in the night before, dialing Colleen's number from memory. She'd spoken briefly to her friend last night, reassuring herself that the complex was safe. Colleen had scoffed at the storm, having been through Andrew, and was in the middle of

planning a hurricane party when Kerry called. The information about her whereabouts were received with a knowing silence that sent prickles up and down her back, but she hadn't really had time to think about that much. The phone picked up on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Col. How is everything?"

"Ah, the mysteriously missing Ms. Stuart," Colleen answered smugly. "How are things on your side of the tracks there, eh?"

Kerry rolled her eyes. "Colleen, for heaven's sake."

The redhead laughed. "Everything's fine and dandy here, my friend. Trees are down, and a few power lines. We don't have power, and it's uncomfortable as hell, but we're all staying outside, and we've got a little grill set up. It's not so bad. We can go into our cars if we're in danger of overheating." She paused. "How are you doing?"

"Oh, well, about the same," Kerry told her. "Power's out here. We've got the doors and windows open. It was pretty bad last night, but doesn't look like there's much damage, except for a few branches down, and..." She shaded her eyes to peer outside. "I think a boat's stuck on the eastern tip of the island."

"Mmm-hmm, must have been...hot and sticky and uncomfortable last night, huh?" Colleen's voice held a hint of playfulness.

Kerry chose to ignore the innuendo, and answered the question at face value. "It was, but we opened a window on the protected side of the apartment. And we had ice cream, so," she laughed softly, "it worked out okay. I just woke up." She glanced up as the sun made a pale appearance, dusting Dar's shoulders with wan light. "Sun's coming out."

"Is it shining on anything interesting?" Colleen asked impishly.

Kerry peered at the receiver, her brows knitting. "Are you all right?" She glanced outside. "It's shining on the ocean, and a few boats that I can see, and the patio. Why?"

The redhead laughed softly. "Never mind, Kerry. You going to spend some time there yet?"

"Um, probably. I think they need the electricity to run the ramps to get on and off the ferry."

"Oh, right," Colleen agreed amiably. "Well, your place survived quite nicely. We didn't get flooded or anything like that, so we'll all be here when you saunter home."

Kerry smiled. "That's great to hear, I'm glad everything was okay." She watched as Dar turned and leaned on one arm, peering back at her from outside. "I, um...I'll talk to you a little later, okay?" She hung up and went to the door, peering out and blinking. "Well, everything's okay at my place." She was still carrying the phone and held it out to Dar when the older woman motioned for it.

"Might as well find out what the prognosis is for getting power back." Dar dialed quickly. "Then I guess I'd better make sure everything's on track at the office."

Kerry nodded. "Um." She bit her lip on a grin. "Want me to get you some frosted flakes?" Her eyes twinkled. "I think that would be better than ice cream for breakfast, though," she cleared her throat, "not by much."

Dar gave her a look as she listened to something on the phone, then hung it up. "Power'll probably be back up after lunchtime, and they've got a generator running down at the beach club, so I think we'll take a ride down there so I don't have to get flack for my choice of breakfast cereals." She paused and drummed her fingers on the phone, then turned and gazed out at the calming seas. "Matter of fact...you in the mood to take a ride?"

"A ride?" Kerry followed her gaze. "Oh, you mean on the boat?" She let out a sigh. "I'd love to, but I'm not exactly dressed for it."

"Oh, we can fix that." Dar grinned.

"We can? Well, okay. Sure. I'd like that...since we're kinda stuck here, and it'll be cooler out there, I guess."

Half an hour later, they were in, of all things, a golf cart with Dar's apartment number on it, dodging downed branches on the road which circled the island. Other carts were out and about, with sightseers and island staff, the former driving slowly and pointing, the latter dragging debris out of the way.

Kerry sat back and enjoyed the ride, as they went past clusters of apartments and drove around past a large structure, then circled the marina and ended up in a cluster of shops where the rumble of a generator was evident. She hopped out and followed her taller companion, who pointed at the doors as they went by.

"Video shop, bookstore, health food store, Island Market. Ah, here we go." Dar pushed open the door of a small store which held various items of casual and beach apparel. "Think you can find something in here?"

Kerry made a beeline for a rack which held one-piece Speedos in rich, bold colors. "Oh yeah." She grinned, checking the sizes and selecting a purple one, then choosing a pair of shorts and a tank top to go with it. She handed a credit card to the clerk, surprised when he merely stamped it on her charge ticket, then handed it back to her, along with a pen for her signature. She smiled up at him, receiving a shy smile in return. "Thank you." She took her package and followed Dar out, catching up with her as she headed for the door to the market. "Dar, he didn't check my credit card."

"No." Dar glanced sideways at her. "Not... Well, let me put it to you this way, Kerry--on this island, if you're running a scam, it's in the multibillions. You don't bother with little bitty stuff like bathing suits." She held the door to the small grocery store open. "Besides, the only way you could get on the island is with a resident, which he knows I am. He figures if anything comes up bad, I'll take care of it." She paused. "Which, of course, I would."

Kerry stopped short. "You don't have to worry about that."

Mild blue eyes regarded her. "I wasn't," Dar replied quietly. "Let's pick up a couple of things to take on the boat with us. Might as well make an afternoon of it."

They walked out with a cute little basket, which held, Dar discovered, a set of plates and silverware and was large enough for sandwich fixings and savory side orders. She flipped open her cell phone and dialed, getting Mark Polenti's cell phone in two rings. "Hey."

"Hey," Mark replied over the faint sound of a rattling keyboard. "Everything survived, no problems, just no power. It's going to be mildewy as hell in there on Monday."

"Good," Dar murmured.

"You like mildew?" Mark answered confused.

"No, no. I mean, good that everything survived," Dar explained.

"All the processing get shifted up in time?"

"Yeah, everything except Bank of New Zealand. I went in and kicked their processors onto the generator and got them going," the MIS chief muttered. "I'm dialed in now, remotely administering them. They had a payroll transfer due yesterday and according to them, you don't pay those guys, they get real ugly."

Dar smiled. "Good work, Mark. Thanks for taking care of that for me."

"Mmph." Mark cleared his throat. "Heard you weren't feeling great. You okay?"

A faint smile crossed Dar's face. "Yeah, I'm fine, just had one hell of a headache. The weather probably brought it on." She paused. "Poor old Kerry here volunteered to give me a ride home, then got stuck when the weather hit."

"Um, that explains her logging on from your terminal, I guess, " Mark commented after a brief pause. "And why her car's still in the parking lot. We moved it under the covered area in the back, along with about a half dozen others."

"Thanks, I'm sure she'll be glad to hear it." Dar chuckled. "Well, I gotta go. I'll have the cell phone on if you need me." She hung up and steered the cart along the marina. "How about I drop you and this stuff off here, then go grab some muffins or something for breakfast?" She suggested. "They took care of your car at work, by the way."

Kerry nodded. "I know, I spoke to Andreas in security last night. That was really nice of them." She hopped out as Dar slowed the cart to a halt at a particular slip, which had a nicely proportioned boat docked in it. "This it?"

"Yep, here." She handed Kerry a set of keys. "The cabin should be stocked with towels and all that, and I had it filled with gas last week."

"Great." She smiled gently. "Thanks for trying to keep me amused, Dar. You know you don't have to. I don't blame you for getting me stuck here."

Blue eyes regarded her enigmatically. "I know, but we've got nothing better to do, so..." She waved, and started off down the dock, leaving Kerry to make her way carefully onto the gently rolling deck of the boat.

"STOCKED, SHE SAYS." Kerry muffled a giggle as she explored the neatly made cabin of the cruiser. It had a small bathroom complete with an equally small shower and a tiny bedroom with a bed just large enough, maybe, for two people. So long as they really liked each other. She suspected Dar would have trouble with the length, though. The interior was warm polished wood, with blues and greens in the curtains that covered the portholes and the bedding on the bed. It felt warm and cozy, and welcoming. She brushed her fingers against the fabric.

She liked it. It felt comfortable here, and she moved with the boat's motion from long experience.

"Well, onto the next area: the kitchen." She put her bag down and ducked into the small galley, which had a compact refrigerator. She opened it, surprised to feel a residual coolness, then realized the boat must have been hooked up to dock power. She put the lunch fixings inside and closed the door, confident it would keep them cool enough until Dar started the engines up. To one side was a microwave, range, and a sink with taps for both salt water and a limited tank of fresh water. A cupboard held nesting pots and two pans and unbreakable cups which were clipped in place and dangled softly as the boat moved. "This is pretty darn cool," she commented to herself, turning around and surveying the area.

Outside the galley was a compact sitting space, with a wooden table surrounded by two built-in benches catty-corner to each other. A soft, comfortable-looking chair was bolted along the open end of the table, and both a television and a stereo were in closed, watertight cabinets overhead. Kerry grinned, then ducked into the bedroom and changed into her new suit, checking her reflection in the mirror and scowling at it a little. She threw her shorts and tank top over it and tucked her borrowed T-shirt and shorts into a drawer, then she trotted up the stairs and onto the deck.

It was in two levels, one which held the bridge and controls, and the lower level which had thick cushioned seats on the long sides and across the back of the stern. Kerry lifted up the cushions, and in a storage compartment under the first one, she found safety gear, floatation devices, flares,

and safety rings. Under the other were two full sets of scuba gear, including two tanks nestled into clips on the bottom. "And you never use this," she chastised her absent boss. "Dar, what are we going to do with you?" She sat down for a moment and just shook her head. "Boy, if I had a place like this, and a boat, I'd be..." She imagined her friends over, and what great parties they could have. Then she stopped and considered Dar's words the previous evening. "You shouldn't do this alone, and I...don't have time, anymore."

Don't have time? Or was it that all these nice things were pretty useless if you didn't have anyone to share them with? "C'mon, Dar, with your looks? Don't tell me you can't get and keep a boyfriend," she muttered. "They'd have to be out of their cotton-picking minds not to want to spend time with you." She swung her feet a little, thumping her heels against the fiberglass, thinking.

The soft whine of the cart approaching broke her reverie, and she turned to see Dar parking the vehicle in the small spot that seemed to be designed for it near the bow of the boat. She was carrying a pair of bags and hopped onto the deck with negligent grace, dropping down into the lower area with a chuckle. "They're doing one hell of a brisk business." She set the bags down. "Everything all right?"

"Looks great." Kerry noted that her companion had stopped back at the apartment to change into a bathing suit, which she was wearing under a long T-shirt. "This is like a regular floating hotel room."

Dar snorted softly. "Yeah, Aunt May had rich tastes. Took me a while to get used to it. I was more inclined to a fifteen-foot dive boat with a single back deck and one chair as an amenity."

Kerry grinned. "But you did get used to it, eventually."

The taller woman chuckled self-deprecatingly. "Eyah, as I got older, I developed a disgusting craving for creature comforts." She walked around the perimeter of the boat, casting off the lines. "Hang on, now."

Chuckling, Kerry said, "I learned how to hang on crewing a racing yacht going thirty knots, thanks." She leaned back on her hands and soaked in the sun. "You get tossed from one of those, you remember it."

Dar seated herself at the controls and started the engines, adjusting the throttles until she heard an even tone. Then, she skillfully backed the boat out, swinging around and nudging the motors into a speed just past idling to get them out of the marina. As soon as they cleared the outer buoy, the breeze picked up, and Dar swung the bow towards the southeast, arcing smoothly over the still choppy waves towards a hazy horizon. Kerry perched next to her, enjoying the salt air and the sunshine, and the cool spray that jutted up from the boat when they hit the waves.

"Wow, it's nice out here," she murmured.

Dar closed her eyes briefly and took in a lungful of the air, letting memories wash over her for a long, aching moment. Swallowing a lump in her throat, she finally said quietly, "Yeah, it is."

They anchored off one of the small islands that dotted the coastline and felt the boat settle down into a quiet bobbing. With the engines shut off, the rhythmic wash of the waves became audible, along with the gentle clank of the boat's rigging. The sun was fully out, and only high, wispy clouds disturbed the perfect blue of the sky.

"I'm going in for a swim." Dar stood and stripped off her T-shirt and tucked it neatly on the console. "You interested?"

Kerry strolled to the railing and peered over. The water was a rich blue-green and smelled of salt and mystery. "Depends, are there sharks down there?" She peered over her shoulder at the taller woman, who was leaning casually against the curve of the cabin door.

Dar, she decided, *looks really good in a bathing suit*. She had one of those long, swimmer's builds, with just enough softness covering her muscles so that she didn't look like a body builder or anything. Just...strong and solid. "The lake we raced on didn't have sharks," she explained apologetically.

Dar chuckled. "Well, there might be a few, but I've been in these waters since I was four years old, and I haven't been nibbled yet." She walked to the rail and hopped up onto it, then dove into the water cleanly, surfacing several yards away from the boat.

Kerry watched her for a moment as she dove down again, then popped up and began to stroke lazily around the boat. "I suppose it's a little early for shark lunch, so..." She shrugged, then tugged off her shirt and shorts and left them folded on the cushion, moving to a more prudent spot in the stern before stepping up onto the fiberglass railing and jumping in.

She surfaced with a splutter. "Oh. It's warm." She ducked her head under water and opened her eyes, blinking against the painful salt. The sun penetrated the green for quite a ways down, outlining waves of golden particles that disappeared into the depths. She could only do it for a moment, though, before it stung her eyes too badly, and she surfaced. "Whoa."

Treading water, her wet, dark hair slicked back, Dar held out a mask with a mild grin. "Here, this works better."

"Thanks." Kerry adjusted the mask, having a bit of difficulty treading water at the same time, then put her face back down, peering into the depths with interest. A school of tiny fish swam by under her, looking for all the world like a flock of birds, even to their splitting and rejoining to some mysterious pattern. Kerry lifted her head up. "Wow, it must be so interesting down there." Dar grinned from her spot where she hung onto the anchor line. "We're pretty shallow right now, only about thirty feet," she explained. "There's a coral ridge that goes up and down the coastline here. So, if we were down there, we'd be seeing all kinds of fish."

With efficient strokes, Kerry swam over to her and grabbed the line as well. "You're making me jealous. Now I know I have to get certified. I tried coaxing some of the guys at Associated into doing it, but they were all scared. I bet I can get at least one or two people at the office join in, though."

Dar studied her in silence for a long moment, then gave a slight nod. "Wait here." She reached up and grabbed the gunwale, pulling herself upright out of the water and pressing her body up and over the railing.

Kerry blinked. "Wow, I couldn't do that even when I was doing gymnastics six times a week," she murmured, impressed. "Heck, I don't think the guys who did rings could do that."

Dar came back and unhitched a section of the railing, pulling it back and seating herself on it. "Okay, we can do a really quick, really easy short dive with just the stuff I have here." She handed Kerry a vest-like garment. "Put that on."

Kerry did, buckling it around her chest and tightening the straps so it fit snugly. "Okay." She felt a thrill of excitement. "What's next?"

Dar handed her a pair of booties. "Now these." She waited. "Okay, now slip these on over the booties and tighten them around your heels." She gave Kerry a pair of swim fins.

"That's a little...oh, okay, I got it." Kerry bit her lip a little as she concentrated. The vest provided some buoyancy, fortunately, and after a moment she looked up. "Okay." She waved her feet, feeling the powerful surge against the water, and grinned. "Oh, that feels neat."

Dar handed her down a snorkel. "Put that through the loop in the mask. Yeah, that's right. Now turn around, and hold onto that anchor line."

Kerry did so, facing out towards the horizon. She felt the splash as Dar entered the water behind her, then experienced a moment of jostling as something was attached to her back. She felt the weight difference immediately. "Oh, is that the tank?"

"Yep." Dar's hand suddenly appeared beside her ear, holding a round object with a mouthpiece.

"Okay, this is how this works."

Her voice was right up next to Kerry's ear, and it took a moment for the words to register. "Um. Okay, that's a regulator," she repeated.

"Right," Dar agreed. "See this button?" She pointed to a round spot on top of the piece of gear.

"That's a forced expel." She put the mouthpiece under water. "Water can't get in, but if you press this..." She did so, and a stream of bubbles erupted. "Got it? You put that in your mouth, and just breath in normally."

Kerry fit the mouthpiece between her teeth and sucked in, mildly surprised when air happened.

"Fowfh."

Dar patted her. "Okay, I'm not going to go into the dive computer or anything, because we're just going down a few feet today. Hang on while I get my gear."

"Owflk." Kerry nodded, looking around and getting used to having the regulator in her mouth.

What seemed like moments later, Dar was back with similar equipment. She put her flippers on, then swam closer, and Kerry felt a touch at her waist as Dar's arms circled her.

She stopped breathing. "Uf..."

"Weight belt," Dar said matter-of-factly. "You need it to compensate for the air in here." She patted the vest and smiled.

"Owf." Kerry nodded in understanding as her lungs started working again.

Dar put her own belt on, adjusting it a little and scowling, then she set her mask in place. "Okay, just do what I do. You're going to let go, and let yourself sink. Just breath normally."

It was the oddest sensation, Kerry decided, as she obeyed and let herself start to fall through the water. The regulator's bubbles kept a steady stream of sound around her, but she looked around as she went deeper, seeing the sun's rays bend and lose their color.

Not far, as Dar had said, and in fact, if she looked up, Kerry could see the solid bottom of the boat just above her. But down here... She leveled out and floated just above the bottom, which was covered with a thick coral formation. Her eyes widened as a school of small, brightly painted yellow and blue fish went right past her, their fins brushing her skin lightly, like butterflies. Past them swam larger, more solitary fish, their bodies undulating back and forth as they surveyed the reef in regal splendor. A tiny, darting red fish zigzagged past her and fled, followed by a larger, flat, black fish with an eye on each side of its body. She glanced down and pointed. A lobster was making its way across the bottom, its spiny shell flexing as it moved.

Just watching her, Dar nodded. The older woman was floating, her arms folded over her stomach and her legs half bent. She lifted one hand and made an okay sign with her fingers, then raised an eyebrow in question. Kerry nodded vigorously, almost unseating her regulator. Dar nodded back, then moved off very slowly, motioning her to follow.

They stayed down for about twenty minutes, while Dar gave her a little tour and pointed out things not to touch. The reef, for one; every touch on the coral was a death sentence to it. Fire coral for another, which could sting human skin badly. Puffer fish, which had spikes; eels, which she wouldn't have come within a hundred yards of anyway; and other various creatures. Then Dar gently led her up to the surface, swimming up the anchor line until they both broke through the waves, and removed their regulators.

"Oh my god, that was amazing!" Kerry blurted immediately. "Did you see those silver fish? They were making faces at me!" She pulled her mask off, and pushed her wet hair back. "And those purple things. What were those purple things? There were these little translucent squiddy things, too. What were they?"

Laughing, Dar held up a hand. "Whoa, take it easy. Let's get back on the boat and we can talk about it, okay?" She had Kerry hand her the gear, and she put it onto the deck, then lifted herself up and extended hand to the smaller woman. "Here, grab on."

Kerry felt herself being pulled up and she grabbed the railing, getting onto the deck far more easily than she had anticipated. "Wow." She smiled at Dar in delight. "Thank you! I really, really mean that."

Dar smiled back. "Always like to see another convert." She chuckled, ducking into the cabin and coming back out with two towels. "Let's get dried off, and I bet you're hungry."

Kerry felt her stomach growl. "Okay, I give. How did you know that?"

Dar's tanned fingers waved dismissively. "Diving does it. I am too."

They sat in the sun, drying off and sharing lunch as Kerry peppered her companion with questions about sea life. Dar stretched out on one of the cushioned benches, putting her hands behind her head and closing her eyes as she answered. Kerry eventually ran out of queries and took the other bench, relaxing against its slightly rough surface with a contented sigh. "Ill wind blows nobody whatever, huh?" she commented wryly.

"Mmm." Dar turned her head slightly and regarded the younger woman. "You could say that." She studied the slim frame, sleek in its purple fabric, then her eyes closed again as the sun bathed them in rich golden light. "Glad we remembered sunscreen."

"Uh huh," the fair-skinned woman agreed. "Otherwise, I'd turn the color of a lobster," A silence fell, and Kerry mused thoughtfully to herself for a bit, then she turned to ask Dar a question. She bit it back when she saw that Dar was peacefully asleep. With a contented smile, she shifted to get a little more comfortable, then let her own eyes close as well.

A SEAGULL, ARCHING overhead and complaining, nudged Dar awake, and she reluctantly opened her eyes, slightly startled by the low arc of the sun. *Oh damn.* She yawned and stretched, rubbing her face with one hand as she sat up. The boat was bobbing gently, and she glanced around, not seeing her companion until she half stood and spotted her on the very front of the bow, her knees tucked up against her chest as she gazed out at the horizon. The sun was hitting her from the back and brought out gentle red highlights in her otherwise blonde hair, and Dar felt a smile on her lips she really had little control over.

"Hey." She climbed up onto the bow and settled down at Kerry's side. "You shouldn't have let me sleep so long."

Eyes the color of the sea around them peered at her from under sun-lightened brows. "I just woke up myself. And you looked so peaceful, I didn't have the heart to wake you up." Kerry smiled. "I know last night wasn't very comfortable, so..." She shrugged. "It was kinda like catching up."

Dar leaned back against the cabin wall and nodded. "That's true. Guess we'd better get going on in, though. Power should be back on and I can get you home."

"Yeah," Kerry murmured, resting her chin on her knee.

Silence settled, save the soft rippling of the waves. Dar finally cleared her throat a little. "Listen, I, um...I wanted to apologize."

Kerry's brows knitted and she turned her head. "For what? Dar, it's not your fault a storm came up."

Dar held up a hand. "No. For what happened with Associated."

"Mmph." There was a brief pause. "Well, it's all right, I mean, it worked out."

"But it wouldn't have," Dar admitted with a sigh. "If you hadn't stood up to me and made me take a second look at what I was doing, it wouldn't have." She fell silent for a moment. "I've been doing this for a long time, and I never stopped to think about how the people I was doing it to felt."

"Oh." Kerry absorbed this. "It was hard," she acknowledged. "I felt like it was so hopeless sometimes, and then when you called. Boy." She looked out at the water and shook her head. "It hurt." She glanced sideways and watched Dar's eyes narrow, her sight firmly focused on the horizon. "But you were doing your job."

"Yes," Dar murmured. "I know. That's why it puzzled me when, after all that, you wanted to come help me do it to other people."

"Maybe the next time something like that comes up, I can get you to think twice again," Kerry answered simply.

Blue eyes looked directly into hers. "What if you can't?"

Kerry thought about that. "I'll just keep trying," she answered quietly. "I have a lot of patience."

Dar ducked her head and chuckled. "Fair enough." She pushed herself to her feet and made her way back to the console. "Hang on, I'm bringing up the anchor."

Kerry scrambled off the bow and settled herself onto the cushioned bench, leaning against the railing and extending her legs into the lowering sunlight. The city was backlit in molten gold.

Wishing she had a camera to capture the sight, she swung around and kept it in her view as Dar turned the boat and headed for shore.

Chapter Thirteen

"MORNING, MARIA." DAR settled back in her seat as the ferry made its way toward the causeway.

"*Dios mío*, Dar. You cannot believe the smells in here this morning. It is like a thousand cats peeped on the rug," the secretary informed her. "I have an orange stuck into my nose."

"Did maintenance arrange for a carpet cleaning service?" Dar inquired, wincing at the thought of the stench. "Never mind, just put me through to Jack Eierdall." She waited a moment, then a gruff voice answered. "Jack? Dar Roberts." She listened. "We need a steam cleaner in there today, Jack, not two days from now ... That's not acceptable." Another wait and protesting tones. "I don't give a rat's ass about your cousin. I'll get a commercial crew in and bill you back for it at cost plus if you don't get 'em in there today."

Dar inspected a nail, then flexed her hand where the skin was just a little tight from the sunburn she'd gotten on Saturday. "Look, cut the crap. Bottom line, I see the truck by the time I get there, or I call in Stanley Steamer Corporate. G'bye, Jack." She hung up the line, then dialed again.

"Maria?"

"*Si*." The secretary sneezed. "Oye, excuse me, Dar." She shuffled some papers. "You have a meeting at eight thirty, remember--the executive committee, and you have three client briefings after that."

Dar sighed. "I know. Listen, block out my morning tomorrow, until at least lunchtime, and Kerry's too." She paused. "She's, um...she has to drive me to an appointment I have to go to." After a period of shocked silence, Maria said slowly, "All right, I will do that. Is it...a business meeting? I..."

"No," the executive said quietly, "I'm having some tests done. It's all right, nothing major. I just don't know what kind of medication they're going to give me and didn't want to risk driving myself."

"*Dios mío*. All right, I'll put that down. I'll have to cancel your account meeting with Travel and Transport, Dar."

"Aw, shucks," Dar drawled. "Reschedule it for sometime extremely inconvenient to them, will you?"

"Tch, Dar." Maria laughed shortly. "You are so bad." She hesitated. "I have my rosary here. What kind of tests for you, so I'll know how to pray?"

Dar blinked at the phone, too stunned to answer for a moment, then she exhaled. "It's nothing, I ... They're not sure, really, Maria, just maybe a leaky valve or something. It's really not anything to worry about, but thanks for offering."

"*Mi madre*." The older woman sighed. "*Ay*, good morning." She held the phone away from her mouth. "Excuse me, what?" Dar heard a muffled exchange, then Maria came back. "Dar, they lost some big thing in New York."

"Oh, hellinahandbasket." Dar covered her eyes. "New York down on a Monday morning. What did I do to deserve this?" She angled the Lexus up the ramp and turned left onto the causeway. "Look, I'm about five or ten minutes out. Have whoever is on duty in the MDF call Netops and find out exactly what's down, and warn Northeast region, especially service recovery, that we've got a problem."

"Okay, okay. Ah, good morning. Thank you, thank you, *chiquita*."

Maria's voice warmed, and Dar could hear another voice in the background, which brought a smile to her face.

"Dar, Kerry is here, she says she'll take care of it."

"Good morning, Kerry." Dar chuckled. "Thanks, how was the rest of your weekend?"

"Eh." Kerry's voice was noncommittal. "Let's not talk about that. Does the term sewer backup mean anything to you?"

"Ouch." Dar winced, as she turned left onto Brickell.

"Yeah, it's almost as bad as it is in here," Kerry told her. "Well, I'm going to go call Netops. I'll try to have a status for you by the time you get here."

Maria's voice came back on the line and the muffled sound of a door closing could be heard in the background. "She is such a nice girl, Dar," the secretary told her approvingly. "That was so sweet of her to take you home on Friday."

"Yes, it was." Dar swung into the parking lot, noting a wildly careening truck just behind her. The truck pulled right up to the service entrance, and four men got out, pulling out carpet-cleaning equipment. She grinned mercilessly. "Be right up." She hung up the line and got out of the car, grabbing her briefcase before heading for the doors.

KERRY CARRIED A handful of papers with her as she slipped down the back hallway and tapped on the door to Dar's office, hearing the older woman's voice raised in a growling yell. "Oh boy." She pushed the door open and slipped inside.

Pacing back and forth behind her desk, Dar looked for all the world like a well-dressed panther. She was yelling at some hapless person in the network operations center, her staccato barks tossing aside his attempts to explain. "Don't give me that crap, I don't want to know about how Sprint had a fiber cut under Newark Airport. I want that circuit rerouted."

Kerry stopped before she reached the desk and held the top sheet out, then handed it over as Dar held her hand up. "It's a big problem, Dar. They had an airport transport vehicle go off the ramp and crash down through the communications center. It took out their entire fiber center, including all the internal com at the airport."

"Jesus." Dar's eyes widened. "Are they shut down?"

"Yeah, they're rerouting traffic through La Guardia, but it's a mess."

Fingers drumming on her desk, eyes shifting rapidly, Dar sat down and requested information from their database, and drummed her fingers again. "All right, all right. Listen up, Netops..."

"We're here," the tired-sounding voice came back. "We've been on this since two AM."

"You've got thirty-seven T1 lines that come down into Newark for T-and-T's rescom that you handle for the Hub site agreement." Dar traced a spiderwork of connections on her screen, motioning Kerry over. The blonde woman put a hand on the back of her chair and peered at the screen.

"Yeah, but that's carrying terminal res traffic." The phone crackled.

"If you shift the endpoint routers at backbone six and seven to one and two, you can send airport com down those, and get the airport back up. Shunt the res functions to dial backup," Dar said rapidly. "That'll bring the net back up there, and pass traffic through for the banking centers in New York, who are down right now and breathing fire on my ass." There was dead silence from the phone. "Did you hear me?" Dar barked, glancing back as Kerry patted her shoulder comfortingly. "Hello?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, okay. We heard you. Hang on, this is going to... Damn it, John, get that Tiger frad configured so we can shift res to backup. Someone call the MTC and tell them we're doing this so they don't freak out when the lines go down."

"I'm waiting," Dar called out impatiently.

"We're working on it," the voice responded hurriedly.

"Work faster," Dar warned. "It's 8:52. If those banks aren't up for transactions by 9:00 AM, the shit is going to hit the fan in so many directions you won't know where to duck."

"Okay! Okay!"

Dar pulled up a Netview screen and displayed the down sites. She repeated the command, then again, nervously refreshing the screen.

"I was going to suggest I get you some coffee," Kerry murmured, "but maybe not."

The dark head turned, and blue eyes regarded her as Dar's lips twitchingly held back a grin. Then she turned her attention back to the screen. "Three minutes left. Where are my circuits!"

"Hang on, hang on. Switch that. No. No!"

"Two minutes!" Dar yelled. "I need that circuit!"

"Okay, we need the secondary tables loaded in that backbone. Serial 1... Okay, okay. Try it now!"

Dar refreshed the screen and smiled. "Thank you," she purred. "Nice doing business with you guys." She hit the release button. "Not!" She barked at the phone, then punched a button and shook her head.

"Elaine Aberman, Service recovery," a nervous, anxious voice answered.

"Good morning, Elaine," Dar said, soothingly.

"No! It's not!" the woman wailed. "It's horrible! It's tragic! We're dying!"

"You're up," the executive stated calmly.

"You can't believe what kind of a mess it is in here. We've got service reps on standby ready to get up to New York, and... Excuse me?"

"You're up. We rerouted traffic a bit. Might be a touch slow, but it's all there," Dar informed her.

"Oh!" The woman squealed. "Guys, guys, we're up! We're up! Glory be to god, we're up!" Kerry put her hand over her mouth and choked back a laugh.

"G'bye, Elaine." Dar hung up and let herself relax back into her chair with a sigh. "Nice way to start a Monday." She rolled her head and looked up at the still-snickering blonde. "Sewer backup, huh?"

Kerry let a hand drop to Dar's shoulder and squeezed it. "Oh my god, yes. It was awful. I finally just had to leave, take a ride down to the little park near my place and wait for them to finish pumping the sewers out."

"Mmm. Sounds great." Dar pushed herself to her feet. "I'm supposed to be at an exec meeting. Keep an eye on this for me, will you? Call my cell if it gets ugly again." She patted Kerry on the back as she pushed her chair in. "See you later."

Kerry watched her leave, then she collected her papers and made her way back to her own office.

DAR COULD HEAR the loud arguments before she even pushed open the door, and she quite deliberately let it slam behind her as she moved across to the large executive conference table. Everyone jumped, then turned and started yelling at her. She blocked out the sound, pulling her chair forward and seating herself in it, then meticulously arranging her papers in front of her and folding long hands together across them. The din continued, and she swept the room, pinning each yelling manager with her pale blue eyes until he or she shut up, then moving on to the next one. Finally, only José Montarosa was left, the head of Sales, whose face was beet red, veins sticking out on a neck a size too big for his white long-sleeved shirt.

"Goddamn it, Dar, I have three contracts in jeopardy in New Jersey. We're supposed to be demoing this morning. If you can't get this shit working, I'm going to take it out of your goddamn paycheck!"

Dar glanced down at her hands, then back up at him, and cocked an eyebrow. "Try it," she purred, with a smile. An uneasy silence fell, and she continued, "Besides, if your admin was worth two percent of the salary you pay her for those...*assets*...you hired her for, she'd have paged you ten minutes ago and told you we were up." Dar poured herself a glass of water and sipped it. "Now sit down and shut up, and let's get on with this. I have things I have to take care of."

Montarosa glared at her, his lips twitching, then he lifted the conference room phone and dialed a number. "Maria, what's the status?" A pause. "Why the hell didn't you let me know?" Another pause. "Don't give me that crap, my pager's..." He paused and glanced at his belt. "*Put*." He flung the phone down and just assumed his seat with a glower.

Duks leaned back, biting a pencil to keep from laughing. "Dar, I heard it was a fiber cut. What happened?"

The tall woman also leaned back, crossing her legs at the ankles under the table. "Truck cut the cable. We rerouted through the regular airport T1s and shunted that traffic to a backup."

"Oh." Duks nodded as though he had any clue as to what she was talking about. "Can I have an egg roll with that?"

A nervous laugh went around the table, breaking the tension. "All right, all right, I'm the chair this week. Let's see what's on the agenda." Mariana chuckled from her place next to Duks as she pulled out the previous meeting's minutes. "Now that we have the morning crisis out of the way, thanks to Dar, we can go over more insignificant things." She cleared her throat. "Global Volunteer day--it's next Saturday, up in North Miami at the proposed Alternative School there. We need people to go down and clean the place up, do some painting, that kind of thing."

"How many volunteers do we have from the field?" Evan Maitzen asked. His department was in charge of most of the data entry, and traditionally provided a lot of volunteers for charity work. "Um, as of today, two hundred and six," Mariana reported. "Quite a group from Associated is coming over. Guess they want to impress the corporate types." A laugh went around the table. "Whose turn is it from us this year?" José asked, propping his chin up on a big fist. "I did it last year, remember?"

Dar considered a moment. "Mine, I think." She was recalling having heard Kerry talk about her recruitment efforts earlier for the clean-up. They all looked at her in mild disbelief. She shrugged. "I haven't done it, so it must be my turn."

Mariana stared hard at her for a long moment, then shook her head and scribbled Dar's name down on her sheet. "All right." She cleared her throat, and went on to the next subject.

"Remember this Friday is Boss's Day." She glanced around the table. "I know most you know the drill, but once again, please be careful--some people do take this opportunity to offer inappropriate gifts."

A chuckle lifted into the air. "Yeah, I remember when someone sent Dar a set of freeze-dried bull's *cojones*." José snickered, giving Dar a sweet smile. "What did you do with them, eh?"

Dar, who had been doodling, looked up. "Co-mailed them to Alastair," she replied in a deadpan voice.

Duks almost fell off his chair laughing, and the others joined in, save José and a few of his cronies. "

"Well, not all of us have to worry about our employees sending pipe bombs," he insinuated. "Some of ours actually like us."

Mariana glanced at him. "Fortunately for us, Dar pays people to do a job, not be her buddy," she responded mildly. "Or we'd all be in big trouble." She shuffled a page. "Speaking of which, let's get onto performance reviews, shall we?"

Dar went back to her sketching, listening with half an ear to the Personnel executive's carefully drawn-out plans. She'd spent the previous day catching up on e-mail and relaxing, sprawled out across the couch in the blessedly restored air conditioning, surprised at how unwound she'd gotten after just one day on the water. She glanced up as Duks leaned close.

"You're in a good mood today," he murmured in a low voice.

"Am I?" Dar inquired. "I guess I am. I had a fairly laid-back weekend."

Duks eyed her pad, which had small pictures of fish all over it. "Did you go fishing?"

She chuckled. "Not really. Did a little diving, though, after the storm cleared."

He clucked at her. "Dar, you should know better than to go diving solo. I don't want to be processing your life insurance claim, thanks."

Blue eyes lifted mildly to his. "I wasn't alone."

He blinked at her in surprise, then laughed softly and shook a finger at her. "I should have guessed. No wonder you look so relaxed."

Dar's brow lifted. "It's not..." She hesitated. "Not what you're thinking."

He just smiled at her and tapped her arm with his pencil. "Say no more."

Silly Duks. He thinks everything has to do with people sleeping

together, doesn't he? Dar smiled to herself. It would never occur to him that two virtual strangers could get stuck together by circumstance and end up becoming friends.

That was a very satisfying thought, and Dar reflected on it a moment as a faint smile touched her face. It had been a very long time since she'd added one of those to her life. Beyond Duks, of course, and Mariana, with whom she would sometimes do occasional things-- dinner, lunches,

and whatnot. She'd known them for years, and they'd been out to the island a few times, but... She sighed. *An ill wind blew nobody good.*

"Dar?"

By the tone, it was not the first time her name was being called, and she glanced up with a start.

"Sorry, what?" All eyes were on her, curious and doubtful. "Sorry, I was going over something in my head." She folded her arms across her chest. "What?"

"Right, well..." Mariana glanced back down at her agenda. "Now that we've closed the third quarter and are starting into fourth, we've got a couple of weeks to decide what to do with Christmas."

"I think we should give it up and become Hindus," Duks stated with a sniff. "Much easier. We can give everyone white rice for presents." He waggled his pencil. "Seventeen cents a pound, remember."

José threw a wadded-up piece of paper at him. "Godless heathen." He snorted. Duks was well-known for his atheist leanings. "Remind me not to ever vote to put you in charge of holiday arrangements."

"Do we have a budget this year or are we going to have to go out and sell embroidered toilet paper for funds again?" Dar drawled, sketching a lobster.

"It's fourth quarter, what do you think?" Duks laughed. "Ah, I suppose I can squeeze some cash out of somewhere. What is it--a tree, some stuffed pigs or something, and yucca? Is that it?"

Mariana sighed. "Never mind, I'll take care of planning it. Maybe we'll get something other than *picadillo* and *ropa vieja* this time." She shot a glance at José, who shrugged and lifted his hands.

"Don't worry, I'll get at least one stuffed pig for you."

They finished the meeting and Duks walked Dar to the door. "You open for lunch, DR?"

Dar took a breath. "Probably not, Dukky, I've got meetings. I don't know when they'll be done." She gave him a smile. "Raincheck." She folded her pad under her arm and headed for the stairwell, a faster way down to the tenth floor, where the operations center was.

"SO I FOUND three people who'll go through certification."

Kerry took a bite of her chicken salad sandwich and chewed it. "They all live near me, so we called this place in Kendall and got a deal for four Saturdays with classroom sessions, two pool sessions, four open water dives, and one night dive." She took a sip of ice tea. "Does that sound good?"

Dar nodded, busy with her own plate. Lunch had been much later than usual, and she was squeezing it in between meetings. "Yeah. They include equipment rental?"

"Yes, though, I was thinking of getting a piece or two of my own," Kerry replied hesitantly. "The regulator, at least."

"Good idea." The executive nodded in agreement. "Mine's a Dacor. You can get them with or without dive computers, like mine has, and with or without an octopus."

Green eyes blinked at her in confusion. "I'm sorry? They give you octopus with your scuba gear? Uck. That's disgusting." She took another bite of the croissant, vainly trying to catch the flakes as they fell.

Dar laughed. "No, no. The extra mouthpiece you saw on my gear, it's called an octopus." She scooped up a forkful of potato salad and chewed it. "It's for buddy breathing."

"Oh." Kerry blushed a little. "Buddy breathing, right." She pulled out a magazine. "I got one of these yesterday. I read it while I was waiting for the sewers to clear."

"*Pro Diver*, that's a pretty good one." Dar smiled at her enthusiasm, remembering her own certification. It seemed like it had been forever, she mused, then she glanced at her watch. "Did you get held up on something?"

Green eyes lifted to hers a touch sheepishly. "Um... Well, no. I was working on those projects, and then I took care of some e-mail, and, um, I don't know, I guess I forgot about lunch until you showed up and poked your head in the door."

Dar studied her curiously. "Uh huh." She spotted the gentle blush creeping up her assistant's neck and bit down on her fork. "Well, good timing, then." Kerry had, she realized, waited for her to go to lunch, and she wondered if the younger woman wasn't feeling a little intimidated by her surroundings. After all, the only person she really knew here was Dar, and she probably was uncomfortable just barging in on the usual lunch cliques. She made a mental note to get Maria to introduce her to some of her buddies, who were usually the kinder, gentler variety. "Nice to have someone to talk to during lunch. I usually just grab something by myself."

Kerry nibbled her sandwich. "I did that too, a lot, at Associated. I...it's weird, I liked the people there, but when I would go out with them, I always had a funny feeling that they were putting on an act for me."

"Mmm." Dar nodded in understanding. "I get that a lot, too." But not with Kerry, she realized with a sense of relief. The woman was just as straightforward as you could get.

"Oh, and I checked on that discounts page you told me about. That's a really good plan for that gym. I signed up," Kerry said, getting the words out somewhat more quickly than was her habit. "I figured, even if...I mean, I'd be crazy not to, right? They've got some really good classes there."

"I did too, this morning," Dar stated nonchalantly. "We have a deal set up on Wednesday, remember?"

Now Kerry smiled. "I remember." She relaxed a little. "What time do you have your appointment tomorrow?"

Dar had been trying to avoid thinking about it. "Eight," she answered quietly.

"Do...do you want me to pick you up at the terminal? No sense in driving all the way here, just to... I mean, it's on the beach, right? Just off Alton Road?"

"That sounds fine," Dar replied. "Yeah, it's just off Alton, near Mount Sinai. Are you sure you want to come? I, um, I don't know how long it's going to take."

Kerry gave her a gently sympathetic look. "I'll bring a trashy novel, but I bet it doesn't take long at all, and everything checks out okay."

Dar exhaled softly. "You keep thinking those good thoughts, Kerry." She lifted her head and gazed into the sea green eyes. "I could use every one of them." Their gazes held for a moment, then Dar pushed herself to her feet. "More meetings, we've got some clients coming in I have to sit in for...I probably won't be back to the office until real late."

"All right, I'll keep working on that stuff you gave me. If anything blows up, I'll page you,"

Kerry promised. With a pat on her shoulder as a parting gesture, Dar moved off, and Kerry returned her attention to finishing up her own lunch. It was amazing, she mused, just how warm that felt even through the fabric of her jacket. She glanced up as a shadow fell over her and smiled. "Hello."

A short, blonde woman was standing there, smiling. "Hi. Mind if I sit down?"

Kerry shook her head. "No, I'm about done. Would...did you want this table?" She could see several similar ones empty around her, but assumed perhaps the woman liked this particular one.

"No, that's okay. I just wanted to introduce myself." She held a beringed hand out. "I'm Eleanor Anastasia, from the Sales and Marketing Group. I hear you're Dar's new girl." The woman seated herself primly and smoothed her hand over the tablecloth as she studied Kerry's face. "I didn't think Dar went in for such youngsters, but I've heard good things about you."

"It's very nice of you to tell me that, thank you," Kerry replied guardedly, prudently ignoring Eleanor's snarkier comments. "It's only been a few days. I'm still getting used to a lot of things." Eleanor smiled toothily. "We always like to see fresh talent here, especially in such an area as important as Operations. I hope we can develop a pleasant working relationship." She paused. "Sometimes we have such...oh, I suppose you can call them communications problems. I'm sure you'll go a long way towards ironing them out."

"Well, I'll certainly try my best. I try to get along with everyone, if I can," Kerry answered with a thin smile. "We have so many things going on at once, it's hard to not rush through the social niceties."

"Honey, your biggest communication problem is right down the hall. We all love dear Dar, but she can be a bit difficult at times." Eleanor positively oozed fake affection for her fellow executive. "Don't you agree?"

Kerry cocked her head slightly. "Actually, no. I've found her to be extremely easy to work with," she replied politely. "So I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Really?" Eleanor gave her a pitying stare. "Well, give it a few more days, sweetie." She patted Kerry's arm condescendingly. "We'll be talking." She patted Dar's new assistant again, then stood up and straightened her tight, bright red skirt suit. "It's nice to have someone with manners over there for a change." She gave Kerry a smile, then walked off across the room to where a table was set to one side, four other business-suited figures seated at it.

Kerry shuddered and resisted the urge to wipe her sleeve with her napkin where the woman had touched her. "Ugh." She picked up her tray and carried it to the washing room, setting it down and dusting her hands off. "I gotta do something about her reputation." Deep in thought, she started walking back to the elevator.

Chapter Fourteen

KERRY PUT HER magazine down and peered around the waiting room. Then she checked her watch and sighed. *Two hours*. The room was pleasant enough, with decently padded chairs set around in a double figure-eight and low tables with an assortment of surprisingly current magazines. She'd already gone through *PC World*, *Windows*, *Infoweeek* and *Time*, and had been flipping through *People* when she decided to give it a rest.

She wasn't really interested in reading about the fifty most intriguing people of 1998 anyway. She leaned back and crossed her ankles, wondering what Dar was doing. Or to be more precise, what was being done to her. She'd picked up her boss at seven thirty, and they'd made the short drive over to the beach in relative silence. Dar kept her emotions hidden very well, but Kerry had seen the motion as she kept swallowing, and the tense pursing of her lips. *Poor Dar*. She felt so bad for the taller woman. Being that nervous was bad enough, but having to pretend you weren't was worse. Kerry had almost just told her it was okay to be scared, but she didn't think Dar would appreciate the attack on her defenses at the time.

With a sigh, she stood up, wandering out of the empty room and down the hall to the small vending room nearby. The walls were covered with pale blue vinyl, and the floors were polished until they shone, but the most curious thing about the place was the plaques.

Plaques were everywhere. There were memorial rooms, memorial wings, memorial staircases, a memorial elevator shaft, and, as she glanced up while she was walking, a memorial water fountain. All in honor of people who gave money to the Heart Institute. Kerry was intrigued and wondered why someone would bother contributing just to put a plaque on a bathroom door. Personally, she would rather just give the money and let them do more productive things with it, like design hospital gowns that didn't expose your butt. *Surely some research dollars could be shaken free for that, right?*

Kerry ducked into the vending room and ambled over to the coffee machine, popping her quarters in and selecting a cappuccino. She retrieved her frothy drink from the dispenser and headed back to the waiting room.

DAR KEPT HER eyes closed, trying to ignore the tiny pinches and strangeness of the gear attached to her body. Leads were over her heart, under her arm, and one was on her back, and they'd just finished setting up a machine off to the side of the bed. It had a small wand-like device, which the head nurse had told her sweetly was like what they used to observe babies in the womb; it would emit sound and map the return waves as a picture. *Oh.* Dar chewed the inside of her lip to prevent herself from snapping at the nurse. *Like I've never heard of an echocardiogram. You wanna know how to take those pictures, convert them to light waves, and reassemble them, little girl? How about if I reroute that current in there so it zaps the hell out of your hand when you pick it up? Condescending little...*

But no, she was being good, so she just closed her eyes, and waited. Finally a male voice rumbled close by, and she opened them to see a tall man with a shock of gray-shot dark hair standing over her. "Hi."

"Hello, Ms. Roberts." The man stuck a hand out within her reach. "My name is Richard Berger, and I'm going to be taking a listen inside you to see if your plumbing needs work."

"All right." Dar liked his frankness. "Lay off the pipe wrenches, though, huh?"

He smiled, then slipped his stethoscope into his ears, and warmed the end of it between his fingers before he laid it on her chest.

Dar liked that touch. A physician had once cheerfully told her it would only chill for a minute. She'd answered by taking a metal bedpan and sticking it between his legs, right up against his testicles. It only chilled for a minute, she recalled, before the doctor had gone flying in the other direction.

She watched Dr. Berger's face as he listened intently, his head turned--a natural human reaction to listening, even though the stethoscope was bringing the sound to his ears evenly. "Hmm," he muttered, then picked up the wand and spread a gel-like substance on it, then on her chest. He pressed the instrument down, moving it in tiny circles as he glanced up at a monitor overhead. After a moment, he frowned down at her. "No offense, Ms. Roberts, but you have damn low blood pressure."

Dar cocked an eyebrow at him. "Not my fault."

"No, but it's making it real hard for me to see anything. Can you, um, think of something that would get your heart pounding a little?"

"I don't...well, I'll try," Dar closed her eyes in concentration. A thought came to her mind with surprising quickness and she let the image go, feeling her breathing increase and the blood start pumping faster, warming her skin in a soft blush. "How's that?"

"Much better," the doctor complimented, patting her shoulder. "Okay, just hold that thought. I want a few more pictures. Got it. Okay." He half turned. "Did you get that on the EKG? Good."

He gave her a professional little smile. "All right, Ms. Connors here will get this stuff off of you, and you can get dressed."

Dar gave him a puzzled look. "That's it?"

He nodded. "That's all I needed to see. I'm going to go review the tape, then talk with your doctor, okay? Get dressed, then we'll chat in the consultation room."

Her mind racing with possibilities, she swallowed hard. "Okay."

He patted her on the shoulder again and walked out, carrying a cartridge he'd ejected from the machine.

The nurse closed in and reached for her. "Honey, let's get you sitting up here a minute so I can get this little old patch off your back, okay?" Dar ignored the outstretched hands and sat up, feeling the pull against her abdominal muscles as she leaned forward.

"My goodness." The nurse, a tall, heavysset cherubic-looking blonde, laughed. "You must work out, right?" She plucked the lead off Dar's back and touched her shoulder. "Okay, back down now."

Dar laid back down, trying to empty her mind of tension as she waited for the idiotic woman to finish pulling off the electronic attachments. She suddenly had an unreasoning desire for a teddy bear to hug. She wished she could just leave, not go into that consultation room, and not listen to what the very nice and thoroughly terrifying Dr. Berger was going to tell her. She didn't want to be sick. She hated being sick.

Dar swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood, taking the clothes the nurse handed her with a brief nod. "Thanks." She slowly slipped back into the familiar wool, tucking in her cream-colored shirt and zipping up the skirt, then hanging the jacket over her shoulder as she made her way out in the waiting room. Anxious green eyes met hers, and she felt a quiet warmth ease the fear a little. Kerry jumped up and trotted over, her gaze searching Dar's face intently. "Well, it's over," Dar told her. "Now I have to go in and find out the bad news."

Kerry hesitated, her lips tensing. "You think it's bad news?"

Dar just nodded, a tiny bit. "Yeah, I think so."

The younger woman reached out and circled her arm with warm fingers, rubbing her thumb against the soft hairs on Dar's skin. "You...do you, um...want some moral support in there?"

The executive hesitated, drawing breath in, then letting it go. "Sure." It felt good to have someone with her, and she gave a resigned little sigh before she motioned Kerry towards the small room to one side of the waiting area. "Let's get this over with."

It was very small, in fact, almost claustrophobic--two chairs, a small desk for the doctor to sit at, and a print of three apples, two oranges and a banana above the desk. Dar sat down in one chair and folded her arms over her chest as Kerry took the other seat, tucking her feet under it and leaning forward a little.

Dr. Berger joined them, sat down and put a large envelope on the desk, and folded his hands over it. He gave Kerry a curious look but didn't ask who she was. Instead, he focused his attention on Dar.

"Well, Ms. Roberts, you are a very interesting case."

Dar wasn't sure how to take that, so she raised an eyebrow.

"You have a congenital valve malformation," the doctor went on, fiddling with the envelope. Though her face remained fairly impassive, Dar's heart sank and she mostly felt like throwing up.

"However..." Dr. Berger glanced up. "Somehow, your body compensated for that, and developed a... Well, here, I'll show you." He pulled out a photo and pointed with his pen to an area. "Here.

It's almost like your body compensated by developing this muscle part here...and here." He shook his head. "I've never seen anything quite like it."

Dar looked at the picture, then at him. She was aware of Kerry's nearby presence, also peering at the shadowy gray and black image. The iron grip that had seized her chest started to loosen a little. "What exactly are you saying? Is there something wrong with me, or not?"

A quick smile flicked over his handsome face. "There sure ought to be." He flicked his pen toward her. "But with all the tests I've done, there's no impairment of the cardiac function in this little arrangement, so I don't know what to tell you." He glanced up at her. "I think the fact that you obviously live a pretty healthy lifestyle has a big part in it. You're in very good shape, you take care of your health, and you have very low levels of triglycerides and cholesterol as well as low blood pressure."

Dar and Kerry glanced at each other. "What am I supposed to do?" Dar finally asked.

He shrugged. "Live. Try to keep your stress levels down. I could put you in for an artificial valve replacement, if you really want me to, but your plumbing, though strange as hell, is working fine."

There was a stunned little silence, then Dar slowly let out a long held breath. "All right," she said slowly. "I'll try to follow that advice."

Berger held out his hand. "Mind if I write you up for the *Journal of the AMA*? This'll make a test case they'll be arguing over for months."

Dar stood up and took his hand, shaking it briefly. "Be my guest. Hope you get a good paper out of it." She gave him a brief smile, then followed Kerry out, neither of them speaking until they were in the elevator and the doors closed.

"Sonofagoddambitch," Dar cursed softly.

Kerry smiled and impulsively put her arms around the taller woman and hugged her gently. "I'm so glad for you Dar."

Dar went stock-still for a moment, then tentatively reached around and hugged her back, a little awkwardly. "Oh well, that was the nicest thing that happened to me all day," she joked weakly as they parted, noting Kerry's blush. "Thanks. Boy, what an unexpected end to that situation."

"No kidding." Kerry wiped her brow. "I thought I was going to have to call and place an order for that machine gun there for a minute. I've never been so relieved in my life."

"Yeah." Dar grinned then, in pure reflex. "Wow." She felt a wave of feeling good wash through her, taking away the nagging anxiety of the past few days, and as the doors slid open, she turned to Kerry. "We're supposed to be offsite until the afternoon at least. How about we do lunch?"

Kerry smiled at the high spirits that were echoing across her boss's face, despite her attempts to quell them. "Sure, where'd you have in mind?"

"You like seafood, right?" Dar asked, a rakish grin twisting her lips. "C'mon, it's not far. We can have stone crabs." She tugged Kerry's sleeve. "And a nice ocean view."

The blonde woman grinned back. "That sounds great to me. Let's go."

KERRY HAD HER chair turned around so she could look out over the water, her body slouched into her chair and a sleepy, contented look on her face. Lunch had been fantastic, but somewhat overfilling, and she'd topped it off with a glass of champagne that Dar had offered, which made matters worse. She felt like curling up in a ball and falling asleep, especially since she was watching the hypnotic shift and dance of the waves.

It had felt so good to see Dar happy. Though she was trying really, really hard to keep the lid on, she'd almost bubbled over with it. Not that Kerry blamed her; she knew the worry had been

really eating at her boss, and she thought Dar had truly believed she was going to hear really bad news this morning.

Of course, even the good news had its not so good side, she reminded Dar. She really did need to relax a little more, and that half joking, half scolding comment had somehow turned into a conversation which had resulted in an invitation to go out on the boat again not next weekend but the following one. With an added dangling enticement of more diving. *Like I'd say no to that.*

"Ha ha ha ha," Kerry chortled softly. "I don't think so." She glanced up as a tap came on the door, and she spun around, straightening up before she called out. "C'mon in."

Maria slipped in and tip-toed across the floor, looking around like she expected spies to be hanging from Kerry's mostly bare walls. "*Chiquita*, you know what Friday is?"

Kerry obediently clicked on her calendar. "Um, the Sixth?" she hazarded.

"*Ay, ay*, it's Boss's Day." Maria waved a hand at her. "I was going to get her some little squishy balls, you know, or one of those crazy masks you put in the icebox, then on your face, but since she says everything turned out okay, I think maybe...I don't know."

"Well," Kerry put some thought to the matter, "actually, they did say she had to keep her stress down, so those balls aren't a bad idea but...hmm." *Boss's Day*... She'd forgotten completely about it, or, to be more precise, hadn't actually known it existed. *A day for bosses?* It didn't make much sense, but, since she had one she liked, she might as well take advantage of the fact. She looked up. "Oh, I know what I'm going to go look for."

"*Oye?* What?" Maria leaned on Kerry's desk.

The woman grinned. "Toys," she confided. "I know some great ones--Nerf dart boards, that kind of thing." She crumpled up a piece of paper, then tossed it at her garbage can, missing by several feet.

"*Dios mío*." Maria covered her eyes. "Do not tell me." She hurried out, closing the door gently behind her.

Kerry chuckled softly and turned her attention back to her computer, where her project list was waiting. "Add project." She clicked twice. "Find some way to get Dar to relax." She clicked again. "Priority, Urgent."

"DAR, MR. HEAD of T-and-T on *linea numero uno*." Maria's voice broke into the executive's thoughts as she looked unseeing out the window. The sunlight was reflecting on the sea, and she'd been counting sailboats crossing the bay while a report she'd been running completed itself on her computer.

"Okay, I'll take it." She punched the specified button. "Afternoon, Uthai." A completely unintelligible mutter traveled through the phone. "That's nice, what can I do for you today?" Dar leaned back and studied her pencil, balancing it on the tip of her finger contentedly. Another, longer spate of gibberish. Dar glanced up as Maria entered, then propped her head up on her fist. "Sure, Uthai, just queue it to my work list." A shorter burst. "Couple days, I guess."

Dar exhaled quietly, stifling a yawn. The long lunch had definitely put her in a lazy mood, and it had been very difficult to drag herself back to the office, despite the heavy slate of projects she was working on. She really wanted to just take the rest of the day off, after the stress of the morning, and get the relief out of her system so she could get back to her normal business attitude. Instead, Dar listened to the gibberish. She was responsible for this place. "You're welcome. Have a nice day, Uthai." Cheerful, if puzzled-sounding, nonsense came back, then the line went dead.

"Dar, it is wonderful how you understand that man. I cannot see a word he says," Maria confessed, shaking her head at the phone.

Her boss grinned briefly. "I don't either," she admitted. "I'll look at my work list later and see what I promised him." She looked up as the line buzzed again and waved at Maria to stop as she picked it up herself. "Dar Roberts."

"Well, well. Hello, Dar." Alastair's voice was extremely cheerful, which usually meant nothing but trouble. "How's the weather down there?"

"Partly cloudy, chance of afternoon showers. Why?" Dar responded.

"Can't I just be asking?" the chairman inquired. "No, of course not. I just thought you'd like a little change of scenery."

The executive rolled her eyes. "How little?"

"Orlando," Alastair responded. "We're bidding Disney."

Dar's eyes widened in honest surprise. "They're taking bids? I thought they were so goddamn proud of doing their own stuff, they'd rather have Mickey admit to cheating on Minnie before they'd outsource."

A rich chuckle. "Not since they had that management changeover. They finally figured out it's better to farm the stuff out. All the majors are in there, but I want it." Alastair cleared his throat.

"We've got a good team bidding, but it needs... Well, John Byers, the account lead, is getting beat up pretty bad by IBM. He needs us to show some weight behind him, and you know the IBM rep, Jerry Andrews."

"Ah. Jerry." Dar let out an unpleasant laugh. "He won't be glad to see my face, let me tell you that, Alastair. Last time I saw him he threw a desk chair at me."

"Exactly," Alastair agreed jovially. "Just what John needs to throw off Jerry's focus." He shuffled some papers. "The meetings are tomorrow and Thursday, but I'd like you to get up there tonight."

Dar considered. "I can take a puddle jumper up. All right, I'll take care of it, Alastair."

"Great." The CEO sighed. "You're in a good mood today. What's up?"

"Nothing much. Just had a good morning, that's all," Dar replied dismissively. "Let me get started on pulling up the files for Disney, Alastair. Talk to you later."

"Give 'em hell, Dar. Bye." Alastair hung up.

Maria sighed. "Travel again? My goodness."

Dar worked seriously at her keyboard for a moment, then looked up. "I'll need a flight out tonight, Maria. Book me for tonight and tomorrow night at someplace relatively close to the admin center up there, and get me the usual..." She paused, considering. Alastair wanted to put on a show, okay, and she wanted to break in her new assistant, maybe she could knock off two birds... "Actually, I think this is a good opportunity for Kerry to get a look at what an account battle looks like. Book two seats, and two rooms, and clear both of our schedules until Friday," she decided crisply, then dialed the phone. "Kerry?"

"Right here," Kerry answered softly, over a flutter of keystrokes. "Just working on some e-mail."

"We need to go up to Orlando for a few days; we're bidding an account up there. Is that a problem?" Dar was busy calling up records.

"Uh, um...sure. No, no problem. I can do that. How long?" Kerry's voice sounded surprised.

"Two days. We'll fly up tonight and come back on Thursday night, probably," Dar replied. "I'd like you to see the process firsthand."

"Sure, no problem. I'll get going on these projects and try to get them out the door before tonight."

"Good." Dar hung up. "Okay, let me just print these. Maria, I'm going to have to run home and pick up a bag since I didn't drive today. Schedule the flight for seven or so, the last one out." She felt her energy picking up as the challenge pricked at her competitive nature. *If I could bring home Disney, ooo...* Her nostrils flared in anticipation.

"*Si*, I will." Maria was making rapid notes on her pad. "You want two rooms together?"

"Yeah, sure." Dar nodded absently, absorbing the information. "That's fine," she muttered to herself as Maria left, sending sheet after sheet to the printer.

"*Ay, Dios mío.*" Maria sat down and pulled out her contact book, checking for a number and then starting to dial. She paused, however, when the outer door opened and Kerry slipped in. "*Oye, chiquita*, you go on your first trip, hmm? Not so far."

Kerry perched on the corner of her desk. "Am I reading this right? Are we going to Disney World?"

Maria smiled. "*Si*, is business, though. No Mickey Mouse at the meetings."

A twinkle of mischief showed in the sea green eyes. "Hmm. So, where are we staying?"

Maria pulled up a trip planner and reviewed her choices. "The Village area is close, it has access to the administrative offices. Is nice...the Hyatt, I think."

Kerry drummed her fingers on the desk. "I kinda thought it would be something like that. What if it's full?"

"*Ay*, well, there are seven, eight hotels in that area. Is not holiday season yet," Maria stated, giving her a curious look.

"Well, what if it...what if they were all full?" the blond woman persisted. "What if..." She pulled the monitor over and scrolled down the choices. "What if we had to stay...here?"

Maria studied the screen. "*Chiquita*, that's right inside the park."

"I know," Kerry assured her.

"What little plans are going through your mind?" the secretary demanded. "Dar will go crazy if I book her in there." She checked the profile nonetheless. The Floridian was one of the nicest hotels on the Disney property, and the picture showed a huge, filigreed white Victorian structure. "Is nice."

"Mmm." Kerry agreed. "Listen, her doctor keeps bugging her to take a vacation, and I know this is a business trip, but those meetings can't last all day. Maybe I can get her to just cut loose, and relax for a while, you know?"

"Ahhh..." Maria smiled and patted her hand. "*Chiquita*, you are so sweet...and very tricky. That is a good thing." She picked up the phone. "I will do it. If she gets mad, she gets mad."

Kerry smiled. "If it works, it'll be worth it." She got up when she heard movement inside Dar's office. "Whoops, gotta go. Listen, I'll bring you back a stuffed Pluto or something." She slipped out of the office and back down the hall.

Maria shook her head. "Pluto. *Ay, chica*, make sure she doesn't stuff you."

Chapter Fifteen

MIAMI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT had started out as a small airport, with one terminal. As Miami grew, so did the airport, adding more terminals and more concourses as more airlines wanted to fly out of it. Now, being the gateway to South America and the Caribbean, it moved an unimaginable number of people twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Unfortunately, it wasn't so much designed as grown, and the concourses were long, endless corridors with no moving sidewalks that seemed to go on forever. The airport was always full of people, with a dozen languages to be heard and overhead announcements in Spanish as well as English.

An overnight bag slung over her shoulder, Dar strode through the crowd while she examined the travel documents Maria had handed her, couriered over by their corporate travel agency. "Where in--Jesus! She booked us inside the damn park."

"Really?" Kerry was working to keep up, and she peered over her boss's elbow curiously. "Oh, wow! That's supposed to be a nice place, I've seen pictures."

Dar gave her a look. "We won't get much of a chance to see it," she warned, then hesitated, seeing the veiled look of disappointment in those interesting green eyes. "Well, maybe a little," she relented. "We can have breakfast with Mickey, anyway."

Kerry smiled. "I've never been to Disney World. I always wanted to go, and we were planning a trip sometime at Associated, just a bunch of us going up one weekend, but we never got the details ironed out." She dodged a hurrying skycap as they arrived at the security checkpoint.

They both put their laptop cases on the moving belt, and Dar dropped her cell phone and pager into the small bowl the agent held out. Then they passed through and picked up their things at the end of the X-ray belt. "You know, I have less trouble getting through security here in Miami than when I board a plane in just about any other place," Dar commented as they started the long walk down the concourse. "I had my entire case searched in Iowa. They even made me turn the laptop on and dial a number on the cell phone."

Kerry chuckled as she pushed herself to keep up, making a little skip now and then to compensate for Dar's much longer stride. "Guess they've got more time on their hands than these guys." She was glad they'd gotten to change and were flying in casual clothes, since they'd have until tomorrow before meeting the prospective clients. She felt a lot better in her baby-soft green flannel shirt tucked into stone-washed denims and her short-topped hiking boots. She eyed her companion; Dar looked casually elegant as usual in a crisply pressed beige shirt and embroidered black vest over button-fly jeans and comfortable-looking sneakers.

Just roll your suit up and put it in the overnight bag, Dar had told her wryly. Even if you carry it in a garment bag, it'll still need pressing, so you might as well save yourself the trouble of carrying the damn thing.

That works, Kerry had agreed, and also packed her bathing suit and some shorts, just in case.

Just in case. She grinned to herself. *I bet I can get her to go to MGM, at least...*

By the time they got to the gate, the flight was boarding. They handed the gate agent their boarding passes, then walked down the carpeted boarding ramp and into the 727. They took their places in first class, put their bags overhead and settled down in the wide, comfortable seats.

"Well," Kerry said, as she buckled her seat belt, "this is traveling in style."

Dar settled back and extended her long legs, crossing them at the ankles. They were in the front set of seats, with extra legroom before them. "Intercompany courtesy." She gave a little shrug.

"We do all of their hardware and software support, so we get pass riding privileges, and if there's space, we go up front." She gave the steward a smile as he sidled over.

"Hello, welcome aboard. Can I get you something to drink before we start?" His crisply efficient manner was reserved, but friendly.

Dar exhaled. "Do you have any chocolate milk?" she asked innocently.

Kerry gave Dar a little nudge and rolled her eyes. "You're awful." She looked up at the waiting steward. "Orange juice for me, please." He nodded and moved off to fill their requests.

One dark brow lifted, and Dar pointed at her own chest. "Me? Milk is very healthy for ya, Kerry." She flexed an arm, the muscles moving smoothly under the soft cotton fabric of the casual khaki shirt she was wearing. "Makes you nice and strong."

"It's squeezed out of a cow," Kerry reminded her.

"And that's so different than squeezing something out of an orange? At least the cow survives the process," Dar retorted. She glanced up as the steward returned with crystal glasses filled with the requested beverages then turned back to Kerry. "Citrus killer."

Kerry studied her glass for a moment. "God, I hope this doesn't have pulp in it." Dar snickered.

Kerry put her glass down and crossed her ankles. "You really like milk?"

"I swear by the stuff," Dar insisted, taking a swallow. "Mmm..." She licked her lips.

"Mmmmiillllk."

Kerry caught the playfulness in her voice and went along with it. "You must own a cow, then. Where do you keep her?"

Dar laughed and raised her glass, clinking it against Kerry's. They both took a sip and their eyes met for a moment before Dar's dropped to the travel documents she'd left lying on her thigh.

"The Floridian, eh? Well, it'll be a drive in the morning, but at least I know we'll have hot water." She reconciled herself to her fate. "And they have great banana-stuffed French toast for breakfast."

Kerry leaned on her armrest and lifted a brow. "Banana-stuffed French toast?"

"Mmm-hmm." Dar nodded, with a quirky grin.

"I love bananas." Kerry covered her eyes. "I'm in trouble."

Dar chuckled, and leaned back, sighing as she relaxed into the leather of the seat. *Maybe it won't be so bad. There's a little water park near the hotel. Maybe we can take an hour off between meetings and take a quick splash, it might be fun. Yeah.* Dar let her head rest against the soft surface. *It will be fun, bid or no bid.*

"THANK YOU." KERRY smiled at the guide who had led them to their rooms as he bowed out and let the door close after him. She looked around curiously, giving the room an approving nod as she took in the light, airy décor and the crisply clean linen. The room had one large bed in it, a dresser flanked by a tall console that contained a television, and a small refrigerator. One wall was glass, covered by drapes which were drawn halfway, exposing a view that sparkled with color. Kerry put her bag down on the bed and walked over, to draw back the fabric and peer out. "Ooo."

A dark lake stretched in front of the hotel, the lights of the building winking fuzzily on its surface. Boats, likewise covered in lights, were crossing the small body of water, and across the way, the glowing, light bulb-chased pattern of Main Street. Beyond that the silvery spires of Cinderella's castle reached skyward. Kerry pressed her nose against the glass, watching the cheerful sparkle of light. Across the water to the other side she could see a glimmer of torchlight on an island in the center of the water, and she could see other torches lining the far shore. She was so busy looking, she didn't hear the connecting door between her room and the next open, and was startled when a warm presence materialized at her back. Kerry looked up and saw pale blue eyes watching her in the reflection of the glass, and she smiled, meeting them. "Oh, hi. You spooked me."

"Mmm." Dar turned her gaze to the outside. "Well, well, the old castle's looking pretty good."

Kerry exhaled. "I have to plan a trip up here, it looks like so much fun." She paused. "Hey, we've got a couple of hours. You want to go over there?"

"Oh no." Dar chuckled, shaking her head. "I've got reports to study."

Oh well, good try. "I guess I should do that too." Kerry smiled. "It's probably crowded and noisy, and we've got an early start tomorrow, right?"

Dar nodded. "Exactly."

Hmm, let's just try one more tack. "Besides, you're supposed to be taking it easy. Better if you just hang out here and relax," Kerry told her innocently. "You don't want to overstrain yourself." A dark brow edged up. Kerry moved back into the room and opened her bag. "I'm going to call the valet for this suit. Want me to have them get yours, too?"

Dar folded her arms and gazed out at the glowing spires. "You know, on second thought, it might be better to take a look around."

Twinkling green eyes regarded her back. "No, it's late, Dar, and you've had a really long day." The taller woman swung around and eyed her. "Late?" She snorted softly. "It's barely prime time, Kerry. I think it would be a good idea to at least check the park out. But if you're not up to it, you can stay here."

Somehow, Kerry was able to keep a grin off her face. "No, I can manage...if you think it's important."

Dar gave her a nod and headed back towards her room. "I do. Besides, it's nice weather out there for a change, might as well take advantage of it." She disappeared into her own room with a decisive closing of the door.

Kerry polished her nails on her shirt, then chuckled. "Watch out, Pluto, here I come."

THE HOTEL CONCIERGE cheerfully provided two tickets, and they ambled through the lobby, passing throngs of people laughing and relaxing. The lobby held several bars and casual restaurants, and Kerry suddenly remembered that she'd forgotten to eat dinner. *Well, I'm sure there'll at least be popcorn over there.* She sighed and followed Dar's tall form across the carpet, and up to the monorail station.

It was crowded with people heading to and from different parts of Disney World, and the murmur of voices rose to a din. "Whoa." Kerry edged back against a low railing, peering down the track and looking for the train. "It is crowded." She glanced at the people around them, and sighed.

Dar glanced around from her more comfortable six-foot-plus height, then put a hand on Kerry's shoulder as she stepped past the barrier and leaned close to the neatly dressed and smiling attendant. "Excuse me."

The man turned. "Yes, ma'am?" His smile grew a bit wider as he looked at Dar. "What can I do for you?"

"Pilot car?" Dar returned the smile. "My friend here's never been."

The man stood on his tiptoes and peered past them. "Sure." He stepped back and motioned them forward. "Always glad to help a first-timer." He grinned at Kerry as they walked past into a small, enclosed area near the control booth. "There you go, ladies. Have a great time."

Kerry looked around at their conspicuous isolation. "Dar?"

"Hmm?" The taller woman looked down, but was saved from further questioning by the arrival of the monorail. It hissed quietly into the station with an electronic whine and pulled to a stop with its nose about six feet from where they were standing.

The attendant popped open the driver's door and motioned to them, and Dar put a hand on Kerry's back, gently shoving her forward. "Go on."

In mild disbelief, Kerry entered the pilot's cabin and smiled at the young man seated there. The roughly triangular space had padded benches along the Plexiglas front nose, and she slipped into one as Dar relaxed on the other. "Isn't this different." She peered ahead at the track.

"Hi, folks. Welcome to Monorail Purple," the driver cheerfully greeted them. "Next stop is the Magic Kingdom." He looked to one side as the door slammed shut, then he put the train in motion, pulling out from the hotel along the tracks. "You folks come far?"

Kerry watched the approaching lights in fascination. "No, we're from Miami."

"Oh, fellow Floridians. That's great. My family is from West Palm Beach. We just moved up here last year," he chattered happily. "Isn't the weather great? It's perfect for walking around the parks."

"You ever get tired of going around in circles all day?" Dar asked, her face half in shadow, and her arms crossed over her chest.

"Oh no." The boy shook his head. "It's different every day. Sometimes we go around one way, sometimes the other, and they also rotate us on the other line. If you're qualified on the mono, you can get parking tram runs in the morning. They're fun."

Dar and Kerry exchanged glances. "So, it's like a ranking, right?" Kerry asked, as the monorail started to slow, preparing to enter the station at the Magic Kingdom. "Are the monorail drivers on top?"

He giggled. "Oh no, that would be the lake pilots...who drive the launches." He stopped the train and pressed a button, opening the door for them. "Wow, it's been great talking to you. Hope you come back soon to Monorail Purple."

Dar stood and gave him a brief grin. "Thanks, have a nice, um..." She rotated her finger in a circle. "...ride."

Kerry slipped past her and ducked outside the door, waiting for her boss to follow her and catch up before she laughed softly. "Omigod, what do they put in the coffee here?"

"They're all like that," Dar assured her. "I think it's corporate policy. Though your notion of drugs in the water fountains has also occurred to me." She followed Kerry down the long sloping ramp, then through the electronic turnstiles which took their tickets and spat them back out.

"Souvenirs." Kerry held hers up and tucked it in her pocket. She took a deep breath and started forward, under the train station and towards the glimmering lights of Main Street.

Her smile half hidden in the darkness, Dar entered the park behind her younger companion. In front of them was a town square, with the train station at the front, two large buildings on either side which had signs indicating they were the fire station and City Hall, and the long street of shops heading down on the far side. They crossed the cobblestones, and turned down the main street, and Dar took in a breath as the castle rose before them, brilliant with light. On either side of them, old-fashioned store facades heralded shops of all kinds, and Dar stopped short at one.

"Hey."

"Wh--" Kerry watched her duck into a doorway and she followed. She was struck in the face with a strong blast of air flavored with taffy and chocolate. "Oh boy." She ducked around a scurrying attendant and spotted her boss, leaning against the glass partition and watching a machine pull long strings of fragrant taffy out, over and over again. A case of chocolates caught her eye, though, and she detoured, finding herself in front of a neatly stacked display of assorted squares. "Fudge."

Dar's voice sounded just behind her. "Is that a conclusion or a curse?"

"Yes," Kerry sighed. "I love fudge." She smiled at the attendant, who gave her a perky grin.

"Could I get a piece of the chocolate, please?"

"Only chocolate?" her boss teased. "They have peanut butter there, too."

"Nope, I'm a purist." Kerry took her purchase and passed the girl the payment. "Thanks."

The girl addressed Dar. "Anything for you, ma'am?"

Dar studied her choices. "A half dozen of those," she pointed at the peanut butter cups, "a bag of the chocolate-covered cherries, and some toffee."

Kerry tried not to follow suit. She folded her arms across her chest and balled her fists, one hand grasping the bag of fudge. "Boy, you're a wild thing in one of these places, huh?"

"Don't worry." Dar tucked her packets away. "I'll share." She sauntered toward the door, dodging a few running children along the way.

Kerry sighed. "I was afraid she'd say that," she murmured, but shook her head and followed as they returned to the street and walked along it. The air was filled with the smell of cotton candy and popcorn, mixed with pine and the warm scent of the tarmac under their feet. "Nice night."

Dar didn't answer for a few steps, as she looked around them. "Yeah," she said. "You hungry?" "A little," Kerry demurred. "I forgot to grab dinner."

"Me, too." The taller woman picked up her pace and headed for the tall, well-lit castle in the center of the park. "C'mon."

"Okay. Hey," Kerry pointed, "there's a hot dog stand over there."

Dar snorted softly. "No Pluto Pups and no Astro Burgers, okay? Those are my rules here. C'mon." She led Kerry across the square at the end of Main Street and right up into the castle, where she abruptly turned into a small alcove, almost causing Kerry to crash into her. In front of them was a small stand, with a perky dressed woman in Medieval garb.

"Hi there, folks. Welcome to Cinderella's Banqueting Hall. Would you like to have dinner tonight?" The woman greeted them. "We've got a table available just for you!"

"Two." Dar informed her, with a smile, as Kerry tugged on her sleeve. "Hmm?"

"There's a restaurant here?" the blonde woman whispered.

Dar grinned. "Mmm-hmm. I hope you like prime rib."

"Prime rib?" Kerry followed her as they made their way to an elevator and got out at the second floor. "But this is Dis..." She stopped, surprised. The second floor contained a wide, open dining space surrounded by tall windows. Sturdy wooden tables with pewter plates and cups were placed on two different levels, and quite a number of diners were already seated around the room. "Oh. Cool."

The hostess led them to a small table near the windows, which was lit by a candle and already set. "Your waiter will be right with you," she told them. "Have a great dinner."

Kerry took a moment to look around them as she opened her napkin and laid it neatly across her lap. "This is adorable," she murmured. "It's got really nice, um..."

"Ambiance?" Dar gave her a wry grin.

"Atmosphere," Kerry asserted. "Have you eaten here before? I guess you have."

Dar held off answering as a waiter came over, removing a pad from his apron and preparing to write.

"Evening, folks. What can I get you?"

Kerry glanced at the menu. "Hmm, wow. Okay, I'll take the prime rib, I guess." She deliberately bypassed the chicken from a sense of occasion. "With the potatoes, and some punch, please."

"Same." Dar leaned back and studied her. "Not everyone knows this place is here. It beats the fast food stuff they mostly sell. There's also a good chicken and fish place near Liberty Square, but I was in the mood for beef tonight."

"No arguments from me." Kerry glanced up as a basket of rolls and butter was set before her. She examined the butter. "Oh, Dar, look. It has little Mickey Mouses stamped into it." She picked up the pewter plate and showed her companion. "Isn't that cute?"

Dar ruthlessly kidnapped a hapless Mickey and spread it on a roll. "Adorable," she agreed, munching on it. "Any place in particular you want to see, now that you conned me into coming over here?" Her blue eyes glinted gently.

"Me?" Kerry pointed her own chest. "But, boss, it was your idea!" However, she grinned impishly at Dar. "Thank you for indulging my somewhat childish whim."

The candle on the table flickered in the air movement and threw interesting shadows across Dar's planed features. The blue eyes moved around a lot as the taller woman watched the crowd, and the skin around them wrinkled and smoothed as she did so. Her dark hair fell gently over her shoulders and framed her face and Kerry suddenly became conscious of the fact that she was staring. She found something else to look at, picking up a wide, two-pronged fork and turning it over.

Dar cleared her throat gently. "So, was there someplace you wanted to see?" she repeated. Kerry thought about that. "Why don't you suggest something? You seem to know this place well enough. I mean, the roller coasters would be fun."

"Ah. Space, Thunder, and Splash Mountain. Okay, we can do that in a couple of hours," Dar agreed. "Park's open until midnight. It'll get quieter after the parade goes by."

As if on cue, a brassy march filtered through the windows, and Kerry pressed her nose against one, peering out through the wavy glass to see a band going by.

Dar watched her with an indulgent smile, taking the opportunity to study her companion's gentle profile. Kerry had a small, straight nose, and a firm, even chin, with rounded cheekbones and soft, fair lashes. Right now, those lashes were fluttering as she studied the parade, catching the odd glint from the candle, which also caught the faint wrinkles at the corner of her mouth as she smiled.

It is, Dar acknowledged to herself, nice to just sit across the table from someone who is cute, and intelligent, and has no ulterior motive in sharing dinner with me. Whoa. Her breath caught, and she went back over that statement. Intelligent, yes. Kerry was certainly that. Cute? Where did that come from? She peeked at the younger woman, who was still engrossed with the sight outside. Well, she is cute, the executive reasoned. Just all kind of sweet, and nice and, well...cute. Her eyes traced the curve of Kerry's ear, and she lowered her gaze to the plate in front of her, the roll taking on a sudden fascination for her.

C'mon, Dar, quit fooling yourself. You know she's cute, and more than that, or it wouldn't have been an image of her in that bathing suit that you used to pick up the old heartbeat this morning, hmm? The executive let out a breath wryly, and dismissed the thought. *Well, she's not your type, so find something else to look at.*

Kerry cleared her throat. "Catchy tune." She indicated the music outside. "Your bread okay?"

Dar looked up, startled. "Yeah, I was just thinking." She straightened sheepishly. "Sorry." Green eyes suddenly met hers and she noticed the little golden flecks in them for the first time. They were interesting eyes, reminding her of sunlight underwater, and she studied them curiously until the raising eyebrow made her realize she was staring. *Okay, enough of that.* "Interesting parade?" Kerry cocked her head. "Parade?" she asked softly, then she blushed a little. "Oh, yes, it's very cute. They just had a float with Mickey and Minnie dancing on it." She looked up as the server arrived with their dinner. "Good grief." She eyed the plate as it was set down. "My god, that cow must have been the size of an elephant!"

"It's actually Dumbo, ma'am," the waiter stated in a smooth, even voice. "He stepped on Minnie's tail, and it was just all over for him."

Both women stared at him, then burst out laughing. "Jesus, did your medication wear off?" Dar snorted.

"They don't give it to *us*," the man confided, placing Dar's portion in front of her. "We have to handle steak knives and hot plates. It could be dangerous." He made a little bow, flicking his long sleeves out of the way, and backed off. "Enjoy your dinners."

It was difficult to know what to make small talk about, Kerry thought. They could talk about work, but somehow she just didn't feel like doing that tonight, so she cut a piece of her steak and nibbled it, gathering her courage before speaking. "Dar?" Those amazing clear blue eyes looked up at her, and the brow raised, which, Kerry realized, meant *Yes*? "Can I ask you a personal question?" she inquired shyly.

The darkness hid her flush, for which Dar was extremely grateful. "Um. I can't guarantee I'll answer it, but yeah, go ahead." She felt a gentle nervous flutter hit her stomach.

Kerry leaned forward. "Is your name short for something, or is it just Dar?"

"Oh." The dark-haired woman speared a roasted potato and popped it in her mouth, giving herself a chance to think. She could just say 'it's just Dar,' since legally it was. However... "Well, my mother was--is still, I suppose--an addict of Spanish romance *novelas*. She had a favorite character, Paladar. I'm named for that." The executive cleared her throat in embarrassment. "I hated it. I had it legally changed when I turned eighteen."

Kerry propped her chin on her hand, fascinated. "Paladar...I don't know, I kinda like it. It's got a nice ring to it." She watched the look of alarm spread on Dar's face. "Don't worry, though, I won't use it, not if you don't like it."

"B...um, well..." Dar fiddled with her fork. "It was just so stupid. I mean, the character was this insane woman who ran around falling in love at the drop of a hat and getting into trouble. I just...I didn't see any likeness, so..." She shrugged. "And the kids my age knew where it came from. I got teased a lot." She speared another cube of rare prime rib and dipped it in the small boat of gravy. "What about you? Is Kerry short for something?"

A charming smile edged the younger woman's face as she regarded her companion. "Kerrison. It's a family name. Usually it's given to the eldest boy, but my father was determined to give it to his firstborn regardless, so, I have to live with it."

Dar considered the name. "I like it," she announced. "Fits you somehow."

"You think so?" Kerry sounded doubtful. "I never did." She bit a green bean in half and chewed it. "I don't use it much. Even my résumé has Kerry on it, and all my official work documents."

"Mmm, I know. That's why I asked." Dar glanced up with a grin. "I could have just logged in and found out otherwise."

Kerry's brows knit. "That's so weird. You know all that stuff about me, and I...it's just strange." She laughed a bit. "I mean, it's not like I can just log in and find out about you."

Dar gazed at her, a tiny smile playing around her lips. "Kerry, you already know more about me than you'd find in the company computers," she answered quietly. "Most of your co-workers would be astonished to know what my house looks like or that I'm a diver, or what my real name is, for instance." She glanced to one side. "Or that I eat Frosted Flakes for breakfast."

Kerry felt a little out of breath for a moment. "Oh." She blushed, this time more noticeably in the low light. "Well, yeah, I guess you don't..." She fell silent.

"Socialize." Dar completed her sentence with a faint smile. "It's all right," she reassured her companion. "I don't. I've just learned along the way the more you let out about personal stuff, the more it comes back to bite you in the ass." She saw Kerry's eyes jerked up to meet hers, the faintly hurt look swiftly hidden. "Sometimes."

"Yeah, I guess," Kerry murmured. "You know, not to bring up a sore subject, but your real name reminds me of something." She changed the subject, a trifle awkwardly.

"Oh?" Dar took her own drink and sipped it. "What's that, a package of marshmallows? That was a popular version when I was younger."

"Oh, like Mallomar?" Kerry laughed softly. "Well, it's sweet and tasty." This time the blush made her fair eyebrows stand out, and she winced in reaction. "Um, that's not...I mean, I wasn't, um..." Dar chuckled softly. "Yeah, yeah. Relax, I know what you meant." She paused. "What else were you thinking of?"

"Um." Kerry rubbed her face as though trying to rub away the flush. "Paladins, actually. The other day I was reading a story that had them, and it, um..." She glanced at Dar, who looked puzzled. "Oh, right. You probably don't read that kind of book. Sure, well, Paladins are knights, but they're especially good kinds of knights. They stood up for people not for reward, but just because it was the right thing to do. That was what they were--people who just did things because they were right, not because it was good for them personally to do it."

Dar leaned forward. "Kerry, I am not any kind of good guy, trust me, okay? I eat people for lunch. I fire people at the drop of a hat. I restructure companies to maximize profit for our company. Everyone hates my guts. So, try to remember that, huh? Or you're in for a shock when we go into those meetings."

"Not everyone," Kerry replied quietly.

"Hmm?" Dar looked at her questioningly.

"Not everyone hates you." The blonde lifted her chin. "I don't."

A silence fell between them as Dar stared at her. "You haven't known me that...long," she finally answered. "I don't want you seeing me as something I'm not, Kerry. I'm very serious about that." They looked at each other for a lengthening moment, until Kerry shrugged faintly. "All right. I'll try not to."

"Okay, just so long as we've got that straight," Dar replied with a nod.

"Right," Kerry agreed. "As long as you don't get mad when I say what I do see."

Dar sighed. "I'm not any kind of a half-assed good guy."

Kerry's eyes held a very grave twinkle in them. "Dar, the one thing for sure is that you're not a half-assed anything," she said. "And you'll never convince me otherwise, okay?"

"If you say so." Dar rolled her eyes and went back to her steak.

"I do." Kerry ate the last of her prime rib, took a sip of her punch and wiped her lips. "Boy, that was good."

Dar popped her last potato into her mouth and nodded, leaning back as the attentive busboy scooted over to take away their plates. "Beats Pluto Pups, huh?"

"Oh yeah." Kerry took a breath to protest as the busboy returned bearing two plates full of strawberry shortcake. "Oh lord." She gave a chuckling Dar her most exasperated look. "I give up. I'm just going to reconcile myself to looking like Miss Piggy, and have done with it."

"Don't worry, we'll walk it off. This place is really spread out," Dar reassured her. "Space Mountain first?"

Kerry started on her dessert. "Sounds good to me. Did someone really ever get their head cut off on that?"

Dar snorted softly. "It's an urban legend, but it's a good one. You always hear it from someone who has ridden before the victim and saw the head arrive several cars before the rest of the poor bastard."

"Ugh, I'll try not to think about that." Kerry made a face. "And tighten my seat belt."

"Oh, well, you don't..." Dar stopped, considering. "Well, now that I think about it..." A thoughtful smile crossed her face. "You'll be pretty safe."
Kerry glanced up at her curiously, wondering what she meant.

EVERYONE WAS WATCHING the parade. That meant there was only a short line, and Kerry grinned as she joined it, putting her hands on the railing that kept the snaking path of humanity in check. Space Mountain was a tall, conical structure in the middle of Tomorrowland. It had a white roof and spire, and conspicuously posted, ominous warnings against riding the roller coaster for pregnant women, children, short people, people with heart conditions, and Mormons... *No, wait*, Kerry reread the notice. "Oh...new mothers. Right. Like anyone would take a newborn child on this."

"Don't laugh," Dar's voice came from a point just behind her. "I saw someone try to take a guinea pig on here once, for a bet."

Kerry turned right around. "You did not," she accused, with a laugh. "Get out of here, Dar."

"Yes, I did," her boss insisted. "They had it in a backpack, and they were in front of me. It stuck its little pink nose out and was wiggling it."

"What did you do?" Kerry asked curiously as they moved forward.

"Made sure I wasn't behind them when it puked," Dar replied dryly. "Go on, down that way." The path divided and they headed down a ramp to a neon-lit boarding area. She studied the cars as they were filled, and realized each car was split into two seating areas. A rider could go solo in a big one and just sort of brace herself or ride double and let the person behind her hang on to her. *Ooo, dilemma*. Kerry glanced up at her companion, who was watching the proceedings with a mildly interested look. "Um." She didn't have to pretend the embarrassment. "Can I ask you a favor?"

Blue eyes turned violet in the neon dropped to her face. "Sure."

Kerry nodded toward the cars. "Would you mind a whole lot if we went double? I love roller coasters, but they spook me a little." Was that a grin that flicked on and off Dar's face? It was far too dark to tell, really.

"Sure, no problem," Dar answered in a normal voice. "You should go to Busch Gardens--now those are roller coasters."

"Ah." Kerry moved forward to where they were loading the next set of cars. "Been to one out of state and went on the one where you are clamped on from overhead. Did you know that when you vomit on one of those you can actually hit your own foot when you're upside down?"

Dar worked out the physics of that. "Wow. No, I didn't," she admitted as they were ushered into their car. She settled back against the backrest as Kerry seated herself somewhat gingerly between Dar's legs. "Did you do that?" she asked, more to distract them both than anything.

"No. My sister did." Kerry took an irregular breath as the car moved to make room for the next set to be loaded. She slid back a little and felt Dar's knees press around her, a warm grip that swiftly penetrated the fabric of her jeans. It felt nice. She tipped back her head and watched as the car started to move, and they inched forward onto a track, then turned a corner into the darkness and started up. "Uh..." Kerry realized she wasn't going to be able to remain upright without some serious holding on.

"Relax, lean back," Dar's voice reassured her, patting her shoulder. "I can take it."

The incline increased, and Kerry had little choice. She loosened her hold on the sides of the car and settled back against the taller woman's chest, feeling Dar take a secure hold around her waist.

"Okay, I got you," the executive told her cheerfully.

Yeah. Kerry absorbed the sensation. *You sure do.* She felt her heartbeat pick up, a subtle thunder in her ears as she fought a feeling of mild panic, unsure of where it was coming from. "Wow. Guess I'm a little nervous," she murmured.

"Relax." Dar's voice was inches from her ear. "It'll be over in a few minutes. I'm not that bad, am I?"

Bad? Kerry fought to slow her breathing down as the angle got a little steeper and she felt Dar take a snugger hold of her. Like it was a completely normal thing to do. Kerry felt a little ashamed of herself and she forced her body to relax, pushing aside the nervous feeling until she could set aside the circumstances and look around her again. *It's okay,* her conscience reassured her. *It's no big deal, nothing unusual, it's...nice. Like we were old friends.* She smiled and relaxed a little more, watching the fake stars overhead as they inched to the top of the incline. She could feel Dar breathing, a slow, steady motion, and stopped resisting both the tug of gravity and Dar's grasp, letting her head drop back against the dark-haired woman's collarbone, a line crossed so easily and almost without her notice.

She closed her eyes and was startled when a flash of her dream from the storm morning came to her. It had felt...yes, a little like this. Just a little.

They reached the top of the incline, and the car shot forward, starting the ride. It was dark and twisty, and there wasn't really much to see so she just kept her eyes closed and let gravity war with Dar's powerful grip.

Unsurprisingly, Dar won. She kept hold of Kerry as the car rushed in a tight circle and over a last series of hills, the bottom dropping out a few times until they rattled into the end of the ride, and the dark dissolved into a blast of blue light, and it was over.

It felt a bit too soon, in fact. Kerry exhaled as they shuttled into an ending platform, and Dar released her. "Wow, that was fun." She got up and hopped out of the car, the taller woman following along behind. "It was so dark, though. Are they all like that?"

Dar shook her head. "Thunder Mountain isn't. I've never been on the other one, but I don't think it is. That's more water than anything." They exited out into a starlit night, where the faint strains of the parade music were still floating in the air.

Kerry smiled at her. "Thanks for keeping me safe."

"No problem," Dar replied with a brief grin. "I'd hate to tell you what I'd have to go through in Personnel if I lost you on a business trip. Mariana would have my head if I let you lose yours." They both chuckled, then Dar motioned to the right. "This way. We can sneak around back through Frontierland to get to Big Thunder."

"Oh, is that where that Country Bear Jamboree is?" Kerry suddenly asked. "I've seen that on TV so many times."

Dar gave her an indulgent look. "Okay, I get the hint. C'mon." She gave her a sideways glance.

"I'm surprised you didn't want to see the Haunted Mansion."

"Ooo." Kerry made a face. "I forgot about that. Is it around here?"

Dar just laughed as she changed direction again. "C'mon."

THEY WERE ON about the last monorail out and happy to settle in a regular seat as the sleek train pulled out of the park and headed back toward the hotel. Dar leaned against the window and peered out, half shaking her head about how she'd spent the night.

Good grief. It better not get back to anyone, or I'll never hear the end of it. She watched the lights of the boats below go by and exhaled, watching her breath condense on the glass. *Wasn't so bad though...and it wasn't like we really had anything else planned for the evening. I'd*

already gone over most of the reports before we left Miami, and the other option was just finding some entertainment in the hotel. This, she decided, was just as good, and all the walking certainly was healthy. Somehow they'd managed to hit all the major areas in under two hours and had walked down Main Street as the park was closing, watching Mickey Mouse balloons float aimlessly up from the hands of sleeping children.

She glanced to her left, hiding a grin at the bags tucked under her companion's arms. From one peeked a stuffed buffalo, its crossed eyes and tiny pink tongue comically protruding. From the other emerged a happy-looking Pluto nestling comfortably against Kerry's shoulder, his floppy ears showing black against her blonde hair. Dar found herself unexpectedly charmed by the sight. "It's a dog's life, huh?" she addressed the stuffed animal. "Aren't you a lucky puppy."

"What?" Kerry turned and looked at her. "Did you say something?"

"Nope." Dar sat back and folded her hands together. "Nothing at all."

Kerry had, to her bemusement, fallen in love with Buff, the animated, wall-mounted buffalo in the Country Bear Jamboree, and wouldn't be satisfied until she'd scoured the Frontierland Trading Post and found one to take home with her. She'd tried to convince Dar to get a coonskin cap, but the executive had taken one look at the fuzzy tail hanging over her ear and plopped it up onto the top of a rack, out of Kerry's reach.

She'd stuck with just her candy, though a filigreed, hand-blown glass dolphin on a cresting wave in the glassmaker's shop had tempted her. She'd finally decided the figurine would probably only get broken and so she decided not to buy it. She'd momentarily lost Kerry, only to have her turn up a few minutes later with Pluto, and a satisfied look on her face. The Emporium, shop of last resort for frantic souvenir hunters, was always the last place to close, and they wandered through there on their way out. Dar succumbed to the overwhelming marketing pressure by purchasing a crisp black polo shirt with a silver Mickey embroidered on the breast.

"Oh, that's festive," Kerry had teased.

Dar chuckled wryly. "Calculated plan of attack. I'll wear it at the meeting tomorrow, under my jacket." Her eyes twinkled wickedly. "Good psychology. This Disney crowd's an odd lot. They're businessmen, but there's still a strong element in there of the old, family-centered franchise.

They're very loyal to the brand name, and they like to see some enthusiasm for their product."

"Hmm, interesting." Kerry considered that as they'd walked out. "What do they consider their product to be?"

Dar had looked at her. "If you had asked Walt Disney, dreams."

NOW, SHE SETTLED back in her seat and stretched out her legs, resting them on the bench facing them. They were almost alone in the car, and the train had several stops to make before it went the entire circuit and ended back up at the Floridian. They passed through the Contemporary, a huge block canyon of a place, and the Hawaiian-style Polynesian, before they slowed to a stop at the stately white Grand Floridian. "This is our stop." Dar stood and stretched, then ducked out the door and entered the lobby.

People were still milling around, mostly near the bars, and the elevators were fairly crowded as they made their way up to their rooms. Dar slipped her door open and ambled over to the dresser, depositing her bag of goodies before she turned and noticed the message light blinking on the phone. "What the hell is that?" She pulled her cell phone from her belt and checked it. "No, I thought this was on. Who in the hell would leave me a message here?"

She shook her head as she sat down and started pulling at her sneakers with one hand while lifting the receiver with the other and dialing the operator for the message. "Yes, this is Dar

Roberts, I have a message?" She wrote down the name and number on a scratch pad left by the phone and thanked the operator, then hung up. "Well, John..." She picked up the receiver and dialed again, listening as it rang. It was picked up on the fourth ring. "Hello, John, you said to call when I got the message, so..."

"Oh. Oh, Dar. Yes. Thanks." The man's voice sounded harried. "I was just putting the last bit of a new proposal together. Listen, I'm glad you're here."

That's new. "What's up?"

"They've asked us to come in with a bid tomorrow, but they're bringing us and the team from IBM in at the same time. Kind of like a face-off."

"Oh, really." Dar pulled off her other sneaker and rubbed her toes. "That's different. They expected us to arm-wrestle it out or something?"

"I don't know," John answered with a sigh. "But I've been getting my tail kicked by their team leader. I understand you know him?"

"Oh yeah." Dar chuckled. "You could say that. He certainly won't be glad to see me, let's just put it that way." She unbuttoned her vest and stood up. "Listen, mail the proposal over to me, and I'll take a look at it. What time's the meeting tomorrow?"

"It's at ten, at the admin center," he answered with audible relief. "Michelle Graver's in charge of their negotiating group. Dar, she's vicious." He cleared his throat. "In today's session, she brought up every major failure we've had in the last ten years. Not sure where she got the info from."

"Probably from Jerry Andrews," Dar replied as she pulled off the vest, and then unzipped her briefcase. "So it's that kind of dirty pool, eh? All right. I'll give the office a call and see what reciprocal dirt I can dig up. They'll be loaded for bear tomorrow." She paused. "Do they know I'm here?"

"Not that I know of. Unless they track our corporate bookings in their central res system," John replied, sounding a good deal more cheerful. "Damn, I'm glad you're here, Dar. Tomorrow it'll be like walking in with an Uzi under my arm."

Dar snorted. "Thanks." She plugged in the laptop and connected the modem cord to the spare jack on the side of the phone. "Actually, make sure there's room for two more. I have my new assistant with me as an observer."

"Oh? Great!" John replied. "Even better, we'll outnumber them, then." He hesitated. "And it'll make a better mix on the team. I've only got guys on this one, I think that's annoying Michelle." "What about them?"

"Are you kidding? At this level bid? All guys, all blue suits, all white shirts, black ties, black shoes, and IBM tie tacks." The account rep chuckled. "At least we're wearing different colored underwear."

"Should be fun." Dar sighed. "Send it over. I'll be dialed in." She waited for him to hang up, then replaced the receiver and instructed her laptop to complete a connection.

"Problems?" a soft voice asked, and she looked up to see Kerry in the adjoining doorway, dressed in an overlong T-shirt with a large, obnoxious Tweety Bird on it and not much else. "I heard that start to connect." She pointed at the laptop.

Dar got over her gut-level response at seeing her assistant in her underwear and shrugged.

"Could be. Apparently the IBM team is playing dirty pool. Not that we wouldn't if we could, of course, but they've given the people here some inside info about us, and John's having a rough time of it." She glanced at the screen, and then waved Kerry inside the room. "Sit down, he's sending me over his new bid to look at."

Kerry willingly did so, curling up on her side on the bed and handing Dar a piece of the fudge she'd been nibbling on. "What kind of inside info?"

Dar checked the download indicator. "Damn, I must have a meg of mail. We've only been gone for seven hours, what's going on down there?" She ate the fudge, then licked her fingers. "Mmm, that's pretty good."

"I don't know, I left my laptop picking up. I had a bunch too," Kerry advised her, as she handed over another piece.

"Hey, that's yours," Dar protested, but took the fudge anyway. "The inside info was screw-ups of ours--times when we promised something we couldn't deliver, or had to void out of a contract due to non-performance, that kind of thing." She started a terminal session and typed in a request. "C'mon, c'mon. Goddamn analog piece of shit lines."

Kerry muffled a grin. Dar had taken off her sneakers and vest and tugged her shirt out, and it was appealingly rumpled-looking. "What are you going to do?"

"Get some dirt on them," Dar replied absently, sending a bot out searching the huge database Programming had custom written for them. "Fire with fire, and all that."

Golden lashes fluttered. "Why not just put in the best bid?" she inquired. "Or is that an incredibly naïve question?"

Dar's blue eyes lifted and twinkled. "Well, not naïve, just a little too, um...optimistic." She placed the laptop on the bed and stood, stripping out of her shirt and reaching for her bag. "In an ideal world, we'd all be judged on our merits. This isn't an ideal world." She glanced at Kerry, who was studiously looking elsewhere, and managed a wry grin.

"And?" Kerry seemed to find the bedside clock fascinating.

"And I know that." She got into her baseball shirt and pulled off her jeans, folding them neatly and tucking them inside the bag. "So you take any advantage you can find, including knocking down the other guy any way you can."

"Hmm." Kerry gave a small nod. "It sounds very antagonistic." She finally looked up and pushed a bit of hair behind one ear.

"It can be," Dar agreed, relaxing onto her side and extending her legs across the bed, while she checked the progress of the bot. She thought a minute, then started another bot, this time searching for information on Michelle Graver. She'd vaguely heard of the woman in passing. Was it with Merrill Lynch? But they'd never met, and she knew nothing about her. Not a good way to go into a bid meeting. "The IBM lead negotiator almost came over the table at me the last time we met."

Kerry's eyes widened. "Really? God, Dar...that's terrible."

"No." Her boss looked up with a devilish grin. "It was hilarious. He couldn't do it because when he stood up, he split his pants, and he had to sit right back down or flash the client with his big white butt." She chuckled at the memory. "I almost hurt myself laughing."

Kerry bit back a laugh. "I would have died. Is he going to be surprised to see you?"

"Ooo, yes." Dar chuckled again, not a nice sound. "It also helps the makeup of the team. John thinks Michelle Graver, the lead rep for Disney, is ticked off because both we and IBM brought in all male groups." She glanced up at Kerry. "She's been giving John a hard time."

"You think she'll give you a hard time?"

Dar studied the results of the second bot. "Hmm. She might." Her brows rose. "She's pretty formidable on paper. She's got a doctorate in psychology in addition to a masters in business. She's been with them for ten years and is viewed as one of their top talents." She turned her laptop around for Kerry to view. "Here, take a look." She watched Kerry read, her eyes flicking

back and forth rapidly. "See anything interesting?" A little test, one she suspected her intelligent young friend would pass.

"She's a skydiver," Kerry murmured, touching the screen with a fingertip. "That shows a certain kind of personality, doesn't it? Someone who looks for adrenaline highs?" She said, "A risk taker."

"Mmm-hmm." Dar gave her an approving smile. "Good catch."

"So, that means she probably thrives on conflict, which is why she's staging the meeting like that tomorrow, right?" She glanced up. "It gives her a thrill to watch you guys go at each other."

"Could be," her boss admitted.

"So, your best bet is to stay cool, right?"

Dar chuckled. "Exactly. She's depending on one or the other of us to lose it and give in to our tempers. And that, my friend, is not going to be me."

My friend. Kerry liked the sound of that. "I just sit quiet and take notes, I assume?"

"If you've got something to say, Kerry, you say it," Dar answered seriously. "But think of these people as sharks. They're looking for tidbits. And bear in mind, no matter how civilized they seem, that there are no friends in there."

She smiled. "Except us."

Dar looked up from her screen and smiled back. "Yeah."

Kerry glanced down to the bedspread, then back up. "Thanks for doing the park with me tonight, Dar. I know this is a business trip, but I had a great time."

Dar let her head rest on her hand. "I had a good time too. Tell you what, if these damn meetings let out at a decent time tomorrow, we'll do Epcot, and I'll treat you to dinner in Mongolia or someplace. How about it?"

A quiet smile edged her lips. "You don't have to do that, I can always come up here another time."

Dar drew a pattern on the fabric, then looked up at her through dark eyelashes. "I know you can, but I also know that I won't, so let me have my little self-delusional excuse for a quasi-vacation, okay?" she replied wryly.

"Oh, oh, sorry. Okay, I get it." Kerry gave her a sweet smile. "Don't worry. I promise I'll never tell anyone you actually have fun sometimes."

"Thanks." Dar chuckled. "And, um, listen, thanks for going with me this morning. I really appreciated having a friendly face there."

"No problem, I'm just glad everything turned out okay," Kerry replied honestly.

"Me too." Dar rolled over onto her back, but kept her head turned towards Kerry. "Feels good not to have to worry about that. I've always been half scared that valve would blow out on me underwater or something."

Kerry squirmed a bit closer. "Why didn't you have it checked out before, then?"

Dar shrugged. "Didn't want to know, I guess." She laid a hand on her stomach, tapping idly with the edge of her thumb. "Stupid."

"Human," Kerry disagreed. "No one likes to hear bad news." She paused, then sighed. "Well, if tomorrow's going to be a big battle, I'd better get some sleep." She stood up and raised a hand. "Night, Dar."

Thoughtful blue eyes regarded her. "Night."

After Kerry left, a silence settled over the room and Dar was conscious of the soft hum of her disk drive as it accepted the downloads, and the gentle clicking as the air conditioning cycled on and off. Her brow creased in mild confusion. The room seemed so empty now with the kid gone.

She found herself wanting Kerry back near her, even if it were only to be studying the files quietly in the corner, or standing around just talking, or... Or just being close by. She thought hard about that. *Okay.* She took a deep breath and released it. *I'm attracted to Kerry.* That wasn't any big deal. It happened often enough, and Kerry was as safe as a baby in a crib from any hint of impropriety from her or anything like that. Company rules were company rules and that was one line Dar Roberts never, ever crossed. She'd had relationships inside the building, sure, most of them embarrassing failures, but none in her own space. *No way. No way, not with Kerry.* Dar found herself looking at the door between their rooms. And, after all, her new assistant was good looking, smart, had a great sense of humor, nice eyes, and nice body...who wouldn't be attracted to her? So that was normal. No problem. She could deal with that, it would disappear in time, and Kerry would never know the difference. Dar thought about that for a long moment. It was true, she'd be able to dismiss the attraction, but there was something else there going on she wasn't sure she could set aside so easily, not and keep working like she'd have to with Kerry. Something was pulling them together on a much deeper level. She could feel it, and she suspected Kerry could too. It had nothing to do with carnal desires, and everything to do with the peaceful, contented feeling she'd gotten on that very brief ride, with Kerry's body snuggled against hers as though it were the most natural thing in the world. She ached to feel it again. And that...that was scaring her. Physical attraction she could deal with. This was something else entirely. She just wished she knew what it was.

Chapter Sixteen

"I'M SURPRISED A meeting like this doesn't specify armor as a requirement," Kerry mentioned, fiddling with her cuff. "The way you made it sound."

Dar was still in her pajamas, her head propped up on one hand, studying her laptop screen. "Okay, I think I've got enough dirt." She scanned the items into her memory and nodded, then pushed away from the table and stood up, lifting her arms overhead and cracking her back audibly.

Kerry winced. "Ow."

The executive chuckled wryly. "That's what I get from years over a keyboard." She went to the valet bag and removed her suit, tossing it gently on the bed and glancing at her watch. "At least we had time for a decent breakfast. That French toast is pretty good, eh?"

"Pretty good?" Kerry laughed "I could eat that every morning."

"Ah hah, and you tease *me* about Frosted Flakes." Dar shook a shoe at her and grinned.

Kerry grinned back, then shook her head as she ducked back inside her room to finish dressing. She looked at herself in the mirror as she slipped on her jacket and adjusted the collar, smoothing down the maroon fabric with faintly nervous fingers. It matched her slim, knee-length skirt and the comfortable shoes and contrasted with the pale gray shirt. She dusted on a little makeup, not too much, as she took her cue from Dar's usual appearance. Just a touch of lip gloss, a little color on her cheeks, and a tiny bit of eye shadow. "All right," she told the reflection, who was looking expectantly back at her. "Are we ready for war?"

She poked her lower lip out and had to restrain a giggle. "You know, I'm just not the warrior type, I don't think." She turned her head at a slight cough and saw Dar in the doorway, dressed in a gunmetal-gray blazer and skirt, with her black Mickey shirt underneath. Her boss looked sleek and, well, dangerous in her monochrome, especially since it matched her dark hair. Only the pale, incredibly blue eyes added even a touch of color to her. "Oh, hi. You look...nice."

"No, I don't," Dar replied cheerfully. "I look like a corporate shark. Which is what I am. Shall we?"

It was a short drive to the admin offices, though they had to wait five minutes for the guard to clear them at the gate. They parked and got out, both of them shouldering their briefcases. "Okay, this could get tough," Dar cautioned, just before they entered the building. "Stay cool. When in doubt, if someone asks you something you think is dangerous, or antagonistic, just tell them. I'm sorry, I don't understand the question. Could you explain what you're asking?"

Kerry thought about that as she followed her boss inside. "That's pretty smart. You make them lay it out."

Dar winked at her. "I knew I picked a sharp one." She nodded to a short, stocky man near the elevator and took a deep breath. "Okay, here we go. Morning, John."

He held out a hand. "Hello, Dar. Good to see you." A brief introduction to the rest of his team followed. They all looked at Dar with a cross between fear and fascination, and Kerry almost had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

It was a short trip up the elevator, and it opened on a floor that seemed mostly made of windows. The walls of glass allowed one to see into all the offices, and there were spears of light coming in everywhere.

Kerry found it distracting, but she put that aside as they turned a corner and entered a large, glass-enclosed room with a huge conference table. There were several people, most of them men, seated around it, and two of them were staring at Dar as though she were the manifestation of Satan here on Earth.

At the head of the table sat a short, slim woman with fiery red hair cut into a short, almost severe cut. She was dressed in an expensive-looking beige suit and emerald-colored shirt. Watching with intense interest, her eyes flicked everywhere, then fell on Dar.

Not involved in the initial greetings, Kerry got to see the reaction as, for a split second, the woman looked her boss up and down, then allowed a fleeting, very satisfied smile to cross her face. Then it was gone. *Interesting.*

"Hello, Jerry. Long time no see," Dar purred as she put her briefcase down and pulled out a chair, but didn't sit. Her smile oozed charm. "Care to introduce your friends?"

The man to whom she spoke looked like he was going to burst a blood vessel, Kerry decided. His neck was as red as a turkey's, and she could see the veins stark and blue under his skin. But somehow, he kept his cool and introduced his colleagues, who stared at Dar uncertainly. Dar reciprocated, then turned and looked the lady at the end of the table right in the eye. "And you must be Ms. Graver. Glad to be finally meeting you."

It was impossible not to react to Dar. She crackled with energy and confidence, and Kerry noticed that the woman, though very self-confident herself, didn't miss that.

"You can't be anyone other than Dar Roberts, then." Michelle Graver stood and held out a hand.

"It is a pleasure. I had no idea you were joining the bid team on this account."

Dar gripped the offered hand, returning the powerful squeeze with one of her own, then she smiled and put her fingertips on her briefcase. "All right, shall we get rolling? It's a beautiful day out; pity we're all stuck in here."

Kerry was, by turns, amazed and impressed. Dar had simply walked in and just taken over, and was acting as if there wasn't anything anyone could do about it. She passed the bid John had given them over to Dar and watched her drop it casually in front of Michelle, who was still standing.

Dar sat down, giving the Disney executive the advantage. "You had some concerns about performance?" Her eyes flicked to those of her rival and a faint grin touched her lips. "I think I can address those."

Graver flipped through the document, then down at her. "I imagine you probably can." She walked back over to her place and put the bid down, then picked up a sheet of paper and slid it across the table top. "Here."

Dar took the paper and glanced at it, then let out a little chuckle. "You want me to start at the top or the bottom? And Jesus, Jerry, is this all you could come up with after ten thousand negotiated contracts?" Ignoring the glaring looks she was getting from across the table, she scanned the list. "Oh, I remember this one." She smiled. "Non-performance with Aamco. I was the one who told their CEO we'd pay off the entire contract just so I wouldn't have to hear his voice on my phone ever again." "Really?" Michelle Graver leaned back and twirled her pencil. "Why?"

Dar exhaled. "They contracted for a manufacturing overhaul, including a new IS system that would link all their shops with computerized inventory. Halfway through, they hired a new OPS VP who was convinced if he could just recycle the 1982 Unix systems with dumb terminals they were using and hire someone to write a custom database in CPM, they'd be fine."

"And you told them?" Michelle asked.

"Bite me," Dar replied frankly. "I'm not in the business of putting together fourth-rate technology with Band-Aids." She glanced across the table. "I hear you bid on that one, Jerry. They ended up with OS/2 and Mod 30s they had to scrap after Microchannel bit the dust, didn't they?"

The man's nostrils flared. "They had some choice things to say about you, that's for sure," he replied. "Like the lawsuit said."

Dar chuckled. "Jerry, everyone has choice things to say about me...and we *won* the lawsuit." She went on down the list. "Oh, now that, that was a true disaster. Heads rolled for that one." She shook her head. "Government accounting office, the implementation of automatic deposit for Social Security checks. That was just totally mishandled."

"So you admit that, huh?" Jerry leaned back with a nasty smile.

"Oh sure." Dar blinked at him. "I fired the entire account team personally, in fact." She smiled back. "Day before Christmas, if I recall."

Kerry darted a look at her, seeing the relaxed grin, and the slight, almost seductive narrowing of her eyes. *Would she do that?* She saw the wondering echoed on faces all around the table from them.

"Lord, yes, I remember that." John sighed, shaking his head. "Poor Mariana, she was at her twentieth high school reunion and they paged her to come in and cut the paperwork." He glanced over at the faintly shocked-looking Michelle. "Mariana's our VP of Personnel. We were in the same class. I was standing talking to her when her pager went off." He looked to one side. "You were not her favorite person that night, that's for sure."

Dar lifted both hands and let them fall. "Someone screws with our reputation that badly, they can expect that from me." Then she went back to her list. "Useless jerks. Damn right, I fired them. Should have dumped them in the Atlantic while I was at it. Let's see what else we've got here." Michelle forestalled her. "I think that's enough. Jerry, do you have something for me?"

Reluctantly, he handed over a sheaf of papers. The Disney exec picked them up, then stood. "Excuse me, I need to review these. I'll be back in a few moments." She caught Dar's eye and favored her with a tiny smile before she left, trailing two aides behind her like a brace of sight hounds.

They were left facing each other, in a glass-walled room. People walking by glanced in curiously at the silent group, but went on their way.

Kerry studied the other team. They were dressed alike, in dark suits and white shirts, and they were all in their mid-thirties to mid-forties, with short haircuts. Their own team was a little different. Aside from herself and Dar, John was dressed in a conventional business suit, but his tie sported cartoon characters. Small, discreet ones, to be sure, but from where she was sitting, Kerry recognized Donald Duck poking his head out from between two buttons. The three other men with John were of varying ages. One was an older man, foxy looking, with a beard and mustache and clever hazel eyes. Seated next to him was a very tall man with oversized ears and the general look of an engineer about him. His pad was covered with doodles Kerry recognized as circuits. The fourth team member was a young, crew-cutted man with blue eyes and a friendly smile, which he turned on her when he caught her looking.

"Well, we must have scared your team shitless for them to send your ass in here, Roberts," Jerry finally spat.

Dar folded her hands on the table and shrugged. "Not at all, Jerry. I just wanted the chance to see you again." A smile totally devoid of humor flashed across the table at him. "I had such a good time the last bidding round we did together."

He leaned forward. "You don't have a chance here. This contract is out of your company's league, and they know it." He glanced to the right. "Oh, unless you're going to offer your little friend there up to Graver to sweeten the deal. That might win you a few points." He looked right at a stunned Kerry. "Is that what you're here for, sweetie? Does Daddy know that?"

Green eyes looked into his with disarming friendliness. "Daddy is Senator Stuart of Michigan, and he'd probably find it a very odd thing for you to say. I'll make sure I mention it the next time we speak, thanks." She added a charming smile to the end of her response, and almost jumped when a hand squeezed her knee in appreciation. Dar's expression hadn't changed, but a tiny sparkle of glee was in her eyes as she glanced toward Kerry.

Even Jerry's colleagues winced. "I meant no disrespect," he forced out with a sour grimace.

"Better keep your mouth shut, Jerry." Dar chuckled. "The room's full of static electricity. You keep chewing on your shoes like that, you're gonna zap your fillings and give yourself a perm." Kerry muffled a laugh, but the rest of their team didn't bother.

He just gave them a disgusted look and stared pointedly at John. "How does it feel to have to hide behind a skirt?"

The short account rep folded his hands over his stomach and smiled. "From where I'm sitting right now? Pretty damn good. Thanks for asking."

The door opened and Michelle came back in, trailed by her hounds. She sat down and placed the two bids on the table and then cleared her throat. "These bids are very competitive." She toyed with one of them. "But what's on paper is not really the important issue for us. Service is the issue. So what I'm going to ask is this--I'm going to hand over a task to each of you, so we can evaluate your response."

Dar was encouraged. That meant the bid was still alive, and they had a chance. She'd undone some of the damage from the previous days, and now it remained to see what this sharp, intense woman was going to come up with as a test.

"Then, I'd like to schedule another meeting tomorrow here, to go over the results, and we'll try to announce our decision at that time." She stood and handed an envelope to each team lead, then nodded. "That's all for now." She watched them all stand, then she turned to Dar. "Ms. Roberts, a word with you, please?"

Ah. Dar's instincts prickled. She excused herself from her little group and stepped around the table, until she was next to the other woman, putting one hand on a chair back and leaning against it to keep from intentionally towering over her. "What can I do for you, Ms. Graver?"

"For starters, please call me Michelle," the woman said with a smile.

"Only if you call me Dar," the dark-haired woman replied instantly, with a return smile.

"Nice shirt."

Was that a twinkle in Michelle's dark gray eyes? Dar chuckled. "It went with the suit, and there's nothing I like better than carrying Mickey around on my chest." She was aware Michelle was sniffing interestedly at her and decided a little reciprocation wouldn't hurt. "Since our plane got in early, I got to indulge in some rampant tourism last night."

"Mmm. I wish I'd known you were coming in, I would have arranged for one of our VIP tours--all the behind-the-scenes stuff us geeks love." She licked a lower lip and let her eyes wander a trifle. "I hear 'results oriented' doesn't begin to describe you. Is that true?"

Definitely flirting. Dar was a little surprised at the aggressiveness, but not that Michelle had taken a moment to request a dossier on her during the break. "It's true," she replied quietly. "I make things happen."

Michelle quirked a grin. "I'd like to hear more about that. Since you're stuck here another night, I'd like you to be my guest for dinner. We can discuss your bid." A hound tapped her shoulder, and she ducked away for a moment. "Excuse me, I'll be right back." She moved a pace away, and dropped her voice to a whisper as she spoke with the man.

Gotcha. Dar could feel the conquest on her fingertips. Michelle was interested, intrigued, and willing to indulge in a personal interaction that would, in all probability, bias the vote in her favor. She was aggressive, and not unattractive, and god only knew, it wouldn't be the first time Dar had used her personal magnetism to seal a contract.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Kerry's interested expression, as the young woman watched the buzzing groups and occasionally flicked her gaze to Dar. Their looks met, and Dar felt a smile touch her lips, which was mirrored from across the room.

What would Kerry think of this? Dar could read the proud look in the kid's face as she regarded her. *No, Kerry is intelligent. She would understand that this is business, and sometimes you have to do things to get what you want. It's all in the results, like I told Michelle. I make things happen.*

She could make this happen; she could feel it. Michelle the thrill-seeker, who actively courted danger, and who sensed in Dar danger of the most exciting, most seductive kind. Oh yes, she could make this happen. Kerry would surely understand. This was a very important deal, and it would be worth... God, Alastair would have an orgasm on the spot if she made it go through. It was worth it. It would be so easy, she could taste it happening. All it would cost her was a night's engagement, and what was that, really, given what she'd done in her life so far? It wouldn't even be unpleasant. *Piece of cake.* Dar paused, remembering a lightly made promise, suddenly echoing in her ears. *Mongolia, huh?* She glanced at Kerry again, seeing the gentle trust there as the green eyes met hers, and she slowly turned back to Michelle and waited for her to finish.

Michelle turned around and stepped back, then gazed up at her in question. "I believe we were discussing dinner?"

For a moment, all Dar could hear was her heartbeat, then she released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "Michelle, I'm so very sorry." Her eyes conveyed true regret, but not for what

the woman would have assumed. "I have an engagement tonight I can't get out of. But I very much appreciate..." she paused meaningfully, "the offer."

How in the world something so stupid could feel so good, she had no clue. She read surprise and disappointment on Michelle's face, but not anger. "That's too bad, Dar." Michelle pursed her lips and sighed. "I was looking forward to talking to you. Maybe if you get stuck another night?"

A smile from her. "Absolutely."

A brisk nod, and then Michelle signaled her dogs and left the room. Dar took a breath, then turned and headed back toward her group, who were waiting by the door. The rival team had already left, and she could hear the buzz of interest dying down as she reached their group.

"Okay."

"Everything all right?" the account lead inquired, glancing after the departing exec.

Dar straightened her shoulders and nodded. "I think so. What do they want us to do?"

John handed her the packet, and she scanned it idly. "Oh, these are the information kiosks they have around the parks--touch screen, maps, that kind of thing." She read on. "They want us to design a proposal to take over the data transmission, improve the speed, deliver the information more efficiently, and enable online reservations?" John nodded.

Dar sat down at the conference table and took out her pen, writing on the cover sheet for ten minutes, then re-reading what she'd written. "All right." She pulled out her laptop and booted it, then scanned in the document using the slimline scan attachment that slipped onto the back buss. Then she pulled out her cell phone and inserted the phone plug from her modem into the data jack. A click, and they all heard the dialing beeps and the soft hiss of a connection.

Dar watched the status, then nodded as it completed and disconnected. "Okay, here you go. Hang onto this, and don't let anyone see it, all right, John?"

With the other team members looking over his shoulder, the account lead read the document.

"Dar, this is technogibberish." He glanced at her. "But I guess you know what it says, and whoever you sent it to does also. Who *did* you send it to, by the way?"

"Mark Polenti," Dar closed up her laptop case. "Well guys, I gotta go. I've got a theme park to explore. See you tomorrow morning."

"But..." John lifted the paper at her questioningly.

"Relax." Dar chuckled. "You'll have your written proposal tomorrow, and if I play my cards right, maybe something more." She picked up her case and joined Kerry in the doorway, giving them all a smile before she urged her companion out the door.

It was a quiet walk to the elevator, and they were alone in it as they rode down. "Wow. That was certainly something," Kerry remarked, watching the floors go by. "What di--" She stopped when a pair of fingers covered her lips, and she looked at Dar in startled question.

Dar removed her fingers, then lifted one to her own lips in a shushing motion. "I'm glad you had such an educational experience during the meeting, Kerry," she stated. "It's good to understand that not everything you see and hear is necessarily what's going on under the surface."

Kerry got the message. "That's true. Your methods are very interesting."

Dar grinned, then shook her head in silence as the doors opened and they walked out. Once out in the parking lot, she leaned closer. "We know they bug the place like crazy."

"What?" Kerry looked shocked. "Why?"

They got in the car and left the parking lot before Dar answered. "To find out things. They don't take anyone at face value."

"Hmm." Kerry leaned back and crossed her arms. "You think that conference room was bugged?"

"Without question. "

Kerry whistled. "She got an earful then."

A soft chuckle greeted that. "Oh yeah. Nice comeback, by the way." She gave her companion an approving look. "John's got a good team there, but he's too nice and too ethical for a dog fight like that."

"Yeah, they were all right," the blonde mused. "Larry asked me out tonight."

Dar blinked and swallowed down a completely inappropriate surge of... "That was nice of him," she got out. "Where are you going?"

"Oh, I'm not. I mean..." Kerry blushed a little. "I told him thanks, but I had a prior offer."

Blue eyes regarded her quietly. "Funny, I told Michelle Graver the same thing." Dar's words tumbled out unexpectedly. "Weird, huh?"

Kerry's eyes widened. "Good god, Dar, you should have said yes! I'm sure you two would have gotten along great and talked about the bid."

Dar had stopped at a light, and now she turned and looked at her assistant. "She wasn't asking me out to talk about the bid, Kerry," she said bluntly.

Sea green eyes studied her face for a long time in silence, before Kerry sat back. "Oh."

Feeling a quiet depression settle on her, Dar continued the drive to the Floridian. *That was obviously an alien concept to the kid. Maybe I should have taken Michelle up after all. Kerry wouldn't have even realized. I've risked the account for nothing. God in heaven, Dar...get your head on straight. What in the hell do you think you're doing?* She toyed with the idea of changing her mind, and giving Michelle a call.

"You mean, she found you attractive, and she was hitting on you?"

Kerry's voice startled her out of her morose thoughts, and she glanced to her right in surprise, seeing an unexpectedly thoughtful look on the blonde woman's face. Dar was rattled, not expecting that calm, interested evaluation. "Um, I would imagine...I guess, yeah."

Kerry crossed her arms over her chest and cocked her head introspectively. "Well, at least she has good taste," she commented simply.

Huh? Dar almost went through a stop sign. "Sorry about that," she muttered as she brought the car to a quick halt, and turned her head to give Kerry a startled look. "She what?"

Kerry gazed at her as though she were nuts. "Well, yeah, I mean..." She let out a little laugh.

"C'mon, Dar..." She turned the rearview mirror to face her boss. "I mean, hello?" She watched Dar's face intently. "Why, did that bother you, her being interested?"

A clue flew in the window and hit Dar on the head. "Um. No." She rubbed her temple, then stifled a relieved laugh. "No, no. I've been through that before. I guess I just wasn't in the mood to play the game tonight." *Holy damn it.* She glanced back at Kerry. "Did it bother you?"

"Me?" Kerry pointed a thumb at herself. "Dar, no offense, but I'm a Republican, not a nun. Of course it didn't bother me."

Dar concentrated on driving for a few minutes as she navigated their way from the administrative offices. A jumble of thoughts were tumbling around inside her head, and finally she paused at a stop sign and looked fully at Kerry. "You're a Republican?" Kerry gave her a sideways look. Dar chuckled. "I'm glad I turned her down." She shook her head and continued driving.

Kerry nodded. "Well, I'll try to make it up to you," she responded with a grin.

Dar felt her throat go dry. "Yeah, I'm sure we'll have fun," she replied easily. "After all, I promised you Mongolia, didn't I?" Her breathing settled, and she stifled a grin. *We'll have fun. With or without Mongolia.*

IT HAD DEFINITELY been an interesting drive, Kerry decided, and an even more interesting morning. She took her time changing, stripping out of the wool suit with a feeling of utter relief. She sorted through her clothing, then decided to wear her bathing suit under a T-shirt and shorts. That way if it got too hot over in the park, she could take off her shirt. She briefly considered suggesting the same thing to Dar, then sighed and shook her head. *Don't cross that line, Stuart,* she warned herself. *She's your boss.*

Her boss, yes, but someone who was also rapidly becoming a friend. Kerry sighed, feeling a touch uncertain. She'd very much felt like she was skirting that line on their drive to the hotel, surprised that the gentle teasing had hinted at something different. Neither of them had asked, but had they both told a little too much? Kerry bit the inside of her lip. She hoped she understood what Dar was pointedly not saying and she was definitely relieved Dar was at least very open-minded. It helped that the idea wasn't likely to freak the older woman out, not after that crack about Michelle.

Kerry slipped into her bathing suit and adjusted the straps, checking her reflection out of the corner of her eye and giving herself a nod of grudging approval. Besides, she knew the company rules-- spelled out in plain language in the huge manual she'd been given on her first day. It was a harmless fantasy, and she suspected Dar enjoyed the flirting banter. Just a little fun, no one got hurt by it, least of all her, so she decided to just accept it and move on.

It certainly explained the little roller coaster ride last night, though. Kerry giggled a little, remembering how really nice that had felt, and how she'd been halfway hoping Dar would suggest another go around. Ah well, she'd had her chance, and now that they sort of understood each other, tonight should be even more fun.

God, she thought I wanted to out with supergeek Larry? Good grief. Kerry shook her head. *And she could have gone out with Michelle.* Kerry slipped on her shorts and leaned on the back of the chair. *But she didn't.* Her eyes lifted and met her reflection with quiet introspection.

Hmm. Maybe she just wasn't in the mood for something serious. Michelle would be the kind of person who wanted action. With Kerry, maybe Dar knew she was safe.

That's cool. I know I'm safe with her too. She nodded at her mirror image. *We can just go out, and have fun.*

"Hey, you daydreaming?" The low voice startled her, and she turned to see Dar leaning in her doorway, dressed in shorts and a tied-off sleeveless shirt over a bathing suit. "I called in. Maria is saving the metric ton of crap we'll have to catch up on next week. Nothing catastrophic is happening other than a tornado watch around the office, and our mail server crashed, so you're probably going to have to re-download tonight."

"Okay," Kerry agreed. "I checked it this morning. Three of the contracts I was working on have finalized, but nothing else is really critical." She paused, remembering that this was, in fact, a business trip. "Would it be better if we hung out here and got some work done?"

Dar glanced down, then pursed her lips in a smile. "No." Her eyes twinkled. "With any luck, I can get this to count as my vacation, and everyone will leave me alone."

"Ah, an ulterior motive." Kerry chuckled. "Okay. I'm ready, let's go." She followed Dar out the door and down the hallway to the elevator.

"God, it's hot out." Kerry leaned against the concierge's counter as Dar made arrangements to keep their rooms another night. "You want to stop for a swim first?"

Dar finished the arrangements and turned, adjusting the small pack she was wearing around her waist to carry her cell phone and pager, along with her wallet. "I've got a better idea." She handed Kerry a small square of laminated plastic. "Here, it's your passport." She rolled her eyes.

"How about this instead of the pool?" She handed Kerry a colorful pamphlet she'd picked up at the desk.

"Blizzard Beach?" The younger woman examined it. It was a water park complete with a huge, 140-foot-tall water slide. "Oh, wow! This looks awesome! You're on."

"YAAAA!" KERRY HOWLED as she sped toward the ground, slipping and sliding across the slick, watery surface before dropping into thin air just prior to hitting the water. Moments later, Dar splashed down next to her, surfacing and shaking her head to clear her wet, dark hair out of her eyes.

"Whew." The older woman pulled away from the chutes with powerful, sure strokes. "That's some drop." She ducked her head back into the water, then, as they neared the concrete shore, she stood up and let the liquid run off her body.

"Oh yeah," Kerry agreed, a little out of breath. "But I won, again."

"Yeah, yeah." Dar splashed her. "You're smaller than I am, so there."

"No way, it's my technique. I know how to catch the curves just right." Kerry moved her hand in a squiggling motion.

"Listen to you." Dar snorted. "I bet if we did it again, I'd beat you."

"Oh yeah?" Kerry splashed out of the pool, and ran fingers through her wet hair. "How much?" They'd been at the water fun for several hours, and the sun was starting to set, but Kerry wasn't about to let the opportunity pass. Dar had slowly relaxed and opened up a little, becoming almost playful as they tried all the slips, and slides, and pools.

"I don't know, what's it worth to ya?" Dar paced alongside her, steering her back towards the entrance of the slides. "Let's see..." She tugged Kerry to a halt next to a smiling snowman.

"Okay, you're more than forty-eight inches. Just wanted to make sure."

"Tch." Kerry gave her a mock glare. "I hate short jokes," she warned. "Just for that, if I win, you have to sit through the Singing Vegetable exhibit in the Land tonight."

"Oh, I'm definitely winning. I'm not getting subjected to dancing broccoli." Dar shook her head.

"All those hydroponic carrots waving their roots in the air. No thanks."

"We'll see." Kerry smirked as they entered the line, now much shortened as people headed for home or out for dinner.

Minutes later, she was cannonballing out of the chute, reaching for the water, then pushing up through the surface and whipping her head around, looking for Dar. "Hah!" she chortled, hopping away from the chute entrance, and glancing up at the other one. Seconds passed, and all was quiet. Kerry pushed her wet hair out of her eyes and waited. More seconds passed. Now she edged over, and peered upward in puzzlement. "C'mon, Dar, did you stop to make a cell phone call?" She moved closer, almost at the edge of the chute now and put her hand on the slick surface.

A surge of water washed against her, and her legs got taken out from under her, ducking her head under the water as she squawked in shock and indignation. Moments later, she was dragged to the surface, dripping and outraged, to face a smug, smirking Dar. "How did you...wh..."

The executive chuckled, releasing her and swimming away. "I'll do anything to avoid singing broccoli. Remember that, my friend."

"Hey!" Kerry lunged after her, grabbing an ankle. "Hold on there," She gave a tug and found herself being pulled through the water. "Oh, crudpuppies." she muttered, kicking a stroke and getting a better hold. "I said, hold on there!"

Dar grinned and kept swimming. She felt Kerry's hand slip, then reach up and get a good grip on her suit, her fingers sliding over the older woman's skin, leaving a gentle tingle behind them. She stopped, then whirled in place, pulling the shorter woman closer. For a moment they just looked at each other, and Dar enjoyed the intense energy she could feel between them, then she smiled, and dunked her companion with a triumphant chortle.

Kerry got her feet under her and broke the surface, then stood with her hands on her slim hips, dripping chlorinated water everywhere. "I'll get you for that," she vowed, but her grin belied her threat.

"Promise?" Dar answered, startling herself a little, then shrugging and returning the grin.

They splashed out and got their towels, drying off and walking back to the locker area where they'd stowed their clothing. "This was a great idea, Dar, except I think I got sunburned." Kerry winced as she touched the back of her neck. "That's going to be a little hard to explain at a business meeting."

Dar put a hand on her shoulder and peered at her skin, reaching out to lift the damp hair up and then touching the sensitive skin with a fingertip. She felt Kerry suck in a breath at the touch and bit off a smile. "Tender, huh?"

"Uh...yes." Kerry was startled at how her body had reacted to the simple touch. "Sunburned, right?"

"A little," Dar observed, tracing a second line across the back of her neck. "Have to get you some cold cream." She handed Kerry her towel, rented from the facility, then slipped her shorts and shirt on over her suit. "Good thing about this stuff, it dries fast."

Kerry swallowed. "Yeah, I noticed that." She cleared her throat. "Might get a little chilly with this sunburn tonight." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Maybe I can pick up a sweatshirt."

"Good idea, not like they don't have seven thousand varieties," Dar answered innocently, as she handed her companion her T-shirt. "C'mon. After all that, I'm starving."

Kerry heard a telltale rumble, and put a hand over her stomach after she slipped her shirt on. "Me too."

DAR LEANED BACK in her bus seat, propping a knee up against the seat in front of her and leaning her head against the cool glass of the window. She watched the green grass and thick foliage go by, as the vehicle traveled through the property back roads heading from the water park to the more centrally located Epcot Center.

She stifled a yawn and tried to think about all the work waiting for her when she got back. High as that pile would be, it couldn't make a dent in her lazy good mood, and she realized this was more fun than she'd had in many years. *Just like some damn kid, Dar. But maybe this is just what you needed.*

It certainly seemed to be helping. She felt relaxed and was looking forward to the evening, and her gentle teasing with Kerry had steadied at a pleasant, mild stimulation. She felt very comfortable with the younger woman, who was seated next to her, one warm shoulder pressing up against Dar's, and she was really glad she'd chosen to take Kerry with her.

It had been an opportunity too good to pass up, both to get to know her new assistant and to sneak in a little R-and-R at the same time. Dar was cautiously pleased with how it was turning out, and if Michelle Graver didn't take too much offense to her turning down their dinner date, they had a chance at the bid, too. That reminded her of something, though, and she took out her cell phone and dialed a number. "Mark?"

"Hey, boss," the MIS Chief's voice responded. "Is it true you slugged Minnie Mouse?"

"I haven't slugged anyone." Dar paused deliberately. "Yet."

"Uh oh, I sense a tongue lashing." Mark chuckled. "That was a toughie, Dar, two of those boxes have pretty high security on them."

"And?"

"It's in progress," Mark stated circumspectly. "You've got Provisioning up in freaking arms, Dar. When I called him, Eldon snapped one of those mechanical freaking pencils he's got millions of in half. I heard the sound."

"But he's moving on the project?" Dar persisted, watching the trees go by.

"He had to rob two circuits from FPL. You'll have some fence mending to do up there, but yeah, he's moving on it. He's not happy."

"Ask him if a formal commendation in his personnel file would make him happier," Dar commented. "And tell him not to be so god-damned anal. This is important."

"I know that. He knows that. Jesus, Dar, every freaking body in HQ knows that, including the cleaning staff," the MIS chief advised her. "John called in. There are stories of you blowing off the IBM team already circulating."

"Great. All right, Mark, I'll leave my cell on, as usual. Give me a call when you get things finalized. Is Robert Maccen publishing the response document?"

"Yep, he sure is. Say, where are you, anyhow?" the man asked curiously. "Sounds quiet."

Dar hesitated, tempering her good spirits with natural caution.

"Casing the place, actually," she stated. "Evaluating the infrastructure." She ignored Kerry's amused look.

Mark clucked his tongue. "Dar, you're the only goddamn person I know who would go to freaking Disney World and end up tracing cables. Take a damn break, will ya? At least go see the fireworks."

Dar surveyed her disheveled and slightly sunburned body, slumped easily against both the seat and her companion, and bit off a wry smile. "If I have a couple of minutes, sure."

"Dar, don't make me think of you walking around up in Orlando in one of those wool suits. Sweating in the control room is a bad thing, okay?"

"I'm, um, not wearing a wool suit, Mark, if it makes you feel any better." Dar laid a hand on her bare knee, tracing a tiny scar just above the kneecap. "And I'll try to catch a firework or two, if you'll guarantee me that plan will be complete by ten AM tomorrow."

"Dar..." Mark sighed. "Oh well, I don't need any sleep. All right, I promise, but you gotta bring me back a souvenir." He paused. "Tell you what, to make it fair, you bring me a back a picture of you actually taking it easy for five minutes. Is that too much to ask?"

"Oh, so if I take my shoes off and kick a stuffed Goofy around in the grass, that counts, right?" the executive drawled. His sigh could be heard clearly. "Okay, you're on, Mark. You come through, you get your picture, I promise." Dar chuckled. "Tell you what--you get it done on time, and I'll make it a bathing suit picture." Dead, absolute, not-even-breathing silence greeted the offer. Dar glanced at the phone, then at her companion, who had a hand firmly clamped over her mouth and was turning pink from the effort not to laugh. "Mark?" Silence, then a rustle of sound and another voice picked up.

"Hey, who is this?"

"Jeffrey, it's Dar Roberts."

"*Oh*. Oh, sorry, ma'am. Um...did you do something to Mark? He's sitting here with this weird, weird look on his face."

Dar sighed. "Just tell him I said I'd talk to him later." She hung up the line and glanced at Kerry, who was chewing on her knuckle and giggling softly. "You think that's funny, huh?" She reached over and tickled Kerry's ribs and grinned as the smaller woman jerked and squealed. "Oh, I can see there's something your profile didn't mention, Ms. Stuart." She tickled her again, and watched Kerry squirm away from her.

"Gah...stop that." Kerry grabbed her hand and held on. "Poor Mark! And are you going to tell me what the plan is, or do I have to guess, too?" She cautiously released her tormentor's fingers and was relieved when the attack wasn't repeated.

Dar sat back and wrapped her hands around one knee. "Well, I have two people working on writing up a proposal that answers their request, with specific resources, that kind of thing. Usually I'd do it myself, but..." She shrugged. "It's not that complicated. Anyway, since they have access to all the information, they'll prep the document for us and send it over before the meeting."

Kerry absorbed that. "And?"

Slowly, pale blue eyes looked over at her. "What do you mean, and?"

A shrewd glance studied her. "That's what the other guys will be doing, too. If I read you right, you go over and above. So what's the rest of the plan?"

Dar smiled, an open, genuine smile. "You're right, but I don't want to jinx it. Let me wait for Mark's call tonight, then I'll tell you all about it."

As the bus pulled up in front of the park, Kerry chuckled in triumph, and she stood up, waiting for Dar to join her. "I don't think they have Mongolian here, though. How about Italian?"

Dar stretched, feeling a little tightness in her shoulders from all the swimming. "How about Japanese?"

"Mmm." Kerry's brow contracted "Hard choice."

They ended up in England, mostly because Kerry really wanted to see the fireworks, and Dar knew a little secret. So they were comfortably settled in an outside table at the English Pub right up against the lake as the crowds started to gather to watch the show.

There was a nice, cool night breeze blowing off the water, and Kerry was glad she'd opted for a sweatshirt, choosing a forest green one with a happy-looking Winnie the Pooh dancing over her left breast. She sipped her pint of ale gingerly as she watched Dar do the same, and glanced at the menu. "It's all pretty safe, right?"

Dar chuckled. "Well, there are a lot of interesting influences in English cooking, especially from India, and the other former colonies, but on this menu--yeah, everything's safe." She glanced around, then settled the gray, beautifully woven sweater she'd purchased in a nearby shop over her shoulders. "Nice."

Kerry reached over and fingered the soft as butter fabric. "That feels so wonderful." She admired it. "And I have to stop in that tea shop again. I need to get some of those flavors to bring back to the office. I'm kinda tired of orange cinnamon and regular."

"Hmm, that's right, you do like tea, don't you?" Dar settled back in her chair and put her feet up on the one opposite her. They placed their order with the perky waitress, and Dar nodded yes to refills of their drinks. The ale had tasted good after their full day of activity, and she was in the mood to relax just a little. The cool breeze pushed the hair off her forehead, and she let her head lean back and her eyes close.

Dar certainly is a different person outside of the office, Kerry decided, eyeing her surreptitiously. She had this...diabolical, mean, evil, nasty, mischievous streak that Kerry had found out about the hard way. Like when Dar kept her distracted while a large,

bubble-headed green something-or-other had snuck up behind her and scared the crap out of her. Or being led into the Moroccan leather place where apparently curing hides wasn't an acquired skill. *Ugh*. Or being given a small tumbler of something sweet and blue to drink, and not realizing until after she'd swallowed it that it was 200 proof.

To be fair, Dar had gotten taken in by the blue stuff too, which she admitted after getting Kerry some water to wash it down. And she had given her the little wax figurine the craftsman had made for her in front of the Chinese pavilion. Out of wax and sticks, he twirled and shaped the piece until it was a fanciful dragon shape with swirled wings. "Here." Dar had shrugged as she handed it over. "I don't collect stuff like this."

No, you don't. Kerry thought, as she studied the angular profile. She leaned back, feeling a pleasant buzz from the ale, glad they'd managed to munch their way around the world at various snack stands before she'd started drinking. The Mexican stop was good. She could still taste the spices on her tongue from the tiny tacos, and she'd enjoyed the tidbits of bratwurst and smoked cheeses in Germany along with the tiny glass of sweet white wine. "Just our luck to visit during the International Food and Wine expo, huh?"

"Mmm." Dar smiled and lazily opened an eye. "That's a nice idea, have all the different countries put out samples of their kinds of food and drink. Different. I liked it." She took a sip of her fresh glass of ale. "Small enough portions so you can try a lot of them, and it's a good chance for the different cultures to show off." She took another sip. "Something like the festivals we have down in Miami--the Art festival, and the heritage festivals--when you can have a ton of the different nationalities down there put up stalls and have different stuff, though we tend to be Caribbean and Hispanic heavy. This is nice, because you get all the continental countries represented too." A blonde brow edged up. *Drinking makes her more talkative. Write that down in the PDA, Ker. It could be useful sometime.* "I haven't gotten a chance to go to one of those. They dragged me to the Scottish festival last year, but I almost got hit in the head with one of those logs and someone tried to get me to eat haggis."

Dar laughed. "Nah, try the Cajun thing. It's more fun, and you get to scarf down lots of spicy mud bugs." She glanced up and smiled as the waitress brought their food, putting her glass down and picking up her silverware.

Kerry thanked the woman and nodded when she looked questioningly at their glasses. *One more couldn't hurt, and besides, I'm succeeding in my quest to get Dar to relax. Maria would be proud of me.*

"I THINK I'M a little drunk," Dar admitted as they strolled towards the exit, past the lighted fountains whose water danced to the background music.

"Not that anyone could tell," Kerry assured her, observing Dar intently. "You walk straight, you don't slur your words, and you haven't kissed any of the wandering characters."

Dar considered that. "That's true." She jumped a little when her cell phone rang, then let out a short laugh and reached for it. "Yes?"

"You owe me a picture, Big D." Mark's voice sounded very, very satisfied. "Did you get to see a firework or two?"

Dar turned around and walked backwards, watching the lasers bounce off the huge geosphere. "Yeah, I got to see one or two." She straightened back up. "Good work. Can you set up the link for tomorrow morning? I'll need to dial in via the cell."

"Already done. Where's my picture?" Mark nudged. "You don't know what an inspiration that was, I did things tonight the likes of which Babbage never imagined."

"All right, all right." Dar laughed helplessly. "I'll have Kerry take one, okay? Tomorrow."

"She there? Put her on," Mark requested. "Hey, Kerry?"

"Right here." She covered her other ear with one hand.

"Did you actually manage to get her out of the damn hotel for an hour?" the MIS chief whispered.

Kerry glanced over to where Dar had climbed over a railing and was inspecting a bush cut in the shape of Figment the Imagination dragon. "Oh yeah. In fact, I got her to go to one of the parks tonight."

"You rock!" he praised. "Damn woman hasn't had a vacation in ten years." He sighed. "You having fun?"

"It's been..." Kerry smiled to herself, "...very educational. I've learned a lot, and I hope things work out for the bid. This is a very interesting account."

"Ain't what I asked," Mark chided.

"Yes, we're having fun. Thanks for asking." She looked up to find Dar watching her, the dark-haired woman's body relaxed against the railing. "Whoops, gotta go. Talk to you later, Mark." They walked off toward the shuttle stop, amiably bumping shoulders as they maneuvered through the thinning crowds.

SHE WAS YAWNING by the time they got back to the hotel, their monorail depositing them neatly in the lobby. Like a puppy, Kerry followed Dar to the elevator, resisting the impulse to latch onto the back of her shirt to keep up, and she had to take a minute to blink her eyes clear before she could open her room door. It was quiet and mostly dark inside, and she really wanted nothing more than to curl up in her already turned-down bed, dressed as she was, and just conk out. Instead, she changed into her nightshirt, wincing where the pink skin around her bathing suit marks stung, then she turned and noticed her message light flashing. Perplexed, she lifted the receiver and dialed the front desk. "Hello? Yes, I have a message?"

"Oh, yes, Ms. Stuart," the voice on the phone answered promptly. "It's from a Colleen. She said it was urgent, and could you please call her."

Urgent? "Okay, thanks very much." Kerry depressed the receiver, wondering what could possibly have gone wrong back in Miami. *Another flood in the complex?* She hoped it wasn't the plumbing again, at any rate.

She dialed her friend's number, and waited until the sleepy voice on the other end answered.

"Col?"

Colleen woke up instantly. "Jesus son of Mary, Kerry, where in the Hell are you? Your parents are going insane. They've called here three times!"

My parents? "Um." Kerry rubbed her head at the unexpected source of the panic. "I'm in Orlando, as you should know. What's the big deal?"

Silence from the other end of the line preceded a deep breath. "You haven't heard?"

"Haven't heard what? No, I've been in meetings all day, and then... What is it?" Kerry asked.

"Someone shoot the president or something?"

"Jesus Christ, Kerry, the plane you were supposed to be on tonight crashed in the Everglades.

Pretty much everyone on it died, they think," Colleen answered. "The only reason I didn't go nuts is the hotel said you hadn't checked out and I know you're not a skip."

Kerry sat down on the bed, her legs suddenly unable to hold her up. "Oh my God." She lifted a shaking hand to her mouth. "I'd better call my parents."

"Then call me back, okay?" Colleen said softly.

"Okay, I will." Kerry hung up, then rested her hand on the receiver for a long moment before she picked it up again and dialed. "Mom?" Her mother's voice practically jumped out of the phone at her. "No, no, I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm still in Orlando. The meeting went on longer than we thought, so we're staying over another night ... No, no, not at all. The office knew I wasn't on the flight." A pause. "You could have called the ... hello, Father."

Roger Stuart's voice thundered down the line. "That's it. No daughter of mine is living down where terrorists can just bomb an airplane. That place has too few Americans in it, God damn it. You're coming home."

"Are you sure it was a terrorist? I didn't hear any details. I don't..." Kerry felt a sudden jolt in her guts at the thought of leaving Miami and Dar. "Nothing happened, we weren't on the flight!"

Her father cut off further objections. "No ifs, ands, or buts, Kerrison. That's final. Could you imagine the press if you'd been on that plane? My God! Make the arrangements."

The line went dead. Kerry slowly put it back down on the cradle and stared at it. "Glad I wasn't on the plane too, thanks for asking." A noise made her look up to see Dar standing in the adjoining doorway, a quietly grim look on her face. "I guess you heard."

Dar nodded, then entered, crossing the room and sitting down next to her on the bed. A remote control was clasped loosely in the executive's hands. "I have the news on in there." She looked at Kerry intently. "Are you all right?"

"Oh yeah," Kerry answered bitterly. "My father was so damned relieved he wouldn't have to spin-doctor my death." She leaned her elbows on her knees and looked down at the carpet. "They want me to leave Miami and go home."

Dar hesitated, then awkwardly put one arm around her companion's shoulders. "Because a plane crashed? That makes no sense, Kerry."

"Because Miami's full of degenerates, perverts, and foreigners who do nothing but plot against the US," Kerry answered with a sigh. "Do they know what made the plane go down? He said it was a terrorist. Is that true?"

"Didn't stick around there long enough to find out. C'mon, let's go into the other room and watch the news. Maybe they'll say." Dar hesitated. "Sorry about all this."

Kerry looked up, grateful for the warmth of Dar's arm around her. "We would have been on that plane."

"I know," the older woman replied calmly. "But we weren't. C'mon, I ordered up some hot chocolate. Let's go see what happened."

They settled on Dar's bed, and she turned the volume up on the television, which was tuned to CNN. The picture was mostly dark, with flashing blue and red lights everywhere, and the occasional flare of yellow. The reporter wore a windbreaker, and it was obviously raining and windy where he was. "As of this moment, the FAA is not commenting or speculating on what brought down this Boeing 727, only that the pilot reported problems over West Palm Beach and decided to swing west, away from populated areas."

"Doesn't sound like a bomb," Dar commented, getting up to answer a light knock on the door.

"Nice service." She opened it and allowed the room service waiter in with a tray. "Put it over there." The waiter left, and she poured two steaming cupfuls of the chocolate, adding a tiny mini-marshmallow to each cup and bringing one over to Kerry. "Here you go, good for what ails you." Kerry took a sip and managed a smile. "Thanks." She turned her attention to the television, where searchlights were showing what looked like hundreds of men in various uniforms up to their thighs in water, moving debris and other things around. "It looks horrible."

"Mmm." Dar exhaled, then picked up the phone and dialed a number. "It's Dar." She paused, listening. "What's the story on that plane that went down?" Another pause. "Well, maybe not, but I was supposed to be on it." She sighed. "I don't think so either, but I'd like to be sure. Thanks, Gerry." She hung up. "Let's see if we can get some real info."

"Who was that?" Kerry asked, feeling her spirits rebounding a little. "Or is it one of those--if you tell me, you have to kill me' kind of things?"

"Friend of mine at the Pentagon," Dar replied. "God, look at that..."

The overhead helicopter shot showed a chaotic mess of fires, lights, and movement on the screen, then suddenly, people started yelling and raising their hands up. The reporter paused and listened to his earpiece, then smiled at the camera. "I've just been told they've started to find some survivors. It appears as if the plane broke up upon landing in the Everglades, and some people, I repeat, some people have survived."

"Wasn't a bomb, then," Dar commented. "That disintegrates in the air and doesn't leave much in the way of live humans." She leaned back against the headboard and stretched out her legs, crossing them at the ankles. Kerry was sitting cross-legged on the other side of the bed, cupping her chocolate in both hands.

They watched as first a few, then more injured people were brought out, and helicopters started landing, ready to transport the victims. Kerry finally slid back until she was leaning against the backboard too, wincing as she rubbed her neck, stiff from sitting hunched over for so long. Dar turned out the lights, leaving just the television on as she stretched her legs out next to Kerry's. "You doing all right?"

Kerry let her head rest against the padded wood. "I don't know," she answered after a pause. "I didn't think they were keeping that close a watch on me. Jesus! I never even told them I was going to Orlando."

Dar sipped her chocolate thoughtfully. "Remind me to have Maria mask your travel next time," she said. "What in the hell do they think they're doing, anyway? You're a grown woman." She frowned, turning to look at Kerry. "They think they own you?"

Kerry's lashes fluttered in the bluish light from the television.

"It's hard to explain," she murmured. "I don't think you'd understand if I..."

"Damn straight I don't understand," Dar replied bluntly. "My parents never agreed with pretty much a damn thing I did, but they never denied me the right to be whatever I wanted to be," she said. "And they sure never followed me around."

Kerry turned to face her. "Well, that's why I left." She felt a bit embarrassed, and sensed in a way she'd been diminished in Dar's eyes, somehow. "I wanted to get away from all that."

"Seems like they don't want to let go," Dar said.

"Seems like," Kerry admitted. "They are my family."

Dar looked away, out the window for a few seconds. "In that case, glad I don't have one."

Kerry felt a jumble of emotions stir inside her. Fear, chiefly-- rooted in the knowledge of how fragile her freedom seemed sometimes--and shame that she could sit here feeling like that next to Dar, who was so proudly independent. "They, um..." She curled her hands around the cup of hot chocolate, glad of its warmth on her suddenly chilled skin. "They think they're doing what's best for me. I guess."

Her companion glanced at her. "You really buy that?"

Do I? "I think they buy it," Kerry admitted softly. "I've got different plans for my life."

"Good." Dar patted her hand, then went back to reviewing the screen.

The low murmur of the television settled between them as they watched in silence for a while, the images flitting on and off the screen. But Kerry found herself unable to focus on them, and she blinked a few times as the cool air in the room stung her eyes. A warmth against her shoulder almost made her jump, until she realized it was Dar's arm, as the dark-haired woman shifted slightly and lifted her cup up to her lips, the motion apparently not a deliberate one. Kerry appreciated it nonetheless and she relaxed a little bit, silently acknowledging the long day, the sun, the unexpected crisis, and the several ales that were playing havoc with her emotions. She exhaled softly. After another moment's silence, Dar turned and looked at her, one brow lifting in question. "Long day," Kerry said. "I think I should go get some sleep."

"Good idea." Dar set her cup down, then reached over and took Kerry's from her. "We've got a presentation to do." She picked up the television remote and clicked it off, plunging the room into unexpected darkness.

"Oh." Kerry had been in the process of persuading her body to move from the comfortable surface. "Hey, give me a chance to find my way out of here."

"Bed's big enough for the entire board of directors." Dar's voice floated over to her. "You can stay where you are."

Kerry's vision adjusted, and she could see the dark square that would lead her into her own room. She was so tired, though, that even the thought of moving made her eyes close, and she didn't protest as Dar pulled the covers up over them both. *Oh well.* She caught a hint of warm skin and clean cotton, and sleep took her before she could absorb the tingle the knowledge brought her. Dar regarded her companion, who was curled onto her side, her breathing already evening out into sleep. She let her arm rest on the bed near her bedmate, and after a few minutes, glanced up at a touch. Fingers were curled around her forearm. Dar looked at her companion closely, saw the steady, even breathing, and realized she was deeply asleep. An unconscious motion, then, Kerry reaching out to her instinctively, desiring the comfort of a touch she'd never presume while awake.

Dar put her head down on her pillow and looked up at the dimly seen ceiling. She felt off-balance and thought maybe all those mugs had been a few too many after all. *What am I thinking, sharing my room, sharing my bed with Kerry? Sure, we're becoming friends, and yeah, we had fun, and sure, I tossed off a client to go spend time with her, but...*

A soft rustle attracted her attention, and she turned her head as Kerry stirred, shifting a little closer and moving her grip, her fingers slipping along Dar's skin in a wonderfully warm sensation. It felt really nice. Kerry was smiling, just a little, in her sleep, and Dar smiled back, gazing at the smaller woman with quiet affection.

With a faint shrug, she dismissed her misgivings and closed her eyes. After all, the bed was big enough for a half dozen people, and no one had to know they'd both slept in it. She tugged the covers up a bit further, bringing a puff of air up from under them. Aware of Kerry's warm scent which imprinted itself into her senses as a compound of clean cotton, sun tan oil and a hint of apricot. *Nice.*

Chapter Seventeen

KERRY BECAME FUZZILY aware of pale sunlight, warm against her closed eyelids, and a sense of quiet peace that radiated mostly from the shoulder against which she was snuggled. She took in a breath and recognized the scent of the wool blanket, and a pleasant, spicy smell her brain amiably identified as Dar Roberts' perfume.

Her body was relaxed, and one arm was wrapped around a gently moving surface that was warm and soft, and she was aware of a feeling of contentedness that eased through her as she nestled a little closer, soaking in the wonderful sensation. Another breath, then her sleepy mind put together Dar, and scent, and the shoulder she was cuddling, and almost spat her heart out of her ears in her haste to get blood to her brain. *Oh goddamnitalltohellIcan'tbelieveldid...* She held her breath and cracked open an eyelid, seeing smooth, tanned skin at very close range. *Oh my god.* It was very quiet in the room, and she very carefully rotated her eyeball up and peeked at Dar's face.

Fast asleep. Phew. Kerry cautiously unwound herself from her unexpected embrace and eased away, feeling a vague but definite sense of regret. She lifted her head a little to check the clock, relieved that it was only seven thirty. She curled an arm around her pillow, and once again, safely on her side of the bed, she took the opportunity to study her sleeping boss. *Damn, I got lucky. What if she'd woken up? Jesus, Kerry. Remember you work for her, okay? This is supposed to be business.*

But her body ached to go back to her snuggling, craving Dar's touch with an intensity that made it hard to breathe. It had felt so good. She sighed and rolled over. *C'mon, get moving. Go do something productive like get breakfast ordered, and check the mail. Stupid crush.*

She got up, and trudged out of the room, going to the phone in her own room and calling room service. Then she remembered she was supposed to call Colleen back, and checked her watch. *I should catch her.* She dialed the phone and waited. "Col?"

"Ker? Oh damn, I fell asleep last night again. Did you call?"

"It was too late. I had a bad time with the folks, and then we watched the news...and I fell asleep too," Kerry told her. "But some of those people lived. I saw that."

"About fifty percent of them, yeah." Colleen yawned. "You coming home today?"

"I think so, yes. We have a meeting at ten, and they said they would announce who won the bid. After that, there's no reason for us to hang around here."

"How is it? Boring?" the redhead asked.

Kerry indulged in a sweet memory of waking, then sighed. "No, it's not boring. We had these meetings and a sort of fight between our account team and the IBM account team, that was kind of wild. Then we had to, um, evaluate some stuff last night, so..."

"Honey, that sounds as boring as my Aunt Mary's penances. Did you even get to pick up that Pluto thing you wanted?"

Kerry smiled wryly. "Well, to be totally honest with you...yes, because I spent most of the day in Epcot yesterday."

There was dead silence. "Ooo, you little stinker. All business meetings, huh?" Colleen laughed.

"You sneak away, or did the dragon lady not need you?"

"Um, no, she was there too," Kerry told her. "The meetings let out early yesterday and weren't going to start up again until today, so there wasn't much we could do but a little sightseeing."

"Ew. You got stuck walking around Epcot Center with the robot woman from hell?" Colleen made a sympathetic noise. "You poor thing."

"I survived." Kerry debated whether or not to protest her characterization of Dar, then figured she had plenty of time to do that when she got home. "Anyway, everything's okay, I got my Pluto, and we'll be back tonight."

"Your folks really bad?" Colleen asked, knowing the answer.

Kerry was quiet for a moment, then she exhaled. "Yeah."

"Sweet Jesus, Ker. Sorry you had to be there all by yourself. I was thinking of you."

"It was all right. Dar kind of figured out what was going on, and patted me on the head, and all that." Kerry assured her. "Listen, I gotta go and get ready for this meeting. Talk to you tonight?" "Right. See you then, girlie."

Colleen hung up and Kerry did likewise, but she sat there for a long moment on her unused bed, deep in thought.

IT WAS THAT stupid dream again. Dar shook herself out of it, waking to find the sun streaming into the room, and herself alone in the bed. The feeling of loss and disappointment was almost palpable, and she rolled over, curling up and hugging her pillow to her until she got a handle on it, and the feeling faded back.

It had been so damn real this time. Some little cabin somewhere-- must have been up north, because a cool breeze was coming in--and she had been just curled up in the early dawn, her arms wrapped around another sleeping form. She remembered a feeling of lazy happiness and a faint tingle of expectation, as though for some reason she'd been waiting for the day to begin. She closed her eyes and let herself feel the ache for a moment, which ended when a soft, concerned voice stirred the silence.

"Dar?" The carpet muffled Kerry's bare footsteps as she came over and perched on the edge of the bed, putting a hand on the older woman's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

The ache eased, and Dar nodded, opening her eyes and giving the blonde woman a wry grin. "A little too much to drink last night."

"Ah." Kerry smiled back and wagged her other hand. "I have a bit of a headache myself. I figured some breakfast would help. I ordered it up, and I'm downloading stuff. "

"Good." Dar rubbed her face with one hand and yawned. "What time is... Ah, okay. We've got a little while. In that case, I need to take a nice long shower." She rolled over onto her back and stretched, arching her back to work a kink out. "I'm not used to these damn mattresses." She gave Kerry a wry look. "I miss my waterbed."

Kerry's fingers itched to set to work on those muscles, dimly visible through the cotton of Dar's T-shirt, but she counted to ten and controlled herself. "Are those really comfortable?" She stood up, moving away from her boss's warm body and walking over to stand near the window, gazing out.

"Oh yeah." Dar sat up and started to get out of bed. She glanced at her shirt, then stopped in mid-motion and sat back down, staring at her own shoulder in puzzlement. Reaching up with a curious hand, she removed several golden strands caught in the nap of the fabric. She stared at them, rolling the soft hair in her fingertips, then glanced over at Kerry, who was still peering out the window with great interest. "You sleep okay?" she asked curiously.

"Yeah...yeah, I did. Um, I haven't been up that long, just a few minutes, really. I slept just fine.

Um. How about you?" Kerry found the small boats zipping around the lake fascinating,

"Like a baby." Dar felt a smile edging her lips. She cast her dice on a gamble. "You, um, you always snuggle up like that at night?" then held her breath, waiting for Kerry's answer. The sudden tightening of the blonde woman's jaw, and the stiffening of her back was it's own answer. Dar swore she could see the "oh shit" form on Kerry's lips, before the younger woman spoke.

"Sorry about that, it's a stupid habit. I've got this big panda thing, and I, um..." Kerry felt herself babbling, and she could feel herself blushing badly.

"Hey." Dar broke in on the stumbling words. "Relax. Didn't bother me a bit." She chuckled, brushing it off to ease Kerry's obvious embarrassment. "I do it myself. I've got two big pillows at home. I'm always wrapping myself around them. Don't worry about it."

Kerry didn't answer for a minute. Then she took in a breath, seen as a shifting of her shoulders, and released it before she turned around. "Well, I'm glad you understand. Um, so you were going to fill me in on this plan of yours? I mean, if Mark came through, which I guess he did, because he called, and..."

"Kerry." Dar's voice stopped her nervous speech. "C'mere." She waited until the smaller woman hesitantly approached, then patted the bed's surface. "Sit down."

"Um..." Kerry settled uneasily on the edge of the mattress and fastened her gaze on her knees, horribly embarrassed.

"Listen to me, okay? We're friends, right?" Dar asked gently.

Shy green eyes lifted to hers. "You're my boss," Kerry replied softly, as though that explained everything.

"Just forget about that for a minute." Dar's brows contracted. "I haven't known you that long, and you haven't known me for that long, but I think it's fair to say we get along pretty well, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Well, that's good." Dar fished for words. "Because I really appreciate having someone around I can think of as a friend, and I'm glad we have a chance to get to know each other."

Kerry relaxed a little. "Me too."

Dar considered her next statement, knowing she was coming close to crossing a line. "I don't want you to feel, um...awkward...about the fact that we're friends, and that you...I mean, that we like each other." She stared hard at the carpet, then looked back up at Kerry. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Kerry considered it. "Yeah." She finally exhaled. "I do. It's just strange."

"Because we work together?" Dar hazarded.

"Because I work for you," Kerry corrected gently. "I don't...it just feels very weird."

"Mmm," Dar mused. "Does it bother you?" She queried hesitantly. "I...I mean..." she lifted a hand and dropped it, "that we've gotten so friendly this fast?"

That finally got a tiny, relieved smile from the younger woman. "No. I just didn't want you to think I was trying to get something from you or that I was, um..."

"Sucking up to the boss?" Dar inquired lightly. "I never considered it for a moment. You're not the type. And believe me, I should know."

A hesitant smile flitted across Kerry's face. "Your opinion matters to me. I appreciate you saying that," Kerry murmured. "I've just, I've never really gotten so friendly with someone this fast before. It's a little strange for me."

"Me too." Dar hitched one knee up and rested her hands on it. "But I guess there's a first for everything, eh?"

Kerry ran her hand through her hair and chuckled. "I guess."

Dar's lips curved. "So you can relax, all right?" She patted Kerry's knee. "Besides, you give great hugs. I don't want to miss out on one just because you're worried about what I might think of you."

Kerry breathed a huge sigh of relief. "Wow, that's good to hear, because I have this habit of touching people I like without thinking. I didn't know if that was bothering you. I didn't even realize I was doing it until last night."

Ah. Clearing the air. "Well..." Dar scratched her jaw. "Funny thing about that. I absolutely, positively hate people touching me, as a rule, and people coming into my personal space gets me livid...as a rule."

"Uh." Kerry bit her lip.

Dar shrugged. "Every rule has an exception, they tell me, and I guess you're it. No, it doesn't bother me at all, for some reason." She gave the younger woman a wry look. "That was kind of a surprise."

"Oh." The blonde brows knit. "Good surprise or bad surprise?" Kerry felt her composure returning, and she realized things were actually going pretty well. Dar wasn't upset about...things...at all.

Suddenly serious pale blue eyes captured hers. "A very good surprise, Kerry. It's been a very long time since I've felt so comfortable with someone. I don't make friends easily."

Kerry felt herself drowning in that intense regard, and she reached out in pure reflex, curling her fingers around Dar's as though it were the most natural thing in the world. "I'm glad," she replied simply, giving the hand a squeeze. They gazed into each other's eyes, and Kerry felt her heart start to pound a little faster.

A knock on the door broke the tableau, and Dar dropped her eyes, a tiny smile playing around her lips. "That'd be breakfast, I guess."

"Yep." Kerry released her hand, and stood, running her fingers through her hair as she padded to the door and peeked through the eyehole. "I hope you're hungry. I think I over-ordered."

White teeth flashed in a grin. "Starving." She got up and checked the time. Eight thirty. "Let's eat, then get moving. I'll fill you in on the plan while we eat."

THE GLASS-WALLED conference room seemed warmer to Kerry as she entered behind Dar's tall form and closed the door after her. A large LCD presentation screen had been added to the far wall, and the IBM team looked, if nothing else, smug. She put her laptop and a folder down next to John, then seated herself, giving him a reassuring smile. "Hello."

"Hi." He leaned closer. "Did you get the proposal?"

She nodded and tapped her folder, watching Dar saunter to the first seat nearest the front of the room and sit down.

"The IBM group was working all night. They've got this whole whiz-bang presentation to do. I'm a little concerned," the account team leader whispered. "What do we have, other than the paper?"

"Shhh." Kerry nodded to the far door, where Michelle and her retinue were entering. "Dar has something planned." She eyed the Disney executive, surprised when the woman scanned the room and let her gaze rest on Kerry's face for a long moment before drifting off. *I must be sunburned*, she realized ruefully. *Oh well*. She took a quick look at Dar's face, realizing the darker-skinned woman didn't show the pink that she did.

"Well." Michelle put down a leather-covered folder and drummed her immaculately painted nails on it. "Thank you all for being prompt." She looked first at Jerry, then at Dar, who had slipped off her jacket and was seated casually, her weight resting on her elbows. She had chosen to wear a sleeveless, low-necked white cotton shirt, and she looked cool and comfortable, in direct contrast to the men, with their tight ties and buttoned collars.

"It's a pity you were *tied up* last night, Dar, Jerry and I had some wonderful conversation."

Michelle's eyes were sharp, and she let a brief, thin smile edge her lips.

Dar didn't even twitch. She just returned the smile with a lazy one of her own. "Sorry I missed it. Hope you had as good a time as I did." Suddenly, she was glad she'd turned down the Disney exec. It was obvious she was enjoying the liberal fawning of the bidding process, and Dar felt a quiet satisfaction that she hadn't stooped to that. Of course, it also might mean she'd dropped the ball and lost the account. She hated losing. It didn't happen often, and if she lost this one, knowing she could have sewn it up was going to hurt, in more ways than one.

Kerry shifted a little in her seat and cleared her throat.

Or would it? Dar knew herself to be skirting a chasm she'd never anticipated and she wondered just how much it would take to simply push her over that edge.

"Well, let's get started." Michelle had obviously decided she wasn't going to get a rise out of Dar, so she sat down. "I believe we have presentations from both teams?"

Jerry leaned back and laced his fingers over his stomach. "Ladies first." He smiled sweetly at Dar.

She shrugged and gave him an amused look. "Okay, if you insist, you go right ahead."

Against her will, Michelle bit the inside of her lip and looked down, then cleared her throat.

"Jerry, go on so we won't be here all day."

His face reddened, but he complied, laying out his materials and launching into his presentation, using the display screen to illustrate how they would realign networks and put servers in place. It was interesting, and Dar reflected that he really did know what he was doing. It took forty-five minutes, though, and she caught Michelle peeking at her watch before he finished. She nodded quietly to herself. A good, solid presentation, worthy of the reputation of his company and probably a very competitive bid. Jerry wanted this; the publicity alone was worth low-balling the price.

Michelle nodded at him as he finished. "Thank you. That was very comprehensive." She paused, then turned and looked at Dar, raising a ginger-colored eyebrow in question.

Dar remained seated and leaned back, resting her weight on the arms of the chair. "Kerry?" She motioned the younger woman forward with a jerk of her head. That was a surprise. Even her own people expected her to do the presentation; certainly Michelle had.

Kerry took a breath, then stood and picked up her laptop, tucking it under her arm and walking to the front of the room. She efficiently disconnected the display screen and plugged into her external video port, then booted up the laptop and requested a cellular connection to their network. She glanced up as it was connecting. "This was an interesting scenario to develop a solution for," she commented. "Because in order for an interactive system to work, you have to make it easy to use and complex in its design all at the same time."

She brought up a network diagram, setting counters and narrowing the focus. "This is your current data communications network." She started the monitors running "You can see, your current utilization runs into bottlenecks here and here, mostly because of the bandwidth requirements, especially in the video link."

Dar watched Michelle's face as the smaller woman leaned forward, peering at the live data with interest.

"So, to open the pipeline, we'd bring in trunk circuits here and here." Kerry had another screen open, and she typed several rapid-fire commands, which suddenly made the monitors jump and flutter. "Like that."

Michelle's brows creased. "Did you just...do it?"

"Mmm-hmm," Kerry acknowledged, with a gentle smile. "See how that smoothes the bottlenecks? You get better through-put." She brought up another screen, this one an actual link into the Disney reservations system. "We analyzed the application you were running as well. It provides a lot of information, but it's slow, and it's very layered, making people go through an intensive drill before they get where they want to go." She clicked again. "Our web design division suggests this as a replacement. You can see it's a three-dimensional representation of one of your parks, and to get where you want to go, the touch screen technology is used, like this..."

She tapped with her mouse key, and the scene shifted, then shifted again to display the castle in the Magic Kingdom.

"Nice," Michelle murmured.

"Um, no." Kerry tapped again, at the graphically drawn doors. "*This* is nice." The doors opened, and she was given a menu of options. "To see the menus, you go here." She showed it. "Then if you want to make a reservation, you go here." The screen was replaced with an overhead shot of the restaurant, complete with tables. "You can pick your time, and it will show what tables are available." She clicked, and a small screen popped up. "You type your name in, and there you are." The table was now labeled Mickey Mouse.

The entire room was focused on Kerry now, and she glanced past them to a pair of warm, sparkling blue eyes, one of which winked at her. "But this is a nice addition," she went on, accepting the reservation. "It gives you the option to leave a pager number, here, so you can be reminded of your reservation, and so the restaurant staff can get hold of you if there's a change." She typed in a number, and clicked Okay, then paused expectantly.

Seconds later, a soft beeping sounded from across the room, and Dar held up her pager, then reset it.

"That's...incredible." Michelle sat back. "But what kind of bandwidth problems are we talking about? That program must be huge."

Kerry met her gaze and smiled. "Want to find out?" she inquired. "We threw this on two of our Alpha servers, and wrote a little stress-testing program." She clicked, displaying a network analyzer in one corner, then started the program with a different session. "See? It's not that big, really, since we cache the screens like the seat maps locally, and we cut way down on the video traffic. You only need to talk to a reservationist if you can't figure something out, or if you want to make special arrangements. There's parameters you can specify, like a cutoff on party size, so someone won't put in for a party of thirty or something."

She stopped talking and gazed out at them. "Any questions?" Kerry glanced around the room, then let her eyes settle on Michelle. "We downloaded the PDF maps from your website, and cross-referenced them to the location database that's up there, then ran it all through a three-D modeler attached to a back-end datafile that stores all the information." She paused for Michelle's nod of understanding. "Beyond that, it was mostly customizing it to your business style, which Dar and I had an opportunity to evaluate the past two days."

Dar's brow lifted unobtrusively. *That...was impressive and unprompted.* Kerry had somehow clued in to the fact that Michelle was miffed that she'd spent the night wandering the park instead of at dinner with her, and had turned a purely personal motive into a compelling business one. *Nice. Very nice.* She caught the younger woman's eyes and smiled appreciatively, noting the faint blush that colored Kerry's cheeks.

"No, I..." Michelle turned to Dar, with a little incredulous shake of her head. "Can I speak to you in private for a moment?"

Gotcha. "Sure," Dar replied amiably, as she stood up and motioned for Michelle to precede her. They slipped out the door in the rear, into a small antechamber with soft ferns and a smoked glass skylight.

The redhead turned to face her. "I didn't expect that."

Dar smiled. "I told you I make things happen. Diagrams and grids are fine, but I thought you wanted to see an end result, not promises."

A slow nod, and then the woman's eyes lazily caressed her. "So, did you have fun last night?"

"More than you did, I bet." Dar chuckled. "I've had dinner with Jerry."

Michelle tried without much success to wipe a smile off her face. "He doesn't have much good to say about you, I'll tell you that." She gazed up at the taller woman. "I spent most of the night hearing about how you'd screw me over."

"Not my style," she disagreed. "We screw up sometimes, just like everyone else does, but we don't go out looking for victims." Now she let her own eyes wander, letting a little of her admittedly seductive side surface. "But I don't think you're the victim type anyway."

Michelle blinked, then she stepped back a little, and folded her arms. "I'll take that as a compliment. That was a nice presentation. Your little protégée knows her stuff." A cynical look entered her eyes. "Here I thought she was just a bit of fluff you brought with you."

"Kerry's not a bit of anything," Dar replied, more sharply than she'd intended.

The smaller woman's lips tensed, then she chuckled softly. "Ah, so you do have the rare soft spot. Well, no offense meant, Dar. I like the fact that you stand up for your people." She sighed.

"That's so rare at our level. I've seen countless situations where a subordinate is mostly used for putting blame on, but I don't think you're that type."

"No," Dar replied honestly.

"And I don't think you're the kind of person who lies for no reason. So, were you really casing the joint last night?" Michelle gazed at her, a half smile on her face.

"I was keeping a promise," Dar answered quietly. "And no, it wasn't business-related."

The shorter woman leaned back against a sideboard and crossed her arms. "Interesting, and that was more important to you than locking up this bid?" she asked. "If that's the case, I'm not sure we can do business, Ms. Roberts."

Dar stepped forward, straightening to her full height and pinning Michelle with pale blue eyes.

"If that's how you base your business decisions, then I won't regret losing the contract," she said softly. "Are we done?"

Without a word, Michelle gestured back towards the door, and they reentered the meeting room, where Kerry had disconnected her laptop and resumed her seat next to John.

"Excuse me for a moment." Michelle picked up both proposals and left the room. This time the hounds stayed behind, glancing at everyone with suspicious eyes.

Dar sat down next to Kerry, putting her elbows on the arms of her chair and steepling her fingers before her face. She could feel the eyes of the entire room on her, and it was a struggle to keep her face calm and relaxed. *I think I blew this one*, she admitted quietly to herself. *If I was going to play her game, I should have played it all the way, not backed off. Damn, I think I need more than a stupid vacation. I need to get my head back on straight and remember what the hell my job is.* A certain grimness settled over her. *Not spend time running around a stupid park, playing games.*

The door opened again, and Michelle re-entered, a thoughtful look on her face. She looked at the two proposals still grasped in her hand for a moment, then inhaled and tossed one at Jerry.

"Thanks for your time." She tossed the other at Dar. "I'll be in touch." Then she simply left, taking her hounds with her.

Mickey Mouse smiled at them from the clock on the wall, his fingers pointing out the time, the solid ticking echoing in the shocked stillness of the room for what seemed like an endless instant.

Then Dar collected herself and stood up, picking up the contract and handing it to John. "Here you go." She let her hand fall on Kerry's shoulder. "C'mon, we've got a plane to catch."

Kerry got up and followed her quickly out of the room, across the hallway, and into the waiting elevator, which slid closed behind them, blocking the view of the glassed-in conference room.

Dar leaned back against the wall and crossed her arms, giving Kerry a cheerfully triumphant grin. In silence, the blonde woman pumped her fist down and mouthed. "Yes!" Dar poked out the tip of her tongue in response, then wiped her face of its glee as the doors opened to let them out on the ground floor. They didn't relax until they were in the rental car, pulling out of the lot, and heading towards the airport.

"That was amazing," Kerry gushed. "Dar, I thought for sure after those nasty comments...I never thought she'd pick us."

The executive slowly shook her head. "Me either, to be honest. I thought I really blew this one." She pulled out her cell phone and dialed a number from memory. "Beatrice? He in?"

"You did?" Kerry looked confused. "Wow, I thought you handled it great," she objected. "You were by far the coolest and most prepared person in there. You didn't even react when she tossed that packet at you, it's like you expected it all along."

"Hah!" Dar snorted, putting her fingers over the microphone on the cell. "Good acting job." She grinned in almost giddy relief, then took a breath. "Alastair?" A pause. "Done deal." She held the phone away from her ear as various whooping and squawking noises issued from it, chuckling as she waited for the racket to die down. "Yeah, about fifteen minutes ago ... No, I'm on my way to the airport, John has the details."

"Dar, you are a goddess." Alastair's voice crackled through the connection. "I'm sending you something for this, and you better the hell not turn it down, or I'm coming down there personally and making sure you don't, got me?"

"Wasn't just me, Alastair," Dar objected. "The website team, Mark, the docs people, and especially my assistant Kerry, who gave the proposal, had a big part in it." She caught a blush out of the corner of her eye, and gave the blonde a playful nudge with her elbow.

"You can take care of them, I'm going to take care of you," the cheerful voice replied. "Let me go. That's John on the other line, probably needing his pants dry cleaned. Bye Dar, God bless you."

Dar folded the phone and tucked it into its belt holder, then exhaled. She'd gotten lucky, all right. *Big time*. Michelle had made her decision based on business reasons, though Dar suspected it had been a close thing. She also suspected she hadn't heard the last from Ms. Graver. But for right now, it was done, and she was headed home. "Hope he doesn't send me caviar again," she joked wryly.

"I'm glad it all worked out. It was nice of you to say everyone else was involved," Kerry commented with a smile.

"You were," Dar said. "I didn't do a damn thing other than throw a few smart-ass comments around and pick the right people to do the right thing for me." She pointed at Kerry without taking her eyes off the road. "You did a sharp as hell demo, my friend. You had them in the palm of your hand."

Now Kerry did blush, blinking with a mildly bemused look on her face. "Um, thanks," she stammered softly. "Glad I did all right. But it was your plan, Dar. When everything works, it's easy to show it off, you know?"

Dar grinned. "I know. So we all did good," she confided, as she drove past an elaborate water tower. "Hey, there's MGM."

"Ooo." Kerry peeked at it. "Next time, I wanted to do the Tower of Terror."

Dar checked her watch, then glanced at the park, then glanced at Kerry's nose-pressed-against-the-glass posture and considered. "Well..." She turned into the left lane, then waited for traffic to slow. "There's later flights."

Kerry glanced over her shoulder, startled. "Dar, you don't...." She saw the sparkle in those blue eyes and stopped. "Promise me something?"

Dar blinked as she completed her turn into the parking area. "Okay, sure."

"Promise you'll come back here, when we've got more time?" Kerry asked.

After a short pause, Dar said, "All right." Green eyes met hers. "I promise we'll come back here. Now, c'mon, grab your shorts. Let's change and have a little fun. We earned it."

IT WAS DARK, the lights of the airfield being the only illumination as they finally took off for the short flight back to Miami. Kerry snuggled down into her leather seat, stifling a yawn as she gingerly eased her shirt away from the back of her neck. "Jesus, even with the sunblock, I still got burned." She stretched out her body, then relaxed. "Ugh."

"Awww." Dar had leaned back, folding her hands over her stomach. "Did I tire you out?" Blue eyes sparkled mischievously. "Maybe you shouldn't push yourself so hard."

Kerry looked at her. "I'm being tweaked, aren't I?" she asked, biting off a grin. "Yes, you did, as a matter of fact. I'm exhausted, and I just remembered I have to go do that global volunteer thing tomorrow."

Dar closed her eyes. "I'll bring you some carrot juice."

A little silence ensued, during which Kerry peered at her. "Are you going to be there?" she asked curiously. "I didn't know that. I thought it was just for regular workers."

Dar shrugged nonchalantly. "It rotates. One of the senior execs has to do it every year. Just so happened this was my year." A blue eye appeared. "Is that okay?"

"Well, yeah, of course," Kerry stammered. "In fact, that's great. A bunch of the Associated people are going to be there. I'd..." She paused awkwardly.

"Like them to see I'm not as bad as they think?" Dar inquired with a wry grin.

Kerry blushed a little and ducked her head. "Something like that, yes."

"Ah, Kerry, it's too late for my reputation to be salvaged, I'm afraid." Dar crossed her arms over her chest. "But I appreciate the thought."

"Any time," Kerry murmured, suddenly struck by how much she liked the sound of her name on Dar's lips. The older woman put a gentle, almost imperceptible roll on the *R*'s that reminded her of a kitten's purr, and she found herself wanting to hear it more.

She found herself liking the idea of Dar being at the event tomorrow, too. Despite her words, she was looking forward to proving to her ex co-workers that the person they referred to as *El Chupacabra* wasn't nearly as horrible as they thought she was. Susan, her former lead programmer, especially, since she'd taken the time to call Kerry on more than one occasion, to make sure she was "still alive" and pass on rumors she'd heard about her new boss.

"You be careful, Ker," Susan had warned. "I heard she fired someone just because she didn't like what they were wearing one day."

Hmm. "Hey, Dar?"

"Huh?" The dark-haired woman glanced over, sipping at a glass of chocolate milk she'd wangled out of the stewardess.

"Did you ever fire someone because you didn't like what they were wearing?" Kerry inquired curiously.

Dar considered the question. "Once, yes," she admitted, watching Kerry's eyes widen. "A man named Lawrence Matthews. He was an account rep at Florida Power and Light."

"Dar, I can't believe you'd do that!" she spluttered. "W-what was he wearing that was so awful?"

The blue eyes flinched almost imperceptibly. "He wasn't wearing anything, Kerry. He got angry and stripped naked at a customer site, and went into the president's office offering her his private parts."

Kerry's jaw dropped. "Oh. Well, Jesus, Dar, that doesn't count. Of course you fired him!" She snorted. "I would have, too!"

Dar nodded quietly. "All right. Well, to get them out of the way: no, I've never slept with Alastair; I've never fired anyone for not brushing their teeth; I don't ask my secretary to solicit escort services for me; and I don't get drunk every night."

Blonde brows knit. "I knew all that," Kerry stated. "How silly."

"Yeah, but I have punched a corporate VP; I have dissolved entire companies to make the numbers; and I have slept with people to win a bid." Dar's voice was quiet and even. "I'm a bastard, and I know it, Kerry."

Sea green eyes studied her face for a long time, as the drone of the engines blocked out the noise around them. "I'm sorry. I know you've done nasty things, and I know what I thought of you when I first met you, but I can't look at you now and think of you like that."

Dar exhaled quietly. "That could be very dangerous for you," she said in an even tone. "I have a lot of enemies."

Kerry smiled suddenly, her eyes twinkling. "It could be dangerous for you, too," she warned, lifting her chin. "Hanging around with me could be deadly to your reputation, you know." She leaned against the arm between their seats and raised her eyebrows in challenge. Dar leaned on her side of the arm, until their noses were inches apart. Green eyes and blue gazed into each other, so close that Kerry could feel Dar's breathing stir the hair on the side of her face, and see the tiny muscles on the side of Dar's face twitch as she held back a smile.

"Is that so?" Dar drawled softly.

"Oh yeah," Kerry replied, reveling in the strength of what she could feel between them. "I'm going to make you into a nice person," she growled, squinting her eyes menacingly. "Paladar." The grin fought its way to the surface, and Dar laughed, shaking her head from side to side gently. Then she leaned a little further forward, and touched her forehead to Kerry's, so that the smaller woman almost had to cross her eyes to keep her in focus. "Unrealistic expectations, Kerrison."

It was so hard not to just... *Oh Jesus!* Kerry finally dropped her gaze and pulled back before she could embarrass herself. She was blushing, and she knew it. She took a moment to compose herself, then glanced back at the quiet, waiting Dar. Her voice was serious. "Not in my eyes." Now Dar's gaze dropped, and as she looked down, a lock of the dark hair fell, obscuring her face. Kerry had to catch herself before she pushed it back, wanting to feel the soft texture against her skin.

A slow exhalation, and then Dar lifted her head and gave Kerry a rakish, playful grin. "I guess we'll have to see if you can deliver on that." She winked, then relaxed back in her seat and gazed out of the window, watching the dark land go by underneath the wings of the plane.

Oh god, I'm in trouble. Kerry felt her body trying to deal with the avalanche of emotions running through her. *All right, calm down. Take a deep breath, Kerry She's your boss, and she's just playing with you, okay? She doesn't mean any of this. It's just a little bit of fun for her. She likes flirting, that's all there is to it. Isn't it?*

Kerry turned her head slightly and watched Dar from the corners of her eyes. She blinked and realized there was a distinct blush across her boss's face, almost invisible against her tanned skin. The taller woman bit her lower lip, showing a brief flash of white teeth and producing an almost

adolescent expression. Then she glanced over and caught Kerry watching, and the look vanished, replaced by a quirky grin and one lifted brow. *Oh boy.*

THE CONDO WAS very quiet as Dar keyed the lock and entered, flipping on the hallway light. It was cool inside, for which she was grateful, but she was suddenly struck by the emptiness of the place, something that had never occurred to her before. Irritated by the thought, she shook her head in dismissal, then moved through the living room, grabbing the remote, and turning on the television just to get some background noise in the place. In the kitchen, her mail was waiting in a little basket, brought in by the cleaning crew who had been there that morning. Dar retrieved a glass and went to the refrigerator, pulling it open and getting herself some milk. Glancing around, she found herself wishing Kerry had come home with her, already missing the blonde woman's presence and her ready smile.

"C'mon, Dar. Get a grip." She grabbed the basket of mail and trudged into the living room, sinking down onto the leather couch with a sigh. "So you had some fun with the kid. All right, now we're back to normal here, so get that pretty face out of your head and read your damn mail."

She started to sift through the contents of the basket, then felt something larger and more bulky beneath the various bills and junk mail. Puzzled, she pulled out a small box, addressed to her, with a return address in Kissimmee. *What the hell?* She put down the basket, and picked up her keys off the table. Using the small penknife she had on her key chain, she opened the box. Inside, bubble wrap obscured the contents, until she carefully pulled it loose and exposed what was inside. Her fingers slowly lifted out the crystal dolphins as she stared at them in disbelief. Dazed, she looked back into the box and saw the folded note. Dolphins in one hand, she pulled out the note with the other and opened it. "Happy Boss's Day! Hope you had a good one. K."

"Oh, Kerry." She exhaled softly, turning the hand-blown glass to the light and seeing the explosion of color inside it. "You little idiot, you shouldn't have done that."

She hated personal knick-knacks, but she felt her face easing into a smile of delight at the laughing sea mammals as she admired the fine tints of green and blue that trickled through the waves they crested on. She set the piece down on the table and gazed at it, her elbows on her knees, and her chin resting on her hands. If she accepted the gift, it also meant accepting that she was allowing herself closer and closer to that line. It meant she was also allowing Kerry into a place she'd deliberately kept barren for a very long time. It was dangerous and probably a mistake.

What line? She knew she'd already crossed it the moment she hired Kerry as her assistant. Any other thought was a lie, and though she readily lied to others, she tried not to lie to herself. After she'd awakened that morning, knowing she'd had Kerry in her arms, and wanting nothing more than to repeat the experience, she knew she'd come to a choice. *Stop, or go.* Cut off their friendship and pull back from Kerry totally, or let things go forward, knowing what was likely to happen. *And stopping...* Even the thought hurt, stabbing her deeply in places she had no defense against. *I don't want to stop. So, we'll just see what happens from here.*

"Well," she addressed the crystal figurine. "I hope she likes what's in her box."

Dar curled up on the couch, her head resting against the soft arm where Kerry had slept the previous week, and watched the changing light from the screen and the moonlight that came in the window sparkle and play in the depths of her gift.

KERRY LOCKED THE doors to the Mustang and shouldered her overnight bag, trudging into her apartment with a not very stifled yawn. She turned on the lights and went over to her fish tank, dropped in a few flakes, and waved to the two kissing gouramies and the tiny guppies that blinked up at her. "Hi, guys." The gouramie blurred, nibbling at the flakes, and she smiled at them. "I'm back. Did you miss me?"

She chuckled and put the cover back on the tank, then set her bag down on the couch and walked over to the small table in the kitchen, where Colleen had tossed her mail. She leafed through it, pulling out the bills and putting them in a small green basket to one side, then sorting through the rest in order of relevance. She lifted up the ubiquitous AOL diskette in its colorful envelope and sighed. "Friends don't let friends do AOL." She tossed the envelope toward the trashcan, then went to her answering machine, pushing a button to retrieve the messages.

"Hello, dear, it's your mother. We've started making arrangements for you to come home, everyone is very excited. I think we'll put you in the west cottage until you and Brian decide for yourselves where you want to settle. He's thrilled you're moving back. By the way, honey. I have several engagements coming up I want you to attend with us, so we'll need to do some shopping when you get home. Those dresses from a few years ago aren't appropriate now, so you'll need something new. Oh yes, and your father says it's perfectly all right for you to get a little job with them up here in the Troy office. He knows several of the managers there, and he's sure you won't have a problem getting something nice, something that doesn't require you to do all this dangerous traveling. Let's see, what else was there? Oh, well, we're expecting you for Thanksgiving. The tickets are already on the way, so plan to fly out Wednesday night, and we made arrangements for you to return on Monday. I know you can tell your boss about that and she won't mind. I have to go, dear, please call me when you get home, since you know how I worry."

Kerry listened with an expressionless face, then hit the Delete key with a savage stab.

The remaining four messages were: one from Colleen, two from Susan, and a fourth from Ray, wanting her to go out tonight to the Grove. A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts, though, and she turned. "C'mon in."

The door fairly exploded open, and Colleen came bounding in, dressed in her skating gear and covered with a thin sheen of sweat. "You're back!"

Kerry held out her arms and looked down at herself. "Looks like it, yep," she agreed. "What's up?"

"Wait, I've got a box for you," Colleen said. "I'll be right back."

She bounded out, reminding Kerry vaguely of Tigger. She was left in quiet for a moment, then the redhead stumbled back in, tugging a large cardboard box behind her.

"This came today. I happened to be here when the Oops man showed up. I signed for it. It's from Orlando."

"Slow down, Col." Kerry laughed as she moved forward to help her friend with the large package. "What on earth is this? I didn't order..." She fell silent and opened the top of the box, pulling back the flap and exposing something plush and golden. "...anything," she finished, reaching in and pulling out a huge, smiling stuffed Winnie the Pooh, his arms spread, just waiting for a hug. "Oh."

Colleen watched her with a puzzled look. "You didn't order this? It's cute as hell, Ker...and I know you love Pooh. You've got all those damn figurines, and that honey cookie jar in the kitchen."

Kerry pulled the stuffed bear closer and sniffed, then put it up against her face and breathed in. A slow, delighted smile crossed her face. "Um. No, I didn't order it. I..." She glanced in the box and saw a little card with a mouse on the front. She picked it up and opened it. "Thanks for a job well done." It was unsigned, but it didn't have to be. "It's from Dar," she told Colleen, handing her the card. "I did a presentation today and it helped us win the bid."

Colleen's jaw dropped, and she held the card as though it were a small thermonuclear device.

"Holy shit!" she squeaked, looking at Kerry in disbelief. "This is from Popsicle Woman?"

Kerry gently smoothed Pooh's eyebrows down and smiled back into his smiling face. "Yep." She picked up the bear and hugged it gently, reveling in the lingering scent of Dar's perfume that clung to its soft fur.

Colleen watched her for a minute, then put a hand on her friend's arm, her freckled face suddenly serious. "Kerry?"

"Hmm?" The sea green eyes glanced up in question. "Oh, sorry."

Kerry released the bear, then set him down on the couch. "I love Pooh...and it's so soft. Did you feel the fur?"

"What's going on with you?" her friend asked softly.

"With me? Nothing, why?" Kerry asked, but she averted her eyes. "That was nice of Dar. I'll have to remember to thank her." She felt Colleen take her arm and allowed herself to be seated on the couch, next to the bear. "It was an interesting couple of days. We got to see a few of the parks, and I got to see my first bidding war."

"Uh huh." Colleen still studied her. "You two spend a lot of time together?"

Kerry knew where this was going, and she sighed inwardly. "Just about every minute, yes." She finally looked back up at Colleen. "And I had a really good time. We actually got kind of friendly."

A faint smile edged Colleen's lips. "Kind of?" She put a hand on Kerry's arm and rubbed it. "I'm thinking it's a little more than that, kiddo."

Kerry felt a deep blush rising and she paused, trying to find words to refute what Colleen was suggesting. She knew there were none, not really, not unless she wanted to lie to her friend. So she shrugged a little at her. "We both had a good time, Colleen. We found out we like...spending time together. That's all there is, really. I mean...Jesus, she's my boss, remember?" She felt a little defensive. "It was just, I don't know, things kind of clicked between us. She's really a lot of fun when she lets all those prickles down, and...and, damn it, I like her."

"Shhh. Okay, okay." Colleen patted her arm. "I believe you, Ker. Take it easy. If anything, it shows just how perceptive you have to have been. I wouldn't have guessed she had a nice bone in her body."

"Well, she does." Kerry's brow puckered. "You have to dig for it, and she doesn't give it up easily, but it's there." She glanced up. "Hey, you're going to be at the Global Day tomorrow, right?"

Colleen nodded. "Yeppers. About two dozen of us'll be there. Why?"

Kerry nodded. "Dar's going to be there from our group. I'll introduce you. You'll see, Colleen, she's not that bad, honest." Unconsciously, she reached out with one hand and stroked the bear.

Colleen gave her a look. "All right, I'll take your word for it." She shifted her gaze to the huge stuffed animal. "I can't argue with this." She could sense Kerry was still uncomfortable discussing her new friend, though, so she changed the subject. "Did your folks calm down any?"

Kerry was grateful for the shift in focus, even though it was a depressing one. "God, no. They're making plans for me to come home. I've got to try and think of a way to get them to back off, before I end up in ruffles attending some rubber-chicken banquet in Michigan."

"Mmm. So, what else did you get?" Colleen resolutely pushed her worries out of her mind. "I see bags."

The blonde woman smiled. "Oh god, wait. I brought you back some of the best chocolate. Here." She dug out her large-handled bag and began showing off her purchases. "Try this fudge."

"Mmm." Colleen nibbled appreciatively as she peered at the brochures her friend had brought back. She held up the picture of the Grand Floridian. "Is this where you stayed?" "Wow. Must be niiiicce."

"Oh yeah." Kerry grinned. "They had the best banana-stuffed French toast for breakfast...and a really nice view."

"French toast, huh?" The redhead chuckled. "So you guys didn't do the bread and water thing, that's good. Did you share a room?" *Artfully put*, she thought, with an inward smirk.

"Nope and nope," Kerry replied cheerfully. "I ate like a pig, I'm ashamed to admit, and I enjoyed every minute of it. We managed to get to Epcot during the International Food Festival. It was great." She patted her stomach. "But with all the damn walking and everything, I don't think I did too much damage--it was worth it, though. I had a really great time, even with worrying about the bid and all."

Colleen studied her as she dug into her packages. Smiling and interested, her sun-tinted skin evident in the lamplight, Kerry looked like she'd just come back from a vacation, not a business meeting. The redhead smiled to herself. "Well, you look great. Got some sun, huh?"

Kerry nodded distractedly. "We spent six or seven hours at Blizzard Beach. I got sunburned like crazy, even though I wore screen, but it was great. Those slides are fantastic." She pulled out a bag. "I got you a T-shirt."

"Ho-ho," Colleen laughed, holding it up. "I like it. He looks good in a tartan." It was a bold Mickey, dressed in green Scottish garb and carrying bagpipes. "Blizzard Beach huh? So, how's your boss look in a bathing suit then, eh?"

"Gorgeous," Kerry answered without thinking. "She's got a body to die f--" She stopped awkwardly, realizing what she was saying, and gave Colleen a gently accusing look. "Col..." Her friend smiled and patted her cheek. "Never you worry, lassie, it's clear as a bell to me you're head over heels. And if you're happy, I'm happy for you, okay?"

"I am not..." Kerry burst into a protest, "...any such thing." Her voice trailed off, and she sighed. "Oh my god, is it that obvious?" Her shoulders slumped.

"Hey, hey." Colleen laughed and put an arm around her. "I think it was the fact that your face lights up every time you say her name that clued me in, but don't worry, kiddo. If it's any consolation to ya, I think you've got great taste. I can't say I like her methods, but she's one hot-looking lady."

Kerry folded her arms across her chest. It felt good to stop dissembling. "I feel like such an idiot, Col. I thought I was too old for crushes. It's embarrassing," she admitted ruefully. "But, yeah. She smiles and my damn blood pressure skyrockets...and I start stuttering like some kind of star struck teenager." She shook her head with a sigh. "I'll get over it, but it's driving me a little crazy."

"Mmm-hmm." Colleen patted her knee. "How does she feel about it?"

Kerry stared at her. "Who, Dar? Oh, Jesus, Colleen, she doesn't know anything about it. I mean, she's my boss, for Christ's sake. She likes me, sure, and she thinks I'm a good employee, but that's it."

Colleen plucked at the bear's arm and raised an eyebrow. "You sure about that?"

"Of course I'm sure," Kerry insisted. "We just get along well, that's all."

The redhead leaned over and sniffed at the bear's fur. "That her perfume?" A half teasing, half sultry note had entered her voice.

"Uh..." Kerry exhaled. "Yeah."

"Nice," Colleen complimented it. "Okay, well, I'm really looking forward to meeting her tomorrow then." Her eyes twinkled.

Kerry grabbed her arm and a fierce note enter her voice. "You're not going to say anything to her. Colleen, I'm warning you..."

A hand lifted. "Not a word, I swear it," the redhead promised solemnly. "Well, let me let you get some sleep. We've got a long day tomorrow." She rose and ruffled Kerry's hair. "Sweet dreams, my friend."

Yeah. Kerry watched her leave, then she leaned against Pooh, letting out a long sigh. She considered a moment, then picked up the cordless phone lying on the table and dialed a number which was now ingrained in her memory. An unusual five rings sounded before it was picked up.

"Um. Hi. Listen, I know it's late, but I..."

"Hey, no, I'm glad you called. I fell asleep on the damn couch." Dar's voice sounded a little blurry. "What's up?"

"Um. Thanks for Pooh," Kerry said softly. "You didn't have to do that." A chuckle sounded, sending gentle shivers down her spine.

"I don't recall signing the card," Dar replied in playful tone. "But you're welcome. I thought you deserved a little memento of the successful bid."

She paused, and Kerry could hear her clear her throat a little.

"And...um, that was an insane thing to do, but thank you for the dolphins. I love...them."

Kerry blushed a deep, brick red. At a loss for words, she stammered softly. "Y-you're welcome." She could almost feel the smile on Dar's face, as it faintly changed the tone of her voice when she spoke.

"It was the best Boss's Day ever, you can be sure of that," Dar assured her. "Hey, you there?"

"Uh, yes. Sorry. I'm really glad it was." Kerry managed to get her tongue untied. "Well, you must be tired. Um. See you tomorrow?"

"Uh huh," Dar agreed. "See you tomorrow. 'Night, Kerry."

"'Night," Kerry said softly as the line went dead. She could feel a deep welling of emotion going through her, and she put down the phone and hugged the bear to her, burying her face into its fur with helpless fierceness. After a long moment, she stood, changed into her nightshirt, then turned out the lights and went to bed, bringing the happy-looking Pooh right along with her.

Chapter Eighteen

KERRY WOKE UP late and didn't even have time to get coffee before she ran out of the apartment and bolted north to the school, arriving with just minutes to spare and signing in with the work coordinator. It was eight AM, and they were due to start shortly, but the company always felt that it needed to make sure its volunteers weren't starving to death beforehand. Kerry looked around her at the dull concrete building and the crowd of T-shirted workers milling about, munching on bananas and bagels and drinking orange juice. She grabbed some juice and a bagel,

and took a deep breath of the cool, crisp morning air, brought on by a mild cold front that had rolled through the previous evening.

"Hey, Kerry!" Susan trotted up. "Nice sunburn."

Kerry laughed and tugged on her T-shirt. She had it tucked into a pair of older jeans and was wearing her hiking boots. "Yeah, I was in Orlando the past few days. Got a chance to get out into the sun for a while." She glanced at Susan. "How are you doing? I hear you're heading up the new programming project."

Susan nodded her head, her silvered chestnut hair dancing in the light. "Yep, it's actually pretty cool. I'm really enjoying it, nice programming environment, and they got me a killer developmental machine--a dual processor Pentium."

"Ooo, listen to the geekazoid." Ray came up on the other side and rubbed Kerry's arm. "*Vaya, chica*. What's up with the pinky stuff?" He stepped back and looked at her. "Have you been on vacation already? You look great."

Kerry rolled her eyes. "No, for the hundredth time already, I was at a meeting in Orlando the past couple of days. I just got a few hours off, that's all." She put her hands on her hips. "Not like you guys would get your faces out of your screens long enough to go to the beach yourselves, I noticed."

"Well, we're not all snooty executives," Ray teased. "So how is *El Chupa*?"

"Yeah, has she made you eat any raw meat yet?" Susan added with a grin. "I heard yesterday that she hides small children in her office closet for afternoon snacks."

Kerry didn't smile. "She's fine. Actually, you'll get to see for yourselves. She's supposed to be here today."

"What?" Susan snorted in disbelief. "You're joking, right? *El* high and mighty power suit doing grunt work?"

"Nah, she'll show up and tell everyone what to do, I betcha." Ray laughed. "I can see it, in those spike heels, too."

Kerry glanced over his shoulder and let a grin edge her lips. "Um, not quite." She watched as the Lexus pulled to a quiet halt, and the door opened, allowing Dar to emerge into the sunlight.

"Huh?" Susan followed her glance and fell silent. So did Ray.

By some weird coincidence, the executive had chosen to wear almost a carbon copy of what Kerry had on. Her company-issued T-shirt was tucked neatly into faded blue jeans, and she wore practical work boots not unlike the ones the blonde woman was sporting. The sleeves on the shirt were rolled up, exposing her toned arms, and she'd tied her hair back into a loose tail. Her pale blue eyes stood out against her tanned skin, and she had a watchful, guarded look on her face.

Until her eyes met Kerry's, and then a quick grin lit up her visage and just as quickly disappeared. She went to the work coordinator and quietly gave her name.

"Huh," Susan muttered, obviously surprised.

"*Mamacita*. She's buff!" Ray whispered to Kerry. "And she's young!"

"Hey, is that the Popsicle Lady?" Colleen had come up on the other side and poked Kerry.

"Certainly looks different than I remember her."

"Be nice, guys." Kerry tore her eyes from the dark-haired woman with some effort. "She's my boss, remember, okay?" She was aware of Dar's moving closer, and she lifted her gaze to greet the older woman with a smile. "Hey."

Dar had reached them, and she gave the group a civilized nod before she let her eyes meet Kerry's. "Morning."

Kerry smiled in reflex. "It sure is that. Dar, this is..."

"Susan Barnes, Ray Ramirez, and Colleen McPherson," Dar interrupted quietly, giving Susan and Ray a polite nod and inclining her head towards Colleen. "You're at Barnett, correct?" They all blinked and Colleen looked uncharacteristically rattled. "Um, yeah. I don't think we've met, but I've seen you at the bank once or twice."

"Over the tape stream incident," Dar replied crisply. "I remember." She turned to Susan and Ray who were frankly gawking at her. "I don't believe we've spoken since you transitioned, but I hear things are settling down there."

"Everything's all right, yes," Ray answered a little stiffly.

A faint, wry expression crossed Dar's face and she backed off a step. "Well, I've got some painting to do." She gave Kerry a nod and a ghost of a wink before she turned and headed for the small group of people assigned to help paint the side of the building. "Later, Kerry," she called over her shoulder, giving her a casual wave.

"Well, color me plaid," Colleen blurted, giving Kerry a look. "I surely didn't expect her to remember me, that's a fact."

Kerry watched the tall figure walking away, her snug jeans and T-shirt showing off her lithely muscular body to admirably good effect. "She does a lot of amazing things," she said. "She's certainly surprised me these last few weeks."

Susan let out a low whistle. "I don't remember her being that...um, she's different than I remember," the programmer muttered.

"Me, too. She sure looks different in that than she did in a suit," Colleen agreed. She looked at Kerry, who was regarding the grass thoughtfully. "Well, we're the garbage detail, right?" She handed around bags. "Let's break up--you guys want to get that side of the yard, and we'll get this side?"

"Sure." Susan shook her bag open. "Let's see who finishes first."

Kerry let her body work mechanically as she and Colleen scoured the schoolyard, picking up cans, bottles, and other, more sinister debris. Her mind roamed all over, but chiefly settled on the tall figure perched on a ladder, one leg swung over the top as she neatly covered part of a wall with a color most kindly called puke green. Quite a few people were painting, but to Kerry's eyes, no one could come close to Dar's casual grace with a paintbrush, and the easy balance she had on the ladder was obvious.

"Why do they pick such a disgusting color for a school?" she commented to Colleen.

"Well, it wasn't that upchuck brown or Pepto Bismol pink, so I guess we should consider ourselves lucky," Colleen replied, watching Kerry's eyes with a quickly stifled grin. "You stuck on the paint or the painter?" Kerry scowled at her and went back to her trash picking in silence.

"Just kidding, Ker," her friend apologized. "If it's any consolation, you're not the only one looking."

Huh? Kerry glanced around furtively, and realized Colleen had a point. More than one set of eyes were fastened on that tall, lanky figure and she experienced an odd spurt of relief and resentment so strong it nearly made her sneeze. She rubbed her nose in irritation. "Jesus. I think I'm coming down with something."

Colleen picked up a crushed can and dropped it into Kerry's bag. "Nothing a nice tall glass of Florida juice wouldn't cure, I'm guessing." She patted Kerry on the hip and continued searching, leaving her friend to stand sputtering in the sun.

They worked all morning, finishing up the garbage detail and moving to work inside the building, peeling old posters off the walls and removing broken furniture from classrooms that had seen hard use. Many of the desks had gang slogans carved into them, and Kerry found

herself shaking her head as she traced the many angry statements written in rough letters in the aged wood. "Jesus." She exhaled. "What are we teaching these kids here? The worst thing I remember seeing when I was in school was rhymes about underpants."

She was working so hard she barely heard the call for lunch until Ray came trotting in, his hair held back with a bright red bandana to get her. "Hey, *chica*, lunch time."

"Oh, sorry." Kerry put down her bag and dusted off her hands, pulling her shirt away from her body as she followed him outside to catch some air. It was warm, and the newly cut grass over which they were walking smelled pungent and green in the sun; she was glad she'd remembered to cover her recent sunburn with lotion.

The other workers were gathering under a spreading tree where tables had been set up, and pizza was being distributed along with cans of soda. She tagged along after Ray and joined Colleen and Susan as they picked up their slices, then glanced around for a cool spot to sit down in. Trees scattered in isolated oases of shade across the grass, and Kerry spotted a familiar, conspicuously lone figure reclining underneath one of them. Everyone was just as conspicuously avoiding her, so Kerry bowed to her inner desires and knew where she was going to head. She poked Colleen.

"C'mon, I'm going to go keep my boss company, since no one else here wants to."

To her credit, Colleen neither rolled her eyes nor chuckled. She merely nodded agreeably and started towards the tree with Kerry, sipping from her can of Sprite as she walked. Susan and Ray hesitated, then sighed, and followed along, giving Dar wary looks as they closed in on the tree. The executive was chewing her pizza slowly and gave them a moderately welcoming look in return as they came closer, before letting her attention turn to Kerry. "How'd the cleanup go?" She let her gaze travel up the blonde woman's body until twin blue eyes reached her face and their eyes met.

Her attention thus distracted, Kerry almost tripped on a root. "Um..." She recovered and took a seat in the grass next to her boss. "Pretty good, I guess. How's the painting coming along?"

"Haven't fallen off the ladder yet," Dar remarked, leaning on one elbow and extending her long legs. "I'm sure everyone's disappointed."

"Tch." Kerry frowned. "No one wants to see you fall off a ladder, Dar. You could break a leg!"

Dar gave her a droll look and took a bite of her pizza. "You obviously don't know your co-workers as well as I do." She cocked an eyebrow at the Associated folks. "Present company excepted, of course."

They settled in a circle around her and started eating in silence, until Susan, giving the others a furtive look, started a technical discussion, getting into programming concepts with Dar that were beyond the other three.

Kerry let out a tiny sigh of relief and reminded herself to thank Susan later. The atmosphere had definitely been getting stilted, and she felt herself losing patience with both the wary dislike coming from her friends and the icy reserve of her boss.

Dar had spatters of paint up and down her long frame, and a spot of it was above her right eyebrow. Kerry found herself having a very rough time not reaching over to wipe it off. Instead, she sighed and settled herself again, her back just touching the edges of Dar's pants legs. She concentrated on her pizza, picking off the pepperoni and chewing it before she took a bite from the small part of the slice, then almost choking on it as she felt a gentle nudge against her back. She stopped chewing, then felt it again, and darted a glance at the reclining Dar.

"No, that wouldn't make sense," Dar's low voice was saying. "They'd have to modularize it."

Then for just a second, those blue eyes wandered casually over and met hers, and a tiny glint appeared.

"I don't know," Susan replied. "They want to do it as one huge executable. I think they're crazy."
"We're going to get more pizza. You want some?" Colleen asked as she and Ray got up. Her offer went to everyone, and she even shyly glanced at Dar.

The executive gave her a smile. "No thanks, none for me."

"I'll go, too." Susan got up and joined them. "Be right back."

They trooped off, leaving Dar and Kerry alone under the tree. A soft breeze came through, blowing the green grass around them and rustling the leaves overhead. Kerry finally gave in to her desires and reached over, rubbing the paint off Dar's eyebrow. "Jesus, you look like a demented Dalmatian."

Dar grinned sardonically. "I did it on purpose. I thought it might break the ice with your buddies. Y'know I've been in boardrooms during a hostile takeover that were friendlier."

Kerry sighed. "Sorry."

"Hey, don't worry about it." Dar chuckled. "I'm used to it, believe me." She picked off a piece of sausage and nibbled it. "Besides, it's a worthy cause. This place is a mess."

Kerry glanced over to where her friends were headed back. "Yeah, I know. It scares me, how filled with hate these kids are." She smiled as Ray sat back down. "I see they're switching to vegetables now."

"Uh huh." he agreed cheerfully as Colleen and Susan also sat down, giving both Dar and Kerry brief smiles.

Uh oh. Kerry sensed collusion.

"So, we were thinking of going over to the Pelican after this and grabbing some dinner," Susan announced. "You guys want to join us?" Her eyes went to Dar first, then to Kerry, and she made it clear the invitation was to both of them.

Dar's dark eyebrow crawled up into her hairline. She took a quick look at Kerry's face, the blank startlement there confirming her suspicion that this was an unplanned event. Tactically, she had no idea what the group was up to, but she had every intention of spending the evening with Kerry regardless. "Sure," she replied casually, getting a quick side glance from the blonde woman.

"That sounds fun," Kerry agreed hastily, wondering what in the world her friends were up to. She looked up as the work supervisor started calling out their names and realized the short lunch break was over. "Back to work, I guess."

Dar got smoothly to her feet and balled up her napkin and cup. "Later." She strode off with a jaunty hitch of her jeans, leaving the rest of them to scramble up and follow her.

Kerry let the others move ahead, and then she was free to grab Colleen and pull her behind a tree. "What in the hell was that about?"

Colleen gave her a startled look. "What was what? It was a dinner invitation, Kerry. Jesus, would you relax?" She shook herself free from the blonde woman's grasp. "We were just talking, saying how maybe you were right. Maybe we need to give the woman a chance. So, we decided that asking her to have dinner with us was at least a step in that direction. What did you think this was?"

Kerry dropped her gaze, and rubbed her temples. "I-I'm sorry, Col. I..."

"Hey." The redhead stroked her arm, giving her a concerned look. "Listen, if this is too much for you, we'll forget it, okay? I didn't mean to freak you out."

Kerry got ahold of herself. "No, no, it's okay. I just...I guess I feel so self-conscious around you guys because all I hear is Popsicle lady this, and *Chupacabra* that, and I just don't...I just want to scream at you, because god-damn it, she's not like that."

"Whoa. Whoa." Colleen glanced around, then took Kerry by the shoulders and gently pushed her back against the tree. "Take it easy. We didn't know, okay? All we had to go on is what we hear at work, and what everyone else says. You obviously know more about her than we do. I'm sorry, I didn't know that stuff was getting to you."

Kerry took a deep breath. "I guess I didn't know it either," she admitted. "I'm not sure what's with me today. Maybe I'm PMS'ing or something." She gave the redhead an apologetic look. "Sorry." Colleen dropped her hands, a relieved look on her face. "Okay, so we're still on? I think it'll be fun. At least if you can give me an idea of something to talk to the damn woman about. Jesus, Kerry, she's so intense."

"Yeah." Kerry started walking towards the school building. "I know. Um... Well, she likes the ocean, she scuba dives, and she's been to most of the reefs and stuff around here. You could ask her about that."

"She likes you," Colleen said, unexpectedly. "But I don't think we'll be asking her about that tonight."

Kerry stopped and glanced around, feeling the blood flush her face. "C'mon, Col, lay off that, will you? We're just friends," she muttered. "She doesn't..."

"Kerry." Colleen put her hands on her friend's shoulders. "I've got no clue if this is a good or a bad thing for you, girl, but don't sell yourself short in those blue icicle eyes of hers, okay? There's something cooking in there."

Kerry shook her head. "Col, you're wrong," she stated decisively. "It's not what you think. We just clicked as friends, and that's it."

"You really believe that?" Colleen asked with a quizzical expression.

Do I? Kerry was briefly silent, then she just shrugged.

The red-haired woman dropped her hands and smiled, shaking her head. "Whatever you say, lassie." She gestured for Kerry to precede her. "After you."

Kerry sighed and shook her head as well, heading off over the grass towards where the work groups were reassembling. She peeked furtively over at the painting section, spotting Dar back up on her ladder. Her boss was just sitting there though, and she realized she was being watched as she walked across the open space.

"Hey, Kerry."

Kerry turned her head to find the Marketing Admin, Mary Evers, catching up with her. "Oh, hi." "We've got a bet on," the woman said. "Did you talk Dar into showing up?"

Kerry was aware of Colleen's cocked ears. "Me?" She didn't have to dissemble. "No, why? She said it was her turn this year or something."

Mary laughed. "Oh, Kerry, you have no clue. Dar's been in the company for fifteen years, and she never does this stuff. She told someone last year she'd have to be drugged senseless to spend time with people she works with on the weekend," she said. "So we figured, I've got money on it, that you talked her into it. Tell the truth, did you?"

Kerry looked past the woman's shoulders and right into Dar's watching eyes. She saw the smile form and felt her lips moving in response and her perceptions shifted subtly as she acknowledged the connection, whatever it was, between them. "Honestly, I didn't talk her into this," she repeated. "Why don't you ask her why she's here?"

Mary lifted both hands. "No thanks!" She backed away. "Oh well, thought I'd pick up a few easy bucks. Take care, Kerry. See you later."

Kerry continued walking, keeping her eyes on the ground in front of her as she kicked thoughtfully at the grass.

THE RUSTY PELICAN sat on an outthrust bit of land, on the seaward side of one of the small Keys that led out to Key Biscayne. The twilight was just settling, lighting the western side of the wooden building in shades of burnished, deep red. The restaurant was a two-level wood building, with rustic decorations including fishing nets and old oars, and came complete with creaking floorboards which held a deep scent of the sea locked in their salt-encrusted pores.

Dar mounted the steps and took a breath of the air, then smiled as she held the door for Kerry. "They look pretty busy," she noted. "Glad we carpooled." She let her eyes briefly scan the interior, which held scattered clusters of waiting patrons.

"Me, too." Kerry stifled a yawn. "Glad we got a chance to use those school showers, too. Boy, I was grungy."

"Mmm." Dar muffled a grin. "Next community project should get them new shower curtains." Kerry frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Never mind." Dar indicated the interior. "After you?"

"It's nice out here," Kerry said softly as she passed in front of the taller woman. "I like the park on the other island."

"So do I," Dar agreed. "Maybe we can stop out there afterward."

Kerry felt a quiet thrill at the words. "Sure, I'd like that." She grinned, then entered the building, spotting her friends immediately. "Hey, guys."

"Hey." Colleen and the rest were standing near the seating station, looking at a tank full of fish.

"Ready? I'm hungry enough to eat one of those little beauties raw."

The hostess led them to a round table. Colleen, Ray and Susan took seats beside one another, and that left the two seats on the far side of the table. Kerry took one, and Dar took the other. "I think I definitely need a beer." She glanced at the waitress. "Got something amber on tap?"

"Make it two," Susan agreed. "Ray?"

"*Mojito, por favor.*" Ray gave the waitress a charming smile. "Lots of mint, okay?"

"Vodka and cranberry for me," Colleen added.

The waitress scribbled, then looked up at Dar with an inquiring expression.

Dar debated asking for milk, then conceded to the occasion. "Whatever she's having." She indicated Kerry. The woman nodded and disappeared, leaving them all looking at each other in a somewhat

awkward silence. Susan peered out the window. Ray played with his napkin. Colleen studied the menu. Dar sighed, then recalled that she was capable of holding her own in hostile boardrooms.

"Did you all know you're sitting in the Bermuda Triangle?" she inquired casually. That broke the ice, big time. Kerry turned to her. "You're joking."

The executive shook her head solemnly. "Nope. This is the western edge. It hits here and scrapes along Key Biscayne. You are, indeed, at this moment, inside the Bermuda Triangle."

"*Dios mío!*" Ray yelped, looking behind him as though expecting ghostly aviators to float through the window. "I knew it. I felt...so strange...coming out here. I knew it."

"Damn." Susan laughed. "I know the weather out here is weird; I never realized it was part of the Triangle, though."

"It's a microclimate." Dar spoke knowledgeably, regarding her interlaced fingers. "Because of the pressure ridges over the coast, it rains a lot less, and the humidity content is much different than the mainland. You can see it in the foliage here, too."

"You lived here all your life?" Susan asked, her reserve broken as she rested her chin on her hand, peering at Dar with interest.

"On and off," Dar replied. "I did a study of the ecology when I was at the university down here. I spent a lot of time at RSMAS." She cleared her throat. "It's interesting if you go out to the tip of the Key, where the state park was. You know Andrew wiped that entire Australian pine forest off, and they let it grow back up as natural vegetation. You can't recognize it anymore."

"Wow. Yeah, I know." Susan leaned forward. "I used to go out there and picnic. After the hurricane, I went out and almost cried. Then they told me that entire forest was really parasite trees, imported, and they were going to burn out the remnants. I was pretty pissed off until someone explained what the Australian Pine was doing."

The tension relaxed and the chatting went on, diverging to discussions on various shellfish which were on the menu. Kerry felt the knot in her stomach relax and she started to enjoy herself, trading jokes with Colleen and ordering a lobster in defiance of Susan's protestations that sea roaches were just disgusting. Dar, she noticed, had ordered a mixed platter, and the executive was talking reefs with Susan, who had done a one-day diving workshop when she'd gone to Bermuda the preceding year.

Okay, this isn't so bad, she thought happily. *I should have known Dar could handle these guys. Silly me.* She leaned forward, her knee pressing against Dar's, and held her breath until it became obvious to her that Dar had no intention of moving away. It felt nice. She smiled, then her eyes widened as their dinner arrived and she was faced with a large, pugnacious-looking lobster, staring at her with baleful, beady black eyes. "Oh, gosh." Everyone laughed, and she picked up the nutcrackers the waiter handed her, peering at the large animal uncertainly. "Good grief. Why did I order this again?"

"You saw it under the water?" Dar muffled a smile.

"I'm sure I saw a flounder under the water, too." Kerry poked the lobster. "Oh, my god, it's looking at me."

"Hah. Told you the sea roach would be too much for you!" Susan crowed, pointing her fork at Kerry. "You better order something else."

"No, no, I can do this," Kerry objected, poking at the shell with the little bitty fork they'd given her. "Somehow." She scowled at the red object, who scowled back. "Why do they leave the shell on?"

"So you can get exercise with your meal." Dar reached over and covered Kerry's hand with her own. "Give me that." The executive took the nutcracker out of her hand. "C'mere." Dar picked up a claw and put the cracker around it, closing her hand and breaking it efficiently. "See?" She held up the claw, with the pink lobster meat peeking out of it.

"Ah." Kerry took it from her, and examined it. "Okay, I gotcha."

"Good." Dar handed her the cracker and went back to her own plate.

Kerry nibbled the lobster. "Mmm." She glanced up at the watching faces, startled to see quiet, knowing smiles there. "I usually stick to shrimp," she explained sheepishly, giving them puzzled looks as they exchanged glances and started their own dinners. *Wonder what that was all about?* she mused, then shrugged, and went to work on her stubborn lobster.

IT WAS LATE by the time they finished dinner and left the others with a cordial set of good-byes. Kerry was happy. They'd had a good time, and so, she thought, had Dar. She glanced at her boss as they got into the Lexus, and she settled into the leather seat with a groan. "Oh god, I think I'm going to explode."

"That's all right, leather cleans up," Dar blithely replied. After a slightly awkward pause, she asked, "You, um, still up for a walk on the beach?" "Moon's out. Looks pretty nice for it."

Kerry peeked out the front window and spotted the round, golden orb. "Wow," she murmured. "Yeah, that's pretty. I'd love to go look at it for a while." Her eyes shifted to Dar's waiting profile. "A walk sounds great, especially after that dessert."

"All right, then, let's go." Dar put the Lexus into gear and pulled forward through the parking row, turning left out of the lot while the rest of their group went to the right. "I like that place. Food's pretty good."

"Once I figured out how to use the can opener, yeah." Kerry leaned back. "Key lime pie, what an odd combination of sweet and sour that is."

Dar chuckled. "Some people say it's just a reflection of what South Florida is--a lot of sour with a little sweet on top just to fool you."

Kerry thought about that. "I don't know. It was kind of refreshing. I think I liked it," she decided, watching the softly blowing palm fronds go by as Dar drove over the last causeway and pulled into a familiar parking lot. "This is ironic," she commented as they got out and let the cool sea breeze hit them. "This is where I went that night."

Dar leaned on the hood of the car, watching her. "The night we ended up at my office?"

Kerry leaned on the other side. "The night you saved my life," she replied, quietly serious, "and then changed it."

Dar wasn't really sure what to say to that. She straightened up and walked around to the front of the car, sliding her hands into the pockets of her jeans. "That was quite a night, huh?" she eventually muttered as they walked together through the lot and towards the soft roar of the sea. "Sure was."

The boardwalk was relatively quiet and echoed their footsteps as they left the lights of the parking lot behind and approached the softly sighing shoreline. The moon tracked along with them, lighting a rippling pathway across the water, leading up onto the beach. Kerry felt the onshore wind brush back her hair, and she welcomed the full moon's reflection across the endless length of the water before them. Far out on the horizon, a buoy winked as it bobbed back and forth, and faintly, on the wind, Kerry could hear music coming from the hotels down the shore south of them.

It's pretty, she thought as they paused and perched on the railing of the boardwalk, listening to the waves. The moonlight reflected off Dar's hair, and made her pale eyes colorless, but Kerry had no trouble conjuring up what they looked like as she glanced up into Dar's quiet face.

She could feel the slow beat of her heart, the rhythm picking up as Dar's gaze left the horizon and tracked to hers, and the lips curved into a smile. Dar's voice broke the stillness in a quiet rumble.

"Nice night."

"Mmm. It is, yes," Kerry reveled in the currents she could feel running between them. "Thanks for taking them up on the invite. That worked out better than I thought it would."

Dar slid off the railing and leaned back against it, so that their heads were almost on a level.

"Wasn't bad." She grinned. "I got them with the Bermuda Triangle thing." She studied Kerry's profile, outlined in the moonlight.

Kerry smiled back. "You sure did. Is that true?"

"Oh yeah," Dar assured her, turning around and pointing. "You're standing in it right now, in fact."

The turn had put her shoulder right up against Kerry's thigh, and it was too much for Kerry not to let her hand drop to rest against the smooth back, feeling the warmth through the cotton of Dar's shirt. Dar didn't move. She just continued to look out over the water, but Kerry could see the muscles in her jaw clench a little, then her throat worked as she swallowed. The blonde woman's

fingers stirred of their own accord, tracing a gentle pattern casually. The dark head turned very slowly, until those blue eyes were looking right at her. Looking right through her, and she felt it in her guts as her knees started to shake a little. "Dar?"

"Mmm?"

A faint, playful smile was starting, plucking chords in her deeper than anything in her life ever had. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

Kerry knew it was her voice, but she had no idea where the words were coming from, and she felt her heart start to pound. A shifting of muscle, a sliding of shadows and light as Dar straightened up, moving closer until Kerry could feel the warmth of her, then a gentle touch on her face brought her eyes up as the taller woman tilted her chin and studied her intently. Kerry felt soft cotton under her hands as she slid them up against Dar's body, wanting the contact as Dar ducked her head gracefully and she felt lips brush hers. Light as a feather, then again, as solid contact, lingering and powerful, lasting long enough for her soul to recognize something in her very deep. Then Dar was pulling back, and she had to focus on those eyes again.

"Does that answer your question?" Dar asked, very softly, her breath warming Kerry's face.

Breathing had never seemed so difficult before, but Kerry somehow managed to pull enough air into her lungs to speak an audible "Yes." She opened her mouth to say more, but found a finger against her lips.

"Slow." Dar breathed. "Easy, I wasn't really expecting this, and I don't think you were either."

Kerry felt like she was drowning. Every inch of her skin was tingling and she leaned against Dar's touch, almost deaf from the thunder of her own heartbeat. She felt like laughing and crying, all at once, and she knew Dar was right--this was way too powerful. They both needed time to think and react. But her body was craving something she knew she wasn't capable of denying it any longer. "Cca...can I..." she stammered softly, moving closer, her hands moving slowly and timidly against the cotton of Dar's shirt. The taller woman's arms closed around her, and as their bodies made contact, a warm, familiar wave flowed over her.

Kerry let herself settle into place, tucking her head down against Dar's shoulder, and burying her face into the taller woman's shirt, as she felt Dar's chin rest on the top of her head. It was an explosion of feeling...a deep, aching familiarity that brought tears to her eyes so quickly she couldn't stop them. "Oh god," She gasped softly, feeling Dar's breathing catch under her ear. *It's been so long.*

Dar had no idea what to do with the barrage of emotion hammering her from every side. She'd had no intention of taking this to where she had, no intention of shattering these particular barriers and crossing that line they'd both been balancing on for the past few days. But once Kerry had touched her, as soon as she'd felt that familiar weight against her back she knew her future had slipped out of her grasp. And now...

It was her dream realized. She could feel it--the same warmth, the same feeling the sunlight had shaken her out of the previous morning. Nothing else mattered. She was lost. Or maybe she was found.

She tightened her hold and tipped her head back, regarding the stars. Letting the moon's silver light baptize them as the other half of her soul came sliding home. At last.

DAR HAD NO idea how long they stood there. It was a long time, though, long enough for the tears to dry on Kerry's face, and long enough for their bodies to become used to each other's touch. Dar felt a sense of quiet peace, and she suspected if she stood here long enough, she'd simply fall asleep in it, standing up and everything.

She thought about what to do next, her hand making idle, gentle circles on Kerry's back, enjoying the feel of her smooth skin under the fabric. Finally, reluctantly, she exhaled and shifted a little, causing Kerry to open her eyes and look up, with an expression of such perfect trust it was almost frightening. They looked at each other for a moment, then Dar smiled. "That wasn't planned."

The blonde smiled back. "No, it certainly wasn't."

"Are you all right?"

Kerry considered the question on several levels. "Yes. Are you?"

Dar had to really think about that. "I...yes, I think so," she murmured in wonder. "I don't usually, um..." She found her fingertips tracing the planes of Kerry's face. "B-but..." She took her hand away and exhaled. "I don't know what came over me."

Seeing Dar so at a loss was very cute and impossibly endearing. "I don't know either, but can we bottle it?" Kerry smiled impishly. She captured Dar's hand and felt the fingers curl around hers.

"You want to sit down a minute? There's a bench near here."

Dar felt a certain weakness in her knees, and realized it was probably a good idea. "Sure. Yeah."

She let herself be led over to the bench in question, and they sat down on it, side by side. "Okay, um..." She laughed a bit, rubbing her face with one hand. "I guess we know we, um..." Words failed her again. "Good god, I have no idea what in the hell is wrong with me."

Kerry leaned her head against the cotton-covered shoulder. "I'm pretty sure this isn't covered in the employee handbook." She patted Dar's back, and just left her hand there. "Or maybe it is, and I just haven't gotten to that section yet. That thing is huge," she rambled on a little, hoping it would get Dar to relax. She paused as a thought occurred to her. The part of the handbook she had read had covered employee relations, and what was allowed between employees and their bosses was spelled out very clearly. Or, more to the point, what wasn't allowed. "Guess this means I've got to start checking ETIPS, huh?"

"Um..." Dar wrestled with her composure. "Well, technically, yeah, I guess. But, um, hold it."

She took a deep breath, then released it. "Let's just...I finally found a decent assistant. I'm not ready to let you go just yet. Let's see if we can keep work, and this...separate."

"Mmm." Kerry felt her hand start a gentle circling motion against Dar's back. She had no desire to change jobs. Maybe they could just see how things worked out. *Slow, Dar said. Take things slow.* "Okay," she agreed softly. "I kinda like the boss I have."

A moment of silence, of waves, of winds stirring the palm leaves. "Your boss kinda likes you too," Dar responded softly. "I didn't expect it to come out like this." She hesitated. "I just couldn't keep it back any more."

Kerry let out a relieved sigh. "It was getting pretty hard for me, too," she admitted shyly. "I thought it was the most ridiculous thing in the world. I mean--having a crush on your boss; how cliché can you possibly get, right?"

A wry smile answered her, and Dar's dark brows lifted. "So it wasn't the promotion you were after, huh?"

Kerry blushed. "I had no idea what that job was, and I could have cared less," she admitted honestly. "Just something about... Oh boy. I couldn't stop thinking about you."

Dar looked down at the wood of the boardwalk. "Likewise." She looked back up, and their eyes met. "Thought I was just being, mmm..." She paused and sighed. "Didn't think you were my type."

Kerry covered her face with one hand and chuckled almost soundlessly. Dar exhaled, unable to prevent a giddy smile from shaping her lips. "Okay. Well, now that we've got that straight, we

can proceed accordingly." She considered. "Let's see, we've already been trapped in a hurricane, gone through a carjacking, and slept in the same bed together. I guess we can skip the obligatory 'meet in the coffee shop' date, huh?"

Kerry giggled. "Uh, yeah." She rubbed her nose. "Let me try this one. Can I interest you in dinner and a movie tomorrow night?" She glanced down, then up again. "I'll cook."

"As long as it's not *Titanic*," Dar agreed with a smile. "Or anything with subtitles."

"Ew." Kerry winced. "I'm more a *Starship Troopers* kind of person myself," she confessed, a little guiltily.

"Phew." Dar mock wiped her brow. "That's a relief."

They looked at each other quietly. "It felt really good when you hugged me," Kerry finally said softly. "I've never felt like that before, except maybe in my dreams."

Dar gazed at her soberly. "Neither have I." Hesitantly, she circled Kerry's shoulders with her arm, and felt the smaller woman immediately ease against her. "I like that." She leaned against the bench's back and almost stopped breathing as Kerry laid an arm across her stomach and nestled her head against Dar's shoulder. They watched the waves in peace for a while, until Dar noticed Kerry was struggling to keep her eyes open. "Hey, c'mon. Time to get you home."

I am home, a tiny voice insisted as Kerry forced herself to sit up straight, very reluctantly leaving Dar's warmth. "Yeah, falling asleep on the beach sounds nice in stories, but they forget to mention all the sand that gets everywhere," she joked as she pushed herself to her feet and held a hand out to the still-seated Dar.

Sand crunching lightly under their shoes, their hands clasped together, they walked back up the boardwalk.

Chapter Nineteen

"MA'AM?" THE VOICE sounded impatient.

Dar's head jerked up and she blinked at the ferry deckhand, who was not-so-patiently waiting for her to drive off the ferry. "Sorry." Dar gave him an apologetic wave and exited the boat, driving to her condo and parking the Lexus without really thinking about what she was doing. She got out and locked the doors, then climbed the steps to the condo and opened the door, closing it behind her and flicking the lights on with an automatic motion.

Her steps wandered into the kitchen, where she glanced at the terminal, glad to see there wasn't any mail waiting, since she had no desire to read any right now. She mixed herself a large glass of chocolate milk and went into her bedroom, where she set the glass down while she got out of her jeans and T-shirt and put on her favorite baseball jersey and flannel shorts.

It felt a little strange, and she glanced down, realizing she'd put them on backwards. With a soft curse, she pulled them off and pulled them back on the right way. "Oh boy." She picked up her glass and wandered back into the living room, turning on the television and sinking down into the couch, looking at the screen without really seeing it as she pondered the evening's unexpected ending.

Jesus Christ, what in the world just happened to me? It wasn't supposed to escalate like this. I was just...she was just...we were... Dar took a long swallow of milk, comforted by the soothing, familiar taste.

Okay. Okay, okay. Let's take stock of the situation. We are attracted to each other. That's not a surprise. I knew that before. Okay? Okay, she's attractive, she thinks I'm attractive, we have similar tastes...she's smart. It's really not that surprising, Dar, so get a grip.

She felt better. A little. But all that rationalization didn't explain just how good it had felt to hold Kerry in her arms and how much her body was craving more of that, so much so that if Kerry had been there, Dar knew she couldn't have kept her hands from touching that soft skin, or playing with her hair or...

Dar slowly lowered her head onto the back of the couch, feeling the cool surface of the leather become warm against her skin. This was a new feeling for her. Intense, and somewhat out of control, but warm and sweet and very, very distracting. She knew she had to get a handle on that, but right now, she was content to sit and sip her milk, and indulge herself in this emotional whirlpool.

She was surprised when the phone rang, and she stared at it for a moment before she hoisted herself to her feet and went to the table, glancing at the clock as she picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Ms. Roberts, this is Mids Ops," the vaguely nervous voice said. "Um, you're on my notify list if we lose anything."

"Oh yeah? What'd we lose?" Dar asked, curiously.

"Um. Netops," the voice answered. "They had a fire in the building, and they had to evac. The fire department won't let them switch to UPS, so..."

"We're down," Dar supplied.

"Um, yes."

"Completely down," Dar added. "Everything--the network *and* the mainframes."

"Yes."

"Guess you can go home then, huh?" the executive commented casually.

"Uh..."

"No sense in your being there if there aren't any mainframes to administer. The internal network is on an automatic backup schedule," Dar reasoned, "so...go on home."

"Uh...okay, Ms. Roberts, if you say so."

"Sure," Dar reassured him. "Bye." The line went dead, and she put the phone down, padding back over to the couch and sitting down, taking a sip of her milk, letting her mind wander again, daydreaming about sea green eyes and lightly sun-tinged skin, her imagination hearing the roar of the waves and the sound of seashells tinkling in their wake.

Then her eyes popped open and she spat milk out over half the table. "Holy shit!" she barked, jumping back up and grabbing for the phone again. "Sonofabitch!" She dialed frantically, then waited. "Yeah, on second thought stick around there. ... No, no, it's my fault. ... No. Who else have you notified? Keep going." She hung up, then slapped herself on the side of the head a few times. "Jesus!"

She dove into her briefcase for her contact book and opened it, bringing it and the phone back to the couch. She dialed a number. "Who is this? Okay, this is Dar Roberts. ... Yes, I know. Who won't let you cut over to backup? What's his name? ... Okay, what division is he with? ... County or city? Thanks. What damage did the building take?" She listened for a long moment. "Did the extinguishers go off?" Another long pause. "Christ! Do we have backup 3270s?"

As she listened, she booted her laptop and plugged in the network cord that would connect the machine to the dedicated line dropped into the condo. "Well, someone better get on the line to Infrastructure in Houston and see if they have a couple mothballed somewhere." She hung up, then studied her screen. System indicators showed red blinking lights everywhere on the top-level view of the network. "Hell, everything's down." People would be calling; she was surprised they hadn't already.

How long has this been going on? Did the system forget to page me? Dar scabbled for her pager, then realized she wasn't wearing it. "What in th--" She paused, eyes unfocused, then cursed softly. "Son of a stupid bitch." With her free hand, she dialed the phone, listening for a familiar voice. "Hey."

"Hey, what's up?" Kerry sounded a little surprised, but not disappointed to hear her voice.

"We're not. Netops had a fire, and the entire network is down," Dar told her with a sigh. "Some idiot in the fire department won't let them go on backup."

"Yikes! You need some help there?"

Dar hesitated. "I'm just going to be yelling at people," she temporized.

"I can make you hot tea," Kerry responded readily. "Besides, I don't think I can sleep."

Dar drummed her fingers against her leg. "Um. You know, we're going to have to reroute a lot of stuff if I can't get the fire department to cooperate. I could use some help in research and identifying available assets."

Kerry's voice perked up. "Really?"

Dar gave in and gave up. "Yeah, you can dump into the second ISDN line here. If you want to, that is."

"I'll be right there," came the immediate assurance.

A smile edged Dar's lips against her will. "See you soon, then. Bye." She took a moment out to call security, then she went back to her searching. She found the name she was looking for, then glanced up at the TV screen, which was tuned to, of all things, the Disney channel. "Oh...*Beauty and the Beast*. I love those candlesticks." She pointed cheerfully at it as she dialed the phone.

"Hello, I need to speak with Walter Blakelock. ... No, this is business." A pause. "I don't give a goddamn if he's humping with the mayor's wife, I need to talk to him." Another pause. "Either get him on the phone, or I'll be calling his boss out of bed, too. ... Thanks, I'll wait."

KERRY DIMMED HER lights as she pulled into the underground parking, slid into place next to Dar's Lexus, and turned off the Mustang's engine. She glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror and gave herself a little lecture. "This is business, Kerrison. You are here because the company is in crisis, and it's part of your job," she told her reflection sternly. "No doe-eyed looks, no batting of the eyelashes, and no backrubs, got it?"

She exhaled, then cleared her throat and got out of the car, bringing her laptop case with her. She trotted up the stairs and rang the bell, listening for and hearing Dar's low voice in response. "It's business, it's business, it's business," she repeated silently, as she pushed open the door and ducked inside.

Dar was sprawled on the couch in her pajamas, one long, bare, muscular leg slung over the end of the furniture and her shirt half unbuttoned. *Oh well. So much for that*, Kerry sighed, as every single solitary hormone in her entire body stood up and said, "Hi there!" She managed to give Dar a crisp nod as she put her case down and got her laptop out. "Hey. Long time no see."

Dar glanced up and over the back of the couch at her, eyes flicking over her as a brief grin appeared. "Hope you brought something more comfortable to change into. It's gonna be a long night."

Kerry just managed not to smirk. "Yeah, I feel a little overdressed," she agreed as her eyes lingered on Dar's bare legs. "I'll go fix that." She took herself off to the nearby washroom, leaving Dar to her phone call.

Dar's eyes briefly followed Kerry toward the washroom, and then she returned her attention to her phone call. "Look, Jim, I don't care what it's going to take, I need the building back online."

She leaned forward and cradled her head in her hand. "They can't go on backup power because the fire department won't certify the electrical substructure as safe. That means I need an electrical engineer in there, and I need them now, not tomorrow or Monday. Got me?"

Kerry got her system going, then she stood up. "Bet you could use some coffee," she guessed, getting a pathetically grateful look from her boss. "Thought so. I'll go make some." *Okay, I can do this. We're functioning.* Kerry felt a little relieved, her initial nervousness fading as she rattled around the kitchen, setting up the coffee maker and starting it going. She returned to the doorway and leaned against it, watching Dar as she persistently threatened, cajoled, and harangued a series of people, finally resulting in a string of curses in two languages that caused Kerry's eyebrows to lift as the executive slammed down the handset.

Dar glowered at the phone, then looked up, to meet warm, green eyes looking back at her. "Idiots."

Kerry disappeared, then reappeared a minute later with a cup of steaming coffee, which she handed over before taking a seat next to Dar on the couch. "No luck, huh?"

Dar sighed and leaned back. "I have an electrical engineer headed there from South Carolina, and two backup machines being prepped in Houston, but...it's not enough." She took a sip of the coffee, then gave Kerry a look. "You remembered how I like it."

Kerry laughed. "Dar, c'mon. You add enough cream and sugar so that it stops tasting like coffee, and there you are." She patted her companion's leg, feeling the subtle shift of muscle under her hand as Dar stretched a little.

"Eh, that's true," Dar admitted, giving her an affectionate look. "God, what's next?"

Kerry was searching the database. "Jesus, that board looks like a frigging Christmas tree." She pulled her laptop back onto her lap as she settled deeper into the soft leather and sat cross-legged next to Dar. She glanced up. "Hey, *Beauty and the Beast*, I love those candlesticks." She grinned and shook her head, not seeing the startled look in Dar's blue eyes. "Yeesh, Dar, this is terrible. We really don't have a backup if we lose that facility." She looked up at her boss, who nodded slowly. "Wow."

"I know. Three years ago in executive committee, we made a decision not to duplicate that center. I fought it like crazy, but no one wanted to allocate the budget for it. I wanted to split the processing, but they just wouldn't go for it." Dar sighed. "This is one of those times when I wish I wasn't being proven right."

Kerry shook her head. "Well, we can shift critical stuff here and here, but they've got all the routers up there, Dar. We don't have enough alternate routes to get around that."

"Yeah, that's why I've been putting my efforts into getting the building back up," Dar acknowledged glumly. The phone rang, and she picked it up. "Yeah?"

"Dar, it's José." Montarosa's voice was excited. "Do you know what's going on?"

"Yeah. We're down," Dar replied tersely. "Now get off my goddamn phone so I can do something about it."

Kerry glanced at her, then disengaged a hand from her keyboard and rubbed the taller woman's back in gentle circles. She could feel the tension in the tight muscles, and she let her fingers probe the knots she found in her neck.

There was a slight pause before Dar's voice resumed. "I'm sorry, José. What was that you asked?" Her tone had relaxed a little. "No, there was a fire in the building. The mainframes are fine, but we don't have power because the fire department won't let us put juice in from the generator."

Dar closed her eyes as strong, sensitive fingers probed muscles sore from painting. "What? Oh, yeah. No, we don't have a backup location. You know that, you voted it down, remember?"

Kerry put down her laptop and crawled up onto the back of the couch, going to work with both hands.

"Uh, I don't...I've got an electrician coming down to certify the building, so yeah, probably. But I'm going to keep pushing on the fire department anyway. Maybe they'll get tired of hearing my voice and give up. ... No. ... Okay, I'll let you know. Bye." Dar let her hand drop with the phone in it and groaned. "You are very good at that."

"Thanks," Kerry murmured. "You're really tense." As the darkhaired woman leaned forward, she worked her way down Dar's back, then started back up. "There. Better?"

Blue eyes gazed back at her as Dar half turned. "Much."

Kerry grinned and slipped back down onto the couch. "So, what's next?"

Dar draped an arm across her shoulders. "Just stay here and keep me company while I yell at people, okay?"

Okay? Kerry squirmed closer, settling against Dar's warm body with a little sigh of contentment.

"Sure." She let her legs join the taller woman's, propped up on the coffee table, her green socks an odd contrast to Dar's bare feet, then pulled her laptop over, resuming her search for resources.

"We could shift these routers and get some of the bank traffic up, or...wait...here, and get Interline back."

Dar peered over her shoulder. "Mmm. Do it. I'd rather have NOTAMS and the weather service back for the airlines. It's the weekend, the banks can wait."

Kerry almost didn't hear the last part of that, since Dar's breath was tickling her ear very distractingly. "Uh, okay...erf...uck, I forgot I can't use... Oh, wait, I can route the request through the Houston backbones. Hang on."

"You're very good at that, too."

Dar's voice almost made her accidentally reconfigure a master router. "Dar?"

The executive peered at the screen. "Hmm?"

"Unless you want me to reroute the NBC satellite feeds to Iran, could you just be quiet for a minute?"

Pale blue eyes winked at her mischievously. "Sorry."

"No problem." Kerry tried not to think about how close those nice, inviting lips were. "What was I doing? Oh yeah..." She worked at the keyboard for a minute. "Okay. Yeesh, that's awkward."

The phone rang, and Dar picked it up. "Yes? ... Oh, right. Okay, good. ... Let me know." She hung up, then stretched. "The electrician just got there. Hey, want some ice cream?"

Kerry didn't think twice. "Sure." She continued her browsing. "Oh, I can get ATMs back up in the Northeast. Hang on."

Dar got up and ambled into the kitchen, musing on how much more fun a disaster was with Kerry around. She thought about that as she dished out the frozen treat. How much more fun everything was with Kerry around. She carried the dishes back and handed Kerry hers, then settled back in her spot and picked up the phone again.

It was almost five AM before the electrician finished his inspection, and Dar had to argue with him for fifteen minutes before he agreed to issue his report then and there. "Look, I didn't have you get out of your god-damn bed at one AM so you could write a report tomorrow. Just do it!" she snarled. "Put Gregory on the phone."

The deep, rumbling voice of the Netops chief came on. "Yeah, Dar?"

"Get that report. I've got that damn fire chief on his way to you now. Give it to him, and tell him to take it and shove it." She stopped abruptly as Kerry stuck a spoonful of ice cream in her

mouth. "Mfufh..." She swallowed. "Sorry, I mean, tell him to please open the seals, and let you in the control room to get the power cut over."

"Sure. Hang on, here he comes now." Gregory chuckled. "You wanna talk to him?"

"No." Dar sighed. "He doesn't want to hear my voice again, I can tell ya that."

"Okay, he's doing it. We're in." Gregory's voice faded, and several clanks and sharp pops came clearly through the phone. "Hold on... Yow, it's dusty in here. Thank god we test this thing once a week. Okay, hold your ears." The overwhelming rumble of the generator was easily heard.

"Stabilizing... Coming up to voltage... Okay..." She could hear the muffled voice of Gregory on another phone. "Yaz! Hit the switches, eh?" He came back. "Power's up, Dar. I'm going to give it ten minutes to peak and spike, then kick the dogs in the ass and get them back online."

"Whoops, here come the routers," Kerry informed her, watching the top-level map. "Do they autoboot?"

Dar nodded "Routers just came back, Greg." She watched as the red lights slowly mapped to green. "Backbones are up." She felt a tired smile twist her lips.

"Packets are passing," Kerry reported, with a grin. "The overseas link just came up." She pointed at the multiline gateways that passed data over the Atlantic.

Dar ruffled her hair, then draped an arm over her shoulders as they watched. "Okay, looks good, Greg."

"Uh huh. Thanks, Dar. Couldn't have done it without you, that's for damn sure." Gregory cheerfully told her. "Later. Go get some sleep, eh?"

"Night, Greg." Dar replied, and cut off the line. "Damn, that was a bitch."

Kerry nodded, then turned her head to regard Dar. "You've got ice cream on your lips," she observed, peering at the offending spot.

Dar eyed her quietly. "I do?"

Kerry leaned over and gently, deliberately, removed it, tasting the surface with a tentative tongue. She felt the soft intake of breath, then a steadying touch against the back of her neck sent tingles down her spine as Dar returned the favor, taking a leisurely bit of time doing so. Kerry could feel the warm closeness of her body, and breathed in the pleasant scent of her as she let herself respond, enjoying the simple, undemanding pleasure of it.

They were both too tired to go further, she knew, but it felt very good to spend a few minutes in this gentle exploration, giving them both a chance to get used to each other. She drew in a breath as Dar pulled back a little and rubbed noses with her. It brought a smile to her face, and she let her head fall back against the couch, with a sigh. "That felt nice."

Dar nodded, brushing back her hair with idle fingers. "Mmmhmm. C'mon, you can find out first hand what a waterbed feels like."

Kerry must have looked a little startled, because Dar laughed a little, and put a hand up, patting her cheek. "Easy, easy. Just to sleep in. We're taking this nice and slow, remember?"

Kerry returned the smile. "It's just all a little new to me," she explained. "But a bed of any kind sounds really good to me right now."

Dar nodded in quiet understanding. "Is this your first time, Kerry?" She knew the answer, but waited.

The green eyes dropped, and a soft flush colored Kerry's neck. "Um. Not...with a woman, yes." she finally got out, glancing up. "I, um..."

"Shhh, it's okay. I kind of guessed that." Dar gave her a reassuring pat on the arm. "Take it easy--no rush, no pressure." Stifling a yawn, Dar got up and then held out a hand in invitation. "C'mon, time for bed. I'm really bushed."

It's... Kerry put down her laptop and stood up, having changed into her pajamas earlier. It was scary, and at the same time, exhilarating. She took Dar's hand and followed her into the cool, blue-walled bedroom, feeling the calmness of the place with a sense of anticipation. She glanced at the bed. "You ever get seasick?"

The executive chuckled. "No." She pulled back the covers and got in, moving over to the center of the bed. "See? Big enough for six."

Kerry laughed and accepted the invitation, surprised at the gently moving surface. "Oh, I thought it would move more."

"It's semi-waveless," Dar explained. "There are these little foam baffles inside, and the water gets trapped in there, so it doesn't move around much." She patted the surface. "See?"

Kerry settled down. "Mmm. Wow, this is comfortable." She had plenty of space around her and a nice soft pillow. Her anxiety eased and she relaxed, watching as Dar reached up and turned off the overhead lamp.

"You okay?" The low, vibrant voice cut through the darkness.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Kerry answered sleepily. "G'night."

Dar put her hands behind her head and gazed up at the unseen ceiling. "G'night." A peaceful silence fell, and Dar waited for sleep to claim her, tired, but very conscious of the warm body nearby. *What a day.* She shook her head in mild disbelief. Her life was changing, shifting so fast she hardly knew what to do about it. In the space of a single day, of a single night, really, she'd suddenly acquired a facet in her life she never would have expected, but now that she had it, she was wondering how she'd ever lived without it.

The bed shifted gently; she felt Kerry's warmth move closer, and a grin appeared. It took another ten minutes, then she felt a touch against her and she sidled over, closing her arm around the sleeping woman, who nestled closer immediately, tucking an arm around her waist, and relaxing with a sigh as she nuzzled Dar's shoulder.

It felt wonderful. Dar's eyes closed, and this time, she welcomed the dreams.

THEY WERE OUTSIDE a waterfall this time. She was looking out over a small ledge thick with moss, above a deep pool that caught the falling water with a dull roar. It was mid-afternoon, and the weather was perfect--nice and cool, but sunny. Other than the water, the only sounds she could hear were birds, and a few small rustles that might have been squirrels around them.

Otherwise it was quiet enough to hear the leaves growing.

Warmth stirred against her, and she glanced down to see a blonde head tucked against her shoulder and one tanned hand resting on her stomach, a surface a good deal more toned than she could recall herself being since she'd stopped competing in tournaments a few years back. It was Kerry...and yet, it wasn't. The hair, though disheveled, was styled differently, and the hand resting on her bore a small scar in the half moon between forefinger and thumb that wasn't familiar. The body resting against her was darker, and more muscular as well. She could feel the solid weight of it and the rippled curves under the arm she had wrapped around the smaller woman.

Strange. And not. A roughly woven blanket covered them from the hips down, and despite the uneven surface, she felt very comfortable and totally relaxed.

She watched a butterfly flutter down, its yellow and black wings in a stark contrast to the green around them. It lighted on a flower; pale pink and salmon, that swayed gently under the weight of the insect. Its wings were spread for balance, and she watched them almost hypnotically as they opened and closed, seeing the odd, dark eyes on each one.

She looked straight up and saw a hawk, coursing through the upper canopy and arching its body to land. A feather floated down, wisps of brown and tan, and landed on the blanket over her thigh.

Then the sound of the water lulled her back into sleep.

Dar slowly became aware of her surroundings, a mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar, as the well-known comfort of her waterbed combined with the wonderful sensation of someone hugging her. She let her eyes drift open, and saw the muted reflection of sunlight coming through the drawn blinds, sending tiny stripes across her body as well as Kerry's.

The blonde was in the same position in which she'd fallen asleep last night, or, to be more precise, earlier that morning, curled up tightly against her left side with one arm thrown across Dar's middle. Just like the dream, she mused. Except they were in a bed, in an apartment in Miami, fully dressed, of course, not naked somewhere in the forest outside a damn waterfall. *What a strange dream.* Dar shook her head faintly, then craned her neck to examine Kerry's hand, where she'd seen the scar in the dream. Nothing but smooth skin met her eyes, and her brows creased in puzzlement. *What was that all about? Why would she imagine something like that? Weird. Very weird.*

She dismissed the images and turned her attention to the present. Where their bodies met, she could feel Kerry's living warmth, and she almost stopped breathing when the younger woman's hand moved, lightly stroking her stomach through the fabric that separated them. She closed her eyes, savoring the touch and trying not to think about how long it had been since she'd allowed herself to want what she wanted with Kerry.

Not sex. Well... Her lips twisted a little. Not sex, but closeness, that trust between two people she'd only known twice in her lifetime, and twice...twice she'd learned a hard lesson. *Everyone has their own agenda, Dar. Nobody gives for giving's sake, just to get something back.*

Something they want. Something from her.

After that, she'd stopped trusting. You wanted sex? Sure, she could do that. It didn't mean a goddamn thing one way or the other. But nobody got inside, nobody got to where it would hurt if they turned out to be scum, or if they walked away, or if they told her thanks, but they'd gotten what they wanted and now she meant nothing. No. Twice was enough. And yet here she was, after all those years, thinking about trusting again. About letting Kerry inside, letting her get hold of the little bits and pieces of vulnerability that were left in there, and trusting her not to scrape them raw again.

She hardly even knew Kerry. *What am I thinking of?* Hell, she didn't even know if she was capable of it anymore, never mind if it was a good idea. She sighed, and looked at the clock.

Eleven. Well, I got a few hours of sleep, anyway. Better get up and see what's going on at the office, and...

Kerry nestled closer, making a soft sound of contentment, her breath warming Dar's skin through the cotton. It felt so good--the touch of her skin, the smell of her. It was like drowning. She tightened her arm around Kerry and exhaled softly. Unexpectedly, she found her eyes drifting shut as her body relaxed against Kerry's, the younger woman's peaceful somnolence coaxing her back into sleep. *No sense in forcing the kid to wake up. She worked hard last night, right? A few more minutes won't hurt.*

Kerry realized where she was before she opened her eyes this time. She caught her breath, but resisted panic when she felt the secure hold wrapped around her and realized Dar knew she was there, and hadn't minded. So she relaxed and enjoyed the sensation, her head pillowed on a very nice shoulder and her ear pressed against Dar's chest, letting her senses absorb the closeness, and

the distinctive scent of her--faint traces of perfume, of soap, the clean cotton smell of her pajamas. Each one was ordinary, but in combination they painted a unique portrait of her new friend. Kerry decided she liked it.

She could hear the heartbeat, slow and steady, and feel the movement as Dar breathed, and decided it was a really comforting sound to wake up to. She opened her eyes and shifted a little, peering up at the angular face above her to see Dar completely relaxed in sleep.

Jesus...she looks so young like that, Kerry mused in faint surprise. Without the wary intelligence that so characterized Dar's face, and the tensions life had put there, she appeared no older than Kerry herself, and the blonde woman found herself wondering just how true that was. Surely someone who was in a position like hers had to be older, had to be more experienced. *Right?* And yet, there was no hint of silver in that dark head, and the creases along her eyes were those Kerry had seen in even the youngest adults in Miami, from the constant squinting into the brilliant sunlight. It would be easy enough to find out, of course. Just send a query for her graduation date from public school into the Dade County archives.

Her more practical side tapped her on the shoulder. *Or you could just ask. I mean, Jesus, Kerry, you're practically sleeping on top of her. I don't think she'd mind you asking how old she is.* She put her head back down with a wry smile. *I'm not sure this is how it's supposed to work, though. Aren't you supposed to go through stages like meeting, dating, having drinks, going to parties in large groups, before you end up sleeping together?*

She let her fingers flex gently against the soft surface. She could feel the bumps that were Dar's ribs moving under her hand and found her thumb rubbing the skin that sloped down towards her navel. It didn't feel strange to be touching her like this. In fact, it seemed so normal to her it was sort of scary.

How had the barriers that existed between any two people broken down so quickly between them? Kerry was a touch-sensitive person in any case. She spoke with her hands, and she tended to reach out and make contact with whoever she was dealing with, but this... It was almost like they'd known each other for a long time, it was that kind of comfortableness. *Weird.*

She absently traced a line down Dar's belly. *Oh well, I always was a fast learner. I hope I can learn fast enough, though. I have absolutely no idea in the world what to do with her beyond kissing. I wonder if there are books*, she mused, considering the thought. She let Dar's warm scent enter her lungs. *I bet I can find something on the Internet. Let's see... Yahoo, Search, keyword: Sex and women but not kinky. Response: We have found six zillion seven hundred million references, please refine your search parameters.* Kerry giggled softly to herself.

"What's so funny?"

The low, vibrant voice rumbled through the surface on which her head was resting. Kerry managed not to jump, but she glanced up to see sleepy blue eyes regarding her in amusement.

"Um..." She muffled another giggle. "Didn't mean to wake you up. It was nothing, really. I was...just, um, thinking of cartoons."

Both dark brows lifted. "Cartoons?" Dar's voice replied in disbelief.

"Yeah, you know, like Space Ghost." Kerry thought fast. "Did you know he interviewed Emeril Lagasse the other night?" She started to back away. "I have no idea why we always end up like this. I don't, um..."

"Hey." Dar patted her back. "It's okay, you just do it in your sleep. It doesn't bother me." She released the smaller woman, though, sensing her discomfort. They had time, and Kerry was going to need it, to get used to the physical dimension they were developing. That was all right. It was going to take Dar some getting used to also.

Kerry rolled over onto her back and stretched. "You're right though--it is comfortable." She smiled at Dar. "I'll have to think about getting one of these." Then she sighed. "After I figure out what I'm going to do about my parents."

Dar rolled onto her side, and cocked her head. "Your parents? What do they have to do with a waterbed?" she inquired curiously.

Kerry remained silent for a moment, then she looked up. "They're putting a lot of pressure on me to come home." She paused in thought. "And I'm not going to go. It's just that I have to find a way to tell them without causing a family nuclear holocaust."

Dar scratched her nose. "They still want you to marry that guy?" Her blue eyes watched Kerry's face intently.

The blonde woman nodded grimly. "Oh yeah. Brian is graduating from law school this semester. He'll be done by the holidays, and that...was what they were waiting for."

"I take it they don't know you, um..." Dar gestured between the two of them.

"Uh, no." Kerry winced. "That's a relatively new development." A pause. "I, um, I mean, I always just did what everyone else does-- the prom, the whole deal--but I never really...I mean, I couldn't figure out what the big deal was, you know?"

Dar muffled a grin. "I know." She gave Kerry an understanding look. "Been there, done that." Kerry smiled at her. "Yeah, I guess you have. So...when I moved down here, everything was just so different. And one Saturday a bunch of my new friends took me to South Beach."

"Oh." Dar clapped a hand over her mouth. "I guess that was a revelation."

"For someone from Saugatuck? Uh huh." Kerry started to laugh and then exhaled. "Most outlandish thing I'd seen until then was the Saugatuck Duck Festival. Let's just say my horizons were considerably broadened that weekend."

"C'mon, Kerry, even in Saugatuck I'm sure there were gay people." Dar chuckled.

"Well, sure. In fact, when I think back, and I know now what I was seeing, I can remember that. But no one talked about it. It was kept, like the cliché, in the closet," Kerry explained. "Certainly, in *my* family, it wasn't discussed." She exhaled. "But then I...well, it took me a while, but I eventually figured out what I was feeling, and why I was having such a hard time dealing with the thought of settling down with Brian and having a couple of kids."

"That must have been rough for you," Dar sympathized. "My father guessed, and he took me aside one day and talked to me about it. I had already figured it out, so it was kind of a relief." Kerry looked at her. "He didn't mind?"

A shake of the dark head. "No. That surprised me. I'd been scared to tell him, because he was military, and you know that doesn't really breed liberal thinking. But when I think about it now, knowing what he was...I shouldn't have been surprised."

Kerry got off track. "What was he?" she asked softly.

"Navy Seal." Dar smiled at her wide-eyed reaction.

"Wow. I can't imagine what that would be like." Kerry breathed. "It would be...very different for me. They wouldn't understand that."

"Ah." Dar nodded. "That's tough." She thought a moment. "Certainly your career is more likely to advance here than in Michigan. The Troy office really doesn't do what you're good at."

Kerry sat up and crossed her legs, pushing her hair behind her ears. "They don't care about that. My mother left this message on my machine last night that said I could get some secretarial position in the Troy office, so I could keep my little hands busy while I waited to get pregnant."

"What?" Dar leaned forward. "Kerry, did anyone tell them this is the 1990s, going on the year 2000?"

"Not in my family," she responded quietly. "I think they're firmly entrenched in the 1940s." Kerry nibbled her lip. "I could just tell them, I guess."

"Maybe you should start slow...like telling them you're staying in Miami first," Dar replied, reasonably. "Before you spring the 'I'm not marrying what's-his-face' and 'oh yeah, by the way, I'm dating my boss' on them." she added with a wry smile. "Before you add, the 'and she's a woman.'"

"Mmm, you're probably right," Kerry acknowledged. "Though I'd get a point for dating my boss, for all of the twenty seconds or so it would take him before he remembered who that was." *It's a tempting thought, though.*

"You...aren't close with your father, I take it?" Dar asked gently.

Kerry stared at the wall, holding down the wave of sick reaction. "You could say that," she finally muttered.

Dar leaned forward and took her hand. "Don't worry, we'll think of something," she promised.

"Hell, worst comes to worst, I'll route his IRS records to MSNBC."

Kerry rolled her eyes. "That would be hilarious, but useless. He's a pillar of moral rectitude. I doubt he even claimed us as dependents until we were a year old, just to prove we were viable."

She sighed. "But thanks, Dar. It helps just to talk to someone about it." She gave her boss a smile, and squeezed the fingers holding hers. "And I'll keep your threat in reserve."

Dar laughed, then rolled over and stretched, arching her back and extending both arms out.

"Okay. Well, now that it's afternoon..." She shook her head at the ceiling. "I guess I'd better check on the office. I'm sure there's going to be a half dozen emergency staff meetings tomorrow to discuss why our fallback procedures--which don't exist--don't work."

Kerry considered that, and considered all the undone things she had to do at home, and sighed. She'd rather spend the day here with Dar. "Listen, why don't we get together next weekend sometime?" she suggested regretfully. "Since I wasn't home the last few days, I have a ton of laundry and everything else to do."

Dar felt a jolt of disappointment, but knew Kerry was right. They both had things to do, and a new week of work to prepare for. "Sounds like a good idea," she admitted. "Much as I hate to admit it. Are you still interested in the gym? That class starts on Wednesday."

Kerry had almost forgotten about that. "Oh, right! Absolutely. God, yes! If I keep hanging around with you, I'm going to need it desperately." She gave Dar a grin. "Thanks for reminding me."

The executive rolled out of bed and stood up. "Well, let's get going then. I think I have some extra Frosted Flakes if you're interested."

"See what I mean?" Kerry shook her head and laughed as she joined the taller woman.

Chapter Twenty

THE ALARM WENT off in the pre-dawn darkness, startling Dar out of sleep. She stared at it in confusion for a moment, then rubbed her face and slapped at it, turning off the loud buzzer. It was very quiet in the condo, and she rested her chin on her pillow for a moment, wistfully thinking of how much nicer it had been to wake up the day before.

Funny. Dar sighed and rolled out of bed, mechanically trudging to the bathroom. She had never considered herself to be lonely before. Her life had been busy, true, but now she wondered how many of her activities had just been a way to fill up the time. It had been unexpectedly nice just to have someone to talk to over their very impromptu brunch yesterday, and she couldn't even begin to remember what it was that they'd talked about. Puppies? Politics?

Dar splashed water on her face, and shook her head as she exchanged her pajamas for her running clothes and sat down in the silent living room to put on her sneakers. Whatever it had been, she'd spent most of the time laughing, something she didn't remember doing a lot of in the past few years. She sat thinking about that for a minute, then prodded herself to her feet. "C'mon, Dar, get moving. Two extra laps around the island this morning, remember?" To make up for missing out the last couple of days, she'd decided, waking up an extra hour early for it.

It was very quiet as she closed the door behind her and exited into the cool air, crisp with the wetness of dew and the breeze from the sea. Her sneakers sounded loud on the gravel as she turned off onto the small path, then she took a deep breath and broke into a slow jog to give her muscles a chance to wake up and stretch before she pushed them.

The water sloshed against the seawall as she turned into the onshore wind, which was bringing the scent of brine and salt to her lungs. There was no other sound, save the far-off clanking of the port and a soft hoot of a tugboat chugging by in the channel. She could see the running lights of the boat and left it behind her as she headed off into the south.

On the sixth ring around, she could feel the strain start to shorten her breathing, and it pissed her off. Instead of stopping, she pushed herself on, speeding up her pace and forcing herself to complete eight rings, by which time the sun was pouring over the horizon, and she was sweating freely.

She slowed as she came around the northern edge of the island for the eighth time, dropping down into a jog and letting her heartbeat begin to slow. She ended up on the seawall, staring out into the dawn light and letting the sea breeze blow her damp hair back off her forehead. Slowly, she sat down on the concrete wall and let her legs dangle over into the light spray from the waves.

For so long, she'd believed she didn't need anyone to complete her life. Maybe because she hadn't had a choice. It had been easy to confuse sterile isolation for happiness, since she hadn't really known the difference. She'd dealt with loneliness by ignoring it and convincing herself that keeping busy was the key to a satisfying life. *Now..* Dar exhaled into the mist. Kerry's innocently held-out hand of friendship had shaken loose that belief and forced her to look at herself objectively for the first time in a long while.

The past week had shown her just how much of a lie her complacency really was. Going forward with Kerry would add a complicated, difficult, troublesome facet to her life, and the potential for pain and personal problems was likely to disrupt her ordered existence beyond repair.

The intelligent and rational view told her to put a halt to their budding relationship. It could only bring trouble to both her and Kerry, and might result in a professional disaster for both of them. It would be better, smarter, for her to sit Kerry down, and just...tell her no. Back off. Push their relationship back to a strictly professional level.

Dar was startled by the sudden sting of tears and the wave of misery that accompanied the thought. Confused, she rubbed her face and clamped an arm over her suddenly aching chest. *Just the thought of giving up that smile...* Dar imagined the hurt, and then the pain in the green eyes as she turned her away, and knew she couldn't stand it. *I can't do that to Kerry. Hell, I can't do that to myself.*

With a shaking hand, she wiped the tears from her face and ran her fingers through her damp hair. Somehow, she'd find a way to make it work. Her heartbeat settled, and she took a few deep breaths, letting the salt spray cool her down. *Okay. It's just another challenge, Dar. Remember what Dad always told you. Break your challenges up into tiny bites, and by the time you've finished, you've eaten a buffalo, tail and all.*

That brought a wry, shaky smile to her face, and she got to her feet, stretching out her legs and straightening her shoulders. *Time to start the day.*

MARIA LIKED THE early morning. She made it a point to enter the building at seven AM, before even the most virtuous of the other administrative assistants, and she used the time to catch up on the piles of correspondence Dar's position generated, along with the volume of electronic mail, requests of all sorts, papers to review, and other matters that fell under her jurisdiction. It gave her nearly an hour, sometimes a little more, before her mercurial boss appeared, bringing with her a whirlwind of activity, and she enjoyed the quiet time, thinking it was a good way to start the day out. Especially on a Monday, which was never a good day, and most especially since Dar had been gone most of the previous week and items had been stacking up, awaiting her attention.

She heard the elevator open, and the soft sound of footsteps traveling down the tiled hallway and continuing on past her door. A smile crossed her face as she recognized them as being more than likely Kerry's, who came in early for much the same reason she did. The young woman was still getting used to her new position and was anxious to make a good impression.

Maria approved of that. She liked Kerry, and was glad her supervisor had found someone she felt she could work with, and who seemed to be willing to put in the same kind of effort that Dar herself did. And as an added bonus, Kerry seemed to also like the sometimes difficult, often impatient and aggressive vice president, which was quite a surprise to the secretary, given where Kerry had come from.

She wondered if Kerry knew just how close she'd come to being fired? With a sigh, Maria turned her attention to a stack of reports, sorting them and notating the ones Dar would want to see first thing. She noticed the lengthy report regarding the massive outage on Saturday and put that one on top.

After a few minutes, the door opened, and Kerry poked her fair head in. "Good morning, Maria." "*Buenos días, Kerrisita,*" the secretary replied with a smile. "*Dios mío,* did you spend the weekend at the beach?" The younger woman's face was a rosy pink, and her arms held a tinge of the same color.

Kerry entered the outer office and walked over, carrying a steaming mug. "Not exactly." She gave Maria a conspiratorial smile. "I got the boss to take a few hours off in Orlando."

"Did you now? *Bueno, bueno.*" Maria laughed. "I hear things went good there." She applauded. "Did you get to see the Mickey Mouse?"

The blonde woman perched on the corner of the desk and sipped her tea. "Let's see...I got to see Mickey Mouse, I got to the water park, and we got to see Epcot." She grinned at Maria's open-mouthed stare. "Oh yeah, and MGM on the way out of town."

The secretary picked up the phone and started punching numbers. "*Ay!* I am calling the Vatican, it's a miracle," she announced. "I will tell the Pope."

Kerry grinned. "It wasn't that hard, really. We had a lot of extra time between meetings, and there really wasn't much to do other than that," she explained. "Besides, it was just what the doctor ordered. I'm glad Dar got a chance to relax a little."

Maria studied Kerry's sunburned features, which made her blonde eyebrows stand out and enhanced the vivid green of her eyes. "You look like you had a good time, eh?"

"I did," the younger woman admitted. "It was a very interesting bid meeting, I didn't really realize it was as cutthroat as it is. But Dar really handled them. I mean, Jesus, Maria, she just

walked in there and took over." Kerry shook her head. "She blew the clients away. I was just sitting there in awe the whole time."

"*Si, si*, she does that." Maria nodded. "Comes and boom, boom...it's all over," she explained. "Is why so many people, they don't like her."

"She intimidates people, yeah, I know." Kerry smiled wistfully. "It's kind of hard to get past that." She stood up. "Well, I've got stuff to do."

"*Si*. Oh, Kerry, did you get something for her for Boss's Day?" Maria asked, remembering. "I got her a little basket of chocolates. I know she likes them."

Kerry glanced down at her tea, then back up. "Um, yeah, I did. At the park, as a matter of fact."

"*Bueno*." Maria sighed. "That is two things, then." She fiddled with her pen. "She makes like she does not care, but I think, *Kerrisita*, I think she does."

"I think so too, Maria," Kerry told her. "And it's really a shame, because she does such great work, you'd think people would appreciate that." She shook her head and turned to go. "See you later."

"*Ay*." The secretary watched her leave. With a slight smile, she spoke to the closed door, "*Chica*, if she had to get some help, better that it was help like you." Then she went back to her letters.

MARK GREETED DAR cheerfully as she joined him on the elevator. "Morning, Dar." "Where's my...oh, thanks." He grinned as she handed him a manila envelope. "I hear my efforts were worth it?"

"Yep." Dar leaned back against the elevator wall, and produced a faint grin. "We got it. Blew their socks off, in fact," she added. "Everyone kicked butt on this one. When I get to my office I'm gonna go process some bonuses."

"Got mine." Mark waved the envelope.

Dar rolled her eyes. "Jesus, Mark, get a grip, will you? It's not that great a picture." But she chuckled.

Unable to resist that temptation, the MIS chief opened the envelope and peeked. Then he raised his eyes to Dar and made an appreciative face. "That camera liked you. I don't know what you consider not great, but...ooo-la-la!"

"Mark, shut up." Dar gave him a look. "I did it because I promised I would. I don't want to hear about it for the next six months, okay?"

Prudently, he tucked the envelope away under an arm for later study. "Gotcha, boss," he replied crisply. "Speaking of which, wanna join us for lunch today? We missed you on Friday."

Dar relaxed a little. "Sure. If they don't keep me in meetings all day long over the Netops fiasco on Saturday."

Mark grunted. "Shit, yeah. What a mess that was." He glanced at her. "You get some sun? You look a little burnt."

"A little," Dar replied as the doors opened on the fourteenth floor. "I did the Volunteer Day Saturday." She headed towards her office. "And got to walk around in the parks a bit."

Mark moved off down the side corridor that held the MIS offices. "Didja have fun?" he called back as she was about to enter her outer office.

Dar stopped and turned, regarding him with an expressionless look as she put one hand on the doorknob. Then she winked and let a brief grin shape her lips, before she continued on into the room.

"Hmm," Mark hummed, as he punched in the security code that would open the door to his own office. He waved a hello to the four or five engineers and analysts who made the place home and

ducked inside his own, mostly darkened office. He dropped into his padded leather seat and looked up as his assistant wandered in. "Hey, Bill."

"Hey." The tall, lanky man wandered over. "Whatcha got?"

Mark rubbed his fingertips before he gently removed the picture from the envelope and set it on his desk. "My bonus." He viewed the item approvingly. Dar was looking right at the camera, a faintly self-deprecating look on her face as she leaned against a wooden pylon with one shoulder, crossing her long legs at the ankles in a casual, relaxed pose. The sleek black fabric of her swimsuit contrasted with her tanned skin, and the firm, just visible muscles dipped and curved, especially noticeable across her shoulders and in her thighs. "Boy, that's nice."

Bill obligingly walked around the desk to see the picture right side up, then almost choked. "Son of a bitch. Where in the hell did you get *that*?" he squeaked.

"Heh. Pays to do good work, okay?" Mark smirked. "She's got nice legs, huh?"

Bill leaned closer. "Nice everything. Man, my gonads just crawled up inside my tonsils to get a better look."

Mark chuckled. "Sure beats working for José. Can you imagine him in a swimsuit?"

Bill made a gagging sound and mock-upchucked into the MIS chief's garbage can. "Hey, we've got that new 64-bit color scanner that just came in." He gave Mark a hopeful puppy look.

His supervisor sighed. "Much as I'd love to put that on my desktop, she'd kill me." He looked at the photo regretfully. "I'd love to have been the one who took the picture, though."

DAR SMILED AS she entered the office. "Morning, Maria."

The secretary looked up. "*Buenos días*, Dar." She noted the hint of sun in her boss's face and the relaxed expression. "And how are you today?"

After a moment's thought, Dar said, "Great. Things went well up in Orlando, but you probably heard about that already."

Maria rolled her eyes. "Oh yes, Mr. Montarosa was dancing in the hallways. You would think his wife had finally given him a son."

Dar burst out laughing. "I'm glad I wasn't here to see *that*," she remarked with a grin. "But yeah...it was good; definitely a worthwhile trip."

The secretary hid her surprise at her boss's good spirits. *Dar, laughing on a Monday? "Kerrisita tells me you even got a minute to see the Mickey Mouse,"* she informed Dar, not missing the way a little sparkle came into the aqua of her eyes at the mention of her assistant's name.

"Yeah, we had some extra time," Dar replied offhandedly, then she paused and thought. "God, you know, I haven't been in one of those damn parks for so many years...it was nice to visit again." She leaned against the door to her inner office. "It felt good to relax a little."

Maria almost held her breath, watching the gentle, introspective look cross Dar's face. *Dios mio...something has changed in her.* "Is good. You needed a vacation," she told her firmly.

Dar smiled and pushed away from the doorframe, then entered her office. Closing the door behind her, she crossed to her desk. She put down her briefcase and seated herself, flipping on her desktop computer and leaning back in the chair. Then she opened the case and pulled out something wrapped in terrycloth, and uncovered it, holding the glass dolphins up to the sunlight coming in her window. With a smile, she put the piece down on the front of her desk and centered it, pleased at the sparkles of rainbow-colored light it scattered everywhere. *There.* She watched it for a moment longer, then turned her attention to the small, colorful basket sitting in the center of her desk. *Mmm.* She sniffed appreciatively. *Chocolates.* A grin appeared, and she munched on the treats as she brought up a disgustingly long list of things to do.

It was almost lunchtime before she looked up after wading through most of the really urgent matters. She'd just gotten off of a conference call about the network failure and was sipping on her second cup of coffee when a soft knock came on her inside door. "C'mon in."

The door eased open, and a blonde head poked itself inside. "Good morning."

Dar felt a smile creasing her face unbidden. "Good morning." She leaned back and motioned the younger woman forward, watching green eyes drift to the dolphins and then back. "Hell of a day, huh?"

Kerry came over to the desk and perched on the corner of it. "It's been busy, yes. I didn't realize how things could get backed up when you're not around for a few days." She gave Dar a rueful grin. "I just now got my inbox cleared."

"Me too." The dark-haired woman propped her head on her hand. She'd been resisting the urge to wander over to Kerry's office all morning, knowing the blonde woman had as much work to do as she did. "I've got staff meetings all afternoon, and José scheduled a new business meeting tomorrow at nine."

"Marketing wants me to attend some kind of service review panel later on today, and I have a whole bunch of reports on my desk that I think have something to do with network response time." She pushed back her hair. "I'm not sure where they came from."

Dar snorted softly. "I can guess. I told them I wasn't going to touch the response-time issue until exec funded more bandwidth. Looks like they're trying an end-around. They figure you're easier to approach than I am. So Marketing's looking to snare you in."

Kerry's brow creased. "Do you want me to send them back?"

Long fingers drummed on the desktop. "No, go ahead." Dar mused. "Let's see what they're up to." She reached out and tapped Kerry on the knee. "Be careful, though, that's not a nice bunch." Dar's eyes took in the trim figure seated on her desk. "You look nice."

Kerry smiled impishly at her. "So do you. I like that blue suit." Her eyes met Dar's. "I was wondering if it would be strange here today." She paused, appearing to gather her courage, then went on. "Listen, Dar, I was thinking about this a lot last night."

"So was I."

Kerry hesitated. "If... If this is going to be hard for you, if... I-I'd rather we don't go forward...with this...if it's going to cause you problems." Her voice was awkward, and stumbling. "So, if you're reconsidering, it's okay, and I understand."

Dar stared at her dumbly. *How arrogant...* She'd never considered that maybe it would be Kerry who wanted out of this. She felt her jaw clench hard, and a lump form in her throat. *Another lesson. How stupid of me.* She shifted her gaze out the window for a long moment, then back.

She struggled to keep her voice even and calm. "Second thoughts, huh?"

"No," Kerry answered very softly. "Not on my part, I just don't want to see you get hurt." She stared at her hands, folded in her lap. "I remembered how people talk around here, and I know how much this all means to you."

Dar stared out at a sailboat making its way against the wind.

"I know what the rules are," Kerry went on. "I read them again this morning just to make sure I couldn't find a loophole in them."

At last, Dar turned back toward her, watching Kerry's painfully tense body posture shift a little.

"Did you want to find one?"

"Yes," she replied simply.

Dar could see that she was shaking. That was all right. The sense of relief that flowed through her was making her tremble just as much. She reached up and clasped the blonde woman's hands

in hers. "Kerry." She had to stop a minute. "I've been alone for a long time. I used to think that was the best way for me, because I had some very bad experiences when I was younger." Sea green eyes peered at her uncertainly. "This past week, you made me realize how wrong I was," Dar said quietly. "What would hurt me is to turn away from this, just because of the risk." She felt Kerry's fingers tighten around hers. "I'm not afraid of a little talk."

Kerry let out a long, shaky sigh of relief. "Okay, I just...wanted to give you one last chance to say stop," she managed to get out. "Okay?"

They regarded each other in silence for bit. "You just scared the crap out of me. You know that, right?" Dar finally said, in an attempt at humor.

"You?" Kerry wiped at her eyes in irritation. "I don't know what I would have done if you had taken me up on it." She exhaled. "You don't know how hard that was."

Dar studied her quietly. "I know that you're a braver person than I am for doing it." She stood up and gently folded her arms around Kerry, hugging her. "Listen, I have to meet Mark and a few other guys for lunch. Why don't you join us?"

Kerry returned the squeeze, then sat back. "Sure, that sounds good." Unconsciously her hand found itself stroking Dar's arm. She became aware of it and tucked her hands under her arms, giving the taller woman a wry look. "We'd better not sit next to each other, though."

Dar chuckled, and patted her cheek, a motion that slowed and became a caress as she felt the soft skin under her fingertips. Kerry leaned into the touch, hoping no one decided it was time to barge into Dar's office.

"I see what you mean," the taller woman murmured with a wistful smile. The phone buzzed, and she had to make a conscious effort to tear her eyes from Kerry's and punch the button. "Yeah?"

"Dar, we've got a problem in Singapore." The voice came through. "They can't get the circuit agreement complete down there, and we need a conference call."

"Now?" Dar asked.

"Yeah. Unfortunately, I've got six people already hanging on. I was going to bring you in and two people from Infrastructure."

She came very close to telling them to work out their own problems, but a pair of hands descended on her shoulders and squeezed them.

"I'll bring you up some lunch," Kerry whispered. "I think they have meatloaf today."

Dar smiled. "All right." She directed her voice to the phone, but her eyes went to Kerry's face.

"Thanks," she mouthed. Kerry winked, and patted her back, then headed for the door. "Psst!" Dar hissed softly, then when her assistant turned, tossed her a wrapped chocolate.

Kerry caught it and returned a smile, as she slipped out the door.

"Sorry, Dar, did you say something?" the voice queried.

"Me? Nope, just here waiting," the executive replied blithely.

"WELL, I DON'T think there's much doubt that we really dropped the ball here." José Montarosa was hammering on the table. "What if that building had been severely damaged? How long would it have taken us to route around it?" He looked right at Dar. "Well?"

Dar glanced up from her doodling. "We couldn't." She went back to the paper, drawing a sailboat.

An awkward silence fell. "Excuse me?" José asked.

"We could not," Dar repeated. "What part of that don't you understand? We don't have the secondary resources to replace that facility."

"A single point of failure--is that what we're talking about?" another supervisor asked, incredulous.

Dar's blue eyes opened in mock surprise. "I guess it is." She added another sail.

Eyes shifted around the table. Mariana leaned forward, glancing at her in a little discomfort.

"Dar, this isn't a joke."

The Operations VP let her eyes go around the table. "You're damn right it's not. But I'm not going to sit here and pretend to be either shocked or surprised, when I told you people this was a possible consequence when you voted to set it up this way." She shrugged and sketched in a seagull.

There was another awkward silence as everyone digested her pointed reminder. "All right, so...what are we going to do about it?"

Montarosa asked, sitting back.

"You're going to give me the budget to run a duplicate location," Dar replied, not looking up. "Or we're going to have more pointless meetings like this one for a few months, until you realize there is no other option and give me the money anyway." She started on a different sketch, this one of a pony. "You just let me know, okay?"

"Dar," Duks leaned close to her, "you feeling all right?"

Dar stared at him, puzzled. "I feel great," she replied, then looked around at the table. "Other than the fact that I had to spend six hours Saturday night, until five AM Sunday morning, yelling at people until I got the building back up, that is." She paused. "Frankly, I coulda done without that."

They all looked at each other. "Well." José cleared his throat. "Do you have an estimate on how much we're talking about, for a duplicate facility?"

Dar finished her pony's tail. "I sent the full document to everyone here this morning." She glanced up. "Along with a recap of the Disney deal, and the Singapore mess." Her eyes flicked to the startled faces. "Mail server acting up? You all didn't get that?"

"Um, no, I saw it," Mariana said hastily. "I think we can table this until everyone's had a chance to look it over. Agreed?"

José nodded. "Yeah, sounds good. Lemme take a look." He cleared his throat. "Disney was good news, Dar."

The pale blue eyes flicked to him. "I hear you were dancing in the hallway." She smiled.

"Anyone take pictures?" A low round of laughter followed as everyone relaxed a little.

"Must have had good weather, you got a sunburn," José retorted. "Let me guess, you were doing research on the property?"

Dar chuckled. "Something like that, yeah," she admitted. "It was worth it. I think it was the presentation that really pulled them in. We modeled it on their actual running system and used one of their restaurants as the demo set." Her voice took on a touch of enthusiasm. "Knocked their socks off."

José snorted. "Dar, you could present garbage bags and sell them." He brushed her off with a backhanded compliment. "Nobody knows what the hell you're saying anyway."

Mariana gave her a brief smile. "You always do knock socks off, Dar."

"I didn't do the presentation," the executive replied mildly. "My assistant did." She finished off her pony's head and added eyelashes.

"Wait, you left it to some green kid?" The sales executive leaned forward in disbelief. "What kind of irresponsible shit is that?"

Eyes shifted back to Dar, expecting a fierce outburst, but Dar only shrugged. "I had confidence in the package, and I trusted Kerry to present it." She sketched in an ear. "Which was more than your entire goddamn team could do in four months, José, so I wouldn't knock it, if I were you," she said. "Besides, we won."

"Well," Eleanor crossed her legs and straightened her skirt a little, "she seems capable...and a nice person. I was surprised, Dar." She gave the dark-haired woman a sweet smile. "I was expecting a sour geek or a beautiful airhead. You managed to mix and match quite nicely." Mariana saw the dangerous glint appear in Dar's eyes.

The VP Op's sketching stopped dead. "Eleanor, I think I said it well enough last time when I pointed out Dar doesn't hire people to be friends or look pretty," Mariana told the woman forcefully. "She makes my job easy. And Ms. Stuart is extremely well qualified for the position."

Dar put down her pencil. "Are we done here? I've got two more meetings to go to."

"Yeah, I guess we are." José threw down his pen and stood up. "C'mon, Eleanor, let's go get a *cafecito*." The Sales and Marketing executives left, leaving Mariana, Dar and Duks still sitting there. "So, what's up with you, *chica*?" Mariana asked, leaning on the table and peering at her friend.

Dar looked at her. "With me? Nothing. What is it with you all today?" She tossed the pencil onto the table. "Jesus Christ, what's the problem, did I grow horns or something?"

Duks patted her arm. "Hey. Hey, relax. You're just really laid back, and we're not used to that, my friend. Is this what Mickey Mouse does to you?"

Dar lifted her hands and let them fall onto the arms of the chair. "What, because I'm not screaming and yelling like a maniac, there's something wrong?" She looked at the table. "All right, I'll start bitching at someone. Will that make everyone feel better?"

"Dar." Mariana gazed at her steadily. "C'mon now, can't we just ask how you are?"

"I'm fine," Dar responded. "Can't I be in a good mood for once?" She spread her hands out to either side in question. "What in the hell's wrong with *you* people?"

"Dar." Mariana patted the table. "There's nothing wrong with you being in a good mood. It just happens so infrequently. We were afraid we'd missed something, like your birthday."

"Or your company anniversary," Duks chimed in solemnly. "Which if we passed it by, you would be happy, no?" He picked up Dar's pad and studied it. "You have good talent at this."

Dar took the pad back from him. "You didn't miss anything," she said. "I just took a couple hours in Orlando and chilled out." Her fingers curled around the pencil. "I needed some time out."

The HR VP got up and circled the table, taking the seat next to Dar. "Hey, I'm glad to hear that," she said in a sincere tone. "I know it's been a rough year, my friend, and I worry about you sometimes." She ignored Dar's rolling eyes. "And especially since I heard you were under the weather the other day. You finally go see someone about those headaches?"

Dar frowned. "You know, Mariana, I'd really hate to think someone's reading into my medical files."

"Uh uh." The personnel director held up a hand. "Not me, my friend. Just gossip. But now that you confirmed it, is everything okay?" She leaned forward. "Dar, I'm asking as a friend, not because I need to know for the company."

Dar glowered at her, then sighed. "Everything is perfectly fine, as a matter of fact. Dr. Steve thought he saw something in my EKG during my last physical, but it turned out to be nothing." She paused, seeing the honest concern in her friend's eyes. "But the stress is getting to me a little, I guess. That's what the headaches were all about."

"Ah." Mariana nodded.

"So, I took the opportunity to just relax a little while I was up there, and over the weekend, and I decided to try and not let this stuff get to me too much," Dar said. "Last thing I want is to have to start taking drugs at my age. This damn job's not worth it."

Duks grunted. "That is the truth," he agreed. "It is good you feel that way, Dar. I, too, have been concerned about you."

Had they? Dar suddenly wondered if she'd been crabbiest than usual, or what. She didn't think she had, but in retrospect, who knew? "Been a tough year." She half shrugged.

"It has," Mari murmured. "Well, look, maybe after Kerry settles in, you can take some time off. She seems pretty sharp. I've heard good things about her from a lot of people," she complimented the absent woman. "Did she really steal that bid from those guys?"

Dar found herself smiling. "She's damn good," she agreed. "They didn't know what hit them, stupid bastards. She nailed it."

"Good to hear." Mariana smiled at her. "She's a sweet person, and you know something? She's in your corner, Dar. Talks about you like you were the greatest thing since sliced white bread." She sat back and gazed at the taller woman, noting the blush visible even under Dar's tan. "You look good. You got some sun there, eh?"

Dar gave her a slight smile and nodded. "Are we done analyzing me now?" She stood up and dusted herself off. "Gotta go."

Duks and Mariana watched her leave, then eyed each other. "You know, Ducky, if I didn't know better, I'd say our good friend there found something other than Pluto and Goofy up in Orlando." Lou Dreyfus let a faintly sardonic smile twist his lips. "You could be right, Mari." He slapped the table. "Well, let's get going."

KERRY FINALLY GOT back to her office after a very interesting meeting with the marketing people. It was obvious they didn't like Dar. It was obvious that they wanted to be Kerry's friend. It was obvious that they wanted her to give them dirt on her boss. Her phone rang and she picked it up. "Yes?"

"Oh, Ms. Stuart, glad I caught you in," Eleanor Anastasia's voice oozed through the receiver. "We were hoping you'd be able to attend a conference call tomorrow. It's with the regional marketing people, and they just have some general questions regarding some of the new operations policies."

"Um... Sure." Kerry pulled out her PDA, and flipped it open. "When?"

"One o'clock, but we're gathering for lunch downstairs beforehand, if you'd like to join us."

I'd rather handle electric eels barehanded. "I'm sorry, I can make the meeting, but I have things I have to do just before that." *Like make sure my boss has lunch, for instance.* She'd gotten a peculiar pleasure out of selecting items for Dar, and an even bigger kick from the smile she'd gotten when she delivered the tray.

"Well, that's too bad, because we're all dying to just let our hair down with you, but perhaps next time." Eleanor sighed. "Tomorrow at one, then."

"I'll be there." Kerry hung up the phone and made a face at it, then she turned her chair around and gazed out over the water. She felt a lot more relaxed than she had this morning, now that the "issue" was out of the way with Dar. "Mmm. I don't know if I'm going to last until Wednesday, though," she commented to the window. Last night's surfing on the internet had turned up lots of...interesting...things. Most had made her blush. She'd been honestly surprised at the range, though--from women's health sites to pages and pages of amateur fiction.

That had certainly been a revelation. She'd had no idea there was so much creativity out there. She'd ended up reading some of it until way too late, but it had certainly given her ideas. Maybe that's why she wanted to make sure Dar was sure before... *Well, one thing at a time.* She heard a gentle knock on her inside door, and she felt a flutter deep inside her. "C'mon in."

The door opened, and Dar slipped inside, her jacket off and her shirtsleeves rolled up. "Hey, there." She sauntered over and collapsed into Kerry's visitor chair, letting her hands drop onto the arm and crossing her legs at the ankles. "How'd it go?"

Kerry inched her chair forward and propped her chin up on both hands. "Dar, do you know what a limpet is?"

"Sure." The executive nodded. "It's a mollusk that attaches itself to a flat surface and lives off of it." She paused. "Why?"

"I'm a flat surface." Kerry gave her a wry look. "They want to suck me dry of information, chiefly about you." She sighed. "They paint you in shades of black, black, dark brown, and black."

"How'd I rate the dark brown?" Dar smiled sardonically.

Kerry gazed at her disheveled boss. "Hey, listen, are you still open for that dinner and a movie?" she inquired. "Tonight, I mean?" She felt her throat go dry, and she swallowed, waiting for Dar to answer.

A soft, low chuckle reassured her. "I was just coming over here to see if you were interested in doing something," Dar admitted. "I, um..." She shook her head and crossed her arms. "Sure, you wanna see *Soldier*?"

"Ooo." Kerry's brows rose. "Yeah, I like Kurt Russell. I really liked *Escape from New York*."

Dar laughed. "Ssssnake," she hissed, causing Kerry to giggle. "Yeah, me too."

"Great. If you want to, we can stop by my place. I'll put something together, then we can go to the movie from there." Kerry went through her food inventory, and decided that no matter what she had, it was better than Frosted Flakes and chocolate milk. "Okay?"

Pale blue eyes peeked back at her from under long, dark lashes. "Sounds good to me." Dar hauled herself out of the chair and patted Kerry's desk. "Pack it up. I've had about enough of this place today." She walked through the door that led to the back corridor and let it close behind her.

Kerry waited, then she twirled herself around in her chair, accepting the half excited and half nervous churning in her guts as the price she'd have to pay for her bold invitation. "Well," she straightened the stack in her inbox, "maybe we'll end up talking about movies all night." *Sure.* She licked her lips as she thought about what it felt like to have Dar kiss her. "Or, maybe not." She shut down her PC and stood, glad the day was over. Glad the night was starting. *Just...* Kerry exhaled, *glad.*

Chapter Twenty-One

KERRY LET THE door close behind her, her mind already buzzing with prospective dinner possibilities. Dar had followed along after her, saying she had to make a quick stop. Kerry suspected her boss was just being polite, and giving her a chance to get her act together. But that was okay, she needed it, and it was okay that she had a minute to settle her thoughts. Except they weren't getting very settled. They bounced back and forth between blue eyes and that lazy smile Dar had given her before they left the office, and she knew her hormones were busy dancing the mamba in her bloodstream which was making it very, very hard to think straight.

"Okay, Kerrison, let's just calm your butt down now." She put down her briefcase and took a deep breath. "First things first, change out of this monkey suit."

Glad she'd had the chance to straighten up the place the day before, she went into her bedroom. She chose a pair of black jeans and a lavender polo shirt, slipping into them and tucking in the shirt and buckling the thin, leather belt.

Her reflection looked back at her, and she smoothed her fingers over the dark denim surface and watched as her breathing pulled the soft cotton of her shirt taut against her body. "Well, these aren't as baggy as they used to be, that's for sure, but I guess it looks okay." The jeans fit snugly around her body, attesting to her past few weeks of culinary indulgence, but the effect wasn't as bad-looking as she'd feared.

As a matter of fact... Kerry blinked at her reflection. *Maybe Colleen was right, I'd taken things a little too far.* Both Susan and Ray had told her she looked a lot healthier and more relaxed since she'd started working for Dar, and she supposed that was true...if she looked at herself objectively, that is. She was sure her parents wouldn't agree, though. She straightened her shoulders and ran her brush through her hair. *To hell with them,* she suddenly decided, as she opened the collar of her shirt a little, exposing her thin golden chain which held a tiny teddy bear charm. "Let's see. A touch of perfume?" *Yeah...*

She pulled open her top drawer and removed a small bottle, taking off the top and sniffing it. "Mmm." She put a bit on her fingertip and touched it behind her ears, then put a playful dab down her cleavage. "God, I feel like a damn teenager on her first date." She giggled at herself and put the bottle away, then met the steady green eyes looking back at her from the mirror. "I guess it is, in a way, though, because this is the first person I..." She stopped and took a breath. "The first person I've ever really cared about." She gave herself a little nod of acknowledgment. "There, I said it." She turned. "Right, Pooh?"

The stuffed, smiling bear held out his arms invitingly. "Not now, maybe later." She shook a finger at him, then she went back out into the living room and glanced around, making sure she'd remembered not to leave out her laundry or anything like that. "Looks okay," she told the fish, then she went into the kitchen and stood for a moment, crossing her arms over her chest and thinking. *She likes Oriental. Let's see...I could do fried rice, and... Oh, right, I've got that skirt steak. I can stir-fry that with vegetables. Okay.*

She was busily chopping things up when a soft knock came at the door and she felt a teasing jolt in her gut. "C'mon in, it's open," she called out. The knob turned and she heard someone enter. "I'm in the kitchen."

Soft footfalls crossed the carpet, and then Dar was just there, in the doorway, filling it. The dark-haired woman had traded her suit for a pair of white denims and a blue tailored shirt, which sported a small bumblebee embroidered on the left breast. She was also carrying an amber bottle, which she held up. "Picked up a little addition," she advised, her eyes going over Kerry's slim form. "You look cute," Dar complimented her a smile.

To hell with them. Kerry smiled back. "Thanks. You look pretty nice yourself. I like the bee." She peered at the bottle. "Oh, that was a great idea. If you want to let it cool down a little..." She motioned with her head towards the refrigerator.

Dar put the bottle on a shelf and peered inside, half turning and giving Kerry a mischievous look. "You sure have a lot more in here than I have in mine," she remarked as she closed the door and wandered closer, peering over Kerry's shoulder. "What's that?"

"Sauce." Kerry added a bit of flaked red pepper. "It's going to be Szechwan beef when I finish." "That sounds tasty," Dar responded, her breath tickling Kerry's ear.

Oh boy. "Dar? Has anyone ever told you, you're a really distracting person?"

"Me?" Her boss's blue eyes widened in surprised innocence. "Um, well, no, actually. I've been called a lot of things, most of them nasty, but distracting has never been one of them."

Kerry blushed and laughed a little. "Well, you are," she said. "You make it very hard to concentrate."

Dar looked puzzled but not displeased. "Okay. Well, I don't want you to cut yourself. I'll just sit quietly over there." She ambled over to the small table in the kitchen and slid into a seat, resting her elbows on the surface. Kerry's reaction to her was just so...different, Dar reflected as she watched Kerry return to her task. She'd always been used to people coming on to her, and she wasn't shy in doing the same in return, but the combination of sweet affection and barely veiled desire she saw in Kerry's eyes was something she'd never experienced before.

It was warm, and nice, and she found herself tumbling helplessly under its spell. *Distracting? Oh yes.* She was finding it very hard to keep her thoughts focused for any length of time, and even when she did concentrate, she found herself taking little side trips into wondering what Kerry was thinking, or what she was doing, or... Dar sighed. Like right now, for instance. She found herself perfectly happy to just be sitting here in Kerry's presence, watching her prepare dinner. It was such a strange feeling. She watched Kerry's shoulder blades moving under the soft cotton of her polo shirt, and she let her eyes wander down the slim form, appreciating the curves.

"Nickel for your thoughts." Kerry spoke, not turning around.

Dar burst into helpless laughter. "Uh, let's skip that, huh?" She felt herself slightly tongue-tied, and she realized Kerry was having the same effect on her that she was having on the younger woman. It was getting out of control. "So, where'd you learn to cook?"

Kerry heard the hesitant confusion in Dar's voice, and smiled quietly to herself. *Glad it's not just me.* "Well, it's expected in my family. My mother doesn't work, she's always stayed home to take care of us," she explained. "I had Home Ec and all that in school, but I kind of developed an interest in it when I was in college." She added some chopped vegetables to her fried rice and stirred it. "We'd have get-togethers. A bunch of us would rotate who cooked." She glanced behind her and smiled. "When you have a group of critics like that, you learn fast."

"Ah." Dar nodded, then rested her chin on her fist. "My mother was an all-right cook, I guess," she mused. "I never learned, though. I was...probably overly involved with sports and things of that sort when I was growing up. We spent a lot of time on military bases, too." She shrugged. "I like hot dogs and French fries."

"I never actually had a hot dog before college." Kerry heated up her wok and poured a little oil in it. "Did you ever want to be in the military?"

After a long silence, Dar finally answered in a reflective voice. "Unfortunately, my father raised me to believe there wasn't anything I couldn't do. In the military, there are qualifiers to that."

Another long pause, and then she said, "I wanted to do what he did."

Kerry nodded. "They wouldn't let you?"

"I'm a girl," Dar answered, with a faintly sarcastic emphasis. "Hell." She sighed. "I know they have a point. I know they can't put mixed groups out in the field, at least not yet, but..." She shrugged. "Water under the bridge. At any rate, to answer your question, yes, I thought about it. I took the ASVAB when I was a junior in high school, and I got a lot of offers." She peered at the saltshaker on the table, lost in thought. "I just didn't think I had the self discipline to commit to that and do what everyone told me I had to do, rather than what I thought I should do." Her brows quirked. "And I was probably right."

"Mmm." Kerry expertly stirred the thinly sliced beef into the wok. "Were your parents upset?"

The blue eyes took on a far-off look. "My father was disappointed," she stated quietly. "I think my mother was relieved." She shook her head. "She was an artist. She never wanted me to go into the service."

"An artist?" Kerry tossed in the sauce and stirred it. "Ah, now I know where you get that doodling style from." She laughed. "I loved that one picture you made of that dog."

"I don't...." Dar stopped and thought about it. "Well, yeah, I guess I do," she admitted, a little sheepishly. "I never thought about that."

Kerry set down the bowl of fragrant fried rice and put another of the stir-fried beef next to it, then handed Dar two plates. "Here." She turned and retrieved the plum wine and a couple of glasses and brought them back to the table with her. "Well, the only talent in my family seems to be politics." She handed Dar a serving spoon. "And law. Neither of which really sparked my imagination when I was growing up."

The taller woman piled two plates with steaming rice and beef and handed Kerry one. "What did spark your imagination?"

Kerry ate a few mouthfuls before she answered. "Books, mostly." She exhaled. "I did the usual things growing up. My mother enrolled me in piano lessons, and in gymnastics--the one to give me culture, the other to give me what she called 'grace.' " Kerry's lips twisted wryly. "I don't think either did much. I never took to the piano, and I was, at best, a mediocre gymnast." She chewed thoughtfully. "I can play 'Chopsticks.' "

Dar chuckled. "So can I if I use both hands and both feet, and you don't listen too closely." She smiled "This is great, by the way." She held up a forkful, then she paused to pour them both a glass of wine. "What kind of books do you like?"

Kerry took a sip of the wine. "You'll laugh, but mostly science fiction...and some historical novels."

Dar gave her a puzzled look. "Why would I laugh? That's what most geeks like to read, myself included," she said in a mild voice. "Not that I have time anymore," she added with a sigh. "So what led you into computers?"

"I didn't want to end up as an English teacher," Kerry replied wryly. "And I...well, I always had a liking for machinery. I used to take apart things--you know, like phones and stuff." She laughed a bit. "When I got to college, I realized there was a computer science track that was pretty close to the general English track I was already on, so I double-majored." She paused and took another sip of wine. "What about you?" It was, she suddenly realized, the first time they'd just sat down and talked about really personal stuff, and she was surprised at how comfortable she felt.

Dar bit a piece of beef in half and chewed it. "What about me? Well, I was always interested in programming--that's what I studied in school. But somewhere along the way, I decided all those lines of code just couldn't hold my interest." She reflected a moment. "Wasn't enough of a challenge, so I went into system analysis and design and from there, into engineering and operations."

"Luckily for us." Kerry smiled.

"Opinions on that vary," Dar replied dryly. She drained her glass and poured a second.

"Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it." She toyed with the glass. "I spend a lot of time ignoring the cuts and digs, but it gets old."

Kerry got up and took their empty plates, setting them in the sink, then returning to put her hands on Dar's shoulders. "I kind of got that feeling...." She tried, but couldn't keep herself from leaning forward, and only barely kept herself from gently kissing Dar's sleek head. "So, if you

start getting complaints that your assistant is whacking people for saying nasty things about you, don't be surprised."

Dar was touched, and she eased back, pressing her body against Kerry's and gazing up at her with a slight smile. "That's sweet of you, Kerry, but I don't think it'll do much good." She lifted a hand and covered the one on her right shoulder, squeezing it gently. "Not that I don't appreciate the thought, though."

Kerry drank in her closeness. "It'll make me feel better," she objected softly. "Really." She looked down into the pale blue eyes and saw a softening there, making her give in to her craving and bend her head, finding Dar's waiting lips with unerring accuracy. A touch traveled up her arm, softly stroking, and Kerry felt her body respond to it, as she closed her eyes and let the gentle probing and tasting continue. *It feels so good...* She could feel Dar's fingers slipping up past her elbow and brushing against her side, making her breathing catch. She felt short of breath and her heart started to pound as she eased her own hands lower, touching bare skin.

Everything shifted then as Dar unexpectedly slid an arm around her waist and tugged her down. Kerry found herself in the dark-haired woman's lap, with those strong arms wrapping around her and every inch of her body tingling in pure reaction. Her own arms slid up around Dar's neck, then one started traveling down, moving across the slope of her neck muscles, and down her shoulder.

Dar knew she should slow down and take it easy, but her body wouldn't relinquish its gentle contact. Her hands moved of their own accord, stroking and exploring the warm curves of the body tucked into her arms with insatiable curiosity. She could feel Kerry's breathing deepen and go ragged and her own wasn't doing much better. *Easy...easy. Not yet.* She lightened up on the intensity and felt Kerry do the same, until they broke off, and Kerry buried her face against Dar's shoulder. "Whoa." She wrapped her arms around Kerry's body and held her, rubbing her back gently. "Easy there."

"Whew," Kerry muttered, feeling her heartbeat start to slow. "That was intense." She decided being embarrassed at this point would be kind of ridiculous, so she lifted her head and just looked at Dar. "This is not going according to plan."

Both dark eyebrows lifted teasingly. "It's not?" Dar protested mildly. "I thought it was working out pretty well." She still had her arms around Kerry, but now she loosened her grasp and backed off a little.

"No...um...that's not what I...uh." She gave up. "We were supposed to go to the movie first," she explained wryly, reaching up and pushing back a bit of Dar's dark hair.

"Oh. Oh, right." Dar nodded in understanding. "But other than that?"

"Mmm." Kerry exhaled slowly. "You know, I did a lot of reading. They didn't mention the fireworks going off in any of it." Her fingers trailed down Dar's cheek. "It's kind of scary." Her breath caught as Dar captured her hand and nibbled her palm. "But nice."

"Okay." Dar considered. "Is this making you uncomfortable?"

A shy smile. "No." Kerry shook her head. "But I bet it's making you uncomfortable. I must be squishing you."

Dar squeezed her, then patted her hip. "Hadn't noticed," she confessed. "Don't worry about squashing me, I'm a big girl, I can take it." She let her hand move down Kerry's thigh. "You want to go see the movie?"

It was scary. Kerry was nervous, but she appreciated the fact that Dar was willing to let her go at her pace, and wasn't pushing, wasn't...forcing. A grim memory filled her mind, and she had to

take a moment to force it out before she could consider it any further. "Well...I, um, I have *Escape from New York* and some microwave popcorn here. We could improvise."

Dar grinned, a smile that lit up her very blue eyes and made the skin next to them crinkle "Oh, I like that idea," she agreed. "And dinner was great. Thank you, by the way."

"Mmm." Kerry gazed at her. "Glad you liked it," she responded, not taking her eyes from Dar's.

They sat quietly like that for a moment, then Kerry cleared her throat. "I guess I have to get up to get that movie, huh." She regretfully untangled herself from Dar's grip and stood, taking a deep breath as she moved away from the seductive warmth. Dar followed her into the living room, and she gave her a little tour, mostly to settle her own nerves. "This is Scully and Mulder and their little friends the Lone Gunmen." Kerry sprinkled a little food in the tank.

"Let me guess--Mulder and Scully are the gouramies." Dar laughed. "Kissing gouramies, if I'm not mistaken."

"Uh huh." Kerry grinned and watched their antics. "What can I tell you, I'm a sucker for a good romance." The blonde woman shrugged. "Silly, I guess."

Dar rubbed her back. "Nah, I think they're cute. Though I thought they copped out in that movie." She chuckled. "And I gotta tell you, the entire movie theatre I was in cracked up laughing when they said FEMA was behind the great government conspiracy."

Kerry's brows creased in puzzlement. "That wasn't a funny part."

"It was if you went through Hurricane Andrew down here and had to watch them work," Dar informed her. "Trust me, if they were in charge of the conspiracy, those damn aliens would have gone home in disgust waiting for fresh water to be delivered."

Kerry laughed and bumped her with an elbow. "I have that movie too, if you're interested." She got out the other videotape and turned on the television, then tossed Dar the remote. "I'll go get some popcorn."

Dar was momentarily left alone, and she took the time to study the apartment. It was bright, and very unlike hers. There were personal knick-knacks everywhere, including several stuffed animals, and a set of diplomas on the wall. One was from college and the other her certification affidavit. A small trophy attested to Kerry's debating skill, and there was a bookshelf against the wall which held an assortment of paperback and hard-back books, a mixture of fiction and computer manuals.

It was a cheerful place; the comfortable couch was in a nice shade of light salmon, and the rug was a pale cream, lending a sense of lightness to the interior that Dar found very soothing. A door to the left obviously led to the bedroom, and there was a small bathroom on the other side of the kitchen. There was a sense of cleanliness and order that Dar found very characteristic of Kerry, and she decided she felt comfortable being here. The scent of freshly popped popcorn attracted her attention and she turned as Kerry reentered the room, carrying a large bowl and a pitcher. She set both down on the coffee table and got two glasses.

"Okay, I think we're set." She glanced at Dar, who was seated comfortably on the couch, and hesitated.

With a quiet smile, Dar patted the cushion next to her and waited for Kerry to settle herself before she reached over and turned down the lights a little and started the movie.

Kerry held out for all of the time it took for the opening credits before she snuggled closer to Dar, leaning against her body as the taller woman put an arm around her shoulders. With a sigh of contentment, she pulled the popcorn over and set it half on her lap, half on Dar's, as they shared the contents.

Much nicer than the theatre, she decided, popping a kernel into her mouth, then snagging another, and glancing up. Dar chose that moment to look down, and Kerry smiled, then held the popcorn up to her lips, stifling a giggle when Dar snapped her teeth down on it and caught her fingers as well. "Hey!"

Dar slowly released her hold, then chewed the popcorn with a little waggle of her eyebrows. That got her another piece, which she held between her teeth as she looked questioningly at Kerry.

Oh. A game. Kerry pulled herself up and took half the piece, letting their lips brush. That tasted so good she decided to try it, and Dar obliged by reciprocating.

They went back and forth a few times, until Kerry forgot to take a piece and just went for Dar's lips instead. She was curled up on her own couch, in her own apartment, and she felt very safe. Safe enough to forget the movie and concentrate on the sleek body under her fingertips instead as she allowed her hands to slip down Dar's neck while the taller woman's free hand curled around her side.

This time she wasn't afraid or embarrassed. It was like diving into something new and exciting, and she found herself more intrigued than anxious. Dar was a good kisser, she decided as they gently explored each other. A hand stroked her side, and she shifted a little as the touch shifted and brushed gently against her breasts. That was an interesting sensation. Her body liked that. She felt a slow building of sensation and her skin became very sensitive, and when Dar's fingertips touched the bare flesh at the neck of her shirt, a soft sound of encouragement escaped her.

Dar's lips nibbled hers then moved away a little. "You doing all right?" she murmured in Kerry's ear, brushing the soft lobe with her tongue.

"Great," she managed to respond.

"You want to keep going?" Dar inquired, running a finger down her cleavage.

A moment of fear, of uncertainty. "I...I don't know if I...know what to do," Kerry replied softly, as she found herself drawn to the smooth skin of Dar's neck, and she nibbled it softly.

"You're doing pretty good so far," Dar confessed. "It's all right, I'll show you."

Kerry felt her way down Dar's body, smoothing her fingers across the curve of her breasts.

"Show me," the shorter woman breathed, surrendering as she felt a pull against her. Kerry soon found herself stretched out on her side on the couch with Dar gently supporting her. The dark-haired woman settled next to her and captured her lips again, letting one hand travel down her body and tug her shirt free of her belt. Kerry felt the sudden electric thrill as the warm fingers touched her skin and traced a teasing line up her midsection, from her belly button up to the bottom of her bra. Her muscles contracted in sheer reaction, and she found herself plucking at the buttons on Dar's shirt, getting two of them undone, which gave her access to smooth flesh that she wanted nothing more than to touch, and stroke and...

She felt a trickle of cool air as her shirt was raised, then heat replaced it as Dar's lips found their way down her throat and her body arched under the touch, a need building in her stronger than anything she'd ever felt before.

The pressure of her clothing seemed unbearable, and she almost cried out when she felt Dar loosen her belt. She felt chilled for an instant after she slipped the denim off, then a rapid heat consumed her as her legs were tangled with the taller woman's and long fingers stroked up the inside of her bare thigh.

It was like an explosion inside her. She lost track of where she was, she only knew that a pressure was building, a pressure that centered itself around Dar's touch, and the movement of her lips and the steady, knowing coaxing movement that brought her closer and closer, and

finally sent her crashing over the top in a shudder of sensation so powerful that every muscle in her body clenched and shuddered. She could hardly breathe, her body convulsed again and again until it slowly relaxed, drawn on by Dar's gentle, easy motions. Kerry was shaking, and her hands clutched feebly at Dar, who wrapped long arms and legs around her, and was whispering quiet reassurances.

"Shhh. Easy." Dar stroked her hair, a little startled at Kerry's responsiveness. "Easy, I've got you." Dar knew that a physical relationship was often awkward for a while, until people got used to each other. But Kerry had... *Damn, it was like I just knew all the right spots to...* *Wow.* She watched the blonde head slowly nestle against her shoulder and she wrapped her arms a little tighter, bringing their mostly bare bodies closer together. "You all right?"

Sea green eyes drifted open and gazed half lidded at her as Kerry nodded faintly. Her hand absently moved up and down Dar's side, sending tingles up and down her spine. "Fulfill your expectations?" the executive inquired, moving the disordered hair out of her companion's face. Kerry moved her touch lower, tracing a series of circles across Dar's abdomen and shook her head a little. "I had no...I didn't know what to expect, but...um, you know, Dar, I really, really liked that." She ducked her head and nipped at the soft skin on Dar's breast, watching her body react to it. "Now, I wonder..." She slid a little closer, wanting the contact and feeling the taller woman's breathing catch. "Let's see if I can..." She nibbled across the surface of Dar's breast, then let her hands roam, exploring the shape and curves of her and letting her imagination take over.

Dar was so much taller than she was, it was hard to get everywhere. But she managed, pulling out a tortured groan when she used her teeth to good effect, tasting Dar's skin in place after place, starting with touches at first tentative, then more confident, until she felt Dar's body convulse and the dark-haired woman grabbed hold of her with an almost painful strength.

She could hear Dar's heartbeat thundering against her ear, and she gently stroked her as they snuggled into each other's arms and just rested. It was peaceful. It was familiar, in a way that Kerry really didn't understand. But she knew that right here, safe in Dar's arms, she'd found something very special.

Well. Kerry felt a delighted surprise. *Yahoo, you didn't really have a clue.* She took a deep breath of Dar's scent and exhaled in deep contentment. She glanced up, smiling in reflex at the half smile on the taller woman's face as she gazed back at her peacefully.

Something was nibbling at the back of her tongue, wanting to be said, and she just couldn't nudge it forward. It was something she felt when she looked at Dar, something that came from deep within her, a truth of the heart her mind just wasn't ready to look at yet. Oh well. It would come to her. "Thanks. That was pretty awesome."

Dar gazed at her, a small half puzzled, half incredulous smile on her face. "Likewise," she murmured. *Boy, did she ever have my number. When was the last time that ever happened? Luck?* She examined Kerry's dreamy expression, almost getting lost in it. *Whatever...* She kissed the blonde woman's forehead and sighed contentedly.

Guess I did okay, Kerry mused giddily. *Wow.* It felt wonderful. She glanced up at the angular face and saw interested blue eyes blinking back at her. A warm feeling re-ignited in her guts. "Hey." She nuzzled a bit of soft, tanned skin. "That bathroom over there has a whirlpool in it. You interested?" One finger idly traced a rib, then moved upward.

Dar chuckled, low and deep in her chest, capturing the roving finger with white teeth and sucking the tip of it. She had a feeling it was going to be long night.

IT'S NOT A dream. Dar heard the faint beep of her pager alarm, and she reached over, pressing the button that would turn the thing off, then she returned her arm to its place around Kerry and let out a tiny sigh. *It's not a dream, not this time.*

This time it was real. No strange forest view, or unknown cabin-- just herself, and Kerry, and a feeling of quiet pleasure that touched something down inside her soul. It felt so nice to wake up with someone. She'd forgotten what that was like, almost. No. She *had* forgotten. Deliberately. It was dark out, and Dar knew she didn't have a lot of time left before she had to leave and drive home to change before she was expected at the office. She stifled a yawn and let her eyes drift closed for a few minutes, reveling in the solid, sleeping warmth of her companion, their limbs tangled together as they snuggled together in the middle of Kerry's bed.

The late-night bath had turned into another long session of intimate exploration, and when they relaxed at last, tired but satisfied, Kerry had simply wrapped herself around Dar's taller body and turned off the light.

Dar could think of a handful of reasons she should have left, but none of them could override the reason she had stayed. Because Kerry wanted her to. So she'd pulled the covers up over them and, surrounded by the clean, sweet scent of the fresh linens, allowed herself to slip into a deep sleep. Which was great, except here she was now, not wanting to budge out of the warm spot she was in and get moving.

Dar sighed, then she opened her eyes and started to straighten her body, hearing a soft murmur of protest from her blonde companion. Kerry took a tighter hold on her. "Hey..." Dar whispered softly in the pink ear near her chin. "Time to get up, kiddo."

"Uhrm," Kerry protested incoherently.

Dar rubbed her back gently. "Kerrrrrrryy."

A sleepy green eye peered up at her. The lashes blinked, then the other eye appeared as Kerry realized where she was. "Oh. Hi, sorry." A charming smile gleamed in the faint light coming into the window from the streetlamp outside. "Guess I should let you go, huh?" she said softly.

Dar hugged her, then released her hold. "Take me a while to get across to the island, then back...and I have a meeting with José and Eleanor at nine."

"Mmm." Kerry gave her a squeeze, then reluctantly moved away, curling up on sheets suddenly cold against her naked body. "I'm supposed to visit the MTC today. They're having town halls."

"Have fun." Dar reached out and stroked her face gently. "You feeling okay?"

Kerry captured her hand, and nibbled it. "I feel great, thanks.

How about you?"

Dar smiled. "Never felt better." She glanced at the clock. "I better get going. If I stick around here much longer, we'll both be late." She paused, then rolled over, and slipped her hand around the back of Kerry's neck, kissing her slowly but thoroughly.

They parted reluctantly, and Kerry closed her eyes, nuzzling the hand she still clasped in her own. "Oh sure, now just leave me here," she teased.

Dar yawned, then rubbed her face. "Believe me, if I had a choice, I wouldn't," she responded offhandedly. "But I think someone would notice if both of us didn't show up for work."

Kerry snorted softly. "Someone? Jesus..." She fell silent. "We have to be careful, don't we?"

Dar remained silent, thinking for a bit. "Careful, but not too careful." She propped her head up on one hand. "I have to admit I've never had to..." She thought about their options. "Okay, I think we need to just act normally."

Kerry nibbled at Dar's fingertips. "Really?"

Her boss muffled a chuckle. "I don't think we should hide the fact that we're friends, I mean. Or that we do the occasional thing after work with each other. If we try to convince everyone we hardly know each other, it's not gonna work."

"Probably not," Kerry acknowledged.

"No matter what, there's going to be talk." Dar exhaled. "Does that bother you?"

The green eyes unfocused a little as Kerry considered. "It's a little intimidating. I know how nasty those people can be. I'm not sure how I'm going to react to that if I get it in the face," she admitted quietly.

"Mmm." Dar paused. "Well, I always found it's best not to deny anything," she commented.

"When people insinuate things, I just smile at them."

"Smile?" Kerry's brows knit. Dar demonstrated, producing a sexy, knowing grin. "Oh." The blonde muffled a laugh.

"Yeah, they're never really sure what to do with that," Dar replied with a smirk. "The more you tell people something isn't happening, the more they think it is. If you just laugh at them, they're not expecting that."

"Hmm." Kerry nodded. "That makes a lot of sense. Is that your trick--all that self-confidence?"

A slow nod of agreement. "If I believe in myself, everyone else tends to," she answered. "No one will say anything outright, but they'll insinuate." She chewed her lip. "You could also try the old standard of asking them exactly what they mean, that you don't understand what they're asking."

"Okay, I think I can do that," Kerry replied hesitantly.

Dar studied her with a sense of quiet regret. "Kerry, if it's going to be too much, we'll think of something else," she told the younger woman softly. "I...I don't want this to be tough on you."

Kerry shook her head vigorously. "No. No, it's all right. It just takes a little getting used to. I'm not really good at hiding things." She chewed her lip. "But I'll be okay. I never thought I'd..." She paused, thinking hard. "Dar, I really like you."

"Well, I kinda hoped so." Dar gave her a wistful little smile. "I kinda hoped it wasn't just that you thought it would be good for your career." She maintained a half joking air, but there was pain behind the statement.

Kerry heard it and gently touched her cheek. "You didn't really think that, did you?"

Dar dropped her gaze to the sheets and traced a little design there. She shrugged. "It's happened before." she acknowledged quietly.

God, if I could find the person who did that, I'd take a cocktail fork and poke them so full of holes... Kerry exhaled. "That's not what I'm about," she said. "That's not..." Dar wouldn't meet her eyes. "I'd rather you fire me right now than have you think that." She paused. "In fact, I'm not going to give you the option, I'm resigning."

Startled blue eyes lifted. "Kerry, wait! That's not what I..."

"I mean it," Kerry stated quietly. "I can easily get a job working for Colleen's bank." She started to scramble out of bed, visibly upset. "I am not going to have you thinking the only reason I..."

"Kerry..."

"No!" Kerry replied sharply. "Is that really what...Jesus Christ." She headed for the door, anger in the set of her body.

Dar somehow managed to intercept her, catching her gently by the shoulders and turning her around. "Hey." Kerry was shaking, and she could see the beginnings of tears in her eyes. "Wait a minute." A pause. "Please." The blonde stilled and just looked at her. "That's not what I thought about you. If it was, I never would have gone this far again." It was a stark, blunt statement.

"Believe me." She felt the tension relax in Kerry's shoulders. "I don't want you to go. I don't want

you to quit. I finally found someone I can trust, who can take some of this job off my shoulders. If I lose that now, I..." Dar sighed. "It won't be good."

Kerry blew out a breath and put out a tentative hand, stroking the soft skin on the taller woman's belly. "This complicates everything." She fell silent for a long moment while Dar merely waited. "I'd rather lose my job than..." she paused awkwardly, "...than lose you." Kerry focused her gaze on Dar's collarbone. "Jesus, you must think that sounds so damn naïve."

Dar gently put her arms around her and pulled her close. "No," Her voice was very quiet. "Not at all." It was, she knew, a big risk. But Dar had always followed her instincts, and her instincts were telling her Kerry could be trusted, despite what had happened before, despite the odds against it. "We'll work things out. It'll be okay, Kerry. I promise. It'll be okay."

Kerry let her forehead fall forward to rest against Dar's shoulder. She really didn't want to leave the company. She really didn't want to leave Dar, sensing that the executive truly wanted her to stay. "Okay." She looked up in the dim light, seeing Dar's features barely outlined as lines of gold and silver, and the splash of crystal that were her eyes. "I'll try."

She tilted her head as Dar bent her neck and kissed her, welcoming the soft brush of her lips and the tingle as their bodies moved together. It was so incredible. She'd never expected it to feel like this, not the deep and wild hunger that robbed her of breath and dignity and made her want to rub up against Dar like a cat in heat. The taller woman's hands slowly moved down her sides and around her back, and she uttered a soft moan against Dar's lips. Echoed by its twin, as the dark-haired woman stepped back a little, and stroked the side of her face.

Dar sighed regretfully. "We keep this up, and I'm not gonna make it into work."

Kerry patted her arm and gave her a wry look. "Uh, yeah. I think I could use a shower myself." She grimaced. "A cold shower," she muttered as an afterthought.

Dar chuckled and gave her a light kiss on the top of her head. "Go on, I'll let myself out. See you in the office?"

"You bet." Kerry nodded. "I'll bring *pastelitos*." She grinned at the way Dar's eyes lit up, then the executive winked and padded out of the room, the light from the street lamp sliding in shadows over her naked form. Kerry turned the shower on and let it run. Even over the sound of the water, she heard Dar slip her clothes on, then the soft click as the front door closed. "Whoa." Kerry leaned against the washbasin and gazed soberly at her reflection. Surely it was the same person who had looked back at her the previous morning--the same almost babyish, slightly rounded face, the same green eyes. Then why did she feel so different?

Well, okay, so it was the first time she'd ever made love to a woman. And if she had to pick a first, Dar certainly was a good one. She was experienced, but gentle, passionate yet playful. So it was a great experience. *Then why are my knees shaking? Why does it feel like butterflies are clustered inside my stomach?* She thought of Dar and felt a fierce blast of emotion grab her, making her lean forward in surprise. *What in the hell is going on with me?*

"C'mon, Kerrison, get your act together and take a shower.

You've got work to do." She sighed, trudging toward the gently steaming water, shocked to find herself seriously considering not getting in it to avoid washing away Dar's lingering scent. "Good grief." She sighed and forced herself forward. "I think I'm losing my mind."

Chapter Twenty-Two

DAR LEANED BACK in her seat and closed her eyes as the warm sunlight poured in her window. She was showered and dressed, and on the ferry heading over to the mainland, only a few minutes later than she usually was. *Not bad*. "Morning, Maria."

"*Buenos días*, Dar," her secretary's voice answered. "I have a note here from Mr. Draefus. Is there a report you were supposed to send to him last night?"

Oh shit. Dar almost slapped her forehead in dismay. "I have it here, I'm...still reviewing it, Maria." She unzipped her laptop case and booted the machine. "I had some problems with some of the...uh, he has some..." Her eyes flicked over the report as the ferry made the long, slow turn into the dock. "Yeah, he has some addendums here that don't make sense. "

"I'll tell him that you're not done with it yet," Maria told her. "Okay?"

"Yeah, I'll send it over when I get in and dock." Dar skimmed the rest of the report. "Uh, I have a set of statistics I need copied for my nine o'clock. They're in my outbox. Can you take care of that?"

"Surely," her secretary assured her.

"Okay, thanks. I've gotta get off the ferry here," Dar mumbled, as she shifted gears and started the car forward. "I'll see you in a few minutes, Maria."

"Drive carefully, Dar," Maria said as usual. "There are crazy people out there."

Uh huh. Dar maneuvered the Lexus off the ferry and out onto the street, turning left onto the causeway, silently berating herself for forgetting Duk's report. "C'mon, Dar, snap out of it. You've got a division to run here." She shook her head.

The short drive gave her time to focus her thoughts, and by the time she pulled into the parking lot, she'd managed to put her mind to the problems of the day, and set aside the distracting wonder of the night before. Almost.

She ran her fingers through her dark hair as she entered the offices, crossing to the elevators in time to join Duks as he held the door for her. "Morning, Duks." She gave him a quick look. "I've got some issues with that report. I'll copy you on them when I get in."

"Fair enough." Duks leaned back against the elevator wall. "Be careful in that meeting this morning. I hear José has some tricks up his sleeve. He's trying to push those government accounts to lower the margin on them."

Dar snorted softly. "Someday he'll learn quantity doesn't do crap for you if you don't make money on it." She shifted her laptop. "He didn't learn from that Olympics fiasco?"

Duks sighed and shook his head. "Not hardly. Hey, listen, Mariana thought she'd get together a few folks for an evening out at Monty's this Friday. You interested?"

Dar glanced at him, slightly puzzled. Usually Mariana did her own group announcements. "Um, I don't think I have plans. Sure, tell her to drop me a note when she finalizes."

"Okay," Duks agreed amiably. "She thought she'd ask Mark Polenti, Barbara and... Hey, she did mention... You think Kerry would be interested?"

Ah. Dar managed to restrict her reaction to a faint shrug. "How would I know? Ask her. She never claimed a seafood allergy or a fear of the ocean, so..."

"Will do," the Finance VP assured her. "Mariana says she's a nice kid. After all, she tolerates you, so she'd probably make a fun addition to the group."

Dar chuckled dryly. "I'm sure she'll be flattered to be asked." She held the door open for Duks to go out before her.

"Well, Mariana wanted to be sure...that you wouldn't mind first. After all, you have to work with her. You might not want to spend off hours with the kid."

She almost--almost--burst into helpless laughter. "Ah, what's one night?" she managed to get out, biting off a grin. "Nah, she's fine. She's got some good ideas, and speaks her mind. Nice change."

"Good to hear." Duks gave her a nod. "See you for lunch?"

Dar gave a half shrug. "Depends on how long-winded José is." She gave her friend a little wave as she exited the elevator. "I'll call you when I get out." When she reached her suite, she opened the outer door and slipped inside. "Hello, Maria."

The short woman glanced up from the phone call she was on and waved, then held out a sheaf of papers in silence. Dar walked over and took them, then continued into her office. She closed the door behind her and moved across the carpet, stopping as she glanced at her desk. Centered on the top of it was a small plate containing several pastries, neatly arranged, along with a covered cup. Dar felt a smile shape her lips as she continued on around the desk and sat down, flipped on her desktop and put down her laptop case. She selected a pastry and bit into it with pleasure. It was still warm, and she enjoyed the taste, along with the sweet coffee in the cup. As soon as her computer finished coming up, she clicked on the corporate instant messaging software she hardly ever used, and keyed in Kerry's network address.

Thanks for the pastries. How'd you know which ones I like? She typed in, and hit enter. After a few more bites, the response came back.

Easy. I picked the unhealthiest ones I could find.

Dar chuckled wryly.

Good guess, she sent back. They're great.

She clicked on her mail, then sent Duks back a copy of his report with a few notes. After a few minutes of review, and the rest of the pastries, she got another message.

I'm heading out to the MTC. Anything you need taken care of first?

Nope. Good luck and have fun, Dar sent back. If you're back around lunch, drop by.

She set down the papers Maria had given to her and started reviewing them, circling things in a bright purple pen that the sales managers had learned to detest with a deep and abiding passion.

The phone buzzed. "Yes?"

"Dar, General Easton on *numero dos*."

She glanced at the phone, then punched the button. "Hello, Gerry."

"Hellloooooo, Dar." The general's robust voice came through the phone. "Just wanted you to know, that flight was pure negligence. A pity, but nothing to do with you, my friend."

Dar nodded quietly to herself. "Wanted to make sure it was all right, Ger. Senator Stuart's daughter was on the flight as well, and he had some concerns in that regard."

A low whistle. "Wow. Intelligence didn't pick that up at all. Howinthehell did you know about it?"

"It wasn't that hard, she's my assistant," Dar told him dryly. She circled another discrepancy with her pen and chuckled to herself. It was going to be an enjoyable meeting.

Easton laughed. "And here you had me marveling at your damn comprehensive detail orientation. That's rich, you hired that bastard's kid? Politically nice, Dar, very nice." His voice was approving. "Never hurts to have a friend up on Mount Olympus."

Oh yes, he'd looovrvvee me. Dar bit her lip to keep from smiling. *Hello, Senator Conservative-as-grass-grows-up from Michigan. I'm dating your daughter. Nice ta meet ya. Whoops, watch that ground there as you fall over; it's a little hard.* "Yeah, well, that wasn't a consideration, but I do have to keep it in mind."

Easton chuckled. "Whatever you say. Listen, you up for a visit over Turkey Day? I've got an extra spot at the table with your name on it."

Dar hesitated, playing with her pen. Kerry would, she knew, be home in Michigan over that whole weekend. The thought of staying alone in her condo was suddenly very unappealing.

"Gerry, I'd like that," she replied quietly. "Thanks."

His smile could be heard through the phone. "Fantastic! I'll tell the wife. She'll be thrilled." He paused. "And so will my kid. See you Wednesday night?"

"Sure," Dar agreed. "I'll make the arrangements. Thanks again, Gerry."

He hung up, and she sat back, considering. Kerry's family was going to put a lot of pressure on her when she was home, Dar reasoned, though the younger woman had been very reluctant to discuss her family with Dar. *Well, Washington is a lot closer to Michigan than Miami is. Just in case.* She pushed the intercom. "Maria?"

"Si?"

"I need a plane ticket to Washington National the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, coming back that Sunday."

"Ay, it's late for that, Dar. One ticket?"

Dark brows drew together. *What an odd question.* "Yes, one ticket. General Easton invited me out there for the holidays. I know it's going to be pricey. Just do the best you can."

"I'll take care of it, Dar." Maria clicked the intercom and she went back to her report, finding a flagrant lie and pouncing on it with a chuckle of glee. "Ah! José, I have your *cojones* in my right hand, can't you feel me squeezing?"

KERRY PARKED HER car in the parking lot and stepped out, locking the doors and putting on her jacket, straightening it with an automatic gesture. The building was an unassuming one, situated just behind the Miami airport, a single-story structure set on a long, narrow strip of land. The company logo was prominent on the outside, and Kerry gave it a look as she walked to the door and pulled it open as the guard inside unlocked it. "Good morning." She gave the man a smile. "I'm looking for..."

A woman came around the corner by the desk. "Ms. Stuart?"

Kerry turned. "Yes. Hello."

A hand poked out at her. "Lisa Andrews, from the account team. Thanks for coming over. It's always nice when people from HQ come out and see what we do." The woman was about Kerry's height, with ash-blond hair and a frank, friendly smile. Her pale gray eyes studied Kerry briefly, then she gestured toward the hallway. "I'll give you the tour, we've got about twenty minutes before we start."

Obligingly, Kerry followed her to the corridor intersection, where the woman turned left. The building was one very long hallway, with rooms on either side. "Down there is the mail room," Lisa explained, "and the facilities room for the contract. We run some servers down there for them."

Kerry nodded, having reviewed the account before leaving the office. "Their web server and two applications servers."

Lisa paused and blinked at her in surprise. "Right," she agreed. "Installation Services are in that suite, and we have an executive area where the account execs have offices and a conference room." She started down the hallway. "Down this side, we have the training area, then at the end, the network center."

"Can we go in there?" Kerry asked. "I'd love to see how that works." She followed the woman down the hall and paused as she scanned her card and opened the door. It gave them access to a large, more or less square room that filled the entire end of the building. Stretched across the floor were rows of cubicles, reminding Kerry of her old offices at Associated. Each cubicle had a PC, and most had technicians inside them, busy speaking to customers. It all looked very professional and very businesslike.

A voice suddenly sounded from the taller walled cubicles just to Kerry's right-hand side.

"Incoming!" A projectile flew over the wall, and she barely caught it, grabbing it out of the air with a startled look. Lisa's eyes popped out as Kerry examined the item.

It was a soft foam dart. She blinked at it, then looked up as a head appeared over the six-foot wall, peering down at her. "Hi."

The man's eyes widened. "Oh... Christ, sorry. It got away." He leaned over the wall and held out a hand. "Did it hit you?"

Kerry tapped the dart on her shoulder, then she walked around the end of the cubicle section and peered down the center. There was an aisle between the cubes, with entrances on either side.

These were larger than the cubes on the floor, with taller walls and overhead bins. *Senior techs*, Kerry decided, as she paced down the row and glanced into one cubicle, where the tall man was still standing on the desk. As she appeared, he hopped down and put his hands in his pockets.

"What did this come from?" Kerry asked, glancing around. The tops of the cabinets were full of toys and small figurines. Beside her, Lisa looked mortified.

The man cleared his throat and pulled a large colorful gun out from behind a set of books and handed it to her.

"Mmm." Kerry took the item and examined it, pulling back the mechanism and putting the dart in place. She raised it and released the trigger. The missile went flying, smacking into the door at the end of the aisle.

Heads popped out of the cubes and looked at her. The denizen of the end cube reached out and plucked the dart off the door, where it had stuck and glanced back down the row. "What in the hell is going on here?" the woman asked, pulling off her headset and hanging it down around her neck. "David, are you shooting people again?"

"Not me." The tall man smiled brightly. He pointed at Kerry. "She did it."

Kerry sauntered down the row until she was at the end cube and plucked the dart from the woman's fingers. "You guys support these?" she inquired, holding up the gun.

The woman's eyebrow rose. "Stress relief," she explained. "For when you deal with the customers who can't find the on/off switch." She leaned out. "You're not supposed to shoot visiting suits with them," she accused the tall man, who smiled charmingly.

"Are the customers really like that?" Kerry asked, aware of Lisa's hovering form. "Doesn't sound like the proper respect for them."

The woman paused. "Want to listen to one?" There was a challenge in the invitation.

"Sure." Kerry smiled, put the gun down and pulled up a chair from the next cube over. She was handed a spare headset, which she put on, and she moved a little closer as the technician resumed her seat.

"Don't talk unless you want the customer to hear you," she was instructed. "That mic is live."

Kerry nodded, glancing around. The cube was filled with technical manuals and a few personal items, including several small stuffed animals sitting on the monitor. Various lists of phone numbers were tacked on the wall, along with a sheaf of certification affidavits and circuit diagrams. The technician called up a screen and punched a button on the phone. "Here we go."

A soft ding sounded, then a voice came on the line. The technician smoothly answered, identifying the support group. "How can I help you?"

"Hello?" a hesitant voice answered. "Um, is this the computer people?"

"Yes, ma'am, it is. What seems to be the problem?" The technician's voice was calm and soothing.

"My machine won't work," the woman answered, a little more certainly.

"Okay. Is there anything on the screen?" the tech asked.

"No."

"Okay, Are there any lights on the front of the screen?"

"No."

"Okay. The screen is attached to a computer. Are there any lights on that?" The technician called up the customer account and checked their inventory.

"I don't have a computer, I just have a screen," the woman objected.

Kerry covered the mic. "She has to have one, doesn't she?"

The tech nodded. "Okay, in the back of the screen there are some cables. One of them goes to the wall, the other one goes to something else.

"Okay." The woman's voice was doubtful. "Okay, yes, I see it."

"Where does the other one go to?"

"The foot warmer." Now the woman sounded more confident again. "But it's hot today, so I had to turn it off."

"Okay, can we turn it on for a minute?" the tech requested patiently.

"But my feet aren't cold," the customer insisted.

"I know, but I'd like to try something. Can you just put it on for a minute?"

"Okay." A sigh. "Oh, the screen just came on. Look at that."

Kerry covered her eyes, silently mouthing, "I can't believe it."

The dark-haired woman chuckled noiselessly and shrugged. "Okay, what's on the screen?" the tech asked, rapidly typing information into the screen.

"Some letters."

"Okay, tell me when the green screen comes up."

"Okay." A little silence fell. "Okay, it's up."

"Can you login for me?" the technician added notes to the trouble ticket on the screen.

"What's that?" The customer asked. "I never have this screen. My boss always puts it in the blue screen for me."

"Okay, type in the word res for me."

"Okay."

"Now type it in again, but you won't see it on the screen," the tech patiently instructed.

"Okay, I...oh! There's my blue screen!" The woman sounded delighted. "You're a genius!"

"Glad it's working. Okay, now listen--you have to leave the foot warmer on, all right?" the technician told her, closing out the ticket.

"Oh. Well, okay, I guess I can just take my shoes off if my feet start getting hot," the woman decided. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, ma'am. Have a nice day." The tech hit the Release button, then turned her head and raised an eyebrow at Kerry.

Kerry simply patted her on the shoulder and stood up. "Where did you get this dart gun?"

"Toys R Us," the tall man supplied helpfully. "They've got super-soakers there too, if you want to have some real fun."

"Mmm." Kerry turned back to the woman who had answered the call. "Are they all like that?"

The tech chuckled. "No. You get a range, just like in everything else. But we get a fair share of that." She turned as the phone rang and put her headset back on. "Yes?" A pause. "Can you ping them?" Another pause. "Shit. Okay, what's the address?"

Kerry turned away, but not before noting the name on the identification tag next to the cubicle.

"Okay. Well, that was informative," she told Lisa. "Shall we?"

There was an awkward little silence as they left the busy room. "Sorry about that, I should have..."

Kerry up put a hand. "Don't worry about it. It's better to release stress like that than on each other. Or the customers." She paused. "Is there a Toys R Us near here?"

She sat through the town halls, listening to the thoughts and concerns of the employees, not unlike the ones with which she was familiar: job stress, training, advancement, pay raises. They were caught in a paradox. Provide the techs the training they were asking for, and chances were they'd leave and go elsewhere, at higher pay. Don't provide it, and you erode your skill sets and make the account less valuable. Kerry sighed. There really was no good answer. You tried to balance the training with the need and give enough other amenities so that people stayed because they were comfortable with the environment. Their benefits package was a good one, but...

She put the thought away for the moment and checked her watch as she stepped out of the building into the warm sunlight. It felt good after the chilly air conditioning, and she rubbed her arms, then glanced around as Lisa Andrews joined her. "Well, thanks for inviting me down. That was very interesting," she told the account executive. "I appreciated seeing everything."

"Anytime." Lisa folded her arms. "You interested in lunch?"

"Well, I actually have to get back to the office, I'm a little late for a meeting." Kerry glanced around. "Is there any place around here where I can just pick something up?"

"I TOLD YOU before, José, you can't margin those circuits," Dar stated flatly, leaning forward and pinning him with her pale eyes. "I'm not going to approve that."

The stocky sales executive stood up and threw out his hands. "Then you give me a goddamn way to get twenty percent new sales this year."

"That's not my job."

"It is your damn job, because you won't let me do mine," José retorted.

"He's right, Dar. You're strangling our marketing efforts," Eleanor interjected smoothly. "How can we compete if we can't project capability?"

"You mean, how can you get contracts if you can't lie?" Dar snapped. "You're not projecting capability--you know perfectly well what the growth curve is for infrastructure--you just want to promise clients services we can't fulfill." She stood up and faced them, putting her fingertips on the table and leaning over it. "I'm not buying it."

"Then you'd better start pushing infrastructure, because otherwise, that's who's going to have this crap laid on their doorstep. They're not keeping up with our needs," José stated triumphantly.

"They're not budging, José. You know better," Dar growled. "You need to get more creative and stop relying on your old fishing buddies in order to get new contracts."

"Dar, that's not fair," Eleanor interrupted, putting up a meticulously manicured finger. "You're failing to provide us the tools we need to properly sell this company."

"No." The knives came out. "You just couldn't market your way out of a paper bag," Dar told her.

"And you'd better change that, because I'm not approving any bid that overreaches our capability." She slammed the papers down on the table. "Now, if we're done with this crap, I have productive work I could be doing." She gathered up her pad and pens and pushed her chair back, stalking out of the room and slamming the door behind her. She paused to listen to the loud voices starting behind her and grinned, then she exited the flashy offices that housed the Sales department and headed back toward her own domain. It was lunchtime, but she knew she didn't really have time to go downstairs before the one o'clock conference call. With a sigh, she pushed open her outer office door and gave Maria a smile. "Any disasters I should know about?"

Maria glanced up. "Mmm. Nothing since you left, Dar. You have three messages. I left them on your desk, and I was supposed to remind you of the Government division cocktail party tonight." Dar blew out a breath. *Damn. I'd forgotten that.* "All right, thanks." She entered her office and closed the door, then crossed the room and seated herself at her desk. A moment later, a soft knock came on her inner door. "C'mon in." She felt a smile coming onto her face even as the wooden panel opened, and Kerry's blonde head poked itself inside. "Hey." *God, it feels good to see her.* Kerry was dressed in a dark blue skirt suit and pale blue shirt, and she looked slightly mussed and, to Dar's eyes, very sexy. Her annoyance with José ebbed away. "Hey."

A flash of white as Kerry returned the smile, then the blonde woman came in, holding up a bag. "Did you get a chance to have lunch? I brought something back for you."

"No, and thank you," Dar replied, leaning back in her chair. "I just got out of a really annoying meeting."

Kerry settled on the edge of the desk and opened the bag, spreading out a napkin, then setting out a container of Chinese food. "They have a limited selection around there, and I didn't think you'd appreciate Taco Bell."

Dar peeked inside the container and grinned. "Good choice." She sniffed the sweet and spicy chicken appreciatively. "I was in the mood for this today. How'd you guess?"

"I think I just got lucky." Kerry chuckled and handed her a pair of chopsticks. "Oh, and, um..." She overturned her cupped hand and poured a trickle of silver-wrapped Hershey's kisses on the desk. "Dessert."

"Heh." Dar immediately abandoned the chicken and pounced on the chocolate. "Listen, be careful in that meeting you've got with Eleanor this afternoon. I just offended her pretty badly." She happily munched a kiss. "On top of it, I have to be nice to her at a cocktail party tonight." Kerry grimaced. "Thanks for warning me. Tonight's my skating night with Colleen. I'll be ready to let out some frustration by the time I get done with them, I bet." She paused, seeming to want to go on, but fell silent.

"We still on for tomorrow night?" Dar asked, watching her face. "If you want, we can go back to my place afterward. Maybe take a swim in the pool?"

Sea green eyes warmed. "I'd like that."

Dar silently unwrapped one of the kisses and handed it to her, eyes twinkling.

The opening door surprised both of them and they jumped a little. Maria entered, giving them a glance, then smiling. "Ah, *Kerrisita*, I have mail for you." She bustled forward and handed Kerry several pieces of mail. "Dar, I got your tickets, but *Dios mío*, it is expensive." She handed the executive an itinerary. "And remember, you have your follow-up visit to your doctor tomorrow." Dar nodded, taking the sheet and examining it. "Great. Thanks, Maria." She thought a minute. "It probably won't take long tomorrow, I'm his first visit. He just wants to repeat the bloodwork he did last time." She glanced at her watch. "Let me swallow this, and I gotta get going."

"Me too." Kerry nodded. "Wish me luck."

The dark-haired woman rolled her eyes. "Good luck. And remember, she's probably in a foul mood." Dar thought a minute. "Especially since she probably missed lunch." She grinned evilly and bit a piece of chicken in half.

Kerry groaned. "All right. See you all later." She got off the desk and left the office, leaving Maria shuffling papers and Dar chewing.

The door closed. "*Ay*, she is such a nice person, Dar." Maria sighed. "So sweet."

"Mmm, yeah. It was nice of her to bring me back some lunch. She's a good kid," Dar replied offhandedly. "Glad I found her."

"Si, is good," Maria agreed. "And how is your headaches?"

Dar took a breath to answer, then stopped. She blinked. "I...I haven't had one since I went home that day," she murmured, a little disconcerted. "Now how do you like that?"

"Is good! Maybe seeing Mickey Mouse helped," Maria suggested.

"Maybe." Dar took another bite of chicken and smiled in return.

"Or maybe it is *Kerrisita* being so nice to you, yes?" Maria asked with an impish expression.

Dar paused in mid-chew and looked at her.

"I will go make copies now. Enjoy your lunch, *Jefa*." Her admin bustled out, closing the door softly behind her and leaving Dar in wide-eyed silence.

KERRY STRAPPED ON the Rollerblades, looking up as a knock came at the door. "C'mon in, Col," she called out cheerfully, then grinned as the door popped open and Colleen came rolling in, waving her hands for balance. "Hey, watch it!"

The redhead plopped down on the couch, sticking her wheeled feet out in front of her. "Hey, Ker, what's up?" Her eyes twinkled mischievously at her friend. "Was that Dar's Lexus out there last night?"

Was it only last night? Jesus. "Um...yeah," Kerry knew she was blushing, "it was. She came over for dinner."

Colleen chuckled in triumph. "I knew it. We think you two are *soooooo* cute together."

Kerry's head came up so fast it made her dizzy. "What? Who is we?"

The redhead noted that her friend didn't dispute the statement. "Ray and Susan and me. We hung around talking about you Saturday night." She grinned unrepentantly at Kerry's shocked look.

"Okay, okay, so she passed the grilling. She's not a gorgon."

"C'mon, Colleen, it was just dinner." Kerry tried a weak laugh. "You're acting like we're a couple or something." After a slight silence, Kerry looked up and saw her friend gazing at her, a knowing look on her face. They stared at each other for a long, tense moment before Kerry sighed and dropped her gaze, looking down at a pair of knotted hands between her knees.

Colleen got up and rolled over, crouching down next to her and putting a hand on her knee.

"Kerry, if it makes you happy, it's all right."

"It's not all right." Kerry looked up. "She's my boss, Colleen. It's against company rules, and we could both get in a lot of trouble." She couldn't keep the tiny smile from stretching her lips.

"We're trying to keep it a secret. I think we're doing a miserable job of it, though, if you guys came to that conclusion after just having dinner with us."

"Well..."

"Before we'd even so much as kissed each other," Kerry finished, resting her chin on one fist.

"Am I wearing a sign or something?"

Colleen sat down on the floor and crossed her legs, careful not to boot her friend in the shins with the Rollerblades. "Listen, hon, let me 'splain something to you about something we call chemistry." She put a fingertip on Kerry's knee. "Do you know what I'm talking about?"

Kerry exhaled. "Not really, unless you're referring to periodic tables or something bizarre like that."

"Okay. Well, chemistry is when something clicks between two people. You can see it on the TV screen sometimes, but not always because those are people who are playing characters, you know?"

Kerry's brow creased. "Not exactly."

Colleen thought. "Okay, have you ever seen a Richard Burton and Liz Taylor movie?"

"Um, sure, that Roman thing. Yeah, okay." Kerry nodded. "They're really good together, I thought. I really believed they were in love with each other."

"Well, they were," Colleen smiled at her, "in real life. And that showed when they were on the screen together, too. When they looked at each other, or just how they acted...you could tell." She exhaled. "That's chemistry. And a lot of times you'll hear someone say 'those two had chemistry' when they're talking about people on TV, or in the movies, or even just two people they see." She paused. "You understand?"

"Not exactly," Kerry admitted. "I mean, yes. I know what you mean about characters. I usually notice when people are supposed to be in love on the screen, and it's obvious that they can't stand each other in real life, so, yeah."

Colleen rubbed her temples. "I was trying to put this gently, but I can see it's a wasted effort." She laughed softly. "Kerry, when you look at her, your whole face lights up." She glanced up at the startled woman. "And when she looks at you, there's an electricity that I can almost feel." She searched Kerry's face for a reaction. "You two have chemistry going, big time, and it doesn't take a PhD to pick up on it."

Kerry thought about that. "Oh." She made a wry face. "I had no idea we...hmm." She considered. "I didn't realize we were that obvious."

"Obviously." Colleen patted her on the knee. "And it may not be so apparent to people who don't know you that well, but remember, lassie, we've been friends for a few years now."

"Mmm." Kerry rested her chin on her fists again. "It makes me feel good to be with her; I guess it shows."

The redhead laughed softly. "You could say that. But if you guys are trying to keep it quiet, you'd better not hang around each other at work a lot."

"Well, we don't," Kerry mused. "I saw her all of once today." She exhaled. "We're both pretty busy. Maybe it was worse that night because we were kinda...um, I mean...we didn't..." She stopped and gathered her thoughts. "Afterward we went out to Crandon and walked on the beach, and, um, we kinda...I guess we admitted that we were attracted to each other," she finished awkwardly. "So now it's not so, um..."

"Freaky," Colleen supplied understandingly.

"Yeah, exactly. We both understand what's going on, and it's not so frustrating, so I'm sure it's not as readily noticeable."

Colleen grinned knowingly. "Did you guys kiss out there? On the beach?"

Kerry felt the blush heat her face, but she nodded. "Yeah," she admitted shyly. "It was...it wasn't what I was expecting." She relived the moment. "We were just out there, talking about stuff--the Bermuda Triangle and dinner...and--I don't know, it was like there was stuff going on underneath it all. I asked her if I could ask a personal question. I have no idea what I was going to ask but she kind of just stood up and kissed me, and said 'does that answer the question?' " She grinned at Colleen's rapt face. "And it did. It was...very strange, but really nice."

"That's really romantic, Ker." Colleen sighed. "She seems like a really deep person."

The blonde head nodded. "She is, yeah, she is. There's all kinds of stuff going on in there. I think that's what makes her so interesting." She paused. "At least to me."

Colleen nodded a little. "Did she stay over all night last night?" She asked delicately, or not so delicately.

Kerry remained silent for a moment. "Yes," she finally admitted softly.

A small quiet descended. "You all right with that?" the redhead asked hesitantly. "I know...I mean, we talked about how you felt... Oh, you know what I mean."

She knew. "I wasn't...I mean, I didn't really know what to expect, Col. I was a little nervous, I'll tell you that, and freaked out, and a dozen other things, but, I..." She stopped to breathe. "It's okay."

Colleen's brow creased in concern. "She's not pushing you into any of this, is she? Kerry, listen, don't feel like you're being pressured to do something you're not comfortable with."

Kerry blushed a deep red, and scratched at her jaw. "Um, actually, *I* was the one who started it," she muttered sheepishly as she gave Colleen a little shrug. "I'm all right with it, really."

The redhead patted her arm. "Good for you." She smiled. "So, when are you guys moving in together?"

Kerry's jaw dropped. "What?" She burst out laughing. "Jesus Christ, Col, it's not like that. It's a physical thing. We're just...it's not that serious." She paused thoughtfully. "Yet."

"Uh...huh. Okay." Colleen bit off a smile and gave her a nod. "When are you guys seeing each other again, then?"

"Tomorrow night. After the gym," Kerry explained. "I told you I signed up for those classes. If I'm going to keep on hanging out with her, Rollerblading isn't going to cut it." She cocked her head. "You guys have a program for that gym, too. Why don't you come along?" she inquired. "I signed up for that beginner self-defense class, it should be fun. I could use some moral support." "Okay, I could do that," Colleen mused. "It's right down the street from our office, too. And besides, I'd better if I want to be able to see you other than waving hello in the mornings," she teased gently. "Anyway, c'mon, let's get rolling. It's muggier than a hot sauna outside. Sooner we finish, the sooner I can take a shower."

"I'll vote for that." Kerry looked up and grinned. "Know what I wish this place had? A hot tub."

"Hot tub?" Colleen put her hands on her hips. "Well, hoity hoi hoi. Let me guess--does Dar have a hot tub, by any chance?" Kerry nodded with a rakish smirk. Her friend laughed. "I guess this is another good reason for you to tell your parents to kiss your ass when you go home for Turkey Day, huh?"

Kerry finished velcroing herself into the skates and stood up, balancing expertly. "I had a lot of good reasons before that, but, yeah." She finally allowed a frankly happy grin to take over her face. "This kinda puts the nail in it, so to speak. I just hope I can find a way to do it without getting kicked out of the family." Firmly putting aside worries about her parents, she shook her head and plodded over to the door, pushing it open. "Let's go."

DAR WAS GLAD to get out of the damp wind and into the cool, quiet peace of the condo. The cocktail party had been outdoors at Viscaya, and she was glad the less than perfect weather had given her a good excuse to get out of there early and escape the throngs of alternately fawning and sniping sales managers clustering around.

Eleanor had been particularly cutting, oozing up to her and telling her what a lovely young person Kerry was, and how she was going to do her best to steal her away and save her from having to suffer where she was. "She's destined for bigger things than being your peon, Dar." Then the woman had smiled at her.

Dar tossed her jacket down on the couch and kicked off her shoes. "Wonder if you knew how close you were to being thrown into Biscayne Bay, Eleanor?" she remarked wryly to the air.

"Toss, sploosh, whoops. Sorry, Mariana, I know that creates a mountain of paperwork."

The cool tile felt good against her tired feet, and she paused a moment, flexing her toes before she wandered into the bedroom. She slid out of her skirt, hose, and silk blouse and into her

baseball shirt and shorts with a feeling of utter relief, enjoying the feel of the soft cotton against her skin.

Humming lightly, she wandered into the kitchen and pulled open her refrigerator, peering at its vast emptiness with a pensive expression. "I'm gonna get teased tomorrow if I don't put some stuff in here," she muttered to herself, startled when a soft knock sounded at the door.

For a moment, her heart bounded, considering the possibility it might be Kerry, then she realized there was no way for the blonde woman to get on the island without them notifying her first. She felt curiously disappointed as she crossed the floor and peered through the small window in the door. "Evening, Clemente." She opened it and allowed the short, round, always perspiring manager of resident services to enter.

"Good evening, good evening, Ms. Roberts. I'm sorry it's so late, but I saw you pull in." The man wiped his brow with a handkerchief. "The floor waxing people will be here on the island tomorrow, and you said to let you know the next time so you can have the tiles done in here."

"Oh, sure." Dar glanced around. "That would be fine. And, hey, listen, Clemente. Can I get your people to do something for me?"

"Surely. What can we do?"

"Shop," Dar replied, "for groceries."

Clemente waved his hands in a very Cuban manner. "Of course. Give me a list and I'll have Rosalita pick everything up for you and put it away."

"I don't have a list," Dar muttered. "Can she just pick up the normal stuff people have in their houses?" She glanced at the kitchen. "Just, whatever?"

The man's brow crumpled like corrugated cardboard. "Ms. Roberts, I can't have her shop for something I don't know what to tell her to shop for. What is it you need?" He peered at the kitchen. "Bread? *Fruitas*?"

Dar sighed and motioned for him to follow her. "Look." She opened the refrigerator. "I need things other than this." She lifted her hands and let them drop. "If I go, I'll end up with a case of Oreos

cookies, six gallons of milk, two tins of Edy's ice cream, and a jar of peanut butter." Clemente covered his eyes. "*Dios mío*." He rubbed his face. "You want...orange juice? Bananas? Soup?"

Dar thought. "Bananas are good," she answered cautiously. "Uh, grapefruit juice. Maybe some English muffins?" "*Si, si*." Clemente pulled a pen from his pocket and scribbled.

"*Marmalada*?" "Apricot is okay, or grape." Dar considered. "Oh, and some tea." "Pekoe, China?"

Clemente inquired. "The kind you put in a cup and drink," Dar replied wryly. "Just some bags. If they have herbal stuff, that's good." She drummed her fingers on the counter.

"They have strawberries?" "*Si, Driscolls*." the man answered, making a note. "They have a nice box today. The big ones, *si*? All laid out like roses, very nice." She flashed him a grin. "Get me a box of those...and two big bars of milk chocolate."

She gave him a few more items, then watched him leave, sighing as the door closed behind his round figure. "That's taken care of." She found herself grinning in anticipation of seeing Kerry's face when she actually had something more than milk to offer her. She got herself a glass, and checked the terminal, seeing the blinking mail-waiting flag. "Mail."

"Dar Roberts, seven mail, none urgent," the terminal replied, displaying the screen. She reviewed them. "Read six." Her face was already creasing into a smile as her eyes saw the author.

Sent by: Kerry Stuart Subject: Party Time: 7:34 PM

Hey...

Just wanted to drop a note to say hi. Hope the party went well. You were right about Eleanor, she was all over me like white on rice at the meeting, and if she didn't tell me twelve times I was wasted where I was, she didn't say it once. I haven't been buttered up that bad since some Young Republicans found out who my father was when I was in high school.

Wonder what she'd do if I told her I'd rather work for Moammar Kadafi than her? At least with him, you know where the knife is coming from. And he's cuter. She smells like slightly rancid make-up foundation.

Anyway, she made a particularly disgusting joke about you, and I think she's testing me to see if I tell you about it. So I'm not going to. But I did pull the plug out of her remote control while she was doing the presentation, so she looked like an idiot for about ten minutes while she was standing there clicking fruitlessly and nothing was happening.

I am ashamed to say I enjoyed that a lot. See you tomorrow.

K

Dar burst into laughter, putting her cup down to keep from spilling it, and leaning over the counter. "Oh god." She snickered, imagining the progressively more frustrated Eleanor pounding the buttons. "Oh god, I'm sorry I missed that." She gasped, still chuckling. "Reply," she told the machine. "Audio record," she added, with a grin.

"Hey, Kerry...it was worth having to suffer through that damn party just to get home and read this. Whenever I see her in a meeting from now on, I'll remember the image you put in my head of her clicking on that stupid remote she loves so much and getting frustrated."

Dar paused.

"Hope you had fun Rollerblading...I'll, um, see you tomorrow after my appointment. We'll see if that little jaunt up in Orlando made any difference. I think it did, because I haven't had a headache since the storm."

During another pause, she could feel several thoughts struggling to get out and be voiced, but the words just wouldn't come to her.

"Anyway, have a good night."

Dar stared at the screen a moment, then sighed. "Send."

She chuckled softly as she scanned the other messages, none of which really required her attention before the morning. She took her milk and wandered out onto the porch, where the breeze blowing out against the waves was growing steadily cooler. Dar settled into one of the padded deck chairs and propped her feet up against the stone railing, leaning back and gazing out over the water.

The soft sound of the surf crashing against the seawall lulled her, as she idly watched the stars wink overhead. "Star light, star bright..."

she murmured. "What would you wish for, Dar? Hmm?"

Prudently, the stars remained silent.

The phone buzzed softly inside, and Dar jumped, shaking her head a little to clear it before she ducked inside and grabbed the wireless receiver. "Hello?"

"Hey." Kerry's voice sounded wry, yet amused.

"Well, hello," Dar replied, taking the phone with her and resuming her seat. "Didn't expect to hear from you tonight. I just answered your mail."

"I know. That's how I knew you were home," came the answer, along with a slight chuckle. "I, um...just wanted to make sure you didn't freak out when I come in looking like a Klingon tomorrow. I had a close encounter with a truck."

There was a split second of dead silence, then Dar sat up straight, her heart pounding. "W-what? Are you all right? What happened? Did you get the license plate number?"

"Dar! Dar, slow down," Kerry interrupted quickly. "No, no, it was parked at the time. Behind the bakery. Colleen and I usually go down there and reward ourselves with a doughnut after we finish. I was coming around the corner and didn't realize a delivery truck was parked right in front of me."

"Oh." Dar settled back, still unnerved. "Ow, I bet that hurt."

"Yeah, my head slammed into the side mirror. I have this huge lump there." Kerry sighed. "I have ice on it. Probably will go down before tomorrow morning, but there'll still be a bruise."

"Well..." Dar breathed a sigh of relief. "Damn, sorry to hear that. Did you get your doughnut, at least?"

A snorting chuckle. "Two of them. Colleen bought them for me. She felt bad because she was distracting me when it happened."

Dar had a sudden desire to personally make sure the bump was not serious, and she had to bite her tongue to keep from telling Kerry she was on her way over there. "You sure you're all right?" she finally asked hesitantly.

The warmth in Kerry's voice was unmistakable. "Yeah, but thanks for asking." A pause. "Well, I'd better let you get going. Just wanted to...um, warn you."

"Glad you called," Dar said quietly. "See you in the morning."

"Good night."

The line went dead, and Dar tucked the phone against her chin, staring out over the waves, evaluating her sudden gut-level response.

Okay, she was a goal-oriented, over-controlling alpha bitch who didn't trust anyone, and who refused to leave even the slightest details to chance. *Right?*

Right.

So naturally, it was her responsibility to make sure her employee, a valuable company asset, was all right.

Right?

Right. Just part of the job. It was completely professional and normal for her to want to personally supervise the placing of cold ice packs on Kerry's head, preferably while she was tucked into Dar's waterbed.

Slapping the side of her head, she started laughing. "I'm going out of my mind," she concluded, as she pushed herself to her feet. *Insanity feels, she mused, surprisingly good.*

KERRY CLOSED HER eyes as she replaced the cold compress on her head, wishing the throbbing would at least ease a little. In addition to her head hurting, her chest and arm also ached where they had impacted the truck, and she'd twisted her ankle as she frantically tried to stop. *Ow.*

She hated getting hurt, and even more so, she hated being a klutz. She'd never been truly graceful, even though she'd plodded through a few years of lessons in posture and her somewhat fondly remembered gymnastics classes, but she'd worked hard over the years to try and stop tripping over her own two feet and conquer an admittedly shaky sense of balance.

She'd learned to dance, and through a determined application of exercise developed enough confidence to be able to walk in a slim-line skirt with moderately high heels and not worry about going head over bottom into a punch bowl.

So plowing headlong into a parked truck--a big, dirty, white, parked truck no less--was just really embarrassing. Kerry winced and shifted the compress, closing her eyes as the damp fabric covered them and a drip of chilled water ran down her face.

Colleen had convinced her to not take anything for the headache, and also told her she'd probably be best off not falling asleep immediately. So here she was, listening to the Discovery Channel and trying not to think about how much her head hurt. *Yeesh. Klutz.*

"Isn't she a beaut?" The man's voice was so full of incredulous enthusiasm, Kerry just had to look.

"No," she muttered back, seeing the wide-open jaws of a crocodile apparently snapping at the narrator's butt. "It's a frigging crocodile about to bite your ass off, you goofball." *Ow. Talking hurts.* She let her eyes close again and refreshed the compress.

A soft knock came at the door. One green eye appeared, its brow lifting in outrage. "Who in the hell is knocking on my damn door at eleven o'clock at night?" Another, more hesitant tap, and she groaned. "Hang on." She got to her feet and trudged across the apartment, leaning against the door and putting her eye to the security glass. It was amazing how quickly she could forget about a headache when she really had to. She pulled back the bolt and jerked open the door. "Hey." Dar was leaning casually against the frame, her hands playing with her keys. "I, um...had to check something out at the South Miami office. I thought I'd stop by and see how you were feeling," her boss explained.

Kerry felt a smile pulling at her lips. "Wow. Um, c'mon in." She stepped back and allowed Dar to enter, closing the door behind her and taking a breath before she hesitantly moved in for a hug, still timid in their newly physical relationship. "Oh," she murmured softly into the leather of Dar's jacket as the long arms closed around her. "That feels so good." Her body tingled with the contact, and she found herself delighted at Dar's unexpected presence. "I'm so glad to see you." "Let me see." Dar released her and gently tipped her head back, examining the discolored lump. "Mmm, that looks nasty. How's it feel?" She looked intently at Kerry's eyes, relieved to see only a bit of bloodshot coloring them as they gazed into hers.

"Well." Kerry grinned sheepishly. "Up until about two minutes ago, it felt lousy." She blinked up at Dar. "I'm just sore all over. And Col said it wouldn't be a good idea to go right to bed in case I had a mild concussion or something." Her eyes searched Dar's face. "I can't believe you're here. That was so nice of you."

"Shhh." Dar stroked her cheek. "Don't you be spreading rumors that I'm nice, okay?" She smiled. "You'll ruin my reputation."

Kerry laughed softly. "Oh, right. I forgot." She sighed. "Well, I was just moping around, putting cold washcloths on my head...unless you have a better idea for this."

"Mmm." Dar considered. "I'm no doctor, but let me see what I can do. You mind a little company?"

"Not yours." Kerry shook her head. "I mean, if you can stay for a few minutes...I know you're on your way home."

"Don't worry about it, I hardly sleep anyway," Dar told her blithely. "Where are your towels?"

Kerry showed her, then, like a curious puppy, followed the taller woman as she entered the kitchen and opened the freezer. "I thought about using ice cubes, but they're so big, they're hard to handle, and the cold hurts."

"Mmm-hmm," Dar agreed. "You have a Ziploc bag?"

"Uh, sure." Kerry retrieved a gallon-sized one and handed it to her. "Here."

Dar took it, then pulled the blender further out onto the counter and took the top off, filling it to the brim with ice. She put the top back on and powered the machine on, watching as it reduced the ice to snowcone status. She pulled the top off and dumped the contents into the Ziploc bag, which she wrapped in the towel. "C'mon." She led Kerry back into the living room and settled in one corner of the couch, patting the seat next to her.

"Okay." Kerry sat down, then smiled as Dar leaned back and patted her chest. She lay back against the taller woman's body and stretched her legs out along the couch. Dar slid an arm around her and placed the compress on her head. It was much colder than the water she'd been using, and she could feel the tense ache in the bump slowly start to ease.

"How's that?" Dar's voice inquired from over her shoulder.

Between the comfortable, warm backrest and the sheer pleasure she felt just being in Dar's presence, Kerry felt like she was pretty damn close to Heaven, in fact. "It's perfect," she murmured quietly. "Thanks."

Dar propped her feet up on the coffee table and relaxed, gazing over Kerry's shoulder at the television. "What are we watching?"

"Some bleeping nutcase who loves to kiss crocodiles," Kerry replied.

"Oh, *the Crocodile Hunter*," Dar supplied promptly. "I watched one the other week where he and some woman were lugging around crocodiles in the mud." She paused. "I hope he pays that woman a nice amount."

Kerry giggled softly. "It's his wife."

"Well, that explains why he was hugging her," Dar mused. "She must be in love...to do something as crazy as that."

"You got that right." Kerry shook her head gently. "Ooo. Did you see that? She almost fell overboard!"

"He's freaking out," Dar noted, watching the screen with interest. "Oh shit! Is that an anaconda?"

"He's probably going to kiss it." Kerry laughed. "Oh, good, he got her back in the boat, and now they're both kissing the damn snake." She sighed. "Amazing what love will make you do. Look, she's got mud in places the good Lord never intended women to have mud." They both fell silent for a bit as Dar shifted the compress on Kerry's head. "Dar?" Kerry finally said, her voice rising in question.

"Mmm-hmm?" Dar inclined her head. "What?"

"What on earth did you have to check in the South Miami office at ten PM?"

An awkward pause ensued. "Um..." Dar cleared her throat and spoke reluctantly. "I didn't," she muttered. "I, um, I just wanted to make sure you were okay." Sea green eyes looked at her as Kerry turned her head and gazed up.

"You...mean you just...came out here?"

A faint nod answered her. "I, um... You can never tell, with knocks on the head, and I was kind of concerned, so I, uh...yeah," Dar replied defensively. "Peace of mind, you know? I just wanted to make sure everything was all right."

"Mmm." Kerry thought about that. "That...makes me feel very special." She curled her fingers over Dar's where they were tucked around her waist. "Thank you. I was feeling pretty lousy before you got here. I'm really glad you came."

Dar smiled contentedly and let her cheek rest against Kerry's hair. "So am I," she murmured, a little surprised at the thought. *It really was kind of crazy, if you thought about it.* So she didn't.

"Know what I think would make me feel even better?" Kerry looked up at her.

"Ice cream?" Dar suggested ingenuously.

"Close." Kerry gently reached up and curled one hand around Dar's neck; she pulled herself upwards and they kissed. She felt Dar's arms catch and support her as their tongues touched and explored, and the next thing she knew, there was a knowing tug at the waistband of her cotton shorts and the pain in her head was forgotten.

"Mmm." Dar licked a drop of water off Kerry's nose. "Holistic medicine. I like it."

"Mmm." Kerry repeated the sound. "Me, too."

Chapter Twenty-Three

THE SUN CREPT across the carpet, scattering a few dust motes as it splashed its way across the couch and its two occupants. Outside, a car door slammed, and an engine sputtered to life as a weed cutter started up nearby and buzzed into life.

Kerry half jumped up, startled at the strangeness of her position. She blinked her eyes open and frowned, taking a moment before she realized where she was. Still cradled more or less in Dar's arms, missing most of her clothing. "Oh, Jesus." They'd fallen asleep on the couch, with the television still on, now displaying a lurid infomercial featuring Chuck Norris with the sound thankfully off. Kerry licked her lips and fuzzily remembered sensual touches, a subtle craving that grew as she lay there quietly just breathing in Dar's scent. *Whoa.*

She reached up and touched her forehead where the bump had gone down a lot but was still tender, then slowly unwrapped her fingers where they were still closed around Dar's. Kerry turned, glancing up at her companion.

The dawn light peeking in the window slanted over her and painted her tanned skin, catching the barest hint of chestnut highlights in the dark hair. The muscles in her face were relaxed, save for the tiniest movement under the lids of her closed eyes, and Kerry found herself almost holding her breath just watching the tremors and absorbing the wonderful feeling of the arms still clasped around her. It was such a gorgeous feeling. With a sigh, Kerry glanced at the clock, then patted Dar on the arm lightly. "Dar?"

Slowly the facial muscles tensed, then the eyelids fluttered, revealing those amazing blue eyes, which blinked, then focused on her. "Oh, um..." Dar shook her head a little to clear it. "Morning." Kerry smiled wryly. "Uh, yeah." She glanced at the window. "Looks like we sorta dropped off there, and I know you've got an appointment."

Dar yawned, then disengaged her arm and rubbed her eyes. "Yeah, I do." She let her head fall back again. "Unfortunately." A pause, then the blue eyes were studying Kerry intently. "How are you feeling?" She reached up and brushed her fingertips over Kerry's forehead. "Looks better." "Feels better." Kerry sat up, flexing arms and legs stiff from being in one position for hours, and took a deep breath. "Not too bad," she decided. "Buh." She rubbed her face with one hand.

"Didn't expect to end up sleeping on top of you. Sorry about that."

"Eh." The taller woman stretched her body out, arching her back a little and stifling another yawn. "I survived," she replied, sounding a touch surprised. "Couch is pretty comfortable, really." She removed the shirt draped over the back of the furniture and pulled it on over her head. "Glad your gardeners don't trim near the windows."

Kerry glanced down at herself, mildly shocked at not being shocked at being pretty much naked. She retrieved her own shirt from the floor near the couch and eased it on over her head. "Eyah, they're not exactly conservative here, but I don't think my landlord would appreciate ungluing the eyeballs from the glass." She gazed at Dar, then leaned over and gave her a hug.

Dar hugged her back. "You're damned nice to wake up to, Kerry."

Kerry smiled into the fabric over Dar's shoulder and exhaled, then she patted her boss on the side. "C'mon, let me get us some breakfast, then you can take off. You don't want to be late." *Yes, I do.* Dar suddenly found herself very much wanting to remain right where she was. But she sighed and released Kerry, waiting for the blonde to stand up before she joined her, working a kink out of her back with a grimace. "You don't need to make breakfast. I can just grab some coffee when I get there. They have a little café on the bottom floor."

"Dar." Kerry poked her. "You come all the way out here, just to pat me literally and figuratively on the head, and you won't let me make you toast? Get real." She shook her head as she ambled into the kitchen, putting up some coffee and getting a loaf of raisin bread out of her refrigerator. "Dar, do you...yow!" The dark-haired woman had silently come up behind her and was peering over her shoulder. "Jesus. How do you do that?"

"Cinnamon raisin toast?" Dar inquired hopefully, her brows lifting in interest.

"Well, yeah. You didn't think I was going to give you white bread, did you?" Kerry laughed. "I mean, Dar, let's be honest here-- you're many things, but white bread isn't one of them."

Her boss smiled charmingly at her. "I'll take that as a compliment." Her eyes twinkled. "I love raisin toast, especially with cream cheese and jelly."

Kerry eyed her. "With chocolate sprinkles?" she hazarded.

Dar's eyes brightened. "Got any?"

"Good grief." Still sleepy, Kerry put the toast up in her four-slice toaster then sidled over, tucking herself against Dar's left side and wrapping an arm around her waist. "But, you know..." she acknowledged with a stifled yawn, "I have more in common with you than I do with my sister. Weird." She considered the differences. "She hates computers; she hates reading; she hates shockingly graphic but curiously satisfying violent movies..."

Dar threaded her fingers into Kerry's disheveled pale hair and tilted her face up, bending her head down and kissing her gently.

Kerry exhaled softly as they parted. "She'd hate to see that." Her voice was tinged with wistful sorrow.

"Does she know?" Dar asked seriously. "Do your parents?"

A single shake of Kerry's head. "No, they have no idea. They don't even suspect." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "How did yours react?"

Dar hesitated as the scent of toasting cinnamon filled the kitchen, along with that of fresh coffee. "My father knew before I told him. He..." She laughed softly. "I thought he was going to lose it if I told him. I couldn't tell him for the longest time because I thought he...I thought he would be disappointed."

The toast popped up, and Kerry reluctantly let go of her companion and removed it, spreading some butter on each piece and pouring Dar a cup of coffee. "He wasn't?" she finally asked, hesitantly.

Dar took a bite, and chewed. "No, it was almost...what he told me was..." She cleared her throat.

"Let me see if I can imitate him. 'Lookee here, Dardar, just because the generals yap about that don't ask don't tell crap, don't mean there ain't lots of boys that don't like to share a foxhole, if you know what I mean?' "

Kerry took a sip of her coffee and muffled a chuckle. "Oh, I always wondered about that. I saw a special about aircraft carriers once, where they have all those tiny bunks all on top of each other."

"Eyah. Well, we had a long talk about it, then we went over to Sawgrass Mills and spent the afternoon comparing our tastes in women." Dar shook her head ruefully. "That was really strange." She studied Kerry's bowed head seriously. "Kerry?"

"Hmm?" The blonde woman glanced up. "You're so lucky. I can't imagine sitting down and...Jesus, he'd kill me." She gave her head a little shake, then glanced at the window. "Um, it's getting late, I guess we'd better get going. I know I have to..." Dar had set her coffee down and put a hand on either side of Kerry's face, gazing down at her. "What?"

"If you need to talk, you can," the dark-haired woman said quietly. "I'll listen."

Kerry felt her breath become short, and she sucked in air nervously, hunting through Dar's expression and searching the blue eyes intently. "I don't...I don't know what you mean, Dar." A quiet hurt filled the blue eyes. "All right." Dar dropped her hands. "Anyway, the offer's out there." She picked up her cup and took a swallow, half turning away. "Guess I'd better get going." A feather touch on her arm made her glance over her shoulder to see pained and confused green eyes peering at her.

"We don't have time right now," Kerry got out, as though the words were dragged from her.

"But...I'll take you up on that offer later."

Dar put an arm around her neck and pulled her closer, kissing the top of her head. "That's a deal." She felt the blonde woman snuggle closer, almost huddling against her. *Who hurt Kerry?* It was obvious to Dar that someone had, and a dark, bubbling anger erupted in her at the thought.

"Lemme go get poked and prodded. Meet you back at the office, okay? On the way back, I'm going to stop by my place to change."

Kerry plucked at the cutoff sweatshirt and faded jeans. "I think you look just fine." She broke out of her funk and gave Dar a smile. "Guess the office would be scandalized, huh?"

"Oh yeah." Dar snorted. "I'd never hear the end of that." She caught Kerry's lips again, and this time took her time, feeling the smaller woman collapse against her. She let her hands run down Kerry's back, touching and rubbing gently, until she felt the blonde woman's ribs expand sharply as her breathing roughened, and her touch started sliding across Dar's belly, searching for a path to her skin. They both broke off, breathing hard, hands still exploring, until Kerry let her forehead rest against Dar's collarbone.

"Gonna be a long day." Dar sighed wryly.

"Oh yeah," Kerry agreed. "Did you have to do that?"

A soft chuckle. "Don't forget to set up that staff meeting for Friday. If I don't go over all this fourth quarter stuff with everyone, Mariana's going to have a cow." She glanced around, then touched her belt. "Did I...oh, damn."

Kerry also looked around in some alarm. "What?"

"Forgot my cell phone." Dar tapped the side of her head. "I'm losing it. I don't know where my brains been the past few days. Even Maria said something about it." She gave Kerry one last hug.

"Oh well. See you in the office."

"See you." Kerry reluctantly let her go and watched her leave in pensive silence. Then she looked down and plucked at her shirt, realizing she had it on inside out. And backwards. "Jesus." She softly tapped the side of her own head. "That makes two of us."

DAR WAITED QUIETLY as an efficient and far too cheerful nurse poked her arm with a needle roughly the size of an Olympic javelin.

"Just a moment, dearie. It won't hurt a bit."

"You shouldn't lie to patients," Dar growled, feeling the lancing pain as the needle found its mark. "It's not nice."

"Now, now." The nurse patted her arm. "We don't want our patients worrying unless they need to. It's nothing but a prick."

"I've been saying that about guys for years," Dar remarked, trying not to look at the vial filling with the rich, red blood coming out of her arm.

"What?" the nurse queried.

Dar rolled her eyes. "Never mind."

The door pushed open, and Dr. Steve poked his head in. "Hey, sweetpea."

Dar glared daggers at him, receiving a charming smile in return. The nurse finished, removing the tube, covering the seeping needle hole quickly with a cotton ball and tightly stretching a Band-Aid over it all. "There you go, all done." She bustled out, leaving Dar with her doctor.

"C'mon, c'mon, stop with the sour look, Dar." Dr. Steve came in and leaned on the examination table where she was sitting. "I hear you had a moment of terror at the Heart Institute."

Blue eyes regarded him dourly. "I got over it."

"Ooo, aren't we tough." Dr. Steve laughed and patted her knee. "You can play that corporate killing machine with other people, Dar, but I've known you since you weren't tall enough to lick my knees, so don't try it with me."

Dar scowled. "Did she leave any blood in there? She must have taken six quarts."

He waved her off. "Psh. Two vials, you big baby. How're you feeling?"

"Better," his reluctant patient admitted. "Took a few days off, went up to Orlando and just played tourist for a couple days." She paused. "Haven't had a headache since the day after I was here last time."

"Really?" Dr. Steve gave her a skeptical look. "You're not just saying that are you, tricky girl? I remember you saying that broken arm didn't hurt much either."

Dar had to smile at the memory, bittersweet though it was. "I'm not," she replied. "I've really been trying to be good."

He nodded. "All-rightie, then." Gentle hands lifted and turned her face to the light as he peered at her intently. "Hmm, interesting."

"What?" Dar queried, a touch nervously.

"Nothing, I just love looking at those baby blues," Dr. Steve answered mischievously as his patient rolled her eyes. "Seriously, Dar, you do look more relaxed." He patted her shoulder. "Glad to hear about the headaches. We'll just check your blood, see how you're doing. I want to look at your white cell count. That was very low last time."

Something else occurred to her. "While you're there...I've been running into some...I don't know, I guess I've been forgetting things lately," Dar muttered. "And I've been having trouble concentrating. It's starting to bug me a little."

"Mmm?" Now her doctor's face was serious. "All right, I'll check to see if there's anything strange in your blood work, but it probably won't show up there. You having dizzy spells, or problems with your vision?" He put on his stethoscope and listened to her chest. "Ticker sounds all right."

"No, well, not dizzy, exactly." Dar struggled to explain. "Just, I'll be doing something, and I'll just go blank, like my attention gets distracted," she said. "I walked out last night and left my cell phone in the condo. Last time I did that... Hell, I don't remember the last time I did that."

"Hmm." Dr. Steve pressed against her shoulder. "Lie down."

Dar did, letting her eyes close and feeling the pressure cuff tighten against her bicep. Her mind drifted, thinking of the coming day. Or to be more precise, the coming night, and she found herself thinking of Kerry, and those warm, green eyes, and...

"Dar?"

She opened her eyes, to see the doctor regarding her in puzzled concern. "Damn, sorry." She sighed. "See what I mean?"

Dr. Steve leaned against the table, a lock of gray hair dropping down over his forehead. "I don't understand. Your pressure is fine; your heart sounds fine. Maybe I should schedule you for a CT scan," he suggested warily.

Dar rubbed her eyes. "Maybe," she muttered.

"You saying that without arguing means your pretty head's probably about to pop off." He shook his head. "Well, let me go run a quick scan on the blood and see if I see anything. Go wait in my office. I think I have the new *PC World* in there."

"Oh, great," Dar grumbled. "Just what I need--to read all about the new bugs." She hopped off the table, though, and made her way to Dr. Steve's comfortable office, slouching in an armchair and picking up the indicated magazine. "Where's the cartoon? At least I can laugh at that."

"HEY! KERRY!"

KERRY turned, her fingers sliding on the strap of her briefcase as she spotted Mark Polenti catching up to her. "Hi. Morning."

Mark's eyes fastened on Kerry's face for an instant, then he looked aside again without comment.

"Listen." He looked around quickly and asked, "You know where the boss is?" His voice was low and urgent.

Kerry paused in momentary indecision. "Um..."

"They've been trying to call her all night, and she's not picking up," Mark said. "We dropped the ball on the payroll transfer last night and we needed her sign off on a workaround."

Oh. Damn. "Why didn't you call me?" Kerry asked. "Maybe her cell's down."

Mark sidestepped the question. "I was kinda worried. I called the condo."

Kerry looked him in the eye. "She's at a doctor's appointment," she said. "So I guess we should go upstairs and clean up the mess before she gets here, shouldn't we?"

Two women walked past them, giving them wary looks. Mark waited for them to pass before he answered. "Uh, yeah, sure." His uncertainty showed on his face. "But you talked to her right? She's okay?"

Kerry was torn between wanting to believe Mark was just honestly worried about Dar, and the knowledge that loose talk could seriously damage both of them. "I talked to her this morning," she finally said. "She's fine."

Mark cocked his head a little. "So I guess her cell's okay."

Bleeping damn. "She called me," Kerry replied in an even tone. "I really don't know where she was calling from, but it doesn't matter. Let's go take care of business." She started toward the elevator. "You can ask her about it when she shows up, right?"

"Um. Sure." Mark caught up to her and they walked together to the elevator. "Sorry they didn't call you. I guess we're not really used to having a Dar Junior."

She was about to hit the button, but Kerry stopped and glanced at him as he looked uneasily back at her. "Flattery will get you nowhere," she said after a long pause, swiping the control and walking through the sliding doors as they opened. She almost wished they would be joined by some of the anonymous secretarial staff in the lobby, but the elevator closed and they faced each other for the long ride up.

Mark stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall, whistling softly under his breath.

Dar Junior: Kerry studied the inlaid tile on the floor of the elevator. *Dar would probably laugh like a nut at that.*

"Um." Mark cleared his throat. "Hey, um...can I ask you something?"

Uh oh. Kerry looked warily up at him. "Am I going to regret saying yes?"

"Maybe. Yeah."

Kerry sighed. "Can I get some coffee first?"

DAR HAD READ through over half the magazine before she heard steady footsteps on the carpet and looked up as Dr. Steve ambled in, a folder under his arm and a peculiar look on his face.

"Finished?" She glanced at her watch. "I've got a million problems waiting for me at the office." The stocky, gray-haired man put the folder down and dropped into his seat, folding his hands over his belly and gazing at her. "Well, my friend, your stress indicators are down, that's for sure."

Dar let a small smile tug at her lips. "That's good."

He nodded. "Mmm. Yes, I was glad to see it. I also ran an analysis for hormones and other anomalies, and I think I might have figured out what your little forgetfulness problem is. Maybe or maybe not."

Dar sat up and cocked her head. "Yeah?"

He nodded solemnly. "Yes, I'm afraid you have elevated levels of endorphins in your bloodstream, my friend, especially oxytocin."

Dar was taken aback. "Oh." She paused, a little alarmed. "What is that? What causes it?"

Dr. Steve rubbed his nose. "Well, it's a naturally occurring hormone. Basically, it's one of the things responsible for making us feel good. Your body releases it under certain circumstances, and it's known to produce the symptoms you're describing."

Dar considered that. "What circumstances?"

"Mmm, in some cases, exercise. Especially long-distance running," Dr. Steve mentioned. "Do you do that?"

She shrugged. "Six, eight miles in a morning."

"Did you do that this morning?" Dr. Steve asked.

Dar shook her head. "I...no." She hesitated. "Not this morning."

"Not that, then." The doctor steepled his fingers. "You take any opiates?"

"What?" Dar's brow contracted sharply. "Dr. Steve, you goddamn well know better."

A hand raised. "Okay, okay, just asking." A tiny grin chased itself around his lips. "That eliminates two of the three most common causes."

"What's the third, eating chocolate?" Dar chuckled.

"Falling in love," Steve quietly replied. "Oxytocin is the hormone that stimulates the need for touching."

Dar simply stared at him, her jaw sagging slightly, and her eyes blinking. "That's...ah, no, Steve, I don't..." She ran a hand through her hair. "That's not..."

"Dar, relax." The doctor leaned forward. "Breathe, okay? I don't want you keeling over in my office, it looks bad to the nurses." He regarded her with fond affection. "My god, you'd think I just said you were pregnant or something. There's nothing wrong with being in love, my friend." He smiled. "It's good for you."

"But I'm..." Dar tried to force the words out, but they just weren't coming. *Jesus, this can't be happening.* Her mind flashed back to her own words to Kerry, what seemed like forever ago. *It's like your body knows.* "Are you...is that all, Dr. Steve?"

"Sure." He gazed at her in quiet compassion. "Go take a walk, Dar. Get some air. You're white as a sheet."

Nodding absently, she walked out, not really sure where she was going until she was outside, where she mechanically found her car and opened the door, collapsing into the seat and leaning against the steering wheel. "He's crazy. He doesn't know what he's...I'm not..."

She stared at the instrument panel, thinking about the past few days. Thinking about how she felt. Thinking about how Kerry made her feel, and how just the impact of those green eyes on hers sent daggers of emotion stabbing through her. About how hugging Kerry made her happier than just about anything else ever had. About how she'd driven out in the middle of the night just to check on a little bump on the head and jeopardized a major account to keep from looking bad in front of her--setting aside the slowly creeping knowledge that for the first time in a long time she'd found something she cared about more than her job and her settled, predictable life.

Slowly, she leaned back, letting her arms fall to her thighs as the inescapable realization hit her. *Son of a bitch. I am in love.* A faint laugh forced its way out of her chest. Then she gripped the steering wheel and stared out through the tinted windows. *Now what do I do?*

"OKAY, LOOK, IT'S only a bulletin board," Kerry said, gazing patiently at the short, upset woman sitting across from her desk. "I know it's something everyone likes, but the drive array went down, and they have to replace it."

"But you don't understand...we had important messages on there," the woman stated in agitation. Kerry cocked her head. "It's a bulletin board. I thought it was for posting things for sale, company notices, that kind of thing."

"No, no." The woman looked frustrated. "It's this...we've got all our social stuff on there, and Mary puts out these little poems, they really make everyone's day. It's like a community. We're helpless without it. No one knows what's going on!"

Kerry folded her hands together. "Helen, what exactly is it you want me to do?"

"Can't it get fixed faster?"

"It's a server drive array. They have to custom-order it from Hewlett Packard, and it has to be configured. They're doing it as fast as they can, believe me," Kerry explained. "That's not the only thing affected. Printing and faxing services are down, too." The server crash had been an unexpected, yet welcome emergency, putting off Mark's questionable questions until some undefined later time.

Unfortunately, the workers had complained more about the downed bulletin board than if the mail servers had crashed. "We're still trying to find out why it went down," Kerry said. "That was a very strange failure." She got an immediate guilty look from the woman, who stood hastily.

"Well, I hope they hurry. I have a lot of things on there that I need." She gave Kerry a distinctly unfriendly glare. "I'm sure Ms. Roberts would have resolved it already." She walked out, leaving a bemused-looking Kerry, who shook her head in mild disbelief.

"No, she would have told you to get your gardenia-smelling butt out of her office," she informed the closed door wryly. Then she sighed and glanced at the clock. "Speaking of which, where in the hell is she?"

It was close to noon, and there was no sign of her boss. Kerry had set up a monitor that checked periodically for Dar's login, and so far, the executive had been conspicuous by her absence. Kerry drummed her fingers on the desk, then picked up the phone and dialed. "Hi, Maria."

"Hello, *Kerrisita*."

"Any word from the boss?" Kerry tried to keep the concern out of her voice and make it only sound vaguely interested. "I have some documents I need to go over with her."

Maria sighed. "No, honey. You and everyone else in the world is looking for her...and nothing. I tried her cell phone, the pager, nothing. I hope she is all right."

Kerry felt a deep worry grab her guts. "Yeah, me too. That's not like her," she murmured, as if she were an expert after all of less than a month.

"*Si, ay*. Wait, I hear her voice coming this way." Maria sounded relieved.

"Okay, great. Thanks, Maria." Kerry hung up with a mixed sensation of relief and anticipation.

"No running down the hallway, Kerrison. Let her sit down first." She decided to get herself a cup of tea instead, so she opened her drawer and took out a blackberry teabag, then grabbed her cup and headed for the door.

The kitchen was relatively quiet, and she smiled at the two other women inside as she put some Equal into her cup, then added boiling water from the dispenser over the teabag.

"Hey, Kerry." One of the women sitting at a small table looked up. "I hear you signed up for the gym. You going tonight?"

The blonde woman nodded. "Yep. I sure did. I'm really looking forward to it. I put my name down for some light aerobics and that self defense class." She casually walked over, dipping her teabag in and leaning against the wall. "Are you going?" The woman's name, she recalled, was Candy, a uniquely inappropriate tag for the usually snippy administrative assistant.

Candy leaned back with a sigh and nodded. "Yeah." She patted her thighs and made a face. "I thought I could get away with just some treadmill plodding at home, but I don't do it enough, and it's showing. I put on ten pounds in the last two months, and it's either go to the goddamn gym or spring for new clothes." She glanced at Kerry. "Self defense, huh? That's pretty funny, coming from Dar Roberts' assistant. And what the hell happened to your head?"

Kerry sighed. "Close encounter with a parked truck while I was Rollerblading last night," she explained. "Yet another reason to pick the gym instead. Fewer obstacles," she added wryly. "And it's air conditioned, has a sauna..."

"Oh yeah, and nice looking bodies running around," Candy added with a smirk. "My boyfriend refuses to go in there. Says his gut makes him embarrassed." The other woman, someone from Marketing, Kerry remembered, snickered.

"Well, that's self-defeating," Kerry protested. "If he'd go in there for a while, he wouldn't have to worry about it." She disposed of her bag and took a sip of the sweetened tea. "But I know how he feels. I've put on a few pounds myself since I started working here--all those daily specials downstairs," she commented casually.

Candy snorted. "Kerry, you'd have to double yourself before anyone would notice, let me tell you. But, um..." She glanced around, then up at the blonde woman. "I hear through the grapevine your boss is joining the gym gang. True?"

Kerry hesitated, then picked her words carefully. "As a matter of fact, I think I heard her saying that the other day. So yeah, I guess she is. Why?"

"Interesting, that's all. First she participates in Global Day, now this. She trying to change her image or something?" Candy asked slyly.

Sensing dangerous waters, Kerry merely shrugged. "She said it was her turn to do Global. And as for this, who knows? I sure don't. She said she wanted to use some climbing thing or other that they have. Maybe that's it."

"Maybe," Candy purred. "Guess we'll find out tonight, eh? C'mon, Drucie, break time's over, let's go feed the press." She glanced at Kerry. "See ya." They got up and sauntered out.

"See ya," Kerry mouthed after her, making a face. She sighed and sipped her tea, then slipped back out of the kitchen and down the hall, opening the door to her office and stepping inside. She was several paces into the room before she realized there was something sitting on her desk. She stopped, one hand raised with the cup in it and the other at her side, and just looked.

Squarely in the center of her desk rested a small, crystal vase containing one single crimson rose. Kerry let out a tiny gasp and moved closer, putting the cup down and circling the furniture, sitting down in her chair and resting both arms on either side of the vase.

The flower was beautiful, large and full with thick petals that gave off a wonderful scent, and the vase was slim, and faceted, and glittered in the light coming in the window. "Oh my god, that's gorgeous." Kerry breathed, touching the flower with a lightly shaking finger. "Did you do this, Dar?" she whispered.

The unexpected romantic gesture touched her deeply, and she sighed, resting her chin on her fists and letting a smile appear as she absorbed the delicate scent. Flowers had never been a particular focus of hers, but who in their right mind could resist a beautiful rose half the size of your head? *In a crystal vase?* Kerry reached out and touched one of the petals, feeling it soft as silk against her skin.

Finally she sat up and gently put the vase at the front of her desk, centered neatly, before she stood and ran her hands through her hair. "I think I need to go say thank you," she told her computer screen, just before ducking out the back door and down the utility hallway.

"SO WHAT, EXACTLY, is the problem?" Dar leaned her chin on her fist and regarded Mark with a tolerant eye. "I thought you ordered a new RAID array."

"I did." Mark sighed, rubbing his eyes. "But HP said they can't get a duplicate unit. If we want to replace it, we've got to go bigger."

"Okay. So do it."

Brown eyes blinked at her. "What?"

"What part of that didn't you understand?" Dar shot back. "I'm up to my ears in whining secretaries who can't get to their love poems, Mark. Get the goddamn array in here before I start taking pot-shots at them with a pellet gun."

"Dar, we're talking big bucks, here," Mark protested. "It's not a critical server."

"Maria tells me Kerry spent at least half the morning listening to people tell her just how critical the damn thing is, and I'm not going to waste her valuable time in dealing with it!" Dar roared.

"Get the damn thing in here. I don't care what it costs!"

"Jesus!" Mark jumped out of his chair and backed off. "All right, all right. But when that bill comes in, don't say I didn't tell you so."

"Just do it," Dar ordered. "And by the way, how in the hell did the damn thing crash anyway?"

Mark paused in the doorway and pursed his lips, glancing around. "Um...they ran a... Well, it's a streaming multimedia clip that got out of hand." He cleared his throat. "It chewed up all the resources, then corrupted the allocation table. When the server went to shut down, it blew the drive controller card."

Dar sat there, her hands resting on her desk. "You're not telling me something one of these technogorps did crashed an array."

He nodded. "Um...it was a streaming clip of Leonardo DiCaprio dancing nude." Then he was gone, leaving Dar to stare at the door in disbelief.

The phone rang. Dar punched the button. "Yeah?"

"Afternoon, Dar!" Alastair's cheerful voice filled the room. "Where the hell have you been?"

Dar eyed the phone. "In Miami. Why?"

"Lady, I've been calling you since last night," her boss said. "Had half the company after my shorts for the payroll. Didn'tcha know?"

Dar blinked. "What?"

"Jesus Christ, Dar!" The voice took on a hint of frustration. "What in hell's going on down there?"

Dar had to admit she was dumbfounded.

"Tell you what, good thing you picked that new little assistant of yours," Alastair added. " She took care of it, but good lord, lady! You had us in a hell of a twist."

Dar pulled out her cell phone and stared at it, looking at the blank display with an almost comical expression. "Sorry, Alastair," she managed to cough out. "My cell's on the blink." She pressed the power button and watched the device light up. "Just got it back."

"Was it?" her boss queried. "Well, that's a damned thing."

"Yeah." Dar watched the message waiting light start up and flash frantically. "Glad Kerry was here and took care of it."

Alastair grunted. "Seems like a nice enough kid," he allowed. "Glad to find out it was just a phone screw-up, Dar. You had me a little worried there," he said. "Not answering the line all that time."

Jesus. "Yeah, well, sorry about that, Alastair," Dar said with a sigh. "I was at an appointment this morning, just got to the office. I'll have to get a backup phone or something, I guess." She folded the cell up and put it on her desk, shaken inside and out from the lapse.

Apparently satisfied with the apology, the CEO changed the subject, "Did you get my present?"

Dar glanced around at her desk and spotted a small comail envelope. She pulled it over and opened it, peering inside. "It's a lovely thought, Alastair, but you know I don't have time to go on a damn cruise." She sighed. "I hardly have time to go swimming in my own damn backyard at night."

"Dar, I'm ordering it," the CEO objected.

She frowned, fingering the tickets. "Tell you what, I'll trade it in for a long weekend down in the Keys." She paused. "For two." A quirky grin tugged her face. "How about it?"

"For two?" Alastair's voice oozed with curiosity. "Dar, I didn't know you were seeing anyone."

A soft chuckle. "Did I say that, Alastair? I just said I wanted a weekend for two. Maybe I just want some company."

"Ho ho ho.... Wonder who you'll take." Alastair chortled. "All right, you're on. I'll tell Beatrice. You just let her know what you want." A muffled voice could be heard in the background.

"Whoops, gotta go, Dar. Talk to you later."

Dar regarded her desktop and smiled, turning the tickets over in her hands, then glanced up as the inner door opened, and Kerry peeked in.

She didn't deny the jolt of emotion this time, she just accepted it, watching as Kerry pushed the door open and walked across the carpet, enjoying the blonde woman's intriguing walk. "Hi."

Kerry knelt down at her side and balanced with a hand on her knee. "Hi." Her voice was slightly husky. "Was that surprise from you?"

No excuses. No explanations. Dar nodded. "Uh huh."

A delicate blush colored Kerry's face. "I've never gotten anything like that before. It's amazing." She exhaled. "Thank you so much."

Dar gazed at her, reaching out and moving a bit of blonde hair out of her face. "You've never gotten flowers, Kerry? I find that very hard to believe."

A hesitant shake of her head. "No, it..." She paused to collect herself. "No, I never did." Aware of their intimate position, her eyes flicked across to the door. "I was kind of concerned. You didn't think the appointment would take very long. Maria was worried, too."

"Ah." Dar gracefully accepted the change of subject. "I had a few things to take care of, and I left the pager and the cell phone in the car. I should have called in." She cleared her throat. "Hell, I should have put the damn phone on. I hear we had a screwup."

Kerry made a face. "Let's say you were really conspicuous by your absence," she demurred. "It wasn't too bad. They knew what do to but they were too chicken to do it without your say-so."

Dar snorted. "I didn't even realize my damn phone was off. Alastair was trying to call me." She pushed the phone across the desk. "I just had other things on my mind." She leaned back and let her head rest against the leather. "Everything was fine at the doc's."

"Great." Kerry smiled. "What was on your mind, then?"

"You."

They looked at each other in silence. Kerry glanced out the window after a long moment, her cheeks coloring. "Ah. Well. Likewise." She looked shyly back at Dar. "Wish I'd gotten you a rose. All I have to offer is a kiss." She held up a wrapped item.

She looked up at the blonde woman, one hand idly resting on Kerry's leg. Dar smiled. "You had lunch?"

Kerry shook her head. "No, I've been too busy listening to everyone complain about that stupid server and ask tactless questions about where you were."

"C'mon." Dar stood and offered her hand up. "I hear a cheeseburger calling my name." She hauled Kerry up and unexpectedly gave her a brief hug. "Let's go."

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE GYM WAS a typical one, smelling of chlorine from the pool, oil from the several groups of weightlifting machines, and the overwhelming scent of macho that seemed to settle over everything like a coating of grease.

Dar finished a round of the Nautilus machines, wiping the sweat off her face and ignoring the sidewise stares from fellow employees who seemed to be caught between amazement and disbelief at her presence. Her mind wasn't really into it, she acknowledged, so she kept it fairly light and easy, letting her thoughts wander as she went through the various motions. It had taken her a few hours, that morning, of wandering down the beach and letting the wavelets wash against her bare feet, before she settled down and tried to figure out what to do.

First and foremost, she had to figure out how Kerry felt about her. Coming out and professing a love for the blonde woman if she didn't share it would be embarrassing at best, and irreparably destructive at worst. *So how to do that?* Dar had decided on a subtle campaign of attentions, of which the rose had been a part, to see if she could get an indication of what was going on behind those green eyes. She knew Kerry liked her, but more than that?

Dar sighed, resting her chin on the crossbar of the pull-down machine she was using. She felt a little nervous and a little uncertain, but twice now, twice, when the blonde woman didn't think she was looking, she'd caught Kerry watching her with a gentle, emotional look that made her hopes emerge timidly, wondering if this time...

If she were honest with herself, she would admit that it was mostly fear that made her cautious, fear of exposing her most sensitive vulnerabilities to someone she'd known for less than a month. Sad prudence dictated caution, demanded she wait to see if Kerry's obvious affection for her was something more or merely the superficial involvement of her tentatively emerging sexuality.

But...she'd liked the rose. Even Dar realized that.

The self-defense class was meeting in the large open area just in front of the circuit machines, a group of a dozen or so people-- ranging from two young boys to an older woman with a grizzled, pugnacious jaw. The instructor was a large bearded man, self-importantly hitching up his black-belted *gi* and proclaiming to his audience in tones that were grating on Dar's nerves.

Kerry was seated near one end of the semi-circle, her elbows resting on her crossed legs, her head cocked in intent attention. Dar could see the faint tension at her brow as she listened, and she suspected the blonde woman was finding some problem with whatever it was she was being told.

"Well, well. What have we got here?"

Dar almost jumped at the loud, pseudo-friendly voice. She turned her head and gazed at José.

"Nice headband," she commented dryly, noting the South Park characters on it. "Funny, but I always think of Cartman when I see you."

José stared at her, then touched his head. "*Mierda*. My kids got me this. I don't watch that crap."

That struck Dar as funny, and she lifted a hand, rubbing her jaw to disguise a grin. "They've got good taste," she replied, eyeing his outfit. *They must be adopted*, her mind continued. José was dressed in tight purple bike shorts and a lurid, orange T-shirt that clashed so badly it made Dar's eyes hurt to look at it.

"I'll tell them that. So what are you doing here?" José asked pointedly. "Don't tell me they don't got a gym on that fantasy island of yours."

Dar lifted a hand and indicated the machine. "I'm doing what everyone else is doing here, José. It's closer to the office, it's got a much better range of facilities, and it's got a climbing wall." She shrugged him off. "Why the hell do you care?"

"I don't. It's just strange as hell to see you out here. I've been coming to this place for a year now, and all of a sudden, you decide you like it?" he said, "You've been acting loco this past week.

You taking drugs?"

"Only antacids." Dar gave him a brief smile. "José, get out of my face. We're not in the office, and I don't have to be polite to your ugly puss." She stood, making the most of the fact that she topped him by at least two inches. "Let me give you a hint...try running something other than your mouth. It might help." She stalked off, leaving him spluttering by the pull-down machine, and escaped into the free weight area where she knew he wouldn't follow.

This was the area for the serious dudes. Dar let her eyes flick to the earnest, sweating faces, eyes intent on the mirror, watching themselves as they pumped and flexed. Some paused and gave her a disdainful look, then went back to their loving self-absorption.

Feeling a mischievous streak rising, she claimed one of the press benches, and settled a bar on it, checking the locking collars carefully. Then she laid down and placed her hands precisely, focusing on the weight and preparing her body for the strain. One deep breath. A second. She wrapped her fingers around the rough metal of the bar and set her feet down squarely, pressing

down to make sure her back was properly supported. Then she took a final breath and shoved upward, taking the bar off its supports and extending her arms, letting the muscles get used to the shock of effort.

Slowly the bar lowered, to brush her chest, then went back up, her shoulders flexing as she concentrated. At the periphery of her attention, she was aware of a little silence around her and she grinned before she repeated the action ten times, then set the bar down in place. A pleasant ache filled her upper body, and she relaxed, peeking at her neighbors.

Lots of wide, round, furtive eyes found other things to look at and the pumping rapidly resumed. Dar grinned impishly at the ceiling, then rubbed her hands together and went for another set. It was more weight than she usually used, that was for sure, but she wasn't above showing off now and again when the mood struck her. The legacy of years and years of sports and martial arts had left her with a sturdily functional body, and it felt good to show that off a little sometimes. *Besides*, Dar peeked again, *Kerry is watching*. Blue eyes twinkled at the tiles above.

AFTER AN HOUR of lecture from the instructor on movements and the preparation of the body, they were on break. Kerry had absorbed the lesson and didn't feel like she needed it repeated six times, but she was willing to hold her tongue, since this was, after all, the first lesson. She leaned against a pile of mats, sipping on a cup of water as she let her eyes roam around, finding Dar with little difficulty.

Dar had staked out a spot in the weight section and was doing chest presses. Kerry found herself glued to the sight, wondering how in the world she could consider sweating sexy. She turned her head as Colleen joined her, the redhead immediately finding what she was looking at.

"Mmm, mmm, mmm." Colleen clucked softly. "Aren't we just the butch."

"Col." Kerry rolled her eyes.

"C'mon, Ker. In a minute, she'll be giving the Small Soldiers over there pointers. You see tha... Ooo, look, he dropped his dumbbell on his foot."

Kerry laughed. "Oh, that's not funny." She watched the overly muscular man hop around, then overbalance and go crashing to the floor. She half expected him to bounce, he had such a rubbery, bulging figure.

Hearing the commotion, Dar had hitched herself up on her elbows and was just sitting there, watching in amusement.

"We're going to...pump. You. Up," Colleen whispered. "God, have you ever seen anything so self-absorbed?"

"Hmm?" Kerry tore her eyes from Dar's relaxed body, which was intriguing her with its gentle ripple of muscle just barely visible under the skin, so different than her burly neighbors. "Sorry, what did you say?"

The redhead rolled her eyes. "Talk about absorbed..."

"Sorry." Kerry blushed. "Um, looks like he's ready to start again." She tugged Colleen back over to where the instructor was gathering them, and forced her attention to the man.

It isn't hard, she decided. He'd started them with simple, repetitive motions, which at first felt awkward, but after a few repetitions, seemed to come more naturally to her. She found her balance and worked through the movements, more successfully than the rounder Colleen and a good deal more so than one of the two boys.

He's growing fast, she realized, *and is completely uncoordinated because of it*. He tried, but he just couldn't get the motions, his arms and oversized feet getting into his way and frustrating

him. Kerry moved over and made gentle suggestions, receiving a pathetically grateful look in response.

"No, look. He's gotta do it himself," the teacher objected, motioning her away. "C'mon, fat boy, take your head out of your ass and watch where your feet are going."

Kerry gave him a dour look. "Insulting people doesn't help them concentrate."

"Look, honey, I didn't ask for a critique, okay? Just get back over there with your roly-poly friend, and let's get through this." He half turned, then found himself being hauled around to face icy green eyes and an angry, set face.

"You listen, you horse's ass..."

"Look, either get over there and do this, or get out of here and go to wimpaerobics, all right?" He gave her a shove. Or he tried to, anyway, but he found his arm held in a grip from behind that made him spin around. "What in the hell?"

Dar just tightened her grip. "You know, big, ugly bullies with delusions of competency really piss me off," she commented calmly. "You're supposed to be teaching these people a martial art, not using them as your personal venting post."

"Don't you fucking tell me what to do. Who in the hell do you think you are?" the bearded man barked in her face. "Let go of me or I'm going to kick your ass."

Dar smiled at him and leaned closer. "Jackass, you couldn't touch me if your life depended on it." She suddenly jerked him closer, then whirled him around and dumped him on the ground by sweeping his legs out from under him with a powerful kick.

"Bitch." He scrambled to his feet and came at her, shifting to one side with moderate skill, then reaching out for a hold. She caught his arm and ducked under it, sliding past him, then whirling and pulling him over her shoulder to be dumped on the mat again.

He bounced up and tried a kick. She blocked it, then returned the favor with a sideways spinning kick that slammed against his chest and knocked him back. Then they were at it full-out, and she was mixing holds with powerful blows, dodging his best efforts and ending by nailing him on the jaw with a thrust of her elbow in close, sending him to the mat in a stupor. She bounced a little in place, waiting to see if he was going to get up. *I shouldn't enjoy this as much as I do*, Dar reflected ruefully, aware of Kerry's rapt eyes on her.

"Hey, what's going on here?" A short, bandy-legged man pushed his way through the crowd that had gathered, glancing at the gasping man on the mat, then up at Dar. "What the hell happened?" Dar glanced at him. "I took exception to his teaching style," she answered, deadpan, her eyes taking in the newcomer's lithe, graceful physique. "It tended to the abusive."

The man cursed in a fluid language. "Frank, get outta here. I've had enough of your damn troublemaking self." He nudged the man with a toe. "G'wan, I'll see what I can do for you later." With a venomous look at Dar, the bearded man got up and stalked off, shoving people out of his way. The short newcomer looked up at Dar, setting his hands on his hips as he regarded her. "You know what you're doing."

Dar dusted herself off, and shrugged lightly. "Used to dabble in it," she admitted, noting the intent and interested look she was getting from him. "I would guess you do yourself."

"Could be, could be." The man sighed, then faced the class, who were watching in fascinated interest. "Listen, sorry, folks. I'll try to get you in a different instructor next week and give you a credit for an extra lesson."

The crowd broke up, leaving the two of them standing there. Dar met Kerry's eyes as she was moving away, and winked, getting a mouthed, "Wow!" back from her.

She and the newcomer studied each other, and the man held out a hand. "Ken Yamamura."

"Mmm, you took the state championship two...no, three years ago." Dar took his hand and gripped it. "Last round, took out that bruiser from Orlando with the red hair."

He blinked. "Wow. Yeah, I sure did. Um..."

She smiled. "Dar Roberts."

His jaw dropped and his eyes lit up. "Holy Buddhist Monk in a bottle...I thought you looked familiar!" He told her with delight. "Son of a... Man, I was there when you won the National. I never saw anything like that final bout."

Dar ducked her head in acknowledgment. "Long time ago," she said. "Nice to meet you finally, though."

"Wow, check this out--just any Wednesday and I have Dar Roberts show up to beat the crap out of my god-damned useless piece of crap brother-in-law." He sighed. "I gotta get someone else now. I know he's not worth much, but I thought he'd at least be able to show these newbies some of the basics."

Dar took a breath, her eyes flicking to where Kerry was waiting, leaning against a towel rack and watching her. "Listen, if you want, I'll teach the class. I was going to make Wednesday my regular night here anyway."

He stared at her. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I've just been doing some casual stuff the last few years, I could use the practice."

"Whoop, I'm not gonna turn that down. Maybe...I haven't been keeping up the last year either. I pulled a knee out after that last fight, never really set right after that, but if you want, we could work together a little. I could at least give you more of a challenge than these kids."

Dar considered. "Yeah, all right, that sounds like a deal to me." She nodded. Her sparring mate on the island was a beginner at best, and she had felt a lot of things slipping lately. Maybe she needed a challenge--knock the rust off a few skills. "I'd like that. Sign me up."

"Great." Ken gave her an enormous grin, transforming his elfin face. "I'll put you on the payroll."

Dar waved him off. "No, thanks, I'm fine. Use it to get some basic equipment for these folks, okay?"

"Deal." Ken reached out a hand. "Dar, it's good to meet you. This'll be a story to tell around the campfire."

The term sent a strange prickle down her back. "Glad to meet you, too, Ken. See you next week." She watched him walk off, then exhaled. *What in the hell did I just get myself into?* she wondered as Kerry ambled over, offering her a bottle of water.

"Wow." The blonde woman smiled at her. "That was pretty impressive."

"C'mon, Kerry." Dar snorted, then took a long sip of the water. "José could have dumped him on his ass, he didn't know a damn thing." She sighed. "What an idiot."

"Well, but will his replacement be any better?" Kerry queried. "The class seems a little generic."

"Um...actually, it's me," Dar muttered.

"What?" She leaned closer. "Did I just hear you say what I think I just heard you say?"

Dar gave her a sheepish look. "I volunteered. I felt bad for those kids, and if I'm going to be around anyway, what the hell, right?"

"Mmm." Kerry smiled at her. "Well, then, can I get some private lessons?" she quipped.

"Sure," her companion agreed. "You finished here?" She glanced around. "I think I promised a hot tub, if I'm not mistaken."

"Ugh." Kerry stretched out her arms. "After that climbing thing and those exercises, yeah, I'd love that." She put her towel over her shoulders, feeling a welcome tingle of anticipation.

"Besides which, I'm starved."

Dar chuckled, and grabbed her own towel. "I can do something about that, too," she teased gently. "C'mon."

They retrieved their bags from the locker room and exited the gym, walking out through the well-lit parking area toward where they'd left their cars. Dar knew she was in trouble as they turned the corner of the building, and she felt, rather than saw, shadows heading towards her, the wind bringing a scent of anger and sweat.

"All right, bitch, now we'll see who's tough!" The bearded man surged forward, another, shorter figure behind him.

IT WAS AN instinct bone-deep, and Dar obeyed it, pulling Kerry behind her and putting her body between the threat and her companion. She was facing two men, and the darkness kept her from seeing them fully, but her senses were enough for her to react as the closer one swung a dark object at her. She dodged the blow, letting it carry her opponent around, then went for the tough stuff, as her father would have said, and nailed him in the crotch with a powerful knee. He squealed like a pig and dropped to his knees, then she took advantage of that by kicking him in the face.

His friend almost got her, though. He was faster and had time to move in while she was fighting with the other man, and he got in a blow to her kidneys with a piece of steel pipe. Dar felt half her body go numb for a frightening moment, then she let loose with a clumsy, but effective right cross which got past his surprised defenses and bloodied his nose with a crunch.

It gave her enough time to catch her breath and her balance, then she set her body and whipped up a roundhouse kick that nailed her opponent in the jaw and sent him sprawling. "Any more, and I call the cops," Dar managed to get out. "And I guarantee you'll be courting girlfriends in the Dade County Jail in under a half hour."

"You got my ass fired, you bitch." The closer man groaned, holding his crotch.

"You got your ass fired, buddy," Dar responded, taking a step back and feeling Kerry's hands touch her. "Don't go blaming it on me."

The man climbed to his feet and glared at her. "Not just me's got a problem with you. Better watch your back, 'cause someone's gonna put a knife in it." He stumbled off, pulling his companion with him.

Dar watched them go, then let her body lean slowly back against the wall, very aware of concerned green eyes that were studying her in the dim light. "Morons."

"Are you okay?" Kerry whispered. "Jesus, Dar, those people are crazy. Maybe you should have called the police."

Dar gingerly felt her ribs, then sighed. "No thanks. I'm not in the mood to be spending a couple of hours doing paperwork, I've got better things to do." She picked up her towel and bag, then nodded toward their cars. "C'mon, let's get out of here." She glanced around, spotting a shadowy figure watching them from under a tree nearby. Dar strained her eyes, but she couldn't make out the features, and she finally turned away with a grim look.

They quietly parted as they reached the car lot, and Kerry went to her car, unaware of the pale blue eyes that watched her until she was safely inside. Only then did Dar open the door and slide into the leather seat of the Lexus with a stifled groan. The ache in her side throbbed painfully and she sat a moment, leaning against the steering wheel before she straightened up and started the car, putting it in gear and following Kerry's taillights out of the parking lot.

A grudge? Or something more. The man's words bothered Dar, and she briefly wondered if some co-worker had taken the opportunity to get back at her. Someone like José, for instance. *Would*

he be that stupid? That venal? The executive sighed. He was that stupid, yes. And hotheaded on top of it. Maybe the chance had just been too much for him to pass up. A couple of bucks slipped to an already pissed-off moron and no dirt on his hands. With a sigh, Dar tried to put it out of her mind and concentrate on something more pleasant.

Who happened to be driving just in front of her, moving the Mustang through the relatively light traffic with casual skill. They would use the hot tub, that's for sure, then have a light dinner, and her strawberries were waiting--no way was she going to waste time going to the doctor's for a few bruises. Hell, she was tougher than that.

Chapter Twenty-Five

KERRY STRETCHED OUT stiffened muscles as she got out of the car, and waited for Dar to lock the Lexus before she joined her companion for the short walk up the stairs. She had her overnight bag with her, and she slung it over her shoulder, following Dar inside and letting the smell of clean wax and wood fill her lungs as she stepped inside.

"Watch it, had the floors waxed this morning," Dar warned her with a smile. "You up for the hot tub?"

"Ooo, you bet." Kerry laughed and nodded. "I'll go put my suit on." She hesitated, then eased closer and put an arm around the taller woman, driven by a nameless need for Dar's touch. "You sure you're okay? I thought that creep hit you pretty hard."

Dar exhaled softly, closing her arms around Kerry. "Yeah. I'm a little sore, but I've had worse." Kerry gave her a gentle hug. "Okay." She released the taller woman, then she moved towards the kitchen. "I'm about dying of thirst, can I get you something?" She waited a beat. "Let me guess--a glass of milk."

Dar ambled into her bedroom to change. "I think I'm being tweaked," she called back.

Kerry grinned, and opened the door to the refrigerator, standing there and blinking for a long moment at what she saw. "Hey, Dar?"

"Yeah?" The voice floated in.

"Dar, there are things in your refrigerator," the blonde yelled.

Her companion came in, adjusting a strap on her swimsuit. "There are?" She peeked. "Oh yeah." She laughed sheepishly, giving Kerry wry look. "I didn't want to get teased. I thought you'd appreciate something other than peanut butter and ice cream."

Kerry fell silent for a moment, then she turned, her face serious. "You know what I do appreciate?" she asked quietly. "I appreciate that what I think matters to you."

Blue eyes blinked at her. "Kerry, of course it does," Dar said, a little taken aback. "Surely you realized that."

She smiled slightly. "I...in the office, sure, but..." She shrugged. "It's just a different feeling, I guess."

Dar brushed a thumb across her jaw line and studied her as the chill air of the refrigerator bathed both of them. "I very much care about what you think," she told her companion seriously, then indicated the open appliance. "I hope I at least guessed partly right."

Kerry peeked over her shoulder. "Oh, what cute bananas." She picked one up. "It's a bananalette."

"Junior Chiquita," Dar supplied, peering in as well. Clemente's staff had added to her list, she noted. "You hungry?"

Kerry peeled the banana and bit off the end. "Mmhmff." She nodded.

"Okay, I'm going to order something up from the restaurant. We can nibble while we're in the tub. Sound okay?"

"Mfff. Unless you order onion soup. That could get messy," Kerry replied with a grin.

"Wasn't what I had in mind," Dar responded drolly. "You...trust me to order for you?"

"Implicitly." The response was affectionate as Kerry wandered out, collecting her swimsuit while Dar picked up the phone.

She placed an order. "And Carlos, I'll leave the front door open. We'll be on the porch," she informed the order taker.

"Will do, Ms. Roberts. You want to open the bottle, or shall I?" the cultured Hispanic voice answered.

"You can do it. Just ice it down," she decided, then hung up, walking to the porch door and pushing it open. The damp, salt air hit her. She took a deep breath of it, then winced as her ribs pulled against the soreness. "Bastard," she cursed softly as she tugged the padded top off the hot tub and flipped the switch that started the water circulating. "Let's see...boil, steam, poach. Okay, that's better." She dipped a finger in, then paused, turning to look out over the ocean as the tide was coming in.

It was a pretty night, with only a few high clouds chasing across the stars, and the moon was at half full, casting a dim, pale line across the ruffled waves. The air was full of the scent of the sea and was a little less humid than it had been. Dar drew it in with pleasure, closing her eyes as the breeze brushed back her hair.

A warm hand touched her skin, and she turned to see Kerry standing next to her, also gazing out at the water, her skin golden against the dark fabric of her suit.

Dar let her eyes travel down her companion's form and smiled. "You look nice in that suit," she complimented Kerry quietly.

Kerry glanced up, a touch surprised, and she looked down at herself with a wry smile, smoothing her hand down over the fabric. "Thanks. I..." She paused awkwardly. "Thanks." The taut fabric didn't hide much, and Dar's admiring eyes sent interesting prickles across her body. *First a rose, then she has stuff for me here, now a compliment...must be my lucky day.* Kerry sighed happily, taking Dar's arm. "Shall we?"

They entered the hot tub, which was nice and warm and swirled around them in a rush of steam and strong water smell. Kerry settled down next to Dar and leaned back. "Ooo, this feels great." Dar allowed the warmth and the motion to relax her. "Yeah," she agreed. "Especially after the gym. I think I overdid it with those weights." She shifted her shoulders a little and winced.

"Ouch."

Kerry shifted onto her side and reached over, gently massaging the tense muscles. "I saw you. The little mini-Arnolds over there were dropping barbells on themselves trying to keep an eye on you, y'know."

Dar chuckled wryly. "They were, huh?"

"Not that I blame them, because I was watching you too," Kerry admitted with a smile. "I was really glad to see you when that guy was being such an asshole, though." She traced a gentle line down Dar's upper arm. "I know you hate when I say this, but...you really are quite the hero when you want to be."

"C'mon, Kerry, don't hang that title on me," Dar protested gently. "All I did was get in some jerk's way. That doesn't take courage, just a bad attitude."

Kerry quietly gazed at her. "Maybe, but it's been a long time since I've had someone stand up for me. It felt good." She lowered her eyes to the water thoughtfully.

Dar studied her. "You have a really independent mind, you stand up for yourself pretty well," she offered, cautiously.

"Survival mechanism." Kerry smiled faintly and played with the water.

Dar sensed her companion was edging slowly toward opening up to her and revealing whatever it was that caused the veiled sadness behind those sea green eyes. And she wanted to know, she wanted to understand what had hurt Kerry so. And she wanted to beat the living daylights out of whoever had done it. "Survival's not a bad trait," she replied gently. "I guess I have...I don't know. My father used to call it my 'in yer damn face' instinct." She chuckled self-deprecatingly. "I'm pretty sure I got it from him. I go into things without thinking sometimes. I just react, and then worry about the consequences later."

"Mmm." Kerry nodded. "It was like you saw those people tonight before they even came at us. One minute I was walking along, the next you had me all covered up and protected--so fast."

Dar exhaled, stretching her legs out into the water. "I didn't really think about it," she confessed with a shrug, then turned as the door opened, and a server in blue slacks and a white starched shirt entered with a laden tray. "Ah, dinner." She signed the check and added a tip to it and let the server go after they set the plates on the small ledge of the hot tub.

"Wow." Kerry nibbled on a coconut shrimp. "I should have known you'd order everything I like.

Dar, what am I going to do with you?"

"Anything you like," the dark-haired woman answered absently, as she poured a glass of cold, sweet wine and set it down beside Kerry's plate. "Here you go."

Kerry took the glass and sipped it slowly, enjoying the tasty chill as it traveled down her throat.

Dar had settled back and was chewing on a mini shish kebab, her pale eyes hooded as she kept silent for a bit. She searched the planed, angular face intently, then made up her mind. It would be hard, she knew that. But she trusted Dar, and...well, she just trusted her, that was all. *Not here, though, and not right this moment.* "Thanks." She snuggled closer to the taller woman and touched her glass to Dar's. "It's so pretty out here. I love the smell of the water so close."

The dark head nodded. "It took me a while to get used to it, but now, god, it's such a relief to get out here after battling all day. I think it's all that's kept me sane this year," she admitted, sliding a casual arm around Kerry's shoulders and pulled her closer without really thinking about it. "Until you got here, that is."

Kerry smiled back and gladly surrendered to her intense craving as she settled against Dar, nuzzling her shoulder gently and kissing the soft skin there, tasting the chemical tang of the water in which they were floating. "Glad I could contribute to the cause." She tilted her head up and gazed at Dar, admiring the clean, smooth planes of her face and feeling a deep surge of the strong emotion she'd been feeling lately. "Thanks for inviting me out here." Dar's eyes bathed her in a quiet, gentle affection that went straight through to her heart.

"Kerry, you're always welcome. I very much enjoy your company, and I...I really like having you here." She felt awkward, and she cleared her throat a little, taking a breath to steady herself.

Dar meant that. Kerry looked up and saw the open look in her eyes, and knew she'd come to a crossroads she hadn't expected quite so soon. But then, their relationship had evolved and morphed so fluidly it had taken her breath away just thinking about it. "I love being with you," she answered, softly.

Dar's eyes brightened visibly. "Listen, I know we've just really met each other, but..."

Kerry reached over and put a finger on her lips. "Let's get out of the water," she requested. "I think we need to talk."

LEANING AGAINST THE bathroom doorframe, Kerry towed her hair dry and watched Dar standing at the kitchen counter getting them both some hot chocolate. Contrary to her previous good humor, Dar now seemed almost sullen, and she wondered at the sudden mood change. Had Dar sensed her own apprehension? Kerry exhaled, as she fought conflicting emotions that were making her stomach roil.

She really liked Dar. And that was the problem, unfortunately. As long as she could consider this just a crush, or at worst, a playful experiment, things were okay. She didn't have to worry about what her family would say, or what consequences there were, because, after all, it was just a little fling, right? Just a dabbling in the strange and interesting waters of her altering sexuality?

A soft clank of a spoon made her look up; the scent of chocolate floated across the condo and reached her as the soft whirr of the microwave started up. Kerry patted her face dry with the towel, her body reacting unexpectedly when she caught the scent of Dar's body wash in its nap. "Mmph, that's more than a toe," she uttered, glancing past the towel towards her companion. It wasn't just a fling anymore. Dar was getting more serious. She was getting more serious. This was already way past a crush and had gone further than an experiment. It was wandering into realms that made her stop and take stock of where she was, where she wanted to go, and who she wanted to be with; a sudden change in her perspective she hadn't expected and didn't honestly know how to deal with. She was head over heels in love, and it scared her. Kerry swallowed the lump that had suddenly appeared in her throat, this sudden need clashing with a lifetime of learning that her wants and her needs just really didn't matter in the grand scheme of things. Above all, she didn't want Dar getting hurt, and she could sense that both of them were moving towards a point where it would be easy to do that.

If they weren't already past that point, that is. Kerry sighed, eyeing her companion. Dar leaned over the counter waiting for the microwave, and as Kerry watched, reached a hand up to push her damp hair back behind one ear. Kerry squinted a little. Her hands were shaking, she realized, and that made her sling her towel around her shoulders and walk over. "Hey."

"Hey, almost done." Dar smiled briefly.

Kerry reached out and touched her arm, feeling the skin chilled under her fingers. "You're cold." The taller woman nodded as she tucked her hands under her arms and folded them across her chest. "A little, it's chilly in here," she acknowledged, keeping her eyes on the microwave. Kerry rubbed her skin gently, sensing the upset in the tall body next to her. Dar's jaw muscles were tensed, and her gaze remained elsewhere, refusing to raise and meet her own. "It is, I guess. G'wan over to the couch. I'll wait for this," Dar's voice was soft, but the words were clearly enunciated.

Kerry hesitated, then took a breath. "Why don't you go in and sit down. I'll bring these in. Do you want a long-sleeved shirt or something?"

The blue eyes dim and shadowed, Dar looked at her. "No, it's all right. I'll be fine."

She decided on directness. "Dar, what's wrong? You got so quiet." The microwave beeped, and she forestalled the taller woman opening the door and removing the cups, an idea occurring to her suddenly. "Is your side hurting?"

Dar shrugged. "A little," she confessed, taking her cup. "Let's go inside." Kerry took her own cup and they walked into the living room, taking seats on the couch together in the quiet living room. Dar cradled her hands around her cup and studied the surface of the chocolate. "So, what is it we need to talk about?" she asked. "You sounded pretty serious."

Kerry heard a note in Dar's tone she hadn't expected, and it made her slow, and think, and choose her words carefully. They were two different people who communicated in two very different

ways, she'd realized. She could almost feel the tightrope she was walking over as she prepared to pull back another layer of herself and risk causing the both of them a lot of pain. She knew it had gone too far already, seeing Dar's whitened knuckles around her cup and feeling the tight ache in her own throat as she realized she had no choice; there was only one way to go with this and still stay honest to her heart. *No way back.* "You know..." Dar's eyes went to her face, and she almost flinched at the wary look. "It occurred to me that earlier tonight, when those guys came at us, that, um...you got between them and me."

Dar shifted a little and cleared her throat. "I guess I did," she admitted. "I...um, I didn't think about it, I just...wanted to make sure you didn't get hurt, that's all." She sounded a touch perplexed, not really understanding the direction Kerry had taken. "That was all right, wasn't it?" "That's a nice feeling," Kerry said, softly. "When you do it, anyway," she reflected soberly. "I...when I was a kid, Dar, I had a lot of people who said they were just looking out for me. You know?" She paused. "Making sure I had the right friends, the right clothes... My father had aides, bodyguards, really, who would go around and report back to him about things they thought weren't good for us."

Pale blue eyes watched her intently. "Mmm," Dar murmured, still unsure of where it was all going. "Parents do stuff like that, I guess."

"Did yours?" Kerry gazed quietly into her eyes. "Did they tell you what to think, and what to wear, and what to believe in, Dar?"

Dar's brow creased a little, and her eyes shifted off Kerry's face for a moment, before returning there. "No," she admitted. "I think they were just glad I could think, and I was wearing something, and I avoided getting arrested."

Kerry had to smile. "You have no idea how lucky you are." She felt the smile fade as she set the cup down and rested her elbows on her knees. "It wasn't like that for me."

"Uhm-mmm," Dar made a thoughtful sound.

"When I was in school, before I went to private school, that is, I had...there were a few kids I really liked, but they weren't...well, they were pretty poor, or one was...not our religion, or...and the funny thing was, when I found one I really liked, but my folks didn't, after a little while they'd just go away." Kerry kept her eyes on her hands. "I'd just go to school one day, and they'd be gone, moved away, sent to another school, whatever."

"Happens sometimes." Dar stated softly.

"I thought that too, until I heard one of their mothers saying they'd been forced to move," Kerry replied quietly. "But it was like that with everything...toys...I had a stuffed rag doll I used to sleep with. They thought that was a bad thing. So I got home from school one day, and it was gone."

"Kerry..." Dar's voice had gentled and deepened.

"I, um...I even had a puppy," Kerry went on, remotely. "A little golden cocker spaniel. Her name was Susie." She took a sip of her chocolate and managed to swallow it. "I loved her. She was so cute. I played with her all the time. We would run around outside, sometimes with my sister, sometimes just us. She knew how to bring a ball back, and I would sit and comb her hair, you know they have that long, silky hair?"

Dar's eyes lowered. "Yes, I know."

"I was playing with her one day, and Kyle..." Kerry's voice twisted. "Came to get me, and told me my father wanted me and my sister to pose for some pictures, some magazine people were there. I told him I didn't want to, that I wanted to stay and play with Susie." She nodded a little. "And the next day, I came home from school and went to find Susie...but she was gone." Her

eyes filled with tears, even now. Even all these years later. There was complete silence from Dar, and she didn't dare look at her.

"I searched and searched. Until finally, three days later they told me she'd been taken to the shelter. They wouldn't take me down there, so I ran...I ran...but I got there too late." She felt the misery all over again, of going down the long, ill lit hall, with the smell of alcohol and hopelessness around her, and all those sad faces behind the grills. "They told me she'd been sick, and that they'd put her down that morning." She paused, and waited, for the lump to go down. "I think the worst part for me was knowing she'd gone alone--no one to pet her."

How many long hours had she sat there, outside that damned shelter? Crying until she hadn't had any tears left, until one of the housekeepers had come to get her. It was the one bit of compassion she'd found that it hadn't been Kyle or one of the other aides but instead this gentle gray-haired woman she'd known all her life who had given her a hug and told her there'd be other puppies, some day. *Some day*. "I got punished when I got home for running off." Kerry exhaled at the memory. "Poor Susie."

She heard a soft, incoherent sound from Dar, but kept her eyes on her cup. This was the important part. She wanted Dar to understand. "So I learned, Dar...I learned not to want anything. Not to care for anything, because as soon as I did that, it would be gone, and the harder I tried to fight for something, the faster it would be taken away from me." She took a shaky breath. "It just got to where it hurt too much, always losing." She paused and seemed to gather her thoughts. "I've been thinking about that a lot...and about us...and...Dar?" She glanced up at a strangled choke.

She met eyes so dark with rage, they almost seemed purple in the amber light. Dar's entire face was still, and her body tense and motionless, save her right hand, which was slowly clenching and unclenching. *Good god*. Kerry put her hand on the taller woman's knee. "Dar?" It was like touching a vibrating engine, the tension fairly sang out of her body. "Are you..." Kerry let her words trail off, amazed at the pure anger being generated.

"How..." Dar managed to get out in a half growl, half groan, "...could they do that to you?"

Kerry wiped the moisture from her eyes and shrugged. "They thought they were doing the right thing, I guess. In their eyes, they were bringing me up properly," she said.

"In my eyes, that was criminal child abuse, and they should be shot," Dar answered. "And then beaten, and then stabbed, and then dragged behind a tractor down US 1."

Kerry was surprised at how strange it felt to hear that. "Dar, they're my parents," she objected softly. "I'm sure they thought they were doing what was right."

"I wouldn't care if they were Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa," Dar replied. "Jesus, Kerry." She reached out and caressed the blonde woman's face. "How could they think taking away things you loved was right?"

The touch did something to her. Maybe it was the compassion, or the honest outrage in Dar's eyes. Kerry tried to resist it, but she found herself moving forward and being pulled into a warm hug that threatened to become her whole world. And she so much wanted to let it.

She wanted to let her fears go, and fall into the strength she found herself cradled in, and never leave it. It hurt to tear herself away, and move back, and peer up at blue eyes that ached with misery for her. *For me*.

"Dar," Kerry said softly. "I don't...I thought I could keep this nice and simple, but I can't. And the more I want to care for you, the more I think about what my father would do if he found out about us. Dar, I can't watch you get hurt on my behalf. I can't." She put a hand out and touched the dark-haired woman's arm. "You mean too much to me." *So*. Kerry exhaled and felt the

moment of silence between them. She looked right into Dar's eyes and saw a slight narrowing there, a tilt of the head that projected a totally unexpected response to what she'd said.

"Kerry." Dar stroked her hair, unintimidated. "It's all right. He can't hurt me."

Kerry took a shuddering breath, and pulled back again. "He can. He will. Dar, I'm telling you. He has people who do nothing but hunt around all day, looking for dirt and finding ways to screw over people." She felt exhausted. "It's like a game to him."

"He can't hurt me," Dar said again.

"Dar." Kerry let her head drop. "You don't know who you're dealing with in him."

Dar's hand touched her chin and lifted it, forcing Kerry to meet the taller woman's eyes. "He doesn't know who he's dealing with in me," she returned the statement in a quiet, serious tone. Silently, Kerry leaned her head against Dar's shoulder, releasing a sigh.

"Kerry, there's only one thing he can do that would hurt me," Dar said after a moment, her tone changing again. "And that would be to drive you away...to take away from me a friend I've come to value very much."

Checkmate. Kerry wasn't sure if she should be relieved or simply scream in frustration. There was no way back from this for either of them in one piece. "Jesus," she finally whispered. "I don't want that either."

"Unless what you're really saying is that you just..." Dar's jaw worked a moment. "That you just aren't interested, in being...um...in staying in a relationship, in which case, I understand." She couldn't hold Kerry's eyes any longer and let her own drop to study the tile floor. "And even then, I...still don't want to lose you as a friend."

Kerry stared at the dark bent head in shocked silence for a long moment, then she let a small sound of dismay escape her throat. Her hands curled around Dar's and she squeezed hard. "Oh god no, that is so not the case. Dar, I'm sorry, I didn't mean for you to...no...no, no...no...no, no..." Blue eyes peeked up at her quietly. "I've got a lousy track record in that regard," Dar said. "So I wondered."

"Don't wonder." Kerry gave in and accepted the inevitable. "You're stuck with me."

Dar felt lightheaded with relief as she folded the blonde woman into her arms again, and they both exhaled simultaneously. "I'm so sorry that happened to you."

Kerry sighed. It felt so good to tell someone; even Colleen only knew bits and pieces. "Kyle is the worst part. He's Father's bodyguard." Her mind pictured his tall, silver-haired sleekness, and her stomach turned. "He does most of the dirty work. Sometimes I'm not even sure my father knows half of what he does." She let her head rest against Dar's collarbone, and paused a moment. "When I was in college, I was going out with a guy I'd known for a few years. I really liked him, and he was a nice guy--good family, very religious. You'd think I'd finally found something my father would approve of."

Dar waited, glancing down to see the lost, aching expression in Kerry's eyes. "What happened?"

"He...Kyle said they didn't really think this guy was right for me, but he said he knew how stubborn I was, so he had to make sure I did...the right thing." Kerry's voice went flat and remote. "So he took me into the back laundry room and, um..." She went silent, then shook her head. "And he told me he'd tell John all about it if I ever saw him again."

Dar exhaled very slowly, feeling the rage start to build again.

"I was stupid. I went to my father and told him what happened, and you know what he did, Dar?" The blond woman smiled bitterly. "He talked to Kyle and decided I was lying. He brought him in, and made me apologize to him. And all the while, Kyle just smiled at me." She laughed humorlessly. "And then, of course, my mother got to me, chewing me out for 'upsetting my

father' with my 'shameful tales.' " Kerry paused. "I think...that night was the most alone I'd ever felt." She spent a moment in quiet memory. "Saying goodbye to John was hard; he didn't understand." Kerry looked up at the pale, quiet face above her. "I can imagine what you're thinking."

"No," Dar managed to get out. "And you most certainly can not imagine what I am thinking, which is a damn good thing, too."

Where *had* that image of drawing and quartering come from? Kerry just looked at her, prickles running down her neck at the fierce tone in Dar's voice. "I guess it sounds so incredible. I just learned to live with it," she concluded softly. "I didn't even realize life could be different until I came down here. Being on my own was..." She stopped. "Oh god, I can't describe it...to make friends with whoever I wanted, do what I wanted, when I wanted to do it..." She reached out a hand and touched Dar's face. "And now you. I'm so scared, Dar. Whenever I've really wanted something, I've had to watch it be taken away, and I..." An awkward pause. "I really want this," she whispered. "You." Another, longer pause. "Us," she concluded very softly.

"Do you?" Dar whispered back.

"With all my heart," Kerry replied, resting her head against Dar's shoulder. "I don't want you to get hurt, Dar, but, my god, I don't want to lose you either."

I don't want to lose you. Dar felt herself calm as she processed the words and understood her greatest fear was unfounded this time. Kerry wasn't walking away from her, and though there was trouble on the horizon, it wasn't that kind of trouble. This kind of trouble, she could handle. Her questions had been answered, and a problem put forth. She set aside both the rage and the shy joy, and considered the problem first. "Does your father have any hold on you other than paternal?"

Kerry looked at her, puzzled. "I don't understand the question."

"Do you owe him money, does he have legal strings holding you?" Dar asked, her brows contracting slightly. "Anything like that?"

"No." Kerry shook her head. "I support myself here, if that's what you're asking. You've made that more than comfortably possible, you realize."

"I just pay people what they're worth." A tiny, tiny smile lit Dar's face. "So he couldn't actually force you to come back."

There was a long period of silence as a succession of emotions crossed Kerry's expressive face, the idea something she apparently hadn't considered before. At last, she half shrugged. "He'd find some way of getting me fired," Kerry replied darkly. "Find some friend of his high enough up." Dar chuckled softly. "Not in this company. It's up to your supervising manager, and that's me. There is nobody that's going to go head to head with me over this," she said, with absolute confidence. "And even if he did, it wouldn't matter."

"Then he'll go after you," Kerry stated seriously. "He'll find someone to dig and dig...until they uncover something he can use against you. And, Dar, the most obvious thing that pops to mind is us," Kerry reminded her. "I know we said we'd keep it low-profile, but you know people talk. I'm sure at least a few of them are already."

Dar didn't look dismayed. On the contrary, she looked intrigued. "Then I'll have to go after him first." she replied.

"What do you mean?" Kerry asked hesitantly.

"You said he digs things up?" Dar asked.

She nodded. "He has investigators, that kind of thing."

A slow nod of Dar's head. "So do I. Only they're not the kind that wear twelve-dollar fedoras and smell of cigar smoke, and I don't have to pay them overtime." She gazed at Kerry. "This is the Information Age, Kerry...and the truth is out there. You just gotta go find it."

"I don't understand."

"Don't worry about it," Dar said. "Trust me, Kerry. I've faced down a lot bigger fish than your father."

Kerry studied her, with a troubled expression. "Are you sure you know what you're getting into?" she asked. "If something happens to you, Dar, I'll..." She fell silent.

Dar smiled and took her hand, running her fingers over the skin lightly. "Just leave it to me," she told the blonde woman. "And, Kerry?"

"Hmm?" The reddened eyes blinked. "I'm sorry I got like this. I don't usually," she apologized.

"Don't be sorry. I'm glad you said it so we could talk about it," Dar replied quietly. "Rather than you just..." She shrugged. "...walking out or whatever."

Kerry closed her fingers around Dar's. "Is that what happened to you before?"

"Something like that, yeah." Dar stared off into the darkness beyond the patio doors.

Kerry sighed. "I won't ever do that to you, Dar, I swear."

Dar slowly focused her attention on Kerry's face, searching it for a long moment. "And I'll always be there for you, Kerry. No matter what."

It was a strange moment, Kerry thought. She could feel a faint shiver go down her back, and as she looked at Dar, some pale, almost translucent barrier between them seemed to drop. "That's what friends do, they stand by each other, right?"

"Right." Dar smiled. "Friend."

Kerry slid gladly into the waiting arms and let the warmth wash over her. *We'll find a way through it. Together.*

DAR LEANED BACK against the couch, content to simply sit and hang on to Kerry, who was peacefully resting in her arms. They'd been sitting like that for a while, in relative silence, only the soft hiss of the waves audible through the half open balcony door. "Hey," Dar finally murmured. "You like strawberries?"

Kerry seemed to come back from very far away. "What human being doesn't like strawberries, Dar?" she inquired reasonably, smoothing her fingers over the soft cotton of her friend's shirt.

She could feel the gentle motion of Dar's breathing, which seemed almost hypnotic to her.

"Why?"

Dar felt Kerry's touch idly roaming her body, and she had to swallow before she answered, "You want some?"

"Means I have to move," Kerry complained, finding interesting things to trace with her fingers.

"And I really like where I am," she concluded softly.

"That's true," Dar acknowledged with a smile. "But they're nice, big, juicy ones, and I have melted chocolate to dip them in," she coaxed teasingly.

"Mmm." Kerry smiled. "Do you always make it a habit of spoiling people you like rotten?" She peeked up at Dar's face, which had creased into a smirk. The expression faded after a moment, though.

"I don't know, haven't had much practice," Dar admitted quietly with a faint shrug. "I just do what comes naturally."

Kerry's brow furrowed. "Dar, do me a favor, okay?"

A nod. "Okay."

"You haven't heard what it is yet," the blonde woman objected. "If we ever bump into any of these people you were involved with, let me know."

Dar looked taken aback. "That's not really likely, but... Why?"

"So I can kick them in the shins," Kerry told her. "And if you're really nice, you'll tell me ahead of time so I can put on the pair of steel-toed cowboy boots I bought in Austin last year." She felt Dar's body jerk as a laugh was forced out. "I mean it."

Dar hugged her. "Thanks. I'd actually enjoy watching that," she muttered wryly. *Oh yes, especially...* Her lips twisted into an ironic grin. *Especially Elana, who so enjoyed telling me the only way I'd ever find love was to purchase it.*

Kerry was so different from anyone she'd been involved with before...certainly worlds different than the tall, aristocratic Elana. *Maybe I've been barking up the wrong tree all these years,* she concluded with a sigh. Even in the best times with anyone else, it hadn't felt anywhere near as wonderful as it did right this moment.

Kerry smiled, and wriggled closer, continuing her idle tracing. A button worked itself free somehow, and she traded cotton for skin, feeling Dar's hands begin a gentle massage on her back. "Ooo. That feels great. I am going to be *soo* sore tomorrow," she commented wryly. "After that climbing wall, I'll be limping around all over the place. People are going to think I'm the world's biggest klutz."

Her fingers moved lower, and she felt a temperature change under them, the skin growing very warm. Puzzled, she probed a little further, and heard the soft sound as Dar stifled a gasp. "Hey." Her brows creased, and she unbuttoned a few more buttons, pulling aside the taller woman's shirt and peering at her. "Oh my god, Dar!"

Guiltily, Dar glanced down. "It looks worse than it is. Really." A mottled bruise covered a space the size of a soccer ball just under her ribs. "It's just a little sore."

"Dar, that's bullshit!" Kerry objected. "You need to get that checked out. Jesus! You could have ruptured something!"

Dar had to smile at Kerry's worriedly indignant speech. "I'm sure I'd have keeled over by now if that was the case," she reminded her friend. "It's really nothing."

Blonde brows knit. "Oh yeah?" Kerry eyed her. "Sit up." She paused. "Without using your hands."

The taller woman hesitated and saw a triumphant smirk appear. "I said it was sore," she grumbled. "Talk about klutzes, I should have gotten out of the way."

Kerry exhaled. "Dar, Dar, Dar... Would a cold pack help?" she asked sympathetically. "You came over and helped me out. I guess it's my turn." She paused, wincing at the bruise. "You sure you don't want to get that checked out? This time of night on a weekday, it probably won't be busy at the hospital."

"No! I hate hospitals," Dar replied stubbornly. "Look, if it still hurts tomorrow, I'll stop by Dr. Steve's on the way in to work and have him look at it, okay?" She paused and cleared her throat awkwardly. "But, um...an ice pack is probably a good idea."

Kerry patted her shoulder. "You stay here, I'll get it." She rose up off the couch and headed towards the kitchen. "And bring back some of your strawberries, too."

Dar settled back with a smile. "If you pull the plastic container on the bottom shelf out and put it in the microwave for about three minutes, that'll about do it."

As she moved towards the refrigerator, Kerry just shook her head and retrieved a good amount of ice, which she put into the blender on the counter. Then she pulled the requested container out and put it in the microwave, slightly popping up the top to vent it before she turned the machine

on. "What is that?" she wondered briefly as she turned on the blender and watched it make snow. After a minute or two, she sniffed at the air. "Mmm."

The blender stopped, and she put the ice in a heavy plastic bag she'd dug out of the closet. Then she set that aside and peeked in the microwave as a blast of warm, rich chocolate scent hit her.

"Oh my god." She gingerly pulled the container out and opened it, revealing a warm pool of the stuff. "Ho, boy." She put the dish on a small tray. Then, glancing around, she poked her finger in it and tasted. "Jesus, that is wonderful."

Being around Dar, she realized, was an extremely sensual experience, and her senses seemed to be on hyperdrive lately. She left the tray and went back to the refrigerator, opening it and kneeling down, blinking when she spotted the strawberries. "Good grief, Dar!" she yelled into the living room. "Teenage Mutant Ninja Strawberries? Where did you get these, the fields outside Turkey Point?" She heard the soft laugh as she pulled the box out, a long plastic container with approximately two dozen of the fruits--laid out like roses on long stems with the leaves still attached. The berries themselves were all larger than an average peach, and the scent was almost intoxicating. With a laugh, she took them out, washing them off before adding them to the tray, then carrying the entire thing out to where Dar was peacefully waiting.

"Here." She put the tray down and settled into the leather next to Dar, feeling the sudden impact of those blue eyes on her. She picked the ice up and gently put it in place, tucking the edges of the terrycloth towel around the ends. "How's that?"

"Nice." Dar regarded her quietly. "You have very gentle hands." She captured one of Kerry's, and studied it, turning it over and stroking the palm.

It was like getting an adrenaline shot right to the groin. Kerry had to swallow before she could make an attempt at regaining her composure. "Thanks," she whispered, finding herself wanting to continue the contact. "They seem to get that way around you for some reason."

Dar gazed at her, then lifted a hand and traced her cheekbone with a feather light touch. "Yeah," she murmured, feeling Kerry lean into the pressure as her eyes fluttered closed, "strange." The touch circled around the blonde's neck, pulling her down willingly as their lips met. Kerry's hands found a place on either side of Dar's head, and they slid together, the ice forgotten. The berries forgotten. Even the chocolate was forgotten.

Dar leaned back and stretched her legs out as Kerry fit herself into the space next to the back of the couch, feeling the cool touch of the leather warm against her skin. She was careful not to jar the taller woman's side as she nibbled the soft skin of her neck, inhaling the smell of cotton mixed with the chlorine that still clung to Dar's body. A hand touched her side, and she drew a sharp breath in as she slid a return touch down Dar's thigh, feeling the muscles move under her hand as the taller woman shifted, pressing her back against the leather into a very safe space.

Lips found her earlobe, then her throat, sucking gently at her pulse point which jumped under the attention. Then she had an idea. She reached over Dar and stuck a finger in the warm chocolate, then bringing it back and painting a line down Dar's face. She nibbled it. "Oh, that's nice." She licked it off, then spread a line lower, hearing a soft chuckle sound deep in Dar's throat.

"This is gonna get mes-sy," the taller woman rumbled softly, reaching over and getting a blob of chocolate, applying it neatly along Kerry's collarbone. "Glad the couch is leather." She pulled the T-shirt down off one of Kerry's shoulders and cleaned off her handiwork as she felt a warm stripe traveling along her breastbone, followed by a tongue and lips.

"Mmm." Kerry painted a set of circles.

"Good chocolate, huh?" Dar managed to whisper, finding a nice well in Kerry's belly button to hide some in.

"What chocolate?" Kerry exhaled, sliding a hand down Dar's stomach. "Oh, right. Yeah." She was careful not to press against the bruise, but she wanted to touch every other square inch of her--her lips roaming over the soft skin and tasting and breathing and touching. The pressure was building again, as Dar's hands moved, and her dark hair brushed against Kerry's sensitized skin. She cried out softly.

"You all right?" Dar's voice, almost inside of her, vibrating down her ears.

"Yeah...just..." Kerry could hardly stand the intensity, and she pulled Dar closer, letting the sensation build until they both were helpless in its grasp.

The release left them gasping, bodies intertwined in the soft nest of damp leather. Kerry managed to stir, shifting up and nestling her head against Dar's shoulder as she wrapped her arms around her, hugging her mindlessly.

Dar let her eyes slide shut, feeling her heart begin to slow its hammering as she gently stroked Kerry's hair. A sweet peace filled her, and she smiled a bit. "Feels so good," she murmured.

"Different."

A faint nod against her chest. "Beautiful." Kerry sighed, thinking about being surrounded by a security and a warmth like none she'd ever known. And something else. She looked up at Dar's face. "I've never felt like this before," she admitted quietly.

There was a long silence while Dar gazed into her eyes. "Me either."

Those blue eyes. Kerry had never known anyone else's quite like hers. And yet, they were as familiar to her as her own reflection. She knew the tiny crinkle at their edges, and the way a smile could creep into them, and how they narrowed and darkened when deep in thought, as though she'd known them all her life. And so, now, when they opened and gentled, warm on her face as a soft hint of sunlight, she had no doubt of the emotion behind them. "Dar?"

"Mmm?"

"Would you think it was really tacky of me if I told you I'm in love with you?" She bit her lip and waited, crossing her toes and the fingers of the one hand she had out of sight.

Dar actually stopped breathing. Her chest stilled as she paused a beat, before a startled, but delighted, smile shaped her lips. "You are?"

Like a child given a surprise toy on her birthday, Kerry decided, having seen that on TV once.

"Yeah." She replied softly. "I am."

"Um..." Dar's face had an expression that was a cross between embarrassment and happiness. "At least you had the sense to figure it out yourself. I had to have the god-damned doctor tell me."

Kerry gazed at her in cautious hope. "Tell you what?" *She means, no she doesn't, yes she does oh Jesus...yes...yes... Yes!*

Dar gave in to it and let it take her over. "Tell me the reason I've been feeling so damn strange." She traced Kerry's eyebrow. "I didn't have the sense to know what love was when I fell into it." She sighed softly. "So, no, I don't think it's tacky. I think it's the most amazing thing I've ever heard."

Yes! Kerry felt a little giddy. *Wheeee!* Her eyes lit, and she felt a big grin take over her face. *No, I feel a lot giddy. It wasn't at all like the romance novels said it would be, but I'll take it.* She sighed happily. *Wait.* "Been feeling?"

Dar smiled sheepishly. "I think I should have realized something was going on with me after I found myself getting you a pin that time we went shopping."

Kerry blinked. "Pin? Oh my god, that dolphin pin?" She stared at Dar in amazement. "The one on that suit? I...Jesus. I found that after I got home. I thought I was just going crazy and didn't see it." She laughed in delight. "Dar, that's so sweet."

The taller woman tried a scowl, then she finally just laughed. Kerry laughed too, and they ended up just hugging each other, squeezing tighter until Dar finally sucked in a breath and gasped. Kerry released her immediately. "Oh god, sorry." Her hand went to cradle Dar's face, tensed in pain. "Dar, are you all right?"

The pain subsided, and the taller woman sighed softly. "Whoa," she muttered. "That stung." Kerry hitched herself up on an elbow and scratched her nose, then prodded Dar's shoulder with a forefinger. "Remember, you said you were going to stop by the doctor's tomorrow if it still hurt?" Penitent blue eyes glanced warily at her. "*Yeaaaah*, I said that."

"Well, you're not getting a choice," Kerry informed her. "Because I'm going to take you there." A dark brow rose. Kerry leaned over and kissed it, then backed off and waited.

Dar chewed her lip, then let a wry grin take over her face. "All right, you win." She sighed. *Yeah*. Kerry retrieved the ice pack, now sadly the worse for wear, and settled it back over Dar's ribs. *We both win*. She squirmed back down against the leather, watching as Dar retrieved a strawberry and scooped up a bit of the cooled chocolate. She brought it over and offered it. Kerry took a bite and chewed. "Mmm."

Dar took her own bite and stretched her legs out a little, feeling Kerry settle against her with a warm familiarity. Everything was changing. Her life was now in a wonderful, frightening chaos. It felt absolutely fantastic.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE WHINE OF the alarm brought Dar out of her dream and into the waking reality of pre-dawn with a gasp. She reached out and slapped the clock, hushing it, then laid her head back onto the pillow and let her heart start to calm. *Jesus*. She blinked a few times, then glanced down at the blonde limpet attached snugly to her. It took a moment of getting used to. She'd been alone for so long, waking up in this warm tangle was a shock, albeit a pleasant one, she had to admit. She was on her back, and Kerry was tucked up against her right side, her head pillowed on Dar's shoulder and a firm grip wound around her stomach. It seemed to be a favorite position of hers, Dar noted, as she watched Kerry's breathing rise and fall with a steady rhythm.

Dar found a smile inching across her face as she softly fingered the bright hair cascading across her chest, tangling it idly in fascination. *She loves me*. The thought swirled around her mind, rinsing it clean of the fogginess of sleep. *She actually said it*. The others never had. Oh, they'd talked about sex, and commitment, but never looked right up at her and just told her...

Do you think it's tacky of me? Dar savored the question with a little sigh. *No, I don't think it was tacky. What would I have said... How would I have expressed that, if it had been up to me?* She snorted in silent laughter. *Like I could have. I was so scared she was gonna walk away from this.* Dar cursed her own insecurity softly. *I'm glad she had more guts than I have. And god, what she's been through.* Now her anger stirred again, thinking of what Kerry had gone through.

Bastards. How could they do that to a kid? She shook her head a tiny bit. *And that piece of shit bodyguard.* She wondered if he'd just roughed Kerry up or... Her hands touched the soft skin on the blonde woman's arm. Had he raped her? *God help him if he did and I ever meet him.* Dar shivered a little at the dark pulse of energy that ran through her. It was a wild, violent streak she didn't often let herself feel, but she knew it was there, and what her temper would lead her to if she wasn't careful.

Looking down at the pale, innocent face nestled against her skin, she knew being careful wasn't something she did naturally. Good-natured as her father had been with her, and with children of

all ages--still, that part she knew she'd gotten from him. This protective instinct for those she cared for wasn't something she could ignore.

Kerry chose that moment to stir, mumbling a bit into Dar's chest before she lifted her head and peered up in the gloom, her eyes finding Dar's. "It's dark," she pointed out, stifling a yawn. "Did you realize that?"

"Uh huh," her bedmate agreed. "It sure is. Best time for running."

Even in the dim light she could see the pale eyebrows lift in disapproval. "I usually get up at this time."

Kerry gave her an incredulous look. "Dar, you're not seriously considering running around out there in the dark, are you? You're hurt," she protested.

"No I'm not, I'm fine, it doesn't hurt a bit this morning." She took a deep breath to demonstrate.

"See?" It was a little tender, but the night's sleep had helped a lot, and she really did feel much better. "I generally run about, um, ten miles in the morning."

Kerry propped up her head on her hand and regarded the taller woman thoughtfully. "That's disgusting," she commented, then she slipped a hand between the buttons on Dar's shirt and let her fingers run over the smooth skin. The heat from the previous night had subsided and the bruise didn't seem to be causing its victim much pain after all. "Hmm, doesn't feel as swollen. I guess you're right."

Dar blinked a few times, enjoying the friendly touch of Kerry's fingers, now moving in idle circles against her skin. It relaxed her, she realized, and she found herself stifling a yawn in reaction. "Mmm, stop that. You're putting me to sleep," she complained wryly.

"Oh, really?" Kerry mused with a tiny smirk. "Well, well, well...look at you. This is better than a hypnotist with a swinging pocket watch." She made her circles wider and bit her lip in amusement as the blue eyes dimly visible in the pre-dawn light slid shut. "C'mon, Dar, let it go. Even if you feel fine, you took quite a jolt last night," Kerry told her reasonably.

"Yeah, it's not every night I get painted in chocolate," Dar murmured, the corners of her mouth twitching. "Certainly was a shock to my system all right."

"That was *not* what I meant, and you know it." Kerry chuckled. "Give yourself a break, Dar, we've got a long day today. That delegation from Pittsburgh is in at ten," she coaxed, grinning impishly when there wasn't an immediate argument. "Besides, I'm really comfortable." She eased closer, feeling the light pressure of Dar's hand against her back.

"Arrrggg... Only for a little while," Dar grumbled, surrendering.

"How about daylight, hmm? That sound good?" Kerry countered, not stopping her petting for a moment.

No answer, and Kerry smiled at the deep, even breathing. She settled back down contentedly and exhaled. *So this is what being in love feels like.* She looked out the window, at the stars still vivid in the southern sky. *I like it,* she decided as she closed her eyes.

Last night had been a big surprise. She knew she hadn't had any intention of bringing up what Colleen referred to as the big "L" word, not last night, not until she had some clue as to how Dar felt, but... *But...* she'd gotten an inkling, even without any words on the taller woman's part. It hadn't taken a telephone psychic to pick up Dar's nervousness or the intensity of her feelings.

Kerry opened her eyes and gazed up at the taller woman's face. *For someone so in control, you sure don't have a handle on the mushy stuff, do you?* She let her lids slide shut again, glad she'd told Dar about her family. Her reaction had been gratifying, to say the least. Kerry let the sleepiness start to take her back over, closing her eyes more tightly and sucking in a breath full of clean linen and her bedmate. Then she opened them again. *Jesus, Kerry, you have a lover. Can*

you imagine that? Green orbs glanced around the room, then fell on Dar's face, peacefully asleep. *Nice to know you have better taste than the President.* She stifled a faint laugh. *And if I didn't have a reason to stay here before, I certainly do now.*

She thought a moment about what Dar had said the previous night. Had she really meant what she'd said, about finding things out about her father? Or was it just bravado talking, Dar's apparent desire to defuse her worry about what he might do to her, to them? Was Dar just a talker? Kerry suddenly remembered Brady's phone conversation with Dar during the takeover of Associated and also the night she'd been carjacked, and she had to admit to herself that there was something real and a little dangerous about her new lover. Just like there was something real and dangerous about her father. Kerry slowly let her held breath out, knowing she'd come to a point where she'd have to put her money on one or the other, and she didn't truly know what the odds were in the possible directions her life could take. *Ah, well.* She put her head back down and closed her eyes. *I'll find out soon enough.*

THE PHONE BUZZED. "Yeah?" Dar punched the speaker button and kept on typing, her eyes flicking across the spreadsheet intently. "What is it?"

"Dar, security at the desk just called up, someone to see you," Maria's voice informed her.

"Is...Michelle Graver?"

Oh crap. Dar mentally reviewed her options. Major client, probably in town for a short visit, probably wanted to finally corner her into that dinner. *Oh crap.* "Sure, have her escorted up." She sighed aggrievedly. Just what she needed after a day like today. Two presentation sessions, a half dozen arguments, one really nasty situation solved by mostly sheer cussedness on her part...

Damn, I was looking forward to leaving. She keyed a popup message.

I'm in trouble, Michelle's here.

She clicked Send, then went back to her spreadsheet for a moment.

You could take her to Shorty's for dinner. Bet she'd look good in ketchup.

Dar chuckled to herself at Kerry's prompt response. Shorty's was the local barbeque hangout, off US 1 near Dadeland. It served great ribs, and she actually was partial to their food, but "rustic" as a term didn't quite do it justice. At least they'd put air conditioning in a few years back and didn't depend on only screening to keep the bugs out.

Might as well just take her to McDonalds.

She sent that reply, then glanced up as the door opened to reveal Maria's round form. "Oh, thought you were her."

"No, no." Maria walked over and handed her a file folder. "Is the contract for the new utilities account in New York."

"Thanks." Dar smiled at her and took the folder, putting it on her desk and leaning back as she saved the spreadsheet. "Well, that's done--the first quarter projections for infrastructure growth. We're going to get slaughtered if we don't buy up more facilities." She stretched and cracked her neck, then put her hands behind her head and let out a satisfied sigh.

Maria watched her. "You feel good, no?" she asked, mildly amazed at the visible difference in her boss.

Dar paused, then finally nodded. "Yeah, must be all this extra rest I'm getting," she deadpanned. "Haven't had a damn headache in weeks."

"Tcha, is good." Maria smiled at her as Dar's eyes rested on the dolphin sculpture.

"Yeah." After a moment, Dar looked up again, a mildly bemused expression on her face. "Sure beats swallowing all those damn pills. Gave me a stomach ache." She lightly rocked back in her chair as she heard the elevator door open. "Here comes trouble, if I'm not mistaken."

Sharp, staccato heels could be heard on the tile before the security guard opened the door, and Michelle Graver stepped around him and in. She gazed around the office appreciatively and finally ended up letting her eyes rest on Dar, who was still leaning back in her chair, her hands folded in front of her. "Hello, Dar."

"Afternoon, Michelle. What brings you to these parts?" Dar inquired civilly. "Please, sit down." She motioned to one of the padded seats before her desk. "What can I do for you?" The red-haired woman was dressed in a neat silk suit that clung to her frame, leaving little to the imagination--an outfit just a little too exotic to be strictly business and a little too sexy not to have a purpose.

"Well, the state tourism board's meeting is this week. You know we're a big part of that," Michelle said, seating herself gracefully. "I had a few hours free tonight, I though I'd stop by and see if I could claim that raincheck." Her eyes found Dar's and a faint, fleeting smile crossed her lips. "If you're not...busy."

A faint warning bell sounded in Dar's head. "I had nothing planned," she replied cautiously. "Did you have someplace in mind you wanted to try?" Idly, she toyed with the idea of telling the woman she had previous plans, then rejected the idea, deciding it would just postpone the inevitable. *Might as well get the damn woman out of the way.*

"Well, this is your end of the pond, Dar. Why don't you suggest something?" Michelle crossed her legs and leaned against the arm of the chair, a predatory smile on her face. "Surely you know all the nice spots around here."

The taller woman considered. "Where are you staying?"

The smile widened perceptibly. "The Hyatt, downtown," she purred.

"Do you like seafood?" Dar asked politely.

"I love it," Michelle replied.

Pale blue eyes regarded her warily. "All right, Monty's down in the Grove is a good spot for that. I could pick you up--say at seven?"

She nodded. "That would be perfect. I can fill you in on the implementation plan, and we can...talk a little." She stood up, having got what she wanted, and straightened her jacket neatly.

"Room 1243." She let her eyes linger on Dar's body, then turned, moving across the carpet and pausing at the door. "Till then." She slipped out, and Dar made a face.

"Is that going to ever be a waste of good crabs. On the other hand, maybe I can get one to bite her." Dar sighed.

KERRY PUSHED HER door open and ducked inside, putting down the bags of groceries and kicking the wooden panel shut behind her. A glance at the clock told her it was well past ten, and she exhaled, having spent the night doing all the errands she could possibly think of. Or make up, for that matter, anything to keep her mind off where Dar was, and who she was with.

"Jealousy is not a fun emotion," she informed her fish. "Don't let anyone fool you, Scully. It sucks." Trudging into the kitchen, she put the bags down, setting the cold stuff down by the refrigerator. "Not that I'm worried mind you, I know Dar doesn't like her."

Scully and Mulder blew bubbles.

"No, really, she doesn't. She was making the funniest jokes about her on the way out, though I think that was mostly to make me feel better." She gave the fish a wry look. "I was trying really

hard to not come off as a green-eyed monster, but of course that's really tough for me, given the fact that I already have green eyes. You know what I mean?"

Mulder blew a bubble. Scully inched up and smacked him on the lips.

"Ooo, I can think of about seven million Internet fans that would kill for that sight."

The Lone Gunmen darted around as she crossed over and sprinkled a little food in the tank. She leaned against the edge, peering down at them. "It's business, guys. Nothing personal." She sighed. "But I can't help wanting to pull her little red eyebrows out and feed them to her with a plunger." She half wished Dar had simply turned down the meeting, even though she knew her boss had a responsibility to maintain good relations with their newest account. *Does it have to be that kind of relations, though?* Kerry felt a little sick every time she thought of Michelle, and her fancy hotel, and her exotic figure. It was a horrible, helpless feeling, and she briefly considered just putting everything away, and going to sleep. It would be over in the morning. *Right?*

"Shit, come on, Kerry, get a grip. Dar turned down a dinner with her for a romp in the park with you just a few weeks ago. She couldn't avoid this. The woman pranced into her office and practically forced her into it," she told herself. *Right?*

With a sigh, she went back into the kitchen and put everything away, including the milk and chocolate syrup she'd found herself getting wholly without conscious thought. Then she changed, and sat down on the couch, letting her fingers drift over the fabric and remembering Monday.

Was it only three days ago? It felt longer. The clock ticked in the silence, and she could hear the soft hum of the aquarium's tank motor. The phone's ringing startled her, and she jumped, then got up and went over to it. "Hello?"

"Kerry, I'm glad I caught you," her mother's voice sounded from the receiver. "You're hardly ever home these days, dear. I've been trying you since Tuesday."

Mmm-hmm. Better see about call forwarding. Kerry winced. "Sorry. I, um...I was working late yesterday, then I went to the gym...and we went out after that."

"Oh? You joined a gym?" Her mother's voice sounded wary.

"It's a special deal through our company," Kerry told her. "A whole bunch of us did it. I'm taking some aerobics, and wall climbing, and...a little self-defense class." She laughed faintly. "It's a lot of fun."

A moment's silence. "Well, I'm very surprised you got involved in something like that when you're leaving, Kerry," her mother stated disapprovingly. "That's not like you."

Kerry took a deep, deep breath. "Mother, let's be sensible, all right? I can't just give up this job and come home just because of an accident. It's silly." Briefly, she wished Dar was there, needing the taller woman's comforting presence. "I'm doing great here, it's such a good opportunity."

"Don't be foolish," her mother snapped. "Your father told you, you're coming home. And let's not hear any talk about that, Kerrison, it's all arranged."

It was almost as though she could feel warm hands resting on her shoulders, and a close presence behind her as she stood a little straighter. "No, I'm not, and if you don't want to talk about it, that's fine, Mother. But I have every intention of staying here," Kerry told her steadily. "I have friends here, and a great job. I'm not ready to give that up."

Kerry could feel the frozen silence emanating through the line. "We'll see what your father has to say about that," the voice replied angrily. "I can't believe I'm hearing this from you. Of all the ungrateful things! Living there has given you horrible ideas, and it's the best reason I can see for bringing you home."

It hurt. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Mother. I don't mean any disrespect to you, or to Daddy, but you have to understand that..." The line went dead. Kerry sighed and hung it up, letting it drop on

the table with a dull thud. "Great. Just freaking, one hundred percent, doesn't-that-bite-the-big-one, piece of crap, great." Like her stomach hadn't hurt enough already. Kerry sat down and cradled her head in her hands.

THE RESTAURANT WAS about three quarters full, and the soft clink of silverware warred with low, buzzing conversation as Dar cocked her head, absorbing the story Michelle was telling her about some problem they'd had with their mainframes. It was sad; Dar had figured out what the problem was ten minutes prior, but she saw no percentage in giving Michelle a freebie, considering her network people had been frustrated over it for a week. "You could contract us to send an analyst out there," she offered with a frank smile.

Michelle toyed with her fork and peered at her over lashes dusted lightly with a faint golden tinge. "You mean you can't solve it off the top of your head? Why, Dar, I'm disappointed." Dar briefly considered responding with a smart remark about services and paying for them, then she merely smiled. "Oh, I can't solve everyone's problems, but I'm sure one of our engineers could fix you right up." She took a sip of the champagne Michelle had insisted on, then speared a piece of salmon and glanced outside. The marina the restaurant bordered was full of winking lights, boats traveling in and out and docked. There was a party in full swing on one, with bearded men in denim shorts and women in halter tops trading beers. She fought the urge to loosen her own buttoned collar, and sighed inwardly. "I heard from infrastructure, your circuits are in."

"Well, that's good news." Michelle apparently decided to give up on her prodding. "Took them long enough," she sniped.

Two weeks for a major T3 circuit wasn't long, but Dar refused to dispute that. "Problem was your demarc, actually, the telco people tell me it took them six days to get access to the switch room." She gave Michelle a pleasant look. "Makes it a little tough to complete the circuit if you can't get into the facilities."

"We're very serious about security," she responded with a tight-lipped smile. "Just like you are, we don't let people wander about our buildings anonymously."

Dar laughed. "Come on, Michelle, two Southern Bell technicians in uniform with their famous truck. How anonymous is that?" She nibbled another piece of salmon as she gazed innocently at the shorter woman, who was neatly decimating a plateful of stuffed shrimp.

Graver didn't answer for a moment as she swallowed. "Anyone can pick up one of those stupid-looking white helmets and a shirt. We don't take chances," she informed Dar. "So, tell me, Dar, I'm curious; what makes someone as experienced as you pick a rank novice as an assistant?"

It came from around the corner, and hit unexpectedly. But Dar hadn't spent years in the boardroom refining her reactions for nothing. She took a forkful of baked potato and considered the question seriously. *Why, Michelle? Because she's a babe, and I fell head over heels in love with her at pretty much first sight, of course. No, no, Dar, can't tell the weeble that.* "Well, she was part of an account we consolidated not long ago, and I thought she had some good potential, so I took a chance on her," she answered evenly. "It paid off. She sent your intranet people some mail telling them how to do a better job securing your network, considering she was able to tap right into your master routers past your firewall." Another forkful of potatoes followed, and she chewed innocently as Michelle apparently swallowed something the wrong way and hastily took a sip of water. "She's good, and a fast learner. Why?"

"Just asking." Michelle cleared her throat. "Actually, she was quite impressive. She's Roger Stuart's daughter?"

Dar nodded. "Mmm-hmm."

Michelle smirked. "That was clever of you. He's not a friend of your company's," she purred. "I sense an ulterior motive here."

Sure you do, it's just not the one you're thinking of, Michelle. "Not really. Though that might turn out to be an asset," Dar answered dismissively.

"I'm sure she has many...assets." Michelle smiled at her. "But enough about her. Tell me more about yourself, Dar."

It feels like the dinner's lasted three weeks, Dar reflected as they finally left the restaurant into the cool night air. She took in a breath of it, then stepped forward as the valet brought the Lexus around. She waited for Michelle to settle herself, then she slid into the driver's side, moving the seat back a little to accommodate her inches.

"Nice." Michelle ran a finger over the leather surface. "Not quite what I pictured you driving, but nice."

Dar bit back an answer and started the car. "Thanks, I like it." She put the Lexus in gear and turned right out onto Bayshore Drive, heading back to pick up the highway and return Michelle to her hotel.

She knew what Michelle was gunning for. That much had been obvious from the moment she'd picked up the shorter woman, when she'd made a point of fingering Dar's jacket and complimenting her perfume. And she obviously felt that Dar was going to be a willing participant. God knew, she had before, and with less attractive people than Michelle Graver, who was good-looking, experienced, very sensual, and certainly more worldly than the sweetly uncertain Kerry.

Kerry had said, with a warm hand on her arm as they parted in the parking lot. "Dar, have fun. Don't hold back if you don't want to." She'd even smiled. So that was all right, right? Kerry understood it was just business...that she really didn't like Michelle. It was just...part of the job. Kerry understood. It wasn't like it meant anything, and it would be a quick, relatively enjoyable time. Michelle would leave happy, and no harm would be done. Dar pulled up in front of the Hyatt and put the Lexus in Park, half turning towards Michelle as the shorter woman eyed her with warm speculation. "Here we are."

A smile started on Michelle's face. "You coming up?" Her voice was low and sure. "I'd love to continue our conversation."

Dar drew breath to answer, then jumped as her cell phone rang. She pulled it out and flipped it open, giving Michelle an apologetic look. "Yeah?"

"Dar, it's Mark. We've got a big problem," the MIS chief's voice burred in her ear.

It was the perfect excuse. It got her off the hook and didn't leave the interestedly watching Michelle feeling rejected. "Hang on, Mark." She muted the phone and turned to the shorter woman. "Much as I appreciate the offer, Michelle, and I do, I'm afraid I have to decline."

A perfectly shaped red eyebrow curved up. "Problems?" She indicated the phone.

Dar met her eyes. "No, but I'm involved with someone, and it's just not my style." *Damn, that felt good to say.* She sighed inwardly as Michelle's face stiffened into a hidden fury. "And, frankly, you're not my type." The door slammed behind her, and Dar leaned back, knowing she'd just caused herself a whole pile of trouble. Amazing how incredibly good that felt. "Okay, Mark, what do we have?" She put the Lexus in gear and pulled away from the towering brown building.

KERRY BARELY MADE it in the door as the phone rang for the fourth time, her skates slipping on the entryway tile and sending her lunging across the room. "Jesus!" she yelped as her sweat-

drenched body hit the side of the couch, and she grabbed the ringing instrument. "Yow!" She landed on her butt and lost the phone, then scrambled after it, capturing it finally. "Hello?" she growled into it, trying to catch her breath.

A pause. "Hi." A low, vibrant voice answered her, a touch quizzically.

Every ounce of tension suddenly drained out of Kerry, leaving her limp as a damp, warm dishrag on the floor. "Hey, sorry." In the background, she could hear music faintly playing; other than that, it was very quiet where Dar was. She glanced at her watch. *Eleven. Hmm.* Her spirits rose from the dumpster. *Guess things didn't work out.* She felt a smile pull at her lips. *What a shame.*

"You all right?" Dar inquired gently.

"I'm drenched, exhausted, pissed off, and now I have a sore butt," Kerry replied. "Other than that, I'm great. How about you? How did dinner go?"

A soft chuckle. "Lousy. I think I may have blown a very important client relationship right to hell." The executive sighed. "Why are you pissed off, not to mention drenched and exhausted?" Kerry crossed her weighted down ankles and regarded the white popcorn ceiling. "Oh...well, I was skating," she explained. "My mother called. I kind of broke the news to her that I wasn't moving back there. She hung up on me."

"Ah," Dar murmured. "Sorry."

"I'm not," Kerry replied. "But it really pissed me off, and I..." She hesitated. *Was already tied in knots. No, she doesn't need to know that.* "I decided to work off some energy skating."

"Mmm, I see. You sound tired," Dar commented. "I should, um, let you get some sleep."

A momentary silence fell. Kerry rolled over and cradled the phone against her ear. "Where are you?"

A soft clucking noise then Dar let out a chuckle. "Outside in your parking lot," she admitted.

"Dar!" Kerry felt a laugh bubble up, and her bad mood vanished. "Get in here. Jesus, don't be goofy. You can help me up. I think I broke my butt." Through the half open door she heard the solid sound of the car door closing, then the soft, rhythmic footsteps she recognized as Dar's. She turned and watched as the door pushed open, and the dark head poked inquisitively in. "Hi." She waggled a skate-covered foot at the taller woman.

Dar put her hands on her hips and gazed down at her, a faint, playful smile pulling at her lips.

"You always go roller skating half naked?" she inquired, blinking appreciatively at the brief shorts and cutoff shirt. "You might coax me into trying it in that case."

"Hah hah hah." Kerry stuck her tongue out. "No, I don't, but everything else is in the laundry. For some reason, I hadn't gotten around to doing it this week." A pause. "Yet."

Dar tossed her jacket down and joined Kerry on the floor, stretching out on her side and propping her head up on one hand. She'd traded her suit for a pair of jeans and a cotton shirt, and she looked relaxed and faintly disheveled.

Just how Kerry liked her. She smiled. "So...is Michelle going to send Uncle Scrooge after you or something?"

Dar shrugged. "She might, I'll have to see. I'd better send a note down to the account team for them and warn them she's probably going to be a bitch on wheels to them." She fell silent and regarded the keys in her hand. "It's too bad, but..."

Kerry rolled over and faced her. "But what? Dar, forgive me for saying this, but she's a pig." The blonde woman's brows knit. "She was chasing after you like some...some..."

"Horny guy?" Dar inquired with a wry twist of her lips. "Maybe it's the short woman syndrome I keep hearing about."

"Hey!" Kerry gave her a look. "Short people don't have syndromes!" she protested. "We're just always pissed off because we can't reach kitchen cabinets."

Dar laughed easily. "Well, you're taller than she is."

Kerry considered. "Yeah, I am, come to think about it. I knew there was something I liked about her."

"You're a lot prettier than she is, too," the taller woman continued, her voice gentling. "On the outside and certainly on the inside."

Her companion blushed and glanced down. "Thanks," she replied softly. "I'm glad you think that."

Dar studied her for a moment. "Your mom was kind of rough, huh?" She reached out and covered Kerry's hand with her own. "Sorry you had to go through that, I know it's tough."

Kerry looked at the hand over hers, and let her fingers explore its surface a bit. "Dar, I wasn't going to say this but...you know, one of the things that is so bad between me and my parents is that we never communicate, and I don't want to start off that way with you." She looked up. "I'm really glad you didn't go with her tonight. It was really bothering me."

The blue eyes blinked. "It was?" The words were soft. "I'm glad you told me that." Dar lifted their joined hands and brushed her lips against them. "I was kind of...surprised when you told me to go ahead. It made me feel..." She stopped and shook her head. "Kind of disappointed," she admitted.

"Oh." Kerry thought about that. "Really?"

Dar nodded. "Really."

"Hmm. I..." Kerry bit her lip. "I didn't think I should get all...um, like 'don't you touch her!' I mean, we could end up on Jerry Springer or something."

A sly grin edged Dar's lips. "Kerry, lemme tell you something, I would have paid good, hard cash to see you smack her hands. Next time someone forces me to go out, you're coming with me."

Dar paused a beat and then asked, "So, what happened with your mother?" She met the startled green eyes. "You hate talking about your family, don't you?"

Kerry sighed. "Yeah, I do." She gave Dar a wry look. "I wish I could just forget I had them sometimes."

The phone rang, and Kerry almost jumped out of her skin since it was resting on her stomach.

"Jesus." She picked it up and pressed the answer button. "Hello?"

"Hi, sis." Her sister Angela's voice sounded halfway between nervous and amused.

"Oh, hi, Angela." She mouthed 'my sister' at Dar. "Let me guess, I'm the topic of conversation tonight."

Dar rolled over and pillowed her head on Kerry's belly, her eyes on the smaller woman's face.

"Oh my god, Ker, what in the name of the Lord did you do to them? Mom's about having a litter of kittens in the middle of the kitchen. You're not pregnant, are you?"

Dar lifted her head, and poked the surface she was resting on, making Kerry giggle softly.

"Nope," she whispered.

"No." Kerry reached down and tickled Dar's nose. "I'm just happy where I am and don't want to come back to Michigan. Is that a crime?" She exhaled. "Good grief, Angie, I've got this great job and all my friends. The stupid airplane was an accident, for crying out loud."

A sigh could be heard over the phone. "Ker, it's not funny, okay. Dad's already talking about things. Be careful, okay? You know how he gets."

Kerry felt a familiar jolt of fear grab her chest. "Yeah, I know," she answered softly. "How are things with you? "

"All right," her sister answered quietly. "Same old, same old. Richard's out with his friends. I'm here. You know how it goes." She paused. "I miss having you around. But honestly, Ker, I don't blame you for staying away."

"Well, I'll see you next week, I guess," Kerry replied. "If they don't lock me out of the house, that is. Maybe they'll settle down by then."

"I doubt it, but I'll be glad to see you anyway. If they give you a hard time, you can stay with us," Angela advised her. "How are things with you? You find anyone...um, I mean...well, you know." Kerry knew. "Yes." She twined her fingers with Dar's. "I did find someone, as a matter of fact." "Ah." Angela sighed. "So this doesn't really have anything to do with your job, does it?" Kerry laughed softly. "In a way, it does," she admitted. "I'll tell you about it when I get there. It's a long story."

"Bring pictures," her sister advised her. "I want to make sure my sister isn't running around with some crazy Latin goat-sacrificer."

Dar's eyes grew round as she listened, and she lifted her head in outrage. "Goat-sacrificer?" she mouthed.

"Shhh." Kerry put a hand on her lips. "No on both counts, Angie," she assured her. "Honest." An awkward pause. "Are you alone?" Angela asked hesitantly.

Kerry let a breath trickle out of her lungs. "No."

"Oh." It came out awkwardly. "Well, I should let you go then. You must be...busy."

Blue eyes and green met and dropped. "I just got back from skating, actually." Kerry cleared her throat. "We're just sitting around talking. But listen, keep an ear on the folks for me, okay? I'd rather know if I'm going to walk into Hell next week."

Angela sighed. "Okay, I can do that. You take care of yourself, Kerry, okay?"

"I will. You too, Angie. See you next week." Her sister told her. "Night."

She hung up, and let the phone rest on the floor. "My sister."

Dar chewed on that. "She seems nice. You sure you two aren't foundlings?"

Kerry snorted softly. "It's crossed my mind, believe me." She reached down and ran her fingers through Dar's dark hair. "Want some chocolate milk? Some followed me home from the store today."

"Sure." The taller woman stood and extended a hand down to her. "C'mon, I think *the Crocodile Lover* is on." She grabbed Kerry's arm and pulled her upright, smiling as the skates brought her smaller companion a good two inches higher than usual. "Mmm, nice positioning." She leaned forward a little and kissed the waiting lips, feeling Kerry's hands slip down and come to rest against her belt.

"Oh, great..." Kerry enjoyed herself, hooking her fingers in the loops and pulling herself closer.

"I'm destined to be stuck on skates for the rest of my life." Dar's arms closed around her, and she gladly let her body relax against her companions.

"Goat-sacrificer? What kind of stories have you been telling your sister?" Dar breathed in her ear. "You haven't been scaring her with that stuff about *Santeria* and the *Chupacabra*, have you?" Kerry let her head rest against Dar's shoulder. "No, she's been watching reruns of *Miami Vice* on cable again." There was a pause while they both silently absorbed each other. "What are you doing for Thanksgiving?" she asked unexpectedly.

"You could invite me home with you," Dar teased, watching a wistful look cross Kerry's face.

"I'm invited up to Gerald Easton's house. He's been a good friend, and sort of an uncle to me since I was a kid."

Kerry patted her gently. "Good, I'm glad. I hated to think of you being all by yourself. That's in Washington, right?"

Dar nodded. "Maryland, actually, just over the border. He's promised me leaves other than green ones, and the chance of a little snow."

"Mmm." Kerry nibbled her jaw. "You're taking your cell phone, right?"

Dar leaned back and studied her seriously. "If you get into trouble with your folks, you call me, Kerry. I'll be there, okay?" She paused. "Cell phone, oh shit, that reminds me, I need to log in. Mark conveniently interrupted me as I was dropping Michelle off and told me we had a security breach."

"Yikes!" Kerry sat down on the couch and started unstrapping her skates. "Did he catch them?"

"Yeah. But they shot off a packet into the network, he was tracing it when he talked to me. He was going to route it and find out where it came from."

"Help yourself." Kerry motioned towards her desk. "I'll get some milk and cookies." She got up and leaned on Dar's back, watching her start up sessions. "And turn on the crocodile dude." She got a gentle, insistent kiss for that, and closed her eyes as Dar half turned to continue the pressure. *Bite me, Michelle. I hope you spend the whole night with your pillow and a breadstick.* The night was definitely looking up.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"LOOK, I DON'T much care what he's saying, that circuit isn't going to be completed in ten days," Dar pronounced for the sixth time. "Not even if I drive to Tampa personally and kick the telco crew in the butt, so forget it."

"But, Dar," the voice on the other end of the phone protested, "it's been two months, they're screaming!"

Dar exhaled. "It's not our fault they got hit with a flood and it took out an entire CO, Brendan. We're pushing telco as hard as we can, all right?" She glanced at her watch. *Only eleven thirty? Damn, it feels like I've been here for eight hours already.* "They had to rebuild from scratch. Listen, tell them it's a good thing, they'll get brand new lines."

Brendan sighed. "All right, I'll see if I can snow them with that. But do me a favor, and push a little harder, huh?"

"I'll see what I can do," Dar promised, then disconnected and went back to her mail. "Damn, must be three hundred messages in here." She went to the next one, a report from Mark about the mysterious packet the previous night. "Someone scoping the place out, eh?" She examined the trace. "From an outside link, huh?" It was a request for information searching on specific strings, and as she scrolled through the dump, she stiffened.

"Well, well." Her name and social security number. "Son of a bitch." She picked up the phone and dialed Mark's number, waiting as it rang and gave her his voice mail. "Mark, it's Dar. I need to know where this came from." She hung up, then put that aside and went to the next message. The phone buzzed. "Yes?" A touch of impatience entered her voice.

"Dar, it's Miss Mariana on *numero uno*," Maria said over the intercom. "She says urgent." The dark-haired woman felt a twinge in her gut. "Okay, I'll take it. Thanks." She drummed her fingers a moment, then pressed the button. "Hi, Mariana, what's up?"

"Dar, I need to speak with you." The formality of the tone sent warning bells off in Dar's head.

"Now, please."

Shit. "Mariana, I'm in the middle of a dozen fires here. What is it?" she objected warily.

"Please just come down here," the Personnel VP stated quietly. "I need to show you something."

Dar sighed inwardly. "All right, I'll be right over." She hung up, then stood and shrugged into her jacket, running a hand through her hair to order it. "I can just imagine what this is about," she muttered softly as she headed for the door.

Moments later, she was knocking lightly on the frame leading into Mariana's spacious office, giving the woman a nod as she looked up. "As you requested."

"Close the door," Mariana said in a quiet, serious tone.

Dar did so, then walked across the carpet and sat down in the visitor's chair across from her, pretending a casualness she really didn't feel. "So, what's up?"

"I got these delivered via courier." The brunette tossed a manila envelope over to her.

Dar reached across the desk and lifted the envelope, opening the top and slipping out a stack of 8"x 10" photos. She glanced at the first one and started laughing. "Well, that was predictable."

She leafed through the others, then tossed the pile down in front of her friend. "And?"

Mariana leaned forward. "Dar." She put a finger on the pictures. "What's going on?"

Dar also leaned forward. "With what? Ten pictures of two people at Disney World?" She let a touch of incredulity show in her voice. "Is there a problem with that?"

"That's not two people, Dar. That's you and an employee of yours," Mariana stated quietly. "I need to tell you this is a very serious matter."

The taller woman let out a snort. "Get a grip, Mari. It's not against company policy to have a couple hours off." Her heart was beating so fast it was making her lightheaded. "What's the big deal?"

"Dar." Mariana stood and leaned on her hands. "What's going on with you? Do you understand what these pictures look like?" She pulled the first one off the top and showed it to her. It was a nice shot, if somewhat fuzzy, of her and Kerry on Space Mountain. Her arms were wrapped snugly around the smaller woman's body and both of them laughing.

"It looks like two people having a good time," Dar answered calmly. "Which is what it was. I'm not sure I like what you're insinuating." She stood, letting a little anger show. "Look, I know it's going to disrupt the entire corporate structure, but it's just possible there's someone in my OrgID who actually doesn't hate my guts. It's odd, but there you have it. What's the god-damned problem, Mari?" She realized going on the offensive was her only chance here.

"You're telling me there's nothing going on between you?" Mariana shot back. "Is that what you're saying?"

"No." Dar answered, her tone dropping dangerously. "There is most certainly something going on. It's called friendship, Mariana. Or don't you think I'm capable of that?" she snapped back.

"You think every time I talk to someone I have to be sleeping with them, is that it?"

Mariana edged back a little, staring at her uncertainly. "Okay, okay, hold on, Dar." She put her hands up. "I'm trying to protect you, and more importantly, protect Kerry. It's my job, remember?" She looked away from the ice cold eyes glaring at her. "So...you're friends, is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes," Dar replied. "I don't hit it off with many people, Mari. You know that. I just got lucky. I can actually spend time with her and not want to strangle her to death. Is that a crime?" Despite her brave words to Kerry earlier, she was shaking inside. Dar knew they were both on the edge of professional disaster, her friendship with the HR VP notwithstanding.

"You spend time together," the brunette clarified cautiously.

"Sure, been to dinner a few times. We go to the gym together. She's a nice kid, and I like her a lot," Dar responded.

The personnel director relaxed a little. "I'm sorry," she said simply, her hazel eyes finding Dar's and projecting regret. "Dar, you and I are friends, and I know how isolated you keep yourself. It's just..." She touched the pictures. "I got scared for you, okay?" She sighed. "There are people who will take any chance to go after you, and I don't want to see that happen."

Dar now relaxed a little and exhaled. "I know." She shook her head. "You know where those came from?"

Mariana blinked at her. "Disney World, I thought...not sure. Was someone taking pictures of you while you were there?"

"They're a bit of spiteful malice from Michelle Graver," Dar responded with a humorless smile.

"I wouldn't sleep with her, so this is her way of replying."

Mariana jerked back and let out a soft gasp. "You're joking."

"No," Dar answered. "I had to practically throw her out of my car last night," she said. "She was down for some tourist convention and hooked me into buying her dinner." Her eyes watched Mari closely. "Figured it came with a roll in the sack, but I wasn't playing her game. She got pissed."

"What a little..." Mariana picked up the pictures and looked at them. "Dar, that's horrible."

Dar got up and wandered over to the window, leaning her hands against the glass and peering out. "Yeah, I know." She snorted softly. "Imagine, I finally develop a conscience, and what do I get for it?" she asked. "I get accused of sleeping with my staff."

Mariana studied her back, then got up and joined her at the window, putting a hand on her arm.

"That wasn't what I..." She sighed, perplexed at the situation. "Dar, listen, in a strange way, I was halfway hoping it was true."

Shocked blue eyes turned and gathered her in. "What?"

"I've known you for years, and it's like I hardly know you, Dar. You only let us see tiny bits and pieces of who you are. And I've been very worried about you," the shorter woman said quietly.

"They put an enormous amount of pressure on you, and it bothered me a lot to know you really had no one to share that with. Beyond this stupid job, okay?"

Warily, Dar regarded her. "What are you saying?" She crossed her arms and leaned against the glass, the sun slanting in on both of them and bisecting the quiet office.

"Don't get mad at me." Mariana put a hand on her arm. "But I've seen a big difference in you the last month. And to be completely honest, I was hoping you'd found someone." She glanced across her office, then met Dar's eyes again. "Even if that someone was Kerry Stuart."

Oh, damn it. I don't want to lie to her. Mariana has been my friend for years, but this... Dar sighed. She didn't want the personnel executive to have her own crisis of conscience, pitting her liking of Dar against her duty to her job. She thought quickly. "I'd had a lot of things on my mind lately..." She chose her words carefully, "...not the least of which has been my health."

It threw Mariana right off the scent, now her eyes widened in real concern.

"I told you about the headaches. Well, when they checked for that, they found something irregular in my heartbeat," Dar told her. "I went in for some tests. And believe me, Mari, I was damned scared."

"Oh my god." Mariana moved a step closer. "What happened?"

Dar shook her head. "It came out all right. Somehow, I'm not really sure how myself, but it was a cloud that had been over me for a long time. I was damned relieved to be rid of it." She glanced at the carpet and nudged a bit of the pile with her foot. "I guess that's why I've been a little more relaxed lately. That and being told I'd better take it easy or risk real problems with those headaches."

"Dar, you should have told me. I could have..."

"What, arranged for crises to stop happening?" Dar asked mildly. "Those couple days in Orlando came at the right time. It really irks me that someone could take pictures of something so normal and make it seem like we were..." Dar shook her head sadly. "Damn." Also true. At the park, neither of them had even really begun to think about a romantic relationship.

Had they? Dar glanced at the top photo and sighed inwardly. How much was she fooling anyone other than herself?

"Dar, don't worry about it," Mariana replied soothingly. "I'll shred them."

Dar considered that, then let a faint smile cross her lips. "No, let me have them. I have a better idea." *You think you got me, huh, you little weeble?* "Look, Mari, I'm sorry I yelled. You were absolutely right to call me on this. It could be hell for all of us if it got out of hand."

Mariana patted her arm. "I could have approached it a little differently. I guess I was just so shocked. Well, not shocked, just..." She walked over, picked up the pictures, and leafed through them, then glanced at Dar, who was gazing out of the window. Her eyes dropped back to the picture on top, seeing the relaxed and happy look on the tall executive's face as she hugged the blonde Kerry to her. "Anyway, to change the subject, I'm looking forward to dinner tonight. You did remember, right?"

Dar turned and nodded. "I did. And Kerry tells me she accepted your invitation also. It should be a good time." She pushed off the glass and crossed to her friend, holding a hand out. "Gimme, I'm gonna have the damned things published on the internal web server. Ops monthly newsletter's about due."

"What?" Mariana blinked. "I'll make sure to e-mail Michelle a copy of the page." Dar smiled acidly. "Tch, Dar." The Personnel VP bit back a grin. "I'll send her a thank you note, how about that? On letterhead." Dar chuckled. "Hey, that'd be a nice touch." She lifted a hand. "I've got a pile of emergencies on my desk. I'll see you tonight, Mari."

"Mmm, see you tonight, my friend." She waved as Dar left, then sat, playing with a pencil in silence for a few minutes. When a soft knock came at the door, she called out, "*Entrez-vous*," and was unsurprised when Duks slipped in. He padded over and perched on a corner of her desk.

"Well?" He raised a brow at her in inquiry.

"Well, I almost got my head handed to me, and I got some very plausible skating of the issue, but you know what, Ducky?"

"What?" He folded his arms across his chest.

They both burst into song. "There's something there that wasn't there before!"

The door swung open, and José put his head in. "Was that singing?"

Two solemn faces looked back at him. "What?" Duks asked, his brows rising.

"Singing?" Mariana studied him. "José, use your health benefits and get the ears checked, will you?" She shook her head disapprovingly. "Did you need something?"

The stocky Sales VP gave them an evil look. "My goddamn new regional sales manager, in fact. You going to make me wait until next year?" he complained. "Or do you have to be Dar Roberts to get anything done around here?"

"NO, PETER." DAR rested one elbow on her desk and closed her eyes. "I'm not going to release that. They'll just have to wait." She held the phone away from her ear as a yell of outrage came out of it. "One more like that and I'm hanging up," she snapped into the phone. "I don't have time for this crap."

"You're sabotaging me, goddamn it," he answered in frustration.

"Don't be stupid," Dar replied. "Why would I do that? You do a great job of it all by yourself."
"Bitch." The phone disconnected and Dar exhaled, grinning wryly.

"Asshole," she muttered, going back to her screen and plowing through yet another mail. The back door opened, and she glanced up to see Kerry enter, a brown bag in her hands. "Hey."

The blonde woman came over, putting the bag down and leaning against the edge of the desk. "Hi." She tugged the edge of her burgundy skirt up and folded her hands.

"What's that?" Dar nudged the bag with her pen.

"Lunch," Kerry replied readily. "I had to run out to the bank during mine, and I figured you'd still be buried in here, so..."

Dar poked at the bag again. "It's not anything with alfalfa sprouts or anything, is it?" She glanced slyly at the smaller woman.

"Oh, yeah, right." Kerry laughed. "As if. No, it's a cheesesteak sandwich and spicy fries." She peered at the screen. "Good grief, I thought I had a lot of mail. What's all that?"

Dar was investigating her lunch and pulled out a fry, munching on it contentedly. "I've been letting things slide for a few days. It all caught up with me today, I guess. Oh yeah." She pulled the manila folder from her inbox and handed it over. "Look what Mariana got today, from our friend Michelle."

Kerry pulled the pictures out and sucked in a breath in surprise. "Holy Christ!" she blurted in surprise. "Where in the... Oh." She realized they must have been spotted by hidden cameras.

"What a pig."

Dar looked, chewing another fry. "No, that's Donald Duck." She pointed at the picture.

Kerry just looked at her. "Who got these?" she asked quietly.

"Mariana." Dar replied. "I, um, got called on the carpet for them, more or less."

"Hmmm. Well, it's not like they're anything big, or are they? I mean, Jesus, Dar..." Her voice trailed off. "Are we in trouble?"

We. Dar curled herself around the word, and remembered what Mari had said. "I don't know," she murmured. "She thinks there's something going on. I...I talked around it more than anything." Her eyes lifted wryly. "We're going to have to watch it tonight, though.

She's not easy to fool."

"Oh." Kerry considered that in thoughtful silence. "She's a friend of yours, right?"

Dar nodded quietly. "Yes, she is."

The smaller woman's brow furrowed. "I think you'd feel better if you told her." Kerry paused a moment. "Because I think she knows anyway, just from the way she was talking to me the other day."

Dar chewed on a fry. "I think she does, too. I just hate putting her, or Duks, for that matter, into an uncomfortable situation. She's the director of personnel, and this is part of her job. I don't know, Kerry."

"Mmm." Kerry stole a fry. "Think about it, okay?" She changed the subject. "These are nice pictures. Can I keep one?"

Dar smiled and glanced at the pile. "Sure. I was going to give them to Betty to put in the division newsletter."

Kerry selected the one of them together on the ride and gave her back the other ones. "I like this one." She gazed at it. "I really wanted you to offer to go on that damn thing again."

Dar laughed. "I almost did," she admitted. "Hey, it's supposed to be nice weather this weekend. You up for a little time on the water?"

Kerry glanced up at her with a delighted look. "Yes!" she agreed quickly. "I have my first scuba class on Saturday morning. How about we head out after lunch?"

"Sounds good." Dar nodded. "You'll have all those snowbirds jealous of your nice tan, that's for sure." She put a hand out and gently rubbed Kerry's knee. "I think I'm going to call Mariana and ask her to change the location for dinner...two nights in a row."

Kerry sucked in a breath. "Jesus, I forgot you took her there. You have someplace else in mind?" Dar shook her head, then punched the phone buttons. It rang twice, then Mariana answered.

"Mari, listen, would you mind a change of venue tonight?"

She heard rustling and a soft mutter in the background that she couldn't make out, then Mariana cleared her throat. "No, no. In fact, Dar, I was about to call you. There's a new Thai restaurant in North Miami Duks has been dying to try."

Green and blue eyes met. Kerry tapped her nose, then made a scrunched up face and poked her teeth out, sniffing. "I smell a rat," she mouthed.

Dar bit back a chuckle. "Sure, but Mari, I didn't know you liked that stuff," she agreed warily, her thumb still absently caressing Kerry's skin.

"Life's short, Dar. Always time to try something new. Besides, Duks swears by the stuff, and he's promised me the chicken is really just chicken."

"Okay, sounds good." Dar relaxed with a pleased expression. "I happen to like Thai."

"Oh, I guess I'd better ask Kerry. She might not..." Mari sighed.

"No, she does." Dar answered without thinking, then slapped her head and rolled her eyes as Kerry covered her mouth with a hasty hand. "Jesus, she got me," she whispered soundlessly. "We were talking about it the other day," she added towards the phone.

Kerry bent over in laughter and leaned against the desk.

"Oh. Well, that's great," Mariana said smugly. "It'll just be the four of us. It's down near US 1, Dar, just before the tracks." A pause. "You'll let Kerry know, then?"

Dar sighed and covered her eyes, not quite able to believe Mariana had snagged her quite so easily. "Sure, I'll let her know," she agreed wryly, eyeing the now-composed blonde, whose sparkling green eyes were gazing merrily at her. "See you." She disconnected and lifted her hands, letting them drop in disgust. "God damn it."

Kerry glanced at the door, then leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. "You're so cute when you're flustered," she told her with a smile.

Dar's brows shot up. "I am not flustered!" she objected, straightening her cuffs and brushing her sleeve off. "I'm just...um..."

The light tap warned them, and Kerry slipped around to the front of the desk, hastily settling in one of Dar's visitor's chairs. Maria poked her head in and spotted them.

"Ah, there you are, *Kerrisita*." The secretary entered and walked across the carpet. "*Dios mío!* Dar, what is that?"

The executive paused in mid-bite, enjoying her sandwich. "Lunch. What does it look like, José's new account manager?" she retorted, taking a mouthful and chewing it.

"Tcha, that is so bad for you," Maria scolded. "*Kerrisita*, you set her a better example, no?"

Kerry rubbed her brow. "Actually, I got it for her," she admitted sheepishly. "Miami Subs really doesn't have much in the way of healthy stuff, Maria." She paused. "Only some Greek roll-up things."

Dar stuck out her tongue, then went back to the screen. "Maria, what is all this junk in my inbox?"

"Ay, that's what I'm here talking to you about." The older woman wrung her hands. "Is Mark, he started up some...what he called it, mailing list," she said. "Let me go get some of the papers." She hurried out, closing the door behind her.

Dar clicked with one hand while handling her sandwich with the other. "Oh, okay, that's why the damn thing's subjects range from TCP/IP to a..." She peered at the screen incredulously. "A recipe for vodka jello eggs." She glanced up, then punched the phone.

"Yeah?" Mark's voice sounded, as always preoccupied.

"Get me the hell off this damn list," Dar growled. "Or I'm going to altroute every single message into an infinite loop and dump them in your voice mail."

Dead silence. "Uh." Mark cleared his throat. "Can you do that?"

"Yes," Dar answered in a silken voice. "I can even make it page you twice for each damned message."

"You're off," Mark squeaked. "Wasn't on purpose, I'm just testing this new listing software that's part of our web server. Honest." He cleared his throat. "Listen, sorry I have to miss out on tonight, but I promised Barbara to take her on one of those Sea Escape things."

"Don't worry about it, I'll catch you next time," Dar told him. "Any luck on that trace?"

A moment's silence, and the sound of the keyboard rattling. "Came in via the intranet through a link with the backbone routers in Chicago. Looks like someone hooked in via one of the milnet hubs. I'm sending a query out after it," the MIS chief muttered. "Did you see the instruction set in that thing? I hex dumped it for you, that's your shit in there, Dar!"

"I know," the executive replied quietly. "I was poking around in it last night."

A pause. "Yeah, I saw you logged in," Mark replied. "Your incoming IP looked a little strange, it's not one of the dial-in lines you usually come in on."

Dar wagged a finger silently at the phone. "The cellular connection was acting up, I had to use a land line," she commented. "Listen, can you trace that packet or not?"

"I'm working on it," Mark assured her. "Later, Dar."

Dar slapped the button and frowned at the phone. "I think he's curious about us."

Kerry fiddled with her watch band. "I think he knows, too," she admitted. "Or at least, I think he suspects, because he was asking me if I liked your condo."

Dar's eyebrows lifted. "Well, he knows you took me home," Dar said.

"He's not supposed to know I'm familiar with your waterbed, and that's what he was asking about."

"Oh." Dar produced a brief grin. "Yeah, he said something about you logging in from my machine that next morning," she admitted. "Guess he saw me come in from your place last night." She sighed. "Nerds. Can't hide anything from us, can you?"

"Mmm." Kerry frowned. "Is that a problem?"

Surprisingly, Dar shook her head immediately. "No problem there," she responded. "I know all his skeletons. He's just curious about mine."

"Ah."

Maria re-entered the room and walked over to Dar's desk. "See?" She handed her boss the papers. "It is jokes, yes? I hope so."

Dar peered at the sheets. "I took care of it." She set the papers down. "Sorry about that, Maria."

"Hmm." Kerry stood up and brushed off her skirt. "Well, I've got a conference all in five minutes, I'm going to go grab some tea." She left, using the front door to Dar's office and closing it behind her.

Dar resumed chewing. "Did we get those contracts?" she asked Maria, glancing up at her.

"You know, Dar, Kerry is such a lovely person." Maria smiled at her. "You were so lucky to have found her."

Dar's jaws stopped, and she considered the statement for a moment. "Well, I think so," she finally answered cautiously. "I'm glad you like her."

Maria reached over and patted her hand, then smiled, and made an impish face before she turned and walked out.

Dar just stared after her in befuddlement. "What in the hell?" she asked the empty room.

"YOU READY?" DAR waited, leaning against the side of her car as Kerry brushed her hair. The last fading rays of sun caught her through the glass of her windshield, and Dar found herself smiling at the image. They were outside the restaurant, in a small and crowded parking lot that boded well for the quality of the restaurant.

Kerry glanced into the rearview mirror a final time, flicking her hair into place, then she got out and brushed her shirt off. "I look okay?" she asked, giving her boss an inquiring look.

"Very much so," Dar assured her. Kerry was wearing a pair of very dark, neatly pressed jeans and an aqua polo shirt under a snugly fitting white sweatshirt with its sleeves pushed halfway up.

"So, you ready?"

Kerry exhaled and studied her companion, who had changed into a pair of tan Dockers and a red tank top, with her leather jacket thrown over her shoulders. "Yep. Let's go run the gauntlet." She tugged at Dar's zipper. "You look nice."

The taller woman smiled and patted her side. "So do you, c'mon." She followed Kerry as they sauntered across the parking lot. "I like that sweatshirt." She admired the tiny, embroidered birds that danced across the front and scampered down the sleeves.

Kerry straightened a little and smiled as they stepped up onto the deck which held the restaurant. She spotted Mariana and Duks leaning against the railing and cleared her throat. "Okay, here we go. I hope we can pull this off."

Dar snorted. "No problem. Just relax, we'll be fine."

"Dar?" Kerry murmured softly.

"Hmm?" The dark-haired woman leaned a bit closer.

"You might want to take your hand off my back."

"Right." Dar took the disobedient hand and waved at Mariana and Duks as they came closer. "I was just making sure you didn't fall off the steps."

"Well, hello, you two." Mariana smiled at them. The Personnel VP was wearing a pair of slacks and a sweater, and Duks had changed into a dark blue sweatshirt and black chinos. "It smells great out here, let's go in."

Dar gave them both a brief nod, then followed them inside, taking in the typical gold, red and black décor that oriental restaurants seemed to regard as almost a livery. The room was large, with a few scattered, small tables in the center, and a raised platform all the way around the walls which featured low tables and pillows. Lots and lots of pillows. And no chairs.

They were led to a table area in the back by a smiling, bobbing waiter, who indicated they were to take their shoes off and make themselves comfortable. The table had padded backrests to sit against, and piles of soft, silk-covered pillows that lined the pit like enclosure.

"Isn't this cute?" Mariana mused. "I've never eaten in a place like this before."

They sat down, one on each side of the table, and settled into the cushions. Dar found it surprisingly relaxing. She spread her arms out on the cushions, and gazed back. "So, hell of a day, huh?"

Duks looked up from his menu and cracked a sardonic grin. He had a powerfully built face, with a square jaw and a thick neck that disappeared into heavy shoulders that betrayed a youth spent doing something other than running a calculator. "If I believed in Hell, I'd agree with you."

Kerry leaned forward, curiously. "Are you an atheist, Mr. Draefus?"

He turned his grin on her. "Duks, please, Kerry. And yes, I am." He selected what he wanted, then put the menu down. "I find it makes my life so much simpler."

"Simpler? How?" Kerry inquired. "I would think having to find explanations for everything would make it more complicated. It's so easy just to say 'because God said so.'"

"Yes, isn't it?" Duks agreed softly. "Simpler because I have no expectations. I have nothing to live up to, nothing to spend my life striving for, because at the end, it's just...the end," he told her.

"You stop and feed the worms. And so life becomes more precious, and you enjoy it more, knowing it's the only chance you'll get."

Kerry cupped her chin in her hand. "You don't believe in souls, then, right?"

A smile. "No. I think what we have in here..." He thumped his chest. "...is blood and muscles, and nothing more." A pause. "Do you believe in a god, Kerry?"

"Yes, I do. In that I believe there's a higher power who directs things in our lives, and I think we all have an immortal soul," Kerry answered seriously. "And that soul continues from life to life."

"Ah, not a conventional Christian, I see," Mariana murmured, fascinated. "I had an orthodox Catholic upbringing...and it stuck, along with all the glorious pageantry and mysticism that goes with it. I still shiver during the Mass." She glanced at Duks. "We have a long-standing argument over that. He thinks I'd get over it if I'd just go and see a good opera." Kerry let out a surprised laugh.

"What about you, my friend?" Duks turned to the silently watching Dar. "I don't think we've ever discussed the big R. And I don't recall you ever saying you'd been in church, so..."

Pale blue eyes flicked over their faces, then Dar shrugged a little. "My mother is a pagan." She smiled wryly at the surprised looks. "My father was as much of a Southern Baptist as you can get and not be a snake handler." She regarded the table for a moment. "We didn't have anything organized when I was growing up, I just knew they both believed in something, not necessarily the same something, but something."

"What a mix!" Mariana said in a surprised voice.

"True, I picked up on that. I believe in something, but I never got around to defining what that something was," Dar finished. "So I celebrate what I want, when I want."

The waiter came back, and they ordered, with Mariana getting conflicting advice from Dar and Duks. "Shush," she finally said, then turned to Kerry in appeal. "Which is it?"

The blonde woman laughed a bit. "The massaman is a sweet curry, with meat and potatoes in it. Then you have the green curry which is very sharp. Finally, the red curry is milder and usually has coconut milk in it."

"Ah, so you're an expert." The Personnel VP gave her an approving nod.

Kerry just grinned and watched as they completed the order. Then she half turned her head to glance at Dar and blinked at the suddenly frozen expression on her companion's face. Her eyes flicked to where Dar was looking, and she spotted a tall, willowy brunette in an impeccably cut suit entering with two other women. When she looked back at Dar, the dark-haired woman's face was carefully controlled, but she could see the faint bunching of her jaw muscles and she leaned over. "Dar?"

Ice blue eyes pinned her, then gentled. "Remember when I told you it would be unlikely for you to meet certain people?" the taller woman commented with forced casualness.

What? Oh, her former lovers. Right. "Yes." Kerry darted a glance to Duks and Mariana, who were busy with the waiter.

"I should have kept my mouth shut," Dar replied softly. "Jinx."

Kerry's eyes flicked away, then back. "Oh." She slid a hand around the edge of the low table and patted Dar's ankle. "Let me go get my boots."

That got a smile from Dar, who leaned her forearms on the table and considered her options. Given where she was seated, and where Elana was going to sit, there was no way in Hell the bitch couldn't just look over and see her. Sure enough, after glancing at the menu, Elana looked up right at her.

Dar half turned her head as though she was listening to Duks and Mari bicker, and watched as a slow, malicious smirk made its way across the aristocratic face. *Damn.* She reached over and touched Duk's arm. "We're going to have a nasty scene here in a minute," she advised him in a low tone, letting her eyes move across the room and back.

Duks glanced up, then bit his lip. "Aw, crap."

Mari also looked. "Well, well. Think she's got enough makeup on? She looks like Tammy Faye Baker." Her voice was sharp, though, and held little humor. "You know, there aren't many people that I can say I totally enjoyed processing termination papers on, but by god, she's one of them." Elana crossed the floor, zeroing in on them with hazel eyes that kept steady on Dar's face. "Look what we have here. Hello, Lou, Mariana." A pause and a faint smile. "Dar." Her eyes went to Kerry. "I'm sorry, I don't know you."

Dar let her wait a moment, then leaned back, circling one knee with both arms. "Hello, Elana, haven't seen you in a while. Been out of town?"

"No, I just don't get outside much." The slim woman smirked. "We just took over another two hospitals, neither of them your accounts, unfortunately."

"I'd heard you got those. You might want to be careful, though," Dar commented. "Word has it they just changed vendors because they're going bankrupt, and you'll give them a 120-day grace on the billing. IBM was about to cut them off."

"Don't bother with that, Dar." Elana laughed. "Your tricks don't work with me, remember?"

Dar shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Her eyes wandered. "So what have you been doing with yourself? Same old, same old?" She chuckled. "I love telling people about you at cocktail parties. It makes a great story, by the way." She smiled sweetly. "And who is this?" Her eyes went to Kerry.

"Kerry Stuart." The blonde woman extended a friendly hand. "I work for Dar."

"I bet you do, honey." Elana laughed. "You must be new around here."

"Oh, I am," Kerry replied, focusing sharp, green eyes on her. "New to the area, too. Say, Dar, is that one of those palmetto bugs you keep describing to me? Oh my god, they're ugly." She let her eyes widen and fasten on Elana's shoulder.

The woman jumped. "Where?" She caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye and slapped at it, then screamed. "Oh my god!" She stumbled backwards, hands flailing at her head in panic. "Oh, help, get it off!"

Kerry jumped to her feet and ran to help, colliding with a rushing waiter just as she reached the frantic woman. The tray he was carrying launched itself up into the air and came down, splattering the floor, the tables, and Elana with a conglomeration of food.

"Oh shit!" Elana slipped in the mess and collapsed, still pawing at her hair. "Oh god, is it gone?" She glanced around at the avidly watching restaurant patrons, who were starting to laugh. Her face reddened, and a blob of curried sauce ran down her cheek.

Kerry stepped forward and crouched, getting to eye level with the woman and catching her attention. "You're lucky I didn't have time to go change into my boots." She handed the woman a napkin. "Have a nice day." Then she stood up and walked back over to the table, careful not to slip in the piles of noodles and sauce that dotted the floor.

Dar's blue eyes captured her as she came closer, and she walked the last few steps gazing into them, lucky she didn't end up plowing right into the table. She settled herself in her place, as the crowd continued its laughter and picked up her napkin again as she looked up at the faces watching her. "Okay, so it was her epaulet. It was brown, I'm from Michigan, how was I supposed to know?"

It broke them all up, and Dar ended up gasping for breath, holding onto the table for dear life as she reached out and circled Kerry's wrist, squeezing it. "That was priceless."

"Bitch," Kerry muttered under her breath, her still-angry green eyes glaring at the sodden mess on the floor, now being helped up by her two friends. "I'll give her a cocktail party story all right, I'll send out a mail to Users All so that whenever anyone sees her from now on they'll do this." She wagged her fingers near her head like a pair of antennae. Then she realized what she was saying, and how it must sound to the watching Duks and Mari, and she bit her lip, glancing at Dar in apologetic appeal. The taller woman's face was an interesting study, a cross between chagrin, amusement, and embarrassment, with a good strong dose of warm affection thrown in. A wry smile crossed her face and she let out a tiny chuckle. "I just blew it, didn't I?" Kerry murmured.

Dar couldn't help it, the look of dismay on Kerry's face was so comical, she had to laugh. "Yeah, I think you did," she admitted, exhaling, and looking over at Mariana to meet expectant, knowing hazel eyes. "Looks like you've got a personnel issue on your hands, Mari." She kept her voice even and managed, somehow, not to blush. "Sorry."

"Are you?" Mari asked with a wry expression. "I'm not. That was hilarious."

Kerry sat there, unsure of what to say or do. She watched Dar's face, the angular planes shifting with barely veiled emotion. Had they fooled Mariana, even for a second?

"Sorry I didn't level with you earlier today," Dar conceded. "I didn't want you to get in the middle of this."

"I see," the shorter woman commented quietly. "Fortunately, I'm off the clock," she added, with a gentle smile. "I meant what I said today, Dar." She met her friend's eyes squarely. "It really doesn't matter if it's an issue for me."

Kerry cleared her throat gently. "I know it's not exactly...um..."

Mari leaned over and touched her hand. "Kerry, those rules, they're there to protect you. Not so much Dar," she said. "It's too easy to use power over our employees to make them do things...that they wouldn't otherwise."

"That is not what happened," Kerry's voice sharpened. "Dar didn't make me do anything I didn't want to do."

"No." The HR VP smiled. "I understand that." Her eyes shifted to the quietly watching Dar.

"Despite her somewhat outrageous reputation, that's not her style."

Dar smiled briefly.

"People will talk," Duks said, twiddling his thumbs. "It could make things difficult, you know."

"I know," Dar spoke up suddenly. "I don't give a damn. I spend most of my time saving people's asses, so they can just kiss mine if they want to talk about me."

After that, a little silence fell over the table. Before it could get really uncomfortable, Kerry turned and looked at Dar. "I don't think I want people kissing your ass," she said in a very serious

tone. Both Duks and Mari started chuckling. "Way not cool." Dar blinked, then managed an embarrassed grin.

Mari nodded quietly to herself. "Well, officially what happens off-hours is none of anyone's business." She patted Duks' hand with an impish grin. "Isn't that right?"

Duks chuckled and blushed a little. "That is so." He glanced at Dar and Kerry. "And, my friend, you did not fool us for a moment, you understand."

Dar sighed. "I don't think I fooled Maria either."

The HR VP snickered. "I do wish I'd gotten pictures of that rampaging hormone-induced witch on wheels, though." Mari sighed regretfully. "Wouldn't I love to put that shot in the next company newsletter."

Duks cleared his throat and held up a tiny digital camera, small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. "And what would you be willing to pay for that, madam?"

They all laughed, and Mariana let a sigh of relief trickle out of her lungs. She peered over at Dar, who was studying the tablecloth with a quiet expression, then she let her eyes flick over to Kerry. Caught unguarded, Kerry had her attention focused on Dar, a gently affectionate look on her face as she regarded her companion's profile. This was not another Elana, Mari realized with relief. Dar was more vulnerable than anyone realized, and she was one of the few who knew that, but maybe this time it would be different. Kerry felt herself being watched and returned the gaze, her shoulders moving as she took in a deep breath. Mariana let a reassuring smile cross her face as she returned the look. "Kerry, that really was absolutely brilliant. Congratulations." She tacitly changed the subject. "A palmetto bug? Too funny."

A shy smile. "It wasn't planned, it just sort of happened," she admitted. "I got so mad it was either that or hit her. And I don't think that would have been a good idea."

"Probably not," Dar finally said, adjusting herself to the situation. *Aw, Hell. Mariana knew anyway, and her statement that she was off duty means she's not going to do anything about it. As long as Kerry and I keep it out of the office. Okay, fine, I've been rehearsing a speech to the personnel director anyway. And besides, seeing Elana with pickled squid hanging over her ear was worth every single minute of it.*

"Dar, was that true about IBM?" Duks drew attention away from her gracefully. "About the hospitals?"

Dar nodded. "Yep, it sure was. I was talking to one of their account reps, who was telling me it was a good thing we did a no-bid on them." She glanced up as their appetizers arrived, suddenly finding herself starving. "Sorry about that accident before," she told the waiter.

"No problem, no problem, lady always comes in, cause fuss, no tip," the waiter confided. "Worth spoiled fish." He put a plate down before Kerry, containing a beautiful piece of fried wonton skin shaped into a swan. The swan's body held a delicious-smelling mixture of chicken, peanuts and spices. "Chef make special for you."

Kerry looked up at him and smiled, a blush coloring her face. "Thank you." She tasted it, then grinned. "This is really good."

Dar sniffed at interestedly. "Looks like it."

"Uh uh." Kerry cupped her hand around the swan teasingly. "Mine."

Dar raised an eyebrow. "I didn't say I wanted any," she retorted, returning her attention to her plate.

A moment's silence, then blue and green eyes looked up at the same time and met, and they both started laughing.

"This is so cute, it makes me want to sing," Duks announced, swallowing a mouthful.

"Oh god, cut it out, Kerry," Dar said instantly. "You don't want him to start that."

"No?" Kerry inquired curiously.

"He thinks he's Placido Domingo." The dark-haired woman waved her fork at him. "Wait till he gets a few beers in."

Another laugh, which Duks cheerfully joined in on as he raised his wine glass to the table. "To palmetto bugs. Long may they wander."

THEY PARTED IN the parking lot some time later, under the bright stars of a cool night. Even from here, Kerry realized she could smell the sea, and she took a large breath of air as she and Dar strolled back towards where they'd parked. "Well..." She cleared her throat and glanced at her taller companion. "That...didn't quite go as expected."

Dar laughed. "No, it sure didn't," she agreed. "But it's all right, I was thinking about what you said. You know, about telling Mari what was going on, and I'd halfway decided to do it. Maybe it was fate."

"So, you're not mad at me?" Kerry asked quietly. "I didn't... Jesus, Dar, that wasn't planned. I don't know what came over me."

Dar glanced at her. "Mad at you?" she asked incredulously. "Nah, I'm not mad at you. I just wish I'd had a movie camera." She glanced down and shook her head. "That certainly changes the scene I always picture when I think of her."

They reached their cars and turned to face each other. "Thanks," Dar said simply.

"You're welcome," came the simple response. "After all, that's what friends are for, right?"

Dar cupped her cheek and smiled. "You bet." A soft beep startled both of them and Dar reached for her cell phone, only to find it silent. "It's not mine."

"Mine." Kerry pulled hers out and opened it. "Hello?" Her face tensed, then took on a shocked look. "Okay, okay, I'm on my way back there now. Be about...forty minutes or so. All right. Bye." She folded the phone closed and looked up at Dar grimly. "My place was broken into."

Dar's eyes narrowed. "Let's go."

Kerry kept her hands clenched on the steering wheel the entire way home, aware of the comforting presence of Dar's Lexus right behind her. She pulled into a parking lot full of police cars and spotted Colleen's agitated figure near the door to her apartment. "Shit." She wasn't sure whether to be upset, angry, frightened, or all three, but she got out of the car and hadn't taken two steps before Dar was right there, with a hand on her shoulder.

Colleen spotted them, and ran over immediately. "Thank god you're here. I just got home, and I went to see if you were back yet. When I found your door wide open, I called the cops."

Too late to do anything about that now. Kerry sighed inwardly. "Great, just great." She shook her head. "Thanks, Col."

"No problem. They won't let me in there, but I poked my head in and the place looks pretty trashed." She paused for breath. "Hi, Dar."

"Hi," the taller woman answered briefly. "Anyone see anything?"

Colleen snorted. "These self-absorbed yuppies? They wouldn't have seen anything if Fox Mulder had landed a frigging alien spacecraft in the parking lot and gotten out to do the hula."

Dar had to suppress a grim chuckle at this description. "C'mon, let's see what the deal is." She gave Kerry a tiny nudge. "You have renter's insurance?"

Kerry had to think through what Dar was asking. "Yes, State Farm," she answered absently as they moved through the lot and up to her front door, peering inside. She was vaguely aware of

Dar's voice muttering into her cell phone as she tried to make her mind see order where there was only...

Colleen had been right. It was a mess. Things were torn apart and thrown everywhere. Her eyes flicked to the television, then to the computer, both of which were still in place. A policeman came towards her. "Ma'am?"

"I live here," Kerry said quietly. "What happened?"

The officer shook his head. "Beats the hell out of me. Looks like whoever it is, was looking for something pretty bad. You keep cash in the apartment?"

She shook her head. "No. Well, five or six bucks in change, sure-- on the dresser. That kind of thing."

He nodded. "Yeah, gotcha. Any jewelry?"

She felt her neck and pulled out her single gold chain. "This, a few pairs of earrings, and a ring are all I have." She glanced over. "Nothing seems to be missing."

The cop was writing furiously on his pad. "Probably druggies looking for cash for a buy, Ms.--" His eyes questioned her.

"Stuart," she answered. "You think so? I guess they went away empty, then, huh?" She moved into the room and peered around. Cushions were scattered everywhere from the couch, and she crossed to her bedroom and pushed the door open. Every drawer was emptied, and the bedding was torn from the bed. Pooh was thrown against the wall and she picked him up, hugging him to her in reflex. Kerry walked back into the living room. "Everything looks like it's here." She told the policeman quietly.

He glanced at her, then at Pooh, and gave her a pat on the shoulder. "Listen, sorry about your fish there. Looks like some chemical can fell in the tank."

Kerry's eyes tracked to the glass enclosure and saw the floating forms. Dar's eyes went the same way, then went to her face in quiet compassion. The blonde woman walked over and stood staring at them, bobbing lifelessly on top of the water. A half empty container of kitchen cleaner bobbed next to them. With exaggerated care, she pulled the container out and closed the lid, aware of Dar's close presence behind her. "I keep that cleaner in the cupboard in the kitchen," she said quietly.

Dar's hands closed on her shoulders. "Go siddown. I'll take care of this."

"Dar, someone killed my fish," she whispered sadly.

"I know," came the low, vibrant response. "First, we're going to get this place cleaned up, and then we're going to get some sleep. Tomorrow morning, I'm going to take you to get more fish."

Kerry exhaled. "Maybe that's not a good idea."

"Yes, it is," Dar insisted quietly. "Don't let them win, Kerry." She squeezed her friend's shoulders. "Go sit down, I'm going to take care of this and dump the water."

Kerry stared at the fish. "Look, Dar. I..."

"It's okay, I've got this. Go sit down for a while, okay?"

Kerry felt exhausted, and she complied, mechanically putting the cushions back into place before she sat down on them. She faced the officer, who was still getting details. She tried not to watch what Dar was doing, and concentrated on the questions instead. Colleen came over and sat down next to her, and she gave the redhead a grateful smile.

Dar scooped the dead fish out of the water, putting them in a small container. She was carefully controlling her breathing and focusing on remaining calm when her first and most immediate instincts were to be yelling her fool head off. The random destruction in the room didn't bother

her. This pointed, deliberate, vicious cruelty to helpless creatures, on the other hand, made her so angry it was a wonder her hands weren't vibrating from the force of it. *Bastard*.

She disposed of the dead fish, then dipped out a good portion of the water before she lifted the tank up and drained out the rest of it, removing the gravel and decorations and running them under clean tap water. Then she mixed a saline solution and cleaned the tank out, using the motion to calm herself. She did a thorough job of it, scrubbing the inside out to get out all the traces of chemical. *Bastard*. She rinsed the ferns and then ran water through the filter. *Son of a bitch*. Then she carried the tank back and filled it three quarters full with clean tap water, adding the rinsed gravel to it and putting in a few drops of water cleaner Kerry had in a bottle near the tank itself. Which she sniffed first, just in case. When she'd gotten it to her satisfaction, she turned to see Kerry shaking the officer's hand and watching him leave, taking his partner with him, both of them giving Kerry looks of professional sympathy.

The door closed, and Kerry turned to look at her, the haunted green eyes beseeching. Dar crossed to her immediately. "C'mere." She pulled Kerry into a hug, feeling her whole body jerk with a sob. "Shhh, I've got you." Over the blonde woman's shoulder, she met Colleen's eyes, and the redhead glanced down, then back up with a faint smile as Kerry buried her face into Dar's shirt and clung to her with desperate strength. "Give us a hand getting this place straightened up?" she asked Colleen.

"You bet your...uh, sorry, I mean..." Colleen blushed.

"I've heard the term," Dar replied dryly. She felt Kerry take a deep, shaky breath, and released her a little, so she could pull back and look up.

"Sorry." The blonde woman sniffled a little, disengaging one hand and rubbing at her eyes. "It's just late, I guess."

Dar pulled a handkerchief from her inner jacket pocket and handed it to Kerry. "Here." She patted her back and left her arm draped over the blonde's shoulders. "All right, let's start in the kitchen, I guess--that seemed to be the least messed up--then do in here, then the bedroom."

They started picking things up, and worked in mostly silence until Colleen trotted over, picked up all the CDs thrown around on the floor, and popped one into the changer. The soft strands of the Disney tune "Circle of Life" drifted across the room. "I know you like this." The redhead gave her friend a smile, which Kerry half-heartedly returned.

It didn't take as long as she feared, until the apartment began to resemble its former state, only the quiet waters of the fish tank a glaring testimony to the invasion. Kerry stood in the center of the room after they finished, listening to Dar putter around in the kitchen, and folded her arms across her chest. Colleen entered from the bedroom and went to her, giving her a little pat on the back.

"All done. Got you some fresh sheets on." Her eyes twinkled gently at Kerry, who looked down and blushed. "Ah, c'mon now, Ker.

For what it's worth, I think you've got a real winner in there."

That got a smile from Kerry, who glanced at the kitchen door, then back at her. "Think so, huh?"

"Yep. Someone who knows when to give a hug when it's needed." Colleen nodded firmly. "That's a very good sign." She was glad to see Dar's unquestioning support of her friend, which had surprised her a little, given the executive's reputation.

The dark-haired woman interrupted the conversation by reappearing with three mugs of something hot and handing one to each of them. She then motioned Kerry and Colleen to sit down. Dar took a seat on the end of the couch and stretched her legs out, patting the cushion next

to her, which got her a compliant Kerry. The blonde woman tucked her legs up under her, and she sipped her chocolate with a sigh. "Well, this has been a night."

Dar dropped a hand to her knee and gently stroked it. "It's over," she said simply, before she took out her cell phone and dialed a number. "Mark?" A pause. "I know what time it is. Get the light on and put on your glasses, because I need you to write something down."

Dar waited, as ideas and plans started clicking into view. "All right, I need you to run a full profile. I need everything...on a Kyle Lewis. He's an employee of Senator Roger Stuart of Michigan." She waited. "You'll probably have to tap Milnet." Another pause. "Let's just say I have a feeling about him, okay? Route the results to my inbox."

Mark left the phone for a moment, and she sat waiting, drumming her fingers against her thigh. "You did? Thanks. Oh, one more thing, I need you to put a scope on the outbound router for Miami Dade, and filter any packets that contain the following number." She read it off. "Just discard them...on the federal transfer." She waited. "I know. It would be from the Kendall substation IP if that helps." Another pause. "Good. Thanks, Mark. I'll fill you in tomorrow." She hung up and glanced at her audience, who was watching her with interest. She smiled. "Welcome to the information age."

"Jesus, can you do that?" Colleen blurted. "I mean, why are you... That was the report number the cops gave us."

Kerry nodded in understanding. "It will exist locally here, but not be updated to the federal system. That was really smart, Dar, thank you."

Dar smiled briefly. "When you move the data, you control it," she told Colleen quietly.

"Wow." Colleen regarded her respectfully. "Remind me not to piss you off, you do our payroll transfer."

That got a chuckle from Dar and a smile from Kerry. "I don't generally do that sort of thing, but I think it would be better for Kerry. And it doesn't hurt anything, since they didn't find any fingerprints or MO, and that's what the federal database checks."

Kerry leaned her head against Dar's shoulder. "My hero." She dared Dar to refute her in front of Colleen, and was pleased when all the taller woman did was reach out and tweak her nose.

"You really think it was that stinker Kyle?" Colleen asked, watching them with a gentle smile.

Kerry sighed. "The fish...and the door wasn't forced open. Did you notice that? Someone keyed in. And when I checked the doorlock, it had my code in it."

"Ew, change it," Colleen advised.

The blonde woman nodded wearily. "I did. But the only people with it are the building manager, you, and my family." She paused and glanced up. "And Dar, but she was with me the whole night, so that knocks her out as a suspect."

"Only that?" Dar's brows lifted teasingly.

"Well, that and a few other things," Kerry admitted, with a smile. "But... Well, I told my mother I wasn't going to move back home last night. The timing's just too coincidental."

"Mmm." Colleen pulled her lip. "Kerry, that sucks."

Kerry sighed. "No kidding." She sipped her chocolate, enjoying the smooth taste as it warmed her insides. "This is the only thing you can cook, isn't it?" she asked Dar, who laughed softly. "I knew it. This, coffee, and what else?"

"Eggs," Dar supplied briefly. "And ice cream."

Kerry smiled. "Dar, ice cream doesn't require cooking." She shook her head in disbelief, then flicked on the television. "Oh, look, the crocodile guy!"

"Good gravy, what is he doing to that fish?" Colleen yelped.

Kerry settled back to watch, feeling a lot better. It was good to have friends around, she decided as she felt Dar's arm slip around her waist and tug her closer. She leaned back and gazed at Dar. "Thanks." She sighed. "Thanks for being here, and helping, and cheering me up."

A wink of a very blue eye. "That's what friends are for, right?" Dar replied softly.

"You bet," Kerry replied, then she hesitated. "Listen, Dar, you don't have to get involved in all this. It's not your business, really."

"Sure it is," Dar replied, her voice shielded by the rounded vowels of the TV character they were watching. "You are my business."

Kerry felt a gentle chill run down her spine. "Am I?"

"Of course." Pale blue engulfed her. "I love you," Dar stated with quiet sincerity. "That makes you my business."

Kerry just sat there, breathing for a long moment. "Oh," she finally said, faintly.

"Does that bother you?" Dar inquired.

Kerry shook her head. "No." She studied Dar's face. "I guess that means you're very much my business, too." She exhaled, then settled into the crook of Dar's arm as the crocodile man went through his antics. It had been Kyle, she knew it. She felt his slimy fingers in the whole thing, and she knew he'd be back. Her eyes lifted to see the sharp profile above her, and she smiled grimly. He didn't know what he was getting into this time, though, and she was glad. *He'll lose. This time.*

Chapter Twenty-Eight

KERRY WOKE UP with a sure, comfortable grip around her, and she kept her eyes closed as she absorbed the sensation of being naked and tangled in Dar's embrace. It was warm, and she could feel the gentle rhythm of the taller woman's breathing moving against her where Dar was pressed up against her back. She thought about her dream. It was strange; she'd had a few of these weird ones lately, where she seemed to be seeing through someone else's eyes, in situations completely unfamiliar to her, but which seemed as comfortable as the nice well of contentment she found herself in right now. *Weird*. She exhaled, feeling Dar's grip tighten a little, and she lifted a hand to lazily stroke the powerful thigh tucked in back of her own. It felt nice, the skin all soft and velvety over the strong muscles that shifted a tiny bit under her touch. She felt Dar's skin pressing against hers, the contact increasing and relaxing ever so gently as her lover breathed in a comforting rhythm she found almost hypnotic. *Nice*.

Kerry let her eyes drift open a bit, taking in the morning sunlight that bathed the room and judging it to be about nine o'clock. She glanced around, remembering what the room had looked like last night, and managed to retain a good feeling about how her friends had so carefully returned it to its original state. Even the clothes pulled out of her drawers had been neatly folded and put back. *Probably more neatly than they were originally*, she wryly admitted. She should feel horrible, she knew that--and her poor fish. Kerry imagined coming home to all that alone, and she shivered, glad of Dar's close presence. It was nice to have someone she could share things with.

A tiny tickle edged around her ear, and she giggled in startlement. That was followed by a low, almost soundless chuckle that echoed perfectly the one in her dream. "That tickles," she accused, enjoying the sensation thoroughly.

"I know," Dar replied, nibbling further. "How are you feeling?"

Kerry hummed deep in her throat. "Nice," she replied dreamily. "I like waking up like this." She sighed contentedly. "Especially after last night."

"Glad you postponed your scuba lesson," Dar commented, moving further down her neck and smiling a little as the blonde woman's body arched against her. "We have fish buying to do." Kerry rolled over and snuggled closer, letting her hands roam freely over Dar's body, curiously exploring the planes and curves of it. "What's that from?" She traced a long, thin scar that started just below the taller woman's breast and ended near her hip.

"I was tree climbing," Dar admitted, glancing down wryly. "I went to jump for a branch and missed. I scraped up against the trunk. There was an old nail there and I sliced myself up pretty good."

"Oh." Kerry ducked her head and kissed the spot. "Bet that hurt."

"I was screaming like a banshee, yeah." Dar chuckled. "I've never liked hospitals--had to go get stitches and a tetanus shot the size of a harpoon."

"Ouch." Kerry winced, then continued her exploration. "Can I ask you a personal question?" She peered up at her companion, who raised an eyebrow at her. "Well?"

"Sure," Dar replied with a grin. "How much more personal can we get here?" She traced a line down Kerry's throat, tickling her pulse point.

"How old are you?" Kerry rested her cheek on Dar's belly and blinked at her.

A sheepish grin covered the dark-haired woman's face. "I'll be thirty in about a month or so."

"Son of a bitch." Kerry laughed. "I knew it. You just act like you've been running the world for years." She paused. "When's your birthday?" she coaxed.

"Uh-uh, I never tell anyone what day it is." Dar shook her head.

"Why?"

"Just because." The pale blue eyes flickered. "I don't like fusses."

"Mmm." Kerry drew a circle on the soft surface she was resting on. "Please tell me?" she asked quietly. "It's no fair, you know mine."

Life isn't fair, Dar almost retorted, then she sighed. After all, what did it matter if Kerry knew? She'd probably actually get a card or something from her. That would be different. "Christmas Day."

The blonde blinked in surprise. "Really?"

Dar nodded. "Yep. So you could say I've never really had a birthday, because there's no point in making anything separate. You know?" She'd gotten over feeling bad about that years and years ago. *Right?*

"Hmm." Kerry drew another circle, then watched her hand move in idle patterns on the tanned skin. "Would you be really pissed off at me if I made you a party?"

Dar remained quiet for a bit, then she raked her fingers through Kerry's pale hair. "It'd be a pretty damn small party," she told her friend. "I think I'd rather celebrate Christmas."

Kerry held her peace. For now. "Okay. Well, I guess some breakfast is in order. I think I have some cinnamon toast left." She rubbed Dar's skin.

"Mmm. We could be adventurous and let me cook," Dar replied playfully. "And you'll see why I always have corn flakes for breakfast."

"Those." Kerry poked her, "aren't," another poke, "Corn Flakes. They're Frosted Flakes, and they are so unhealthy for you."

"Yeah, but they taste g-r-reat," Dar shot back immediately, rolling the *R*'s on the great and sounding very much like the commercial. "And besides, I've been eating them since I was a kid, and it certainly didn't stunt my growth." She spread her arms out and indicated her tall frame.

"Now, you, on the other hand..."

"Uh uh, don't you start!" Kerry warned, with a laugh. "I always got told drinking alcohol would stunt my growth. I didn't touch a damn drop until I got to college, and look where it got me?"

Dar grinned back, tracing a line down her arm. "I think you're the perfect size."

Kerry snorted. "For what? Shortstop?"

Dar slid her arms around her smaller companion and lifted her up, rolling over and settling her into place, sprawled on top of her, with Kerry's head tucked against her shoulder. "For that." She closed her eyes and hugged the blonde woman to her, feeling Kerry's body go limp and relaxed against her own. "See? Perfect fit."

Kerry had the sudden urge to burrow into the taller woman's soft skin and never let go. "Yes, but can you breathe?" she murmured softly, knowing the answer by the steady movement under her. "No problem," Dar assured her, rubbing a hand gently up and down Kerry's back. She fell silent as peace flooded over her, completely foreign to anything she'd ever known. She had no desire to do anything but stay right here with the blonde woman, trading touches and the exploratory kisses Kerry was planting on her chest. There was no restless urge to move, no desire to be up and going, just a warmly sensual place she had no intention of leaving. Her hands moved slowly up Kerry's sides, tracing the curves.

Kerry sighed in pleasure. *I definitely like waking up like this.*

"HERE, AT LEAST make me feel better by drinking some orange juice." Kerry put a glass of the fragrant orange beverage in front of her.

"I can't drink that, Kerry," Dar informed her, munching on her toast. "It's un-Floridian, we leave it all for the tourists and the export trade. Why do you think it costs so damn much here?"

"Dar." Green eyes gave her an amusedly exasperated look. "Drink the damn juice."

That got her a bright grin. "You're feisty this morning," the dark-haired woman commented.

"It's not morning," Kerry pointed out wryly. "Not that I'm complaining, it's been a while since I've slept in."

Dar sucked on her juice and nodded. "Me too," she agreed in mild surprise, feeling very relaxed.

"Why don't you grab a shower, and I'll log in to see if there's anything going on I need to take care of." She leaned back and stretched, feeling her shoulders pop into place.

Kerry leaned over her, thoroughly enjoying the taut stretch of the cotton fabric against Dar's body. Her lips found the taller woman's and lingered, tasting the cinnamon from the toast she'd been chewing, and the tartness of the orange juice. Before she knew it, Dar's arms had slipped around her and tugged her down on her lap, and Kerry's hands were insistently sliding under the thin cotton.

They broke off amidst trailing touches and ragged breathing. "Whoa." Kerry let her forehead rest against Dar's. "We're not really getting very far today, are we?" She sucked in air as her hands returned to the warm skin she couldn't seem to stop touching. "Sorry."

Dar smiled at her, through lazily half-lidded eyes. "Don't apologize, it feels great." She nuzzled Kerry's neck, then nipped lightly at the neatly outlined breasts under the soft fabric, drawing a soft, incoherent sound from the blonde woman. "Ooo, I like that noise," she purred, then relented, and simply hugged her lover. "Okay, okay, we've got plenty of time to indulge. Let's get our chores finished."

Kerry was very close to telling her to toss the chores, then she sighed and hugged Dar back.

"Right, okay, I was going to go shower." Reluctantly, she unwound herself from Dar's embrace and stood. "Be out in a minute." She started to move off, but found her shirt being tugged from behind. "Hmm?"

"Want some help?" Dar inquired, lifting an eyebrow.

A sigh. "Good thing I don't pay for hot water, I think." Kerry held out a hand with a grin.

"C'mon." *Well*, she rationalized, *at least we're sort of making progress towards the fish store.*

IT WAS A Petsmart. Dar glanced around her approvingly. She liked Petsmarts because they weren't puppy mills. They hosted shelter adoption centers, and they had fifty-two different colors of dog collars. She didn't know why that was important, except that she hated to think she was being forced into something, and that big a variety pretty much insured you could pick what you wanted. They also let people bring their pets inside, and it was interesting to note that people generally picked dog breeds that matched them.

She watched Kerry browse the aquarium aisle as a woman with an Afgan hound walked by, the dog's nervously coquettish air matching her owner's with uncanny precision. Next came a man with an unlit cigar and no neck walking a bulldog. *Amazing*. Then she spotted a woman strolling down the bulk dog food aisle with a small, golden cocker spaniel. She examined the dog, then, casting a glance at her companion, she slipped after the woman silently.

Kerry paced back and forth, peering into the tanks trying to decide which ones to pick. "Do you have any gouramies?" she asked the patiently waiting boy in the red vest who was holding a small case filled with water and a net.

"Sure, over here." He pointed to two large tanks to her right. "There are some big ones in there."

"Mmm." Kerry examined the fish. "Okay, okay. That one." She pointed, then realized Dar was behind her. "That's a nice one, isn't it?"

"Yep," Dar agreed, putting her hands behind her back. "That's a nice one, too." She pointed at a brightly striped gouramie near the tank's filter.

"Okay, and that one." Kerry smiled at her. "Thanks." She looked into the next tank. "Do I want guppies again?"

"They're easy to take care of," Dar offered. "Goldfish are nice, too."

Kerry gave her a look, then glanced up. "Oh, hey, Siamese fighting fish." She blinked respectfully at the luridly colorful, solitary creatures each in its own bowl. An idea formed. "Dar, you should get one of these."

"No." Dar shook her head. "I don't have pets."

"It's not a pet." Kerry turned and concentrated on convincing her. "Think of it as...a, um, a business strategy. You can keep it on your desk."

"Kerry, I don't have pets. I especially don't have pets on my desk," the taller woman replied sternly.

"C'mon." Kerry spotted a double tank. "Oh, no, this one." She pulled it down. It was a clever construct, with intertwining lucite tubes that let its inhabitants see but not touch each other.

"Look, you can get two. I think it would be good for you, Dar. Something nice and relaxing to look at on your desk."

"Kerry," Dar's voice dropped ominously.

"Listen, I'll feed them. They'll just look so pretty in your office. You can get a blue one and a red one. Think of how relaxing they'd be to watch."

The taller woman turned to the watching attendant. "Do they eat human flesh?"

The boy's eyes bugged out. "Uh. I...they eat, uh, brine shrimp, ma'am, but I guess...I mean, if you fed it to them in tiny bites." He swallowed. "Like if you ground it up or something."

Dar wanted to bark a refusal, she really did. She didn't have time for fish, or pets, or... The green eyes facing her blinked beseechingly. *No, no...* Fish had no place in her life; nothing like that did.

Kerry tilted her head a bit, and put a hopeful smile on her face. *Oh shit.* "Fine." She gave up. "Put 'em in a bag or something." She gave the mischievously delighted Kerry a dour look. "I'm warning you, I'll end up knocking them over. I've got the worst luck with pets." She winced, imagining the comments she'd get from the rest of the staff. Then she considered. *Siamese fighting fish.* Her fingers drummed against her thigh. *Maybe that won't be so bad after all.* She grinned. *Here, José, give me your finger. Oops, did I prick you? Sorry, didn't realize I was holding a needle. Oh, here, just put your finger in here to wash it off.* "Heh heh."

"What's so funny?" Kerry was busy picking out two of the biggest, prettiest fighting fish she could find.

"Oh, nothing." Dar cupped her chin in her hand. "You up for some lunch after this? I'm starved." Kerry gave her a look, then gathered her choices and proceeded towards the checkout lane.

"Sure. What'd you have in mind?"

"Dunno." Dar chuckled softly to herself. "How about some burgers?"

"Mmm, okay," the blonde woman agreed. "Did you get some shrimp for your fish?"

Dar juggled the box. "Yep. Do you know what these really are?" she asked teasingly.

Kerry peered at the container. "Yes, brine shrimp." She got to the counter and put her stuff down.

"Nope, they're Sea Monkeys." Dar took possession of her fish and their case, and pulled out her credit card, passing it over to the woman. She took advantage of the fact that Kerry was staring, aghast, at her fish's food, to make a circling gesture over Kerry's fish too and give the clerk a smile.

"Sea Monkeys?" Kerry squeaked. "Those cute little things that have families and do tricks?" She grabbed the container. "Dar, you can't feed your fish Sea Monkeys!"

Dar snatched it back. "Yes, I can." She gave her companion a piratical grin. "Just be glad you didn't talk me in to a python."

Kerry stared at her. "What do they eat?"

"Bunnies," Dar told her seriously as she took the slip from the clerk and signed her name. "Nice fluffy ones."

"*Eewwww!*" her shorter companion let out a squeal. Then she turned to the clerk. "Do they?"

The clerk nodded sadly at her. "Oh yes, ma'am. And they go down tail first, the last thing you see is their twitching little noses."

"That's it." Kerry slapped her hand on the counter. "I'm out of here." She looked up expectantly.

"How much?"

The clerk glanced at her, then up at Dar. "Um..." She cleared her throat.

"I took care of it," Dar said quietly. "You were too busy squealing."

Kerry put her hands on her hips and looked first at the clerk, then at Dar. "I *will* get you for that," she warned, then shook her head. "Thank you," she added, picking up the bags. "Now, let's get out of here before you start telling me they feed the parrots live mice." She stalked out, leaving Dar to exchange amused looks with the clerk, and pick up her own purchases. Dar strolled out after her, feeling quite pleased with herself--for several reasons.

IT WAS CLOUDING over by the time they got back to Kerry's apartment, and Dar tipped her dark head back to regard the clouds as they walked towards the door. "Looks like a front's coming through." The wind rose and whipped their hair around them. "Good thing we're not out on the water, this could get nasty."

"Brr." Kerry hopped up on the sidewalk. "I must be getting used to the warmth down here, that wind feels cool."

Dar only barely kept herself from wrapping a friendly arm around the smaller woman. *Jesus, Dar*, she admonished herself. *What the hell happened to the 'I don't like to be touched' person you used to be? All it takes is one five-foot-four-inch blonde with pretty eyes to turn you into a huge, dripping pile of mush?* "Yeah," she commented simply.

"Well..." Kerry keyed in her new code and opened the door, standing back to let Dar enter. "I, um..." Suddenly, she didn't want Dar to go home. "Hey, I picked up some stuff the other night, to try a new recipe. You game?"

There was so much she had to do at home, Dar reflected. Work lists and projects she had to take care of. She could see the imperfectly hidden hopefulness in Kerry's eyes, though, and she smiled inwardly. "I'd love to, but I've got to log in and take care of some stuff."

Kerry smiled happily. "Computer's all yours. I'll get the fish put away." She gestured toward her desk, and moved past it to put the packages down on the dining room table. "Listen, I picked up a copy of the *X-files* movie. We could watch that afterward."

Dar settled into the comfortable desk chair and flipped the computer on, cracking her knuckles lightly. It felt good to be part of someone else's plans for a change. "Hmm, I'd like that." She waited for the connection to complete, then logged in and set her mail to downloading while she started up a session with the mainframe. "Oh, crap." She reviewed an Urgent Notify. "Ouch." Kerry finished tucking the containers of fish into the tank without opening them, allowing the temperatures to equalize, then she wandered over and peered at the screen. "What's wrong?"

"Damned airline tried to backup its print servers...and blew one." Dar sighed. "All of domestic printing is down for them."

"What does that mean?" Kerry asked curiously.

"You ever check in at an airline counter?" Dar asked as she flicked through the report.

"Sure." Kerry laughed. "A lot of times. Why?"

"You ever need a boarding pass?"

"Yeah."

"You ever need your bags tagged?"

"Sure."

"You see all those lists the stewards check passengers off on?"

"Um..."

"Ever had to buy a ticket at the counter?"

"I'm getting a clue here, Dar." Kerry patted her shoulder. "What do they do if this stuff's down?"

"Hand write everything."

Kerry blinked. "Oh my god, I'm glad I'm not at Newark."

Dar turned her head and gently kissed the hand resting on her shoulder. "Me too. It's going to be a lousy night to fly." *Mushball*. The hand lifted and caressed her cheek. "This close to the holidays, too."

"Can you do anything?" Kerry asked, enjoying the feel of her soft skin.

About what? Dar wondered. *Oh, right. The printers.* "Well, it's their server. We just carry the data."

"They don't have a backup?" Kerry asked. "Where are those servers?"

"Charlotte. They maintain them long distance." Dar leaned back against her.

"Do we have a backup we can lend them?"

Dar crossed her arms and thought. "Hmm. Damn thing's a beast box--quad Pentium II, hundred twenty eight megs of ram. They have a RAID five array on the thing, and normally they'd just

plug the array into the backup box. But they upgraded the operating system on the primary and hadn't gotten around to doing the backup yet. And, they have different controller cards."

"Not supported?" Kerry winced.

"Nope. They'd need a duplicate of their existing box." She closed her eyes and concentrated. "Let me think."

Kerry obliged, massaging her neck lightly with a gentle touch. "When we were doing the Disney project, I thought we had some pretty powerful resources up there--those Alpha boxes I was plugging into, for instance."

Dar cocked her head. "I wonder..." She reached over and typed a request in the database. "No, those are dual processor, but... Wait a minute." She drummed her fingers on the desk, then unclipped her cell phone from her belt and dialed a number. "Brent? Dar Roberts."

She glanced at the screen. "Listen, you've got a backup server we use for the Sprint account, right?"

"Well, yes, ma'am, we do," the man answered hesitantly. "Haven't used it in forever, but it's still back there."

"Good. Dust it off and get it over to the server room," Dar told him. "Disconnect it from their backup lines, under my authority."

"Okay." The man was more than happy to comply.

Dar hung up and dialed again. "Isis? Dar Roberts here. I understand you've got a little problem."

"A little problem?" The woman's voice was clearly incredulous. "I don't have a single printer working in all of the continental United States. That's not a problem, that's a high-order cluster, Dar."

"What's the prognosis?" the tall executive asked, circling the listening Kerry with one arm.

"Don't ask. They're trying to build a duplicate, but it's going to take HP about six hours to fly the controller board out there from Washington State." The woman sighed.

"What's a ten-minute uptime worth to you?" Dar drawled.

"If you're joking, Dar, I'm going to fly to damn Miami and punch you," Isis replied. "What's it worth? My undying gratitude."

"I have a backup server set up in Charlotte, you'll just have to plug in your array. It's got the same architecture as your old one."

"God bless you, Dar. Goodbye, Dar." The woman spoke rapidly and hung up.

Dar chuckled, then turned to her companion. "Very good idea, Kerry, thank you." She gazed fondly at her. "The traveling public thanks you."

Kerry grinned. "Hey, I do my best." She gave Dar a quick hug then went back to the fish, setting up Dar's tanklet while her boss continued to check her mail. The fighting fish were swimming in their little bags, watching her suspiciously. She waved at them as she cleaned out the tank, and filled it with fresh water. "You think this stuff will make the water okay?" She held up the container of bacteria they'd gotten.

"Hmm?" Dar turned around and peered at her. "You're asking me?" She chuckled softly. "I think it'll be okay. The guy said they're pretty sturdy fish." She turned back, hesitating before she opened up the file Mark had sent her. It was a complete, a very complete, outline on Kyle Lewis. "Did you know Kyle was discharged with prejudice from the Marines?"

Kerry looked up with a start. "Oh, I forgot you did that. Um, yeah, I did. He really resented that, but I never knew why. He just used to tell people he'd been set up." She put the top on Dar's fish, and smiled at them. "There you go."

The two fish explored their new home suspiciously, immediately heading for the twinned bridge where they could keep an eye on each other. Kerry wandered over to where Dar was sitting again and perched on the corner of the desk. "Yeah, that's him."

The picture Mark had included was of a handsome, sharply featured man with silvered hair and direct, intelligent hazel eyes. Dar glanced over his record, then flicked her eyes to Kerry's face, which was cool and expressionless. "He was in charge of a training exercise that went bad--six men died and three were wounded."

Kerry nodded a little. "You think he was framed? That's what he says."

A shake of her head. "I don't know. Based on the report, it seems pretty cut and dried. He told the group to go ahead into an area that had been blocked off as off limits due to a live mining exercise," Dar said softly. "Two of the three injured had their legs blown off."

The blonde remained silent, then they both looked up at a tap on the door. "You expecting someone?" Dar asked quietly.

"Colleen's out shopping, she thought I wasn't going to be here today," Kerry answered, just as quietly, as she moved across the carpet and peered out the security hole. Her eyes widened. "It's Kyle," she mouthed back to Dar. Another tap. Dar motioned her back and she came to her side. "Tell him you'll be right there," Dar whispered.

Kerry licked her lips, her heart pounding in reaction to seeing Kyle's face. "Coming!" she called out. "Hold on."

Dar had closed out her sessions, and now she took Kerry by the shoulders. "All right, just take it easy. I'll duck behind the door there, and you just let him in and pretend nothing happened last night."

Kerry sucked in a breath. "I think I can do that." She nodded. "He's probably here to take notes and report back."

"Probably. You keep calm. I'll be right here. Trust me, Kerry, if he touches you..." Dar left the threat unfinished.

The blonde woman kissed her lightly. "My hero," she said with quiet insistence. "Okay, you go hide, let me let the slimeball in." Dar's presence gave her courage, and she watched her companion tuck herself away behind the bathroom door while she padded over to the front door, taking a deep breath, then pulling it open.

Hazel eyes immediately fastened on her, running over her as though she were a racehorse. Kerry stiffened in pure reflex. "Oh, hello, Kyle. I wasn't expecting you."

"I bet." He smiled at her. "Can I come in?"

"Sure." Kerry stepped back and watched him enter, getting a whiff of his distinctive cologne as he passed. He was dressed in a sport coat and slacks and was impeccable as usual. "What brings you to Miami?"

"Oh, this and that for your father--as usual." He turned full circle, regarding the room with a slightly puzzled air. "I thought I'd stop in and see how you were doing." Now his eyes came to rest on her. "You're looking good. Put on a little weight, though, haven't you?" Another smile. "Your mother will be devastated."

Kerry perched on the corner of the couch, very aware of the silent presence at her back.

"Actually, I feel better than I have in a long time. I think I was a little too thin before." She met his eyes unflinchingly.

"Tch. Not according to your mother." He shook his head. "You don't want to disappoint her, Kerry, you know how important appearances are to her."

It was funny, Kerry thought. Not a sound came from Dar, but she could swear she could hear the taller woman's teeth grinding together. Hers were. "Well, she'll just have to live with it, I guess. I leave on Wednesday."

"Oh yes, I heard you told her you were thinking of staying." Kyle looked around again. "Nice place, can't say I blame you." He looked back at her. "Now, you know that's not going to happen, right?" His voice was friendly and sweet. "It's time you came home and settled down, Kerry. They've planned the wedding for April."

Kerry looked right at him. "That's a matter between me and my parents, Kyle," she stated softly. "So I guess I'll be talking to them about it next week."

Kyle came up to her suddenly and frighteningly fast. "You're going to be a good girl, aren't you?" he asked softly. "You're not going to get your father upset now, hmm?"

Kerry swallowed, feeling a lifetime of concession laying on her like a blanket. "I hope not, but as I said, that's between them and me." She deliberately remained seated, her arms crossed on her chest. His eyes bored into hers, and Kerry knew if Dar hadn't been there, she would have been in a lot of trouble.

A fingertip found her chin. "Be good," he warned softly. "I don't like having to deal with your father when he's upset. It makes me...anxious."

Kerry looked past his eyes and up, and found herself staring into a pair of pale blue chips of ice, framed by a set, furious face so close behind Kyle, it was a wonder he didn't hear her breathing.

"Kyle, go home," she said quietly. "I'm not a kid anymore, and you're not my keeper."

He breathed on her for a moment, hesitant. "Now I know you're going to have to come home. This place isn't good for you, Kerry." He reached out to grip her jaw in a sudden, savage move. It never completed, as he found his wrist held by long, powerful fingers. Slowly, he turned his head and found his eyes captured by incredibly blue ones in the face of a stranger. "Who the fuck are you?"

Dar smiled, with a total lack of humor. "A friend." She released his hand, then moved a step closer to Kerry. "Who doesn't like to see other friends being manhandled."

"Lady, I don't know who in the hell you are, but you'd do better for yourself to keep out of my business," Kyle told her. "Got me?" His voice dropped in menace.

"You know, my father had a name for people like you," Dar replied in a conversational tone. "But you probably don't want to hear what it was." She gave him an amused look, very obviously not intimidated by his threat.

He studied her. "Oh, let me see here, are you Kerry's...*special* friend?" His mouth twisted into a sneer.

"No, I'm far worse than that," Dar responded with a smile. "I'm her boss." She handed him her business card. "Here, make sure you spell the name right." She moved a step closer to him.

"Now, are you done threatening, browbeating, and insulting my employee?"

Kyle flicked his gaze at the card, then up at her face. "Be careful, Ms. Roberts. This is family business, and you're not welcome in it."

Ice blue eyes stared back at him unflinchingly. "Be careful, Mr. Lewis. You'd be surprised at what businesses I choose to take an interest in," Dar replied very softly. "Or what happens when I do."

He chose not to answer that. Instead, he turned to the silent blonde woman at Dar's side. "Well, always nice to see you, Kerry." A forced smile shaped his lips. "It will be good to have you home on Wednesday. Perhaps we can continue our discussion then." He pocketed Dar's card, then turned and walked to the door, yanking it open, then exiting and slamming it behind him.

A momentary silence fell, then Kerry sighed. "Well. That was pleasant." She turned and gazed at her companion. "But it could have been a lot worse, thanks."

"Obnoxious little son of a *puta*," Dar cursed disgustedly. "Piece of..." She exhaled. "What a horse's ass."

Kerry leaned against her. "Yeah." She sighed. "He certainly is. This coming weekend's not going to be pleasant." Briefly, she contemplated not going and was startled at how tempting that was.

"I'd rather be here, eating turkey roll on white bread and watching that watchamacallit marathon they're doing on cable."

"Well..." Dar kissed her forehead. "If you decide to cop out, let me know. I'll stick around and come share turkey roll with you, okay?"

Kerry circled Dar with her arms. "You don't know how tempting that is, but I have to go. I've got to get this over with." She sighed. "And tell them I won't be home for Christmas."

Dar hugged her back. "I'll be there with you in spirit, you know that, right?"

Kerry looked up at her. "I know that," she murmured in wonder.

"It...helps. I never could have answered him like that otherwise."

The dark-haired woman brushed her bangs back gently. "You did a good job of it," she informed Kerry. "He was looking to push your buttons."

"Mmm." Kerry let her head rest against Dar's shoulder. *And he did, too.* It was just like there was a warm layer between her and his words, even the meanest of them. "Always has to get his digs in."

Dar looked over her shoulder without really seeing anything, her mind on strategy. "Maybe it's time someone did a little digging at him," she commented. "C'mon, let's go cause some trouble." She led Kerry back to the desk and sat down. "He have a favorite airline?"

"Delta, but..." Kerry peered at the screen as Dar activated a session.

"Delta, today, from here to DC...his name... Ah." She typed in a sequence and pulled up something. "There you go, there's his flight PNR for his return." She looked at Kerry mischievously. "You know what you can do in here?" A shake of the blonde head. "This." Dar typed in a four-letter sequence and the screen disappeared. "Poof. He no longer has airline reservations." She smiled at the screen. "Welcome to the Information Age, Mr. Lewis." Kerry covered her eyes.

DAR THREW ENERGY into finishing her work list, clearing out several items in a row and keeping half an ear on Kerry, who was puttering around in the kitchen. She knew Kyle's visit had unsettled Kerry, and she impatiently answered some of the dozen or so urgent mails she had waiting, anxious to get them out of the way so she could go back to... *Go back to what, Dar? Playing around?* Her lips quirked. *Yeah.* So much more interesting than telling José he had to go back to the drawing board on two accounts and typing in an official answer to the complaint lodged against her by Peter. *Jerk.* She sighed and rubbed her forehead, considering how to phrase the response. "He screwed up the account, Alastair sent me out there to bail him out, and I did. What's the problem?" She drummed her fingers on the keyboard and then backspaced. "No, she'd kill me if I said that."

"What's wrong?" Kerry appeared, resting an arm on her shoulder. Her hand had a soft cotton mitt covering it, and she was carrying a mixing spoon which smelled very distracting. Dar immediately licked it and grinned at the smaller woman's squawk of surprise. "Dar! Cut that out!"

"Mmm. Whatever that is tastes great," the dark-haired woman replied. "This. Peter filed a formal complaint against my conduct and I have to answer it. I'm trying to find a politically correct way to say 'bite me' and not have Mariana pull her hair out."

"It's meatball sauce. I'm trying a new recipe for spaghetti and meatballs," Kerry answered absently, peering at the document. "I figured that was pretty safe."

Dar's eyes brightened. "Haven't had that in a while," she stated. "I don't usually order it in restaurants; the meatballs generally taste like pressed oatmeal."

Kerry nodded in agreement. "Yeah. Hey, listen, why don't you say that you were asked to evaluate the situation, and the client decided they wanted to negotiate with you directly." She glanced at Dar. "That's what happened, right?"

"More or less," Dar acknowledged. "Truthfully, Gerald Easton is an old friend of my father's. He's known me since I was a kid." She sighed. "He just really didn't like Peter's style, so he called and bitched at Alastair."

"Hmm." Kerry exhaled. "Okay, you can say that you had prior experience with that contract, and the client felt more comfortable dealing with you."

A faint smile curved Dar's lips. "You're pretty good at this stuff."

Green eyes twinkled. "Debating, remember? You have to sometimes say the same thing four different ways in order to get your point across."

Dar laughed. "I'd love to have seen you up there. Nothing I like better than a good debate."

Kerry blushed a little and grinned. "The contest I won was the one thing my father came to. It was pretty high profile, and he had such a good time doing the chip off the old block thing in the audience." She looked a little sad. "It felt good to win that."

"You ever think of going into politics yourself?" Dar inquired.

A soft snort. "No way. If I'd wanted to spend my life deceiving people I'd have gone into marketing, thanks." She gave Dar a wry look. "You're not going to tell me you think public servants do it for the pleasure of serving their fellow countrymen, are you?"

"No."

"Whew. I didn't want to burst that bubble for ya, let me tell you, Dar," Kerry informed her. "It's a disgusting business."

Dar grunted softly. "Tell you what, why don't you type up an answer for me, and I'll go stir your sauce." She slipped out of the chair and plucked the spoon from Kerry's hand. "Fair trade?"

Kerry sat down, the chair warm from Dar's body and glanced up. "Try not to eat it all, okay?" she teased, getting a flash of a smile in return as she turned her attention to the screen.

Dar padded into the kitchen, lifting the cover off a cast iron pot on the stove and releasing a moist cloud of garlic and spices into the air. "Ooo." She stirred the sauce gently as she thought about the report that had come back about Kerry's father. The usual, mostly. Minor kickbacks, some reported bribery, nothing concrete. But there were two anonymous bank accounts she was investigating further, and a very strange series of transactions from what looked like a private credit line in his name only. No sense, she'd decided, in letting Kerry see the report until she was finished and had something concrete.

And then what? Dar exhaled. Despite everything, she suspected Kerry still loved her parents, and her family. Doing something to hurt her father would hurt her as well, and as much as Dar wanted to slam the man for what she considered a disgusting persecution of her friend... *Would that really serve a purpose?* Maybe the information would come in handy to her, though, in her arguments for staying here. *And I want to give Kerry all the ammunition for that I can, right?* Of course, there was always the possibility it wouldn't work. That Kerry would allow herself to be

persuaded to leave. *That's what you're afraid of, isn't it?* Dar's eyes closed as she absently stirred the sauce. *You've only known her for a month, Dar, the thought of living without her can't possibly hurt you that much.* But it did.

She felt so comfortable with Kerry. Her usual wariness around people seemed to evaporate around the blonde woman, and she found herself basking in the warmth of a true friendship for the first time in a long while. She hadn't suspected she missed having that in her life quite as much as she did, and now something was threatening that. She didn't respond well to threats. They made her want to do crazy things like beg Kerry not to go home. Or go home with her. *Oh yeah.* She laughed uneasily to herself. *That would win a popularity contest, you just show up at her parents' house. Let's see...um... "Hi, the company is instituting a new program in which supervisors must visit all of their employees at least once over the holiday, and I'm starting with Kerry. Do you mind?" Yeah.*

She was so involved in her thoughts she didn't even hear Kerry calling her name until a warm hand touched her back and she jumped. "Wh-- Oh, sorry." She stepped away from the stove and handed Kerry back her spoon. "Here. I was just...um..."

"A million miles away," Kerry supplied, gazing at her curiously. "You all right?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking, that's all." Dar chuckled. "You finished in there?" She was a little embarrassed to have been caught daydreaming. "I, um, I'll go take care of that other stuff."

Kerry gave her a worried little frown, but nodded. "Okay, yeah, take a look at what I wrote. See if you like it." She patted Dar's side. "Do you like garlic bread?" Dar nodded. "Silly question. I guess I've got some of those breadsticks in the freezer. I'll put them up, too."

The taller woman chuckled. "You like doing this, don't you?"

Kerry shrugged. "I guess, I mean...I don't think I'd bother for myself. In fact, I know I wouldn't. I generally just come home from work and grab some carrots or something, but it's nice to take trouble for someone who appreciates it."

Dar regarded her seriously. "I do appreciate it," she replied quietly. "Very much so."

That got her a big smile "I know. I noticed your kitchen doesn't get used much," she teased gently. "I have nightmares thinking of you there with your Egg McMuffins and chocolate milk." Dar laughed in pure reflex. "Nah, you've got me all wrong." She shook her head solemnly. "It's Croissanwicks or nothing."

A poke. "You should take better care of yourself." Kerry mock scowled. "That's going to catch up with you one day."

"Play hard...die young," Dar half joked.

"I'd rather you didn't," Kerry replied very seriously. "I'd like to have you around for a long time." An awkward silence fell, as stunned blue eyes looked at her. "I'm sorry," Kerry finally muttered. "That's an incredibly presumptuous thing for me to say." She turned back to the stove and bent over the pot, only to feel hands grip her shoulders gently.

She went still and didn't resist as Dar turned her around, and she met the pale blue eyes now gentled as they studied her face. "You know, when you came in here, I was wondering what in the hell I was going to do if you did decide to go home," she murmured softly. "And I was trying to figure out how someone I've known for less than a month could become so important to me."

"Oh," Kerry replied.

"So, no, it wasn't presumptuous. It's nice that you care," Dar added shyly. "It feels kind of strange, but I think I like it."

Kerry let out a relieved sigh. "That's good." She reached up and interlaced her fingers with Dar's. "Because I can't help feeling that way, and I'd hate to be driving you crazy or anything."

Dar gave in to the insidious craving and hugged her. "Nah." She released her and stepped back, then smiled. "Let me go finish." She turned and left the kitchen.

Kerry sucked on the end of her spoon in thought as she turned back to her sauce, and a small, incredulous smile slowly inched its way across her face.

Dar went back to the desk and dropped into the chair, propping her chin onto her hand and peering at the screen. She let her eyes scan over the words three times before any of them penetrated. Then she let her eyelids flutter shut and just took a moment to collect herself, feeling a wealth of conflicting emotion battering at her. Half of her was scared shitless. The other half, which was this strange, new, alien-from-outer-space half, wanted to drop to her knees and pledge lifelong devotion to this poor woman she barely knew. "I'm a little old for this hormonal crap, aren't I?" she muttered to herself wryly. "I haven't felt like this since I was twelve and had my first crush."

She rubbed her eyes, then forced herself to concentrate on the screen, this time actually reading it. "Oh, nice job," she complimented the absent Kerry. "Yeah, I like it." The response was very reasonable and politely worded. "Of course she's gonna know I didn't write it." Dar chuckled softly. "But that's okay, the mark of a good manager is knowing where to use their resources, right?" She raised her voice. "Nice work."

"Thanks," came floating back, and Dar could all but hear the smile in the word as she hit the Send key and sent the reply on its way. Then she settled down and plowed through the next several issues, trying to ignore the intriguing scents wafting in from the kitchen, only stopping for a moment as thunder rolled overhead. "Hmm."

Kerry entered, also listening. "Sounds nasty." She leaned on the back of the chair. "You finished? Dinner's ready."

"So I smell," Dar agreed as she straightened. "Yep, I told off six people, canceled three meetings, and sent two scathing replies to people who should have known better." She sighed. "Not a bad day."

"Did you really?" Kerry gave her a look.

Dar nodded wryly. "Yes, I did." She stood up and stretched. "But don't worry, everyone's used to it. If I didn't do that, they'd think something was wrong with me," she advised the blonde woman. "You want everything out here on the table?"

Kerry hesitated, then grinned. "Well, I've got this big platter thing. I thought it might be fun if we just use that and share it. It's got little legs, we could bring it over to the couch and watch the movie."

"Hmm." Dar's voice dropped to a low, speculative growl. "I think I like that idea." She smiled abruptly. "I wonder if we can do that Lady and the Tramp thing."

"The wh..." Puzzled blonde brows knit, then cleared. "Oh...oh, you mean with the spaghetti?" Kerry's eyes lit up. "Well, sure, we could try it." She laughed. "C'mon." They went into the kitchen together, laughing.

"IT WAS A cop-out," Dar mumbled, gazing at the screen "Bee, my ass."

Kerry giggled. "C'mon, they couldn't have them kiss. The world would end, monsters would explode out of everyone's chest, the Cigarette Smoking man would quit." She tilted her head back and accepted a gentle assault on her lips. "Glad we don't have the same problem."

"Me too," Dar agreed with a chuckle as she leaned back against the couch, with Kerry's body cradled against hers as they watched. "God, I'm stuffed, that was really good."

Kerry stretched back against her and sighed. "Me too. And thanks, that recipe really worked out." She glanced up, then laughed and reached up to wipe a bit of sauce off her companion's face. "Except that spaghetti thing was messy."

"Mmm. So what was the secret of those meatballs?" Dar inquired. "They were so light, did you put feathers in them?" She gave the smaller woman a squeeze, then rewrapped her arms around Kerry's middle.

A soft snort. "You won't believe it, but the secret is milk," Kerry admitted with a laugh.

"Milk?" Dar protested. "You put milk in meatballs?"

Kerry rested her head back against the soft cushion of Dar's breast and smiled. "Yep. You mix a splash of milk into the pound of hamburger, then add the Italian breadcrumbs to it to soak it all up," she stated smugly. "And an egg." A pause and a glance at Dar. "And, um...a little brown sugar."

Dar laughed. "Milk, eggs, and brown sugar--sounds about my speed." She sighed. "Whatever it was, it was great." She turned her head as the phone rang, and they exchanged looks.

Kerry turn the sound down and picked up the cordless phone. "Hello?"

Her mother's voice echoed in her ear. "Hello, Kerry?"

Like who else would be answering, hmm? "Hello, Mother." She kept her voice somewhere between cordiality and wariness. After all, the woman had hung up on her the last time.

"Dear, I've been thinking."

That's a first. "Yes, Mother?" She held the phone so Dar could hear, not hard since the taller woman was practically wrapped around her.

"Perhaps I was hasty the other night. I've spoken with your father, and while he's very upset, he says he's sure you'll calm down and be able to talk with us about this when you come home." Her mother's voice sounded smug. "I'm sure we can come to an arrangement. We understand you must have gotten attached to your new friends down in that place."

Attached? Kerry glanced down to the strong arms cradling her. "Well, yes, Mother, you could say that. And I am wrapped up in some really interesting things right now." Dar snorted in laughter, burying her face into Kerry's neck for a moment and tickling her. Kerry bit her lip to keep from giggling.

"Certainly, certainly. We're all grown up here, and we're so looking forward to seeing you. Brian misses you terribly."

Really? He hasn't called once since August. "I'm sure he does, Mother," she replied.

A momentary silence, then her mother cleared her throat. "You seem distant, dear. Am I interrupting anything?"

Kerry tilted her head back as a nibble touched a nerve. "No, no. Um, I was just watching a movie." She swallowed, then closed her eyes as Dar's hands wandered up her belly, exposing her skin to the cool air conditioning.

"Oh. Well, we're watching *War and Peace*." A sigh. "Your father does so love that one."

"I'm sure he does," Kerry managed to answer. "I'm watching the *X-files*."

"Kerry, you know what I think of that show," her mother's voice was disapproving. "Disgusting. So disrespectful of the government. Why, did you know your father once wrote a letter to that horrible man who puts it on, and he got a note back telling him to go and take some drugs?"

Mental note, Dar decided, send fan mail to Chris Carter.

"Well, Mother..." Kerry let her head go limp against Dar's chest as the gentle nibbling reached around her throat. "It's, um...just a TV show." The roaming fingers traced teasing circles around her breasts, and she let out soft, incoherent sound.

"What was that, dear?" Her mother's voice nudged her.

"Um...just something I was watching," Kerry replied, giving her lover a beseeching look.

"Nothing you'd want to hear about. Oh yeah, did Kyle get home all right?" She put a twist into her voice. "It was so nice of him to stop by while he was down here."

There was an awkward pause. "Was he there, dear? I didn't...well, I'm sure if he was in the area, of course he stopped in to see you. You know how fond of you he is." There was a muffled sound. "Roger, did you know Kyle was in Florida? You did? Oh ... Well, no... Kerry was just mentioning it. What?"

Blue and green eyes exchanged conspiratorial looks.

"Oh, goodness, the poor man." Kerry's mother came back to the phone. "Poor Kyle, there was a mix-up at the airport. His reservations got lost somehow, and he had to drive to Tampa in order to catch a flight up here. He's waiting in Houston right now."

"Gee. That's awful," Kerry intoned sincerely. "Only connecting flights, huh?"

"Apparently so. Well, I'm glad he had a chance to see you." Her mother sighed.

"Oh yes, it was wonderful," Kerry replied softly. "He even got to meet my boss."

"Really?"

"Um-hmm. She was over here working with me on a project. She gave him her business card. Make sure Daddy gets it, okay?"

"Oh, well, of course." A pause. "Is that normal, dear? I thought you worked in an office."

"I do," Kerry replied. "But I had this extra thing going, and Dar takes a very..." She flicked a glance at the tanned face peering over her shoulder, "...personal interest in things." The grip around her tightened, and she winced, covering the receiver. "Not so tight, I'll lose my dinner," she whispered softly, sucking in a breath as the hold loosened. Then Dar's hands playfully unbuckled the thin belt she was wearing, and undid the button holding her jeans closed.

As fingers started a gentle, soothing massage, "Better?" a ghost of a word reached her ears.

"Mmm." Kerry relaxed and pressed the phone to her ear. "What was that, Mother?"

"I said, did you get the tickets?" Now her mother sounded a bit annoyed.

"Yes," Kerry replied. "I got them the other day."

"All right, well, I've got to go make some coffee for your father. We'll see you on Wednesday, dear."

"G'night, Mother," Kerry replied politely, then hung up, and put down the phone as she reached behind her and tangled her fingers in Dar's hair. "You're a troublemaker."

A low, sexy chuckle made little shivers go up and down her spine. "You betcha." She captured a tasty earlobe and bit down on it gently. "Was that an apology from your mother?"

Kerry shrugged. "I guess, she hates conflict."

"Hmm." Dar rested her chin on Kerry's shoulder. "Hell of a way to spend Thanksgiving."

Kerry wrapped her arms around Dar's and sighed. "I get a stomach ache just thinking about it," she admitted. "I wish I could pack you in my suitcase and take you with me. It's going to be the longest five days of my life." She thought about not going, again, and spending the holiday with Dar instead. *Oh boy.* It was like a little puppy inside her started wagging its tail, and she had to stifle it. "It's like watching a train wreck in slow motion."

Dar fought off an almost overwhelming desire to protect her lover from the anger and strife she knew she was walking into. "I wish you could pack me in there, too," she quipped wanly. "I'd love to see their faces when I popped out."

Kerry started laughing. "Jesus, that's a mental picture." She paused. "So, tell me about this place you're going to?"

"Well, like I said, Gerry's an old friend of the family. By the way, he's the one who gave me those two contracts that saved Associated," she said. "He invited me up for the weekend. He's got a son I get along with really well. His family's sweet, in an old-fashioned, service family kind of way. I don't know.

"Is his son cute?" Kerry inquired curiously.

"Mmm, yeah, if you like the crew-cutted earnest type. He's a Navy pilot who just got assigned carrier duty," Dar replied. "We more or less grew up together. I know Gerry would like it if we were closer, but..." She chuckled. "You know how that goes."

"Mmm." Kerry sighed. "I think you're going to have a much better time than I am."

I doubt it, Dar mused silently. *I'll be worried about you the whole time.* "Well, next Thanksgiving, we'll have everyone over at the Island, how's that?"

Kerry paused in silence for a moment, then she turned her head and regarded Dar with a shy smile. "All right," she agreed. "That'll give me something to think about while I battle through my parents' plans." She half turned and snuggled into Dar's chest, playing with the taller woman's buttons idly. "Damn, I wish this coming week were over with already. I'd give anything for it to be next Sunday night...with all that behind me, and..." A sigh. "I'm so dreading this."

Dar stroked her hair awkwardly. "I know. Hell, it's almost even giving me a stomach ache," she responded. "But hey, it'll be over in a week, then...we can...um..." She cast around for something she knew Kerry would like. "Plan a Christmas party, okay?"

Kerry slid her eyes up the long, firm neck, and over the bump of Dar's jaw, up until she was meeting those pretty blue eyes. "Mmm. How about a birthday party?"

Trapped. Augh. "Bu..." Dar nibbled a lip. "Ke..." The green orbs gentled and pleaded with her. "Oh, okay." She sighed, defeated.

Kerry smiled and patted her chest. "Nothing on earth would make me miss that." She hugged Dar close. "To hell with Thanksgiving."

Dar grinned fiercely to herself. *Now that was worth having a birthday for.*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"DAR?"

MARIA's VOICE penetrated her thoughts, and she looked up, a little startled. "Yes?" She stopped turning the pencil over in her hands and exhaled.

"Here are your tickets for tomorrow." The secretary bustled across the carpet and put the folder down near her hand. "Did Kerry go all right?"

"Yeah, I dropped her off before I came in," Dar replied. "Her flight was at eight AM." She checked her watch. "She should be there in a little while."

"So nice." Maria smiled, then her expression changed a little. "No?"

Dar looked up from where her attention had been drawn to her new fish. "Oh, yes, I'm sure it's fine. I was just thinking of something else, sorry about that." Her body was, actually busy remembering the fierce hug Kerry had given her before she'd gone off to her gate, and the quiet, whispered "I'll miss you."

With a sigh, she pushed the thought aside and smiled at Maria. "So, how do you like Bert and Ernie here?" She'd just brought them in that morning, having given the two fractious fish a few days to settle in at Kerry's apartment before she introduced them into the office.

Maria studied the fish. "They are very pretty," she admitted. "I was thinking to get a goldfish for me, but I'm always dropping things around my desk. I would be spending too much time in fishing them out." She knelt to examine the tank. "This is nice."

Dar propped her chin up on one hand. "I thought so," she agreed. "Um...I've got an executive committee meeting after lunch today, is there anything pending I need to look at before then?" "Si." Maria handed her the other folder she had been carrying. "The new building plans," she told her. "You have first meeting next week."

Dar flipped open the folder and studied the cover sheet. "Right, the lease is up on this building next year, and José thinks he found us a new location. Hmm." She studied the document. "Well, I don't...ah." Her lips twisted sardonically. "Now I see the picture, his brother-in-law owns it." Maria rolled her eyes. "*Dios mío*, does it always have to be games?"

The executive sighed and shook her head. "And I hate the location. Looks like another battle royale in the making." She glanced at the fish wryly. "Maybe I should have called them Dar and José.

What do you think?"

"Si." Maria smiled. "I am going out to the bank during lunch, Dar. You want I should bring you something back? It is turkey in the cafeteria, I think you will have enough of that this weekend." The dark-haired woman leaned back and made a face. "No, thanks. My stomach is kind of upset today. Something I had last night maybe," she advised her secretary. The truth was she hadn't been able to swallow so much as a cup of coffee since the morning, and even thinking about it made her stomach churn. She swallowed hard against the sensation and sighed.

It had been a tough week, all the more so because she hadn't seen much of Kerry, who had been busy packing for her trip. Monday night she'd been tied up in meetings until past eleven, and last night she'd had to force herself to be present at a business dinner to work on a new client of José's.

So she'd shown up a little early that morning to pick Kerry up. Well, okay, a lot early, and had been treated to the sight of sleepy green eyes that brightened perceptibly when they recognized her. Kerry had dragged her back into the bedroom and they'd spent an hour snuggling before the rising sun nudged them awake again in time to go to the airport.

Dar sighed, then glanced up at Maria. "Maybe I'll take a walk downstairs and get some club soda or something." She stood and stretched, then settled her jacket over her shoulders and headed for the door. At the elevator she bumped into Duks, who was also headed down. "Morning," she commented, leaning back against the elevator wall. "Ready for the meeting this afternoon?"

"Don't ask me that." Duks rubbed his eyes. "I've been going over financials for the last two days. I have such a headache, I can't tell you," he complained grumpily. "What about you? They're going to hit you with those facilities additions, you know." He studied Dar's face, noticing that the tense lines and faint shadows that used to characterize it had faded, replaced by a noticeably more relaxed expression. "Let me guess, you have all the answers already."

Dar shrugged. "I have some of them...and enough evasions to get by with on the others." She held the door open as they reached the bottom floor. "You headed for the cafeteria?" she inquired. "I'll buy you a cup of coffee, how's that?"

"I never turn down that kind of offer." Duks laughed as he followed her through the line, glancing at her choice. "None for you?"

Dar waved him off. "Must have picked up a bug or something, my stomach's bothering me." She set the bottle of club soda down, then nodded at Duk's steaming cup and handed the cashier a bill. They took their drinks and went to a corner table, away from the early lunch crowd. Dar noted the eyes following her and saw the veiled interest. Idly she wondered what list of rumors was currently making the rounds. "So." She leaned on her elbows, and twisted the top off the

bottle, taking a small sip and grimacing as it hit her empty stomach. "What do you think José will try?"

Duks took a swallow of coffee and pondered the question. "He's been quiet, too quiet," he mused. "You'd better watch your back, my friend. I think whatever he's up to, it's got you in the center of it."

"Probably," she agreed.

"You don't look worried," her friend remarked. "My assistant overheard Eleanor's two poodle girls talking about Kerry. Seems Eleanor is convinced she can turn her."

"Well." Dar had to smile. "She's welcome to try, but, um..." She waggled her hand. "I think I've got a pretty good handle on her loyalties."

Duks smiled back. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

The dark head tilted in question. "What, having one up on Eleanor?"

Steady eyes regarded her, as a slight grin quirked Duk's lips.

"Oh." Dar felt a faint blush creeping up her neck, and she studied her bottle, turning it over and over in her hands. Finally she looked up. "Yes. Yes it does."

He leaned forward, dropping his voice. "Dar, please believe me when I say that I am so, so, happy for you." He watched her eyes flick around the room in obvious discomfort. "I really like her. I think you picked a good one, this time." Pale blue orbs fastened on him intently. "A blue chip." He winked.

Dar covered her embarrassment by taking a long swallow of fizzy liquid. She appreciated the sentiment, and Lou had been a good friend for many years, but still. She cleared her throat. "Glad you approve." She managed to keep her tone droll, but she knew her lips were twitching into a helpless grin and she felt awkwardly exposed. Her cell phone's beeping was a welcome interruption. "Excuse me." She pulled the instrument out and flipped it open. "Yeah?"

"Hi." There was a world of tension in the voice.

"Hey," Dar responded, instinctively gentling her own. "Flight okay?"

"Right up until it pulled up to the gate," Kerry replied with a sigh. "I'll call you later."

"Okay, take it easy," Dar replied quietly.

"I'll try," came the answer, then a momentary pause. "I love you."

Dar closed her eyes, and consciously blocked out her surroundings. "I love you too." She spoke the words clearly and intently. "If you need anything, you call me, okay?"

She could hear the smile right through the phone. "I will. Bye."

Dar folded the phone closed, and opened her eyes. She was grateful that Duks had found something desperately interesting in his coffee cup, and he gave her a moment to compose herself before he looked up. They looked at each other in awkward silence for a moment, then the financial officer smiled reflectively. "You know, Dar, times like this, times when I see something in us so beyond the animal, are when I come closest to giving in and believing in the grace of something higher than myself." And he stood, putting a hand on her shoulder for a gentle squeeze before walking off into a rising hum of lunchtime chatter.

"IS THAT ONE yours, Kerry?" Her mother's voice echoed in her ears, and she turned.

"Yes, I've got it." Kerry reached over and grabbed the handle, hoisting it clear of the belt and setting it down next to her feet. "That's it, just this and the carry-on." She attached the strap to the rings on the duffle bag and slung it over her shoulder. It seemed curiously lighter than it usually did, but she put that down to her own nervousness. "Let's go."

"Do you have that? Let me get a sky cap, dear." Her mother eyed her. "Goodness, you've put on weight, haven't you?"

Kerry let the memory of Dar's voice wrap around her like a comfortable jacket. "Yes I have, thanks, I feel great," she replied. "Are we ready?"

Her mother looked like she wanted to say more but instead simply nodded. "Yes, I wanted to stop at the store on the way. Is that a new coat you have there?" She examined the garment. "I don't recall it."

Kerry shifted her shoulders a little. "Yes, it comes with this zip-in liner." She opened a flap as she walked, knowing it would distract her mother. "We do get the occasional cold day down there."

The softly textured, chocolate-colored leather smelled wonderful, and if she concentrated, she could get a whiff of a familiar scent. Dar had looked at her in puzzled question when she'd asked her to put the thing on-- the sleeves only coming halfway down Dar's long arms, and the fabric tight over her broader shoulders. But Dar had as she was asked and had handed it back, watching in bemusement as Kerry then buried her nose into it and broke into a smile.

And she did again, watching the dull brown brick walls of the airport go by and taking a breath of cold air as they exited from the terminal into a cloudy November day. A thin drizzle was falling, dusting them with moisture as Kerry glanced around, taking in the gray and brown landscape, where trees had already shed their leaves and the grass its color. It struck Kerry's eyes as strange, almost alien, so used to the vivid colors of the subtropics as she was now.

She followed her mother to the car, where a driver was waiting, pulling open the door as they approached. He took Kerry's bags from her, and she slid in after her mother, leaning back in the soft seat and folding her arms over her chest after she put her laptop case between herself and the car door. Her mother spoke to the driver, and she let her thoughts drift back to that morning, before she and Dar had left the apartment. She'd found the taller woman gazing at the sunset lithograph in her living room as she'd come out of the bedroom and crossed to her.

"Dar...I..." She'd held something in her hand. "After that break in, I...would you hold on to something for me?"

Startled blue eyes had turned to her. "Sure."

She'd held out her hand, and by reflex Dar had lifted hers to meet it. She put a small, round object in its palm. "It's been in my family forever. My great-aunt gave it to me."

The ring was ancient and delicate, a traced filigree with a barely visible round inset. It was a very simple design, a bird's head in profile on a darker background, but she'd always loved it.

"Just hang on to it till I get back, all right?" she'd asked Dar.

Long fingers had closed gently over it. "All right." Had Dar understood what Kerry was trying to tell her, by giving her something to keep that was so important to her? She hoped so.

"Kerry?"

She turned and gazed at her mother. "I'm sorry? I was just thinking."

Cynthia Stuart was a thin, aristocratic woman with pinched features and wavy, silvered brown hair. Her eyes were the same green as Kerry's, but that's where the resemblance stopped, and she stood several inches taller than her eldest daughter. "Now, listen to me, dear, I want you to promise me you'll hold your tongue on this nonsense of your staying in Miami. Your father has some definite plans, and I don't want him upset over the holiday."

Kerry simply stared at her. "Mother, I have no problem with not saying anything...as long as you understand I have no intention of moving back here."

Her mother sighed. "Kerry, I don't understand what's gotten into you."

"Maybe I've just grown up, Mother," Kerry replied in a gentler tone. "I'm twenty-seven, I think I've got a right to a say in my own life."

"It's all a question of what's best for you, Kerry. Why can't you see that?" her mother's voice became upset. "You're down there in that dangerous place, with no family around you. What if something were to happen to you?"

Kerry looked away. "I have a lot of friends there," she said. "Some I'm very close with."

"Friends are not family, Kerrison, you know that. And, what about Brian?" Her mother changed the subject.

"What about him?" She looked at her mother.

"Honey, you're getting married to him in the spring. Or have you forgotten that?" Her mother was getting more upset.

Bite the bullet time. "Mother, I like Brian very much, and he's always been one of my best friends, but we haven't spoken since August. I just don't think we have much in common anymore."

Her mother stared at her in shock. "Don't you dare say that," she snapped. "Don't you dare. Do you know how long we've been planning this?" She fussed with her purse, slamming it open and shut. "You had just better not say that to your father."

Kerry leaned back and closed her eyes. "Fine."

"Give me one good reason why the two of you can't be married," her mother went on. "It's ridiculous."

I could answer her honestly. Kerry mused. She glanced at her mother's face and decided giving her a heart attack was probably not the best idea at the moment. "Mother, let's talk about this later. All right?"

The older woman's hands were shaking. "You make me very upset."

Kerry sighed and gazed out the window at the rows of winter-grayed trees. It was going to be a very, very long weekend.

IT WAS, DAR decided, too quiet. She closed the door to her condo behind her, and moved into the living room, setting her gym bag down on the couch and letting out a long breath. She was tired, having just spent the last three hours at the gym, teaching the beginner's class as she'd promised. She then took two hours to spar with Ken, giving her body a workout that was probably a little more than it really was in any condition to handle at the moment. But she hadn't been as rusty as she'd been afraid of, which was a pleasant surprise. She had even managed to deliver a combination kick at the very end of the session that had amazed her and knocked poor Ken flat on his butt on the mat.

That had felt pretty damn good, given that the man was five years younger than she was and in better shape on top of that. A faint smile curved her lips. She'd almost forgotten how much she liked that feeling. How much she liked the physical competition, and the satisfying release of a pent-up aggression that left her feeling a lot more relaxed.

But not totally. There was still that knot of worry in her gut that had Kerry's name written all over it. As she had all day, she found herself wondering how Kerry was faring. With a sigh, she trudged into the kitchen, stretching out the stiffness that had settled in her shoulders during the drive home and reaching into the cabinet for a mug as she glanced at her terminal. *Mail. Of course.* "Mail. Read." She poured milk into the mug and added chocolate to it.

"Mail, sixteen items, three urgent."

"It's the day before Thanksgiving, what in the hell could be urgent?" Dar queried wryly as she stuck her mug in the microwave and turned it on. "Display."

The list came up, and she scanned it. "Read six."

Sent by: Stuart, Kerry Subject: Hell Time: 6:00 PM

Hi.

They were wrong, Dar... Hell isn't a fiery pit. It's a two story ranch home in Michigan. I've been here six hours, and I want to kill everyone already. My sister's due here any minute, then we get to have the first of the family dinners. Lucky for me, I don't get to see Brian until tomorrow. So far we haven't talked about the situation, but I've gotten criticized for just about everything else. One more round of that, and I just may lose it.

I miss you. Gee, that sounds goofy, doesn't it? Well, I'm going to go change...I may put on that Navy sweatshirt you gave me just to annoy my parents. Might as well take my fun where I can find it, right? Wish me luck. K

"Reply," Dar said softly.

"Hey, glad you dropped me a note. I've been thinking about you all day and wondering how things were going."

Dar paused as the microwave beeped, and she removed the mug.

"I just got home. I taught that class tonight, missed having you in it."

She took a sip.

"Then I worked out with Ken for two hours, and boy, am I feeling it. I'm going to take my hot chocolate and go sit in the whirlpool for a while."

She smiled at the screen.

"Wish you were joining me." She paused.

"Send." Dar watched the message process, then she sighed and reviewed the rest of the list.

"Read ten."

Urgent Sent by: Alastair McLean Subject: no subject Time: 9:56 PM

Dar-- What the hell is this?:

<<Attached message ->> Mr. McLean, In the interests of promoting and maintaining excellent relations between our two companies, I find myself forced to bring a matter to your attention, in hopes that you will address it in the proper manner.

While at our facility this month, one of your officers was observed in an inappropriate relationship with a subordinate, and we feel that this is not a good indication of how your company deals with discipline and presentation.

Please review the attached at your discretion, and take whatever action you deem appropriate.

Michelle Graver <<End text attachment>>

<<photo1.jpg>><<photo2.jpg>><<photo3.jpg>>

Dar exhaled. *Bitch.* "Reply."

"Hi, Alastair."

She paused a moment, considering.

"What the hell is this? Michelle Graver wanted me to sleep with her, and I wouldn't."

She drummed her fingers on the counter.

"We already have those pictures, they're in this month's division newsletter. And anyway, you wanted to see a picture of my new assistant. Is there a problem?"

She reviewed the files.

"I like the middle one best."

"Send." She stewed in anger for a moment, then smiled.

"Compose." "Ready."

Dar dictated furiously before stopping to re-read the display:

First off, a happy Thanksgiving to you and your family. I had the pleasure of being in the Orlando property during a business meeting not long ago, and I want to compliment you on the quality of your product, and tell you how much I enjoyed my visit there.

One thing which did concern me is the photo-imaging system you seem to be using for your surveillance cameras. As you can see by the attached examples, the graininess is really quite pronounced, and the auto-focusing seems to be off by several degrees. Since we produce a system for driving and controlling these cameras, I'd like a chance to put in a proposal to acquire and replace the system on your behalf.

Thanks for your time, and be sure to drop a word of thanks to your excellent manager down there, Michelle Graver, who was nice enough to forward these pictures for my attention.

Best Regards, Dar Roberts

She added her sig at the end. "Send," she ordered, after typing in an address. *Fuck with me, will you? Kiss my ass, Michelle.* Dar snarled silently.

She checked the two other urgent messages, from Duks and Mariana, both on the same subject seeing as how Mariana had been copied on the original message. "Compose, to Lou Draefus." Dar chuckled.

"Duks, relax. Tell Mari to relax. It's handled. Don't worry about it. Happy Thanksgiving."

She shook her head. "Send." She wondered briefly why they hadn't just paged or called her cell phone, then realized it was because she'd turned the damn thing off at the gym. "What in the hell's gotten into me the last few days?"

"Incoming Netmeeting request, Alastair M," the computer chirped.

Shit. "On." Dar leaned against the counter.

Alastair was in his study, a bright orange sweater almost making her flinch and adjust the contrast. "Evening, Alastair."

He propped his clean-shaven chin up on one hand. "She wanted to sleep with you?"

Dar chuckled. "That was her plan, yes. First there, then when she visited here the other day."

"Is she ugly?" Alastair inquired.

"No, she's pretty good-looking, why?" the dark-haired woman asked.

Alastair blinked at her. "I've never known you to have scruples about that. What's up?" He leaned forward. "She could be trouble, when it comes to renewal."

Dar stared back at him. "I'm not your corporate whore, Alastair," she snapped. "So you can take your assumptions and shove them up your ass."

A hand. "Whoa, whoa. Take it easy, tiger," Alastair protested. "You're the one who always brags about that, lady. Don't take it out on me if I remember that."

Dar fell silent, knowing it for the truth. "Maybe I'm getting too old for that crap." She let a conciliatory note enter her voice. "Or maybe I'm just smarter now."

Alastair smiled wryly. "I'd vote for two, there. You've gotten pretty smart the last few years. And, frankly, Dar, if the woman isn't smart enough to outfox you without getting you in bed, then the hell with her. She's not going to be able to get around you in the boardroom either."

Dar relaxed a little. "Sorry, it's been a long day. I just got home and got hit with that."

"Mmm." Alastair folded his hands on his desk. "Well, I just wanted you to know not to worry about the whole thing. I sent an answer back, wanting to know why pictures of two tourists would be of a concern, and that you'd been under my orders to take time off there, so what was her problem?" He paused. "Only in a little nicer language."

"Thanks," Dar replied quietly.

"No problem. Dar, you're a valuable employee. And though I don't say it a lot, I do appreciate all you do for me. You know that, right?"

Dar nodded. "I know."

"Cute kid."

Dark brows contracted. "What?"

"Your assistant."

"Oh. Oh, right. Kerry. Yeah." Dar waved him off. "She's all right. A little too nice sometimes, but...she's new."

Alastair nodded. "You'll change that." He winked. "Well, happy Thanksgiving, Dar. You staying in town?"

I'll change that? No, she's changed me, Dar wryly admitted. "No, I'm heading out tomorrow morning. I'll be back on Sunday."

"See ya." Alastair waved an amiable hand and the connection cut off.

Dar shook her head, and picked up her mug, taking it with her into the living room. She set it down. She then went into the bathroom, changing into her bathing suit and throwing a towel around her neck. Moments later she was submerged up to her neck in swirling, soothing warm water, and regarding the canopy of stars overhead.

KERRY WATCHED THE mail send, then she closed down her laptop and turned to the bed, where her bag was resting. She sat down next to it with a sigh, then unzipped the top, and pulled out the sweatshirt, which she'd packed last. As she pulled it out something came with it, and she grabbed at the item in puzzlement. It was a small, blue-green stuffed animal, and she peered at it in half recognition. "Where have I seen you before?" she mused to the tiny salamander. "Oh, I remember. You were at the Rainforest, but how did you get here?" She glanced at the suitcase and remembered who had slipped it into the back of the car for the ride to the airport. "Oh, did you follow Auntie Dar home?"

The salamander winked at her. Kerry gave him a kiss on the nose and detected Dar's familiar scent on the fabric. She was setting him back into the suitcase when a soft knock came at the door, and she looked up. "C'mon in."

It opened, and she was relieved to see her sister's face. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself." Angela slipped in and crossed over to her. Kerry stood and held her arms out, smiling when her sister threw her arms around her and hugged her. "Bet you're glad to see a friendly face."

"Oh, you know it." Kerry sighed, releasing her.

"Let me see you." Her sister held her at arms distance and studied her. "Mom went on and on about how much weight you'd put on, but Jesus Christ, Kerry, you look fantastic."

Kerry's eyes flickered in surprise, not expecting that. "Think so?"

"My god, yes." Angela smiled. "I thought she meant... You're working out, aren't you? And would you look at that tan?"

Kerry smiled. "Yeah, I spent all day Sunday out on the water. I'm still a little sunburned," she admitted. "And I've been doing a lot more stuff outside and at the gym. I've been really busy."

"I bet. So, tell me about the new job?" Angela sat down on the bed as Kerry untucked her short-sleeved shirt from her jeans and started to unbutton it. "I heard Dad say your boss was actually at your apartment the other day?"

"Well..." Kerry folded her shirt and put it away, then slipped the dark blue sweatshirt over her head. "I really like it. I'm learning so much, and there's so much opportunity. I've got this big office with a window, and great benefits, it's fantastic." She turned and sat down next to Angela. "And I really like my new boss. She, um... She got me interested in doing a lot of stuff." "Really? From what Dad was saying, I'd have thought she was tough to work for," her sister commented. "I'm glad you like her, though." She leaned closer and dropped her voice. "So, you found someone, didn't you?"

Kerry glanced at her. "What makes you say that?" she countered warily.

"Mmm, let's just say, I'm your sister, okay?" Angela smiled. "C'mon, spill it. Did you bring pictures?"

Kerry folded her hands together and studied them. Of all her family, her sister was the only one she was at least willing to try to tell. Paradoxically, Angela was the one ally she had, and chances were, this would ruin that. No good choices. "Ang, you don't want to hear this."

Her sister was silent. "What do you mean?" she asked in a puzzled tone. "Of course I do. I could hardly wait for you to get here."

"It's...not what you think," Kerry started, very carefully. "It's not what you expect."

Angela glanced towards the door again, then reached out and folded her hands over her older sister's. "Ker, whatever it is, you can tell me. I'm your sister, remember?" She paused and waited, watching Kerry's face remain closed and silent. "Did you finally figure out you liked girls and not guys?"

Green eyes widened in utter shock as Kerry turned to look at her. She couldn't speak for a moment. "You knew?"

"Duh." Angela had to laugh at her expression. "Close your mouth, sis, you'll attract gnats." She squeezed Kerry's hands. "Listen, I should have talked to you about it before. I was just...I don't know, maybe it's all that indoctrination we got growing up."

Kerry lifted a hand and rubbed her temple, feeling a mixture of relief and shock. "I..."

"Hey, take it easy." Angela put an arm around her shoulders. "Just because I live a stereotype, doesn't mean I don't have a brain, sis."

"I know, I..." Kerry laughed weakly. "I was just expecting a different reaction."

Angela sighed. "I know, but Richard got this computer last year. And you know he's never home? Well, I took it upon myself to wander out onto the Web. It's really changed a lot of the things I used to think."

Her sister smiled wryly. "The wonders of modern technology."

"So, did you bring pictures?" Angela's dark eyebrow lifted up.

Kerry studied her for a moment, then she got up and went to her laptop bag, unzipping the document pocket and removing a folder. She handed it to her sister and gave her a tense smile.

"That's her."

Angela willingly took the folder and flipped it open, peering at the pictures inside. After a moment, she looked up at her sister. "Jesus, she's gorgeous."

Kerry felt a big grin stretching her lips. She resumed her seat on the bed and peered over Angela's shoulder. "Yeah, she is, isn't she? I like that one." It was a nice shot of Dar on the boat, leaning against the cabin front on the bow, one knee raised, the sunlight glittering off the droplets of seawater that beaded on her skin. The bathing suit left very little to the imagination. And once you stopped looking at that, you looked up at her face and were caught by those startlingly pale blue eyes.

"Oh wow." Angela turned it over and caught the next one, a picture of the view from the condo. "Where is this?"

Kerry cleared her throat. "Her place. The boat's her's, too." She gave her sister a very wry look.

"It's a private island off the tip of South Beach."

Angela blew a soft whistle. "Wow! Where'd you meet her?"

There was an awkward pause. "Um...she's my boss."

Angela looked up in utter shock. "That's Dar?"

Kerry nodded. "Yeah, I know it seems weird, but we just hit it off from almost the first. I mean, it was a great opportunity and all, becoming her assistant, and at first I...I thought it was just me. You know, just a silly crush."

Angela shook her head. "You know, sis, corporate VP, boat, pricey condo... Except for one small detail, Dad would cream his shorts to get you involved with someone like that." She peered at her sister. "How serious is this?"

Kerry picked up the picture she was looking at, one where she'd actually gotten Dar to smile at the camera. She smiled back in reflex. "It's serious."

"You know Dad's going to flip out," Angela stated quietly. "I don't know if you should say anything--maybe just put them off for a while, and get the heck out of here."

Before Kerry could answer, they heard their mother's voice. "Girls! Come on now, dinner's being served."

The two sisters glanced at each other. "Thanks for understanding," Kerry told the younger woman softly. "You don't know how much it means to me." She stood up. "C'mon, let's go and get this over with."

Angela stood and hugged her. "Ker, whatever you do, I'm with you. Okay?"

Kerry hugged her back. "Likewise. I hear I'm going to be an aunt again."

Her sister sucked in a breath and gazed at her. "Yes, but the baby isn't Richard's."

Kerry's jaw dropped. "Oh boy," she muttered.

"Girls!" Their mother's voice had a hint of impatience in it.

Angela smiled tightly. "We'll talk later."

They stepped into the dining room side by side, Kerry pushing up the sleeves on her sweatshirt, and Angela running her fingers through her curly brown hair. Richard was already there, sitting next to her father, and Kerry had a chance to look at them before they saw her. Her father was a stocky man of middling height, with silver hair and a neatly trimmed beard and moustache--he gave the impression of sophisticated power. Seated next to him was her brother-in-law Richard, who was half his age, but taller, with thinning brown hair and a rugged, but slightly off-centered face. His nose had been broken several times during his football-playing days, and they'd never really gotten it just right. Her father looked up and saw them, fixing his eyes on her as he leaned back.

Kerry called up the image she held in her mind of Dar entering that hostile room in Orlando, and she lifted her chin a little as she crossed the parquet floor and took one of the remaining seats at the table. "Hello, Richard," she said quietly as her sister took the chair next to her. "Dad."

"Good to see you, Ker." Richard gave her a friendly smile. "Nice shirt."

"Didn't know they had a base down there," her father commented. "You're looking...healthy...Kerrison."

Kerry smiled precisely at him. "Thanks, and no, there's no base. A friend of mine gave it to me." She took the napkin at her place setting and opened it, settling it on her lap neatly. "How are things going for you?"

"Pretty good, you know how it is in stocks." Richard laughed a bit. "You're up, you're down. Right now, we're trying to hang on while the international stuff dies down." He peered at her. "We all don't get to sit out in the sun all day like you guys down in Miami."

Kerry pushed her hair behind her ear and accepted the jibe. "It definitely has its advantages," she cheerfully agreed. "This past Sunday I was swimming in the ocean--it was beautiful weather."

"Thought that job would be keeping you too busy." Her father snorted.

"It does," his daughter replied. "I'm at the office before eight AM, and I usually don't leave until after seven. After that, I usually go to the gym or out Rollerblading by my complex."

"I heard you work on Saturdays." Roger Stuart gazed across at his daughter.

"Occasionally," Kerry responded. "Depends on what projects I'm working on." She glanced up as her mother came in and seated herself. "My system at home will connect up to the office if I need it to."

Her father grunted. "I hear your boss pays you visits."

Nothing like getting right to the point, and before the soup's served, eh? Kerry sighed inwardly.

"Sure. We work very closely together on stuff. And you know, despite all the stories I heard about her, I really like Dar." Her sister hid a smile.

Senator Stuart glanced up as his soup plate was put down, then he picked up his spoon and pointed it at her. "That's a dangerous woman. You'd best steer clear of her." He took a spoonful of soup and tasted it. "More pepper, damn it."

Angela silently passed him the salt and pepper dishes.

"She can be, that's true," Kerry answered his comment. "But I consider myself lucky to have gotten the position under her. And that's the main reason it just wouldn't make good sense for me to just up and leave." She tried to keep her voice calm and reasonable. "The potential to learn, and to advance... I can't find that here."

"Why do you need that?" her mother objected. "When you're married and settled down, what difference is it going to make?"

"C'mon, Mother, it's a great opportunity," Angela disagreed. "Once Kerry spends a little time in the position, she can move anywhere and get the same kind of work at the same level. Of course she wants to spend some time doing that. I bet she got a pay raise." She turned to Kerry and asked, "Didn't you?"

Kerry gave her sister a smile. "Boy, did I." She laughed. "I was surprised. I thought they'd keep me at my previous salary while they tried me out, but no, it was a fifty percent increase." Even her father looked impressed.

"But you don't have to worry about that," her mother persistently objected. "Brian's going to make you a very good living, dear."

"He's just out of school, Mother." Angela dove back into the fray.

"It's going to take a while. And besides, you can never have enough money, right, Dad?"

Roger Stuart grunted.

An awkward silence fell.

"So, how about those Lions?" Richard asked with forced cheerfulness. "That was some game the other day, huh?"

Kerry dove into her soup, glad the conversation had been directed away. So far, so good, but looking at her father's closed face, she suspected he had another plan already in place. *At least*, she sighed, *Kyle isn't here*. Facing his smug arrogance over the table would have made the dinner even more aggravating.

The door slowly opened, and the family cook, Elena, poked her head in. "Everything all right here, ma'am?"

Cynthia Stuart glanced up. "The soup's a bit on the bland side, Elena, the senator likes more pepper in it."

Kerry caught the cook's eye and smiled at her. "I think it's great. I've missed your cooking, Elena."

The elderly woman smiled back at her. "Glad to hear you say so, Miss Kerrison." She pulled her head back and the door closed behind her.

Kerry took a roll from the napkin-covered bread basket and split it open, enjoying the rich, warm smell, and ignoring her mother's scandalized look as she cheerfully covered it with butter. "Did you know my old account is supporting the IRS computers, Dad?"

Senator Stuart glanced at her. "What?"

Kerry took a bite of her roll and chewed it. "Mmm-hmm, that big website they use so people can get forms and information."

"What, you mean they do their own taxes?" Richard laughed. "I haven't been able to do that since I left college."

Figures. Kerry refrained from rolling her eyes. "I file mine electronically. Just go to the transmitter's website, fill in a few fields, and click. It's gone." She took another bite of her roll and a spoonful of the potato soup. "And my refund gets deposited automatically."

"Ah, the simplicity of an unencumbered life." Richard smiled at her. "Wait until you start investing."

Kerry smiled right back. "I let my 401K do that for me, thanks. We have a company that handles that, and the stock options, and the retirement fund." She chewed her roll and swallowed. "I just do my job, they take care of the rest."

"Wow, that's a great benefit package," Angela commented, sipping a spoonful of the soup.

"That's better than the one you had at the other place."

Kerry nodded. "Much, but then, it's a much bigger company. It's a nice building, too. I have pictures if you want to see them later." She finished off her soup. "Including a shot from my office window. Wait until you see the view."

"Easy come, easy go," her father commented. "From what I hear of your boss, she could just cut you loose anytime." He picked up a roll and took a bite out of it. "I don't like her way of doing business, and I'm going to get them out of our state contracts if it's the last thing I do."

Kerry bit her tongue to keep from leaping to Dar's defense. "Does the account not do what it's supposed to do?"

Senator Stuart looked at his daughter. "How in the hell should I know? All that mixed-up mumbo jumbo you people spout like garbage. All I know is we asked for some simple things, and got told it wasn't going to happen, and nobody tells me that." He slapped a hand on the table.

"Especially not some goddamned smart-mouthed woman."

Another awkward silence fell, as Kerry refused to rise to his baiting. Finally her mother cleared her throat. "Tell us about the church bazaar you ran the other week, Angela."

After they finished dinner, Richard gamely took on the senator in a debate about offshore fishing rights, which the older man was reviewing as part of his work. Mary and Elizabeth, the two house maids, silently cleared off the table. Kerry sat back and folded her arms across her stomach, wishing for an excuse to leave. Considering, she turned as Angela put her napkin down.

"Wow, that was great, wasn't it. You up for a walk?"

Angela pursed her lips in amusement, then nodded. "Yeah, we can head up towards the lake, I think they're starting to string up the Christmas lights." She stood up. "We're going to go for a walk to the lake, Richard, are you all right here with Daddy?"

Her husband looked up blankly. "Huh? Oh, oh sure, honey. You go on. Have fun." He patted her knee condescendingly. "I know all this business talk must be boring you."

Kerry got up and retrieved her jacket from the closet, patting its pocket to make sure her cell phone was inside. Then she lifted her sister's jacket from its hook and handed it to her as Angela met her at the door. "Thanks," she whispered.

"No problem, that crap does bore me," her sister replied softly. "Oh, not that I don't think offshore rights aren't important, I do, but I've heard this same argument six times already. Richard's got some money in fishing futures, and he thinks he can influence Daddy into voting the measure in."

They walked through the hall and out the front door, closing it carefully behind them and exiting into a cold, clear night. Kerry tugged her jacket shut, watching her breath appear before her eyes, and chuckled softly. "Not used to this anymore."

Angela glanced at her. "Already?" she teased gently. "That old blood thins fast, huh?" She reached up and pushed her curly brown hair out of her face.

"You got that right," her sister admitted. "I like being able to go out to pick up the paper on Christmas morning in a T-shirt, thanks." She kicked a rock out ahead of her as they moved away from the house and onto the path that would take them up towards the lake. "Dar was telling me the funniest stories of the first time she had to drive in snow and ice. She ended up almost getting stuck in a washout gully."

Angela laughed. "I can imagine. Heck, I almost did that when I first started driving. And if I recall, you did some pretty horrible things yourself." She prodded Kerry's shoulder. "Remember the time you hit that cow?"

Kerry covered her eyes. "Oh, god, don't remind me of that. Those pathetic brown eyes. It took half the debating team to get the car out of that field and lift her up." She sighed and rocked her head from side to side to loosen the muscles of her neck. "I needed a walk, I'm stuffed."

Her sister chuckled. "Did you do that just to piss Mom off?" she queried. "I thought she was going to have a coronary--watching you chow down like that."

That surprised a laugh out of Kerry. "No, I didn't really. I was just hungry. We didn't get anything on the plane except for peanuts, and I was too nervous to eat this morning." Actually, she reflected, she'd traded breakfast time with snuggling time and hadn't regretted it. "I should have thought about that, about Mom, I mean, but..." She sighed. "I've guess I've gotten out of the habit of denying myself in the past month." It was always tiny portions at her mother's table, she remembered belatedly. No seconds, and tiny bites. *Oh well.* "One more nail in my coffin, right?"

Angela laughed. "I thought it was great, I haven't seen you eat like that since we were kids. And to be honest, sis, I thought the last time I saw you, on the Fourth, that you were really too thin."

"Mmm, that's what Dar said," Kerry acknowledged soberly. "And, that's what all my friends were telling me. I think I knew that, deep down, but...I kept hearing that harping. I didn't think it was worth fighting about," she admitted with a sigh.

"I told Mom that. She's got that weird Spartan mentality, though," Angela commented wryly.

"So, how did Dar manage to convince you?"

Kerry smiled. "Convince me? She subverted me." She laughed. "After I started working up in her building, I would find these cookies and god only knows what else on my desk all the time. I finally cornered her on it, saying, like, what is up with this, Dar?" She reached down and picked

up a rock, then tossed it to one side. "Then she told me she was worried I'd blow out the window if they opened the storm doors upstairs. I mean, she was really kind of cute about it, all embarrassed and everything. So..." Kerry shrugged. "I kind of chilled out about it," she reflected. "It was...harder than I thought at first, I kept wanting to do stupid things...like come back after we'd had dinner and make myself throw up...but my brain took over, and I didn't. And then we went to Disney World, where I couldn't have gotten away with that if I tried, since Dar was with me every single minute practically, and after that..." She chuckled softly. "And besides, I had so much more energy. I mean, before, I would go to work, come home, maybe one night or two I'd go out skating with Colleen, but mostly I'd just crash, because I was so tired. Now it's different, I either go to the gym, or go 'Blading, or I'm out with Dar...or...I'm hardly ever tired."

"In case I hadn't said this before, by the way..." Angela glanced at her. "...you really do look fantastic, Sis." She watched Kerry hop from rock to rock down the path. "It's like you're a different person. Or maybe one I remember from a long time ago."

Kerry stopped and faced her. "I'm pretty sure that's not all chocolate chip cookies," she commented wryly as she hopped off the last rock and trotted over to Angela. "For the last few weeks, I've felt better than I have in my entire life." She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath of the cold air, then let it out in a satisfied puff, watching the cloud gather around her head.

Angela shook her head a little. "I always knew when you finally fell in love, it'd be a doozy." She gazed at her sister. "That's what it is, isn't it?"

Kerry spread her arms wide and threw her head back, drinking in the stars hungrily. "Yes." She breathed. "And it's wonderful." She let her arms drop and cocked her head at her sister. "It was like I was waiting for this to happen all my life. And it was so strange, because the minute I saw her, I could feel it." She had to laugh. "And it was the most horrible of circumstances, too. But...oh my god, Angela, I had no idea it was possible to feel this strongly about anything or anyone, but I do."

Her sister put an arm around her shoulders. "I'm really glad to hear that, it makes what I have to tell you a lot easier."

Kerry slid an arm around her waist and cocked her head. "What's that?"

A wry, half-embarrassed smile crossed her younger sister's face. "The baby's father..." She rested a hand on her still-flat stomach. "It's Brian."

Kerry's jaw dropped, and she stared at her in amazement. "Holy cow!" It was a moment of shock, a moment of almost betrayal, and then she laughed. "No wonder he hasn't called me since August."

Angela peeked at her. "You're not mad?"

Her sister sighed. "How could I be? You know how I feel about Brian. He's sweet, he's one of my best friends, I love him like a brother." A pause. "Period."

"He was so scared you weren't ever going to talk to him again," her sister told her. "That's why he's not over here tonight. We made it up so that I would kinda, um..."

"Break the news?" Kerry hazarded.

"Eyah, something like that." Angela nodded. "And if it looked like you were going to go ballistic, he was going to find some way to be recalled to college for the week."

"Chicken." Her sister laughed. "Not that I blame him, talk about awkward situations." She paused and glanced at the path they were still walking on. "What are you going to do?"

Angela steered them towards a bench overlooking the somber lake, and they sat down side by side. A light wind rustled the dead leaves around them and whispered through the bare branches overhead. "I don't know," she finally answered. "You know I never wanted to marry Richard." Kerry nodded. "I know. Dad bullied you into it, just like he was doing with me and Brian. But I got lucky."

Hazel eyes turned and regarded her. "It's not luck. You're smart, Kerry, really sharp, and you had a chance to go places. I never did." Angela's college degree was in Literature. "Oh, I could teach, you know, but still." She sighed. "There wasn't any reason for me to go anywhere, and it wasn't so bad. I mean Richard's not a bad guy, you know?"

"I know." Kerry gazed at her in quiet compassion. "And there's Sally." Her two-year-old niece. "Yeah, she really loves her daddy." Angela sighed. "I sure wish I did." She turned her eyes to Kerry. "Brian makes me feel so special. He listens to me, and it's like..." She stopped and blinked. "He really likes you, Ker. He doesn't want to lose you as a friend."

Kerry smiled. "How could he?" She rubbed her sister's back in gentle compassion. "He's just saved me from a task I've been really, really dreading."

Angela looked up. "Telling him?"

Kerry nodded. "I didn't want to hurt him, I'm glad it's not going to be an issue." She paused. "Did you tell him about me?"

Angela hesitated. "I told him...that I thought you'd gotten involved with someone down there," she answered cautiously. "I didn't get into specifics, because I didn't have any, right?"

"Mmm." Kerry nibbled her fingernail. "You think he'd freak out?" she asked. "We've been friends for a long time, but that's...I don't know, for someone who's been brought up like he was, that's a tough thing to adjust to."

Angela considered. "I don't know, we never talked about it," she answered honestly. "I'd like to say he'd be fine with it. But I don't know, he is pretty conservative."

"Mmm." Kerry sighed. "Well, I'll have to feel him out. What I don't want is Kyle finding out about it." She leaned back and gazed up at the clear sky. "Pretty night," she reflected, glancing at her watch, then pulling her cell phone out of her pocket and dialing a number. It rang twice, then picked up. "Hi, there," she drawled into the receiver.

"Hi, there, yourself," Dar's voice rumbled back, a warm, velvety sound. "How's it going?"

"Mmm. Better than I expected, actually." She glanced at her sister, who was listening with interest. "There are some, um, *complications* that I wasn't expecting. Apparently my sister here has taken Brian away from me and is having his child."

She heard a startled squawk and splash. "What?" Dar's voice came back, incredulous.

"Where are you?" Kerry inquired curiously.

"In the hot tub. What did you say?" Dar replied. "I thought your sister was married."

"She is," the blonde answered solemnly. "Why are you in the hot tub? It's ten thirty at night, Dar."

A sigh answered her. "Because I went and drilled with Ken for two hours after teaching that class, and I'm regretting it," Dar replied. "That is a complication. What's she going to do?" More splashing. "Did you tell her?"

"Uh huh." Kerry replied, giving her now giggling sister a push. "She wasn't...um, surprised."

"Really? Points for her." Dar laughed. "Hey, I'm glad to hear it. Sounds like things are going pretty good up there."

"Yeah, yeah, not bad." Kerry sighed. "I'll survive, I guess. Hey, you better get out of there before you turn into a raisin."

"Dried grape."

Kerry stared at the phone, a strange tingle going up and down her spine. "What did you say?" Splashing sounds, then the soft hiss of the sliding door opening and closing. "My mother always used to have that argument with my father, he used to say, 'damned dried apples is dried apples, dried peaches is dried peaches, I ain't calling no pansy assed dried grape a raisin.' "

"Oh." Kerry laughed. "Sorry, it sounded so weird." She paused, just listening to the comforting sounds of Dar moving around--going in the kitchen and pulling out, Kerry was sure, a glass for some milk. "Well, I should let you go towel off. Just wanted you to know things are going all right." She heard the refrigerator open and the soft hiss of the milk dispenser, and she smiled. "Enjoy your milk."

A chuckle. "You can hear that?" Dar asked, amused. "I'm glad you called, I was just looking up at the stars and wondering what you were up to."

"Funny, I was just doing the same thing," Kerry admitted. "It's cold up here, I'm glad I got that new jacket. I've got your sweatshirt on underneath it," she related. "Oh, and I found this little lizard in my bag. Any idea where it came from?" her voice turned teasing.

"Lizard?" Utter innocence in Dar's voice. "What lizard?" Then she chuckled. "Been hanging on to that for a while. Listen, Michelle struck again today, she sent copies of those pictures up to Alastair."

"What?" Kerry's eyes widened. "What did you do?"

"I forwarded them to her boss and offered to put in a bid to replace his camera resolution software," Dar replied dryly. "Don't worry, I talked to Alastair. It's okay," she added. "You might want to pick up mail if you get a chance. Some idiot put me in charge of arranging entertainment for the Christmas party at work, and I need some advice."

Kerry muffled a giggle with one hand. "Oh, okay. I will," she promised. "Listen, have a good flight tomorrow, okay? Be careful."

"I will. You be careful, too," the soft response came back. "Call me if you need anything."

"Count on it. 'Night, Dar." Kerry smiled. "I love you."

A soft chuckle. "I love you too, and you nearly got me into some hot water with that today. You know where I was when you called?"

"Um, no." Kerry bit her lip.

"In the cafeteria, having coffee with Duks," Dar replied. "I think it warmed the cockles of his atheistic little heart."

"Eep. Sorry," Kerry squeaked, not really sorry at all.

"I'm not," Dar replied quietly. "Go get some rest so you can attack the turkey tomorrow."

"I will. 'Night," Kerry answered, folding up the phone as the line disconnected and tucking it into her pocket. Then she leaned back against the bench and gazed up at the stars again, remaining reflectively silent for a moment. "She's so different from me, and yet, when we're together, it's like I've known her all my life. I don't understand it sometimes."

Angela watched her in silence, then she reached over and covered Kerry's hand with her own. "I know it's not really what..." She stopped. "Well, last Sunday in church, the pastor was talking about how everyone out there, somewhere, has someone who completes them. Who are their other halves, their soulmates." She paused, seeing Kerry's body stiffen. "Maybe that's what you are."

Soulmates. The word echoed through her mind, turning corners and tearing through shuttered doorways of understanding. It finally settled home, draping over her heart like a silk handkerchief, and she closed her eyes as she accepted the truth of it. "You may be right," she

whispered. "I never thought of that. I remember Pastor Robert talking about it when I was in college."

Angela nodded. "He still does. And when he talks about it, it always makes me wonder if he has found his because his face lights up so." She rubbed Kerry's fingers. "Maybe you should go talk to him, Kerry. He's always been so fond of you. He asks about you all the time."

Kerry turned toward her, serious. "I don't think he'd understand, Angie. He's a pastor."

Wise, hazel eyes warmed her. "I think he'd understand a lot better than you think, Sis." She studied Kerry's face. "You don't go to church down there, do you?"

A shake of the blonde head. "No, there isn't one of our denomination around. At least where I live. There are a few up in Broward, but..." She glanced at the ground. "I miss that sometimes; maybe I will go talk to him." She stifled a yawn. "Dar's right, it's been a long, aggravating day. Are you guys staying over?"

Angela nodded. "Yes, Sally's with Richard's mother. Hey, what about I toss Richard over for the night, and we share the room you're in like we used to. How about it?"

Kerry smiled at her. "You know, I'd really like that." She stood and held a hand out to her sister. "C'mon, I'll snitch some hot chocolate out of the kitchen, and you can see the rest of my pictures."

Angela allowed herself to be tugged upright by her shorter sister, then she wrapped an arm around her and they started back.

DAR GLANCED OUTSIDE at the gray sky as the plane taxied, seeing the lash of rain against the small, squared oval window, and sighed. It had been a long flight, since the weather front had forced their plane to circle for thirty minutes before it finally landed at Dulles, and she felt an intense need to stretch and move around inside the small, cramped cabin. As the plane nudged up to the gate, she released her seatbelt and stood, glad she was, at least, at the front of the plane and near the exit. She opened the overhead and tugged down her jacket, then pulled her laptop case from the bin and settled it over her shoulder.

The door opened, letting in a blast of wet, cold air, and she shivered in reflex, pulling the jacket closer and zipping it before she nodded pleasantly to the steward and exited the craft, heading up the walkway towards the terminal. She'd gotten three steps past the door when she spotted the waiting Jack and had to smile in reflex as his face lit up on seeing her. *He is really a sweetie*, she admitted, as he trotted over and enveloped her in a hug--his six-foot-plus military frame making her feel a bit dwarfed. She returned the hug, feeling the solidness of him under her hands, and gave him a pat on the back. "Hey, Jack."

"Dar." He gave her a last squeeze and released her. "Damn, it's good to see ya. I'm so glad you decided to c'mon up for Turkey Day."

She was glad, too. It had been so quiet and so lonely in the condo last night, she'd almost gone crazy, unable to believe her reaction after living alone so many years. At least a few days up at the Eastons' would fill in for Kerry's missing presence, and she admitted privately that she could use the change of scenery. "Glad to see you, too. Got your hair cut again, I see." She ruffled his short buzz-cut affectionately. "You guys get paid by how short you can cut it?"

He laughed. "Better than how some guys think we pilots get paid--by the length of something else," he wryly answered. "C'mon, you got a bag checked?"

Dar nodded. "One, yeah. I was going to carry it on, but the flight was so full, they made everyone check everything." She followed his striding form toward the baggage claim, dodging the crowd headed in all directions. "How's Gerry doing?"

"Dad's great," he answered, with a sunny grin. "He can't wait to see you, either. He was really rocked that you decided to take him up on the invite. So was Mom, she was busy quizzing him on what stuff you liked. He had no idea, so we called your secretary."

Dar burst out laughing. "Oh god, I'm in trouble. She probably told your mother I like broccoli and spinach greens--she hates the way I eat."

He grinned. "Exactly. She did, and Mom got kind of suspicious-- remembering you like she does. So she called around some more and somehow got hold of an assistant of yours."

"She did, huh?" Dar bit back a grin. "Bet that was a different story."

"Heck, yeah! And, boy, was I glad, 'cause I hate broccoli," Jack replied. "Candied sweet potatoes are much more my speed." He parked himself next to the belt and crossed his muscular arms.

"Point it out."

Dar dutifully did so, allowing him to lift the leather duffel from the moving belt and shoulder it. Chivalry always amused her, and Jack's was the genuine kind. He took her bag because he knew it was his privilege and right to do so, not because he was showing off, or making a point, or any of the other reasons someone like, say, José would have.

It was a guy thing, and, like opening doors, saying ma'am, doffing his hat, or holding a chair, it came utterly naturally to him. He would be utterly bewildered if she'd accused him of chauvinistic behavior of any kind, or protested that she was capable of handling her own baggage. It was an appealingly sweet innocence, and one of the things Dar most liked about the pilot. The fact that he was ruggedly good-looking and had a charming sense of humor didn't hurt, either. He had blond hair and interestingly dark blue eyes, and when he was being particularly silly, he'd waggle his ears, which were prominent against his crew cut. "So, what's been up with you?" Dar asked, as they walked towards the entrance. "I hear you got carrier duty?"

He rolled his eyes. "Oh yeah, I sure did. USS Nimitz. I fly out there after Christmas and join her at sea." He exhaled. "I had to do a nighttime qualification last month, and let me tell you, Dar...that's the most scared I've been since I fell out of that treehouse when I was ten and nearly busted my neck."

Dar laughed a little. "I can't even imagine that--landing on that tiny deck at all. But in the dark?"

"In high seas." Jack shook his head. "I almost lost my lunch through body orifices I didn't even know I had." He went out the door and held it open for her, grinning wryly seeing Dar wince at the cold wind that hit her. "Not used to this stuff, huh?"

Dar fastened her jacket and lifted her collar. "You got that right," she muttered. "I was sitting outside under the stars in my Jacuzzi last night."

"Well, you're just a delicate hot-house flower there, ma'am," Jack drawled, his eyes twinkling. "If you want, I've got a heavy overcoat in the car. That jacket doesn't cover much."

Dar tugged her sleeves down and gave him a crooked grin. "Thanks, I'll live. I think I remembered to pack my gloves in there." She was glad she'd chosen to wear her heavier jeans and a pair of boots, and made a mental note to add an extra layer of clothes when she changed. They got into Jack's car, a maroon Ford Explorer with comfortable leather seats. He hit a switch on the dashboard as he closed Dar's door, then walked around and got in, settling his big body in the driver's seat and starting the engine. "Heated seats." He indicated the switch, then he winked at her.

Dar felt the warmth begin to seep through her and she relaxed, stretching her long legs out and gazing at the now impotent weather. "They don't sell those in Miami," she commented with a sigh. "You looking forward to carrier duty?"

He nodded. "I am. It means not seeing the folks for a while, but it gives me a chance at some action." He glanced at her. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm not looking to go drop bombs on someone, okay?"

Blue eyes flicked to his face, and Dar let a tiny, understanding smile cross her lips. "I know." "But you train, and train. It would be sort of nice to be able to use that, you know? It's like if all you could do is run a test-pattern all day, that'd be kinda boring."

"That's true," Dar acknowledged quietly. "I guess it's just that we all hope all that training won't be put to use. Even though it's looking more and more likely that we'll just end up being the world police force."

Jack looked at her before returning his attention to the road. "You don't like that idea?" he asked curiously. "I never thought you had a problem with the use of force, Dar."

She thought about the question. "You know, I never thought I did either. God knows I was anxious enough to go into the special forces. I know I wouldn't have been behind a desk there."

"You'd have been a rocking SEAL, Dar." Jack grinned. "Kicked their stuffed-up blue butts, I bet." He glanced at her. "No offense to your daddy."

"Maybe." Dar smiled quietly. "It's an attractive thought, to have that kind of power--might makes right, all that kind of thing. I think I could have done it." She remembered wanting to...remembered the taste of blood on her tongue when she'd fairly bitten through it, when her father's last effort at getting her into the program had failed. She'd been so close. So close to being allowed to join that fraternity. She knew most of the guys, she knew she'd even have had a chance to break down the walls of that male-only thing, because they knew her, they knew her father, they knew her capabilities. They knew she could stick it out when the hard stuff came down, and put a knife where it needed to go.

Instead, stunned and angry, she'd turned her back on the service, and gone a different route. A path no less dangerous, with enemies just as sneaky, but with one major difference. There, she would have been a killer. Here, she was not. She had no idea why, all of a sudden, that mattered. Jack pulled into the driveway of the Easton family home a few minutes later, the tires crunching on dead branches that lined the pavement. He got out and retrieved Dar's duffel, then joined her on the walk up to the front door. "We've got a surprise inside," he murmured, his blue eyes lighting up. "I think you'll like it."

Dar eyed him suspiciously. "Jack, I hate surprises. You know that."

He grinned, and opened the door. "G'wan."

Warily, Dar entered, getting an overwhelming draft of warm cinnamon and baking bread that made her remember she hadn't eaten all day. The inside of the Easton home was large and spacious, a huge entryway leading off into a sunken living room, and directly ahead, the kitchen, where all the nice smells were coming from. Mary Easton poked her head out as she heard the door open. "Dar! Lookit you!

C'mere!" She hurried out, sticking a stirring spoon in her apron pocket and smiling. She was a short, round woman with a friendly, open face.

"Hello, mamma Mary." Dar had to smile back, getting her arms open in time to receive a fragrant hug.

"My gosh, did you get taller?" the tiny woman demanded, looking up at her. "Honey, you look wonderful. You been out on vacation or something?"

"Nope." Dar chuckled pushing her hair back a trifle selfconsciously. "Just had some time out in the sun recently. We have that down there, you know."

"Jack, set that bag up in the guest room, then c'mon down and show Dar your new friends."

Mary's eyes twinkled. "I got some fresh apple bread, you want a slice?"

"Sure, it smells great," the taller woman replied, setting her laptop down on the low table near the couch and unfastening her jacket. "It's great to see you."

"C'mon with me." Mary latched onto her arm and tugged her towards the kitchen. "I've got a dozen things going. I am so glad you let Gerry talk you into coming up here." She bustled into the large open room, mostly white with blue checkerboards around the edges, and went to the cooling rack near the stove. "Here, put your teeth in this, I know you like it."

Dar chuckled. "Ah, yes. I hear my staff's been snitching on me." She settled on one of the stools and glanced around, appreciating the workmanlike efficiency of the space.

"Now, don't you be mad at them." Mary laughed as she handed a slice of the warm, spicy bread to Dar after spreading a bit of butter on the top. "And, honey, I have to just tell you something. That assistant of yours down in Miami is just the sweetest person I've ever talked to in my life." Dar smiled around her mouthful of bread and chewed a moment, swallowing before she answered. "Kerry?"

Mary nodded. "Yes, what a nice woman. And you know, I mean, I realize it's a business, and you people don't probably even talk to each other outside the building, not like we do here in the service, but I think she really likes you."

"Oh really?" Dar's eyes twinkled. "What makes you say that?"

Mary beamed at her. "Just her voice...when she said your name, you could tell she was smiling all the time."

Dar grinned a little. "Well, yes. Kerry is a very, very nice person, and in fact, we're pretty close friends outside work, too." *Little fink, she didn't even mention Mary had called. I'll have to think up something suitably sneaky to do to her in revenge.* "Glad you liked her."

Jack came back in and tugged Dar's jacket. "Hey, let me take that for you, and c'mon with me."

The surprise. Dar amiably stood and shrugged out of her jacket, letting Jack fold it over his arm, then followed him out the back door to the kitchen and down two steps to a utility room. "You ready?" he whispered mischievously.

Dar could hear some small, muffled noises behind the door she was in front of, but she couldn't quite make out what they were. "Um, sure," she replied uncertainly, stepping a pace back as he opened the door and moved aside.

A living tide of fur engulfed her legs, and her eyes widened. "Good grief!"

Nine squirming, stumbling, squeaking puppies were clustered around her boots, tugging at them and sniffing her with wildly wagging taillets.

"Go on, say hello." Jack grinned. "They're Alabaster's."

Dar looked up before she allowed herself the indulgence of dropping to one knee and sorting among the puppies. Alabaster was Gerald's staid, dignified Labrador Retriever, an animal so pale she was almost white, hence the name. "They're gorgeous." The puppies scrambled up her leg, crying, and she slid down into a seated position, letting them climb all over her. "Damn, they're so cute." She picked one up, a tiny boy who wriggled frantically as she brought him close, then nibbled on her ear. "Yow."

Jack set her jacket aside and sat down next to her, attracting his own mini-herd. "Aren't they?" He scratched a large female behind the ears. "They're five weeks old. We've got homes for some of them." He paused, watching the puppy snuggle down in Dar's arms and gaze up at her adoringly. "Which one do you want?"

Dar looked up from where she was playing with a puppy paw. "No, sorry, I..." She fell silent for a moment, thinking. "Are you serious?"

Jack cocked his head at her. "Sure. Dad and I talked about it. He worries about you, y'know. He thinks a Lab would be perfect for you." He scratched a puppy's chest. "They're loyal, friendly...obedient. You could take them on walks. It would be good for ya."

Dar didn't answer for a minute. She gazed down at the small head now nuzzling her chest, its tiny black nose sniffing interestedly at her hair. Innocent brown eyes blinked up at her, and the small muzzle opened, to reveal a soft, U-shaped pink tongue. *First fish, now a puppy? What in the hell's happening to you, Dar?* "Let me think about it," she finally said, looking up with a wry smile. "I...really appreciate the offer."

Jack grinned, then turned as Alabaster entered, sniffing after her puppies with a worried Labrador frown. She spotted Dar and whuffed in amazement, then plowed her way through the herd and proceeded to lick Dar's face in a thorough, professional manner.

"Easy." Dar laughed, patting her side. "Yeah, I'm glad to see you too, girl." She leaned back against the washing machine and sighed, letting puppies run all over her legs. Well, if she couldn't be with Kerry, this wasn't a bad second choice. Outside, the wind was howling, and branches thumped against the roof, but she just grinned over at Jack and inclined her head towards the living room. "You up for a fire?"

He grinned back and reached a hand over to help her up. "Can you still split a log like you used to?"

"Guess we'll find out," Dar replied as she headed up the steps, carefully shedding puppies as she went.

Chapter Thirty

KERRY YAWNED AS she woke up, letting her eyes scan the quiet room, and taking in her sister's sleeping form with a tiny smile. Dawn was just breaking outside, and the first tendrils of pinkish gray were barely visible between the trees in the backyard.

She lay there for a moment, then decided she wasn't going to get back to sleep and slipped out from under the covers, padding across the carpeted floor and kneeling in front of her duffel bag. Her body felt a little antsy, and she decided a quick run around the lake wouldn't be a bad idea. So she pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt over a thick T-shirt, and tugged on her sneakers. Running hadn't been a favorite activity of hers, but lately, since she'd been joining Dar when she stayed over at the island, and Dar had coaxed her out on nighttime runs at her apartment, she'd developed a taste for it. Or so she told herself. At any rate, it didn't require any special equipment, and it was comfortably neutral in that it was something both men and women regularly did. "Not a stereotypical gay tip-off," Dar had said wryly.

She walked quietly down the stairs and to the back door, hearing only the faint stirrings of someone working in the kitchen. She undid the latch and slipped out, sucking in a breath as the cold morning air hit her. "Whoa, boy," she muttered, stretching quickly, before she broke into a light jog and headed for the path. "Better warm up fast." The path was a well-kept gravel one, and she found it with no problem, her feet settling into a familiar, easy rhythm as she allowed her body to wake up. The cold air made her blink a little at first, but she got used to it and took in a lungful as she reached the turn that would take her around the perimeter of the small lake.

It was quiet. She was the only one out here at this hour, and her footsteps against the gravel seemed echoingly loud to her. No sounds but the wind itself reached her, and she realized she'd become so accustomed to Miami's verdant fauna that the absence of birds and crickets seemed

odd and strange to her. She thought about Bob the Duck as she let her strides move her down the lakeside. Bob was an old friend who lived in the drainage canal near her apartment. On summer nights, she often ended up gazing over the black, rippling water, and often as not, Bob would come find her.

She'd taken to keeping bread crusts in her pockets for the old white duck, and on many nights, she'd actually sat down, letting the faint breeze cool her from the muggy heat for a while, until the familiar, waddling shape headed her way. Kerry smiled as she thought of him, remembering the suspicious look he'd given Dar when she'd brought her new friend over to meet her old one. It had taken ten minutes or so before Bob had grudgingly come over, wagging his tail at the taller woman and quacking a protest to her.

Her breath appeared as a steady, visible stream, and she glanced around, wishing her running companion was with her. She'd had to really push herself to keep up with Dar, since as much as she kidded the taller woman about her love of chocolate and other sinful indulgences, Dar really was in good shape. It showed in the effortlessness of her running, and her ability to add little interesting additions to her morning workout. Like juggling. She'd hardly believed it when she'd first seen Dar scoop up three rocks, then, while they were running around the island, juggle them neatly as she went. She said it developed balance and coordination, and made your upper body work too, when running mostly just did things to your legs and lower body.

Juggling. Jesus. Kerry was positive she'd fall right on her face if she even tried it. She continued on around the lake, going downhill, then rounding the back end and heading back up hill again. That part, she acknowledged, she missed in Miami, where the only hills were freeway overpasses. She could feel the strain in her thighs and calves, but she kept on, pushing through the tightness like Dar had taught her.

It was a two-mile circuit, and she was glad to see the house at the end of it when she made it back up to the top of the hill, her breath coming hard and the sweat standing out against her skin. The sun was up by now, and she slowed to a walk as she hit the path up towards the kitchen door, pacing herself and trying to catch her breath. Dar had said stamina would come to her after a while, and she felt satisfied with the effort as she climbed up the steps and into the yard.

Stopping short at the tall, casual figure waiting there, silver hair outlined in the dawn light. Kerry sucked in a breath. "Morning, Kyle," she said warily.

"Well, well." Kyle pushed away from the post he'd been leaning on and walked over to her.

"Don't we look dewy." He chuckled. "Becoming the regular little athlete, aren't you?"

Kerry stared at him evenly. "I wouldn't say that."

"Wouldn't you?" Kyle inquired lazily, wiping a finger through the sweat on her cheek. "I don't know, you join a gym, start taking karate lessons. Now this, makes me wonder." His eyes raked her. "Not very ladylike."

"Ladies can be physically fit," Kerry commented softly. "And I don't think it's any of your concern, Kyle."

He studied her. "You'd be surprised at what's my concern, girl," he replied easily. "Especially when it has to do with my future niece. Got me?"

Kerry's green eyes narrowed. "I think you're overstepping your bounds, Kyle."

"And I think there's something going on with you that I don't like, and that your daddy won't like. It's going to be wonderful when I find out what that is, Cupcake." He chucked her under the chin.

"Go take a shower. You stink." He then turned and strolled off, trotting down the stairs and heading out towards the garage.

"Not nearly as badly as you do, asshole," Kerry enunciated sharply, under her breath. She turned and made her way up the stairs and into the back entrance, where she was spotted by Mary. "Oh. Morning, Mary."

"Ms. Kerry, g'morning." The middle-aged black woman nodded at her. "Were you out running? My goodness, it's too cold for that, you're gonna catch your death if you're not careful." Kerry ran her fingers through her hair. "It's okay, I got warmed up pretty fast." She smiled at the servant, who had been with their household since Kerry was a child. "Any chance of some muffins?"

Mary looked both ways, then leaned closer. "Well, you know, your mamma told us not to be giving you stuff like that, on account of her thinking it's bad for you. But I gotta say, Ms. Kerry, you're looking mighty healthy to me."

Kerry now looked both ways, then pulled off her sweatshirt and T-shirt, leaving her in her sports bra. She held out her hands. "Do I look like a muffin's gonna hurt me?"

Mary looked her up and down. "Mmm, mmm. No, ma'am, you don't. I'll be getting you that muffin. But, please, put those clothes back on before one of the gentlemen spots you."

"Thank you." Kerry smiled and pulled her shirt back on, waiting patiently while Mary disappeared, then reappeared with a small basket.

"Here you go, two hot blueberry muffins, and something to put on 'em. You go and enjoy yourself." She handed Kerry the basket and shooed her away.

The blonde woman grinned in triumph and ducked into the hallway, heading for the stairs and trotting up them as Mary watched her.

Elizabeth walked over and nudged her cohort. "What were you looking at?"

"Mmm, mmm, that girl sure grew up nice." Mary clucked her tongue. "She is the spawn of the devil pulling off her clothes like that in front of me--that was one pretty little navel."

"You old whore." Liz chuckled deep in her throat.

"Woman, please, I'd like to know who finally talked some sense into her. Damn good job it was, too." Mary shook her head. "Best thing she ever did was get out of this house."

"Hmm. Best for her if she never came back into it," Liz stated softly as she reached for the tablecloths to fold.

"DID YOU KNOW we could get this stuff twenty-four of twenty-four a day?" Gerald Easton pointed at the screen. "They keep telling me they got a cable channel for everything; now I believe it." They were watching the Military Channel, a station which showed earnest programs featuring the armed services. "Damnedest thing. Look at that, Dar, they're selling fatigues like it was the Home Shopping Network."

Dar stretched her legs out and crossed them, letting her head rest against the couches soft back.

"Makes money. Lots of civs collect and use that stuff. Jesus, eighty-eight bucks for a pair of reg boots?"

"Hmph." Easton sucked on his pipe and shook his head. "Modern crap. What in the hell is someone going to do with a case of MREs? I wouldn't feed those things to Alabaster. She'd bite me right in the, ah..."

"Leg," Dar supplied with a dry grin. "Well, we're between games, Gerry. It beats watching 'Pilgrims: Reevaluating the Conquest of America' again."

"Communists." The general snorted. "Fashionable nowadays to see history in the worst light possible."

Dar muffled a grin and looked up as Jack appeared in the doorway, hefting a football.

"You up for some catch, Dar?" The tall blond man grinned. "Weather cleared, figure we could work up an appetite outside."

"You bet." Dar pushed herself to her feet and followed him willingly outside, laughing as Alabaster plowed past them, anxious to escape the tiny teeth of her nine voracious puppies for a little while. She moved across the still damp lawn as the sun filtered down, and took a breath of the cold the wind swept down, pushing aside the little unease in her guts she'd had since mid-morning. *Baby, give it a rest, Dar. Just because Kerry didn't call you twice probably means everything's fine. She's out with her family, and maybe even having a good time.* "G'wan." Jack tossed her the football, which she caught one-handed, then examined. "Nice one," she complimented its owner, noting the scuffing of long use before she wrapped her fingers around the laces and tossed it back.

"So, how's things with the company?" Jack asked, throwing the ball back to her. "Still running the world behind the scenes?"

Dar caught it and whipped it back, putting a little more arm into the throw. "More or less. You win some, you lose some. It's been a pretty good year for us this year."

"Yow." Jack shook his hand as he caught the football. "Jesus, Dar, you can still put a sting on that thing, you know?"

"Sorry." Dar grinned.

"Yeah, right." Jack winged it back. "You ever regret doing that stuff?" he asked offhandedly. "I mean, you know, someone with your skills could make good bucks in the service."

Dar stopped in mid-throw, and put her hands on her hips, or rather, one hand and one football.

"Are you trying to recruit me?"

He stuck his hands in his pockets and looked up through boyish eyebrows. "Who, me?" He laughed sheepishly. "I don't know, Dar, you always fit into the military world. I was just wondering if you didn't sometimes think about coming back in."

Dar juggled the football then threw it back. "Too late for that," she told him. "I'm too used to giving orders, I'd never last a minute." It was, she knew, an honest admission. "I'd be telling some five-star to get his starched ass out of the way so I could get to a mainframe and end up scrubbing heads with a brillo pad."

Jack caught the ball and threw it back. "Just a thought," he commented. "Can't blame me for trying, can you?"

They played for a while longer, then switched to a new game, where one of them would take the ball and try to get past the other. "Tag or tackle?" Jack asked, playfully.

"Me and what bulldozer are going to tackle you?" Dar snorted.

"Chicken." He grinned.

Dar felt her competitive spirit surge. "All right, but don't say I didn't warn you." She grabbed the ball and took off running as he yelped and jumped after her.

"Shit, Dar! Not fair!" He ran faster, skidding past her as she dodged and jumped over a small hedge in the yard. He jumped the hedge after her, then there was only an open field in front of them. "Ah. I gotcha now."

"Think so, huh?" Dar leaned forward and sped up, lengthening her strides until she was running full out, hearing his determined steps behind her. "Man, you pilots spend too much time sitting on your butts," she yelled back as she powered between two tall trees at the end of the rolling field and slowed, letting him roar past her and skid to a halt in the wet grass. "Heh, my score."

"You...you..." Jack shook a finger at her. "Damn, Dar, for someone who spends all day behind a desk, you sure got a pair of legs on you."

She flipped him the ball. "Your turn."

He considered, then bolted away, tucking the ball under his arm with a professional air. Dar gave him a few steps grace, then she started after him, running at a slight angle to his path. She closed on him and waited for him to dodge away. She then changed her angle again and sped up, correctly predicting his next turn and hurling her body against his, wrapping her arms around him and letting her momentum and weight swing them both around. They landed in the grass with a thump.

"Shit." Jack sighed.

Dar released him and sat up, dusting the knees of her jeans off as she broke into a laugh.

Jack scowled, then he laughed too. "I should have remembered not to challenge you," he admitted. "You always had a way of coming out on top."

She was about to answer when the cell phone clipped to her belt chirped. She retrieved it and opened it up. "Yes?"

"Happy Thanksgiving," Kerry's voice sounded a touch strained, but otherwise warm.

"Same to you. How are things?" Dar stretched her legs out before her and plucked a grass stem, as Jack reclined on the grass, putting his hands behind his head and gazing up at the clouds.

"Okay." Kerry sighed. "Mom's been working on me all morning, trying to convince me of how much more appropriate it would be for me to come home now, so she has time to prepare for the wedding."

"Ah." Dar exhaled. "So you haven't broken the news to them yet, huh?" She kept her tone sympathetic. Alabaster trotted over and nuzzled her, and she petted the Labrador absently.

"Sounds like it's going to cause a big bang."

"Yeah," Kerry muttered into the phone. "What are you doing?"

Dar wiggled her sneakers. "Sitting in the grass, actually. I was just playing some catch with Jack," she admitted. "Getting some exercise in before we go inside and have Mamma Easton stuff us until we explode."

"Boom!" Jack mouthed, spreading his hands out in pantomime. Alabaster ambled over and nosed him.

"Wish I was there," Kerry admitted. "Sounds like a lot more fun than it is here. I'm going to run into town for a while with Angela, just to get away from all the nonsense. I took a look at the mail, by the way, and answered that one you sent and a few others."

"Good girl." Dar smiled. "Getting away sounds like a good idea. Maybe after today, they'll settle down a little."

"Maybe," Kerry replied, reluctantly. "Well, anyway, let me get going. Just wanted to say hi, and I hope you enjoy your dinner."

"You, too," Dar answered.

"Not likely," came the uncharacteristically pessimistic retort. "But I'll give it the old college try. Talk to you later, Dar."

Dar closed the phone thoughtfully and clipped it back onto her belt. *Damn, she sounds depressed.* "Families can be such hell," she commented audibly.

"Hmm?" Jack turned his head. "Oh, yeah, I guess. Was that your office?"

"No, my assistant. She's home and having a tough time with her folks."

Slowly, Jack rolled over, and propped his head up on one hand. "Dar, I..." He fell silent, then plucked a stem of grass, not looking at her. "I need some advice."

Dar drew up one knee and circled it with an arm. "Sure."

He hesitated. "Have you...ever had to tell someone...I mean, someone you really cared about, something you knew was going to hurt them and make them feel...disappointed in you?"

Uh oh. Dar considered carefully before she answered. "Yes, I have. Why?"

He looked up, his blue eyes meeting Dar's. "Was it hard?"

She nodded. "Very."

He looked back at the ground. "Do you think, sometimes, it's better not to tell?"

"Well." Dar sighed. "It depends on what it is, and who the other person is. An elderly grandmother, for instance, you don't want to go telling that her long-dead husband was actually a swindler. It serves no purpose." He nodded. "But important things, Jack, they have a way of coming out anyway." The hypocrisy of what she was saying hit her, and she winced in reflex.

"Funny you should put it that way," he replied softly.

Her eyes fastened on his bent head, an eyebrow edging up. "You wanna tell me what's going on? You know I can keep my mouth shut."

He swallowed and nervously fingered the grass. "Dar, you've known me since I was in short pants." He exhaled. "We grew up together. Did I ever seem...not normal to you?"

Dar let out a snort of laughter. "Jack, you're the most normal person I know. You're a stereotype for a Navy brat, and you know it."

Jack nodded. "That's what I thought. That's what I always thought, until last May." He fell silent for a long moment. "I got a new back seat."

It took Dar a minute to realize he was talking about his flying partner, and not a car part. "Yeah?" she prodded cautiously.

"Robbie, yeah. Robin Hood, we call him." Jack seemed intently interested in examining the grass stalks. "We, um...we hit it off real good, you know? Sometimes you do, and sometimes you don't. I've had some back seats I couldn't hardly stand to talk to, and some that are my buddies even now."

"Uh huh," Dar murmured. "Nice guy, huh?"

"Yeah." Jack sighed. "We started hanging around together, and I, um, I... It's never happened to me before, but...I kept wanting to...to touch him."

Dar's eyes closed briefly, and she shifted, biting her lip. "Yeah, and?" She kept her voice interested, but unalarmed.

"And, at first, I thought I was just...I thought I was sick, okay? I hadn't had a girlfriend in a while, and... Well, you know." He looked miserable. "And I-I...I just told myself that I should go into a corner, and...and..."

"I know," Dar replied softly. "So what happened?"

He ripped a few blades of grass up. "I was coming back from the shower, and...and he came into my quarters, and he, um, he..." He fell silent again.

"He touched you?" Dar guessed, and got a tiny nod. "And you liked that." Another tiny nod. "All right."

Finally, Jack looked up, fearfully peeking into her blue eyes. "You don't think that's sick?"

Dar reached out and put a hand over his. "That would be incredibly hypocritical of me."

Dead silence. Jack blinked at her. "Bu..." His brows knit. "You?"

Blue eyes met his evenly. "Do you think that's sick?"

"Dar, that's insane. You could have any guy you wanted. I don't...I mean...you're gorgeous. I..."

He spluttered, winding down.

Dar waited. Finally she sighed. "No, I don't think it's sick, and you shouldn't either."

He thought about that. "We were both kind of...we were pretty weirded out." He sighed. "But after a while, it just seemed okay." He paused. "Until I thought about telling my father."

Dar exhaled. "Yeah."

"Dar, it would kill him." Jack looked up at her. "I'm his only son. He wants grandkids. Jesus, he's given me everything, done everything in his power for me. I..." His blond head shook back and forth. "I can't do that to him. I love him too much."

What a problem. Dar felt for both her friend and for Gerald Easton. Who, certainly, would be devastated at the news. She didn't really blame Gerald; he was a prisoner to his generation, his upbringing, and his lifelong devotion to the service. "Tell you what, just put it aside for a few days. Let me think about it. Maybe I can come up with an idea," she told him sympathetically. He looked up at her pathetically. "If you can find a way out of this for me with honor, I'll owe you for the rest of my life, Dar."

She ruffled his hair gently. "That's what friends are for, Jack, and I don't have many, so I take care of the ones I do have." She gazed at him. "You know, I told your father if I was going to marry anyone, it'd be you." He blushed a deep, fierce red. "You know..." she kidded him gently. "Worst comes to worst I'll bear you a grandkid for your dad." He turned a color so dark, his eyebrows stood out in stark whiteness. She ruffled his hair and chuckled again.

KERRY CLOSED THE phone and went to find Angela. "You ready?" she asked her sister, finding her in the living room.

"Mmm-hmm, let me just get my bag. Hang on." Angela nodded, leaving the room and returning a moment later. "Let's go. They're having a choir recital at the downtown church, I thought maybe you'd like to hear it."

Anything. "Sure," Kerry agreed readily, following her out the door. They got in Angela's car and drove onto the parkway, passing endless rows of tall, thin, bare trees. "This place is depressing, Angie," Kerry said softly.

Her sister eyed her. "You're just now noticing that?"

"Guess I never had a contrast before. You have to come visit me sometimes in Miami," Kerry responded. "It's so different. I could take you out to Bayside, or the Grove, maybe down into the Keys. I think you'd like it."

Angela sighed. "Maybe if Brian and I end up running away from home, we'll end up down by you," she told her sister wryly. "Is there a market for earnest lawyers down there?"

Kerry gazed at her a long time. "Have you talked about that, or are you just razzing me?" she asked. "Of course there's a market for lawyers, are you kidding? He could make a living alone just representing one of our politicians on voter-fraud charges."

Her sister exhaled. "We talked about it," she admitted. "A lot had to do with how you...I mean, you know."

"Reacted to the news?" Kerry smiled.

"Mmm, more or less, yeah. I don't know, it's such a huge step, but if I try to separate or divorce Richard legally, you know I'll never get out of here." She navigated an interchange. "You know he'll demand custody, and you know Father will just go crazy."

"Yeah," Kerry acknowledged softly. "I don't know, that seems really drastic, Angie. But I won't lie to you and tell you I wouldn't be glad to have you down there." She smiled at her sister. "In fact, I know a nice apartment in Kendall that might be available sometime soon."

Angela darted a look at her. "Oh, really?" She signaled and turned off the expressway, heading into town. Low, brown brick buildings began to travel by on either side of the road. "That's moving kind of fast, isn't it?"

Kerry leaned back and braced a knee against the dashboard. "It was just something Dar said, before I left. She said next year we'd have Thanksgiving on the Island. It surprised me, because she's someone who really values her privacy, you know?" She exhaled. "But when we're together, it's like there's no...personal space, if that makes sense. She doesn't get on my nerves or make me uncomfortable to be around, and I don't make her that way, I don't think." She paused reflectively. "I know that when I woke up this past Sunday, I realized I wanted to wake up with her next to me for a long time to come."

Angela slowed to turn into the church. "Well, don't take things too quickly. I know you guys really like each other, but that's a big step, Ker."

Kerry laughed gently. "I have to wait for her to ask, you know? It could take months, and I was trying to figure out how she'd do it. Probably really matter-of-fact... 'You know, Kerry, it would be more cost efficient to use one car to go to work, and my place is closer. What about it?' "

Angela laughed. "Really?"

"Oh yeah, that's Dar--no flowery speech or anything. She's very practical and straightforward," Kerry assured her, then paused. "Though I did come back from lunch to find a rose on my desk once," she amended thoughtfully.

Angela parked the car and sighed. "Sounds pretty darn romantic to me, Sis," she commented wistfully. They got out and walked across the parking lot, joining several groups of other people heading for the church's entrance.

It was a tall, brick building with inset stained glass windows and mahogany pews burnished to a rich glow. Kerry joined Angela in greeting several long-time neighbors, and took some good-natured kidding about her suntan before they seated themselves to listen to the choir. The room featured a huge organ and a triple semi-circle of singers, who delivered a more than creditable performance of some old and well-known hymns. Kerry felt the familiar sounds relaxing her, and she was able, for a few minutes, to forget her surroundings and simply enjoy the music.

"Nice recital," Kerry murmured as it ended, the last booming tones of the organ echoing softly against the building's interior. "I liked that last piece a lot."

Her sister smiled. "Me, too. C'mon, let's go talk to Pastor Robert." She edged out of the row and headed back towards the administrative part of the church, waving a little at several friends who waved back and called out greetings to both her and Kerry. She led Kerry to a small door and knocked on it.

"Come in," a soft, vibrant voice answered.

Angela pushed the door open and poked her head in. "Pastor Robert?"

"Angela. What a nice surprise, come in." The pastor waved at her.

She opened the door fully and pulled Kerry in with her. "Look who I brought."

The pastor stood. "Kerrison!" He smiled at her.

Kerry moved forward, smiling back. Pastor Robert was a huge bear of a man, easily six and a half feet tall and perhaps two hundred and fifty pounds. His bearded face took on a look of delight as she came closer. "Hello, Pastor Robert."

"Kerrison, goodness, let me look at you." He took her by the shoulders and beamed at her. "You look wonderful. I can hardly believe it."

Kerry smiled. "Thanks, you look great, too." She patted his arm.

"Um, I'm going to get some recipes Mrs. Van Ardyn owes me. I'll be right back, Ker." Angela was gone before she could even turn around, and she spared her sister a wry roll of the eyes.

"Sit down, sit down," the pastor was saying, motioning her to a bench next to the one he'd been sitting on, arranging sheets of music. "Are you home then for good?"

"Just for a visit." Kerry shook her head. "I'm...very happy down in Miami."

"Oh." He seemed surprised. "But I thought your mother...well, never mind." He sat down and patted her knee. "How are you doing?"

"I'm doing fine. I got a new job, that I really like, and a whole group of really good friends. It's been great," Kerry answered quietly. "How about you?"

He lifted a large hand and let it drop. "As always, the seasons turn, it gets colder, gets warmer, but it's my favorite time of the year, so I can't complain." He sighed and leaned back. "Things are good in the congregation--prices are steady; we're not at war. All in all, not bad."

Kerry regarded him. "That's good to hear." She hesitated, then searched his eyes. "Pastor, can I ask you something?"

He nodded. "Yes, of course. Are you having trouble finding a community down there? Can I help? You know you've always been one of my favorite people, Kerry."

She settled her elbows on her knees and interlaced her fingers. "I remember when you used to preach on Sundays, every once in a while you'd talk about...um, something you called soulmates." The word rolled around her tongue in utter familiarity.

"Yes. In fact, I discussed it at pulpit just last week," he agreed. "The old fable of each person being born with two heads, and four arms and legs, then being split in two to roam the world ever after looking for the other half."

"Mmm, yeah." Kerry rubbed her thumbs together. "Do you believe in that story?"

He paused a moment before answering. "Yes, I do. If what you mean is, do I believe in that special kind of love in which two people seemed to be destined to be a part of each other, yes. Not that I'm rewriting the creation history, you understand."

Kerry smiled wryly. "I understand." She patted his arm. "But, how do you know if you've been lucky enough to find someone like that?" she asked.

He reached over and tipped her chin up, gazing into her eyes somberly. "Because when you look at them, you see everything you need in this world to complete yourself."

Kerry closed her eyes. "Oh," she uttered softly.

"Have you found someone like that, Kerrison?" His voice was very gentle.

She opened her eyes. "Yes, I think I have." She exhaled. "It's someone I met not too long ago, but who I've become very close to. And it's like you said, when I look at them, it's like I feel their hands closing very gently over my heart." She paused. "Holding it safely."

"I never knew you for a poet, child." A slow, sweet smile crossed his face. "But it's not my friend Brian, is it?"

"No," Kerry replied softly. "He's one of my best friends, and I love him, but...no."

Pastor Robert blew a long breath out. "And you haven't told your parents, I take it? No, of course you haven't. Your mother still thinks... Ah, what a web of tangles we have here." He pondered.

"Well, perhaps you should consider explaining as you have to me. I'm sure your parents, once they get to know this person, will be happy for you."

Kerry shook her head sadly. "No, Pastor Robert, they won't. They won't accept this person." She looked down again. "Except for my sister, I'm not close with my family, but this will put something between us I don't think any amount of time will heal."

He sighed. "God has a way of healing even the worst of wounds, my friend. How bad can this person be, that they would give up a daughter?"

Kerry hesitated, then took a deep breath. "She's not a bad person at all," she stated simply and let the comment fall between them.

He went quite still for a few breaths, then reached up and tugged on his beard. "Ah." His voice was quietly reflective. "That's a toughie."

Kerry found herself smiling in reaction. "You have any advice? I'm willing to listen--half of me wants to just get it over with, and the other half is scared to death to even start."

"Hmm." He cocked his head. "Well, it's the coward's way out, I suppose, but what I'd do is wait until you're ready to leave to go...home." He smiled at her. "And just tell them then, just a flat statement, and then leave. Get someone else to take you to the airport and just go." He clasped her hand. "The holidays are a very emotional time; it's hard for people to cope with situations while they're under that kind of stress. Especially on Thanksgiving, which is so family oriented." She considered that. "You know, that's good advice," she admitted. "Just play along until then, it'll make the weekend a lot more pleasant."

He nodded. "That's what I did," he told her softly, then put a finger up to his lips.

How had Angela known? Kerry blinked at him in mild shock. "Oh." She got a pat on the cheek.

"I see." Her eyes darted around the room. "But...you..."

"Yes, and if they knew, I'd be out of a job," Robert said quietly. "So I know what it is to live with a secret, Kerry, but there are things in life worth risking that for." He paused. "A soulmate is one of them."

Kerry slowly nodded. "It's worth risking everything for." She let out a breath. "Thank you, Pastor Robert."

He gazed at her fondly. "I wish you all the joy in the world, my friend. I'll pray for you, and for your parents' understanding." He stood and waited for her to stand as well, then hugged her. "Be well."

She smiled and patted his side. "You, too." A knock at the door made her look up, and it pushed open to reveal Angela's face. "C'mon in."

"Silvia Cessnes wants to know if we want to sit down and have coffee with them. You up for it?" Angela asked.

"Yeah, that would be nice," Kerry agreed. Silvia Cessnes was one of her favorite high school teachers. "Happy Thanksgiving, Pastor Robert."

"Same to you, Kerry...and you too, Angela. Thanks for stopping by." He led her to the door and waved at them before closing it at Kerry's back.

"Everything okay?" Angela asked in a whisper.

Kerry smiled. "Everything's great. Come on, I bet they have fresh Linzer tortes at the coffee shop." She tugged on Angela's sleeve and led her down the corridor.

Never seeing the tall, dark form that watched her go, then walked off in the opposite direction.

"WASN'T SHE A trip?" Kerry laughed as she and Angela climbed up the stairs to the room they'd shared the previous night. "She hasn't changed a bit." She pushed the door open and walked inside, then stopped. It wasn't obviously messy, but someone had been going through her things.

Angela stopped too, seeing the papers strewn around Kerry's laptop case. "What's going on?"

Kerry's heart hammered in her chest, and she walked over, looking inside the zipped compartment with shaking fingers. "Oh shit."

"What?" Her sister peered over her shoulder anxiously.

"The pictures," she breathed. "How could I have been so stupid?" In pure reflex, she reached for her cell phone, then stopped. *What am I going to call and tell her, how dumb I was?* "Shit."

Angela blew out a breath. "Man, I can't believe they came in here and rifled through your stuff. Kerry, that's disgusting."

"I should have remembered. It was standard operating procedure when we were in high school, remember? Looking for god knows what." Kerry pushed her hair back and tried to think. Were the pictures that incriminating? A few of the island, pretty innocuous. The boat, also could be anywhere. The two of Dar in her suit... *Well...* Then she sighed. And the last one, which she'd had Colleen take of them together in her apartment on the couch. Dar's arm was draped over her shoulders and Kerry's left leg was slung over the taller woman's knees. Both of them were smiling, Dar's eyes on her in unmistakable affection that even the camera had caught. *Oh shit.*

"What are you going to do?" Angela murmured. "He's going to go insane, you know that."

"I know," Kerry murmured. "I guess I'll just have to be honest. But Angie, I might need to get out of here."

"I'll take you, don't worry," her sister replied instantly. "And Brian will be here in a little while, too." She rubbed Kerry's back gently. "I'm sorry, I didn't think about them doing this."

Kerry closed her eyes. "Me, either, and I should have--I know better, especially after what happened the other day." She turned around and leaned on the desk. "My place got broken into, turned upside down and searched, and someone poisoned my fish."

Angela stared at her in shock. "You don't think..."

"Kyle visited, coincidentally, the next day," Kerry replied shortly. "Dar was there. She was going to keep out of sight, but he started...pawing at me, and she..." A pause. "She stopped him."

Angela digested this. "Kyle can be really scary. Brian thinks he's half nuts or something, ever since that military thing."

"Dar can be scary, too," Kerry responded. "She's as tall as he is, and she doesn't look like someone you want to mess around with too much." She considered. "She probably kicked him right in the ego."

"He'd try to get back at her for that," Angela said softly. "He's really smart, Ker, and he's got a lot of tricks up his sleeve. I bet he's the one who went through your stuff."

Kerry stood there breathing a moment, then she flipped open her cell phone and punched a button. "Hey," she said quietly when Dar answered.

"Hey." Dar sounded surprised. "Didn't expect to hear from you again so soon, not that I mind. What's up?"

"I'm an idiot," Kerry admitted softly. "I did something very stupid. Dar, I left those pictures I'd taken in my laptop case, and someone went through my stuff here and found them."

"Ah." The executive's voice sounded thoughtful. "So the cat's out, eh? Well, I hope they like my suit."

Kerry paused, feeling a calming wave pass over her. "You don't think I'm a total fool?"

Dar hesitated. "Why'd you bring the pictures?" she asked quietly.

"Um..." Kerry blushed. "To show you off to my sister."

A soft chuckle warmed her. "And I'm supposed to think that's foolish? Nah, bad luck, but...keep your head together, and if they've got questions, just answer them. Don't let them rattle you."

"All right." Kerry squared her shoulders a little. "Thanks, Dar."

"Let me know what happens, okay?" her friend urged gently.

"Yeah, I will," Kerry reassured her. "Bye." She closed the phone and tucked in onto her belt.

"Dar says, just stay cool and see what happens."

Angela put an arm around her. "She sounds like a good friend, on top of everything else."

Kerry nodded absently. "She is. I know I can count on her." She carefully put her things away.

"Okay, let's change and go downstairs. The rest of the family should be arriving, that should give me a grace period over dinner, at least." She unbuttoned the soft flannel green shirt she'd worn to town and tugged it from her jeans, pulling off the shirt and folding it neatly before she tucked it inside her bag. "I could just make them explode by wearing jeans to dinner, I guess."

Angela removed a beige, pleated skirt and a long-sleeved shirt from her own bag, along with a pearl-embroidered pink wool sweater. "Kerry."

She smiled. "Just kidding." Her jeans followed the shirt into the bag, and she removed the blue-green skirt and jacket outfit Dar had picked out for her in Macy's. The silk blouse followed, and she pulled out her good shoes. "There, they can't complain about that."

"Wow," Angela commented as she changed into it. "That's very nice, Ker."

Her sister tucked the silk blouse into her skirt neatly and zipped it, then settled her jacket over her shoulders. "Thanks, it's one of the new ones I got for work when I changed jobs. I really like it."

Angela finished changing and walked over, brushing a speck of dust from Kerry's lapel and straightening the sleeves a little. "Nice pin."

Green eyes glanced down, then back up. "A gift, though I didn't know it at the time. Dar picked this one out as a favor--she was along so I'd know what kind of stuff to wear to the office." She grabbed her brush and set to work on her wind-blown hair, arranging it to her satisfaction, then removing a small bottle from her bag and putting on a touch of perfume.

"Mmm, what is that?" Arlene sniffed.

"Polo," Kerry answered absently.

"I like it," her sister approved. "C'mon, let's go downstairs."

Kerry gazed at herself in the mirror, the soft lamplight in the room highlighting her pale hair and making her green eyes glitter. "All right, let's go."

They walked down the stairs together, hearing a low murmur of voices in the hall, and stepped out onto the landing, heading for the dining room. Eyes turned as they approached, and Kerry felt her back stiffen as she spotted her father's face, set and angry, where he was standing next to Kyle. She lifted her chin and turned her attention instead to her other relatives, as her aunts and uncles bore down on her. Across the room, she spotted a very nervous-looking Brian, and she managed to catch his eye and smile at him, winking lightly. He visibly relaxed.

"Why, Kerrison, don't you look lovely." Her Aunt Agatha tottered over. "What a charming color on you, my dear. You look so grown up!"

"I'm twenty-seven," Kerry told her kindly. "I thought it was about time."

"Oh, aren't you clever." The old woman patted her arm. "Eustace, look at how wonderful our niece looks." She peered over Kerry's shoulder. "Honey, your daughter looks just great."

Kerry turned to see her mother bearing down on them. She paused and eyed Kerry, then gave a grudging nod of approval at her daughter's appearance. "Well, she knows how to make an appearance, of course," the older woman stated loftily. "Dear, your Uncle Milton desperately wants to say hello to you."

"Sure," Kerry replied. "Where is...oh, right. I see him." Her uncle towered above the rest of the crowd by a good six inches. "Okay, I'll go over." She started towards him but stopped when her mother pulled her aside a little and looked her over.

"You do look very nice, Kerrison," she finally admitted, pulling at a tendril of Kerry's pale hair. Kerry let her smile touch her eyes. "Thanks...Mom, I really like the way I look, and everyone else does, too. So can you lay off on the criticism?"

Her mother stiffened "I wasn't..."

"I'm over it," Kerry said very softly.

Her mother stared at her, totally at a loss. "Well, I never." She shook her head and turned, moving away from Kerry with a bewildered look.

"Jesus, I'd have to apply for a credit card just to order her a clue." Kerry sighed as she resumed her walk towards her uncle.

She was intercepted by Brian, who approached her tentatively, then more confidently as she waved him forward. He was a tall man with sandy hair and a loosely knit way of walking, large, powerful hands, and a handsome, boyish face. "Hello, Bri." She pulled him into a hug, hearing him suck in a breath. "It's okay," she whispered. "Really okay."

He relaxed and allowed his arms to circle her, giving her back a hug "Kerriboo, I'm sorry." His voice was very soft. "I should have called you, I..."

"Shhh." Kerry patted his back. "It's okay, don't worry about it, I'm fine. It worked out better this way, honest." They broke apart, arms still loosely linked about each other. "You're still one of my best friends, okay?"

He smiled and touched his forehead to hers, while aunts and uncles cooed around them. "Aren't they cute?"

Green eyes and gray ones met and rolled together. "C'mon, if I have to run the gauntlet, you should at least be with me," Kerry whispered, taking him by the arm and starting across the floor. It was a long dinner, around the huge table, in the formal dining room. Kerry found herself seated between a gaggle of her older relatives, with Brian down the table somewhat and her sister at the other end. Her father and Kyle, fortunately, were also at the other end. She kept her table-mates entertained with stories about Miami and the customs there until the dinner was over, and they were all standing up, ready to move into the living room for drinks and conversation. Maybe she'd get lucky, Kerry mused, and they'd leave it for tomorrow; in front of all the family would be a bad move. She allowed herself to be dragged into several conversations, and before she knew it, the clock was ringing the midnight chimes, and the guests were starting to leave. She stood and got Angela's attention, then made her goodnights and headed for the stairs.

"Kerrison." Her father's voice.

Kerry exhaled, taking a moment to compose herself before she turned around. "Yes?"

He was standing in the doorway, face very grim. "I need to see you in my study, now."

Oh well, wishful thinking. Kerry ran a hand through her hair and gathered up her courage. "All right," she replied, and walked towards the study door.

She opened it and passed through. Kyle was in there, perched on her father's broad desk with a smirk on his face. She heard the door close firmly behind her, and Kerry knew, as a shudder passed through her guts, that she was in trouble.

Her father walked past her and went behind his desk, then pushed a very familiar file folder across it towards her. "I'd like you to explain this."

Kerry remained silent while she pondered her options. Well, conciliation wasn't going to do any good, so... "Only if you can explain why you feel it necessary to search my personal belongings," she responded quietly, putting her hands on the back of the chair before the desk and gazing evenly at him.

"Don't smart-mouth me, girl," her father warned.

"I'm not, but I am an adult, and I have the right to carry around whatever things I want to in my briefcase, Dad." She kept her voice reasonable. "And not have to worry that people inside my own parents' house are ransacking them." Her temper was building, though. She could feel it. He thumbed through the pictures, then looked up. "You know what I think? I think I know the reason you all of a sudden decided you wanted to stay down in that hell-hole." Kerry remained silent. "I think it has nothing to do with your damn little job and everything to do with that bitch you work for." He slammed his fist down on the table. "What did she do to you, Kerry? Minute movements of her eyes as she studied him. "Nothing."

"Nothing? You call this nothing?" He picked up the folder and threw it at her, scattering colorful photographs over the carpet. "I'll have the law on her! It's obvious to me what's going on, Kerry. In fact, I can't believe you didn't tell me!" He paced back and forth. "Didn't you think I could help you?"

Kerry's brows knit. "Just what is it...you think she did?" she asked, honestly puzzled.

"Forced you into that job, of course! Her reputation... Well, I can't say that in front of you, but it's obvious what she's after...my god, girl!" He threw up his hands. "First thing we have to do is get you out of there, then I'll file a formal protest. Don't you worry, girl, she won't be able to come after you."

"Whoa!" Kerry held up a hand. "Let me get this straight, you think Dar's trying to seduce me?" Her father reddened. "Watch your language, young lady." He cleared his throat. "Isn't it obvious?"

Kerry exhaled. "No, Dad, she's not trying to seduce me, and she didn't force me into that position, either. It was my choice."

"Stop trying to protect her!" Senator Stuart barked. "It's no good, Kerry, unless you can give me another *reasonable* explanation of those pictures!"

Long silence. "All right," Kerry finally said, very quietly. "It's a lot simpler than you think. We're in love with each other."

She could hear the carpet fibers unraveling in the deathly stillness that followed her words. The building creaked around them, and she became very aware of her own breathing. She had not, in the furthest stretches of her imagination, considered this conversation going in quite this way.

"What?" her father finally said, stepping around his desk and facing her.

Kerry felt curiously calm. "Dar's a very special person, and we're in love with each other," she repeated. "And she didn't force me into..."

The impact slammed her against the filing cabinet next to the desk as her father slapped her hard across the cheek.

"Don't you dare say that." His voice was a hiss. "No daughter of mine is one of those." Kerry straightened up and put a hand to her cheek, staring at him. "You are going to resign from that godless company, and I'll have your apartment packed up and brought home," he enunciated softly. "And we're not going to hear you say anything like that ever again, are we?"

Kerry could hear her own heartbeat thundering in her ears as she came to a personal crossroads. She stared at him for a long moment, breathing hard, then took a final deeper breath. "Go to hell." She spat the words in his face. "I'd rather live homeless than come back here."

He started forward, but she backed up and put the chair between them, so intent on his progress that she forgot there was another person in the room. Until a hand slipped over her neck and something foul and sharp-smelling was pressed to her nose and mouth. She struggled wildly, but the grip was too strong, and her body made her breathe through the stink.

A numb feeling came over her, and a growing darkness, and a chilling cold.

Chapter Thirty-One

DAR WOKE IN a sweat, half rolling out of bed in total disorientation as her senses tried to force the unfamiliar surroundings into some semblance of order. Her heart was pounding, and she was breathing hard, and she gripped the edge of the bed with shaking fingers. "Jesus." She looked around in confusion, seeing only the peaceful moonlight streaming in the double hung window of the Eastons' guest room.

"What in the hell was that?" she murmured, running her fingers through her hair and swallowing against the upset in her stomach. "Too much stuffing, I think," she ruefully concluded, realizing it must have been a bad dream brought on by shameless overindulgence in just about everything that night.

Slowly, she straightened up and let out a breath, now wide awake and knowing she'd be unlikely to drop back off to sleep anytime soon. "Guess I could read a book," she muttered. "Except I don't have any, and the only thing I saw downstairs was Jane's *Military Hardware*, and I've already read that."

Sighing, she stood and walked to the small antique writing desk that was settled against the window and sat down, unzipping her briefcase and pulling out her laptop as she gazed out across the silver and sable landscape. She booted the machine and sat drumming her fingers until it came up, then she plugged in the modem line and requested a network connection. "Might as well check the mail, see if there are any crises going on," she murmured to herself, glancing at the time on the laptop. Only just past midnight; she'd only been sleeping for about a half an hour, since the Eastons held to the early to bed, early to rise military tradition, and she hadn't minded since she'd been up since very early to catch her 6:00 AM flight.

The machine connected and started to download her mail, and she watched it idly, scanning the headers. Then she noticed the blinking box in the corner, and her brows creased. One of her running bots? Puzzled, she clicked on it, and watched the box expand.

Database Access Request--Scan Match--String "Stuart, Kerry" Medical Benefits Card usage
00:23 112798 Admitted Bryan's Counseling Center Ident 999823

Dar's heart started pounding again, and she suddenly felt lightheaded. With shaking fingers, she did a search for Bryan's, and found them in the client database. She pulled up their profile.

Bryan's Counseling Center Account A0022323

A psychiatric research and treatment center designed to evaluate short and long term mental illnesses and provide strategies for adjustment of deviant behaviors to assist patients in rejoining the societal norm.

A counseling center? Dar stared at the screen in puzzlement. *Why in the hell would Kerry have gone there? Was it a mistake? Or could she have been in an accident, and maybe it was the closest...* She reread the description. "Deviant behaviors," she mouthed silently to herself. "Oh no." Her eyes jerked to the window, and her breathing sped up.

"Oh my god." Dar breathed. "Those sons of bitches." Slowly, she put her hands down on the writing table and closed her eyes, forcing herself to be calm. "Okay, think." Brain first, heart second, wasn't that what she'd always said?

Bloody hell! Doesn't count when you're in love, now does it? "Son of a fucking bitch!"

First thing, she needed to get to Michigan. With that decided, she shut the computer down and put it away, then quietly changed into her clothes, and packed her bag up. Then she went down the hall and into Jack's room, where her friend was sprawled across his bed in an orgy of slumber.

"Jack." She knelt and touched his shoulder, getting an almost instant fluttering of pale eyelashes. "Wake up."

"Wh...uh..." Jack rolled onto one side and peered at her. "Dar? What's going on?"

"Listen, I have a friend in a lot of trouble. I need to get out to Michigan. Can you drive me to the airport?"

He blinked at her. "There aren't any planes this late, Dar."

"I'll rent one," the executive told him in utter seriousness. "But it's gotta be quick, speed counts."

"Wh..." Jack nibbled his lip. "Speed counts, huh?" He rubbed his face. "How does Mach Two strike you?"

It was Dar's turn to blink. "What?"

"C'mon. The base is closer than the damn airport, and my cat's just sitting there collecting dust. I'll take you."

"Jack, you can't just do that," Dar said softly. "Not that I don't appreciate the offer, but it's not worth risking your ass, not to mention your career. I'm not living with you stuck in a Navy brig for twenty years. I just need a ride to the damn airport!"

He laughed. "Dar, you're worth risking my ass for, but it's not in any danger." He stood up and tugged his flannel pajama bottoms up.

"I'll just get Dad to approve it, gimme a minute." He trotted off down the hall, leaving slightly stunned eyes following him. "Those stars come in handy, y'know."

"Got troubles, then, do we?" General Easton's rumble traveled down the hall, followed by the General himself. "Problems, Dar?"

"Friend in trouble," Dar replied quietly. "Someone who means a lot to me."

Easton's eyes studied her intently. "Good enough." He picked up the phone in Jack's room. "Get dressed, son. You can't be driving that damn plane in your jammies." He motioned Dar to turn towards him. "Look this way, Dar, Mister Prude there is afraid to go to half-staff in front of you." If Dar hadn't been so worried, she would have laughed, but she faced towards him and heard Jack curse as he got tangled up in his shorts.

"Who's this? ... Right, this is General Easton, from the Joint Chiefs." Easton waited a few seconds. "No time for all that nonsense, son, just listen. I have a pilot coming down to file a flight plan from here to..." He thought a minute. "No, Wurtsmith is too far, Kent County would probably be your best bet."

"That's civ," Jack muttered, pulling a shirt over his head.

"It's after midnight up there, won't matter," his father covered the receiver and whispered back. "Kent County, and I'll need a liaison up there with a car for him." He paused, listening. "That's right, good man." He hung up. "Right, all set."

Dar regarded him quietly. "I owe you one, Gerry. I owe you both."

A faint smile crossed the older man's face. "Consider it payment for a long-gone debt, my friend." He shook his head a bit. "Someday we'll have to have a beer and I'll tell you about it."

Dar nodded. "All right." She turned to see Jack slipping into his leather jacket. "Ready?"

He ran a hand through his stubble. "My hair look okay?" His eyes twinkled gently.

"Like a short carpet." Dar exhaled. "Let's go."

Chapter Thirty-Two

KERRY WAS CHIEFLY aware, first, of a pounding headache. She kept her eyes closed and let the throbbing, in time with her heartbeat, subside a little before she let her lids drift up. She was lying down, in a railed hospital bed, in a stark, forbidding white room. "Oh my god." She

breathed faintly, letting her eyes roam around. It was small, with one door on the outside wall and another on the inside, bare concrete walls and polished tile floors. The one small window to her right had bars on it and was curtained.

The bed she was on was utilitarian, but she noticed a full set of restraint straps, which were, as yet, unfastened, their mute threat sending a pulse of fear through her. Slowly, she got up and slid her feet over the edge of the bed, letting herself down on the cold tile that stung her bare feet. Her clothes had been taken, and she'd been left in a thin cotton hospital gown, which she tugged around her as she padded over to the door and tried the handle.

Locked.

She wandered over to the window and peered out, pushing the curtain aside to see a bleak landscape of dead trees which surrounded the building. "Oh my god, I can't believe he did this." She had no idea where she was. She had no way of contacting anyone. Her eyes glanced down and noted they'd taken her watch as well, making her unable to distinguish what time it was. It could have been minutes she was lying there, it could have been hours. She walked over and leaned her elbows on the bed. "You're in a lot of trouble, Kerry," she murmured. "You should have just stayed in Miami and had turkey roll."

How long would they keep her here? Long enough to make the company think she'd abandoned her job? *Sure*. Long enough to where Dar, not hearing from her, would start to question whether she'd just...changed her mind?

No. Surely Dar would know there was something wrong. Even if she had changed her mind, she wouldn't do it without at the very least, telling her boss in person. Dar knew that.

Didn't she?

It was Dar's one weak spot, and she knew it--that one vulnerability only fleetingly alluded to, but which had struck her hard, and which haunted her even at their parting, when the taller woman had given her a hug, and said, "See you Monday, right?"

She would never abandon Dar. She knew that. But she realized that at some deep level, it was hard for Dar herself to believe it, and that made this one facet of her lover very, very fragile. "I have to get out of here." Kerry drummed her fingers on the bed.

The tiny shutter in the door shot open, and eyes peered through, then the door opened and admitted what appeared to be a nurse in white scrubs. The woman carried a clipboard and several small cups. "Well, good, I'm glad you're awake."

Kerry decided on the calm approach. "Where am I?"

The nurse made several marks on the clipboard before she answered. "You're in a hospital, dear, but don't worry, you're going to be fine."

She digested this. "Well, I sort of figured, given the wardrobe, but which hospital is it?"

A slight pause. "Bryan's."

Kerry nodded, her heart sinking. "Hmm. That explains the bars." She paused. "What time is it?"

"Now, don't you worry about that, honey. We just have some people in here sometimes who aren't very happy, and we have to protect them, that's all," the woman reassured her. "And it's three thirty AM."

Three hours. "So, why am I here?" Kerry asked, in a reasonable tone. "The last time I considered killing myself is when I forgot to tape *X-files*."

The nurse looked at her uncertainly, then she laughed. "Oh, I see. Yes, that's very funny. Well, your family brought you in because of the problems you've been having, and we're just going to work with you to make you all better."

Kerry leaned on her elbows. "What problems am I supposed to be having?" she inquired.

"I'm sure you know that better than I do, dear." The nurse smiled at her. "But the doctor will be in to see you in the morning. And in the meantime, I'd like you to take these pills for me, okay?"

"What are they?"

The nurse sighed, obviously getting impatient. "They're just a little sedative, to let you rest until the morning."

"A sedative. Well, you know, I'm really pretty calm here, I don't think I'll be needing that," Kerry objected. "I usually sleep just fine."

The nurse walked over and faced her. "Look, I know you think you're being very clever, but you just listen to me, all right? Your father gave us some pretty strict instructions, and we are going to follow them. Now, you can do what I ask, or I can have two of the orderlies come in here, tie you down, and give it to you intravenously." She paused, her eyes cool. "Your choice."

Kerry gazed at her. "What you're doing is against the law, you do realize that, right?" she commented. "I did not agree to this, and there is nothing wrong with me."

"Do yourself a favor, honey." The nurse's voice was now sharp.

"Cooperate. You don't know what you're getting into here."

Kerry smiled. "Actually, it's you who doesn't know what you're getting into here."

The nurse's eyes narrowed. "I can see what your father's point was."

Kerry smiled. "That's easy. It's on the top of his head." She hopped up into the bed and took the pills from the nurse's hand, dumping them into her palm and tossing them into her mouth. Then she took a drink of the water the woman held out. "Thank you, Ms.," she peered at the badge, "Archer." She put her head back down on the pillow and closed her eyes.

The woman stayed there a moment longer, then stormed toward the door, keying it open and letting it slam behind her. Kerry listened, hearing the soft click of the shutter being drawn back and remained still. Then she heard the solid snick of it closing and opened an eye. "Bitch." She leaned forward and spat the two pills out, grimacing. "Ugh. God, what did they coat that with, lemon pepper?" Disgusted, she got out of bed and retrieved the capsules, separating them and emptying the powder inside them into the radiator. It hissed. Then she fit the two ends back together, and put them in her mouth, swallowing them down with the rest of the water the woman had left.

Three thirty. That meant she had...probably four and a half hours left before they'd start working on her in earnest, and if they gave her drugs through a needle... Kerry chewed her lip. They could keep her drugged up enough for anything to happen.

Her eyes wandered over the room, stopping on the small stool placed in the corner, ready for the doctor to warm it with his butt. She glanced at the stool, then at the door. "I never was a person who advocated violence, but you know, sometimes, you just gotta do what you gotta do."

Purposefully, she set to work, fluffing the covers up and using the pillows to make it appear that she was curled up in bed. Then she walked over to the door and stood behind it, satisfied that whoever looked in the grating couldn't see her. She walked over and got the stool, bringing it back with her to her post and sitting down on it.

It was strange, how little fear she was feeling. All of the terror had been sucked out of her, replaced by a slowly growing, slowly heating anger that made her look at her recent past and see her walking the fence with utter disgust.

"What kind of idiot was I?" She leaned her head against the door. "My family, my family. What the hell was I thinking? That they'd just accept me? Accept what I am?" She shook her head.

"What an idiot. Kerry you don't deserve a life partner, you deserve a brain transplant."

She'd wanted everything. If she failed in her one shot here, she'd get nothing, and she'd lose. "My god." Kerry felt tears welling up in her eyes. "What the hell did I do?"

Silence gathered around her, the soft sounds of the hospital muted by the late hour.

And she waited. She suspected her friend Ms. Archer would be back to check up on her, what with her being so important and all, and she'd be alone. Kerry just hoped she didn't screw this up, because she had only one chance.

One chance.

She waited. Kerry estimated that fifteen minutes went by, then thirty. At last, she heard a faint sound of footsteps coming down the hall, pausing periodically. She guessed the nurse was checking each room. They came closer, and closer, and at last they were outside her door.

Kerry silently got up and lifted the stool in her hands, hefting it. The shutter slid back, then closed, and a series of short beeps were sounded as the woman keyed the door.

She felt her heart pounding, and she licked her lips, getting ready. The doorknob turned and pushed inward. She waited for the figure to clear the edge, then slammed the stool down as hard as she could.

THE HANGAR BAY door rolled back, revealing the F14 Tomcat in all its sinister glory. Dar took a brief moment to study the swept-back wing fighter before she shook her head and tightened one of the seven zillion straps there seemed to be on the flight suit Jack had insisted she wear.

What in the hell am I doing?

Three shadowy figures were standing by the plane, and they saluted as Jack came up, stepping out of his way as he circled the aircraft, checking it thoroughly. He was all business now, and spoke to the crewmen in quiet, terse sentences as they finished the fueling and hooked the mounting ladder to its side. The canopy swung up, and Jack motioned Dar forward. "You first, so I can stand up there and tell you what not to touch."

He missed the wry look from his friend as she pulled herself up the ladder, stepped over the high cockpit side, and settled herself into the surprisingly comfortable seat. She was surrounded by electronics, and she was momentarily glad the canopy was glass, which lessened the claustrophobic feeling a bit. "Okay."

Jack mounted next, and placed a booted foot on the edge of the canopy, pointing down. "That's the weapons array, that's radar, that's..."

"The targeting system, threat management, and navigation," Dar finished dryly. "And this, this little beauty, is the heads-up generator, which I wrote the original programming for."

Jack stared at her. "Oh." He gave her a sheepish grin. "Sorry."

Dar glanced up. "It's all right. I won't touch anything, I promise," she assured him, feeling the tremor as her muscles jerked in agitation. "Let's just get going."

They finished the checklist, then a small vehicle tugged them out into the open and to the taxiway, where Jack lit off his engines and started under his own power. The roar was almost subliminal in its intensity, and Dar could feel it vibrating down along her clenched jaw. She settled the headphones on her head and listened as Jack talked quietly to the tower at the airfield, filing his flight plan and confirming that he was heading for a civilian airport. Then the Tomcat rolled forward, winding down the taxiways before it reached the runway outlined in dim blues and reds, the oil-marked tarmac clear in the icy white of his plane's running lights.

"You ready?" His voice sounded tinny through the earpieces.

"Yep," Dar responded and tightened her straps. The song "I Would Do Anything for Love" inescapably began running through her mind, and she sighed, hoping the afterburners would drown it out. The Tomcat's engines powered up, and the plane began to shake against its brakes, then with a tremendous jerk, they released, and they were flying down the runway.

It seemed mere seconds, rather than the long time it took with a regular airplane, before they were airborne and headed up at a steep angle. Dar could feel the G-pressure slamming against her, and she kept her breathing steady, closing her eyes and waiting for the plane to eventually level out. Which it did, cruising along at quite a pace for a little while as Jack navigated out of the established flight paths and into an isolated one reserved for military aircraft. "You ready?" he asked again. "It's one thirty AM, and we're gonna crack plates all over Maryland, so hang on." "Okay. Go." Dar briefly wondered what it was like to fly at more than the speed of sound, then the afterburners kicked in, and she felt like a horse's hooves had slammed her in the chest. "Jesus." The acceleration kept up, and she watched the mach meter creeping closer and closer until it hit Mach One, and a rolling wave of thunder cascaded around the plane, shivering through every part of it and making her ears itch.

Then it was quiet.

They rolled up through Mach Two, then Jack trimmed the engines and maintained a steady flight speed, whipping over the earth with nonchalant ease.

It seemed only moments, in which she sat trying not to think of anything at all, until she felt the pressure in her ears that meant they were descending. The plane slowed, and the rumble came back, and she could hear Jack's low, even conversation with the traffic controllers in the area. Kent County, apparently, didn't have anything but a radar officer and one single controller on watch, just in case. But they had no other planes in the area, and Jack just told them to turn on the runway lights, and he'd find it okay.

They queried him uncertainly.

"I'm a carrier pilot," he responded dryly. "I've landed on something a lot smaller than your field." Then they were on the ground, and Jack parked his plane in an unused hangar, shutting it down and turning it over to the watchful eye of an MP sent for just that purpose. They got in the car he had waiting and started off. It was an hour's drive to Saugatuck, which was right on the water. They could feel the lake breeze hitting the car even before they got there, and Dar peered at the map, giving terse, nervous directions. *At last*. A somber, white building rose before them, with gates in the front and a full complement of security.

Jack looked at her uncertainly. "How are we going to get in there?"

Blue eyes regarded him. "You're not. You're staying right here until I get back. And if I don't get back, call this number." She tried to hand him a card, but he wouldn't take it.

"No way, Dar. I'm going in there with you." His jaw jutted stubbornly. "You had me fly all the way out here, I'm not missing out on the fun."

"Jack, this could mean trouble for you. I don't want that on my conscience," Dar objected.

"Flying into Iraqi airspace meant trouble for me," he replied bluntly. "I went anyway."

Dar remained silent, then sighed. "All right." She took her badge from her briefcase and clipped it on her collar, then peered at him. "Here." She clipped the luggage tag on his flight suit. "Take off the insignia, they won't know the difference."

They got out of the car, and Dar stripped off her flight suit, donning instead the trench coat she'd brought against the chill air. She shouldered her laptop, and faced him. "We're here to fix the computers, okay?"

His brows creased as he pulled off his wings and name patch. "What if they aren't broken?"

"They are," Dar assured him. "They have a trouble ticket open with the local account here."

"That's a bit of a coincidence, isn't it?" he inquired warily.

"Not really," Dar replied as she started walking towards the guard house. "It's a long holiday weekend, they have to transmit their payroll tonight, and both of their local techs are with their families three hundred miles away. It's the worst possible time for a problem, ergo, there is one." She straightened her lapel. "Computers are like that."

Jack thought about that. "Oh." He zipped up his jacket, hanging his luggage tag from the outside pocket. "Murphy's Law?"

"Dar's Rule of FUBAR." Dar smiled grimly as they came up to the gate, a large rectangle of light from the glassed-in window spilling out along the darkened path. "Much more precise."

As they approached, a small panel slid aside, revealing a young guard with thick, curly blond hair and blue eyes. "Can I help you?" he started to ask, then his eyes fell on her badge. "Oh, thank god! Thank god! Let me get the gate open."

Dar winked at Jack. "Now, that's the kind of reception I like to see the company get." Now that she was here and doing something, her nerves had steadied, and she felt a lot calmer. It was the waiting that killed her.

The gate swung open and the guard hurried out. "You need an escort?" he asked anxiously.

Dar consulted a paper. "Let's see...it's the computer room on the..." She bent closer.

"Third floor, near the lockdown unit," he supplied helpfully. "Go up the elevator, get off at the third floor, turn right, and it's three doors down on the left. I'll have it opened for you."

"Great, thanks. We'll try to be quick," Dar promised.

"Please. If they don't transmit that tape before the banks update in the morning, I'm toast," the man begged. "I promised I'd take my mother-in-law out to brunch on Sunday, and at this rate, it's going to be at McDonalds."

Dar patted his shoulder. "Relax." The stones crunching under her boots, she started up the gravel path and exhaled. "First hurdle down."

Jack moved closer. "Isn't it bad, raising his hopes like that?"

Blue eyes shot a look at him. "Trust me, they've got a lot better chance of getting those damn systems working with me here than if they'd sent one of our field techs." She continued walking, heading up a low series of steps to the front door of the facility. "I'm not just an administrator, y'know."

"Bu...uh...well, I know, Dar, but we're not really here to do that. I mean... Are you actually going to fix it, then?"

Dar sighed. "Why the hell not? I'm here to break a senator's daughter out of a psych ward in the middle of the night after hijacking a government aircraft." She paused. "And it's gonna snow. Might as well fix the damn computers so I can at least bill them before I get thrown in jail and then fired, if I'm really, really lucky."

Jack looked nervously around. "Oh. Okay."

They entered the building, quiet at this hour, and nodded at the guard sitting on the reception desk. He glanced at them, then spotted the badge and looked profoundly relieved. "Damn, are we glad to see you guys. They said they didn't have anyone in the area. I thought we were really screwed."

"We flew in," Dar replied honestly as she headed past the desk and entered the elevator. The doors closed behind them, and she exhaled again. "Hurdle number two." It was a silent ride until the doors slid open on the third floor, exposing a long expanse of mind-numbingly mint green concrete. "Jesus, I hate that color," Dar muttered as she turned to her right.

Their shoes squeaked on the polished tile, and the sound made the nurse at the desk look up in startled attention. She came around the corner and approached them--a short, slim woman with dark hair and a lightly made up face. "Can I... Oh." Her eyes widened on seeing Dar's badge. "Thank the good Lord's mercy."

Dar smiled and stopped in front of the room the guard had indicated, nodding at it. "Wanna let me in?"

The nurse hurriedly punched in a code, and the door opened. She pushed it back, holding it respectfully as they entered. "Oh, you have no idea how wonderful it is to see you. I can't believe they found someone at this time of night. It's incredible."

Dar entered the computer room and set her briefcase down, then seated herself in front of the AS400 terminal and examined it. She pulled her laptop out of its case and booted it, while Jack watched with interest.

"Can I get you two anything?" the nurse asked anxiously. "Coffee, a doughnut--we've got some turkey and stuffing left."

Dar glanced over. "Thanks, Ms.," she squinted a little, "Archer, coffee would be wonderful." She paused. "I like mine with everything."

The nurse nodded, then glanced at Jack.

"Just black for me, thanks." He smiled at her.

"Right you are. I'll be right back." She hurried off.

Dar recalled the company's profile and drilled down to their operations section, retrieving their administrative login and password. She typed it in and was rewarded with full access to their systems.

"How do you guys do this?" Jack whispered. "It's like you've got some massive set of skeleton keys or something."

"Well." Dar entered a query to their patient database and waited for the screen to come back.

Then she recorded Kerry's location and the lock code to her room. "It's like this: We do all the data transfer for most of the credit unions out there. Most places that are members of the credit unions know that, because we take care that they do--with joint advertising, that kind of thing. We sponsor credit union picnics. If they have a fundraiser, we're involved. So then we can go in and say, 'hey, we do this data stuff for the CU, why not let us handle yours?' " Dar made several changes to Kerry's file, then saved it and returned to the main menu. "And they usually sit back and realize it does make sense, because we are professionals, and this is what we do. It's more cost-efficient for us to add them to our network than for them to maintain their own--especially WANS. Those T1 lines are expensive as hell, and you don't get redundancy on them." Dar then dumped out of the menus and went to the operating system level, starting a diagnostic.

"Okay, that makes sense," Jack acknowledged.

"So after that, we go in and say, 'hey, we're doing the data stuff for the CU, and we handle your network, why not outsource the rest of your IS to us. We'll give you a support package, and you won't have to worry about anything.' " Dar watched the diagnostic run. "There's the problem," she muttered, stopping it, then standing up and going around to the back of the computer and kneeling down. "Stupid interface cable's chewed, they must have rats."

"Rats? What?" Jack peered at her. "You figured it out already?"

Blue eyes glanced back at him. "It's my job, remember?" Dar took a splicing kit from her briefcase and quickly fixed the cable, then went back to the console. "They don't know we're here; I might as well fix this, then we can get on with getting Kerry the hell out of here. She's

probably sleeping, might as well give her a few more minutes." She typed in a set of commands and tested the cable. "Ah, better."

"So, do they usually let you take over their stuff?" Jack asked, fascinated.

"A lot of times, yeah, because maintaining an IS group, especially in a place like this, whose focus is so narrow, is just a pain in the butt for them. It's much easier, and about the same amount of money, or maybe just a bit more, if they let us do it. And it's a big problem off their shoulders because we're big enough so they know if something does go wrong, we'll get it fixed."

"Like now." Jack smiled.

"Well, we don't usually send corporate vice presidents to splice cable." Dar chuckled ruefully as she started up the data transfer cycle. "They were bringing a tech up from Chicago, I canceled him." She watched the counters roll. "Another day, another dollar." She stood up and dusted off her hands, then turned as the nurse came back with the coffee. "Good news."

The woman handed the coffee over and peered at the screen. "Really?"

"Yep, you're rolling," Dar informed her. "It'll take about twenty minutes for this to go through; we'll hang around and make sure it gets finished."

"Bless you!" the nurse squealed in delight. "Oh my god, I have to go let everyone know. Thank you, thank you. You're a genius." She dashed out, headed back for her station.

"Okay." Dar took a sip of her coffee. "You stay here. I'm going to wander casually down the hallway and see if I can get into Kerry's room." She picked up the piece of paper with the room and code on it and put it into her pocket. "Then I have to figure a way to get her the hell out of here."

"Oh, so that part of the plan's not ready yet?" he asked nervously.

"Plan?" Dar gave him a nervous look right back and grinned faintly. "What plan?" She slipped out the door and sauntered down the hallway, gazing around in apparently casual interest. The nurse spotted her and waved, never stopping her speech on the phone as she did so. Dar waved back and continued her progress, stopping every so often to peer at the bulletin boards, which dotted the walls, and read the notices and schedules on them.

Kerry's room was at the end of the hallway, Dar realized, around a small crook in the otherwise straight walls. When she came even with the door and glanced back over her shoulder, she could no longer see the inside of the nurse's station, only the front edge of the desk. "Good," she muttered, then eased back the little peephole and peered inside. The harsh white light displayed a stark, almost bare room, with a bed near the far wall. A figure was curled up in it, and Dar nodded to herself as she closed the panel, then keyed in the lock code and gently opened the door.

She felt rather than saw the blow coming and let her body react, twisting as something hard and cold struck her on the shoulders. She went with the force of it, diving for the floor and rolling, then coming back up on her feet in a dazed blur, holding her hands out in a defensive posture. She blinked the stars from her eyes, and heard a faint choking sound, then her vision focused finally on Kerry's stunned face. "Wow," she managed to joke weakly. "I love you too, but couldn't we just kiss each other?"

"Oh my god, I'm..." Kerry unfroze and closed the distance between them, touching Dar's neck in horror. "Dar...I'm...I didn't know it w...I thought it was... You're bleeding. Oh Jesus."

Dar rubbed her head. "Does that mean you're glad to see me or not?" She gave the blonde woman a wry smile.

Kerry just looked at her for a long moment, then slowly came forward and leaned her body against Dar's taller one, sliding her arms around her lover's waist and burying her face in Dar's

chest. "Glad to see you? I've never been so glad to see anyone in my entire life." She let out a shaky sigh. "Oh god."

Dar felt her entire world collapse until it only encompassed the two of them, as she wrapped her arms around Kerry and gently kissed her head. "What in the hell's going on here?"

A sigh warmed her chest, even through the fabric. "I can't believe he did this, it was horrible, Dar. At first, he wanted to blame you, he said it was all your fault. That you...lured me into this." Dar exhaled but kept silent.

"And, I couldn't. I had to tell him that wasn't true. And he..." Kerry's arm unwound and lifted, her hand touching her cheek. "He hit me."

The dark-haired woman pulled back a little, so she could see her partner's cheek. "Bastard." Kerry just looked sad. "There was so much hate in him. I don't understand, Dar, how can people hate you for something as beautiful as loving someone?" She put her head back down, her voice shaking.

"It's part of what makes us human, Kerry," Dar answered in a tired voice. "We hate anyone different," she told her softly. "Come on, we've got to get you out of here."

Kerry nodded. "I know. They were going to start 'probing' me in the morning. I knew I had to get out of here before then. I was afraid they'd..." She hesitated. "I didn't know what kind of drugs they were going to fill me with, or...I mean, you can say anything under some of that stuff, and..." Her eyes lifted and met the pale blue ones gazing down at her. "I didn't want to take a chance on them forcing me to say something I didn't mean."

Dar's lips tensed into a grim smile. "What were you going to do after you knocked out Little Miss Sunshine out there?"

"Find a phone," Kerry admitted, "and scream for help." She plucked at her hospital gown. "After stealing some scrubs to wear." Her brow creased. "And, how did you know about this, Dar? How did you get here?"

The taller woman snorted. "They found your medical card in your wallet and figured they might as well bill us for your brainwashing." She keyed the door open again and peeked out, seeing a quiet, empty hallway. "Let me go see if I can find your clothes and let Jack know what's going on."

"Jack?" Kerry queried.

"Gerald Easton's son, he got me here," Dar answered absently, peering at doors to try and figure out what was behind them.

"Got you here?" A pause. "I thought you were in Maryland with him, did you... No, you couldn't have driven, it's the middle of the night, there's no planes!" Kerry stared at her in confusion.

"He's a Navy pilot," Dar replied offhandedly. "It pays to have old friends in fast places, Kerry. I'll explain later." She eased out. "Okay, I'll be right back. Just take it easy, okay?" She patted her pockets, then pulled out a slip of paper. "Just in case." She handed it to Kerry. "It's your lock code."

"A Navy p..." Kerry took the paper mechanically, watching as Dar carefully closed the door and eased down the hall. She leaned against the wall again, her knees shaking so badly she could hardly stand. It was too much. She slid down the wall and rested her head on her arms, wondering if it was all just another one of those strange dreams she'd soon wake up from.

OUTSIDE, AFTER SHIFTING her jacket so that the cut on her neck was covered, Dar padded quietly down the hallway and popped around the corner to see the nurse bending over some paperwork. She looked up as Dar sauntered closer, then smiled.

"Well, you certainly are the hero of the building." She put down her clipboard and sighed. "You don't know how many people there are here who can breathe now. For me, tomorrow is my kid's birthday. It was gonna be a doughnut with a candle in it until you walked in."

Dar smiled sincerely at her. "Glad I could help." She leaned on the counter, checking her watch. "Not too much longer," she commented, stifling a yawn. "Say, are those things really comfortable?"

The nurse looked down. "Oh, the scrubs? Yeah, they sure are. Beats the heck out of that starched polyester they used to make us wear, let me tell you." She looked at Dar speculatively. "Hey, would you like a set to try? I could get you one, we've got thousands."

This is too easy. "Could you?" Mild blue eyes blinked at her in gratitude. "I've always wanted to try them."

The nurse patted her hand. "Honey, for you, anything." She ducked out from behind the desk and hurried off.

Dar smiled and regarded the nurse's station, peering under the counter to see if she could spot any of Kerry's belongings, without much success. "Hey, Jack, how's it going in there?" she called in a normal tone of voice.

Jack's blond head popped out, and he glanced at her. "Um, the red bar is about seventy five percent of the way across, is that what you're asking?" She nodded. "Everything okay?" He looked closer. "Christ on a rudder, Dar, you're bleeding." He walked over to her and pulled her jacket collar back. "What happened?" He asked in a lower voice. "Did you find Kerry?"

"Yes, I got hit with a stool, and yes," Dar muttered. "Kerry was trying to make a break for it and thought I was a nurse."

"God. Feisty thing, isn't she?" Jack half laughed. "She okay?"

Dar nodded. "She's fine, they hadn't had time to do anything to her. That was scheduled for the morning." She sighed. "But she's pretty shook up."

He digested this. "Why is she in here, Dar? She nuts?"

Dar shook her head. "No. Just gay."

The shock showed in his face as he stared at her. "You're not serious."

She sighed tiredly, rubbing eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep and tension. "Yeah, I'm serious."

Dar looked up as the nurse returned, holding a package and smiling cheerfully. "Here you go, hope you enjoy them." The woman handed it over, then gave Jack a smile as well. "Hello there. You want a set, too? My husband loves them."

"Um, no thanks." Jack mumbled. "Thanks anyway."

"Thanks." Dar took the scrubs and tried to figure out what to do next. Her mind was slowing down, she realized, as the problems of getting Kerry out of the hospital safely weighed down on her shoulders.

She hadn't really gotten past what to do after she got in here, mostly because she had no idea what the layout was, or the possibilities. Maybe she could pull the fire alarm...or, was that a water pressure pipe in that other alcove?

"Excuse me." The nurse touched her arm. "Listen, can I ask you a big favor, since you're stuck here for a little while anyway?"

"Huh?" Dar broke off her planning and turned to the woman. "Sorry, sure."

"I'd like to run down and grab a sandwich from the cafeteria, can you just listen for this phone?" She pointed at it. "If it rings, just answer Third Floor and take a message."

"Uh...well, sure, of course, no problem," Dar assured her, working hard to keep an incredulous grin off her face. "Go on, we'll be here another...uh, thirty minutes at least, that load's taking longer than I thought."

Nurse Archer beamed at her. "You're the best." She ducked out from behind the desk again. "Can I bring you back a sandwich? They have turkey on a croissant today and some tomato soup."

"No, no, we're fine. Thanks." Dar waved at her. "Take your time."

The doors to the elevator slid closed behind her white butt, and they looked at each other. "Well." Dar rubbed her nose. "You stay here and listen for the phone, and I'll go get Kerry." Unable to quite believe her good luck, Dar trotted down the hallway to her lover's door and punched in the code, having the handle practically taken out of her hand by an impatient blonde. "Hey!"

"I was starting to get nervous," Kerry whispered. "I thought maybe you got into trouble."

Dar leaned forward and kissed her on the lips, letting her touch linger a bit. "I am trouble," she purred into the shorter woman's ear.

"Here." She handed Kerry the scrubs, which came complete with little booties. "It's not chic, but it'll get you the hell out of here."

Kerry took the bundle and examined it with interest. "Hmm, I always wanted a set of these. This wasn't the way I'd have chosen to get them, though." She opened the packages and shook out the white garments, stripping off her uncomfortable hospital gown and slipping into the drawstring pants. "Yeesh." She tugged on the waist strings to make them fit, and ended up tying a big bow, while Dar knelt and did the same for the ankles. "That's better, at least I won't trip on them,"

Kerry muttered as she pulled on the shirt, settling it around her body. "Well, that's not too bad."

Dar smiled, then stood up and pulled a comb out of her pocket and ran it through Kerry's disheveled hair. "So, other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was Thanksgiving?"

That got a weak laugh from the blonde woman. "Oh, lots of relatives, lots of bullshit. I got to make nice with Brian and see some of my uncles and aunts I haven't seen in a while." She paused. "Now I guess I won't ever again," she concluded softly. "Dar, he's not going to just let go of this."

"Leave that to me," her partner responded in a crisp, no-nonsense voice.

Kerry looked at her. "What does that mean?"

Dar finished her task and turned her lover towards the light. "You'll do," she concluded. "It means that I have a few tricks up my sleeve, and I'd like you to just trust me to handle the situation."

Warily, Kerry gazed at her. "You're not going to tell me what's going on?"

Serious blue eyes studied her face. "Not here, not now...and it's easier if I show you. When we get home, I'll lay it all out for you, I promise." She paused. "Will you trust me?"

Kerry looked her right in the eye for a long silent moment. "I trust you," she stated quietly.

"Just...remember, Dar, whatever else he may be, he is my father."

Dar patted her cheek. "I know." She took a breath. "Come on, let's get out of here. I'm going to have you go downstairs with Jack. I'll wait for the nurse to get back here, then join you. It would look strange if we left the floor unwatched, and I don't want any alarms getting out."

Kerry nodded. "Then what?"

Dar pondered. "Then I guess we go to your parents' house to pick up your things," she said.

"What? Dar, no, I don't need that stuff. There is nothing there irreplaceable. I don't want to go back there," Kerry protested vehemently.

"Kerry..." Dar started to speak.

"No!" the green-eyed woman interrupted. "I can't face them, not after this. Dar, don't ask that of me, please." She turned away, hugging herself. "Can't we just get out of here?" she whispered. "I'll pay for the company laptop."

Dar exhaled. "Okay, let's go." She walked forward and put an arm around Kerry's shoulders. "I'm sorry, I'm so used to being so damn confrontational, I forget it's not always the smartest thing to do."

Kerry let herself be turned around, and they headed for the door. "What purpose would it serve anyway?"

"Just lets them know they didn't beat you," Dar replied quietly as she opened the door and gently ushered her lover out into the hall, checking first to make sure the coast was clear. "But that's my pride speaking, and it's kinda loud sometimes."

Kerry looked over her shoulder at the frank admission and felt a tiny smile tugging at her lips. "That 'in yer face' gene again, huh?" She glanced around at the depressing hallway. "Uck, this place is disgusting."

They came around the corner and spotted Jack's lonely figure, casually slumped against the desk as he waited. He saw them and straightened, then smiled as they came closer. "Hi." He gave Kerry a tentative smile. "You must be Kerry."

She held a hand out. "And you must be Jack. It's nice to meet you."

Dar went around behind the desk and started rooting through drawers. She came to a locked one, then glanced at the counter. "Nice nurse." She grabbed the set of keys the woman had left and unlocked the drawer, pawing through it. "Ah." A set of hospital badges, all with little Post It notes on them. "Let's see..." She studied them. "Terminated, terminated, quit, terminated, deceased, terminated... Admitted?" She peered at that one. "Hmm. Ah..." She pulled one out from the stack and handed it to Kerry. "Clip that on, the picture's close enough."

Kerry did so. "Now what?"

Dar relocked the drawer and put the keys back down. "Okay, you two take the elevator there down and just walk out the front door. Kerry, you pretend you're just walking him out, okay?"

The blonde was recovering her composure. "It would be more realistic if I was hitting on him." She glanced at the blushing Jack. "He's cute."

"Fine." The executive chuckled wearily. "Once you get out there, just wait for me, okay?"

They both nodded. "What are you going to do?" Kerry asked predictably.

"Discharge you." Dar smiled piratically. "I like things neat. Get going." She paused. "Jack, take my laptop, okay?"

He nodded. "Gotcha. See you downstairs." He retrieved the case and left, guiding Kerry towards the elevator. At the doors, the blonde woman turned and met Dar's watching eyes.

"Be careful."

Dar smiled. "You, too." She watched the doors close, then she turned her attention to the task at hand.

THE RIDE DOWN the elevator was quiet, and Kerry restlessly ran her fingers through her hair, fidgeting until the doors opened at the bottom floor and they got out. Ahead of them, a single guard was seated at the reception desk, leaning on his elbows. He glanced up as he saw them, and a big smile crossed his face.

"Hey, hear you guys saved the day! Way to go, man!"

Jack waved. "Yeah, it was a chewed-up wire, but we got things going again. I'm just going to put my stuff away." He hefted the briefcase. "Boss is upstairs making sure things finish okay for you guys."

"Great, great. Listen, can we get you a pop or something?" The guard's eyes flicked over Kerry and dismissed her.

"Nah, we're just wanting to get to the motel, and get some sleep. Been a hell of a long day." He started to move past the desk. "Glad it all worked out."

"Which hotel they got you at?" the guard asked in friendly interest. "I know most of the good happy hours around here."

Jack was at a loss. "Um..."

"Didn't you say the Marriott Courtyard? It's about a half mile from here," Kerry interjected casually. "That's where you said we could get a drink later."

"Whooo, they put you up at the good places." The guard laughed. "And you got an invitation on top if it. Well, g'night. And thanks again." He glanced once more at Kerry, then went back to the magazine he'd been reading.

They passed through the front hall and exited the building. "Brr." Kerry sighed. "These scrubs are not meant for November in Saugatuck."

Jack glanced around as they crunched down the gravel path. "Thanks for saving my butt in there. I've got no damn idea what hotels there are around this place. Hell, I don't even know where I am. Dar got us here." He glanced around. "Once we get past the front gate, I'll give you my jacket, okay?"

Kerry nodded but kept silent, feeling the cold, hard ground through the thin surface of her booties. They came even with the front gate, and the guard inside looked up. Kerry waved at him, and he waved back, then he waved even harder at Jack.

Jack smiled. "I feel like a goddamned messiah," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "I haven't gotten this kind of a greeting since we liberated Kuwait." He glanced at the beaming guard. "He doesn't even realize he doesn't know you, does he?" The gate slowly opened in front of them, and they started to pass through.

Kerry snorted softly. "There's a lot of Dutch and Germans settled in this area--blonde, white women are a dime a dozen, trust me. He probably sees twenty people who look like me every day." They passed out of the light cone around the guardhouse, and finally, Kerry felt her guts start to relax a little as she heard the metal lock close shut behind her.

She was free. She was out of the worst situation she'd ever been in, and she mostly felt like finding a warm spot and just curling up into it and crying. It was dark around them now, and Jack stripped off his jacket and set it around her shoulders. "Thanks." She nodded gratefully to him. "I know I owe you a big thank you for helping Dar get here, however that happened."

He chuckled a little as they came up to the military car, in dark blue, and he unlocked the door for her. "I'd do just about anything for her. We've been friends since we were kids. She saved my ass once, after we built a treehouse out in a ficus that overhung a sinkhole."

He waited for her to slide in, then he closed the door and got in on the other side. "My dad told me not to, but I was pretty damn stubborn, and I did anyway. I was putting the final railing on when I lost my step and fell over the edge, with nothing between me and the bottom of that damn sinkhole except Oh-Two." He exhaled. "My belt caught on a branch nub, and there I was, hanging like a stuffed pig on Christmas, yelling my head off."

Kerry muffed a slightly hysterical laugh. "Oh no."

"Yep. Next thing I know, Dar's there, and she manages to get a rope tied off and around her, then she climbs down next to me and helps me get up onto the next branch. So then we both lose our balance and fall, and she's hanging on to me and tied to that rope--so I figure we're both toast."

"Oh no!" Kerry's eyes widened.

"Yep, but she's stronger than all hell, if you know what I mean, even then, when we were little. So she manages to get her body twisted round, and I can grab onto the branch and pull myself up. Then she gets up next to me, and we were all right."

"Whew." Kerry blew out a breath. "Then what happened?"

He gave her a wry glance. "She slugged me for being so damned stupid."

Kerry burst into laughter, clamping a hand over her mouth quickly. "Oh, god. I'm sorry, that's not funny," she apologized.

"Sure it is." Jack laughed. "It's Dar all over."

The blonde woman sighed. "Yeah, I think I can see that, even though I've only known her for a little while." Her eyes flicked to Jack's. "She's a brave woman."

He smiled at her "She's a brave human," he corrected her. "She's the best friend and the worst enemy you could possibly want to have. She never backs down, and she's always there if you need her to be."

Kerry stared out the windshield, at the faintly glowing lights from the hospital. "That's true," she finally said, softly. "She'll stand up to anyone." She fell silent and leaned her head against the door jamb, her eyes glued on the path leading down from the hospital.

They waited what seemed like an eternity, but what was actually about ten minutes, until Kerry's eyes found what they were looking for. A tall, lean figure came gliding down the gravel, stopping at the gate and exchanging a few words with the guard, who laughed and waved. Dar then exited out the sliding wire barrier into the darkness of the parking lot.

A moment later, and Dar was getting into the back seat with a long, exhausted sigh. "God damn it all to hell in a wire handbasket, I'm glad that's over with," she muttered, slumping against the cushions. "Damn woman nearly talked my ear off. Tried to give me a cupcake. Wanted my boss's name so she could put in a good word. Jesus!"

Kerry started laughing helplessly. "You should have given it to her." She exhaled. "And you like cupcakes."

Jack glanced at her, then into the rearview mirror. "Where to?"

Dar considered. "There a hotel nearby? I think we all could use some sleep. I know I could. Then we can pack Jack back off to DC and catch a commercial flight home."

"What about that Marriott you mentioned?" Jack asked Kerry.

Kerry remained silent for a moment. "I, um..." She half turned and rested her chin on the back of the seat, gazing at Dar. "I...think you're right. I think we should go pick up my stuff."

A dark eyebrow lifted. "I thought..."

"I know." Kerry looked down at the fabric. "But I started this, and I need to finish it." She raised her eyes to Dar's. "I just need a little backup."

A quiet, proud smile edged Dar's lips. "You've got that. Kerry, I know this is tough for you, and I know you still love your parents very much. Try to remember that, all right?" She sighed. "Don't let what happened take that away from you, no matter how much they seem to deserve it."

Jack started the car and pulled out of the lot. Throughout the quiet, darkness-shrouded drive, Kerry thought about Dar's advice.

THE HOUSE WAS dark. The front light was on, sending a pool of silver across the brown grass, but the rest of the building was silent and gray. Jack pulled up next to the driveway and glanced back at Dar.

"All right." Dar sucked in a breath and tried to summon up energy. "Jack..."

The pilot blinked at her. "He's enough of a scud to nap his own daughter and have her shipped off to the funny farm. I'm going as your security." He reached under the seat of the car and brought out his service-issued automatic, snapping the adjustable holster into its place under his arm. "And just so they know I'm registered to carry that..." He put his insignia back on.

Dar put a hand on his arm. "No," she quietly disagreed. "I don't think it's going to be necessary, and I've got a few cards up my sleeve if he does try anything stupid. Let's not get the military involved in this, okay? He's a senator, and it could only mean big, big trouble, my friend."

"Dar's right," Kerry added softly. "My father has a bug up his ass about the power of the Pentagon. Don't give him that kind of ammunition."

Jack glanced from one to the other. "Okay, but you've got thirty minutes. More than that, and I'm coming in after you."

"All right," Dar agreed. "You ready?" she asked Kerry, who nodded. "Let's go."

They eased out of the car and shut the doors gently, then made their way up the front walk to the entrance. Kerry faced the door and her hands clenched, then relaxed. She reached up and rang the bell.

Once. Twice. Three times, before they heard footsteps approaching. Dar put a steadying hand on her lover's back and straightened her own, gathering her wits about her. The door opened and swung back, and the senator was standing there, blinking at them in sleep-fogged disbelief.

Kerry walked forward and mounted the step up to the threshold, then hauled off and slapped him hard across the face. The sound of the slap ricocheted through the hallway, making him stumble back, and startling Dar, who'd had no idea in the world her lover was going to do that.

"What in the..." The senator reached for a light switch and flipped it on, illuminating the doorway and inner hall. "How dare you?"

"How dare I?" Kerry walked right in and up to him. "How dare *I*? How dare *you* do something like that to me!"

He stared at her, then slowly, his eyes drifted past her to the tall, dark figure looming behind her.

"You." His voice dripped with revulsion.

Dar walked inside and closed the door behind her. "I don't think we've met, have we?" She put a hand on her furious friend's back. "My name is Dar Roberts."

"I know who you are, you whore," the man roared, "Get out of my house!" He turned for the phone. "I'll have the law on you!"

"For...what?" Dar cut off Kerry's violent protest. "Exactly?"

"Breaking and entering!" he answered, dialing.

"You let us in," Dar reminded him.

"Of the hospital, you freak!"

"Actually, they're an account of ours. I signed the visitors' log like anyone else," Dar replied calmly. "And I was requested there due to a computer problem."

He stopped dialing. "You broke her out of there," he accused.

"No, no, the nursing supervisor discharged her." The executive smiled at him. "After they found nothing wrong with her."

"There is something wrong with her." He put the phone down. "And it's your fault. You corrupted her, you bitch, and I'll have you..."

A long, powerful finger lifted. "You will have me filing a lawsuit against you for libel, along with one for kidnapping and forcibly detaining an employee of mine if you don't shut up." She slid ahead of Kerry, dangerous as a panther as she walked up to him, staring him evenly in the eyes. "Now, I suggest we take this little discussion to whatever you use as an office, so the rest of your...family...doesn't have to hear what I have to tell you, okay?"

"You think you're so damn clever," the man spat.

"No, the company does. In fact, the company pays me to be clever, and I like to give them their money's worth," Dar replied with a smile. "Now, you can move, or we can just collect Kerry's things and be on our way, and I'll just run a transmit to the news services when I get back in the car. Your choice." Dar's voice dripped with danger, smooth, slick syllables that rolled off her tongue and were accented with glints of her eyes. "Senator."

He moved, turning and heading towards a wooden door visible through the living room they were standing at the edge of. Dar followed him, and Kerry, after taking a breath, followed her, stunned by the powerful presence Dar had manifested. She glanced to one side and found herself looking into her mother's eyes, peering out from their bedroom doorway.

The eyes disappeared, and the door closed. Kerry sighed and kept walking, trailing after Dar's tall figure as they entered that damn study, and this time she closed the door behind them. A small reading lamp dimly lit the senator's private study. Shadows filled the corners making it hard to see what hid between the bookshelves and display cases distributed along the walls. Dar circled the room, her focus on the angry man before her, and ended up by his desk. She perched on a corner and crossed her arms. Taking a moment to study him with interested, blue eyes, she stayed quiet.

"What do you want?" he finally asked, after a period of this.

Dar let him wait a bit longer, then she stood and walked around a little, ending up next to the window. "What do I want?" she repeated. "I want you to go back twenty-four hours and not have assaulted, kidnapped, and illegally incarcerated your own daughter there. That's what I want."

"I didn't illegally do anything," the senator brusquely informed her. "She was admitted for observation, and it's my responsibility to make sure my family gets taken care of."

"Oh, so when they filled me full of drugs and tried to brainwash me in the morning, that was for...observational reasons?" Kerry asked from her position against the wall.

He glanced at her. "I wanted them to talk to you, yes, and get these crazy ideas out of your head, before you ruin your life." He glared at Dar. "She's the one who brainwashed you."

"Brainwashed her into what?" Dar snorted. "Into thinking for herself? No, thanks, she did that all by herself with no help from me." She paused. "Oh, you mean brainwashed her into thinking we were in love with each other. Right?"

"I don't want to hear that." The man turned his back on them. "I don't accept that any child of mine would be a part of something that disgusting and depraved." He turned. "And be damned to Hell on top of it." His hand slashed through his hair. "No!" His eyes went to Dar's shadowed face. "Why don't you just get out of here and leave decent people alone? Your kind doesn't belong in this country."

Dar stepped closer, so fast he didn't even have time to move or to blink before she was practically on top of him, nose to nose. "My daddy died for this country, you piece of ignorant trash, so you watch what you say." Her voice had dropped to a menacing growl. "And he was worth a thousand of you."

Kerry held her breath. She'd never seen Dar like this. Her eyes were glittering, and her whole body seemed alert with energy. The fiery rage was almost palpable.

Dead silence. Then, "I'm calling the police." The senator picked up the phone. "I'm going to have you arrested on whatever charges I feel like paying the chief to write up for me, and then I'm going to enjoy seeing your ugly ass locked up in the men's side of the prison and watch you get raped until you scream."

Surprisingly, Dar smiled. "Ah, your true colors," she purred charmingly, her temper put back on a leash. "Before you finish dialing, you might want to think of the number 99344343." He stopped dead, his finger on one button, and slowly, viciously, raised his eyes to hers. Dar chuckled. "Did you know, Senator, that in this day and age, everything you do goes in a computer?" Dar stepped around the desk and sat on its edge again. "Every credit card transaction, every banking transaction, every medical record." She smiled again. "Birth certificates, death certificates...everything."

He just stared at her. Hating.

Dar leaned forward. "You put the phone down. You let me get Kerrison's stuff out of here, and then you don't bother her ever again, or I have one huge-ass file that's going out on a mass mailing to every goddamned news agency in the world, along with the Attorney General's office." She paused. "With a personal note from me to Janet, if you know what I mean."

"You're bluffing," he whispered.

Dar leaned closer. "No, I'm not." She chuckled. "And believe me, I'd enjoy every single second of watching you self-destruct on CNN." She eyed him lazily. "I'd even send a condolence card to Pamela." His eyes bugged out. Dar slipped off the edge of the desk and stood, waiting.

"All right." He straightened and appeared to regain his composure. "What do you really want? What deal are you after?"

"Deal?" Dar inquired softly.

"You must be after something. What is it, money?" He glanced up. "They can't pay you that much at that place, is that what you're after?" He moved around, drawing her attention and Kerry's as he paced. "We can work out a deal, you just name what your price is, and we..."

Dar's body moved with a savage suddenness that startled even Kerry. She half turned and sent a sideways kick snapping up, her foot hitting something hard and sending it flying. Then she whirled and spun kicked again, this time sending a body flying against the wall with an audible thump. Kerry ran for the lights as she heard movement, and got to them, flicking them on just in time to see Kyle go flying again, caught squarely in the ribs by a flying drop-kick.

"What's the matter, Kyle, you too used to picking on little girls?" Dar taunted as she ducked a side swipe of his fist. "Intimidating them and taking their puppies?" She swiveled and cracked him in the jaw with a roundhouse kick. "Stinking pig."

He lunged at her, grabbing her around the waist and taking them both down. But he didn't count on Dar's powerful legs, which wrapped around him and flipped them both over, landing Dar on top and letting her get in a good blow to the groin.

"Bitch." He slugged her in the side, did it again, then wheezed as a knee slammed him in the gut. He scrambled out of her range, then lunged to his feet, intent on grabbing her.

Dar rolled up and caught him as he tried to stand up, slamming an elbow into his jaw, then grabbing an arm and throwing him over her shoulder to land with a sodden crash on the parquet floor. "Oh yeah, the bitch that just kicked your ass and loved every minute of it." Dar felt her breathing steady, and she felt her temper dropping, the violent need satisfied for the moment.

It was quiet then, until Dar walked over to the far wall and picked up the automatic pistol she'd kicked out of Kyle's hand, juggling it in her own. Kerry watched an unfamiliar expression appear on her father's face.

Fear.

"Did I forget to mention she was the National Champion in karate one year?" Kerry murmured. "Guess I did." Now it was her turn. She stepped forward until she was standing against her father's desk. "What you did to me was wrong." He just looked at her. "Not just last night. You've been trying to make me into something I'm not since I was a little girl, and you hurt me a lot," Kerry told him. "But you're still my father, and I still love you. I just can't live with you." "I am not your father." He turned his back. "Get out of my house, and take your *friend* with you." Kerry sighed and glanced at Dar, who was unloading the pistol and pocketing the rounds. "Come on, I don't have much to get here."

Dar tossed the automatic on the desk. "Right behind you."

They left the office and proceeded silently up the stairs. Dar settled her hands on her lover's shoulders. "You okay?" she murmured softly into a pink ear.

Kerry felt like just leaning back and letting Dar's body envelope hers. "I'm really hurting inside," she told the dark-haired woman honestly. "I think I'm going to need a good, long cuddling real soon now."

Dar kissed her gently on the head. "Tonight, and every other night for the rest of your life, if you want," she promised, realizing what she said after the words came out.

A momentary, almost shocked silence. "I want," Kerry finally answered in a soft voice. "C'mon, let's get out of here. I have a future to attend to."

KERRY WALKED INTO her old bedroom and crossed the floor to where her things were still resting. Someone had tucked everything away, and she hoped it had been Angela. She quickly checked through the laptop case, then her bag, and gave Dar a nod. "This is everything." She pulled out a pair of jeans and the Navy sweatshirt and quickly changed, tucking her scrubs away in the bag and sitting down to pull on her sneakers.

Dar walked over and lifted the bag, swinging it to her shoulder. "All right, let's go."

Kerry hesitated and looked around. "I grew up in this room," she said quietly. "Angela and me."

Dar let her eyes flick over the room, then she put her free arm over Kerry's shoulders. "You know you won't lose touch with your sister, right?"

"I know." The blonde woman sighed.

They both looked up at a sound and saw a disheveled chestnut head poke in. "Ker?"

"Angie."

Her sister came in and hurried over, as Kerry stepped forward and hugged her. "Oh my god, Kerry, what in the hell happened? You disappeared, and they wouldn't tell me what was going on, or where you went, and I..."

"Shhh. Yeah, it was pretty bad," Kerry answered softly. "They knocked me out and took me to Bryan's."

Angela released her and stared at her sister in shock. "Oh my god." Her eyes finally drifted to the right as she realized Kerry wasn't alone, and she gasped a little at the pale blue orbs catching the low light in the room. "Oh, I..." She looked closer. "You must be... Dar?"

The taller woman smiled, a glint of white in the gloom. "That's right." She held out a hand courteously. "Nice to meet you, Angela. Wish it was under better circumstances."

"Oh...uh, yeah." Kerry's sister took her hand gingerly and shook it. "I've heard a lot about you."

She smiled tentatively, then turned back to her sister. "So, what happened?"

Kerry sighed. "Well...Dar showed up and sprung me."

"You were doing pretty damn good at that yourself when I got there," Dar interrupted.

Green eyes gave her a mild, affectionate look. "Then we came back here, and I...sort of had it out with Dad, and now...we're leaving." She paused, gazing at her sister. "For good, it looks like." "Oh." Angela took her hands and squeezed them. "Well, I might be right behind you, and I'll keep in touch, okay?"

Kerry smiled and hugged her. "Please. I'll miss you. Will you let Michael know what's going on?"

Angela nodded as they parted. "I'll call him tomorrow. I'm sort of glad he got stuck at school and wasn't here--you know he would have gone ballistic."

Kerry sighed. "I know. Well, we've got to get going. I'll call you when I get back to Miami."

"During the day," Angela told her softly. "Richard's given me a lecture about getting involved."

She made a face. "We had quite a discussion about that."

"All right." The blonde shouldered her laptop. "C'mon, Dar, before Jack comes busting in here."

She gave her sister one last hug, then moved towards the door, trailing her tall, dark shadow behind her. They walked down the stairs and out the front door, passing through the pool of light and onto the path, towards where an anxious-looking Jack was half in and half out of the car, one foot on the ground. He got back in as they arrived, and Dar opened the door, allowing Kerry to slide inside. She started to close the door when the blonde woman held a hand up, then reached out and tugged her coat, sliding over further to make room.

Dar tossed the bag in the back seat and closed the door, then got in next to her lover and exhaled. "Let's get out of here."

Jack needed no further instruction. He started the car and backed out, then turned around and headed down the road. "Nasty?" he asked, after a few silent moments.

Dar sucked on a sore knuckle and glanced at him. "Disgusting." She snuck a peek at the very quiet Kerry, then put a hand on her shoulder. "How are you doing?"

Kerry tore her eyes from the dark landscape and slowly turned her head, peering up at Dar's half shadowed face. "Really sucky," she answered in a hoarse voice. "Dar, why can't I just hate them? It would be so much simpler."

The dark-haired woman circled her shoulders with a powerful arm and pulled her closer. "Sorry, I wish I had an answer for you." She felt Kerry settle against her, an arm wrapping around her stomach as her lover buried her face into her shoulder. "I wish I could change their minds." She felt the catch in Kerry's breathing and pulled her closer, rubbing her back soothingly. Jack looked over and caught her eye, his own full of quiet sympathy.

Dar sighed. "Find a main road, stop at the first place that looks like it doesn't have roaches in the sinks." She pulled her cell phone from her pocket and dialed a number. "Morning," she said softly. "This is Dar Roberts, employee number 4432234." She paused. "I need two tickets from Grand Rapids to Miami, first flight out, airline not important." She listened for a long few moments. "That's fine. Use my credit card on record, though, this is personal."

Kerry stirred at that, but Dar just patted her back and kept up her soothing motion. "Okay, that's great ... Excuse me? Oh." Dar smiled a little. "Yeah, that's true, go ahead and apply them. It's been a real long night and I think I can use a little extra space." She listened again. "Thanks, I'll pick them up at the airport, I appreciate it." She hung up and let her head rest against the back of the seat. "Change in plans, keep going and head for the airport. The first flight out is at eleven. We might as well get a few hours sleep before we all get out of here." She glanced at Jack. "Can you take off from there without causing havoc?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I won't be able to do the kind of speed I did on the way in here, but..." He yawned. "A few hours' sack time sounds like a great idea. I can call Dad, and I'll buy you guys breakfast before your flight, how's that?"

Dar felt Kerry slump more heavily against her, and she realized the exhaustion was overtaking her friend. "Sounds great," Dar admitted. "Oh, damn, I want a bed. I feel like I was run over by a truck." She sighed.

Kerry lifted her head and peered up at her. "Well, he did hit you a few times, everything okay in there?" She patted Dar's chest.

"Hit you?" Jack's head snapped up and around. "Who? What?"

Kerry put her head back down. "My father's bodyguard. He tried to get the drop on Quick Draw McGraw here; who proceeded to kick his butt all over the room."

Jack's face split into a grin. "Quick Draw, huh?" He laughed softly.

Dar groaned. "Just drive," she growled.

The hotel at the airport was small, and the desk clerk was rubbing his eyes when he finally came out and registered them. "One room?" he asked in a mumble.

"Two," Jack answered, giving Dar a sideways look. "Adjoining."

She didn't protest. They got their keys and trudged upstairs, to rooms smelling of must and damp brick. Dar automatically flipped on the air conditioner, then she went for the bed--the long days catching up with her. She let herself down on her back and felt her muscles go limp in reaction.

"Damn." She hadn't really been counting on the fight with Kyle. His sudden appearance had shocked her senses, and triggered a surge of adrenaline that had carried her through the battle, but now... "I'm getting too old for this stuff," she muttered.

Jack had disappeared into his room, and Kerry finished up the soda she'd gotten from the vending machine, then shut the light off. She crawled into bed next to Dar and settled on her side. Her eyes searched the sharp profile so close to her. "I don't think I've thanked you yet." Dar rolled her head to one side and peered wearily at her. "It's an odd feeling, you know," Kerry let her chin rest on her forearm, "having your own knight in shining armor and all."

A soft snort. "I am not any such thing," Dar objected. "And we both know that."

Kerry shook her head. "You may know that, but I don't," she replied in quiet reflection. "Oh, maybe I could write off the arriving by supersonic jet part. Hey, it was opportunistic, right?"

Dar rolled over and faced her, only inches separating them. "Right."

"Mmm. But not the standing up to my father, and not the ass kicking you gave Kyle. I heard what you said to him, by the way," Kerry continued. "So, thank you, Dar. I've lived my life under the belief that people act for themselves and their own interests, now I know that's not the case."

A dark brow edged up. "Who said it wasn't in my own interests?" she inquired softly. "It was very much in my best interests to make damn sure you were safe and whole." She reached over and brushed her knuckles against Kerry's cheek. "I very selfishly wanted you back." Kerry blushed a little and ducked her head. "I mean it. That was just pure self-interest, not a noble thing about it." Dar shook her head firmly. "Besides, you have any idea how long it would take me to find another assistant half as good as you?"

"Dar, I was trying to be serious," the blonde woman protested gently.

Soft fingertips caressed her jaw. "Whatever the effort, it was worth it, Kerry. Believe me," Dar answered, just as seriously.

The blonde cocked her head in question. "I know you said you knew where I was because they submitted the charges to my benefits card, but how did you find out, Dar?"

"Mmm." Dar rolled over onto her back and stretched, feeling a wave of exhaustion roll over her. "I had a...I don't know, a nightmare, I guess. I woke up in a sweat, that's for sure, at about twelve thirty." She let her eyes close, remembering.

"Twelve thirty?" Kerry murmured. "That's about when...yeah, that's when they knocked me out. I remember looking at my watch right before I went into the study."

"Well, I knew I couldn't go back to sleep, so I dialed up the office. And when I connected, a bot I had running popped up and displayed the fact that your card had been used, and I..."

"Whoa. You had a bot checking for that?" Kerry asked, puzzled. "Did you suspect something was going to happen?"

"Uh." Dar peeked at her from the corner of one eye. "Not exactly."

Kerry crawled closer and put her chin on Dar's shoulder. "Not exactly?"

"No, well, since you had that close encounter with the milk truck, I, um..." Dar was embarrassed, and she felt her skin heat with a blush. "I set it up just in case anything... Well, I mean, it's not like you have a contact card on you. I mean, whatever... If something happened to you, I'd, um..."

"Dar, that's very sweet." Kerry gazed at her.

"Practical," the executive argued. "A simple need for information."

They looked at each other, and Kerry gently kissed the shoulder she was leaning on. "Thank you for caring, Dar," she said very softly.

"You don't know how much that means to me right now."

The taller woman gently pulled her closer and slid both arms around her. "I'm sorry things didn't work out with your folks, Kerry." She tucked the blonde head down against her and kissed it. Kerry allowed herself to sink into the comforting warmth at last, breathing in Dar's distinctive scent, and settling her head down on her lover's broad shoulder. "Me too." She sighed. "I guess I have no family now," she added sadly.

"Sure you do," Dar murmured, her eyes closed.

Kerry tilted her head and regarded her in silence, then she smiled to herself and put her head back down, at last allowing sleep to wash over her.

Chapter Thirty-Three

HER PAGER WENT off at nine, and Dar had to force her eyes open, as her body complained heartily about leaving the warm, somnolent nest she was snuggled into. The thin curtain in the room was blocking most of the daylight, and it was nice and dark inside.

"Ugh," she groaned softly, blinking the sleep out of her eyes and peering down at the still sleeping Kerry. The blonde woman was sprawled half across her, and Dar could see the strain and exhaustion that still marked her friend's face.

Poor kid. Dar absently stroked the soft golden hair lying across her chest. *I can't believe they did that to her. She didn't deserve that.* Kerry had been very withdrawn since they'd left her parents' house, and Dar knew she was probably still in shock. Dar took a moment to reflect on the last twenty-four hours, scarcely able to believe what they'd both been through. "Damn." She muttered softly to herself. "I'll be glad to get home."

"Am home," Kerry mumbled, letting out a sigh and tightening her grip, still mostly asleep.

The taller woman smiled, then rubbed her lover's back. "Ker?" she called softly.

Pale green eyes very slowly fluttered open and focused on her. "Uh?"

"We've got a plane to catch," Dar told her, half apologetically, smoothing the fair hair back from her forehead.

"Oh, right." With an obvious effort, Kerry pushed herself up on her elbows, then let her head drop and rest on Dar's arm. "Oh god, I feel like I've been run over by a truck." She moaned. Dar yawned. "Me too, must have been all the excitement." She rolled over and paused, catching her breath as the bruises she'd collected a few hours previous made themselves known.

"Ah...whoa."

Kerry slid over and took her arm. "What's wrong?" she asked anxiously, "Are you okay?" Her taller companion slowly straightened. "Just a few aches, I'm all right." She stood up and cautiously stretched out her body, then trudged over to the bathroom and flipped on the light, running water into the sink. "Jack offered to buy us breakfast. We can do that, then head for the gate and get out of here." She splashed water on her face and exhaled. "We unfortunately have to change planes in Detroit."

"Sounds wonderful," Kerry murmured. "The sooner the better." She sighed. "Detroit, huh? Well, I can get a Lions sweatshirt. I always liked them."

Jack poked his head in the door between their two rooms. "Did I hear my name?" The Navy pilot inquired brightly. "And something about a Lion?" They washed and headed off to breakfast.

THE FLIGHT WAS uneventful. Kerry was happy to sleep through most of it, curled up in her first class seat near the window, with Dar's comforting presence on the other side of her. The slanting sun woke her, and she peered out the window to see an endless sea of grass spreading out beneath the plane's wings, the patchwork of green interspersed with the odd ripple of dark blue and forest green. She turned her head and gazed at Dar, who was staring off into the distance, her eyes half closed. "Dar?" She reached over and touched the taller woman's arm. The blue eyes turned to meet hers. "Hmm? Almost home."

Kerry nodded. "We're over the 'glades. What's the weather like?"

A smile. "Lower eighties, sunny, chance of showers tonight."

"Oh, an odd day." Kerry smiled back, letting her fingers move lightly over Dar's tanned skin.

"You look really wiped."

"I am," Dar admitted. "I couldn't sleep night before last, then I had that early flight. We ran around playing football and all that yesterday, then last night..." She exhaled. "I'm running on nothing but cussedness right now."

Kerry leaned over and rested her cheek against Dar's arm. "Lend me some cussedness for a while, then, okay?"

The plane continued its descent, and the greens of the Everglades slowly morphed into cinderblock buildings, then the paved lots of the outer-rim warehouses. Then the heavy industrial section flowed under the wings, storage buildings directly in the flight path of the airport. Lower and lower, and finally Kerry saw the distinctive arch of the 826 freeway pass under them. She settled back against the leather seat as the plane dropped to the ground and landed with a soft hop on the long, sun-bleached runway. Green trees surrounded them, and Kerry felt a sense of relief as the plane taxied up to the terminal, nudging into place at a gate.

They got their luggage, and Dar handed her claim ticket to the valet service. "Easier than parking myself," she commented to Kerry, who had been very quiet. "You want me to drop you at your place, or...?" She was a little uncertain, knowing what she wanted Kerry to do, but not wanting to push her lover if Kerry felt like some time alone to think about things.

The blonde woman was silent for a bit, then she looked up as the Lexus was brought around.

"Um, to be honest, Dar, I don't know if I want to be by myself right now," she admitted. "No

one's going to be around my complex, and..." She let her eyes rest on Dar's face. "And I think I need a shoulder to lean on."

A smile crossed the taller woman's face. "I know a little island you might be interested in," she commented quietly. "I think I even have some turkey roll."

Kerry nodded. "I'd love that." She knew the reaction to everything would hit soon, and the peace of Dar's condo was very enticing. She certainly didn't want to face Colleen or her other friends with explanations yet. They got in the car and Dar pulled out cautiously.

DAR WENT IN first, holding the door open for Kerry to follow, then shutting it behind them as the cool peace of the apartment surrounded them both. "Well." Dar tossed her bag down on the couch, then took Kerry's from her and held it for a moment.

Kerry walked over to the sliding glass doors and peered out, pressing her fingertips against the glass and absorbing the huge expanse of green stretching to the horizon. "It's so pretty out there," she commented softly.

Dar studied her, then chewed her lip a bit. "Um." It was horrible timing, but... "Kerry?" she called, tentatively.

The blonde woman half turned, peering at her. "Yeah?" She peered at her lover, surprised by a sudden, perceptible awkwardness that was painfully evident to her. "What's up?"

"Um, you know, you spend a lot of time here and I..." Dar focused her eyesight on the tile. "I mean, I hope you spend a lot more time here, but it's... I mean it's kind of senseless to be carrying things back and forth all the time, so I thought..." She found herself uncharacteristically fumbling for words. "I thought maybe you'd... Well, I have all those spare rooms upstairs, and I thought maybe you'd like to sort of keep some...stuff...um, here."

Hands covered hers where they rested on the bag, and she looked up in startlement to see Kerry gazing at her from a very short distance. She took the duffel bag and slung it over her shoulder, then took Dar's hands in her own. "That's incredibly sweet and generous of you, Dar. I know how much you value your private space."

Dar searched her face for a minute. "Does that mean yes or no?" She managed a half smile.

"I...um, I... Yes," Kerry finally got out. "I'd really like that. Thank you."

"Good." The taller woman exhaled in relief. "You can, um, pick out whichever one you like, though I kinda thought you might like the one on the end." She rubbed her neck. "I'm going to get some coffee going; I think we both could use it." She rubbed her neck and pretended an offhandedness she simply didn't feel.

Kerry nodded. "Good idea, I'll just go...um..." She patted the bag. "Put stuff away." She smiled at Dar. "Be right back. "

Dar watched her disappear up the stairs and allowed her face to crease into a relaxed, delighted grin as she turned and made her way back into the kitchen. It wasn't like... Okay, so it was a tiny step towards Kerry moving in with her, but she knew they both weren't ready for that. This seemed a good first move, though, and it was practical. It would let her test out the idea of actually living with someone, which she certainly wasn't used to.

She knew she loved Kerry, there wasn't any doubt about that, but Dar was also a realist, and she knew herself pretty well. She'd been living alone for many years, and adjusting to a roommate, no matter how beloved, would be a trial. *Wouldn't it?*

Dar nibbled on a bit of dried apricot she'd taken from the refrigerator and put on a pot of coffee, using the newly delivered flavored blend she'd gotten before she left. Hazelnut; she sniffed approvingly before peeking in the refrigerator again, and was relieved at seeing a somewhat

meager but adequate variety of groceries. "Ooo." She leaned forward and examined a neatly packaged bunch of ripe green grapes, then checked the crisper for the small baby finger carrots she'd asked for, knowing Kerry loved to nibble on them.

"Wonder if she'd like those dipped in chocolate?" Dar mused absently, selecting one and examining it. "No, that probably defeats the purpose, right?" She bit the end off the carrot and chewed it. "Hmm." She rolled the sweet pulp around in her mouth and swallowed it. "That's not too bad," she admitted, "for a vegetable."

She checked the rest of the groceries, then wandered into the living room, considering. "Have to have that second ISDN line dropped in up there, that second room could be another office." Dar chewed another piece of apricot thoughtfully. "This could work."

KERRY GOT TO the top of the stairs and stopped; she leaned against the wall and just closed her eyes. It was just all happening too fast, she realized, her mind was still whirling with the situation regarding her family, and now this.

"Okay." She shook the hair out of her eyes and tried to settle herself. "It was just a really, really nice thing for Dar to do, probably because she knows how weirded out I am right now." She found a smile twitching her lips up anyway, and she moved slowly from room to room, peering into each one until she reached the last one.

She nudged the door open and peeked inside, remembering the wide, open space and beautiful view. *Yep*. Kerry walked all the way inside, feeling the carpet thick and comfortable under her feet, and looked around. The room was a pale shade of greenish-blue, with pale wood furniture in it. There was a tall dresser with six drawers tucked into one corner, and a long set of drawers across the length of the room, with a neatly framed mirror in the center. A door in the corner led to a walk-in closet larger than her kitchen, and on the other wall was a door which led into an eggshell-and-cobalt bathroom, complete with a corner stall shower and a large whirlpool-equipped bathtub raised up for easy entrance. "So." Kerry leaned against the wall and gazed at the room. "You think I'd like this one, huh, Dar?" She walked over to the tall dresser, and pulled a drawer out. "You're right, I do."

She unpacked her bag and put everything away, then went to the window and let the ocean's mellow movement calm her. A nutty scent distracted her, however, and she turned and made her way to the door, running her fingers through her hair to order it a little, and almost collided with Dar. "Whoa."

The taller woman held out a cup. "Here," she offered. "Everything okay in here for you?" Kerry took a sip of the fragrant beverage and swallowed it. "Mmm." She glanced behind her. "Of course it is, and you know it." She exhaled. "Thanks." She looked up and noticed Dar's bloodshot eyes and weary expression. "C'mon." She tucked a hand into the crook of her lover's elbow. "I need to go sit down." They walked downstairs, and Kerry settled in the corner of the couch, sipping her coffee and letting her head rest against the soft leather while Dar hunted out the remote and flipped on the large-screen TV.

"How are you doing?" the taller woman asked as she seated herself next to Kerry on the couch, putting her coffee down and clasping a hand over the blonde woman's knee.

Kerry stifled a yawn. "Oh, I'm all right, I guess," she answered softly. "I just keep trying not to think about it." Her father's angry, disgusted voice echoed loudly in her ears. "You know, I...I'm not sure what I expected," she mused. "Anger, yeah, I thought he'd yell, and scream, but..." A pause. "I didn't expect that."

"How could you have?" Dar asked reasonably.

"Oh, I don't know, Dar. Surely I should have seen that coming," Kerry responded bitterly. "It was pretty naïve of me to think we'd just be able to talk this out, huh? That he'd listen to reason, or..." Her shoulders slumped. "Or that I'd matter to him as a person instead of window dressing," she finished in a low voice.

"You couldn't have predicted that," her lover insisted. "Hell, I didn't predict that, and I always expect the worst from people, not the best, like you do."

Kerry sighed. "I don't know, maybe you've got the right idea."

Dar tipped her chin up a bit. "Don't let them take that away from you, my friend. I'd rather you think the best of people, not the worst. After all, where would I be if you did?"

The blonde woman rested her head against her hand. "In Washington, enjoying your holiday," she muttered. "Instead of here, tired, hurting, and having to listen to my hard luck story."

"Kerry." Dar put a sympathetic hand on her back. "I wouldn't trade where I am right now for anything." Hooded green eyes peeked up at her. "Honestly," Dar commented softly, "I know it's hard for you, and I'm sorry you had to go through this, but I don't regret one single second of the past twenty-four hours, for my part of it."

A tiny smile. "You're a good friend, Dar." Kerry reached out and took her hand, bringing it up and pressing it against her lips. "You're the best friend anyone could ever hope for." She felt the tears starting to well up, and she closed her eyes, fighting it. "And they can't understand why I love you." A sob escaped her. "Oh god."

Dar pulled her close. "Easy, easy. I got you."

"After everything he's done," Kerry whispered, "everything he's taken from me, I couldn't let him take you too." She felt her composure shatter, and a wall of emotion swamped her senses. "I need you so much."

Dar swallowed, feeling Kerry come apart, her words dissolving into hiccupping sobs that wrenched her body with little shudders. She took a deep breath and just hung on, murmuring reassurances and rocking Kerry in whatever comfort she could muster.

Kerry needed that. She needed Dar's touch and the warmth of her body, and the comforting scent which surrounded her. "They hate me," she got out. "Dar, I don't want them to hate me for this."

Dar's jaw clenched, and she exhaled slowly. "I know." She felt Kerry's body jerk as she tried to catch her breath, and a soft moan escaped her. "Shhh."

"S'not fair," Kerry whispered.

"No, it's not," Dar replied, rubbing her back.

A long pause, and Dar could feel the sobs slowly subsiding. She kept up her gentle petting until Kerry's breathing evened out and steadied, and she could sense a calm returning to her lover.

"Was that stuff you told him true?" Kerry finally whispered in a hoarse tone.

Dar hesitated, not wanting to hurt her friend further. But lying, at this stage, would be pointless.

"Yes. I was able to isolate those two pieces of information. I...you can look at it later if you want to."

Another long pause. "Who's Pamela?"

"Kerry, you don't need to talk about this now. Wait a while," Dar pleaded. "The information's not going anywhere. Just rest. It's been a hell of a long day, and we're both exhausted."

Red-rimmed green eyes peered up at her. "Just answer." She sniffled, wiping at her eyes with one hand.

Dar sighed. "A woman your father's been supporting for twenty years. She has three kids, two boys and a girl. They're his."

Kerry's jaw dropped.

"Yeah, and he has the balls to say anything about you," Dar stated darkly. "That alone would blow his career out of the water." Her eyes narrowed. "I hate hypocrites." She gently dabbed at Kerry's eyes with her sleeve.

"Wow," Kerry breathed softly. "I can't imagine that, no wonder he turned white when you said her name." She felt better all of a sudden. "How do you know those kids are his?"

A soft snort. "DNA test results entered in the computer."

"Oh." The blonde woman closed her eyes. "Can I take a look at all that stuff later?"

"Sure." Dar eased back into the corner of the couch and gently pulled Kerry down with her, tucking the smaller woman in between herself and the couch back. "Just relax now, you're safe here."

Kerry nodded "I know. Dar?"

"Mmm?"

"Do you think I should tell my mother about that?"

Whoa. Loaded question. "Let's get some sleep before we talk about all this, okay?" Dar told her.

"I'm too tired to think that through right now."

Kerry looked up and gave her a little, weary smile. "Sorry, my head's just spinning. You're right." She closed her eyes, and nestled closer. "I love you."

Dar felt a wall of sleep overwhelming her. "Love you too," she murmured, surrendering to her body's demands.

Sea green eyes regarded her with wistful pride, before they too, closed.

Kerry woke near sunset, opening her eyes to see Dar still fast asleep, her body tangled around the blonde woman's. That was all right, it gave her a while to just sit and think, allowing herself to absorb fully the last twenty-four hours.

It hurt, she acknowledged, even though she'd resented her parents and dreaded flying home for those far-too-long holidays. But in a way, it was also kind of a relief to finally have it out in the open, and not have to pretend, or put them off constantly. She was free to live her life and do whatever she wanted to do.

Even if that whatever included this tall, beautiful woman who had pretty much put herself on the line for Kerry, in more ways than one. She sat thinking about Dar actually getting into the cockpit of a fighter jet just to come and find her, and a silly, incredulous smile edged onto her face. It was like a fairy tale, really. No one ever did that in real life, right? *Of course not.* And yet, she had, making nothing of it as though it were an everyday occurrence for her. "My hero," Kerry whispered softly, curling a dark lock around one finger as she gazed at her sleeping lover's face.

Her eyes fell on the neat bandage taped across the cut the stool had made in Dar's neck, and she pursed her lips. *She's lucky she moves as fast as she does*, Kerry reflected wryly. *I would have clobbered her otherwise, poor thing.* She felt very protective of Dar suddenly and felt a fierce surge of simple affection for her, beyond their physical relationship.

Idle words formed in her head, and she let them chase themselves around a little, ordering and reordering them. Finally she smiled wistfully to herself. "Haven't done that in a long, long time," she whispered, winding her fingers around Dar's, which were resting on her hip. "Didn't think I even remembered how, but there's something in you that touches something way down deep inside me, Dar. And it makes me feel things so strongly, it's like seeing life in a million colors suddenly, instead of just a few." The words floated by again, and she closed her eyes and recited them silently, tasting their depth.

The winds of life are circling Over grass and under trees, Touching my heart and lifting me up to soar. And as my eyes fall upon you, an ancient song surrounds me Binding our souls together with sure hands. The future lies an uncertain path Under dark and stormy skies, But I will walk in sunlight beside you forever.

Kerry smiled in silent wonder, then her eyes flickered open as a fingertip traced her lips. "Oh." "What's so funny?" Dar inquired curiously, her voice husky from sleep.

"Life," Kerry answered softly. "You don't have to get up. Go back to sleep, Dar. You still look pretty tired." She smoothed the disordered hair back out of the taller woman's eyes. "I'm going to root around and scare us up some dinner."

A frank, lazy grin appeared. "Scare is probably the appropriate word. I think I've got grapes, milk, some frozen pizzas, and a can of fruit cocktail," Dar admitted. "Maybe we should order in." "Ah ah ah." Kerry shook her finger playfully. "Where's the challenge in that? I like this, Dar. I get a chance to use my imagination. Give me a minute, okay?"

Blue eyes gentled. "You feeling better?"

Kerry exhaled. "Yeah, now that the shock is kind of over. I just want to get on with my life, you know?" She played with the edge of Dar's sleeve. "It's weird to realize I don't have to worry about their opinions anymore." A shrug. "And, I think it was also that I was just really tired, my defenses were sort of shot."

Dar relaxed back into the soft leather and let her hands wander down the denim-covered leg resting over her own. She could feel the muscles tensing as she explored, and she put strong hands to use in a gentle massage. "Maybe in time they'll change their minds," she offered.

"Kerry, no matter what, you're still their daughter."

Kerry exhaled slowly. "Do you think your mother will ever change her mind?" She looked up, right into Dar's eyes.

Dar's gaze dropped to the surface of the couch. "That's different. She's angry with me because she thinks I don't understand how much she loved him." Dar spoke quietly. "I told her... We got in a big argument after he died when I told her he'd gone the way he'd always wanted to, and she should just let him go."

"Mmm." Kerry twined her fingers with Dar's.

"She told me I didn't understand, and probably never would." Dar remained silent for a moment.

"Maybe she was right."

"She must have loved him a great deal," Kerry murmured.

"He was everything to her. She'd look at him, and it was like he was some god or something."

Dar sighed. "She knew, before they came to the house. She'd been beside herself all day long."

"Maybe, maybe they were soulmates," Kerry said hesitantly, the word tasting sweet but strange on her tongue. "You know that old story--two halves, that kind of thing."

A long moment of silence while Dar considered her words. "I...I never believed in any of that stuff, but..." She shrugged. "Who knows?" Her eyes studied the blonde woman. "Do you believe in that, in there being such a thing?"

Kerry kept quiet, thinking about the question. "I didn't used to," she admitted finally. "I never considered myself a romantic person, or someone who believed in great, mythical love." A pause. "But, I don't know, it's a really nice kind of possibility, you know?"

"Yeah," Dar murmured.

"When I was up in Michigan, I got to talk to an old pastor of mine, Pastor Robert. He used to talk about that all the time, so..." Kerry carefully kept her eyes on her hands. "And, um, well, he kind of told me about that, and how he thought you could tell. I mean, if you've found yours, that is."

"Yeah?" Dar cleared her throat. "Just for argument's sake, what did he say?" She propped her head up on one hand, and paid close attention to a seam in the leather.

Kerry lifted her eyes and studied the dark, bowed head. "I, um...he...um, he said you can tell, because when you look at that person, you see everything you need to complete yourself."

Faintly startled blue eyes lifted and met hers. "Which sorta makes sense, I guess," Kerry added in a low mutter.

Dar simply breathed for a long instant. "In-interesting theory," she finally managed to say, clearing her throat when her voice came out a touch hoarse, her eyes still locked with Kerry's.

"Isn't it?" Kerry replied softly.

"It, um," Dar rubbed the back of her neck and exhaled, "...has a certain logic to it." She pursed her lips, then glanced up into Kerry's eyes again. "Did you say something about dinner?"

Kerry smiled, feeling a happy little jolt in her chest. "Uh, yeah. Let me go see what I can find." She leaned forward and brushed her lips against her lover's, enjoying the tingle of heat that stirred up in her guts. "On the other hand..." she murmured, delighting in the distraction as her body forgot about dinner and concentrated on something equally as tasty.

Dar's hand slid slowly off her hip, and she felt a teasing touch exploring her ribs under her T-shirt. "Mmm," Kerry murmured softly, unbuttoning Dar's cotton polo and tugging it loose from her belt. "By the way, have I told you how inspiring you are?"

Teeth nibbled her ear teasingly. "Inspiring?" the deep voice inquired curiously. "How so?"

"You ignite my dreams," Kerry replied softly, her hands exploring hungrily. Dar's skin was amazingly soft, and had a warm, silky texture she really liked. The muscles felt thick and strong under their light layer of softness, and the blonde woman traced their contours with sensual delight.

"I do?" Dar sounded a bit surprised. "Imagine that." She let her hands slide down Kerry's waistline, long fingers working loose the top button of her jeans with a soft pop.

"Coincidentally..." Another pop, as the second button came free. "You..." A third. "Dominate mine." The last button loosened, and she slid her hands under the heavy fabric. "I've been dreaming about us together since before that trip."

Kerry arched her back, feeling the jeans slide slowly down her thighs, and the cool air of the room brush her bare skin. "So have I," she whispered as she unbuckled the belt holding up Dar's Dockers. "Guess it was just meant to be." She ducked her head to allow Dar to pull her T-shirt off as she nudged the cotton pants off her lover. "Mmm," Kerry growled softly as they slid together, and she kissed Dar's belly button, working her way teasingly up from there.

A slow, teasing touch traveled up her thigh, and Kerry let out a soft groan as her body shuddered, anxious for her lover's attentions. Dar had pushed her gently back and slid a leg between hers, and Kerry leaned into her, reaching for the soft skin that was so tantalizingly close. Every touch just made her want more, and she rapidly felt her senses forgetting where she was and focusing on the touch, taste, and scent of her partner.

Until the knowing nips and nibbles and touches wound her body up to the breaking point, then released it into a thundering wash of sensation that left her panting in a helpless shiver. "God." She pawed weakly at Dar's chest, as the taller woman gathered her in and wrapped her in a loving embrace. Her heart was pounding, and she clung to Dar, catching her breath.

Dar nuzzled her neck, rubbing her side gently. "You okay?"

"Ungh." Kerry took a deep breath and released it. "Oh yeah. I'm great." She nibbled lightly across Dar's bare collarbone and then moved lower. "So, where's this scar from?" She licked the mark in question, near the taller woman's shoulder.

"Mmm." Dar found it hard to focus as Kerry slid an exploring hand down her belly. "Fishhook caught...oh...me."

"Uh huh, and this one?" Kerry moved lower, across the curve of her left breast.

"Uh..."

Kerry continued her exploration, as her fingers felt muscles jump under her touch. "Uh? I don't think I know what an 'uh' is," she teased gently.

"Fell off my bike," Dar managed to say, faintly.

"Oh yeah?" Kerry chuckled, moving in for a better angle. "Did it hurt?"

Dar had no idea what she was talking about as her body shamelessly abandoned itself to Kerry's inquisitive touch. "No, it feels wonderful," she finally muttered, finding a smiling pair of lips that captured hers, then slipped away and continued on their way.

THE SOFT SOUNDS of motion from the kitchen floated to her ears as Dar lay limply on the couch, about as totally relaxed as a human being could get and not dissolve into jello. She kept her eyes closed and let her mind drift from subject to subject, nothing really making an impact on her conscious mind.

Kerry, though relatively inexperienced, certainly seemed to have her number down pat. Dar stretched a little and relaxed again. That had never happened before. Usually it took time, to get to know the other person's likes and dislikes, and have hers learned as well. Not this time.

Dar put her hands behind her head and exhaled, glancing down at her half-clad body. It was almost as though they were just...

"Hey." Kerry poked her head out and smiled, letting her eyes linger over the long, bare legs extended on the couch. "You hungry?"

Dar enjoyed the look, indulging her ego guiltily. "Are you?" She lifted a saucy eyebrow and broke into a laugh as Kerry blushed a deep red. Dar found the mixture of gentle innocence and barely veiled desire incredibly attractive, and she rolled up and off the couch, padding over to where her lover was standing. The green eyes dropped as she approached. "Hey." She gently laced her fingers through Kerry's hair and tipped her head back up. "You're beautiful when you blush."

Kerry gazed at her, lips twitching a little. "I am?" she murmured softly.

Dar traced the flushed skin, watching Kerry's eyes flutter closed as she leaned into the touch.

"Yes, you are," she answered honestly, smoothing the fair hair back. "But I'm sure you've heard that before."

Kerry shook her head. "No, I usually get described as, um, 'cute.'" She let her eyes open and smiled at her taller companion. She wrinkled her nose. "Now you, on the other hand..." She reached up and brushed a fingertip over Dar's cheekbone. "Wow."

She was rewarded with a faint blush of her own. "Don't you tell me you've never heard that," Kerry chided with a grin.

Dar put her arms around her lover. "Never from someone I really wanted to hear it from before." The words slipped out, startling her, and exposing a rawness she hadn't really intended.

Kerry just hugged her back, giddily flattered. "C'mon, I'm going to burn something." She slipped an arm around Dar's waist and pulled her into the kitchen.

"So, what did you conjure up?" Dar asked as she sniffed interestedly at the pot bubbling away on the stove. "Looks like stew."

"Ooo." Kerry patted her. "Right guess, first time. Well, given what I had to work with, it was all I could really do. It's got those two packages of the shish kebab meat you had in the freezer in it,

some canned vegetables, and soup you had back in the hurricane supplies." She peered at Dar. "Tomorrow, we're going to go shopping, okay?" She tapped Dar on the shoulder with her serving spoon.

"Good idea," Dar deadpanned, "I'm almost out of Frosted Flakes." Her eyes twinkled as she dodged a mock blow. "Hey, I got you those little carrots and fresh fruit. Don't I get points?" Green eyes slid sideways and regarded her as Kerry stirred her creation. "Actually, yes, you do. That was very thoughtful, Dar," she commented. "Makes me feel right at home." Hands settled lightly on her shoulders and squeezed. "Good," Dar answered with a chuckle. "Can I drain those noodles for you?"

They took their dinner out onto the patio and set it down on the small stone table that faced the ocean. Dar disappeared inside and returned with a bottle of wine and two glasses, setting them down and opening the bottle with a graceful motion. She poured Kerry a glass and then herself one, then she sat down, propping her bare feet up on the spare chair. "Nice night out."

Kerry leaned back in her chair and appropriated the fourth one as a footstool. "Very. Not too hot but not cold, either." She picked up her bowl of noodles and stew and started eating, her eyes watching the moonlit horizon. "Look at those lights. Are those cargo ships?"

Dar leaned over to see where she was gazing. "Mmm. One of them is; the other two are cruise ships. I think that one's the *Norway*." She shifted a little so their shoulders were brushing, then settled down with her dish.

"I always wanted to go on a cruise," Kerry commented, biting a piece of stew meat in half and chewing it. "I'd love to take you on one, but I guess both of us disappearing at the same time for a week would be a little conspicuous, huh?"

Dar chuckled wryly. "Just a little. Pity, because the last bonus Alastair sent me was two tickets to an Alaskan Passage cruise." She took a mouthful of noodles. "This is wonderful, by the way. You're amazing."

"Thanks." Kerry smiled. "Alaskan passage, huh? Wow, I've always wanted to see inside a glacier." She munched on a string bean. "I've seen the Northern Lights twice, when we had sunspots, and you could just see them at night up in Michigan. But I'd like to see them in their proper place, and I've heard you can hear them, too."

Dar nodded, resting her head against the wall and gazing up at the huge, full moon. "They hiss, supposedly, kind of like the surf on the beach." The thought of spending a week with Kerry exploring Alaska suddenly seemed very, very attractive, and she sighed quietly to herself. "Yeah, it is too bad."

"Mmm," Kerry mused, "do you like hiking?"

A chuckle. "As long as there's a comfortable lodge at the end of the trail, sure. I'm not much for rough camping," Dar replied. "Another reason the military was probably not a good idea." She paused. "Maybe we could work a long weekend in, go up to Colorado and hike around a little. They've got good horseback riding there, too."

Kerry grinned. "Ooo, I'd like that. I haven't been riding since forever, I miss it." She took a sip of her wine and swallowed. "Wow, that's nice. Hey, have you ever been up to the wine country, in California?"

Dar shook her head. "No, can't say I have, I hear it's nice up there, though. Have you?"

"Twice. Maybe that can be another long weekend. You can take a tour of all the vineyards, and it's really pretty," Kerry replied enthusiastically. "I've always wanted to go back there."

Dar felt a silly smile crossing her face. She masked it by lifting her glass and drinking a deep swallow. "That sounds fun," she agreed soberly. "You interested in some diving tomorrow? Weather's supposed to be nice."

A nod. "After we go restock your kitchen." Kerry pointed her fork at her. "Even my creativity has its limits. I don't think there's much I can do with grapes, milk, pizza, and peanuts." She shook her head. "I don't understand how you haven't just keeled over from scurvy or whatever it is people get who live on ice cream."

Dar chuckled. "I take vitamins," she admitted. "We should probably get you a BC that actually fits and a weight belt. That one you've been using is too heavy. Tell you what, we can go out to the dive shop and stop at the big Publix off Washington. How's that?"

Kerry finished off her portion of stew and licked her fork. "Sounds good to me," she agreed readily. "Though, I don't know, give me a few months, and I think I'll need that heavier weight belt." She gave Dar a rueful look as she patted her stomach. "Not that everyone, with the exception of my mother, hasn't told me how good I look," she conceded.

Dar studied her. "To hell with what everyone says, how do you feel?" she asked bluntly. There was a long pause as Kerry gazed out over the ocean. "Great," she finally answered in a reflective voice. She let her hand fall to her bare thigh, flexing it and watching the muscles move under her skin. "Getting a lot more of these, I think, instead of just more padding," she admitted. "Feels kinda good, actually."

Dar reached over and extended her hand, smiling when Kerry took it, and curled her fingers around the taller woman's. "Well, in my opinion, you look fantastic, and I'm the one who gets to see you naked the most, so..."

Kerry burst into an embarrassed giggle. "Dar!"

"Hey, it's true," her partner protested with a smile, then she turned her attention to the water.

"Can I interest you in a little walk in the moonlight?"

A squeeze on her fingers. "Absolutely."

Dar stood and collected their bowls. "C'mon, I hear a hot fudge sundae calling me down at the market."

Kerry latched on to the back of Dar's shirt, following her inside. "Where you go, I go," she assured the taller woman lightly.

They both stopped and looked at each other, twin shivers going down two spines. "Well," Dar finally said softly. "I think I like that idea."

Kerry nibbled her lip, wondering where the words had come from. "Mmm, yeah, me too." She smiled. "Guess we'd better put on some shorts though. Meet you back down here." She trotted up the stairs, leaving a quietly reflective Dar behind.

Chapter Thirty-Four

"WHAT ABOUT THIS one?" Kerry picked up the nearest jacket and held it up. "It's...colorful." Dar glanced up, then chuckled. "Oh yeah, no doubt about it. I'd be able to find you at 100 fathoms in that."

The Dacor buoyancy compensator had bright pink and green pockets and was dazzlingly bright. Kerry slipped it over her shoulders and faced her friend. "Well?"

The taller woman sauntered over and adjusted the device, buckling it across Kerry's chest and stepping back to judge the effect. "Nice."

Kerry grinned and bounced a little, then unbuckled the catches and shrugged out of the vest. "Okay, and you said a new weight belt, right?" She mentally added up the cost and nodded a

little. Her bills were paid for the month, and her raise allowed for little luxuries like this. She picked up a dark pink web belt, liberally studded with small pink weights. "How's this?"

Dar studied it, then hefted the weight. "Yeah, that'd be okay," she judged. "Here." She added a pair of snug-fitting neoprene booties. "Oh." She went to a rack holding wetsuits and pulled off one with short sleeves and mid-thigh length legs. "This, too."

Kerry fingered the thin neoprene. "Ah, to protect against jellyfish?"

Dar stepped closer. "No, I just think you'd look really good in it," she muttered softly, her eyes twinkling.

"Tch. Dar." Kerry's face wrinkled up into a mildly embarrassed smile. "Let me pass on this right now. It's a little over my budget."

Blue eyes flicked over the supplies, then to her face. "I could, um..."

A hand touched her arm. "No." Kerry's voice dropped a little, and she glanced around. "I appreciate the thought, Dar, but I'm responsible for myself, okay?"

The dark-haired woman drew breath, then let it trickle out her lips. "All right, I was just..."

Kerry smiled at her. "I know, and I let you get away with it with my fish and those plane tickets, but it's important to me to stand on my own two feet."

Dar looked almost comically crestfallen. "Um..." She looked around. "Look, the truth is, between my salary and the bonuses Alastair keeps dumping on me, I've got this huge lump of funds stuck in a couple of accounts at the credit union, and I've..." She paused and exhaled. "I haven't had anyone in my life in a while that I really wanted to spend it on." She shrugged a little. "I didn't mean to insult you or anything."

Kerry was at a loss for words. "Uh." She frantically searched for some kind of response, and realized she was just out of luck. So she merely looked up into Dar's eyes and tried to express what her heart was feeling silently.

Her companion produced a little smile, and glanced around the store. "We about done here?"

For a sophisticated, intelligent, aggressive woman, Dar certainly could present an excellent imitation of a spanked puppy sometimes, Kerry noted mournfully. Maybe it was the way she stuck her hands in the pockets of her shorts. "Dar?"

Those pretty blue eyes focused on her. "Yes?"

Kerry gathered up her vest, belt, and booties, then handed her taller companion the wetsuit and lifted her eyebrows. "Since you think it'll enhance the visuals." A flash of white as Dar smiled and took possession of the suit. *A compromise*, Kerry reasoned as she made her way towards the cash register. "Hey." She stopped, as her eye caught a bathing suit in crimson with deep gold slashes in it.

Dar peered over her shoulder. "Not your size," she commented regretfully.

Green eyes studied her speculatively. "No, but I bet it's yours." Her nose crinkled up in a mischievous grin. "Fair's fair." One dark eyebrow lifted slowly as Dar gave her a look, then plucked the suit off the rack without another word and headed up to the counter. "Heh," Kerry chortled softly as she followed.

"GOOD THING I brought the truck," Dar commented, putting the last bag in the back of the Lexus and giving her companion a slightly amazed, slightly alarmed look. "You actually use all that stuff?"

Kerry put a hand on her back. "Believe it or not, yes. When you actually cook real food with real ingredients, it's not just pulling something out of a box and nuking it."

Dar closed the back hatch and put her hands on her hips. "Sure is easier that way," she commented teasingly.

"Yes, it is," Kerry agreed. "But it's a lot less healthy for you because of all the junk they put in there to keep the food from crystallizing when they freeze it. I think that stuff turns your ears blue or something."

"Oh." Dar considered this. "I guess that makes sense." She walked around and got into the car, waiting for Kerry to do the same. "You up for some *café con leche*?"

Speaking of unhealthy. Kerry gave her companion a wry look but didn't resist. "Sure," she agreed readily, acknowledging to herself that she'd become somewhat addicted to the sweet coffee and the tiny pastries that would go with them. Her stomach growled, already anticipating the cheese and guava ones she particularly liked.

Dar navigated the beachfront streets with skill, pulling into the back parking lot of a small Cuban cafeteria and parking. Kerry took a deep breath of the morning air contentedly, tasting the strong hint of salt on it. "Nice morning," she complimented the weather, being in the lower seventies, and much less humid than it had been recently. The sun was warm but not overbearing, and the breeze fluttered the thin fabric of her T-shirt against her body.

She felt... It was like having been in school, and now she was out on summer break, Kerry decided, but with the knowledge that there was no fall term to go back to. In a way, it was like when she graduated college and started out on her first real job. Everything changed. Now it was changing again, as she took slow, tentative steps towards a whole new life, allowing the reality of a partnership with Dar to sink in. It felt so strange, but in a weird way, familiar.

She was hurting over her parents, and she knew that. She knew it would be a long time before she could think about them and not feel the grief of not being accepted. But on the flip side, it felt so, so good to not have to measure up to their standards anymore. Now she was free to set her own standards.

The sea breeze blew cleanly across her, and a gull circled overhead as Kerry smiled up at the fluffy white clouds floating lazily overhead. *What's that about breaking eggs to make omelets?* Her eyes slipped sideways, to the tall form pacing beside her. *What kind of omelet are you, hmm? My favorite kind, I think.*

Dar felt a quiet contentment drop over her, and she was surprised at how easily her lone and sometimes prickly nature accepted Kerry's close and constant presence. She'd been skeptical of her own ability to adjust to that, but her subconscious had apparently been fooling her all along into thinking she was happier alone.

It wasn't true, and she knew it now. She'd just had to find the right person. She wondered briefly if Kerry felt the same way. She hoped so. She really, really did. Dar found herself very much looking forward to building a lasting relationship with her blonde companion.

She reached out and opened the door to the cafeteria, releasing the heady scents of the thick Cuban coffee and pastries into the salty air. They entered, and she ordered for them in a workmanlike, slightly accented Spanish that caused Kerry to give her an amazed look.

"What? I had no idea you spoke Spanish," she sputtered.

Dar shrugged. "Enough to get by, sure." She sat down on a vacant stool and motioned her companion to do the same, and they waited for their order. The cafeteria was mostly full of other patrons, most enjoying various types of coffee and either the pastelitos or full breakfasts. "Oh, hmm." She turned and got the waitress's attention and pointed at a nearby plate. The woman nodded and smiled at her.

"What is that?" Kerry peered at her.

"Cuban Egg McMuffin," Dar replied with a grin. "Eggs, cheese, and bacon on toasted Cuban bread." She watched Kerry cover her eyes. "You can have half."

"Jesus." Kerry moaned. "You are so corrupting me." She sighed and picked up the warm, flaky pastry the waitress had settled in front of her, taking a bite and enjoying the combination of sweet and tangy. "I spent most of Thanksgiving night wondering why everything was so damn tasteless, then I remembered my mother has them cook everything without salt, butter, or cream." "Yuck." Dar munched on her sandwich, nudging the other half over to Kerry's plate. "What purpose do potatoes serve if you can't use them as a delivery vehicle for all three of those things?" she asked reasonably.

Kerry gave her a look, then nibbled a corner of the sandwich. "Mmm, that certainly is better than an Egg McMuffin," she admitted.

Dar chuckled. "Relax, look around." Dar flicked her eyes around the room. "This is standard Cuban fare. You see all the old folks around here? It won't kill you." She stood up and gathered her bag of pastelitos. "C'mon, we'd better get that stuff in the refrigerator." They walked outside and headed around the corner of the small building, into the lot that was bordered by the cafeteria on one side and an apartment complex on the other.

It was a very, very quiet drive back. Kerry finally sat back, once they were safely on the ferry, and rolled her head to one side, regarding Dar's profile. "Know something?"

"Hmm?"

She covered Dar's hand with her own and rested her head against the taller woman's shoulder.

"You're the most important person in my life." She kept her eyes on the leather seat, not daring to look up to see Dar's reaction.

Which was a pity, because she missed a round-eyed look of absolute, quiet wonder bestowed on her by her companion. "You know, I was kind of hoping you felt like that," Dar murmured.

The soft clank of the waves against the ferry's rigging drifted in the open window of the Lexus.

"Why?" Kerry whispered.

Dar rested her head against the smaller woman's. "Because I feel the same way."

"Oh." Kerry smiled, closing her eyes. "I guess that's all right, then."

They stayed like that until the ferry docked, and Kerry steered the car up the ramp and through the winding roads to the parking spot they'd left a few hours and a lifetime ago. She helped Dar carry the groceries and their new diving gear inside, and they put things away in a comfortable silence.

Finally, Kerry dropped into the loveseat and gazed at the ceiling, while Dar pattered around the kitchen. She could hear the microwave beeping and predicted smelling the rich, distinctive scent of chocolate next. Dar didn't disappoint her, and she smiled as the tall, dark-haired woman padded into the living room, handing her a gently steaming cup of hot chocolate. She took a seat next to her companion and propped her bare feet up on the coffee table.

They looked at each other in quiet regard for a long moment. "Been quite a month," Dar commented, taking a sip of her chocolate.

"Oh yeah," Kerry agreed. "It sure has been." She swallowed a mouthful of the sweet beverage. "I should start keeping a diary, especially if this is what life's going to be like from now on."

Dar laughed gently. "Jesus, I hope not. It would end up sounding like some crazy television show." She laid an arm across the back of the couch and tangled her fingers in Kerry's hair.

"Listen, I know it's been a rough weekend." She paused, collecting her thoughts, then went on.

"And I know you're going to need some time to get used to things, But, um..."

Kerry put down her chocolate and edged over, slipping her arms around Dar's body and leaning against her. "But, um, what?"

Dar blinked at her, putting down her own cup and returning her embrace. "But, um," her brows knit, "I really think we work well together."

Kerry sniffed reflectively. "Well, that's true. We have different approaches, but we generally get to the same point." She was fairly sure Dar's speech had nothing to do with work, but she was willing to go along with the charade. "You're a logical person, and you usually get right to the heart of the problem and fix it."

"Uh...right," Dar agreed hesitantly.

"Usually," Kerry repeated, tipping her head back and gazing up at her companion.

"Usually, what?" the dark-haired woman hazarded.

"You usually get right to the point," Kerry stated patiently.

"Oh, right. Yeah, I do," Dar muttered. "I know I do, in fact, there's a point around here, and I'm going to get to it as soon as I figure out what the hell it is."

Kerry buried her face into Dar's chest and muffled a laugh.

Dar sighed. "You have this knack of making me feel like a lovestruck teenager, did you know that?"

Green eyes peeked up at her. "Is that good or bad?"

"Well, it certainly blows my image all to hell," Dar replied with a faint laugh. "So I guess my asking you if you want to move in here won't do much worse."

Kerry swallowed hard. "Guess you found the point, huh?" she asked softly.

"Guess I did," Dar admitted. "Look, I know you can't just give up your place. For one thing, changing your address in CAS is going to cause one hell of a ruckus, but I..." She gathered her courage up again. "I really like having you around, and I'd like to try making a life with you."

Kerry felt a deep, honest warmth creeping over her. "Now, that's more like it," she murmured, then fell silent as she considered the request. "Work is going to be extremely weird," she finally said. "And you're right, I really can't just give my place up--at least not yet." Another pause.

"And you probably need time to adjust to the invasion." Dar didn't deny any of the statements.

"Tell you what, why don't we do weekends here, and the rest of the week I can stay down in Kendall. Then on Wednesdays, you can come over after the gym." It seemed a good compromise, giving them both a little space and time to adjust to each other.

Dar blinked at her. "So, is that a yes?"

Kerry blushed and nodded. "I'd very much like to make a life with you." She inclined her head, and they kissed gently. "Dar?"

"Yes?" The dark-haired woman smiled fondly at her.

"Can you show me the stuff you found out about my father?"

The request caught Dar by surprise, and it showed in her swiftly elevated eyebrows. "Eh, sure." She stood and extended a hand down to her companion. "Sorry. I forgot I told you I'd show you all of that." She led Kerry into her office and settled behind her desk, keying the computer to life and starting up her mail program.

"Mmm. I like that ISDN line," Kerry commented, leaning an arm on Dar's shoulder and peering over it.

Dar typed in a request and brought the mail which held the information up. "You know, that little room in the middle upstairs would make a nice little office," she commented innocently. "I could have the other channel dropped in there."

"Dar?" Kerry whispered. "You don't have to bribe me with toys."

Blue eyes peeked up at her. "Wasn't a bribe. I have to know where to tell Bellsouth to put the jack, that's all." She straightened and indicated the screen. "You sure you want to see all this?" Kerry regarded her quietly. "I'm a big girl, Dar. Yes, I want to read it."

"All right." The taller woman stood up and indicated the chair, then she walked over to the window--the same window they'd opened during the tropical storm--and leaned on the sill, peering out while Kerry read.

The documents were ugly, even to Dar's experienced and somewhat jaded eyes. Years worth of accepting bribes, standard among a percentage of politicians, but bribes which lead to the stonewalling of legislation that hurt people, and disregarded the common good. Payoffs for jobs, for bills, for votes--all depressingly regular.

It was the funding by right-wing extremist groups that made her nauseous, millions of dollars, socked away in private bank accounts over the course of a career, to further the interests of people whose chief platform was hate. That and the hypocrisy of that other family, that woman and her children, being supported by the senator. She and two of the older children were in comfortable government jobs and supplied with generous benefits and stipends. *Oh, and the tax fraud.* Dar wondered if Kerry realized she and her sister were still being listed as dependents, and her still on the books at some school, enrolled? *Disgusting.* She heard the click of keystrokes and turned to see Kerry's eyes flicking over the screen.

"I'm forwarding this to my mailbox," the blonde woman murmured. "That was really kind of slimy to read, Dar."

She settled warm hands on Kerry's shoulders. "I know, the entries from United Klan's of America kind of got to me."

Kerry logged out then logged in as her own account, the screen popping up immediately. She accessed her mail and opened the documents again. "Dar, you know, I've been having to spend a lot of time with those marketing people, and they gave me a tour of their operation the other week."

Dar blinked in confusion. "Um, yeah. Okay. What does that have to do with anything?"

Kerry selected the documents, then opened a new mail message and pasted them in. "Well, one of the things they showed me was their distribution network; it's really kind of neat. They can get information out by using a mailing list. See? Like this." She addressed the message. "You just click here." She hit the Send key. "And it gets sent to sixty different news outlets."

Dar's jaw dropped in utter shock. "Did you just..."

Green eyes looked calmly up at her. "Yes, I did." A pause. "You said it would be my decision, didn't you?"

"W...but...uh, yes, but I..." Dar sat down on the desk, nonplussed. "Jesus, Kerry!"

"I wasn't going to," the blonde woman stated softly. "But then I thought about how he just couldn't let go, he couldn't just let me leave. I thought about how before he had to send that bastard down here because he thought I was bluffing about not moving back." Now she looked right up at Dar. "You told me if someone calls your bluff, you have to just go with it. So I did."

"You understand what that will do," Dar said quietly. "Don't you?"

"Yes," Kerry answered steadily. "I do." She studied the desktop. "I'll warn Michael and Angela." Her eyes lifted to Dar's still-shocked face. "I surprised you, huh?"

A faint nod. "Yes, you did." She hadn't expected quite that level of vindictiveness in her friend. "I didn't think you would do that."

Kerry sighed and rested her chin in her hands. "If it had just been me, I probably wouldn't have, but they came after you." She rubbed her lip with her thumb. "That was too much, Dar. I can't

have that. Maybe some of that ruthlessness I see in him came down to me." She blinked at the screen. "I feel pretty ruthless right now."

Dar slowly exhaled and curled her fingers around Kerry's wrist, which was resting on the desk's surface. "No, what he did, what Kyle did, that was ruthless. What you did was justice."

"Maybe," Kerry murmured.

"I know you care about your family, Kerry, and this wasn't an easy thing for you to do." Dar gave her a sympathetic look. "In a way, we've both lost our families."

A slow, almost puzzled smile crossed Kerry's face. "But there are two kinds of families, Dar. The ones you're born into, and the ones you make yourself." She looked up and met the blue eyes regarding her. "And our friendship binds us closer than blood ever could." Memory chimed, clear and piercing as a bell.

Dar smiled acknowledgment, holding up one hand, palm outstretched, and watching Kerry's fingers curl into hers. "You are my family," she agreed, then reached into her shirt pocket. "By the way, thought you might want this back." She turned Kerry's palm over and set a golden circle into it. "It's an interesting piece."

Kerry took the ring up between her forefinger and thumb and peered at it. "I always felt there was something behind it, some story, you know?" She turned it over. "Probably just an overactive imagination on my part. Though when my great-aunt gave it to me, it was kind of strange. She hadn't seen me since I was a... Jesus, probably three, four years old. I went to visit her after I got out of college, and when she saw me, she had me stand in the light and just looked at me for about ten minutes--not saying anything. Then she laughed and got this out and gave it to me."

"That is kind of strange," Dar agreed. "What kind of person was she, did she do a particular thing, or..."

"Hmm? Oh, she was a writer." Kerry sighed. "Poetry and these lyric, old-fashioned stories about the past, and knights, and things like that." A shake of her head. "The family mostly thought she was a little crazy. I liked reading her stuff, though. She even had a story about Paladins." Her eyes twinkled teasingly at Dar. Who rolled her eyes and chuckled a little.

Kerry was silent for a moment, then she looked up. "What your father did was kind of scary, wasn't it?"

Dar nodded soberly. "Yes, it was."

"Yeah." Kerry chewed her lip. "Is that...I mean, what he did, is that really what you wanted to do?" She looked up and searched Dar's face.

A sigh. "I thought I did. Yes, for a long time."

"What about now?"

Dar remained silent, considering the question. "I think you hit a point where you...I mean, when I was sixteen or so, and taking those tests, I was hot for it. It seemed like the most exciting, the most incredible life I could imagine. I wanted it, really bad." A pause. "But now, I look back and think...Jesus, was I nuts?" Dar sighed. "I'm glad, in a lot of ways, it worked out differently."

"Me, too." Kerry twined their fingers and looked up into her eyes. "For one thing, we probably would have never met, and for another, I think that kind of thing puts a very heavy toll on your conscience. I can't imagine that."

"No, I'm glad I don't have to bear that burden," Dar acknowledged softly. "Life's hard enough, I'm glad I didn't take that path after all."

The green eyes gazing at her took on extra depth as Kerry stood, putting a hand against her cheek tenderly. "So am I, tiger."

Dar felt a warm fist of emotion squeeze against her heart. "Tiger?" she murmured. "Haven't been called that in a long time." She laced her fingers around the back of Kerry's neck and gazed at her, blinking a little as a faint haze seemed to obscure her vision for just a moment. "Brings back a lot of memories."

"Does it?" Kerry whispered, feeling a tremor run through her knees as their bodies drew closer and joined, and their lips met. An emotion half joy and half relief coursed through her as they paused, and she leaned back, meeting eyes both newly met and well known.

"Welcome home." Dar's voice burred the words, low and sweet, as they joined again in the warm light of a tropical winter's day.

OTHER MELISSA GOOD TITLES

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Red Sky At Morning

A connection others don't understand... A love that won't be denied... Danger they can sense but cannot see...

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Now new dangers confront them from all sides. While traveling to Chicago, Kerry's plane is struck by lightning. Dar, in New York for a stockholders' meeting, senses Kerry is in trouble.

They simultaneously experience feelings that are new, sensations that both are reluctant to admit when they are finally back together. Back in Miami, a cover-up of the worst kind, problems with the military, and unexpected betrayals will cause more danger. Can Kerry help as Dar has to examine her life and loyalties and call into question all she's believed in since childhood? Will their relationship deepen through it all? Or will it be destroyed?

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This fifth entry in the continuing saga of Dar Roberts and Kerry Stuart starts off with Kerry involved in mentoring a church group of girls. Kerry is forced to acknowledge her own feelings toward and experiences with her own parents as she and Dar assist a teenager from the group who gets jailed because her parents tossed her out onto the streets when they found out she is gay. While trying to help the teenagers adjust to real world situations, Kerry gets a call concerning her father's health. Kerry flies to her family's side as her father dies, putting the family in crisis. Caught up in an international problem, Dar abandons the issue to go to Michigan, determined to support Kerry in the face of grief and hatred. Dar and Kerry face down Kerry's extended family with a little help from their own, and return home, where they decide to leave work and the world behind for a while for some time to themselves.

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