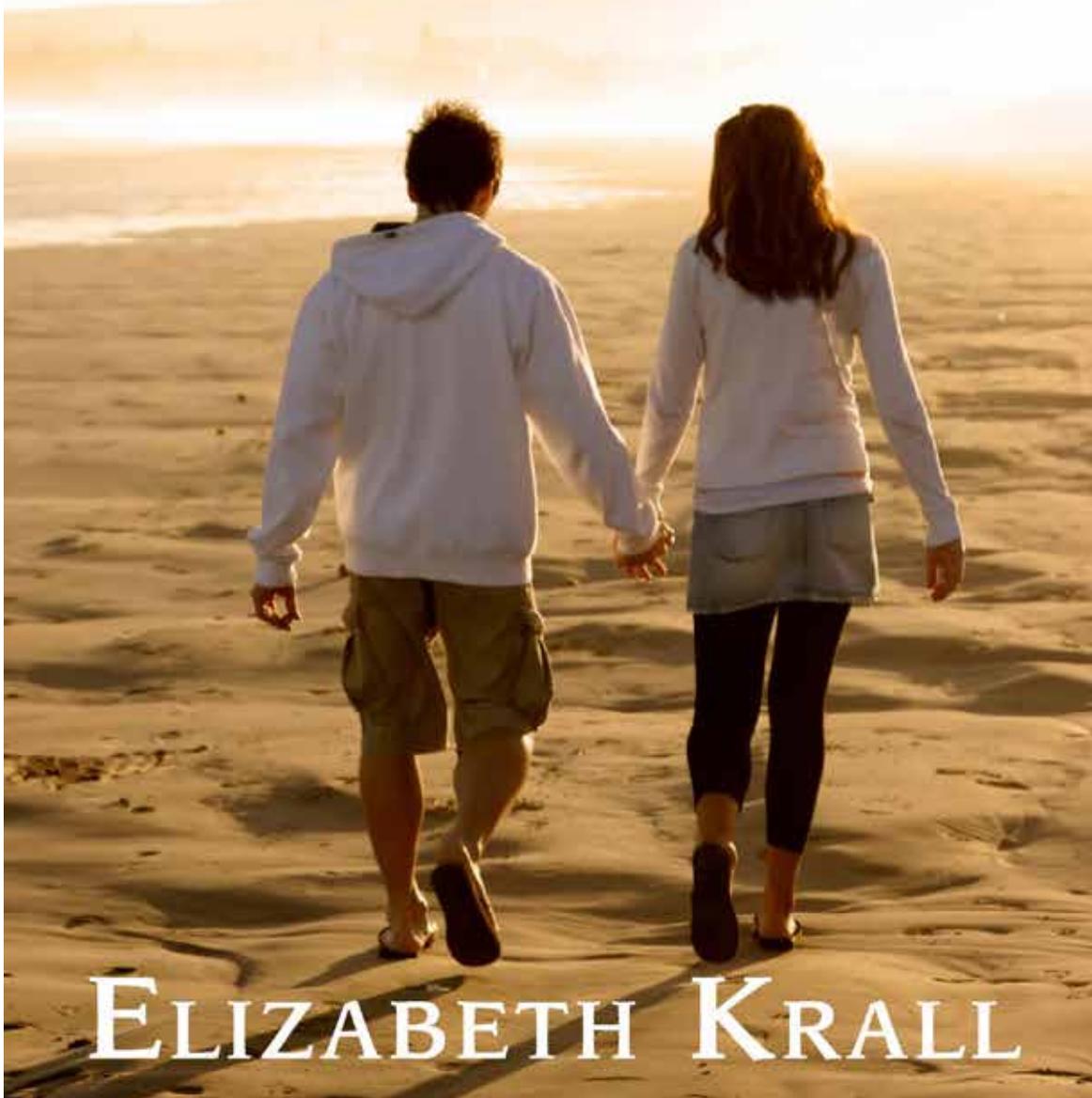


Too Close

Love makes its own rules



ELIZABETH KRALL

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Too
Close

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Three weeks before their wedding day, Nicola and Greg discover that they may have the same mother.

If they really are half-siblings, they face a devastating choice: break all of society's rules and fight for their love, or break their hearts and give each other up. A DNA test will reveal the truth, but their love is tested to the breaking point during the agonizing wait for the answer. Nicola is prepared to do anything to stay together; Greg sees only the sin. Yet, if they do not have each other, they have nothing. Only together can they triumph over adversity.

'Too Close' will take you on an emotional roller coaster and make you question the rules that dictate who you are allowed to love.

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Chapter 1

“THE NEW GUY is hot.”

Nicola frowned at her computer screen. That analogy she had drawn between the crescent moon in the sky over Istanbul and the crescent moons on the city’s mosques had seemed almost poetic in a jet-lagged daze over the Atlantic Ocean at 35,000 feet, but now it seemed contrived. She tapped at the delete key. “Hmmm?” she replied, only half-listening to the woman who had spoken to her. “What new guy?”

Kylie put her hands on her hips, sheathed in a skirt one size too small. “Really, Nicky!” she huffed. “That new guy in finance. Don’t you read any of your emails?”

Nicola admitted defeat: she was never going to fix this article as long as Kylie was bent on Monday morning gossip. She had never been able to understand why Kylie thought that she wanted to hear all the gossip in the first place, but she could never be rude enough to tell her to go away.

She turned from the screen. “There were, I don’t know, 150 emails in my inbox this morning, Kylie. You’ll have to forgive me for not reading them all closely. But I think there was one regarding a new deputy financial officer. George?”

“Greg,” corrected Kylie. She perched on the edge of Nicola’s desk, revealing a long leg that ended in a shoe with a heel far higher than Nicola would ever consider wearing. In this crowded corner of the third floor of the office building housing the *San Francisco Age* newspaper, home to the writers for travel, fashion, gardening and lifestyle, more than one set of male eyes were drawn to that leg.

When the younger woman had joined the newspaper’s fashion team three years ago, Nicola had, for a time, felt like a drab sparrow beside Kylie’s flamboyant canary. Her own carefully chosen pantsuits, even her occasional skirts, had overnight seemed dull and sensible. And from the way Kylie’s eyes were narrowing, it looked as if another fashion lecture was coming.

“Nicky.” Kylie’s voice held disappointment, and she plucked at Nicola’s sleeve. “How many times have I told you that caramel is not your color?”

“Ten?”

“At least! We got some cute tops in last week, try one,” suggested Kylie.

Nicola knew that if she ever dressed in something Kylie described as “cute,” such as today’s leopard-print mini-skirt and low-cut orange blouse, she would feel ridiculous.

Kylie gave in with a smile. “I guess you travel types just have no sense of fashion. Anyway, back to much more interesting things! Greg came to Friday drinks at Casey’s. He’s 33, and moved here from Seattle a year ago. Built like a... well, I’m not sure what, but it’s all muscle. Even though he was wearing a suit, I could tell. He has blue eyes and hair so dark it’s almost black.” She cocked her head, a look of faint surprise on her face. “Like you, actually. Though he’s better looking. In a guy way, I mean!”

The fashion editor, who sat in the cubicle opposite Nicola, called out, “You girls talking about Greg? I met him in the elevator this morning. He can audit my books any night!”

Kylie cast one swift, dismissive glance towards the partition that blocked her from her boss’s view, and muttered, “As if.” Then, in her normal voice, “We’re going out tomorrow night.”

Nicola laughed, and thought, Another victim for The Man Eater! “Does he have any idea what he’s in for?”

Kylie shrugged. “If he doesn’t, he sure will by the end of tomorrow night!”

Trying to stifle a yawn, Nicola smiled with sympathy for the unsuspecting man.

“When did you get back from Istanbul, Nicky?” asked Kylie. “You look tired.”

“After midnight.”

Kylie shook her head in disapproval. “Why didn’t you work from home today? Your body’s got to be messed up after a five-day trip from here to Turkey and back.”

Nicola felt more awake just thinking about her stay in Istanbul, and she grinned. “A day or two of jet lag is fair exchange for a free stay at that resort on the Bosphorus. Five stars do not begin to do it justice.”

“One of the perks of being the editor, rather than a lowly writer like me,” grumbled Kylie. “The editors get all the good assignments. Guess who goes to the fashion shows in Paris, and who goes to them in LA?”

“Poor Kylie,” Nicola replied. “Don’t you have a trip to Madrid in a few days?”

“Thursday.” She looked underwhelmed at the prospect of Spanish fashions.

“That still gives you time to ravish poor George before you go,” Nicola pointed out with a sly smile. “Cheer up.”

“Greg!”

Nicola shrugged. “Sorry. Your men all blur together, I guess.”

“You can refuse to get involved with a colleague again, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to take the same stance,” said Kylie. She lowered her voice. “Of all the co-workers you could have fallen in love with, you chose Andrew! Nicky, the one good thing that jerk ever did for you was to run off with your boss. She got your man, but you got her job.”

Nicola could not help but laugh at Kylie’s attempt to look on the bright side. “So true. And I’ve got a lot of work to do, so if I want to keep that job, I’d better get back to it.” She jabbed one finger at her computer. “I suspect you’ve got work of your own to do,” she hinted.

Kylie slid from the desk and tugged the skirt back into place. “Yeah. Research into the latest styles of flamenco dresses, or whatever they wear in Spain.” She minced to her own desk at the other end of the row of cubicles.

Nicola turned back to her screen, but her mind was no longer on Istanbul. She wished Kylie hadn’t brought up Andrew. Yes, he had been a jerk, and she was over him now, but she didn’t like to be reminded of him. After he and Brenda had disappeared, it seemed everyone at the newspaper had treated her with the utmost delicacy; she could almost hear them calling her “poor Nicky.” It didn’t seem to bother Kylie in the slightest that everyone called her something far less flattering, but she was made of sterner stuff than Nicola.

* *

On Wednesday morning, Kylie again perched on Nicola’s desk, but this time her face beneath its permanent tan was white with fury.

“George turned you down?” repeated Nicola in surprise. This was worth losing a few minutes’ work to hear. She pushed her chair back to see Kylie better.

“Greg!” The blonde hair was tossed back. “Said he wasn’t ‘that kind of a guy,’ can you believe it? I’ll bet he’s gay.”

“Why on earth would he have gone out with you if he was gay?”

Kylie examined her red-painted fingernails. “To make people think he wasn’t, obviously.”

Nicola laughed. “In 2011? In San Francisco? I don’t think he needs to hide in the closet!” She felt a small surge of admiration for Greg, whoever he was. In the three years she had known Kylie, no man had ever turned her down. “Maybe it was a misunderstanding?”

Kylie stared at her. “A misunderstanding? When I put my hand on his thigh in the restaurant, he actually moved away. But when I suggested a nightcap at that little jazz bar near my apartment he agreed, and in the taxi on the way there he sure didn’t move away when I kissed him. But then when I put my hand on his—” she stopped abruptly, looked around and leaned closer. “His, you know, he plucked it off like it was a dirty rag. Then he gave me the ‘not that kind of a guy’ line, had the taxi driver pull over and got out! And he’s a lousy kisser!”

The laughter that had been building in Nicola throughout this story spilled out. “Oh, poor Kylie!”

“Easy for you to laugh, it wasn’t you sitting in a taxi with a smirking driver,” muttered Kylie.

“Maybe you’ll find someone who is that kind of a guy in Madrid,” suggested Nicola, although the laugh still lurked in her voice. “How’s your Spanish?”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “If it takes words, I’m definitely doing something wrong.”

* *

“You coming, Nicky?”

She looked up from the drift of papers and receipts on her desk. It was 6.00 on Friday evening, and people were heading off to Casey’s for the ritual drink. “In a minute, Max,” she replied to the man who had paused in the doorway to call back to her. “I want to sort out this Istanbul stuff. Accounts is on my back about it.”

With most people gone now, a peaceful stillness settled over the office. She could hear someone’s rapid tapping on a keyboard a few cubicles away, and over the hum of the air conditioning came the faint noise of traffic. Evening sunlight fell in golden stripes through the half-drawn blinds. Nicola liked the office at this time of day, in part because fewer people meant fewer interruptions. More than once she had considered changing her work hours, to start later and finish later, but as much as she liked the quieter office, she liked the evening at home more.

Casey’s was a block from the *Age*’s building, and on this gentle May evening the walk seemed too short. Nicola lingered, looking up at the pale blue sky and savoring the warm breeze. Even in downtown San Francisco, the change of seasons could not be held back. She opened the door to the sports bar, and spring disappeared like a light going out. Casey’s was heaving, as usual, smelling of beer and fried food, full of the workers who had spilled from their offices and were intent on loosening their ties and letting down their hair at the end of the working week. Nicola pushed through the noisy crowd to the back, where the *Age* group always gathered, but kept one eye on the big screens to see how the Giants were doing. Still in a slump, apparently.

Her colleagues and friends made room for her, and someone handed her a glass of white wine. On the other side of the group she spotted Max, talking to a man she didn’t recognize. The stranger’s back was to her, and her first impression was of big, straight shoulders, his torso tapering in a V down to narrow hips.

She wondered if this was Greg, the only man ever known to say “no” to The Man Eater. She tried to remember how Kylie had described him. Muscles...yes, the bulk of his torso, the strong forearms below the rolled-up white shirtsleeves, hinted at a life beyond balancing the books. He was a couple of inches shorter than Max’s lanky six feet. When he turned, Nicola saw the straight nose and the strong, sculpted features – and saw, too, the relaxed, expectant expression, saw the smile hovering on his lips break into a grin as Max delivered the punch line to the story he had been telling.

He was easy on the eye, she admitted. Very easy.

Max waved her over. “Nicky, have you met Greg yet? He started in finance a week or so ago.” The woman beside him tugged on his sleeve, and Max turned away.

“So you’re Greg,” Nicola commented, holding out a hand to shake.

One dark eyebrow rose as he took her hand. “I admit it. Has my reputation preceded me?”

Too late, Nicola realized she probably should have settled for saying hello. “Uh, no. Someone I work with mentioned you, that’s all.” His hand felt rough, the fingers callused; not what she would have expected from an accountant.

He regarded her with curiosity.

His eyes are the color of the sky just before the evening light fades, thought Nicola. And then she looked hastily away, wondering what had brought on such a fanciful idea.

“Someone you work with?”

She sipped her wine, praying for inspiration. It didn’t come. “Kylie. She said she met you here last Friday.”

One side of his mouth quirked up. “Is that all she said?”

“What else would she say?” Nicola asked with a smile, responding to the humor in his face.

“Nothing very flattering, I imagine,” he said dryly.

Nicola laughed, liking the way he wasn’t trying to play down what had happened with Kylie. “No, not very,” she admitted.

“Is Kylie your friend?” His eyes, over the rim of his glass, looked doubtful.

Nicola did not want to gossip about Kylie behind her back, but she also did not want Greg to have the wrong idea. “She latched on to me when she started at the *Age* a few years ago. I was never sure why! I wouldn’t describe her as my friend, though. More of a colleague. You’re stuck with them, whether you like them or not!”

His eyes lit with laughter. “That’s true! So you know what happened?”

“By now, I suspect the whole company knows what happened! Kylie is not big on secrets.”

“Is she always like that? Or was she blown away by my irresistible charms?” His lips turned up and his eyes looked down, and his expression was of such absurd modesty that it was clear he was mocking both himself and his charms. Not waiting for an answer, he asked, “Were you not here last week, or did I not see you?”

She shook her head. “Not here. I do drop by most Fridays, but not all. And I don’t stay long.”

“I suppose you have a family to get home to?”

“No, I’m just not into the noisy bar scene. I take it you aren’t, either?” She gestured to his glass of Coke. “Don’t you drink?”

He smiled. “Oh I do, and I would love a beer right now! But I’m driving home, and I have an early start tomorrow.”

“Is it a long drive?”

He shook his head. “Not bad, 30 to 40 minutes depending on traffic. Across the bay, in Richmond. How about you?”

“Polk Gulch.”

“I love that name!” Greg exclaimed. “When I moved here from Seattle, I thought it sounded like a Wild West town. You can walk home from here.”

She pulled a face. “Yeah, uphill the whole way. I think I’ll settle for the trolley. The last stop is a couple of blocks from my apartment. Whereabouts in Richmond are you?”

“Bayside Yacht Harbor,” he replied.

Nicola frowned. “Is that one of those new condo developments on the bay?”

He laughed. “No, it’s a marina. I live on my boat.”

“You live on a yacht?” Her voice rose in disbelief.

The laugh grew louder. “You’re thinking of a shiny white monstrosity with a helicopter pad, and a crew in matching uniforms, aren’t you? My boat is a 30-foot sailboat. No helicopter, and I’m the only crew.”

A waitress was worming through the crowd, tray of drinks held high, and Nicola moved aside to let her pass. She caught the tail end of an old joke someone was telling, and laughed. She was torn between staying with this group and returning to Greg; he was new, and it wouldn’t be fair to abandon him in a crowd of strangers. He was interesting, too, she admitted. A glance at Greg showed him standing by himself, looking around with that air of someone wondering what to do next. Then he met her eyes, and smiled, and the next thing Nicola knew she was back beside him.

“I’ve never met anyone who lived on a sailboat,” she said, picking up the conversation. That would explain the tan on his face and arms.

“It wasn’t my plan to start with,” Greg admitted. “I’d already spent a year on the boat before I ended up here, and I did intend to find an apartment. But I never seem to get around to it! And it is convenient: when I get home from work and want a quick sail on the bay, all I have to do is swap the suit for shorts, un-moor her, and I’m off.”

She could not imagine being on a 30-foot sailboat for a day, let alone a year, let alone two years. “Can I ask why you had already spent a year on it, or am I being too nosy?”

Greg shook his head. “Not too nosy. I took a year off. Dropped out of the rat race and sailed south along the coast from Seattle, down into Mexico and the Gulf of California. It was wonderful,” he confided with a grin. “No work, no commute, no suits. Just me and the sea. But all good things must end, huh?”

“So how did you end up in San Francisco?” she asked, then with a laugh, “Did you take a wrong turn on the way back to Seattle?” What she really wanted to ask was “Why did you take a year off? What happened?” but those questions seemed

too personal for such a brief acquaintance.

“I made the turn on purpose, but I didn’t intend to stay so long! I have some good friends in San Francisco so I stopped off for a while to see them. They suggested I should get a job here but I didn’t take it seriously, until one rainy day I had nothing better to do than check out job openings on an accountants’ website. I found what I thought was a great one, with one of the mid-tier firms. So I bought a suit and went in for an interview.”

Something in his voice told Nicola there was more to the story than this. “And?” she prompted.

“And it turned out to be not so great. After a while I realized things weren’t as rosy as I had been told, and a few months ago the word ‘downsizing’ started doing the rounds,” he said.

“Uh oh.”

“Yup.” He nodded, smiling ruefully. “Last in, first out. So here I am in the newspaper business! It’s very different to what I’m used to. Interesting, though.”

Nicola’s mind was still struggling with the idea of spending so much time on such a small boat, and alone. “Did you sail all that way on your own?”

“Mostly, but sometimes friends would join me, and my parents came down once,” he replied. “Do you sail?”

Nicola was taken aback at the very idea. “I’ve never been on anything smaller than a ferry in my life!” she said.

“I’ll take you out one day, if you like,” he offered. “Everyone should try it.”

“I’d be totally useless!” she protested. “And seasick, no doubt.”

Greg smiled at her. “Don’t worry, she’s rigged so I can manage her on my own. You can lounge around on deck. And take seasickness pills.” He tilted his empty glass. “I think I’ll get another Coke. You want anything?”

She shook her head and held up the glass of wine, still half full. “No, thanks. Nice talking to you.”

“You too.”

Nicola heard someone say, “The Giants are out of it!” and she turned quickly.

“I still say they can take the Series this season!” she declared, jumping into the conversation.

* *

At the bar, Max sidled up beside Greg as he waited for his Coke. “You’re wasting your time there, buddy,” he advised.

Greg looked at him in silent query.

“Nicky. She won’t have anything to do with anyone from the *Age*. If you want to get any closer than Casey’s on a Friday, you’d better find a new job. She has a strict ‘no colleagues’ rule. Turned me down flat. Twice,” he added. “And I’m not the only one.”

“What’s with the rule?”

Max drained his beer and waved at the bartender for another. “Three years ago she started going out with a guy named Andrew, one of the news journalists. After a year, they moved in together. And a year after that, she comes home one day to find all his shit gone. Not even a note. And what do you think? He’d been screwing Nicky’s boss the whole time and the two of them took off together. She was married, by the way.”

“That bastard,” growled Greg.

“Oh yeah, man, you won’t get any disagreement from anyone at the *Age* about that. Nicky swore off dating colleagues after that. She said if her love life was going to end in humiliation, she didn’t need the whole company knowing about it,” Max said. “And some good came of it. She got her boss’s job. Now Nicky’s the travel editor.”

“I’ll bet that keeps her warm in bed on a winter night,” retorted Greg.

Max raised both hands in a peaceful gesture. “Hey, I’m only bringing you up to speed on the Nicky thing. You wouldn’t be the first guy at the *Age* to fall for her pretty face and big blue eyes, but I’m warning you, it ain’t going to go anywhere.” He took his beer from the bartender and moved off.

Greg turned back to the crowd. More people had arrived, jostling and talking loudly, and he couldn’t see her. Had she

left? No, there she was, laughing at something a woman he didn't know was saying. Her dark hair gleamed and her sapphire eyes were alight with humor. He couldn't imagine how any man could be such an ass as to cheat on her, and go off with someone else.

Nicola looked at him then, as if the weight of his stare pulled her eyes to his, the straight fall of her hair like shining curtains framing her heart-shaped face. She held his gaze for a moment or two, and then smiled.

His heart skipped a beat.

* *

Nicola left the bar when her glass of wine was empty, after refusing offers of a refill. Outside, it was almost dark and a north wind stole under the hem of her short jacket. The balmy spring evening had given way to a cold night.

She was lucky: the trolley was approaching the stop as she hurried around the corner, and she managed to find a seat inside. It was touristy, yes, and some days she had to resort to a bus, but she had loved the trolleys since she was a child – and this one stopped, as she had told Greg, only two blocks from home.

He's nice, she thought. She could see why Kylie had been so attracted. Although Kylie probably had been more interested in his muscles and his good looks than in his personality and his conversation! She smiled as she imagined that scene in the taxi.

But what, Nicola wondered, was the truth behind that glib “dropping out of the rat race for a year” story?

* * * *

Chapter 2

GREG GLANCED at his watch. The meeting at the auditors' office, with the newspaper's chief financial officer and chairman, had gone on longer than expected. Once he'd got over the strangeness of being in an accounting firm's office as a client, rather than as an employee, he had struggled to focus his attention. The meeting hadn't been necessary, in his view, and very little had been accomplished.

The taxi stopped near the *Age's* building, and Greg was first out. If he was quick, he could still get to the marina in time for a sail. He began to walk around the taxi, and his eye was caught by a flash of color in the mass of people streaming along the sidewalk. He'd seen that yellow jacket before, when Nicola put it on to leave Casey's last Friday.

"Please excuse me, gentlemen, I must speak to someone," Greg said over his shoulder, and he plunged into the crowd, following that jacket, without stopping to question why.

She was half a block ahead and everyone between them seemed intent on getting in his way, but he closed the gap. Ten feet behind her, he was forced almost onto the road by a group of gawking tourists. His knee bumped hard against the corner of something solid, and he glared down. A planter full of marigolds looked back at him.

He finally caught up to her at a red light. "Hi."

"Oh! Hello, Greg," Nicola replied. She smiled at him, which he thought was a good sign. Or maybe she was just naturally polite. "Do you go this way too?"

His mind was blank. Great. I walk away from my boss and my boss's boss, chase this woman for two blocks, steal a flower, and now I can't think of a damned thing to say.

"Sometimes," he said weakly. Then he laughed, and said, "No, never. I wanted to give you this. It matches your jacket." He held out the yellow marigold.

Surprise, wariness, pleasure – they were all plain on her face. She looked at the flower, and then her eyes, as blue as the sea far from land, flashed up at him.

The light changed and the waiting crowd surged forward, jostling them.

Then she laughed, too, and took the marigold. "Thank you."

Greg watched her walk across the street, and all the witty, amusing, sweep-her-off-her-feet things he should have said crowded into his head. Too late. But she had accepted his flower, which was something.

* *

Midway through Tuesday morning, Nicola became aware of someone standing behind her chair. She looked over her shoulder, and there was Greg. The pinstriped suit fit perfectly and the white shirt emphasized his tan. She told her stomach to stop its absurd fluttering. Yes, his eyes were darker blue than she remembered, and his shoulders broader, but he was just another colleague. There was no need for this silly happiness at the unexpected sight of him, just as there had been no need to think of him as often as she had since he'd given her that flower yesterday.

"Hello," she said. "Are you lost?"

"I was looking for you, and I've found you, so I don't think so," he replied.

"Why were you looking for me?"

His face took on a serious expression. "There's a discrepancy in your Istanbul expenses."

"Hey everyone, Nicky's been fiddling the expenses!" called out Max from the next desk. People all around looked up with interest.

"What kind of discrepancy?" asked Nicola, who was secure in the scrupulousness of her expense recording. Fairly secure.

Greg withdrew a sheet of paper from one pocket and studied it. "You claimed that you paid \$14.25 for lunch at JFK airport, but according to the receipt it was \$14.20." From the same pocket he pulled out a coin, and handed it to her. "The

company owes you five cents.”

Laughter from the surrounding desks, and someone advised, “Keep it, Nicky, it’s the only bonus this company is ever likely to hand out!”

She turned the nickel over in her fingers, looking down at it so he wouldn’t see her smile. “You didn’t have to come down here and give me this, you know. And is checking expenses the sort of work a deputy financial officer does?”

He leaned against the low divider between Max’s desk and her own. “On a slow day, maybe. But it really was a transparent ploy to see you again,” he admitted, speaking quietly.

Dismay fought with pleasure at this admission, and to Nicola’s chagrin the pleasure won. “Greg, that’s very flattering, but I don’t get involved with men I work with. It’s a rule I have.” A rule that was a lot easier to stick to when the men who asked her out didn’t interest her in the slightest.

He smiled. “So I was warned. But fools rush in, you know. Why don’t you have lunch with me today?”

She cast around for an excuse to say no, and saw it sitting on her desk. “I brought my lunch. Look, there it is.”

“Bring it outside. We can sit in the park,” he coaxed.

“Greg,” she began, but he held up a hand.

“Do you object on principle to eating lunch outside?”

She shook her head.

“Do you think every person in this building who is having lunch with a colleague today considers it a date, or a declaration of some type?”

She shook her head again, struggling to stop a smile creeping over her lips.

“Do you have a prior engagement? A meeting to attend? Urgent calls to make?”

Again, she shook her head, the smile bigger now.

“In that case, Nicola, I believe you must agree to join me for lunch.”

She laughed, and gave in. “I believe I must.”

The small park was wedged between buildings, crowded by their glassy soaring height, but its trees and benches offered a respite from the recycled air of offices. Tubs held clumps of flowers, bright splashes of color among the greens and browns of the trees. A woman sitting in the middle of a bench moved over to make room for them.

“Did you have a good weekend?” Greg asked, before taking a bite from his sandwich.

She smiled, thinking that she had heard more original opening gambits. “Nothing special. I went for a run Saturday morning with a friend, did laundry and groceries and cleaning in the afternoon. On Sunday, I went over to my parents’ house in Sausalito for the day.”

“So your family is here?”

Nicola nodded. “Yes, none of us kids strayed far from the nest. Want to see us?” Before he could answer, she put her lunch to one side and dug in her purse for her smartphone. “Here,” she said, when she’d found the photo she wanted. “This was last Christmas, a picture without the spouses and kids.”

Greg leaned closer to see the screen, which brought his thigh into contact with hers. Nicola fidgeted discreetly. Moving away would seem rude, or give the touch a significance he couldn’t have intended; and, really, what harm could it do?

He made a small grunt of surprise. “You don’t look much like them,” he commented. “They’ve all got red hair, apart from this blonde lady whom I assume is your mother.”

“Her name’s Gwen. My dad is Arthur. And my brother Bill, he’s 39, and my sister Alison, who’s the same age as me. Well, she’s five weeks older, actually. It was her birthday on Sunday, so for the next five weeks she’s 36 and I’m only 35. When we were kids, she kept insisting that she was the oldest by a whole year, so she was in charge!” Nicola was full of laughter at the memory.

“Nicola?”

“Hmmm?” She took a bite from a cold chicken drumstick.

“How can your sister be five weeks older than you?” Greg asked, frowning. “I find it hard to believe that you hung around inside your mother’s womb for that long after she was born.”

She laughed at his look of confusion. “Oh I’m sorry, Greg, I always assume that everyone knows I’m adopted!” She patted his hand in sympathy. “I was nine months old when they adopted me. I’ve always admired Mom for that, when she already had a baby girl not even one year old.”

The confused look had given way to interest. “Really? That’s something we have in common. No, that’s not strictly true; my mother is my real mother, but my father is my stepfather. They married a few weeks before I was born. She’s always refused to talk about her life then, or my natural father, and, frankly, I don’t care. Dad – Edward – is my father. He taught me to sail, helped me with my math homework, and gave me a good talking-to when I needed one. Or rather, when he thought I needed one!”

Nicola nodded enthusiastically. “Yes! That’s it. I know absolutely nothing about my natural parents, and don’t want to. This is my family.” She stabbed at the cell phone. “They are the people who have loved me my whole life, and whom I love. What’s DNA got to do with it?”

She grinned at him and he grinned back. The awkwardness she had felt when they sat down was now gone in this discovery of shared family life.

Around a mouthful of roast beef, Greg said, “Have you ever considered living in another city?”

She shook her head. “Never. I can’t ever imagine leaving San Francisco. I love this city! It’s my home. Although I do like to travel to other places!” she enthused.

“Hence the job as travel editor,” he remarked. He tossed a crumb to the pigeon pecking at the ground near his feet.

“I started out as a writer, of course. I became the editor a year ago.”

Greg paused, then said with deliberation, “Yes, I know.”

She turned to face him. “I’ll bet you know the circumstances, too.”

He nodded.

“So now you understand why I don’t get involved with colleagues any more,” she said firmly.

He sounded as firm when he said, “No, I don’t. You can’t put us all into the same basket. I’ve never cheated on any woman I was seeing, and I can’t imagine starting with you.”

She rested her fork on her salad, and tried to explain. “It wasn’t only the cheating, although that was bad enough! It was the way everyone treated me with kid gloves for weeks after, so careful not to say the wrong thing or upset me. I knew they were all talking about me.”

“They care,” he said lightly. “You should be pleased to have so many friends. Tell me, if I worked somewhere else, would you go out with me?”

Nicola was so surprised at the directness of the question that she answered, “Probably,” then looked away, embarrassed. She expected Greg to pounce on this inadvertent admission that she wasn’t indifferent to him, but he chewed in silence, his eyes on the fountain where water splashed over a sculpture of jumping frogs.

“I owe you an explanation about Kylie,” he said abruptly.

“No, you don’t. I know what she’s like,” she assured him.

“You know what she’s like, but you don’t know what I’m like. You’d be justified in thinking ‘Oh, that Greg, last week he went out with one woman and now he’s after me.’ I’m not. Well,” he corrected with a laugh, “I am, obviously, but not like that. I said yes when she asked me out because I’m as weak as the next guy when a woman comes on to me, and yes I kissed her, but when I realized all she wanted was casual sex, I left. That’s not me, Nicola.”

His eyes held hers so steadily, so evenly, that it did not occur to Nicola to doubt him. Nor to wonder why she was so pleased to hear him say that.

“By the way, should I call you Nicola, or Nicky?” he asked. “Everyone at work calls you Nicky, maybe you prefer that?”

“I don’t mind which,” she said. “My family and some friends call me Nicola, but almost everyone else uses Nicky.”

“Then as someone who aspires to be at least your friend, I’ll stick with Nicola,” he said. The lazy grin spreading over his face gave him the look of a mischievous boy planning an escapade.

He is ridiculously good looking, thought Nicola. He even has a dimple when he smiles. There was a fleck of mustard on his upper lip, and she had the impulse to wipe it off with her finger. Where on earth had that crazy thought come from? “So, uh, was your weekend more interesting than mine?”

“No groceries and no laundry. No family because my parents are in Seattle and my sister in Chicago. No running because I was sailing, and also because I’m not a great runner. I’m more of a weights man than a marathon man. A lot of cleaning once I got back, however. What do you think, does it sound more interesting?” he teased.

She placed the half-eaten drumstick on her salad while she considered. “Yes, I think it does. Not so...so ordinary. Maybe too much sailing, and from the sounds of it too much cleaning, but no dull chores.”

He laughed. “I’m afraid the dull chores were only postponed! No escaping them. Perhaps I shouldn’t admit this, but I’m a fairly ordinary guy.”

Nicola slanted a glance at him, laughing too, but something told her that Greg was possibly the least ordinary man she had ever met.

* *

Greg leaned against the bar in Casey’s. He was talking to Max, but he was watching Nicola. Since that lunch on Tuesday, he had wracked his brain to come up with the least threatening, least date-like way to spend time with Nicola alone. She would, he knew, dismiss dinner or drinks or theatre out of hand. He thought he had the answer, but he had no intention of suggesting it in here, shouting over the noise of people, televisions and music.

She had that look of someone on the verge of leaving, playing with the clasp of her purse and listening with partial attention to Kylie. He frowned in Kylie’s general direction; he couldn’t believe he had ever gone out with that woman. Well, yes, he could believe it: she was pretty, in a flashy way, and he hadn’t known anything about her. And he’d always been a sucker for a woman who made the first move. Greg wished Nicola had come to Casey’s on his first Friday, for he would never have looked at the blonde if she had been here and he wouldn’t now be wondering if it was a strike against him.

There! Nicola had stood, and was saying goodbyes to the people at her table. She glanced over and waved at him and Max, then began to thread her way through the crowd. Greg let her get to the door before he followed.

“You’re wasting your time,” came Max’s voice from behind, in a “didn’t I tell you already?” sort of tone.

It’s my time, thought Greg, and I can do with it what I want.

Outside, he called, “Nicola!” and she looked back. Her expression held not the slightest trace of surprise, and she smiled at him.

“What a coincidence – that you should leave so soon after me, I mean,” she observed.

He grinned. “It is, isn’t it?”

“Where are you headed?”

“Wherever you’re going,” he replied. “What else would I want to do on a spring evening other than walk with a pretty girl?”

She shook her head at his foolishness. “You could go sailing?”

“I’ve got a whole day of that tomorrow.” He had a sudden image of this beautiful woman sitting on the deck of his sailboat, wearing no more than a swimsuit, her dark hair blowing in the breeze, and smiling up at him. Greg cleared his throat. “Do you like penguins?”

In a tone of amused surprise, she said, “I suppose.”

“Three eggs hatched at the zoo a few weeks ago. The chicks are completely adorable. You should see them,” he added, sounding casual.

“Maybe I will.”

“Thing is,” he continued, “they’re in a special area, not open to the public.”

She glanced at him in puzzlement. “Then I guess I won’t.”

“If you went with me, you could see them.”

“Oh? Are we going to scale the walls at night, and break in?” Nicola teased.

“We could, if that’s what you want, but it might be easier to swipe my security card at the door. I volunteer at the zoo, 10 hours a month,” he explained.

She turned to look at him, eyebrows raised. “Really?”

“Really. So showing the penguin chicks to you would be no different than showing them to other zoo visitors.” Like hell it wouldn’t. “Not a date at all. Nothing more than two animal lovers looking at animals.”

She was considering it, he could see. What woman could resist animals, particularly cute baby animals?

“Did I mention how adorable they are?”

The look she gave him said that she knew exactly what he was up to. But she was smiling, too.

* *

As Nicola walked from the parking lot to the gray wooden building housing the zoo’s ticket office, she reminded herself that this was not a date. She wasn’t certain what it was, but it was not a date.

She bought her ticket and went in and there was Greg, sitting on a bench by a cluster of trees. He was wearing faded jeans, and a powder-blue polo shirt with the zoo’s logo on his chest. Above the logo was pinned a badge with his name and the word “volunteer.” He rose smoothly to his feet and pushed his sunglasses back onto his head, and smiled at her, and her heart gave one mighty thump.

Who was she fooling? This was a date. She hadn’t taken so long to decide what to wear simply to go look at animals. It was worth it, though, to see how his gaze ran over her sweater and down to the jeans that hugged her hips.

“Hi,” he said. “You look different.”

She laughed. “Not as different as you!” She pointed to the badge, not quite touching his chest with her finger. “What do you do here?”

“I’m a docent,” he said, and taking her arm he steered her towards a path.

“A what?”

“A docent. I lead educational tours about the animals. For school groups, and general visitors,” he explained.

Nicola stared at him. “What, you’re a zoologist in addition to being a certified public accountant?”

He shook his head with a smile. “No, the zoo provides a training course. Anything you want to know about lions or meerkats, I’m your man.”

“I like elephants better,” she said.

“Wrong zoo. We don’t have any.”

They skirted a family clustered around their foldout map, arguing directions.

“Shouldn’t you offer to help them?” she asked in an undertone.

“I’m off duty. You are the only one I’m helping this afternoon. Not about elephants, though,” he added.

He led her on a winding path around the zoo, showing her Chinese Fire-Bellied Newts and Double-wattled Cassowaries and Black Lemurs, telling her things about the animals she would never have imagined. Who knew, for example, that gorillas liked cottage cheese?

When they stopped at a café, Nicola secured a table outside while Greg ordered. Looking around to make sure he wasn’t watching, she plucked at the V-neck of her sweater, fanning herself discreetly. Why hadn’t she worn a shirt under this sweater so she could take it off? Vanity, that was why, as she very well knew: she hadn’t wanted to ruin its smooth lines.

The loud laughter of two young women at the next table drew her attention, so she happened to be watching them as

Greg walked towards her and she saw how one of the women, a skinny redhead, ran her eyes over him in appreciation and nudged her friend.

“Here we go, two iced coffees,” said Greg, as he put the drinks down and slid onto the chair opposite.

“Thanks.”

His right hand rested on the wooden table, and she noticed the angry red mark curving up from his palm and running across the back of his hand. “Ow,” she sympathized. “What happened? Did an animal scratch you?”

He laughed, and flexed the hand. “No, *Drifter* did! *Drifter*’s my boat,” he added. “It’s a rope burn from yesterday. I was in a race, and did something stupid trying to win.”

“Do you sail every day?” She couldn’t see why anyone would want to do that.

“I don’t have the time. And when it’s cold and wet, sometimes even I would rather stay at the marina, reading a book or something. And what with three hours here after church this morning, and now the afternoon with you, I won’t get out today.” He shrugged. “So no, not every day.”

Had he really said church? “You went to church?”

He nodded absently, tearing open a sugar packet.

“Do you go every Sunday?”

Greg looked up from his coffee. “No, but at least once a month, usually more. Why are you so curious? Don’t you go?”

“At Christmas. Weddings, funerals and baptisms, too. You know, the usual,” she said with a faint laugh, thinking for the first time that for some people, that wasn’t “the usual.”

“But you believe in God?” he asked.

His intensity made her uneasy. Would he try to persuade her to join a cult? Then she laughed at herself, imaging a cult of crazed God-fearing accountants with Greg as their leader. She said, “Yes, I do. It’s organized religion I’m not so wild about.”

“That’s fair,” he conceded. “I struggled with that myself for a time.” He glanced at his watch and said, “Come on, let’s go. We still have to see the penguins.”

So much for the cult! “I’ll be right back, okay?” She pointed to the small building at the edge of the table area.

Washing her hands, she tried to conceive of going to church when the sole reason to go was that you wanted to go. As far as she was concerned, Sunday mornings were for sleeping in and drinking too much coffee over the newspaper in a café.

Another woman came in, and Nicola recognized the skinny redhead.

“Your brother is hot!” exclaimed the other woman.

Did this woman know Bill? But how would she know who Nicola was? And not even Bill’s own wife would ever describe him as “hot.” “Excuse me?”

The redhead pointed in the direction of the tables. “Isn’t he your brother, that man you’re with? You look like twins.”

“No, he’s not. My brother has red hair, actually, like you,” said Nicola with a smile. But the woman’s words reminded her that Kylie, when describing Greg, had said he resembled Nicola. She looked at Greg thoughtfully as she walked towards him. They couldn’t possibly be as alike as that woman had said, could they?

When they reached Penguin Island, and the baby penguin enclosure, all other thoughts flew out of her head. “Oh, you were right! Completely adorable.” She leaned down, her eyes misty at the sight of the small balls of fluff.

Greg smiled at her. “They’ll lose that adorableness soon, but we should come back when they go to Fish School. I hear it’s a laugh, watching the keepers teach the young penguins how to swim!”

She looked up at him. “It’s a date!” she declared, then caught herself. “I mean, I’d love to see that.”

His smile grew broader, and he pulled her up. Outside, they strolled along the path, dodging running children and watching the antics of the adult penguins.

“What’s up?” he asked. “Why are you peeking at me from the corner of your eyes? Have I got something on my face?”

“It’s nothing,” she replied with a laugh, waving a hand in dismissal. “A woman told me we look like twins. She thought you were my brother.”

“You’re prettier than I am,” he joked. He put his hands on his hips, and looked at her. “Maybe. We both have dark hair, though yours is almost straight. Blue eyes, though a different shade of blue.” Greg ran a finger down her nose, making her laugh. “And your nose tilts up at the tip, delightfully. Mine doesn’t.”

Their eyes held, and a breathless, giddy feeling rose in her.

“I’m glad I’m not your brother,” he said softly.

“Any particular reason?”

“If I was your brother, I’d have to kiss you like this.” Greg deposited a chaste peck on her cheek. “Rather than like this.”

His lips against hers were soft, and his hands rested on her shoulders. It was a light kiss, one she could pull back from easily if that was what she wanted. Instead, Nicola slipped her arms around his waist. She felt his own arms go around her, pulling her to him, and his lips pressed more firmly.

Nicola had always dated men much taller than she was, and if anyone had asked she would have insisted that was important. However, the feel of Greg in her arms, his body hard and muscular but only three inches taller than her own, was strangely arousing in its novelty, she was finding.

And Kylie had lied: he was definitely not a lousy kisser.

* * * *

Chapter 3

“WATCH IT!” cried a man, as Nicola pushed open the heavy door to the fire stairs. She heard a quick scuffle of shoes on the small landing as someone jumped out of the way.

“I’m sorry!” she exclaimed, then saw who it was. “Greg!”

He took one step down and looked up at her, his expression changing with comical speed from annoyance to pleasure. She couldn’t deny that she was just as pleased to see him.

“Hi,” he said, smiling.

“Hi.”

Voices and the thump of feet from the floor above propelled them down the stairs to street level.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

She pointed in the general direction of the bay, a few blocks away. “Just for a walk. I try to get outside at lunch whenever I can. Where are you going?”

“Just for a walk,” he said. “My mind turns to mush if I spend all day staring at numbers. Can I join you?”

Nicola smiled. “Yes.” Oh, yes. She wasn’t going to question the coincidence that put him on that landing the moment she opened the door.

“Did you get home okay yesterday?”

“Fine, once I got out of the zoo parking lot. How about you?” she asked.

He nodded. “Fine.”

They walked in silence. Not really awkward silence, but certainly not easy silence. It was impossible to forget that kiss yesterday, the feel of his arms around her and his body against her.

“Uh, when’s your next zoo shift?” she asked.

“In a couple of weeks.”

Curious, she asked, “How did you get into that, anyway?”

Greg laughed. “My mother. She’s a great one for volunteering. ‘In this life, we must give back part of what we are given’; if I’ve heard her say that once, I’ve heard her say it a hundred times. I guess it sunk in. I taught sailing to kids in Seattle, but I thought I’d try something different here.”

Nicola glanced at him, and when she saw that he was looking away from her, watching a ferry, she let her gaze linger on him. Not especially tall, but big and solid, like a man who made his living from heavy manual labor; yet he was a CPA, and he did volunteer work. No one she had ever known, man or woman, did volunteer work. It would never have occurred to her.

“Let’s go over there,” he said, pointing, and she followed him across the Embarcadero to the railing that ran along the water.

They rested their forearms on the rail, looking out at the water that sparkled on this warm, sunny day and across to Oakland rising on the opposite shore. Their shoulders almost – almost – touched. His shirtsleeve brushed her bare arm.

“Thank you for yesterday,” Greg said. “I wasn’t sure you would really turn up.”

“Why?”

He shrugged, and she felt the fabric of his sleeve slide along her arm. “Your rule. I was afraid you might think it was a date, after all, and change your mind.”

“It was a date,” Nicola said. “You were sneaky about it, but it was.”

Greg turned, one arm still on the rail but his left hand now on her shoulder. “But you came anyway.”

She turned, too, and somehow her right hand was on his waist. “Yes.”

“I’m so glad you did,” he said, his voice warm.

Nicola leaned closer. “So am I.”

* *

“So it’s graffiti, right?” asked Greg as they got out of his car. “Big graffiti?”

They had come to the Mission District straight from work. The day was still warm, the light still bright but edging towards the gold of early evening. Greg paused to remove his jacket and pull off his tie, tossing both into the back seat.

“Murals, not graffiti!” insisted Nicola, as she walked around the car to join him. “I can’t believe you’ve never heard of Balmy Alley in the year you’ve been here.”

He shrugged lightly. “Where I come from, painting things on walls is called graffiti, not art. We don’t make a special trip halfway across town to look at it.”

Greg tugged on her arm to stop her walking off, and with a slight pressure he pulled her closer; it was slight enough that she could ignore it, if she wanted. But as he had hoped, Nicola turned back and took a step towards him.

“Whatever they’re called,” he said, holding her eyes with his own, “I want to thank you for asking me to see them with you.”

This was date number two. He didn’t count that walk to the bay at lunch yesterday as a date, no matter how wonderful that kiss had been. During their slow stroll back to the office, she had asked him if he would like to join her on her semiannual visit to Balmy Alley. So here he was, giving up the sweetest Wednesday evening of sailing imaginable, to look at graffiti. And Greg didn’t mind in the least.

They walked along tree-shaded 24th Street, one block from the car to the alley. Store signs here were in Spanish as well as English, and a small boy, running towards them so fast that Greg feared he would trip and fall, flashed an exuberant grin and cried “Hola!” as he passed.

Neither of them had an unthinking feel yet for where the other was; their elbows would knock together and they would veer away, or he would turn to point at something and she would walk into him. “Sorry,” one would say, with a sheepish smile, or “Oops.” The same thing had happened at the zoo. Finally, when the back of her hand brushed against his as she moved aside to make room for a woman pushing a baby stroller, Greg threaded his fingers through hers.

Nicola gave him a swift look of surprise, and a smile. Their fingers tightened at the same time.

“Okay,” said Greg. “If I’m going to admire graffiti, you’d better tell me why.”

Another swift look from those brilliant blue eyes, but this one was laughing at him. “Murals! It started in the 1980s, as a way of protesting against what was happening in Central America then. Human rights abuses, you know? There’s still a political theme to a lot of them, but now there are also local scenes and things that are there because they’re beautiful or they make you laugh. Oh!” Nicola said, with a sudden smile. “I just remembered, there’s one with a sailboat! You’ll like that one. If it’s still there. They change all the time.”

“That’s why you come twice a year,” suggested Greg.

She nodded. “That’s why.” She steered him into the alley.

It wasn’t very long, Greg saw, one block running from 24th to 25th Streets. And it was an alley, no doubt there. Narrow, and lined with garage doors and houses or the walls of buildings. Every surface was an artist’s canvas. An explosion of vibrant color met his eye, big bold shapes and tiny delicate figures, and moss-edged brickwork forming a walkway from one end to the other. Nature vied for his attention in the form of vibrant spills of hot pink bougainvillea, or purple wisteria that cascaded over walls. He didn’t know what to look at first.

“Still graffiti?” she asked.

“No way.”

“Come on, I’ll show you my favorite,” Nicola said, and hand-in-hand they strolled between the murals. “There.” She pointed up, above two mural-covered garage doors, to the side of a building: two narrow eyes stared down, and below them the word “Rejoice” in pale blue letters the color of the sky. “It’s good advice, I think. It’s so easy to go through life thinking only of what’s wrong. Sometimes we need to stop and remember what’s good, and be happy about that.”

Greg's hand, still holding hers, slipped behind her waist and pulled her against him. "I couldn't agree more," he said, and rejoiced at the feel of her lips against his.

Her free hand slid along his bare forearm and then his sleeve, rolled back to the elbow. Her hand was warm on the back of his neck, her fingertips playing in his hair. He released her hand and tightened both arms around her as her lips opened to the darting pressure of his tongue. Part of him whispered that this busy alley full of people was not the right place for a kiss like this, but the rest of him ignored it. On this delicious evening in late spring, or early summer, wrapped in Nicola's arms, nowhere could be more right than this.

"Hey," Greg whispered, when they drew apart. "That was more than I planned. Sorry."

Nicola laughed softly, and her hands skimmed down his back, then fell away. He missed her touch already.

"It takes two to kiss like that," she pointed out. "You've got nothing to be sorry for."

He brushed her hair back from her face.

"You hungry?" she asked, as they turned and headed back down the alley.

"Yes! I've been hungry since we walked past those Mexican restaurants by the car," he replied. "I'm surprised you haven't heard the gurgles." He patted one hand against his stomach.

Nicola said with dismay, "Does it have to be Mexican?"

He looked at her with curiosity. "No. Why? Don't you like it?"

"Oh I do!" she said. "I'm allergic to tomatoes, though, and so much Mexican food has them. It's easier to avoid it all than to force myself not to eat the salsa. I love salsa." She sounded forlorn.

Greg stopped, and stared, and then began to laugh. "I'll be damned!"

"What?" She frowned.

"I thought my mother was the only person who was allergic to tomatoes," he explained, still smiling. "I've never met anyone else. She'll be thrilled to know there's another sufferer."

Nicola sniffed. "I wouldn't call that a cause for celebration," she said tartly.

"Actually," Greg said, looking at her from the new perspective that this comparison with his mother had given him, "you look like my mother, too. I hadn't noticed that before." It was a disconcerting discovery.

She shrugged, and resumed walking. "That's hardly a surprise! That woman at the zoo said you and I look like twins, so it stands to reason I'd also look like your mother."

"Don't you think it's kind of weird?" he persisted.

"That I look like your mother?"

"That I'm attracted to someone who looks like my mother!" he exclaimed.

Nicola stopped again, and regarded him with an expression that he could only think of as indulgent skepticism. "No. If you were attracted to your mother, yes! I'm just me." She flicked a glance at him, then away, and smiled. "But I like that you're attracted to me." She hesitated, then with much less assurance she asked, "Um...do you like French food?"

"I like all food. Never yet met a nationality I didn't like."

"The thing is..." She paused again, looking uncertain, then plunged on with, "My friend H el ene's husband Antoine is a fantastic cook. I had supper at their apartment last night and he always makes too much, on purpose, so I can take it home. So I've got a pot of beef *bourguignon* plus some potatoes *dauphinoise* in the fridge that just need heating up. What I mean is, if you want, you can join me. It's very good!" she added hastily.

Greg had gone from polite yet puzzled at the beginning of her explanation to pleased at the end. "I'm sure it is. Real French food cooked by a real French man! I would love to join you, Nicola. Thank you for the invitation." He was pleased as much by the idea of the food as he was that she had invited him to her apartment, despite having had obvious doubts about the wisdom of doing such a thing on the second date. And," he added with a smile, "I know the invitation is only for supper, so relax."

Her own smile was part relief and part embarrassment. "Was it that plain? Sorry. I haven't been in this early dating stage

in a while. I'm rusty."

He hesitated, but decided he had to tell her. "I lived with a woman in Seattle for three years. When it ended, I was... upset, and I took that year off that I told you about. I haven't been serious about anyone since then." He lifted her hand and kissed it. "So I'm rusty, too. But I'm sure we'll figure this out."

Her hand stroked his cheek, so soft. "I had wondered if it was something like that," she said, and the sympathy in her eyes was clear. "I guess we're two of the walking wounded, with bad relationships behind us."

There were at the car now and Greg opened the door for her. He put a hand on her arm. "A good one ahead, though, I hope."

"So do I."

She lived, as she had told him that first evening at Casey's, in Polk Gulch, near Lafayette Park. The building was brown brick, well kept, with stone steps flanked by potted shrubs leading under an archway to recessed wooden doors. Nicola's one-bedroom apartment was on the fifth floor.

"This is a nice building," Greg said, as he followed her down the hallway to her door. "I like these older ones. They have more character, I think. How long have you lived here?"

"About 10 years," she said, unlocking the door. "I like it, too. And it's close to everything, plus the park is nearby."

"That long?" he asked in surprise. He hadn't realized that the guy who ran off with her boss a year ago had lived here, too.

"Bathroom's there." She pointed to one of two closed doors on the right. "The other door is a closet. My bedroom," she added, as they walked down the hallway past an open door on the left.

Greg snatched a quick look, but couldn't see much – a glimpse of a bed with a white cover and bright cushions, a window, a dresser. At the far end, the hallway branched like a T, to the kitchen on the right and the living room on the left. He would never describe her apartment as spacious, but it was bright and airy with little architectural touches such as molded ceilings and art deco light fittings.

"Interesting curtains," he commented.

She looked confused, and then laughed. "Oh, the plants! Well, they need the light. I can't bring myself to get rid of any."

He followed her into the kitchen, where the window was also hidden behind foliage.

"Hélène and Antoine have huge, wrap-around balconies," Nicola said as she opened the fridge. "They get the sun almost all day long. And what do you think she grows out there? Cactus!"

Greg laughed at her look of disgust.

Nicola smiled. "I know, I could move. Do you like lemonade?"

"Love it," he said robustly. If he had been honest, Greg would have admitted that lemonade came far down on his list of favorite beverages, but he was so thrilled and intrigued to be in her home that he would happily drink the stuff all night if needed. He took his glass with a smile and sat at the table to watch while she pulled containers from the fridge. "Your friends are French, I take it?"

"Yes. They came here three years ago when Hélène was offered the position of West Coast sales manager for a French luxury goods group. Antoine is a software developer. His English isn't as good as hers, but, as he says himself, the code understands him perfectly well!" Nicola emptied the beef into a pan and put the potatoes in the microwave. "They have a son, Philippe, who's almost 13. He's in France right now. Antoine is afraid he's becoming too American and wants him to go to school back home. Hélène has other ideas!" she said with a laugh.

"How did you meet?"

"At Pilates. They live a couple of blocks from me, and Hélène and I go to the same class. We got along from the start, and became friends," she said.

Greg rose, and asked, "Can I help? Set the table maybe? I feel like an oaf sitting there while you do all the work."

Nicola laughed. "I'm stirring stew, which someone else made, so I wouldn't really describe that as work! But sure,

thanks.” She pointed out cupboards and drawers to him. “I suppose all your friends are back in Seattle,” she said after a moment. “That must be lonely.”

He shook his head, and shoved some bushy green thing out of the way. It bounced back. “No, actually, my best friends have lived in San Francisco for quite a while.”

“Oh, you mentioned them!” she exclaimed. “They were why you stopped here on the way back from Mexico.”

“Yes. Sam and Debbie. They have a son, too, Peter. He’s nine. I’m his godfather,” he added, rummaging for forks. “Sam and I had classes together at university, and Debbie is the sister of my roommate in second year. He set us up on a date. Boy, did that not work out!” Greg laughed, remembering that brightly lit pizza parlor and the way they had argued about politics all night, Debbie stabbing her fork towards him each time she made a point. “I liked her, but there was nothing between us. Not a spark of anything. She could have been my sister, not my roommate’s. But I thought she and Sam would hit it off. So I introduced them, and I was best man at their wedding a year later.”

They carried their plates to the table, and Greg pushed a straggling vine out of the way, hoping she wouldn’t notice. “This is fantastic,” he said, after the first mouthful.

Nicola nodded. “Antoine says there should be tomato paste in the beef, but he left it out because of me. You should taste his chocolate croissants!”

“He makes croissants?” Greg’s fork paused halfway to his mouth. “What, by hand? From scratch?”

“Yes. Incredible, isn’t it?”

“I hope that’s not the sort of thing you’re looking for,” Greg commented with a smile. “A man who can make French pastries, I mean. I’m in big trouble if you are.”

She rested her chin in her hand, as if considering the idea. “It would be a definite bonus if you could,” she said, sounding serious, although the twitch of her lips was a giveaway. “They wouldn’t have to be chocolate. You could start with the plain ones. Maybe Antoine could teach you.”

Greg laughed. “Oh yes, I can see us in the kitchen, flour everywhere, while you and your friend relax on the balcony, drinking champagne and admiring the cactus!”

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” she replied, eyes twinkling. “What about you? What sort of a woman are you looking for? Not a sailor, I hope!”

He regarded her, the laugh lingering. “That would be a definite bonus,” he said, as seriously as she had. “But I’d settle for one with long dark hair and big blue eyes, who thinks a jungle is an adequate substitute for a curtain.” He brushed the damned vine away, again.

“Oh.”

Greg ran one hand over her shoulder, into that mass of dark hair, to bring her closer. “Just like you, in fact,” he said.

Her mouth tasted of beef and wine and potatoes and lemons, and of her. Their tongues darted and jostled, teasing and playing. Both of them were on the edges of their chairs, precariously balanced, lips and arms entwined. Greg leaned that little bit more and got both arms around her.

She gave a squeak of surprise when he pulled her off her chair and onto his lap, but didn’t appear to object to finding herself there. Rather, she twisted to face him and wrapped her arms around his neck. Greg trailed his mouth down her neck, nibbling and kissing. One hand slipped under her blouse and stroked the soft, bare skin above her waist.

Greg gave one last, slow kiss to that enticing hollow at the base of her throat, telling himself not to go any lower. This was getting out of hand and he was in great danger of doing something he didn’t want to do. Christ, yes, he wanted to, but what would she think of him, coming on so strong, so soon? Especially after assuring her that he knew supper was the only thing on offer. But her breasts were pressed against his chest, and with only his shirt and her blouse between them, he could feel their rise and fall as she breathed, feel the quick beat of her heart. The gentlest upward slide and he could, he could....

With extreme reluctance, Greg moved his hand from her bare waist to the less dangerous region of her back, and he pulled Nicola against him in a hug, safe and brotherly.

* *

“Ahoy, *Drifter!*”

Greg poked his head up through the deck, out of the hatch at the front. On the pontoon stood Sam and Debbie, a small heap of bags and a case of beer at their feet. Beside them, Peter was hopping from one foot to the other in excitement. “Come aboard!” Greg invited.

It was 7am on Saturday morning, the sun was shining and the air was clear and cool. A light breeze played in the bay, but Greg knew that once they cleared the Golden Gate the wind would pick up – perfect for sailing south along the coast.

“Ahoy, Greg!” shrilled the boy, as Greg reached across to hoist him over the rail and set him down in the cockpit.

“Hey, sport,” said Greg, ruffling the boy’s hair. “All set?”

Peter nodded enthusiastically. He had taken to sailing as naturally as Greg himself had at that age, and could competently handle his own small dinghy. Where this talent came from was a mystery to his landlubber parents.

“Stow your gear in the usual spot, put that beer in the cooler, and let’s go,” Greg said to them by way of greeting. “It’s too nice a day for hanging around the marina!”

Ten minutes later, he backed the boat slowly out of its slip. Sam was sitting in the cockpit, legs stretched out and arms splayed along the rail, and Debbie was unpacking in the berth wedged into the front of the boat. Peter’s head appeared as he started up the stairs from the cabin, but Greg’s stern voice stopped him halfway up.

“Get your lifejacket on,” he commanded. “You know the rules.”

The boy’s face was a mix of disappointment and disobedience. “Dad and you don’t have one,” he muttered.

“Your dad and I can swim. Very well. In an ocean. You can barely manage one length in a swimming pool,” Greg pointed out, with some ruthlessness. He wasn’t about to endanger the boy in order to avoid a tantrum. Then he added, with the beginning of a grin, “And don’t forget that as well as we can swim, the sharks can swim even better. If you go overboard and sink, they’ll get to you before we will.”

Peter eyed him with suspicion, clearly weighing his chances with the sharks, and then backed down into the cabin.

* *

Nicola came to a gasping halt at the top of the stairs. If ever the day came when she could do this whole four-mile run in the Presidio without stopping at the top of these stairs, she intended to celebrate by hanging up her running shoes for good. To her left stretched the vast Pacific, its rollers crashing and booming onto the beach below, and ahead of her the Golden Gate Bridge pierced the sky in slender elegance. Behind her, H el ene dropped noisily to the grass.

“*Merde*, but I hate those stairs,” declared H el ene. “Why do we do this to ourselves, eh?”

“Because we’re masochistic suckers for punishment?” suggested Nicola. “No, wait, I think it’s because both of us want to fit into the same swimsuits we wore last year.”

H el ene laughed shortly. “Right now, I am happy to buy another one.” She ran her fingers through her short blonde hair, which, Nicola noticed with envy, looked neat and perfectly coifed even after two miles of running. Nicola’s own hair was straggling out of its ponytail and sticking to the sweat on her forehead.

She took her friend’s extended hand and hauled her up. “How was Philippe when you phoned him?” inquired Nicola.

H el ene’s face lit up. “Good. I miss my baby! But he will be home again soon.”

“Philippe is 12! Hardly a baby,” protested Nicola with a laugh.

“He will always be my baby. Sending him to France for this year of school was Antoine’s idea, as you know, not mine. This summer,” said H el ene, with a look that boded ill for domestic peace in their household, “we will discuss again this plan of Antoine.”

Over H el ene’s shoulder, Nicola saw a small boat making its way along the coast, its sails blazing white in the sun. The

front bashed up and down, and spray flew every time it smacked into the water.

“How long do you think that boat is?”

Hélène shaded her eyes with one hand. “How long? You mean how short, I think! Nine meters?” She paused, doing the conversion in her head. “Thirty feet, I mean. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no particular reason,” said Nicola lightly.

Hélène looked at her closely. “No?”

“I met a man a couple of weeks ago who said he has a 30-foot sailboat, and he offered to take me sailing some time. Look at that!” she exclaimed. “Who in their right mind would go on the ocean in that little tub?”

Hélène smiled. “*Oh là là!*”

Nicola stared at her. “*Oh là là!*?” she repeated in disbelief. “I have never heard you say that!”

“I believe it is the man, not the boat, that you are thinking of right now, no? Which means this is about affairs of the heart, and the only language for discussing affairs of the heart is French. But since you speak no more than four words of French, all of them badly, I shall content myself with an ‘*Oh là là!*,’” explained Hélène. “So, who is he?”

“No one special,” said Nicola, trying to sound casual. She failed. “Just someone from work.”

“From work?” repeated Hélène in surprise. “But you refuse to have anything to do with men from your work. Or has that changed?”

In a low voice, Nicola admitted, “I guess we went out once. Okay, twice. Oh, and he bought me lunch yesterday, does that count?”

Hélène nodded with mock solemnity, and said, “I think we must include it. Three dates in how long?”

“Um, the first was last Sunday.”

“Not even one week! He must be something!” exclaimed Hélène.

Nicola winked, and said, “*Oh là là!*!”

* *

It had been an exhilarating sail south, *Drifter* leaning into the waves and cutting her way effortlessly through the water. Exhilarating, that is, for Greg and for Peter, who hadn’t even objected to being tethered to the rail to ensure he didn’t slide overboard as the boat heeled and rolled. For Debbie, it had been hours of lying on Greg’s bed, which being at the back of the boat was marginally more stable than the berth at the front, one hand clutching a cool wet cloth to her forehead and the other clutching her stomach. Sam had toughed it out on deck, marveling at his crazy kid who loved the way the boat was bouncing around.

But now they were at a calm anchor in the sheltered bay, the men had gone for a swim and cracked open the beers, and Greg was relieved to see that Debbie began to take an interest in life again. The two of them were in the cabin, making a salad while the potatoes baked in the microwave. On deck, Sam and Peter were firing up the barbecue for hot dogs and hamburgers.

Without looking up from the tomato she was chopping, Debbie said, “There’s a woman in my office I think you’d really like. Why don’t we all go out for supper one night, and you can meet her?”

“Debbie!” laughed Greg. “That’s the third woman you’ve tried to fix me up with!”

“You shouldn’t be single, Greg. If ever a man was meant to be married and have children, it’s you,” said Debbie earnestly. “You’re great with Peter.”

He rinsed a cucumber and patted it dry, but didn’t say anything, and she went on with, “Hey, I know you needed time after you and Jackie split. You can tell everyone else that story about dropping out of the rat race, but you can’t fool me.”

A wry smile, and Greg said, “I never could.”

Like everyone else, Greg had fallen for all of Jackie’s reasons for postponing marriage. He still found it nearly impossible to believe, though, that Jackie could have lied like she had about wanting to start a family and no longer taking

contraception. The truth had devastated him.

“Have you gone out with anyone since you moved here?” Debbie demanded.

He looked at her with amusement. “I’m not a hermit. Of course I have.”

Her expression was doubtful.

“I met someone at the yacht club not long after I settled in,” he explained patiently. “We went out a few times. It didn’t lead to anything.”

“Why didn’t she snatch you up?”

“Maybe because I didn’t want her to snatch me up,” he laughed. “Or maybe not every woman thinks I’m as much of a prize as you do! You see nothing but my good side, you know.”

She snorted. “Right. Thirteen years of seeing nothing but your good side. What about your new job? Is there really no one there good enough for you?” she asked.

He said nothing, and she looked at him again, and began to smile. “Or is there?”

Greg shrugged lightly. “There might be.” Not even to Debbie would he admit how hard he had fallen for Nicola, and how fast. “I only met her a couple of weeks ago. And she has a rule against dating colleagues.”

Debbie scoffed. “And you’re going to let that stop you?”

Greg looked up from the cucumber, and grinned. “Three dates so far, so I guess not.”

* *

Kylie plunked herself onto the edge of Nicola’s desk, arms folded. “That Greg! Can you believe the nerve? After the way he treated me, now all of a sudden he’s got nothing better to do than hang around the third floor and pretend to talk to you. All he’s trying to do is make me jealous!”

“Uh, Kylie—”

“I’m sorry, Nicky. It’s nice of you to pretend to be happy to see him, but he’s wasting his time. Oh, and yours too,” Kylie added, in what was obviously an afterthought.

“Kylie, I should tell you—”

One leg crossed over the other. “If he thinks I’m going to give him another chance, well, it won’t—”

“Kylie!” exclaimed Nicola in sharp exasperation. “Stop! And lower your voice.” The other woman had no problem with everyone within 20 feet knowing many of the details of her love life, but Nicola drew the line when it involved her personally. “Greg really is coming here to see me. We’ve, um, gone out a few times.”

Kylie stared at Nicola in stupefaction, trying on expressions of disbelief and anger and outrage before settling on glee. “Nicky, you broke your dumb rule!” she crowed, and everyone within 20 feet looked up. “About damned time, too!”

She held out her hand, and Nicola, amused, shook it. “No hard feelings, right?” asked Kylie anxiously. “I mean, you’re not sore because he liked me first?”

Nicola shook her head solemnly, biting her lip to keep the laugh inside. “These things happen. I see no reason why we can’t all be adults about it.”

Kylie jumped to her feet and clapped her hands, laughing. “I am so happy for you, Nicky! And if he breaks your heart, I’ll cut the bastard’s balls off.”

She smiled as she watched Kylie walk away, touched by the younger woman’s genuine pleasure. Then she frowned, seeing how Kylie’s bikini-cut panties dug into her generous curves and how the tight green pencil skirt clung to every bulge of skin and wrinkle of underwear. Did Kylie never check the rear view in a mirror?

Nicola turned back, and met the eyes of Max, looking at her with faint disappointment.

“You broke your rule, huh?”

In all the dizzy exhilaration of this budding relationship with Greg, she hadn’t given a thought to how her colleagues might react, particularly those men whose offers had been firmly declined.

“Oh, Max,” she said with consternation. “It’s not... I mean, I...” Nicola had no idea what she did mean, beyond the bare truth that Max did not fascinate and excite her, and Greg did. She could not possibly say that.

“It’s okay, Nicky. My heart’s not broken and my ego’s not crushed,” he assured her with a wide smile. “I feel kind of stupid, that’s all, telling Greg he was wasting his time with you.”

She leaned over and touched his hand. “You sure, Max?”

He nodded, messy hazel hair flopping into his eyes. “Tell you what, if he does break your heart, I’ll help Kylie cut his balls off. How’s that?”

Nicola laughed. “Deal!”

* *

Nicola and H el ene had returned in mud-splattered weariness this Saturday morning from their assault on the rain-soaked running tracks of the Presidio. The cool, cloudy early morning was giving way to sun, and they were sprawled on cushioned loungers on H el ene’s balcony with its view of the bay.

H el ene pushed the plate of warm croissants towards Nicola. “Have another, please. We assuredly burned off all of the calories for a dozen croissants this morning, and Antoine will be desolate if you have only one. He made them because I told him I would invite you.”

Nicola hesitated for no more than a second. “I still can’t believe your husband can actually make these things! He could give up the software business and become San Francisco’s most sought-after baker,” she commented, pulling apart the flaky, buttery pastry and dipping one end into her caf e au lait. Post-run breakfasts at H el ene’s apartment had a delightful feel of Paris to them, but they did undo everything the two of them had recently sweated over.

“I believe not! He enjoys making them from time to time, but to get up at 3am to make them for customers every day? My Antoine is too lazy for that,” she said crisply. And then smiled. “And can you imagine me in the front of the store, selling them?”

“I think poor Antoine would get no sleep at all, trying to make all the croissants that you could persuade people to buy,” replied Nicola. “If you can do it with cognac and handbags, you can do it with pastry.”

H el ene shrugged, and said complacently, “This is true.”

Nicola’s attention was diverted by the squat, elderly woman who had appeared on a balcony of the building across the road. Dressed in a fluffy blue bathrobe and wearing scruffy slippers, she was stumping purposefully from one end of her balcony to the other. She would touch the rail, turn, and repeat. A sleek black cat sat on a table in the middle of the balcony, head turning to watch her go first one way, then the other.

“Ah, it’s Madame La Marche!” exclaimed H el ene.

“Who?”

H el ene laughed. “That’s what Philippe has named her. Mrs Walk, you would say. She does that every day.”

Nicola said thoughtfully, “And who’s to say that she doesn’t have the right idea? That looks better than killing ourselves on the Presidio stairs.”

H el ene grinned wickedly. “And I’m sure your Greg would admire you just as much if you wore such a lovely gown rather than last summer’s bikini. It is the one with polka dots, no?”

“Yes.” Nicola eyed the plate of croissants. What harm could one more do?

“What delightful pastime has he planned for you this weekend? There has been the zoo, live jazz and supper at the Grand Caf e, walking on the beach at sunset, a Spanish tapas cooking class and admiring the murals along Balmy Alley, in addition to those things you have not told me; what could be left?” H el ene asked. “Nicola, he is too good to be true! You say he is handsome, he makes you laugh, he kisses you so that your toes tingle, he volunteers at the zoo and he likes children! For he must like them; think of the noisy little brutes that overrun the zoo. Surely he must be hiding a terrible flaw.”

Nicola laughed. “A terrible flaw?”

“Or perhaps a terrible secret? Yes, that is it!” H el ene threw herself into her theory. “There is a deep, dark secret that will prevent you from ever finding true happiness with this man.”

“H el ene! What could he possibly be hiding?” demanded Nicola, still laughing.

She shrugged again. “I don’t know. Perhaps...perhaps he wears women’s underwear?”

“What!” exclaimed Nicola in astonishment. “Why would that be the first deep, dark secret you would think of?”

H el ene sipped her caf e au lait. “I am a Frenchwoman, after all. We know these things.”

* * * *

Chapter 4

THIS WAS IT. She had known Greg for four weeks now, and had run out of excuses. Even the weather had let her down. It was a beautiful Sunday in June, the sky was blue and the sun was warm, and delightful breezes played over the water; and, God help her, she was about to go sailing.

Hélène had shrieked with laughter yesterday when Nicola had told her the nature of Greg's planned "delightful pastime." "Oh, *chérie*," she had said, "this must be love!"

Nicola fell in with the stream of passengers leaving the train station. In the car park, she spotted Greg waving, and hitched the beach bag's strap higher over her shoulder as she headed his way. She had followed his suggestion that she bring her swimsuit and a change of clothes. And she had brought something else, too: tucked in a small pocket inside the bag were two condoms. Just in case. After three weeks of dating, and kissing, and cuddling, she was ready for more. What worried her, though, was his reaction to Kylie and her casual approach to sex; would Greg consider nine dates in three weeks to still fall within the casual sex bracket? If Nicola made a move he wasn't ready for, would that be the end? She strongly hoped not, because apart from Greg being the sexiest damned man she had ever dated, it had been a long, passion-free year since Andrew had run off.

"Hello," they said at the same time, and laughed.

She leaned closer to kiss Greg, a brief touch of lips that gave away nothing of what she had just been contemplating. "I'm sorry to drag you to the station like this."

"It's not your fault someone backed into your car," Greg replied. "Did you take your seasickness pill?"

She nodded dutifully. Not only did she have no desire to get sick, but she couldn't imagine him having any interest in making love to her if she was pasty and nauseous. Nor, of course, would she be able to muster much enthusiasm for it herself.

It was only a few minutes in the car from the station to the marina. The forest of bare masts was a giveaway even to Nicola. As they walked towards the security gate leading to the pontoon, she asked, "What's that noise?"

"What noise?"

"Don't you hear it? That sort of metallic tapping-knocking sound. It's everywhere." How could he not hear it?

Understanding dawned on Greg's face. "No, I don't hear it. I mean, not anymore. It's the bits of rigging flapping against the masts in the breeze. You'll hear it in every marina."

She looked at him pointedly. "I've never been in a marina before. How can you sleep with that racket?"

He shrugged. "I don't hear this, and I'll bet you don't hear that roar of traffic outside your apartment."

"What traffic?"

He laughed, and ushered her through the gate. "Exactly."

She followed him along the main pontoon, passing smaller ones stretching to right and left, each lined with small yachts. So many boats! And there was another cluster of pontoons and boats off to one side. At the end of the pontoon, he turned right and led her halfway along a row of boats, stopping at one on his left.

"Here she is!" he announced with a wide smile of pride.

Drifter was a sleek white shape with lots of shining metal and gleaming wood. It looked bigger than she was dreading, tied up in its own little U-shaped harbor. Two small walkways separated Greg's boat from the ones on either side.

"It's pretty," she said, with mild surprise, and felt a stirring of interest at the idea of being on the bay on it.

Greg stepped easily over the boat's wire rail. "Come aboard," he invited, and held out a hand to help her. "Be sure to hold on to something whenever you're moving around."

There was a slightly greater sense of movement on the boat than on the pontoon, but not enough to disturb her. Once down the narrow stairway to the cabin, Nicola was pleasantly surprised at how bright it was. The walls and ceiling were white, and all the cupboards and shelves were of a pale wood. Air and sunlight poured in through a number of small open

windows and hatches.

“There’s the bathroom,” he pointed to a small door, “and at the front is a berth, uh, a room, you can use. For changing clothes, I mean.”

“Okay. Is that where you sleep?” she asked. She could see through its open door, and it was small. No, it wasn’t big enough to be small; it was tiny. How could he possibly live here? she wondered. They were standing at the bottom of the stairs, and there was nothing but a minuscule kitchen, then padded benches on either side of a drop-down table in the center, and that small room no more than five steps away. That was it.

But he shook his head. “No, that’s the ‘spare room.’ My cabin’s there.” He pointed to another small door, to the left of the kitchen.

She had to say it. “How can you possibly live here?”

Greg threw back his head and laughed. “I have low standards, I guess! And I don’t have much stuff, so the space isn’t a problem.”

Nicola shook her head in amazement. She looked around the cabin again. So small!

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing to something woven that stuck up over the top of a bench cushion.

He plucked the object from the shelf. “It’s a floor mat,” he explained. “Or rather, it will be when it’s done.”

She turned it over in her hands. It was rope, intricately knotted and woven to form a mat. “You must have a lot of patience to make this,” she commented.

“Not a chance!” he exclaimed. “That’s my godson’s handiwork. Peter. He thinks I need a mat at the foot of the stairs. Every time he comes, he adds a bit to it. A very small bit!” Greg traced one finger along the knotting. “He did that yesterday.” He tossed it back onto the shelf.

“You ready to go?” he asked her with a smile. “Last chance to jump ship!”

She shook her head. “I’ll hang around.”

“Good,” Greg said, his voice gone soft and his gaze steady.

Nicola swallowed. What if I push him onto that bench and—

But he took her hand to lead her back outside, and with a sigh of resignation, Nicola followed.

In only a few minutes, they were motoring away from the pontoon. Before they cleared the marina, Greg asked, “Do you want a lifejacket?” He stood behind the wheel, peering ahead.

She was sitting on the wooden decking around the cockpit, her back against the wire railing and actually enjoying herself, but now she looked up at him, startled. “Do I need one?”

“It’s up to you. How well do you swim?” he asked with a smile of mischief. “In case you go over the side unexpectedly, I mean.”

“I think I can manage to stay afloat until you turn this thing around and come back for me,” she replied tartly. Then, with suspicion, “What are you laughing at?”

“Peter’s a great kid, most of the time, but he’s got a real thing about not wearing his lifejacket. I gave him a story about the sharks getting to him before I could if he wasn’t floating on the surface. I debated trying it out on you, too, but I think you’re harder to scare.” Then he asked, with studied casualness, “Do you want children some day?”

“Yes. Very much. And given I’m almost 36 now, I should probably get started soon,” she said lightly. Matching his casual tone, she added, “How about you?”

He looked down at her. “Yes.”

Their eyes met, and held.

Desire flashed through Nicola, hot and fast. Oh yes, she wanted children, but what she really wanted right now was to do what made them.

Greg stepped out from behind the wheel and she pulled her legs up, out of the way of whatever he was about to do. How could anyone make sense of these ropes? she wondered.

“Am I in the way?” she asked.

“Never.”

She paused, smiling at that. “Can I help?”

He spared her a glance as he wound a rope around a winch. “No, I’m fine on my own. And I think you’re only being polite, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” She couldn’t imagine herself ever being any use on this boat, except maybe making coffee.

Then Greg wrapped both hands around the winch handle and began to turn it furiously, his whole body swaying with the effort as he crouched over it, legs apart. A sail crept up the mast, flapping and rattling in the breeze. Nicola’s eyes widened, but she wasn’t looking at the sail. It wasn’t only the gym that explained those muscles on his arms, and the breadth of his shoulders.

When he had finished, and also raised a sail at the front, he straightened up and looked around. He gave her a smile as he leaned over and tweaked the wheel, but Nicola thought his attention was more on the boat than on her. Sweat glistened on his forehead and darkened the back of his t-shirt. In one easy motion, Greg pulled the shirt over his head and tossed it onto the floor of the cockpit.

Oh. My. God. A breathless jolt shot through Nicola.

He was wearing only swim shorts, which hung low on his hips. Brown; his skin was tanned everywhere she could see, from forehead to toes. Did he sail in the nude? Under the shorts, what color was he? Her gaze traveled over the hair sprinkled lightly across his wide chest and down to the solid, defined muscles of his waist, and farther down to where the line of dark hair dipped into the shorts and led to— she looked hastily away.

Greg seemed unaware of her scrutiny, and her heightened color, as he turned in a circle, shading his eyes with one hand. He hoisted up the shorts in an absent gesture.

“Where . . .” Nicola cleared her throat. “Where are we going, by the way?” The Golden Gate Bridge and Sausalito were behind them and over to the left, and it looked to her as if they were heading towards San Pablo Bay.

Greg turned to her, and with a smile he sat beside her, one hand on the wheel and one hand on her knee.

“China Camp,” he replied. “It should only take a couple of hours, max, with today’s wind. I thought we could have a swim, and lunch. Then when we get back to the marina, we can have supper. I make a mean chicken stir-fry, I warn you! Is that okay?”

She slid closer and he lifted his arm to drape it around her shoulders. “Sounds great,” Nicola said. “We used to go hiking there when I was a kid, but I’ve never seen it from the water.” His skin, where she leaned against him, was warm from the sun and the exertion, warm and smooth.

After a while, she said, “I can’t believe I’ve never been sailing before. This is great.”

“Good,” he said, and his lips pressed against her forehead. “Though I warn you that as sailing goes, what we’re doing right now is pretty tame. More of a stroll than a sail.”

A little while after that, she said, “Greg, have you seen that container ship?” She pointed tentatively to the massive vessel bearing straight for them; it wasn’t worryingly close, but it moved significantly faster than they moved.

He nodded.

“Shouldn’t we get out of its way?”

He shook his head. “No need. We’re under sail, it’s under engines. We have right of way.”

Nicola turned to stare at him. “You’re joking. You expect that thing to politely get out of our way?”

“Oh yeah, they always do. Well, sometimes it can be touch and go. Depends on the captain’s mood, I guess. Some of them like to play chicken,” he confided.

“You play chicken with that?” Her voice squeaked. “Greg, it’s very close!”

She finally noticed the way his lips were pressed together, and the tilt of his head. “Oh!” Nicola slapped his arm.

“If it will make you happier, I’ll tack,” Greg laughed.

* *

Nicola made her way with care down the stairs into the cabin while Greg dropped the anchor and did mysterious things with the sails. She had been enthralled as the state park grew slowly larger with their approach, and pointed out to him where she and her family had hiked and camped. She hadn't been here in years, and felt nostalgic to see the familiar line of ramshackle wooden buildings straggling along the beach, the green wooded hills behind and the spindly dock stretching out over the mud flats.

She closed the door to the small cabin at the front of the boat. He had called this a V-berth, and she could certainly see why! She couldn't believe his friends, Peter's parents, both slept in this small bed, which was itself V-shaped to fit the walls.

Poor Debbie! Greg had related the tale of how sick she had been during that weekend sail. Nicola had not felt so much as a twinge of seasickness in the time it had taken them to get here, but she didn't know if that was because she was a naturally robust sailor (not likely!), or if the bay was much calmer than the ocean Debbie had experienced, or if Debbie had not taken any pills. She hoped she'd get a chance to meet Debbie and talk about it. Nicola knew Greg well enough by now to know that if they had any future together, this boat would be part of it.

But, Nicola vowed as she unzipped the beach bag, there is no way I will ever live on this thing!

* *

Greg pulled sharply on the anchor cable. It seemed firm. The bottom was sticky mud, he had been told, and could be unstable. He had never been here himself, but a neighbor at the marina had been full of helpful information. And there was only one other boat nearby, so even if the anchor slipped, it wouldn't be too bad.

His eyes fell on a dirty shoe print on the deck. Where had that come from? Yesterday, he and Peter had polished and scrubbed *Drifter* so that she looked her best for Nicola, and Greg would have sworn that print hadn't been there this morning. It couldn't be Nicola, for she was in smooth-soled deck shoes.

He grinned, remembering that first sight of her this morning in the crowd streaming from the station. She had been wearing white pants that stopped somewhere between her knees and her ankles – he knew women had a name for them, but he could never remember it – and a blue-and-white striped top, plus a white baseball cap on her head: it was as if she had stepped out of a sailing fashion photograph. At least she had dressed the part, even if, as he knew, she had agreed to go sailing only to please him.

And to please her, he had cleaned *Drifter's* cabin as thoroughly as the deck and brightwork, putting fresh flowers on the table and fresh towels in the bathroom – and fresh sheets on his bed. Just in case. Today was three weeks since their first date at the zoo, three weeks of long walks and long talks, drinks and dinners, and increasingly intense kisses and caresses. Greg was ready for more, and he fervently hoped that Nicola was, too.

“What a great view,” Nicola commented behind him, and he turned.

Holy Christ, talk about great views. She was wearing a sky blue bikini with big white polka dots, and nothing else. He had never seen her in anything that could be called revealing, no low necklines or high hems, so he had been expecting a more modest swimsuit, probably a one-piece.

This polka-dotted thing was not modest, and as the blood rushed south of his navel Greg wondered what else about Nicola might not be as modest as he had thought. He was thankful that his sunglasses prevented her from seeing how his gaze lingered on her full breasts, their curve highlighted by a scallop of ruffle below. The straps rose over her shoulders, which were as straight and as level as the horizon at sea. Below the bikini top, she tapered in like an hourglass, and then swelled out again, the pale skin of her hips disappearing into the bikini bottom. Her legs were shapely and long, like those of a dancer. Must be all that running she does, he thought absently. She turned to look at the beach and revealed an absurd flounce of polka-dotted ruffles sticking out behind.

He wanted to fling her onto the deck, rip off those polka dots and ruffles, and discover what lay beneath them.

“Nice bikini,” Greg managed to say.

His eyes followed her hand as she ran it along the curve of her waist. He licked his lips.

“Thanks! I was such a slob all winter I wasn’t certain it would still fit.”

“Oh, it fits,” he assured her.

Nicola flashed a smile at him, stood poised for a moment on the stern and then dove neatly into the water, making only the smallest of splashes. The water was murky with mud particles and Greg soon lost sight of her. He wasn’t really worried, but he wasn’t entirely at ease, either.

She surfaced, much farther from the boat than he had been looking, took a few breaths and then calmly treaded water, looking around with a smile. Yes, Greg thought, she’d have no trouble staying afloat if she ever went over the side.

“How’s the water?” he called.

“Freezing!” she yelled back cheerfully. “Get in here, unless you’re a coward!”

His dive was not as elegant as hers, but his strokes were much stronger. He came to a halt as she disappeared under the water, that ridiculous bunch of ruffles sticking up as she doubled over. With only his head above the water he had even less chance of spotting her than he had from the boat, so he floated and waited. She’d have to come up for air at some time.

She did, shooting up right in front of him and blowing a spray of salty water into his face, then laughing. Greg grabbed for her. Her arms crossed behind his neck and he ran his hands down her back.

“You’re like a seal,” he said. “Smooth and sleek.”

The kiss ended abruptly when they forgot to keep moving their legs, and their chins began to sink below the water. They broke apart, spluttering.

“Race you back to the boat,” she dared.

He was off, churning through the water. When he climbed up the ladder at the stern and looked back, she was stroking lazily towards the boat.

“Since you’re there anyway,” she said, and held up a hand, “you can help me up.”

He helped her up and drew her nearer. “You set me up, didn’t you?”

She laughed, her hands against his chest, and pushed him away.

Greg lay on his back on the sun-warmed wood along the wide flat edge of the cockpit, watching as she wrung water from her hair. He’d guessed those curves were hiding under the pantsuits and blouses she wore to work; he had caressed her and stroked her, but never undressed her. To finally see her like this...Christ. The boat swung easily on the anchor and the sun fell full in his eyes. He closed them, enjoying the feel of the gentle movement and the warmth of the sun after the cold of the water, and wondering what all that skin would feel like against his skin. His fantasy ended abruptly with a patter of cold water on his chest and he jerked half up, to find Nicola leaning over him, laughing and squeezing her hair.

“You’ll pay for that,” he laughed, and pulled her down to him.

She sprawled partly on him and partly on the deck. Greg slid one hand slowly along her back, tracing the bumps of her spine, until his hand rose with the swell of her bottom – where he ended up with a handful of ruffles.

“This is the silliest bikini,” he murmured, lips trailing down her neck.

“Don’t you like it?” she asked.

“I love it. But it is silly.”

Her tongue, warm and moist, traced around the curve of his ear.

“Agh!” He sat up suddenly, almost dumping her into the cockpit.

“What? What is it?” she asked wildly, looking around in alarm.

Rubbing his ear, he said, “Don’t ever do that!”

She started to laugh. “Oh dear. Not an erogenous zone for you, is it?”

Greg shook his head. His reaction had been completely beyond his control, but she was right: what he had felt was the

physical equivalent of nails on a blackboard. “I do have others,” he told her. She cocked her head to one side and regarded him, eyebrows tilted up and blue eyes moving over him as if expecting to see signs reading “erogenous zone here!”.

The sound of an engine drew his attention from her to the motor cruiser that slowly approached. Another sailboat had also anchored while they had been swimming, and he decided, reluctantly, that this wasn’t the best place for what they had been doing.

“You ready for lunch?” he asked. “I’ve got cheese and fruit and a baguette.”

She nodded. “I’m famished. Is there a shower? I hate the feel of dried salt water.”

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

The bathroom was tucked along one hull. A toilet, a counter with a sink, and cupboards fitted over the counter. A square of floor with a large drain hole in the middle, and a small window. There was no shower, or none that a landlubber like Nicola would recognize.

Greg pulled the faucet up, revealing a long flexible hose. “Spray it over yourself. Try not to get the towels wet, okay?”

She pulled a face at him, and pushed him out.

Greg stood in the galley and reached out his hand for a knife to slice the baguette. But his mind was in the bathroom: she was in there, nude, a few feet away. He imagined running soapy hands over her, up those long legs and the curve of her hips, the roundness of her breasts, his hands gliding on her smooth, warm, wet skin. Greg twitched at the damp swim shorts that clung to him uncomfortably. Lunch, he told himself, think of lunch!

“Greg? Can you give me a hand?” she called.

He frowned, wondering what she could need a hand with. Turn on tap, spray water. That was it. He twitched again at the shorts, hoping nothing was noticeable, and went back to the bathroom.

She was still in her bikini, her arms raised, leaning against the counter. “The clasp seems to be stuck. Would you try?”

His breath stopped. “Turn around,” he said hoarsely.

“It’s at the front.”

He swallowed. He would have to put one hand inside the top in order to get hold of the clasp. Her skin was cool and stippled with goose bumps, but, oh, so wonderful against the back of his fingers.

The clasp opened easily.

“I guess I loosened it,” she said with a straight face, and put her arms around him.

Greg shuddered, with no hope now of any restraint. His hands cupped her breasts and he lowered his head to them. He felt the shiver run through her as his lips brushed her, and he tasted the salt. Nicola’s hands were on his back and down into his shorts, cool and soft, closing around his backside and then pulling him hard against her. Oh Christ, how he wanted her! The air brushed cold against his damp skin as she tugged the shorts down.

Greg kicked them to one side and reached over her shoulder, wrenching open a cupboard. He fumbled a condom from the package, fingers clumsy in his urgency, and ripped it open. She had shrugged off her top and was wriggling out of the wet bikini bottom. He moved against Nicola and she lifted one leg, wrapping it around his hips and bracing her foot against the wall behind him. She was liquid fire in his arms, scorching him and burning him, and there was nothing in the world but the feel of her body moving with his.

Nicola fell against him with a sigh, and her foot slid slowly back to the floor.

Greg rested his forehead against hers, breathing hard. “That was not how I had imagined our first time,” he whispered.

“Me, either,” she whispered back, then added, “But damn, it was good.” The boat lurched and she clutched his arms for balance. “See, the earth moved!” she joked.

He started to reply, a glib comment about San Francisco and earthquakes, and then realized what had happened at the same time as he heard the shouts of alarm from outside. “The anchor’s come free!” He was out the door and up the stairs.

The warning calls turned to shrieks of laughter as Greg, stark naked, lunged for the engine controls at the side of the cockpit. As *Drifter* backed slowly away from the cruiser she had seemed intent on ramming, Greg became aware that at

least a dozen people in three boats were laughing and clapping, and pointing at him. Well, there wasn't a lot he could do but brazen this out. Then he saw Nicola coming up from the cabin, a large red towel wrapped around her, and in a moment she had whipped another one around his hips and tucked it in.

Cheers rang out, and someone called, "There's quick thinking!"

He put an arm around her and pulled her to him, and kissed her, to the delight of their audience.

"Do you think we'll be on YouTube tomorrow?" she asked, with a teasing smile.

"Probably," Greg said glumly.

* *

Nicola reclined on one of the padded benches, her back against the wall of the V-berth. Greg had declined her offer of help, so she sipped her wine and watched him make supper. One part of her mind was thinking that she had never dated a man so at ease in the kitchen, and no previous boyfriend would have spent an evening happily making tapas, as Greg had done, nor have suggested it in the first place. Tonight he was cooking only a stir-fry, but it might have been a five-course gourmet meal as far as she was concerned. Her stomach rumbled as the smells of chicken sautéing with onions and garlic filled the cabin.

Another part of her mind, however, was remembering what had happened in the bathroom and wondering when it could be repeated, preferably somewhere more comfortable. His jeans were old and had molded themselves to his thighs and backside, the t-shirt stretched across his shoulders and chest, and as much as she enjoyed looking at him, Nicola found it difficult to sit still. She knew now what was under the clothes, and she longed to touch him, to have him touch her, to feel him inside her again.

She took a deep breath, and told herself to slow down. To let it happen. To not leap up, push him to the floor and ravish him. Although, she admitted, given that he was many times stronger than she was, the only way she was going to ravish him was if he let her. Nicola smiled, and sipped her wine.

Greg looked up and caught her watching him, and raised his glass in salute.

"You don't drink much, do you?" she remarked, noticing that his wine had barely been touched.

"Alcohol? No. Not at all if I'm sailing or driving, and I do one or the other most days. I can't remember the last time I was really drunk," he added thoughtfully. "University, probably."

Nicola worked out the logic of the no-drinking-at-all-if-driving rule. "So am I walking back to the station tonight?" she asked.

"You can, if you want. Or you can get a taxi from the yacht club. Or," he added, and walked around the table to lean over her so that his face was inches from hers, "you can stay here. That's what I'm hoping you'll do. I can drive you home early tomorrow, so you can change for work. I'd hate to think I put clean sheets on the bed for nothing." He leaned the small extra distance, and kissed her, long and slow, touching her only where their lips met and sending fire dancing along her nerves.

Greg pulled away and looked at her, eyebrows raised.

"If you went to all that trouble, it would be discourteous not to stay." Courtesy had nothing to do with it; desire quivered through her at the thought of staying. Sex in the bathroom, so brief and so intense, had been the release of the tension that had been building between them. But a whole night of loving each other, playing and discovering, in his bed...oh, that would be something very different.

He went back to his cooking, and her eyes devoured him.

The setting sun bathed the cabin in gold while they ate, and seagulls cried harsh and strident over the ever-present flap of rigging on masts.

"This is really good," Nicola commented. "What other specialties do you have?"

"I'll show you later," he said with a leer, then with assumed innocence, "Oh, did you mean cooking?"

She eyed him with a leer of her own. "Not necessarily."

He laughed, and forked up a chunk of celery. "It's your birthday soon, isn't it?"

“That’s an interesting change of topic. What made you think of that?” she asked.

“I remembered you told me your sister is five weeks older than you, so I figured it had to be coming up,” he explained. “And I wondered if you’re one of those women who refuse to have birthdays and don’t want anyone to acknowledge them, or if I’m expected to shower you with presents and take you out for an expensive dinner. I’d like a warning, either way, so I get it right.”

“Oh, showers of presents and expensive dinners, definitely,” she said with great seriousness. Then, “You don’t have to do anything, Greg! I get enough of that at home. Next Sunday I’ll have to go to Sausalito and do the whole family thing. You and *Drifter* can have a proper sail!”

He glanced at her but was silent, toying with a piece of chicken.

“Unless,” she began hesitantly, “I mean, you can come with me. If you want. I’d like that. I wouldn’t expect you to want to, though.”

“I’ll have to meet them all at some point. There would be less pressure at something like a birthday party,” he replied. “Or don’t they know about me?”

“I had to explain the sudden increase in my social activities somehow,” she laughed. “The truth seemed easiest. Does your family know about me?”

“You may have crept into an email or two,” he admitted. “And a text message. Maybe a phone call, too.”

They looked at each other, blue eyes into blue eyes, admitting for the first time, even in this roundabout way, that what was going on was important enough to share with their families. Greg traced one finger down her cheek, and smiled. “I think it’s time you saw the only room in the boat you haven’t seen already. And I don’t mean the sail locker.”

When he opened his cabin door, she stood in the galley and peered over his shoulder. It wasn’t square, it wasn’t triangular, it wasn’t any shape she could name. Nor was it much bigger than that squashed berth at the front. And most of it was the bed, a mattress fitted into the strange shape at knee height, plus a drawer unit to one side and a closet to the other. One window high up let in air and light.

“The master bedroom?” she asked.

“And yours, for tonight at least,” Greg replied softly. “Although I hope it’s not the only time. Put your arms up.” She did, and he pulled her striped top over her head, then reached behind to unfasten her bra. “This one doesn’t seem to be stuck, either,” he said with a smile. “I couldn’t believe you did that. I was afraid I was reading it wrong, and you would slap my face or something.”

She laughed, low in her throat, and lifted first one foot and then the other as he slid her pants down. Then she pulled off his t-shirt and threw it onto the small pile of clothes building up on top of the drawer unit. She ran her hands over the hard muscles of his chest, and down to the zipper of his jeans. “And I was afraid you would think I was only after casual sex, and throw me out.”

The jeans didn’t slide as easily as her pants, and he had to tug them down. He stood before her in the dimly lit cabin in only his underwear.

I must remember to tell H el ene it’s boxer shorts, she thought, absurdly, and bit back the giggle.

His shorts and her panties joined the rest of their clothes, and Greg eased her down onto the bed with him.

“Oh, Nicola,” he whispered, as her body rose to meet the rhythm of his own, “what’s between us is anything but casual.”

* * * *

END OF EXCERPT OF "TOO CLOSE"