

Beside Myself Book Excerpt

Prologue

He sat alone in his dim apartment and thought about what he'd done. The tattered drapery blocked out society and created the perfect ambiance for his dark mood. His curtains were never open; instead he kept the floor lamp in the corner turned down low.

In his mind, he tightened the electrical cord over and over, choking the last breath from each of his victims. Momentarily, he chastised himself, and then in a flash of sanity, supposed he should feel bad--but he didn't. His lips curled in a feral smile, and an enjoyable feeling of power swept over him. For now, the hunger was sated.

His mind replayed the crimes. They all had it coming--every one of them. They shouldn't have fought me. He only wanted to show them love, but they wouldn't let him. He scowled. Filthy women--all they do is play with a man's emotions and, eventually, destroy his ego and break his heart--and for what?--to move on and do it again to someone else? He reveled in his quest to end man's suffering. Each of his victims begged for mercy, but he had none to spare.

The red tip of his cigarette glowed brighter as he inhaled. Safe in his comfort zone, he could relax. No one will ever suspect me.

He passed potential victims every day--coming and going as he pleased. Whether they lived or died all depended upon how he felt at the moment. He emptied his lungs, filling the air with acrid smoke.

Meeting women had always been problematic for him. He either wasn't tall enough or didn't have the good looks they preferred. But, things seemed right when he had first met her--she was different from the others, or so he'd thought. Memories caused his calloused fingers to ache with want to splay through her soft, blonde hair as he had when they had made love in the past. His lips still hungered for her kisses. She'd been very convincing--accepting him, welcoming his attentions, and sharing his bed--but now he knew it had all been a farce. The ancient wood beneath the chair's upholstered arm splintered beneath his fist.

Some days he put it all behind him, forcing the hurt and anger from his mind and trying to live a normal life. He didn't really want to hurt anyone, but there were days--dark haunting days--when her mocking laughter taunted him, and visions of her cold, blue eyes burned a hole in his heart. She shouldn't have hurt me like that.

If he couldn't have her, no man would. He started to rise, but his simmering anger boiled. His fingernails painfully embedded themselves in his palms and he dropped back into his seat.

Didn't she know I had feelings? Wasn't he supposed to hurt when she told him she had no further need for him? She had thrown him aside like yesterday's garbage--her words still resounded in his head. "I don't want to be with you anymore, and I certainly don't want to bear your children. You turn my stomach."

He willingly planned to devote his life to her and she dashed his dreams. How could she vow to love him 'til death parted them, and then change her mind?

Hmpf...death parted us all right. I saw to that. An evil smile spread across his face when he remembered how she had pleaded with him to give her another chance and vowed to love him again. But it was far too late for that. She'd already proven she was a liar and a cheat, and he had to make sure she never hurt anyone again.

Her last gasping breath numbed his pain for a little while, but now it wasn't enough! There were still others who looked like her, reminded him of her. They were the same; never giving him the time of day unless they wanted or needed something from him. Users, all of them; he'd make sure to get rid of as many of them as possible. With the help of the media, people would soon recognize his calling card as the mark of someone doing the world a huge favor.

The already dim room went totally dark for a moment as the lamp across the room flickered, died then came back to light. Unfazed, he pondered what had just happened. The old building seems to be having another electrical surge. I've grown rather used to them.

Chapter One

Cynthia Freitas straddled the complimentary copy of the daily newspaper lying in front of her apartment. She glanced down at the headlines. "Women Still Missing--No Leads". She had heard only bits and pieces about the case, but the thought of a kidnapper on the loose sent a shiver up her spine.

With two grocery bags balanced in one arm, she strained to see around them to find the keyhole. Just as she unlocked the door and stepped inside, the bottom fell out of one of the bags. She clenched her teeth in frustration. Her carefully selected apples rolled freely on the warped floorboards, and an assortment of vegetables landed in a premature salad at her feet. "Damn! Damn! Double damn!"

Not in the habit of cursing, she winced and turned to see if anyone was in the hallway and had overheard. Relieved that no one was there, she took a deep breath, removed the dangling key, closed the door and chastised herself. You've picked up some bad habits, Cynthia Ann!

She stepped over the spillage, still grasping the torn bag, and placed it and the intact bag on the stained kitchen counter. She dropped to her knees with a heavy sigh and crawled

from apple to apple until she had recaptured all the escapees. Her nose crinkled in disgust at the recent mouse droppings next to the stove, and she made a mental note. Buy another mousetrap when you go back to the store.

Thoughts of the headlines again flashed through her mind. She pushed them aside and rose, cradled the Granny Smiths in one arm and dumped them into the sink. Curiosity drew her back to the hallway to retrieve the newspaper. She tucked the daily edition beneath her chin and fiddled with the deadbolt. It still wouldn't work. Her call to the super had done no good, and this wasn't the best of times to have a broken lock. She placed the flimsy chain across the door and added making another call for maintenance to her growing mental notebook. She sat and unfolded the paper. The hair on her arms bristled when she read the startling headlines again.

She quickly scanned the story beneath the bold print. It wasn't encouraging. The kidnapper hadn't left any clues, and there hadn't been much progress on the case at all. Reading about it made her nervous, and she was just about to toss the paper aside when the word divorced--describing the victim--jumped out at her and yanked her thoughts elsewhere. Her mom and dad had split, but both still lived in Ord, Nebraska--a dim spot in the road to somewhere else. She left home because of the small town scandal.

The divorce soured Cynthia on relationships. Not that she'd had any of which to speak, but, if an occasion arose, she planned to use caution and move slowly. Besides, she wasn't sure she trusted in love anymore. People always talked about how divorce affected young children. The pain in her heart reminded her it had an equal effect on someone thirty-one.

Cynthia neatly folded the paper, placed it on the coffee table and returned to the sink to rinse the apples. The pipes squealed and vibrated in protest, but finally sputtered a thin stream of liquid into the discolored basin. She shook her head in utter disgust. Oh God, please spare me any more surprises in this apartment from hell.

When the clean fruit was stowed in the antique refrigerator, and the rest of the mess cleaned, she turned to her usual routine. A stale, musty odor, a constant aroma in the dank spaces of The Cairns, greeted her when she opened the coat closet to retrieve the vacuum.

A flip of a switch and the machine whirred to life. She wondered if this was how everyone else spent their Saturday morning, then paused, knowing sadly there were a few women who would give anything to be able to tend to their boring lives. Those darn headlines; she just couldn't get them out of her thoughts.

She crisscrossed the threadbare carpeting, moving the worn furniture as she went. Being thorough was a must. She never did things half-heartedly, and although she hadn't yet entertained anyone in her home, cleanliness was important to her. My apartment may look like hell, but no one can say it isn't clean.

She reached to tuck a bothersome strand of hair behind her ear, stashed the Hoover back in its niche, and pulled out a dust cloth. The apartment was so old, a constant coating of dirt seemed to sift through the walls. She wrote her name in the latest layer on the coffee table, knowing dusting would be a waste of time. Fortunately, on weekends, time was something she had in abundance.

Lost in the mundane task, Cynthia inspected each nick and scratch and pondered who or what caused them. Her mind wandered. How many people have been here before me? I wonder what brought them to the Cairns...and what finally made them leave? She chuckled at her last thought. If she could afford to move, she certainly wouldn't be living here, especially with a kidnapper running loose in the neighborhood. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to move to the big city.

Cynthia worked for Harris & Morgan Accounting, in downtown San Francisco. She had expected big city life to be exciting when she'd moved there after completion of her MBA at the University of California, Davis, but now she questioned her rationale. Spending most of her time commuting back and forth to work, she hadn't had much time to even experience the city. Her days were spent in the office and her evenings in this crummy, run-down apartment. It was all she could afford on her starting salary. Who would have guessed rent would be so expensive? But then, what did she know? In Ord, everything was a bargain-and safe.

It was too quiet. She turned on the radio to her favorite, smooth-jazz station just in time to catch the news, but as she listened to more disturbing news about the missing women, the phone rang.

The voice on the other end was her brother. "Hey, Cyn, what's up?"

"Kevin! Hey! Nothing's up here. What's new with you?" Nothing could have made her day better than hearing her brother's voice. She plopped down in the armchair, and pulled her feet up beneath her.

His voice bubbled with the great personality she remembered. "Just thought I'd call and check in before I head over to Sara's. We have an office picnic today...big doins' in Ord. Just didn't want you to think I'd forgotten about you."

"A picnic? How nice. It's been ages since I've been on one. Actually, it's been ages since I've done anything." She couldn't hide her envy.

"Sounds like life in the big city isn't as exciting as you expected."

Her mind reflected on the missing women. The hair on her arms stood on end. "Scary is more like it. Ord never prepared me for anything like what's happening right here in my neighborhood. Women are disappearing, and the police haven't caught the kidnapper yet."

His voice tinged with concern. "Haven't you made any new friends? I don't like you being there all alone and knowing no one."

"It seems like all I do is work, eat, and sleep. I haven't had time to meet anyone, except the people with whom I work. If you count sitting at the BART station waiting for the train to work and back, I'm gone twelve hours a day. When I get home, I'm too tired to do anything else."

"And you thought San Francisco had so much more to offer." He chortled.

Even his half-hearted laughter lifted her spirits. He was the person from home she missed the most. She pictured his freckled face and laughing blue eyes, and sadness crept over her. Her best friend, he had kept her smiling and made life tolerable during their parents' split.

"It probably does, but I've yet to experience it..." she confessed. "I sure miss you, Kev. Your weekly phone calls are great, but I wish we weren't so far apart."

"I know, Sis. I miss you, too. If it weren't for Sara, I'd probably have left Ord right behind you."

"Well, if you ever leave home, make sure you check the cost-of-living situation. You have no idea how expensive it is here."

"Well, then, I guess I'll find out. I've decided to see what the big attraction is for myself."

"You mean..."

"Yep, I'm coming to visit. If that's all right? Do you have room for two?"

Trying to imagine where she could fit two more people into her cramped apartment, she lied, "Sure, there's always room. As long as you don't mind sleeping on the floor. You did say two?"

"Yes, Sara is coming with me."

Cynthia's thoughts of her dismal living situation were lost in feelings of excitement. Besides, Kevin already knew her money situation. "When? I can't wait."

"In three weeks. Maybe our visit will be the opportunity you need to experience San Francisco first hand. You can be our tour guide."

"Some tour guide I'd be. I can only find my way to work and back. Maybe we should hire a professional, or ride around on one of those buses that show you where all the notable places in the city are located." She chuckled.

"Or...maybe you can actually get a date and we can double like we did when you were home," he suggested.

She rolled her eyes at the thought. "If you could see me right now, you wouldn't even suggest such a thing. I'm in the middle of cleaning and I look horrible. Besides, I haven't been out with anyone in ages. I haven't met anyone here, and even if I had, I don't think I'd even know how to behave on a date."

"Why are you always so hard on yourself? When you're all dolled up, you're a looker, Sis, whether you want to admit it or not. Just put on your best smile and do a little flirting. You remember that old cliché, men prefer petite blondes?"

"Sure! That's why men are beating down my door." She felt a blush creeping up her neck, even though the kind words came from her brother. And when she thought how easy it would be to pummel through her flimsy apartment door, she almost laughed aloud.

Her brother sounded frustrated. "Yeah, yeah! I give up. You never could take a compliment. Okay, you're ugly, and men will never give you a second look. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Not really. I liked your first description better." She chuckled, but wondered why she was always so negative about herself. Was it because of her parent's divorce? She didn't remember being so negative when she was younger. Why can't I take a compliment? I'm really not bad looking. Quickly changing the subject, she asked, "So, do you have your flight number and arrival time?"

"Not handy. Sara made the reservations. I'll call you the week before we come and give you the info. Love ya, Sis!"

"Me, too." She hung up wishing she hadn't missed the rest of the news. She'd catch it later on TV. She thought back to the safety of Ord. Nothing like this ever happened there.

Thinking of what Kevin said about doubling, she shook her head. A date! Yeah right! He must think single men grow on trees in California.

She hummed as she went about the rest of her Saturday cleaning. Still, in the back of her mind, she wished she lived somewhere more presentable. God, how am I going to explain this rat hole? What an embarrassment. Maybe if I plan lots of fun things we won't have to spend much time here. She took a deep breath. Stop it Cynthia! Kevin and Sara know you're just starting out. They won't be expecting the Ritz!

She carried her bottle of window cleaner to the window and pushed aside the tattered rags masquerading as curtains. Once her checkbook was back in the black she planned to buy some new ones. There was no use asking the super about replacements-she couldn't even get her lock fixed.

She misted the glass, then wiped it dry. Why she bothered she didn't know. It must have been years since the outside was cleaned. There were so many water spots, it looked as though she hadn't touched the pane, but there wasn't much to look at anyhow. Her gaze rested on the littered alley below. What a lovely view I have. But then it rather fits the apartment motif.

Something caught her eye; a man seemingly pilfering through the trash bin. Maybe it was one of the vagrants she passed every day on her way to the station. So many bums and homeless people on the streets was not something she was used to seeing, but this man didn't look like one of those. There was something vaguely familiar about him-perhaps his frame, his hair. What was it? She squinted to see through the blotchy glass.

He bundled something inside a blue wrapper then, very suspiciously, glanced from side-to-side. He poked around in the trash, seeming to move things about before tossing his package into the dumpster. She couldn't help but think he appeared to be hiding something. When he turned, she saw his face; the building super!

You watch way too much television, Cynthia. The man is only throwing out his trash. She shrugged her shoulders and pulled the window coverings back in place.

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Alexander Carlyle slammed his apartment door so hard, he heard the "2E" on the other side loosen, and swing back and forth several times. The paper-thin walls attached to the door shimmied like plywood in a windstorm. He had already placed two non-productive calls to the new apartment super requesting that the latch be fixed, and now, he'd have to make another. He wouldn't be quite so nice this time.

Besides not responding to repair calls, there was something about this guy that bugged Alex. He just couldn't put his finger on what it was. He pulled on the knob to make sure the door shut securely this time.

"Friggin' door! Whatta ya gotta do to get service in this hell hole?"

Grumbling loudly, he exploded from the stress that had built all day from dealing with the scum of society. Alex worked for the San Francisco Police Department, and had lived in 2E in the Cairns Building for two years, ever since his fiancé had a change of heart and left him for someone else. He had needed to find a place fast; the Cairns was the best he could do on short notice and matching funds. Why had he stayed so long? It certainly wasn't the charm and allure of the place. But where else would he go? His hopes of building a family were as dead as his mother and father, and Alex, an only child, had no one he considered family. He certainly wasn't eager to enter into another relationship and have his heart broken again. The apartment served the purpose he needed-a place to eat and sleep. He spent most of his time working anyhow.

He secured the dead bolt and snapped on the light switch, illuminating the squalor. The peeling paint and fading curtains did little to enhance the well-worn furniture that came with the apartment. The avocado-green carpeting, a throwback to an era gone by, had more bald spots than remaining shag.

Odors of rotting leftovers wafted past his nose when he opened the fridge, but he ignored them and grabbed a beer. He dropped all six-foot-two-inches of himself into his easy chair and twisted off the bottle top. As usual, he engaged in a game of trying to bounce the cap off the wall and into the trashcan, but failed. The metal round landed among the other missed shots that peppered the carpet around the wastebasket. Being a slob was a perk of living alone.

He took a long, satisfying swallow, then placed the can on the end table, almost perfectly atop one of the many other watermarks left by previous beers. Leaning forward, he searched the debris on the coffee table for the remote control and found it buried under last Sunday's comics. The ancient table teetered precariously to one side; Alex bent and pushed a folded piece of cardboard back under the uneven leg.

He draped one long leg over the frayed arm of the chair and took another swig of Bud Light, while he selected random buttons on the remote, channel surfing for something to occupy his mind until bedtime.

Normally, he worked a regular beat with his partner, but they had been the two uniforms assigned to assist detectives on a kidnap/homicide. Thoughts of the crime invaded his mind continuously. Another young woman had vanished, the fourth in a month. One body had been recovered so far, but there were no leads. Shuddering at the thought of finding the others dead, Alex ran a hand through his thick shock of dark hair and tried to block the case from his mind, but another one haunted him.

His mother had been murdered when he was only twelve, but he still remembered it as though it were yesterday; her battered body sprawled on the floor, her face still contorted with fear for the intruders who robbed and beat her. Eventually, the coroner had covered her with a sheet, but he still had visions of blood soaking through, changing the white to crimson. It was then he chose a career to follow.

He lost both parents that day. His father was never the same, and died within a year. Alex had watched him wither away before his very eyes. The local police never caught his mother's killer, and, once Alex graduated from the academy, he pushed himself to the limit to solve any cases to which he was assigned. He'd be damned if his current one was going to defeat him.

He took another swallow and pushed his loneliness aside. Another Friday night with no plans. His work buddies had invited him out for a drink, but he got his fill of their braggadocio during the day. Alex preferred to leave his badge at work when he left, even if he couldn't leave his thoughts. He was certain some of the guys at work had egos so big they actually wore their badges on their pajamas. Going out with them probably wouldn't

have been any better than watching this nerdy-looking guy on Channel six forecasting the weather. Besides, it was cheaper to drink at home. Alex took another gulp of beer and glanced out the window to confirm the accuracy of the weather report. "Yep, sun going down, sky is clear, day is done."

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Alex rolled over on his back and stretched. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand and was perturbed to see it was only seven thirty a.m. Why can't I sleep in? I don't have to be to work...it's Saturday.

Immediately, thoughts of his job flashed through his mind. He tried to put the puzzle together, but there were just too many missing pieces. He shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind, and, curling one arm under his neck, he snaked the fingers of his other hand under the waistband of his boxers and scratched his flat stomach. Okay Alex, what big plans do you have for today? Oh...nothing again. How exciting.

He sighed, rolled to the edge of the bed and sat for a moment, then sleepily swaggered into the bathroom to relieve himself of the six pack of beer he'd finished before bed. As he drained his bladder, he stared at his reflection in the medicine chest mirror. Rubbing the palm of his hand against his stubbly chin, he wished he could go back to the days of youth when he didn't have to shave every morning. He quipped at the face looking back at him. "I guess being tall, dark and handsome has its drawbacks. Hmm! Maybe I should just not shave and see if I can pull off that Miami Vice-Don Johnson look. Ah, maybe not...then I'd have to get one of those white, linen outfits like he wears." Hey! Maybe if I look like Don Johnson, I can solve this damn case. It's driving me crazy. He wished he had something or someone else on which to focus his attention.

Knowing it would take at least five minutes for hot water to reach his apartment, Alex turned on the shower. While he waited, he threw the covers back up on the sagging bed and straightened the pillows. Okay, I've done my part for good housekeeping.

He dropped his boxers on the floor and stepped out of them, then went back into the bathroom. He was intent on taking a shower whether cold or hot. When the drizzle of water turned warm, Alex stepped in and quickly soaped and rinsed. One thing he had learned from living in The Cairns was that hot water didn't last very long.

Alex hastily grabbed yesterday's towel from the wall rack, sending the securing hardware flying in all directions. Amidst the tinkling of scattering screws, the entire bar clattered to the floor. He shook his head and sighed. "Shit! What next?"

He wrapped the terrycloth around his waist, left the hardware lying on the floor and went into the bedroom wondering whether to fix the bar or call the super. I'll fix it later. Right after I pick up all those bottle caps on the floor in the living room.

Alex donned his sweat suit and tennis shoes. If he didn't get out of his cramped environment, he'd go crazy thinking about his job. Hell, it was all he had to think about these days. No woman, no relationship, no family--life was a bitch lately. A quick run around the nearby park was just the ticket. Besides, a little exercise would counter-balance all those calories from his nightly beers, a habit he'd acquired since the breakup and one he needed to discard.

He picked up his Walkman and clipped it to his waistband. As he opened the door, the heaping trashcan in the corner of the kitchen caught his attention. The contents overflowed the container and spewed onto the floor. He donned his headphones and cranked up the volume of his theme song-Travis Tritt's, Ten Feet Tall and Bulletproof. Singing along, not caring that he wasn't in tune, he picked up empty beer cans and potato chip bags, and stuffed them all inside the garbage sack. After tying the top securely, he hefted it over his shoulder and walked out into the hallway in step with the beat of the music.

He was passing Apartment 2A when the door opened. The tenant backed into the hallway, two garbage bags in tow. Not watching where she was going, she bumped right into him.

Obviously shocked by the sudden impact, she quickly turned. "Excuse me, I'm so sorry. I should..." Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open, but he noticed her eyes travel the length of his body. He towered over her. She was petite, maybe five-foot-three. Gazing up at him, she completed her sentence, "Uh... I should have been watching where I was going."

Alex dropped the trash bag on the floor and removed his headphones. Unable to resist, he gave her a quick once over. Her blond hair, drawn back into a ponytail, presented a youthful appearance, but the clingy, terrycloth outfit she wore did a great job of outlining assets that proved she wasn't just a child. The way she licked her full bottom lip, maybe a nervous habit, made him want to savor a taste for himself.

He was missing most of what she said and forced himself to stop ogling her and pay attention. After her apology, he started to speak. His mouth was as dry as dust. "No problem," he said, his voice cracking.

Puberty and voice change passed through his mind, but that was a long time ago. He swallowed hard and made another attempt to speak. Pointing to her trash bags and then to his own, he said, "Looks like we're both headed for the same place."

"Yep, it's Saturday, my cleaning day. Same routine every weekend."

Her head tilted in a way that made her beautiful, hazel eyes sparkle. Suddenly his palms started to sweat. He wiped his right hand against his pant leg, then extended it. "Name's Alex Carlyle. I live in Apartment 2E."

Her tiny hand disappeared inside his. "Hi, Alex. I'm Cynthia Freitas. Looks like we're neighbors. How long have you lived here?"

"Going on two years already. Time flies when you're having fun."

"Wow, two years!" She was shocked. "I've only lived here for three months and I'm ready to move."

He laughed. "Me, too. Service is lousy around here, and everything is falling apart. But, don't give your two weeks notice yet. There aren't too many other affordable places to live this close to the city."

He still held her hand. He quickly let go. If she was bothered, it didn't show. She seemed to want to keep the conversation going.

"That's for sure," she agreed. "I looked at lots of places, but this is the only one within my price range. So, here I am! Say, why haven't we run into each other before?"

"It is strange that we haven't, especially since we're just two doors apart. But, then, I pretty much spend all of my time at work. When I am home, I hibernate."

"What do you do when you aren't... hibernating?"

"I'm in law enforcement--police officer."

"Gee. I didn't know a policeman lived so close. I guess I'll have to keep my wild parties to a minimum." Tipping her head back, she giggled.

A woman's laughter after so long was a welcomed sound, and she was so darn cute. He casually leaned against the wall, not wanting the conversation to end either. "So, that's where all the noises are coming from. I just thought the pipes were creaking and the floor settling."

"Actually, that's exactly what it was. That pretty much describes the only sounds coming from my apartment."

"Right! A pretty girl like you?"

Her cheeks reddened. "Thank you, kind sir. But, I haven't had time to mix and mingle with anyone other than colleagues from work, and although I'm an accountant by trade, they aren't the most exciting folks in the world. I like to leave that part of me behind at five o'clock."

It surprised him to see her blush at his compliment. Surely she was used to them, a looker like her. He reached past her and put his hand on the doorknob. "Got your key?"

She reached into her pocket and produced one. "Right here."

He locked the door and pulled it closed. "Don't want to take any chances with your valuables. "You mentioned not having excitement in your life," he said, picking up one of her trash bags along with his own. "How's this? Allow me to escort you to the dumpster."

Once in the alley, Cynthia flashed back to the Building Superintendent and his suspicious behavior. I wonder what was in that bundle?

Alex jokingly snapped his fingers in front of her face. "Can I have your other bag or have you become attached to it?"

"I'm sorry," she said, handing it to him. "I guess I drifted off somewhere."

What she really wanted to do was dig around in the dumpster to see what the super left behind, but decided that wouldn't make a very good first impression.

Alex took her elbow. "Garbage delivered, mission accomplished."

She giggled as they walked back into the building. "Next time I hope you take me some place that smells a little better."

They didn't notice the slightly ajar door as they descended the stairs.

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Slowly, he shut the door then leaned against it. He placed a cigarette in his mouth and struck a match. The acrid smell of sulphur curled around his nostrils. What a disgusting display he had just witnessed. An evil chuckle escaped his puckered lips as he held the fire to the tobacco end and watched it come to life.

He'd watched them laughing and carrying on while he peeked through the door. She was a looker, that blonde from upstairs, but then she probably knew it. It made him sick to his stomach to watch her work her wiles on the unsuspecting man with her.

The sun had moved to the other side of the building and left his room virtually dark. He moved to turn on the light and pondered saving the poor schmuck who'd been with the bitch. So many blondes and so little time-but, it was his responsibility and he'd take care of it.

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Cynthia couldn't believe she actually got up enough nerve to invite Alex for dinner. He was so easy to talk to. The fact that he was drop-dead gorgeous didn't hurt either. While she and Alex were at the dumpster earlier, she thought about mentioning what she had seen from her window, but the last thing she wanted was for him to think she had nothing

better to do than spy on people. She decided to keep it to herself, at least for the moment. Still, she wondered about the strange man who oversaw the building.

She rummaged through the cupboards, hastily looking for ideas on what to prepare. There was chicken in the fridge, so she could broil the breasts and top them with melted Parmesan cheese and chives. Now all she needed was a side dish. Hmm...mac and cheese. Everyone likes mac and cheese... at least, I hope. Standing on tiptoes and still barely reaching the second shelf, she tipped the box forward until it fell into her hands. She surveyed the can goods on the shelf below. Green beans? Corn? Got it, I'll do green beans with sliced new potatoes and bacon bits. She put the cans with the beans and potatoes on the counter next to the box of pasta to simplify preparation later. Afterwards, she made one more sweep through the apartment making sure everything was tidy before she showered.

In the bathroom, she stood with her hand under the running water for what seemed an eternity. When the coldness finally changed to warm, Cynthia stepped into the tub and drew the shower curtain closed. As usual, the pressure was terrible. Water dribbled out rather than sprayed. She lathered her body with fragrant, liquid jasmine, then struggled to remove the suds with the diminished trickle of water. Geez, a drooling old woman produces more liquid than this. Suddenly, the pressure increased at the same time that the water turned to ice. She screamed and bolted from the tub. Goose bumps dotted her ivory skin. She reached in to turn off the shower, then quickly grabbed a towel. "Yikes! I hate this place. First no water, then cold water. What next?"

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It was nearing seven o'clock. Dinner was ready, the oven set to warm. The last hour had been spent checking and re-checking her appearance. After all, she wanted to make a good impression. His first glimpse of her hadn't been all that great--sweaty, hair a mess, and probably smelling pretty awful. The small table in the kitchen was set for two, complete with candle and cloth napkins. Smooth jazz played softly on the radio. She nervously paced while she chastised herself. Why in the world did you get ready so early?

At the sound of a knock, she adjusted the collar on her blouse and made sure her shirttail was tucked securely into her jeans. Before opening the door, she bent at the waist and vigorously swept her hair from side-to-side to give it a fuller, more natural appearance--a hint she picked up in a magazine. A sudden wave of dizziness overtook her when she straightened, and she placed her hand against her forehead. Whew, head rush! Let's not do that again, full hair or not! Feeling just a tad disoriented, she opened the door.

He looked magnificent in his form-fitting Levi's, and a cobalt blue T-shirt that almost matched his eyes. His thick, black hair, no longer confined beneath headphones, was impeccably styled, and he sported white, tennis shoes that were as unblemished as his dark complexion. Her heart fluttered and she still felt dizzy, but she was sure it wasn't from any crummy beauty tip. "Hi. You're right on time. Come in."

His outstretched hand offered a bottle of wine. "I hope you like White Zin."

"I love it. It's my favorite." Her hand purposely grazed his as she took the bottle, and she asked, "Would you like a glass before dinner?"

"Sure, why not? Wine has never been my forte, but Emily Post says it's good etiquette to bring a bottle of wine to dinner. So, for the sake of appearances I'll have a glass before dinner? During dinner? Maybe after dinner?"

"Well, maybe you should have brought more than one bottle," she quipped.

"Actually, I can probably only handle one glass. Although a good, cold brew is my drink of choice, tonight I'm making a sacrifice. I'm trying to make a good impression. So...how am I doin' so far?"

Retrieving the only two wine glasses she owned, she glanced over her shoulder as she poured. "You're doing just fine. You picked a wine I like and I have just enough glasses. I'd say you're on a roll."

She walked over and handed him his wine. "Sit. Please. Make yourself comfortable." If that's possible on this furniture. She was just about to warn him about the couch...

The weakened springs of the dilapidated sofa collapsed under his weight. He sank into the worn cushion. With knees almost level with his eye-brows, he raised his glass precariously to keep his wine from spilling. Confused, he looked up at Cynthia. "Should I have sat somewhere else?"

She didn't know whether to laugh at him or cry from embarrassment, but he looked so funny she collapsed into a fit of giggles. "I'm so sorry. I was just going to warn you about the broken springs. Only two cushions provide any support whatsoever and guess which one you picked? You might want to move."

She took the wine glass from his hand and motioned toward the other end of the couch, then extended her hand to help him up.

Developing a rocking motion, Alex struggled to his feet and moved to the other end of the sofa. He lowered himself cautiously and took a deep breath. "Well, this is better. I think your couch was built in the same era that mine was." He fingered the material on the cushion next to him. "But, yours appears to have a little more fabric left on it."

His joke lightened the moment. She handed his wine back and sauntered over to the radio. "I find it hard to believe that your furniture is any worse than mine."

Cynthia switched from the radio to CD and popped in a disc. There would be no newsbreaks about the case to disturb their evening. She sat next to him. Finally, there was

something to appreciate about her shabby furniture--his closeness. His aftershave was intoxicating. She leaned a little closer to inhale the delightful fragrance.

Alex seemed nervous. Hopefully, not because of her. He tipped his wine glass up and drained it, then put it on the end table. Wiping his hands on his pant legs, he glanced at the stove. "Something smells great. I'm starved."

She felt a pang of disappointment. Eating was the last thing on her mind. It would be preferable to stay just as they were and continue talking, but reluctantly she leaned across him and put her glass on the table next to his. "Then I guess we should eat."

She went to the table and lit the candles. "I hope you like chicken, macaroni and cheese and green beans. It's what I had handy. I know most men prefer beef, but I don't eat red meat so I never buy it."

"Sounds like a feast to me. I'm usually on my second bag of nachos, and my third beer by now."

~*~

"Why don't you make yourself comfortable while I clear the table," Cynthia insisted.

"Are you sure I can't help? I think I remember how to wash or dry."

"Nope, I'm just going to dump everything in the sink and handle it later," she said as she balanced the dirty dishes in her arms.

Alex wandered back over to the safe couch cushion and sat. "Mind if I kick off my shoes?"

Normally, that casual request on a first date would have been shocking, but there was something about him that made it feel natural. Apparently, he had relaxed.

Cynthia looked over her shoulder and scrunched up her nose. "Did you wash your feet?"

He put his sock-clad feet on the coffee table and replied, "Yep, sure did. Even changed my socks." He closed one gorgeous eye in a wink.

Who cared if he made himself at home? She brushed aside thoughts that he was acting just a little too casual and recalled growing up with a brother who had smelly feet. She glanced back at Alex again, and just that one look wiped away the memory. She doubted anything about him would be unpleasant.

Cynthia rinsed and dried her hands, then hung the dishtowel on the edge of the sink. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"That sounds good. You know...it's funny. When I go out to dinner, which is very rare, I always enjoy a cup of coffee afterwards, but at home, I never make the stuff. Too much trouble for one cup, I guess."

"I know what you mean. There are times I'd love to bake a cake just to have a good smell to cover the musty odor of this old building, but I know it would get moldy before I could eat it all, and I'm not one to waste things. But, I do make my coffee every morning, couldn't make it through the day without it. I'm not about to become one of those people who stand in line at one of those fancy coffee places every morning. Number one, I don't have the time, and number two, I can't afford it." She poured water into the drip-style coffee maker, plugged it in, then wiped the counter. She chastised herself for rambling on so. Take a breath, Cynthia! You sound like a babbling idiot.

Alex glanced around the room. "How come your apartment looks so much better than mine?"

Her precious china cups and saucers clinked against the counter. "What do you mean? Your furniture can't look worse than this stuff." She scanned the peeling walls. "I even considered doing the repainting myself, but when I asked the super about it he just rolled his eyes at me. I took it as a no."

Alex scratched his head. "It's not the furniture or paint, it's the...Okay, I got it! It's the...cleanliness. I think I answered my own question."

She handed him a cup of coffee and grinned. "You know what they say? Cleanliness is next to Godliness."

Alex looked awkward holding a dainty saucer in one hand while he held the steaming china cup with the other. "Well, in that case, I don't think God even knows my name. I'm not filthy, mind you, just not a very tidy guy when it comes to picking up. I used to be, but in this place, it just doesn't seem to matter." Taking care not to burn his lips, he took a small sip. "Taste's just as good as Starbucks," he said waggling an eyebrow as he set his cup down.

Balancing her own cup, Cynthia came and sat down next to him. "I could have sat in the chair, but it's actually worse than the man-eating couch cushion. I've been pierced by its broken springs more than once."

"I like you just where you are."

She was pleasantly surprised when he moved a little closer. Her mind echoed his sentiments. I like me just where I am, too. She relaxed against the back of the sofa and took a sip of her coffee. She was just going to say how much she was enjoying the evening when total darkness engulfed the room.

~*~

"Shit! The wiring in this dump sucks." The building superintendent commented on the flickering lights and hoped it wasn't a problem he'd have to address. Usually, the dimming meant that someone had blown a breaker, but on occasion the entire building went dark, and he'd have to trek down to the basement and find out which switch had been thrown.

He sat, expecting to become engulfed in complete darkness, but the lights stayed on. He breathed a sigh of relief. "Whew, I hate having to fix things."

He picked up his newspaper and turned to the continuation of the headline story-Dead and Missing Women. The story held a special interest for him.

Chapter Two

"Whoa, what happened?" Alex asked.

She wanted to swear but restrained herself. "It's that darn breaker. The old fuse boxes were replaced, but nothing has been done about the ancient wiring. The breaker switch trips every time I plug in one extra thing. I have no idea how this building passed the code restrictions. Sometimes I actually see sparks fly when I vacuum."

His melodious laughter filled the darkened room. "Maybe you should slow down."

She reached over and poked him. "Very funny. I'm talking danger here, and you're making jokes." Despite the man-eating couch and the faulty wiring, the evening was still going far better than she'd hoped. She felt like she'd known him for ages.

"Do you know where the breaker box is?" he asked.

"Probably in the same place as the one in your apartment."

"Duh! Guess I should have figured that out. Do you have a flashlight?"

"In the kitchen drawer. I keep fresh batteries in it at all times. It only took three or four times for me to learn they're a necessity at The Cairns."

She felt around for the coffee table and set her cup down. Rising, she groped her way into the kitchen to find the flashlight. She fumbled in the drawer where she remembered last putting it. Finally, her fingers closed around its familiar long handle. She turned and started back to the couch, and ran smack into Alex. The flashlight fell to the floor with a clatter. "Yikes," she exclaimed. "I thought you were still over there."

"I guess I should have stayed," he said with a hearty chuckle.

She dropped to her knees and began feeling around in the darkness.

"Ouch!" Her head collided with his. "What are you doing down here?"

"Just trying to be helpful."

His warm breath sprayed across her face as she rubbed the point of impact on her forehead. "Thanks, I guess."

"Eureka, I found it," Alex yelled.

"Great! Now, if we can make it to the fuse box without any further incidents, that would be nice." She hoped, in the darkness, that her smile carried in her voice.

While Cynthia held the light, Alex fumbled with the breakers. Finally, after flipping each of them to find the thrown one, the electricity surged to life. Alex raised his arms toward heaven. "And the Lord said, 'Let there be light'."

"Thanks. You're pretty handy to have around. I could have done it myself, but I'm glad you were here to fix it." Her mind fantasized about another scenario. Maybe it would have been more romantic to just stay in the dark. Would it be so wrong if he kissed me already? She forced herself back to reality, remembering her mother's advice about brazen women. Just talk about something general, Cynthia. It's way too early for romance. "Maybe you should apply for the apartment superintendent's position. God knows we need a good replacement."

Alex held up a hand in protest. "Nooo! Not me. This building could become a lifetime commitment, and I'm not planning on staying here until I die." He sat, picked up his cup and downed the last of his coffee.

Cynthia put away the flashlight. "Would you like another cup?"

"No thanks. I'm fine."

She joined him on the couch. Tucking one leg beneath her, she turned slightly toward him. "Where were we?"

"Talking about the super's job."

"Speaking of ...do you find him as non-responsive as I do? I've been trying for weeks to get my deadbolt fixed."

"I think he's a lazy, no-good shirker. It's easier to fix things myself then have to keep calling him. He's no better than the one who used to work here."

"I didn't know the other one, but this one has only been in my apartment once since I moved here, and that's enough for me. He gives me the creeps. He has those beady little

eyes and looks like he hasn't bathed in weeks. I just keep my fingers crossed that nothing else breaks."

"Well, if something does, you can always call me." He rose. "Let's have a look at the broken lock." Alex bent down and looked at the deadbolt. "Looks like you'll need a new one. You can pick one up at any hardware store. I recommend you do that right away. You can never be too safe...if you know what I mean."

Cynthia smiled. "I know...what's going on right now is way to close to home. Thanks, I'll get a one right away. I promise I won't wait for the super."

Alex glanced at his watch. "Well, it's getting late, already eleven o'clock. Maybe I should get going." She thought she detected a note of reluctance in his voice.

"Well, if you have to leave..." Was that a look of disappointment on his face when she didn't object?

Alex grabbed the doorknob. "Thanks for dinner and a nice evening. I really enjoyed myself. Next time, dinner will be my treat."

He paused for a moment before opening the door. Is he going to kiss me? Maybe he thinks it's too soon. Although she thought about being kissed, she didn't want to move too quickly. Still her dreams deflated when he simply said, "Good night, Cynthia."

Her heart fell. Was he just going to leave? Her mind raced. If he isn't he going to try to kiss me, should I should kiss him. No! Absolutely not. That would be way too forward. It's his move.

Trying not to sound too disappointed, she responded, "Good night, Alex. I enjoyed tonight too, and I'll hold you to your offer of dinner." After she closed the door behind him, she congratulated herself on a successful evening. He must want to see me again. He mentioned 'next time'.

~*~

Lurking in the shadows was becoming his habit. He ducked around the corner and waited for the man she called Alex, to unlock his door and slip inside. It was tiring hanging around outside her apartment, straining to hear their conversation and hoping no one saw him. They'd had quite a time tonight, the two of them. He'd heard enough to know that he'd have to make his move soon. She was just too charming for her own good.

~*~

Cynthia opened her eyes. Immediately, thoughts of the previous night flooded her mind. Her mouth curled into a smile thinking of Alex; she hugged herself beneath the covers. Oh Alex, you weren't just a dream, I know because there's still a faint aroma of your

aftershave. Maybe this old run-down place has some good points after all. Rays of sunlight filtered through a separation in the curtains. Cynthia pulled an arm from beneath the blanket and playfully swatted at the dust motes that danced along the beam of light. Can't lie in bed all day and think about Alex. Waiting for him to call will be torture enough. Sighing, she threw off the covers and stood.

She grabbed her robe from the foot of the bed, pulled it around her and meandered into the living room. Even the dingy furniture held more appeal this morning, and Alex's seductive aftershave lingered more heavily around the dilapidated sofa. She sat on the same cushion where she had sat last night and pretended he was still sitting next to her. Feeling like a foolish schoolgirl, she chided herself. "Girl, you are one sick puppy. Get a grip and go make coffee!"

She spooned grounds into a filter, filled the receptacle with water, then flipped the 'on' switch. After a few moments, the hot, dark liquid dripped into the carafe, and the freshly brewed aroma summoned her back. She was just filling her cup when the phone rang. Taking her coffee with her she returned to the couch, she sat and answered. "Hello."

His sexy voice sounded on the other end, "Good morning. This is Alex. Hope I didn't wake you."

Cynthia's heart skipped a beat. She tried to suppress the excitement in her voice. "Oh, Alex! No, you didn't wake me. I've been up for a while. I was just sitting here having my morning coffee." And thinking of you. She curled her legs up beneath her robe and waited through a lengthy pause.

"I just wanted to thank you again for last night. I had a great time."

"Me, too. It was probably the best Saturday night I've spent in quite a while."

He laughed. "And to think our date all started with an exciting trip to the trash dumpster."

"Yeah! Did I remember to thank you for the personalized tour?"

"Not a problem. Always happy to help." Another pause.

We didn't have this much trouble talking last night. Why do I feel like I'm tongue-tied? She struggled to keep the conversation going. Don't let him hang up...keep talking, Cyn, maybe he's going to ask you out. "So, what are you doing up so early on a Sunday morning?"

"Couldn't sleep. I can't quit thinking about the case I'm working right now, trying to piece it all together. Seems I always wake up early when I don't have to. Tics me off! During the week, I have to drag myself out of bed, and here it is the weekend and I'm up with the sun."

"Are you by chance working on the case involving the missing women?"

"Yep, that's the one that keeps me up late and wakes me up early. What gets you out of bed?"

"I've always been an early riser. It's the afternoons that I dread. I tend to run out of steam around two-thirty. Gee. We make a great team. I can keep you awake in the morning and you can keep me awake in the afternoon." Oh geez, Cynthia. Now he thinks you're trying to hook him.

His laughter danced across the phone lines and she imagined the twinkle in his eyes. "Are you offering to come over every morning and throw me in the shower?"

Visions of his naked body flashed through her mind and she felt herself redden. I'd like nothing better than to start my morning off...you-me-naked. She stammered, trying to say the right thing. "Only...if...you come by my office every afternoon and bring me strong coffee."

"Would you mind if I brought a handcuffed suspect with me on occasion?"

The image filled her mind. "Well, maybe that wouldn't be such a good idea after all. I can imagine the gossip in the office." There was dead silence. "Are you still there, Alex?"

"Yeah, I'm here. I'm just trying to get up the courage to ask you out. Is it too soon? It's been quite a while since I've been in the dating scene. I think I've forgotten everything I ever knew about it."

Cynthia jumped off the couch and did a happy dance around the coffee table. Faking composure, she answered, "No, it's not too soon. I'd love to go out with you again. Maybe you can tell me all about the case you're working." Don't appear too eager and scare him away, and don't ask when, let him suggest the time. Make it soon Alex...please!

"Is lunch today a possibility?"

"Well, let me check my social calendar." She laughed. If you only knew how dead my social life has been until now. She didn't want to act desperate, but she was dying to go. "As luck would have it, I appear to be free, but you'd better book me quickly...you never know." His responsive chuckle sent a shiver through her. Oh my gosh, just his laughter turns me on.

"Okay, I'll be on your door step at twelve sharp. We can decide together where we want to go, and what we want to eat. I'll see you then."

Before he hung up, she yelled. "Wait! I'm dressing casually. If that's okay."

"Is there any other way to dress?"

"Okay, Alex. See you at noon."

She sat, reveling in the moment. Okay, let's see. What can I wear to turn you on? Going through her closet, Cynthia pushed hanger after hanger aside looking for just the right thing to wear. Casual, but still classy. No, too dressy. No, too revealing. No, too plain. Darn, in all these clothes, why can't I find something I want to wear? After agonizing over each article of clothing, she finally settled on a pair of camel-colored slacks with a coordinating sweater. For an accent, she draped a scarf around her neckline.

In the bathroom, she tried various hairstyles. Despite the fact that damp, sea air sometimes made her hair frizzy on the ends, she decided not to pull it back into her usual weekend ponytail. Wearing her hair down was much more sexy, and that's what she wanted to be.

She was just applying the final touch of lipstick when there was a knock on the door. She quickly blotted her lips together. Hurry, Cyn. It's Alex. It has to be. No one else ever comes calling. Gliding across the floor, she opened the door and greeted him with an enthusiastic, "Hi!"

If possible, he looked even more handsome than at dinner. His white, polo shirt clung to his well-muscled arms and chest, and tan slacks sufficiently displayed a great pair of legs. The familiar aroma of his aftershave wafted past her nose. Having him for lunch was her preference.

"Are you ready, or do you need a few minutes?" he asked.

"I'm ready. Just let me grab my purse." She slung the strap over her shoulder and joined him in the hallway. Pulling the door closed, she checked to make sure it locked. "Never can be too sure. I came home one day and the door was open. I guess I didn't close it very well. I know, I know...fix the deadbolt...just one more thing to fix in this crummy place. Really, I'm not usually a flustered nit-wit."

"I'm sure you aren't, but really, Cynthia, you do need to get that fixed."

"I know." She smiled. "And, like I said, there's certainly no use calling the super again. He already has an endless list of things he's ignoring."

Alex laughed. "I've added a few things to that list myself." Then, changing the subject, he asked, "Okay, what are you in the mood for?"

Oh, if you only knew. He brought out a side of her that was totally new and she wasn't sure how to react. She smiled and pushed her wanton thoughts aside. "I'm not particular. What about you?"

"How about going to the wharf and having some seafood? After all, we live in the best place to get it. Maybe afterwards we can walk around Pier 39 and act like tourists."

Cynthia giggled. "I'll feel like one. Can you believe I've never been there?"

"You're kidding! Well, then, the wharf it is."

While they were going down the stairs, Alex suddenly turned serious. "Oh, and Cynthia, I'm going to bug you until we get that lock fixed. This isn't a very safe neighborhood."

"Really? I've never felt that way...until recently."

"I don't want to scare you, but you really have to be careful. The case I'm working is really baffling. Four women have disappeared into thin air this past month, and all lived within a five-mile radius of each other. Each is blonde, early to mid-thirties with a slender build. So far we've only recovered one body, and it was the strangest thing...."

"How so?"

A strange look appeared on his face and he took a deep breath. "I shouldn't be telling you any of this. It's not like me to be so loose-lipped with facts about unsolved cases. We've managed to keep these latest details from even the press. I'd appreciate if we could just let it drop. I'll share more with you when I can."

Just visualizing a crime scene sent chills through Cynthia. "Of course. I understand the need for confidentiality, but can you at least tell me if you think there's a specific reason why he's abducting women with similar looks?"

"I haven't a clue. It's driving me crazy. Judging from the victim we found, the perpetrator is trying to tell us something, but damned if I can figure it out."

"Their poor families. Have there been any ransom attempts?"

He shook his head. "None."

Alex held the door open while she walked out onto the sidewalk, then followed. He scanned the street for a taxi. "That's the hardest part of any case like this. We don't have any answers for their families. And with them all being from this general area, you can see why I want you to be extra safe." He placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled at a passing cab.

She shivered at the thought of a kidnapper right in her back yard and, even more, that she shared attributes with the victims that the kidnapper found appealing.

~*~

He watched from the shadow of the building as the taxi sped away, then stepped out into the sunlight. The brightness made him squint and he shielded his eyes momentarily to allow them to adjust.

He'd barely heard their conversation about the kidnapping and murder, but he understood their interest. He'd since discovered that the schmuck was a cop--right in his own apartment building. Being careful was a top priority now. The law was way too close. That wasn't going to be a deterrent--they hadn't caught him yet.

He tossed his cigarette butt on the cement and ground the burning embers out with the toe of his shoe. He enjoyed snuffing things out.

~*~

Alex pushed back from the table and threw his napkin on his plate. "Wow! I'm stuffed."

Cynthia took the last sip of her soda. "Me, too, I couldn't eat another bite. My crab salad was delicious."

"My halibut was a little on the dry side, but everything else was good...especially the company."

She felt the heat of a blush creeping up her neck, but returned the compliment. "I thought the company was the best part, too." She wanted to reach across the table and touch his hand, but her fear of appearing too forward precluded her actions. There were hundreds of questions she wanted to ask. She barely knew anything about him.

"So, I know you told me that your last relationship ended, but how long ago? I hope you don't mind me asking...do you?"

"No, not at all." He brushed a lock of hair off his forehead. "It was right before I moved to The Cairns. I thought she was the one, but evidently she didn't share my opinion. I was so engrossed in my job I didn't see what was right under my nose. She was having an affair with one of her co-workers. I guess being a dedicated worker isn't all that it's cracked up to be."

"I'm so sorry, Alex. I know that must have been painful." She chewed on her bottom lip feeling awkward for having dredged up old hurt.

"I'll survive. You know what they say...time heals all wounds." He reached for and took a long drink of water, then continued. "I think it hurt more because I don't have family. I was counting on building one, and she dashed those dreams, but that's enough about that." He fidgeted with the collar on his shirt. "I'm not much for sharing my emotions with people. Can't believe you got so much information out of me."

"My mother always told me I was nosy. I guess she was right."

Alex signed the credit card receipt and put his card back in his wallet, then stood. "Got your walking shoes on?"

Rising, she smiled. "Yep! I sure do. I'm ready to play tourist." She followed him through the narrow aisle to the exit. Her eyes remained riveted to the seat of his well-fitting pants and the outline of a firm behind.

The restaurant had been overly warm, but outside, the crisp air carried the smell of the ocean and cooled her heated face. She tossed her head back and inhaled deeply. "The one thing I really like about San Francisco is the salty air. I love the smell of the ocean."

She was surprised when he reached for her hand. "Okay, on to Pier 39."

It was hard to suppress her elation. He's holding my hand. Okay, Cyn, don't get carried away here. It's only hand holding. Keep control of yourself and don't be a dolt. She calmed herself. "You know, of course, I'm going to force you to look in the stores. I love to shop."

"What woman doesn't?"