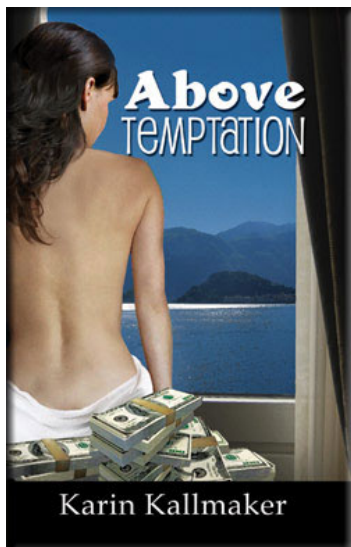


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## Excerpt from ABOVE TEMPTATION



*ABOVE TEMPTATION* IS A LESBIAN ROMANCE BY KARIN KALLMAKER.

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## CHAPTER ONE

“Here’s the last of the files, Barrett.” The clerk hardly paused as he shoehorned two more boxes into her cubicle. “What a waste of paper.”

“Wait—take these back. I’m done with them.” Kip Barrett wearily lifted four file boxes into the clerk’s waiting hands. It was progress, at least. She was finally giving back more than she was getting and it wasn’t too often that she felt that way.

She staged the new boxes in the precarious Jenga-like stack crowding her cubicle. She was still trying to figure out how doing her job really well meant she was assigned the mind-shredding task of numbering exhibits. “It has to be right so I want you to do it” from her boss didn’t seem like a compliment now, especially when the files in question were actual hard copy, relics of a case from the pre-digital era. A wasteland of manila folders mounded across her desk. The only spots of color were the coded file tags and the printed lettering across each file: CONFIDENTIAL PROPERTY OF STERLING FRAUD INVESTIGATIONS.

It's important work, she told herself. After all, this stack of paper held one critical fact supported with multiple verified source documents. When added to the next fact, and the next, and hundreds of others it meant a failed appeal and Joseph Wyndham III could go on writing his memoir in his minimum security cell.

She swapped her pencil for an indelible fine point marker and wrote numbers on the sheets of paper in the long-used company script. This piece of paper, this fact: \$19,929.17 from the account of prosecution witness 4,866, via unauthorized bank transfer initiated in Oregon moving funds through Federal Reserve District 12 from California to a bank domiciled in Zurich.

One mistake, erasures, corrections, anything imperfect, and the defense's contention that his innocent, God-fearing, pillar-of-the-community client had been mistakenly prosecuted is bolstered by "shoddy, inconsistent" work by the firm of Sterling Fraud Investigations. There—4,866 files checked. Only 623 to go.

She tried to whip up her flagging energy with the thought of her weekend plans, but that strategy had stopped working two days ago. Just a few more hours, she told herself.

"You want to shut off that alarm?" Her cube neighbor's raspy voice floated over the barrier. "I got plenty of alarms of my own to worry about."

It took her a minute to realize the comment was meant for her. Her tired brain had shut out the persistent tone of an urgent internal e-mail. Ignoring everything around her was a survival skill when confronted with this much to do. Her equally punchy neighbors had been playing a candy bar jingle most of the morning. Someone would rhythmically start it, and it would travel bit by bit along all the cubicles until it was done. It was not nearly so annoying as "Wassup!" and "Who let the dogs out?", the two previous cubicle noise games.

She silenced the e-mail alarm. It was probably from Emilio

Woo, her boss. Please, she thought, any other day I'm happy to do whatever. But not today.

It wasn't from Emilio. She stared at the sender's name and then took a deep breath. What did Tamara Sterling, the woman who stared impassively at her from the covers of SFI annual reports, want with her? Maybe it was a mistake.

It wasn't. The message was brief and to the point: Come to my office at precisely half past four. Please do not mention this appointment to anyone.

Her computer put her on hold while her brief confirmation was sent and she allowed herself to wonder what the appointment was about. She'd officially met with Sterling only once since joining the banking specialists staff, though they'd said a casual word or two at meetings, receptions and office functions. A promotion? No, Emilio or his boss would have talked to her about that. There were no openings that she knew about. And from what Kip knew of Tamara Sterling, she didn't need any help finding or balancing her accounts.

Speculation wouldn't get any work done and she needed to finish at least fifty more files before she left for the weekend. She caught her heavy sigh before it escaped from her lungs. She tried to tell herself she hadn't turned into a desk jockey. Field investigations were a lot more interesting, but nobody got to do just the fun stuff. Tracing live digital signals, watching a magician programmer open trap doors for high-tech thieves to fall through, right into their waiting virtual hands—that was so very fun. And all too rare.

Paperwork was killing her, though. After this, she had two trials coming up where she was the lead investigator and end of the month was the report deadline for the last three cases she'd worked on. She was up to her ears in schedules and exhibits with paralegals and lawyers breathing down her neck.

She set her computer alarm to remind her of the appointment and

turned back to the manila folders. Time for number 4,867.

There was no sign of Tamara Sterling's assistant when Kip entered the outer sanctum of the CEO's office. She waited a moment or two, then glanced at her watch. She would be late if the legendary Mercedes Houston didn't return.

After another minute ticked away, Kip straightened her shoulders and calmly knocked on the inner door. She glanced down at her favorite ivory blouse and deep plum suit combination, then patted her hair—it was as trim as the rest of her. Though her long black curls could be unruly, the fashionably knotted ponytail was in perfect order. She hoped the tidiness of her attire would mask her exhaustion.

When a low voice called for her to enter, she pushed the door open.

Tamara Sterling was already halfway across the office to greet her. "Please come in, Kip."

She was holding out her hand, so Kip shook it as she looked up at her. The sparkling collar pin at the top button of the crisp white shirt was an inch below eye level for her. That put Sterling at around fifteen. The short brown hair didn't add to her height, but its straight, simple lines echoed the rest of her angular physique. In photographs it appeared dark brown, but the afternoon sunlight revealed a hint of red. The handshake was firm, palm dry, and her expression, while welcoming, was unreadable. The steady gray eyes seemed to be taking note of everything they saw. As usual, when considering her employer's appearance, Kip knew why few people ever forgot meeting Tamara Sterling. She was rarely called attractive. Kip, if asked, would have said arresting was the better word.

She mentally kicked herself for having her investigative instincts so engaged that she were describing her boss's boss's boss in her head as if she was a witness or suspect. She badly needed some down time.

“What can I do for you, Ms. Sterling?”

She gestured at a chair in front of her desk. “I need to—damn.”

Her expression turned so grim as she answered the phone that Kip hoped she hadn’t done anything to jeopardize what she had thought would be a long career. There was simply no other company like SFI.

“Have a seat,” she said as she covered the mouthpiece. “I’m sorry, but this will only take a moment.”

Kip oozed down into the teak and burgundy leather guest chair and watched surreptitiously as Sterling fired short questions at the person on the other end of the line. The Mount Rushmore face from the Annual Report was in full evidence, and it was easy to believe the rumors that floated around about Sterling’s past in intelligence work. She was too memorable to work undercover, and the rumors suggested a more steely-eyed confrontational style—interrogation wasn’t hard to believe, though Kip was certain Sterling’s own tendency to refer to her past as “Geek with a Badge” was the truth.

To avoid noticeably eavesdropping, Kip stared past Sterling to the iridescent panorama of Seattle and Puget Sound. The normally smoky blue-green waters of the Sound were washed with orange by the late afternoon sun. Across the expanse of Elliott Bay, past the point of Duwamish Head, she could see faint golden lights...probably Winslow. It was one of many spectacular views of the Seattle area and if this were Kip’s office, she’d always be staring out the window. Perhaps that was why Tamara Sterling had her back to it.

Today’s afternoon rain shower had left the air pure and brisk. Outside the temperature was falling to the high forties. She thought with pleasure of her coming weekend at the cabin. There was no chance of snow and the mountain air rolling down out of the Olympic Mountains would work magic on her tired spirit. A crackling fire, steaming bowl of soup with a good book—heaven, or as close to it as

she was ever going to get.

Forcing her concentration inside the room, Kip's brain began tallying up the cost of the office furnishings. She'd had a lot of practice at it. The bookcases, conference table and side chairs were all burnished teak—the real thing, not thin veneer over cheaper wood. The bookcases held books bound in leather that showed signs of actually having been read, and objets d'art that she guessed were costly, but not astronomically so. There was no antique commode cabinet worth \$20,000 and the carpet had not cost \$400 a square yard. The office would have been sterile and impersonal if not for the signed baseball under glass on a bookshelf, an attractive award Kip recognized from the company newsletter as the GLAAD Lesbian of Distinction award, and a framed, signed photo of Sally Ride on the credenza behind Sterling's desk. The reception to honor the GLAAD recipients was one of the times they had officially met. She didn't know if Sterling would even remember her from that event.

The desk was large and also teak and it was a well-used piece of furniture. The surface of the desk sported several large stacks of paperwork, but the collection had an organized look to it. Her practiced eye read file names upside down, but she lacked the memory to be able to recall the coded numbers later. They were definitely SFI client files. Several, however, were names lightly written in pencil—possible new clients?

She was trying to figure out if the Apple laptop was the latest version or one removed when she realized that Sterling had hung up and the ice-gray eyes were intently scrutinizing her.

“You're probably wondering what this is about.”

Kip nodded.

“I have a special assignment and you're the person for the job.”

“Wouldn't this normally go through channels?”

Her lips twitched. “I don't have to go through channels.”

Kip felt herself color. Fortunately, her olive-tinted skin—the legacy of her father’s DNA—wouldn’t show it. “Of course not. I’m just startled that you selected me.”

Sterling opened the file directly in front of her. “You’ve had the experience I need right now. Before you came to us you graduated top of your class from NYU and then went on to summa cum laude honors at Yale with a master’s in finance.” She glanced up from the file. “You returned to NYU for criminology specialty courses, then you underwent extensive training with the Justice Department.”

Kip had schooled herself not to react. “The Secret Service, actually.”

“Why?”

“I was following in my grandfather’s footsteps.”

“And you left after six months because...”

“Personal reasons.”

“And they are?”

Kip paused, then said steadily, “Personal.”

Sterling stared at her for a moment as if she would press further. The silence stretched but Kip knew it for what it was—people often volunteered information to put an end to a long silence.

Kip could match her, stone for stone.

Finally, Sterling arched one eyebrow as if to say Kip had not outstared her but she found continuing the silence pointless. “The training has stayed with you, I see.”

She looked back at the file. “After leaving the government, you joined us as an Internal Controls Consultant. That was four—almost five—years ago, and you’ve been promoted steadily. Currently you’re an Internal Audit Specialist on a team that handles some of our more complicated clients. Your performance appraisals are exemplary and a year ago I authorized a sizeable performance bonus for you after some excellent work tracing transfers for Big Blue here in Seattle.”

Kip wasn't sure how to handle this summation of her life. She tried to sound confident as she said, "I hope I've lived up to the expectations of the firm."

Her lips twitched again—not quite a smile. "If you hadn't you'd be gone."

She felt herself flush again but said nothing. She'd only stated the obvious, but apparently making her feel stupid was the game they were playing.

After a moment, Sterling closed the file and leaned back in her chair. Long fingers tapped the folder idly. "I'm hiring you as a consultant."

Kip kept her expression blank, as if her boss's boss's boss gave her assignments every day. She straightened. "I don't understand."

"I want you to do for me what you did on the McMillan case. Woo's report said that while he took the lead, you were the backbone of the investigation team. Reading the appraisal closely I can see that Woo's been dragging his heels on your next promotion because he doesn't want to lose you from his team."

Kip took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The McMillan investigation had been a guarded, secret commission from the chairman of the board who had suspected that a top executive was embezzling. Discovering the embezzlement had been easy. Figuring out how it was being done had been difficult. Finding where the money had gone and recovering it had been a grueling, nerve-wracking challenge. Ultimately, they'd recovered all but a fraction of the funds, then prepared the documentation for the eventual prosecution of the director of finance.

Kip said carefully, "You want me to investigate embezzlement at SFI? In secrecy and potentially involving one of your direct reports? And you can't ask Woo or Daniels because the guilty party might notice?"

She nodded gravely. “I need you because you’re still a low profile. Someone is siphoning cash out of SFI bank accounts. You can start with these.” She tossed a stack of papers in her direction.

Kip had examined thousands of bank reconciliations in her years with SFI and the Justice Department. Even in the digital age, bank statements were tick marked by real people for key balances, an essential check against error and fraud. She flipped through the pages and saw the telltale signs of alterations. It was a very good job, though. “How much is missing?”

“Half a million that I’ve discovered so far. I haven’t started looking where the real money is. Someone would notice if I did.”

Kip arched an eyebrow. “The trust accounts?”

She got a nod in response. “I was ambivalent about offering the service to clients from the beginning, and this was one of the reasons why.”

“We take every precaution,” Kip said. “Loss of a client’s money would be devastating. It would literally shatter our reputation.”

The look she got said she had just stated the obvious again.

Fighting down another flush, Kip changed direction. “I understand why you’re asking me. Whoever is doing this might be on the lookout for you or one of the top investigators. But they won’t be looking for someone like me. How do you know you can trust me?”

“Because of the Prudential case. If you were susceptible to bribery I think you would have taken the three hundred thousand they offered you. You have no offspring yearning to go to Ivy League schools. You’re driving a six-year-old car and you live in a very modest condo. No untoward debts, no unexplained riches.”

Sterling had clearly done a cursory background check. Kip tried not to resent the intrusion; it came with the territory. “The condo is modest, maybe, but it cost plenty. Seattle’s real estate was through the roof when I bought it.” Kip didn’t mention the cabin, which she’d been

able to buy last year, using her savings and the bonus from the Big Blue case. Nobody knew about the cabin.

“I don’t know why you left the government and moved out of D.C., but if the Secret Service brought you in for full training, you must have been screened thoroughly. Though I can’t see you as one of those guys that runs alongside the limousine.” The gray gaze flicked down Kip’s body, then back to her face. It was an impersonal glance, but she knew what Sterling was thinking—she was small for that kind of work. As often as she bemoaned her petite height she was thankful for it. People tended to underestimate small women, a bias she had used to her advantage more than once.

“My ultimate role was going to be advance fieldwork. Investigating the financial status of potential hosts. I was also doing financial investigation of hosts.” She saw no reason to tell Sterling that she’d met all the physical requirements, including marksmanship. She wasn’t going to explain about the simulators either.

“Their loss was our gain.”

Though she found it quite fulfilling chasing white-collar criminals—and there had been so many of them the last several years—she still felt the sting of the failure to serve and protect. As her father routinely sneered, she was the reincarnation of her grandfather.

“And you have no intention of telling me why you left.”

It was a statement of fact, so Kip said nothing. The last thing she would do was inform the head of the company why she had been allowed to resign from the Secret Service.

Sterling’s vexed sigh was brief, but heartfelt. “There are a few other conditions you should know about before you say yes.”

“And they are?”

“You’ll have to carry this in addition to your other duties. Woo can’t know you’re working on something else. I want quick results. If this account is missing a half million, there might be more and whoever

it is could be preparing to leave the country and we won't recover a cent. I want the funds back."

"I'll do my best." She said it with all sincerity and the quick nod said she was understood—they had made a pact. At SFI they took agreements very, very seriously. "My resources and investigative reach will be limited if I can't have authorized access to certain kinds of files, however. It will take me longer than a team."

"I understand. Even if all you can do is ETO, it will be a good start. If a senior officer is involved our fidelity bond won't cover the losses, so I'm anxious to know if it's any of them."

Eliminating the Obvious was always the first and easiest step. Kip nodded again.

"Thank you," Sterling said quietly. "After this meeting we shouldn't see each other at the office. If you need to talk to me, leave a message on my private voice mail." She pushed a business card toward her.

"Of course." As she tucked the card in her pocket, she noted the home address and private phone numbers written in standard SFI lettering script.

"I also have a lot of materials to give you. I thought I could do this on my own, but I am traveling too much to do an effective job."

"How can I get them from you?"

"I have to be on a plane out of SeaTac at ten. An appointment in New York came out of the blue, and that's when I realized I needed help. Can you come by my home around eight thirty? I'm on the Hill."

"Eight thirty will work." So much for a leisurely birthday dinner with Jen, Luke and their pals. She could hear the conversation already over birthday cake. Her friends were all starting to sound like her ex.

"Good." Sterling's tone indicated their meeting was over. Kip took the bank statements she'd been given and stood up.

Tamara Sterling rose as well, and came around her desk to shake

hands. Her touch was cool. “I think I’ve made the right decision.”

It was Kip’s turn to twitch her lips. “It’s an SFI motto—hire the best.”

“You’re not the most modest of people,” she said, but for the first time the smile seemed genuine.

Kip arched her eyebrows. “People tend to praise modesty, then overlook you.”

She turned to go and could feel the gaze on her back as she walked to the office door. When she got there she turned to salute smartly and made what she hoped was a dignified exit.

Sterling’s assistant was still not at her desk, and Kip wondered if the formidable Mercedes Houston was elsewhere so Kip wouldn’t be seen coming and going. Probably. A successful investigation was conducted in the utmost secrecy, not that anyone would get anything out of Mercedes Houston. People had tried. They had always failed. Mercedes’ considerable wit was company legend. Her boss had It’s a law law of physics —youryour foot foot will always alwaysalwaysalways fit in youryour mouth tacked to his office wall.

The office door opened just as she reached it. She stepped back to let in the lanky, sandy-haired man. She recognized him immediately and turned the bank reconciliations so the faces were hidden against her chest.

“The old girl in?” He smiled at her with boyish charm. Ted Langhorn was Director of Client Relations and Tamara Sterling’s longtime friend. And a suspect until she cleared him. “Where’s Mercedes? Are you temping for her?”

Kip was mildly irritated by the question, and peeved by Langhorn’s disrespectful use of “old girl” to describe the CEO. He might say it to Sterling’s face, but Kip was a subordinate. He’d always struck her as a glib deal-broker. Essential, but incapable of doing the work he was selling to clients.

“Ms. Sterling is in. I was just dropping off something. And picking up.” She indicated the stack of papers she was clutching against her stomach.

“Oh, sorry. Don’t I know you? You did that Big Blue investigation last year didn’t you? Barrett, right? Great work. Clients mention it all the time.”

Kip nodded, sorry she hadn’t been out of Sterling’s office thirty seconds earlier. Besides, she thought she’d been over-praised for that case. Fourteen million dollars was a lot of money, to be sure. But it had been stolen by a clumsy cocaine addict who had drawn a lot of attention to himself with conspicuous spending. He’d even ordered tickets to Brazil in his own name with his company credit card. Kip had seen the transaction on their tap of his credit card records just a few moments after he’d made it. The companion programmer working with her had laughed out loud. Stupid criminals made life easy.

It had felt good, arriving at the idiot’s office with two agents. They’d done the arresting, and she’d pointed out the evidence they would need to take, including the laptop. That afternoon she’d helped the Fed’s forensic accountant hack into the guy’s system, though “hacking” didn’t really apply when she’d suggested they try his middle name for his password and had been right. Local law enforcement had been delighted to receive the names and phone numbers of several cocaine suppliers. Yes, that had felt good, even the tedious preparation for her own testimony. It had been too long since she’d had a moment quite so fulfilling.

Tamara Sterling’s office door opened abruptly. “Thought I heard voices. Come on in, Ted.” Looking at Kip, she added, “Glad I was able to catch you. There’s one more folder for Woo.” She looked annoyed that Kip had forgotten something.

Turning back to Ted, she said, “How’d you make out in New York? Oh, and the Seahawks lost a squeaker while you were gone.” She waved vaguely at Kip as though she’d already forgotten her existence.

Kip made a speedy exit.

“Don’t tell me about the Seahawks,” Ted was saying as the door closed. “They were supposed to beat the spread...”

In the elevator she looked into the folder she’d been given. A dozen blank sheets of paper. That meant Sterling had waited to find out if Kip was going to be seen leaving. Since Sterling had misled Ted Langhorn about Kip’s reason for being there, it meant that she hadn’t dismissed Ted as a suspect.

She sat at her desk in a daze, overwhelmed. Her cubicle neighbors were tapping out another homage to the Kit Kat bar. She had to get away this weekend. Everyone, even her, had their limits. She’d been working weekends for so long she wasn’t sure what day of the week it was unless she checked her cell phone.

She hunkered down over her work for another hour, carefully double-checking everything because she was so tired. The papers Sterling had given her were tucked into her satchel, out of sight, but to her they were glowing like neon. When the clock told her she had to leave right then or completely miss Jen’s birthday party she packed up her running shoes, coffee travel mug, paperback she’d been trying to finish for two months and a half of a banana that was probably going to be her dinner.

Cafe C’est Bon had been chosen by the birthday girl for the crepes, and by the time Kip pulled into the parking lot she was sure that dessert was already flambéed and served. She could linger for thirty minutes. The only break she was catching was that C’est Bon was most of the way to the Queen Anne Hill address Sterling had given her.

On the walk from the parking lot she spied Jen at a table for seven. The chair to Jen’s left was conspicuously empty. Jen had cut her long, blond hair—it only brushed her shoulders now. Her boyfriend,

Luke, was in his usual black tie on a black shirt, but instead of the customary glower that Kip was used to seeing he was laughing at something Jen had just said.

She threaded her way through the crowded cafe and slid into the empty chair after dropping a kiss onto Jen's forehead. If she had a best friend, Jen was it. "Sorry—work, as usual."

"It's always work with you," Jen muttered. Her schoolteacher you-flunked face was in full evidence.

"It's a living," Kip answered, hoping to change the subject. It was also a calling, something that nobody ever seemed to understand. Certainly not Meena, whose parting words had been, "I moved out two weeks ago and you just noticed."

"Tell us about it," Luke said, tossing a little kindling on the emotional fire. "We've already ordered dessert."

"I'd be honored if Jen would let me have a taste of whatever she ordered," Kip said, trying hard to smile. "I don't deserve more. But if there's coffee I'd kill for some." The last she directed to the hovering waiter, who nodded and sped away.

"A new, important case?" Luke was smiling in that not-a-clue-why-my-girlfriend-tolerates-you way. Kip understood why Jen found him attractive, but the charm of the carefully trimmed beard and moody brown eyes was lost on her. He waited tables to support his career as a bass guitarist in a Goth band, which was fine by Kip except, near as she could tell, the band hadn't gigged in a year. Thirty-something was a little old not to have any kind of plan for the next six decades. Jen deserved better, and she was pretty sure Luke felt the same way about her as Jen's friend.

Before she could answer, Luke added, "Oh, I forgot. You can't say."

"That's right," Kip said brightly. She glanced at Jen and Luke's other friends—two more couples she had met several times and whose

names escaped her. They were politely ignoring the undercurrents. She knew Luke had some justification for his feelings. If the other couples had been clients or suspects, she'd remember every last detail. She might not be a bad person, but she was pretty much a bad friend these days.

However, she had her good moments, and hoped this was one of them. Pulling the small wrapped box out of her satchel, she set it next to Jen's plate. "Happy birthday."

The crease between Jen's eyebrows disappeared. They'd been friends since the fifth grade, ever since they'd compared notes and discovered they were both Libras and Jen was only six days older. Jen was the only person outside immediate family who'd met her grandfather. She came closest to understanding why Kip was the way she was. She tapped the bedraggled wrapping paper and ribbon. "How long have you had this?"

"I saw it in a shop window when I was in Munich about five months ago. They wrapped it for me, or else it would be—"

"Wrapped in the funny pages or aluminum foil." Jen laughed. "I know it's not easy—thanks for making time tonight."

Luke's sigh was loud, but fortunately lost in the shredding of the paper. Jen's puzzlement was obvious as she considered the drawing on the outside of the box. She was probably thinking "A miniature china figurine? Me?"

She popped open the box with a smile, though, and pulled out the contents. When the cardboard and bubble wrap finally parted she let out a stunned gasp. "That's amazing. Wow."

She held it up on the palm of her hand so the others could see.

Kip knew she would likely never care much for Luke, but he earned points by saying to Jen, "It's the spitting image of your mom and the cat in your baby pictures!"

"Mr. Peeps," Jen said. "And my mom wore an apron and a blue

blouse all the time.”

“Can I see it?” One of the other friends held out a hand and Jen passed it along.

If it bothered Luke right then that Kip knew so much about Jen’s past, it didn’t show. She got a look that said she might be tolerated a little longer along with an ungrudging, “What a great find.”

“It was total chance. The first time I went over to Jen’s house her mom was sitting at the window with the cat on her lap—just like that. Her hair was exactly that light shade of blond, too.”

“It was before how sick she was really started to show, but...” Jen swallowed. “She was melancholy sometimes, just wanted to sit and think. It’s beautiful, Kip.”

“Then she made us cookies. Sugar cookies with bits of Hot Tamales. Best cookies I ever had.”

“They were the first cookies you ever had.” Jen took the figurine back and gazed at it one more time. “Your mom was such a food Nazi.”

“True, but remember how much my grandma spoiled me to make up for bulgar and wheat germ salad? Your mom was a great cook too,” Kip said. She patted Jen’s hand and Jen squeezed back. They didn’t have to say aloud that the last cookies Jen’s mom had made them had been the day before she’d collapsed and died at home, her bad heart finally giving out. Kip was glad that Jen’s own heart was healthy and strong. It had been only another month before Kip’s grandfather had also died after a heart attack. There were reasons they were still friends, twenty-odd years later.

Luke didn’t miss the silent exchange and was frowning. Nothing Kip could do about that, so she sipped the wonderful, fresh, fragrant, caffeine-infused coffee and joined the conversation as best she could. Jen did let her have a couple of bites of her vanilla gelato and toasted walnut caramel crepe. For a few scant minutes, life was relaxed and easy.

At eight fifteen she excused herself, not free to say she had a business appointment, only that she had to leave.

“I think you must have a hot date,” Luke said, after a fake cheek kiss.

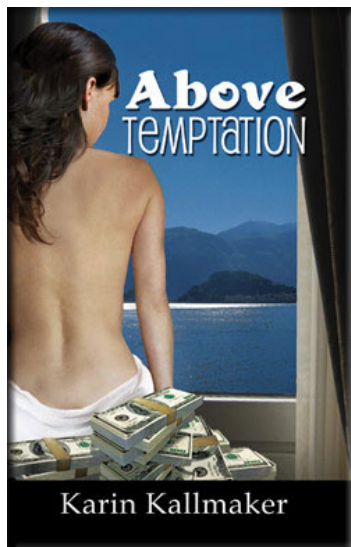
“I wish,” Kip answered, even though she didn’t. She couldn’t handle a girlfriend right now.

“You sound like Kip’s ex,” Jen admonished him.

“He has a point—and so did she.” Kip gave Jen one last hug.

“Go get the bad guys,” Jen whispered in her ear.

Kip grinned. “I promise.”



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