

ANNE

Copyright 2000 by Ed Howdershelt

ROCKET ISBN 1-58505-943-9

Abintra Press <http://abintrapress.tripod.com>

CAUTION: Some tasteful erotica late in the story.

## Introduction:

Anne was my first lover and first love. This story is a small tribute to her. She knows that I changed only her name and the names of other participants. She's already read the drafts and approved them after only a few corrections concerning event sequences. The others haven't seen this story yet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cyndi got home from work at 5:30, as usual, and had her clothes off before she'd crossed the living room, also as usual. Her march step told me that her day hadn't been perfect. I handed her a beer from the cooler after she settled herself onto her favourite bubbly seat in the hot tub.

"Fuck 'em all," she said, and took a long pull on the Ice House.

I waited until she put the beer down to lean over and kiss her.

"Captain Quirk made the meeting, huh?"

"He did." She took another pull on the beer and stretched herself out.

"Should I guess who got the job?"

"Hey, his Mom owns the company. Who else would hire him?"

We sat and soaked for a while without comment. Maybe fifteen minutes passed before Vickie came in from the garage. She set her briefcase on the floor by the couch and waved in our general direction. I waved my beer in response. Vickie disappeared into her bedroom and reappeared a few minutes later as naked as the rest of us, pausing on her way to the hot tub to grab a can of Coke from the kitchen fridge.

"Hi, all. Any news?" she asked me, climbing into the tub. She kissed me and settled in opposite me in our usual arrangement for maximum leg-room.

"Yeah, Ed, any news?" asked Cyndi, "It's been a couple of weeks."

"Steve's cancer tests were negative and Anne will be able to spend about a week with us after all," I said, "She'll be here next Friday."

"It'll be like meeting the President, as far as I'm concerned," said Vickie, "You've told us so much about her, I feel as if I've met her already."

"Same here," said Cyndi, "You haven't seen her since, what? 1967?"

"Yup. A few days before I went into the Army. Spoke to her on the phone a few times over the years, though."

Vickie asked, "So how's progress on the book?"

"Good," I said, "About half finished. Take a look later."

"Think she'll go for it?" asked Cyndi.

"I think so. She'll probably want some editing, but I think so."

"What about the sexy stuff?" asked Vickie.

"No, I don't think she'll mind it unless she's changed a great deal. I think she'll be editing it as a publisher would. Content, use of English, all that. She's been teaching thirty years. It would embarrass her if a book she was involved with wasn't perfect in that regard."

"I don't give a damn about the grammar," said Cyndi, "I want to read the sexy stuff. In fact," she rose from the tub, "It's been a rough day. I want to read some of it now."

Cyndi leaned over and kissed me as she towed herself dry, then set a course for the living room table with her beer. I heard her flop open the cover on my manuscript folder. Vickie stretched gloriously in the extra tubspace and asked for a beer. I opened one and held it out to her, but she chose to slide over next to me and gave me a kiss as she took the beer.

"Cyndi's going to be reading a while," she said, "I don't suppose you have an extra copy for me?"

"Nope. No extra copies, Ma'am."

"Well, then," she said as her free hand trailed up my thigh, "I guess we could kill some time in the bedroom, couldn't we?"

"Time with you is never wasted," I said, kissing her.

Cyndi waved off on joining us. "Later," she said, "I really did have a long day." She sipped her beer, turned the cover page and read.

## Chapter One

The phone rang at 7am. It was Jim, reminding me that we were supposed to help Mrs. Anne Barnell move to her new home outside Mesquite, Texas. Although my enthusiasm for anything before noon on a Saturday was then as it is now, I told Jim to pick me up in an hour, then blearily dragged myself through various preparations and breakfast and waited outside on the front porch.

It wasn't long before Jim Terry's old Ford pickup rattled into the driveway. We had become friends after each of us had been solicited by the coach for basketball and football. Jim had overheard me telling the coach that I considered heavily organized sports to be a boring waste of time and energy. Coach Keller hadn't accepted my decision not to participate in a gracious manner.

"Get your ass in gear, sport. This is your only chance to save your grade. Be suited up and out there in five minutes or you get an 'F' for the week."

"I'll take the 'F'. I told you I don't like football."

"What do you mean you don't like football? Everybody likes football. Now get your butt out there." Coach Keller turned to go as if the conversation was over. He was about half a dozen strides away when he realized he was marching alone.

"What's the matter, sport? Are you scared? Is that it? Too delicate for football?"

I was simply unmotivated before. Now I was getting pissed off.

"If you can't browbeat 'em, try poking them in the ego, right? That won't work with me, coach."

"How would you like to be running laps for being a smart-ass? You want laps every day for the rest of the semester? While everybody else watches you?"

"There's no polite way to refuse, is there? No football. No running laps around the sacred football field, either."

"That's it. Get suited up and spend the rest of PE class running or get your butt over to the tryouts. One or the other, sport."

The activity was drawing a small crowd. I held my ground and waited in glaring silence. Coach Keller finally realized that I wouldn't run or play, so he sent me to the office with orders to wait for him there.

When Jim Terry came in and sat down a few minutes after I did, the biddy behind the counter looked at us as if we smelled bad and might possibly stain the waiting bench.

"Got me, too," said Jim, "Run or play. Screw it. What can they really do to us for not wanting to run or play football?"

"Excommunicate us, maybe. Rant and rave until we give in or go deaf."

People came and went for most of an hour. Most pretended not to notice us, but some gave us disapproving looks. We were on the principal's bench, reserved for wrong-thinkers and troublemakers. I sat reading the paperback that I'd planned to read during PE class. Jim just sat back and waited.

Mrs. Barnell came in and checked her in-box, then made arrangements to have some test papers mimeographed. She leaned over the counter making notes in a folder and talking to the clerk and her skirt rose a bit as she leaned even farther to put something on the clerk's desk.

"Wow. Great legs, huh?" said Jim. I agreed. We spent some time pretending not to be staring at her as she organized her schedules.

Anne Barnell was a young and pretty teacher, the object of much adolescent lust and many female students' resentment or envy. She was nearly six feet tall with flat shoes and seemed to look a little bit like a combination of

Natalie Wood and Ingrid Bergman to me. She had auburn hair that flowed below her shoulders and brown eyes that had appeared in some of my best dreams.

Widowed when a Viet Cong missile hit her Navy husband's plane, she had continued at her teaching post, trying to jam bits of History and pieces of English grammar into her students' heads.

Like most other high school students, I didn't know very much about my teachers' off-duty lives, but I did know that she spent more time at the school after the last bell than the other teachers.

The paperback was suddenly snatched from me by Coach Keller. He broke the binding and tore it in two, then tossed the pieces in my lap.

"You aren't here to have a good time. You're here because you're in trouble with me, and that means you don't read or eyeball the women."

Mrs. Barnell turned around at that comment. I smiled and shrugged at her as I rose to place both pieces of the book on the counter and calmly told the blue-hair behind it to notify the school library that Coach Keller owed them a book. I noted Mrs. Barnell observing my actions.

The coach grabbed our arms and walked us into the principal's office, where we wound up suspended for three days. I wondered aloud how missing classes for three days would benefit our educations and how a dislike of team sports could justify suspension from the true purposes of attending a school and was offered another three days off.

Things were definitely getting out of hand when Mrs. Barnell asked to speak with the principal. Perhaps ten minutes later, we were told that our parents would be notified and that we were still suspended from school for three days. We had no idea what had been said in there.

She spoke with our parents. The school's psychologist was persuaded we should be kept from PE classes for the duration of the semester, probably just to keep us away from other students. We were also assigned to after-school detention, one of Mrs. Barnell's classes.

Detention meant staying after school an hour a day for two weeks. Mrs. Barnell expected us to study, after hours or not. If we had nothing to study, she had us help her grade papers and discuss the reasons why some pass and some fail in both school and life.

She was a serious teacher who taught as a friend more than as an authority figure. The two weeks became six weeks for me. I enjoyed helping her and being around her, so I kept coming to detention. She asked me why once, thinking there might be something wrong at home.

"Nothing's wrong," I told her. "TV is a waste of time and I've read everything in the house." She let the matter drop and didn't ask again.

In the last week of the semester, Mrs. Barnell told us about having bought a small farm in Mesquite and her plans to move during the first week of June. I immediately offered to help her and Jim volunteered the use of his truck. With something to look forward to, the last days of school seemed to drag by.

Jim's old Ford pickup rolled into the drive at about 8:30. We picked up his girlfriend, Judy, on the way. She was barely awake and making no real effort to wake further, but she was dressed for work, in jeans and an old shirt, her blonde hair tied back in a pony tail. We found the apartment in a maze of two-story buildings and rang the doorbell.

Several moments passed; I touched the button again. The door opened slightly. Mrs. Barnell was wearing a large man's shirt and a pair of fuzzy slippers. She looked at us rather blankly for a moment before the door opened and we were ushered inside. Books, boxes, dishes, and other items were all over the place.

"Thank you for coming," she said, "I'm sorry I'm not ready yet, but it was a long night. Get comfortable. I'll be right back."

She left us to our own devices in the dining room, bare legs flashing as she hurried down the hall to the bedroom, dodging stacks of boxes already filled and hopping over a small pile of stuff yet to be packed. We spent a minute marveling at how un-teacherlike she looked in the morning and found places to sit until Mrs. Barnell returned.

"Great, great legs," said Jim. Judy slapped his arm soundly.

"Yup," I said, heading to the kitchen. I found the makings and soon had a pot of coffee brewing. Judy claimed the couch and dozed. Jim was getting to know a big Siamese cat that had noisily appeared. A search of cabinets produced cups and spoons that hadn't been packed.

"Coffee's on in about five minutes, Mrs. B.," I yelled.

"Oh, great! Thank you!" she called back. The cat jumped to the countertop to supervise my efforts. I ruffled his chin fuzz and said hello to him.

"Yaaow," he said, moving against my hand. Mrs. Barnell had come into the kitchen; she accepted the cup from me and took a sip, watching Kelly.

"He's not usually that friendly with men. Mmmm..! Who taught you to make coffee?" She seemed a bit surprised at the contents of her cup.

"Taught myself, I guess," I said, "Why?"

"You aren't concerned that it might be too strong for someone else?"

"Nope. They can water it down themselves if they want pale coffee."

"Remind me to try you as a bartender when you're old enough," she said, "This is how I like it, too. Frank used to just stain the water a little. He hated my coffee and I hated his."

"Frank? Oh, your...uhm..."

"Don't worry about it. Husband is the word. I'm not going to get a case of the vapors at the mention of him."

We moved into the living room. Mrs. B. still wore the big shirt and had added denim cutoffs and sneakers. She sat crosslegged on the floor near a box of books and found a flat spot for the coffee cup. The Siamese had sprawled out where he could see everybody at once.

"I see you've all met Kelly," she said, indicating the cat. "Are you sure you guys don't mind being drafted this way?" She stretched and yawned as she spoke. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

"No problem," said Jim, "We do this or we do something else today." Judy grunted in what may have been agreement.

"And you, Ed?" she asked, taking a seat on the couch. "You couldn't think of anything better to do on a Saturday?"

A geology book in one of the piles had caught my attention. Leafing through it, I almost missed her question. I answered distractedly, "Not a thing."

I opened another book and looked through it. It was a college text. There were two more; I brought them to my lap and spent several moments leafing through them all. I wrote their titles on a piece of scrap paper and returned them to the stack, feeling as if I were being watched, and I was right. My interest in her books hadn't gone unnoticed.

When I looked up Mrs. B was looking back at me. Our eyes met and her gaze held mine in such a manner that I very much didn't want to lose that contact, but I suddenly felt uncomfortably warm in an air-conditioned apartment.

She closed her eyes while she sipped coffee; when she opened them a few seconds later, it was as if she had softly placed a spell on me. I became lost in her eyes as the moment continued. The room around us seemed to fade away and I have no idea how long I wandered in her gaze before a sharp sound broke the spell.

Judy and Jim were staring at us; Jim picked up the spoon he'd dropped on the table. Mrs. Barnell rose quickly and went to the kitchen.

Jim and Judy shot me questioning glances, but said nothing. I gave them my best 'damned if I know' look and finished my coffee. The moving soon began in earnest. We packed boxes while talking about school, the Vietnam war, protest marches, and the world in general. Talk of the war led Jim to ask about Anne's husband.

Mrs. Barnell told us a little about Frank's Navy job as a jet pilot stationed on an aircraft carrier. She spoke of his flying and the Navy as if they were another woman he'd been seeing, and I wondered if she ever realized how her feelings came through with her words. Then she told us he had been shot down over Vietnam.

Packing proceeded quickly. Her car and Jim's truck were almost full before noon and lunch seemed like a good idea. Judy and I had carried a box down between us. After heaving it onto the truck, she put her hand on my arm as I started to tie things down.

"What HAPPENED up there?" she asked. I looked at her a moment before answering.

"Can't say exactly," I said, tossing ropes over the load on the truck. Judy looked at me a moment more before heading for the stairs. I finished tying the load and followed her.

For a while there had been a rush like being on a carnival ride, just from looking into Mrs. Barnell's eyes. Something that my sister once told me came to mind.

She'd read an article about eye contact somewhere. Pupil dilation as an indicator and tool for advertising success? The model would keep her eyes closed until the shot was ready. When she opened her eyes, the camera caught the eyes with pupils wide. It was a technique that made a picture seem to pull at you. Applied biological response, I think they called it. Whatever it was, I was ready believe it worked.

And maybe it had been just a ridiculous rationalization of a crush, I quickly realized. Could be I was just thinking myself into a kind of corner. After all, she was soon going to be gone, and I was taking every opportunity to study her face, legs, and hair as if to memorize her before she left. Yeah, I'd call that a crush. I finished tying the load and went back upstairs.

Laughter erupted from the apartment as I approached. I stopped outside to prop a boot on the rail and haul up my socks as I listened a moment before entering. Jim was enthusiastically telling about the time we'd caught snakes instead of fish at Mountain Creek Lake.

"...and we hit a stump. The boat was sinking. Snakes were coming out of that old stump in all directions. Ed grabbed a big one that came up by his leg and whacked it's head on the motor, then used it to beat the water all around us to scare off the other snakes while I used my hat to bail water. There musta been half a dozen snakes swimming in the boat. Ed grabbed them behind the head and tossed them out when they got near us. Scared the hell out of us."

"He grabbed them? My God...! What happened then?" asked Mrs. B.

"Well, he couldn't let go of that one big-assed snake. It wasn't dead, and it was REAL pissed off, whipping itself around like crazy. Ed couldn't throw it away, because he had a tail-grip on it and he'd put his foot on the other end, and he had to help me bail to keep the motor up out of the water. He just had to keep a grip on that snake all the way back to shore, where some guy gave him ten bucks for it."

"Why would anyone buy a snake?" asked Mrs. B.

"It was the guy from the baithouse. I saw that snake on his wall later. He probably told people some story about it." Jim paused a moment and looked around his audience. "Anyway, next thing I hear is Ed asking the guy if he needed any more snakes."

Another round of laughter. I grinned as I found a three-foot piece of leftover tie-down rope and tossed it at Jim as I entered the apartment. It landed in his lap. He yelled and stood up so fast the chair fell over behind him. Kelly pounced on the rope as it hit the floor. Judy and Mrs. B. were laughing themselves sick at both of them.

"I'll get you for that," he said, grinning and hitching up his pants.

Kelly triumphantly dragged the rope across the room to Mrs. Barnell. She made it move for him and then tossed it across the room. Kelly was on it in a flash, wrestling it into relative submission.

"About lunch..." said Mrs. B.

"Sounds good to me," said Jim.

I said, "Whatever from wherever."

Mrs. B. said, "I'll buy if someone goes for it."

"And I'll fly if you buy," said Jim, rattling his keys.

"Who wants what?" asked Judy, pencil in hand.

When the orders were all in, Mrs. Barnell produced money. Judy took it and she and Jim headed for the door.

"Wait!" called Mrs. Barnell. She made a distasteful face and said, "I'm not your teacher anymore. My name is Anne, and I'm ONLY twenty-six years old. 'Mrs. B.', 'Mrs. Barnell', or 'Ma'am' makes me feel old."

Jim waved acknowledgment and Judy said, "Got it!" as they left.

There were empty boxes near the piles of books. We had two of them filled and taped shut before Anne broke the silence.

"Ed...", she said as I shoved the boxes to the door and stood up. She sounded tentative.

"Present," I said, as if answering roll call.

Anne sat with her shoes off and feet tucked under her on the couch. She had a wry expression on her face.

"I'm... Sorry, I suppose..." her gaze shifted to her cup.

"Define, please," I said. It was a parody of her own classroom technique. When a student used a word in a questionable fashion, she would repeat the word as if it tasted strange and say 'Define, please'.

That tickled her and she managed to inhale some of her coffee, choking and laughing at the same time. I waited for her to settle.

"Well...um...You remember...um...How we looked at each other this morning?" She put her cup down as she hunted for words.

I waved a hand to interrupt her. "I remember," I said, taking a seat across from her with my own coffee. "May I tell you what I think happened, at least to me? If I'm right, fine. If I'm not, it's better that you correct me right now."

Anne nodded and sat very still while I took my own turn at finding the right words.

"I think something about each of us interests the other. When you looked at me, I felt it, and your eyes are magical to me. I was so lost in there that nothing else mattered," I leaned over and touched her hand, "It was very nice in there."

Her mouth fell open a bit and her eyes widened in surprise as I continued.

"I've thought about it some and decided it couldn't hurt a thing to let you know how I feel about you. You're leaving, after all. Hell, your detention class is half the reason I stayed in school. You've been in many of my dreams for a long time, Anne. It beats the hell out of dreaming about the girls my own age... Some of them are cute, but they're trite and mindless for the most part. Pretty, maybe, but boring as hell."

I paused a moment. "I have a feeling that YOU are what I'll always be looking for in women. Beautiful, intelligent, and caring."

I let go of her hand reluctantly, but I felt it was time to do so. It was my turn to stare into my coffee cup. For some moments Anne sat without speaking, then swung her feet off the couch, got up, and quickly went into the kitchen.

Her trembling was audible when she set her cup and saucer on the counter and I hoped that my little speech hadn't scared her. I went back to work, unflattening and taping boxes we would need for later. Kelly came to supervise. I made him a paper ball and tossed it into one of the boxes.

He dived in after it, peering back at me over the edge, so I picked up the rope and dragged it along the flap. The pile exploded as Kelly launched himself after the rope. Boxes tumbled everywhere. Kelly thought he'd done something terrible and zipped under the couch.

"Hey, Kelly, it's okay," I said, reaching down to waggle the rope near the couch.

Kelly looked out from under the couch as if fearing a trap. A hand on my shoulder nearly startled me under the couch with Kelly. Anne leaned down to ruffle Kelly's cheek, telling him in a soft voice that things were okay.

Her face was very close to mine. I saw the lovely lines of her face and neck from a distance of about six inches. Her fragrance and voice surrounded

me as the moment seemed to stretch on. Skin, hair, soft voice, lashes, lips.

Her shirt gaped open a little bit at this angle and she wore nothing under it. I tore my eyes away, afraid she'd see me staring into her blouse. I looked again at her face.

"Um..." I said, unable to say much else and unable to look away. She turned to face me at that very close range. I tried to clear my throat. She looked up at me. Her eyes met mine as they had before, and I fell into them again.

Time stopped, or maybe just my own brain activity. Kelly came out to see what was going on, making little questioning sounds and rubbing against us. We drew apart, but I could still feel her closeness.

We stared into each others' eyes for a long moment. Anne's face seemed to soften and her lips seemed to be a bit swollen. I suddenly ached to touch her. My hand went to her cheek and traced the line of her face.

The doorbell chimed. I helped Anne to her feet; she went to the door while I went to the kitchen, where I busied myself making another pot of coffee as an excuse not to have to turn around. Womens' voices came from the front room; a few minutes of conversation and then goodbyes and the door closed.

Someone who would be missed, I guessed. Anne came in with a small box of chocolates and put them on the counter. She opened the box and offered it to me, then took one herself. The moments ticked by as she regarded me thoughtfully. I munched my chocolate and leaned on the counter in an attempt to appear unruffled.

"About what you said earlier," said Anne, "You must have put every bit of yourself on the line to tell me that. I was absolutely amazed to hear it and amazed that you could say it. It must have taken a great deal of courage, Ed."

Courage..? I kept my mouth shut. I didn't even nod. It hadn't seemed all that courageous to me. I had just told her what was on my mind as concisely as possible, but I wasn't about to correct her impression of my courageousness. You could say I was afraid to.

"I'm considering something," she said. "That farm is not in the best of condition. I'll need help fixing things just to be able to get settled properly. Do you think you can handle some basic carpentry and cleaning or painting everything in sight out there? Not as a volunteer, either. Money for work."

I mentally fumbled to catch up with her change of subjects. Work on her farm?

"Sure, but how would I get out there? It's about forty miles to Mesquite, and I don't have a car to match my driver's license yet."

"If it's okay with your parents, you can stay out there. There are four bedrooms," she said, taking another chocolate from the box.

I didn't have to consider the offer. "Let me call home about it. Pray they say yes."

She laughed and reached for the phone, handing it to me. I called home and suggested that Mesquite was far enough away that it made sense to stay over and help out. My father wanted to talk to Anne. I handed her the phone. They discussed the idea.

I caught myself gripping my cup with both hands as I waited for an outcome. My Dad surprised me. He only confirmed details, traded emergency phone numbers, and asked for the address of her new place with directions. After their thanks and goodbyes, the phone was handed back to me.

I tried to control my excitement as I answered. "I'm back, Dad."

"You behave yourself out there," said my father, "Do as you're told and be careful with her equipment. Have a good time, work hard, and be careful what you say and do. She's a damn nice lady who has had a very rough time over the last couple of years."

I agreed emphatically. After I had hung up, amazed and relieved, Anne handed me a chocolate and studied at me a few moments as if from a distance. "Sometimes parents are like that," she said.

## Chapter Two

We told Jim and Judy during lunch that I would be staying awhile in Mesquite. Judy gave me a searching look and Jim said they'd try to keep busy somehow until I got back. I borrowed Jim's truck to run home and pack a bag. My Dad gave me \$20 pocket money and another quick lecture about behaving myself as I gathered stuff he recommended for the trip; clothes and books, mostly.

Jim and Judy went in his truck and I rode with Anne. Kelly was on the back seat in a carrier cage, trying to look in all directions at once and making a great deal of Siamese noise.

"He'll settle down in a few minutes," said Anne.

"I know. We have two cats. They don't like disruptions in their routines, either. You'd think cats would be a little more adventurous."

Anne negotiated city streets to the DFW Turnpike and headed us east toward Dallas at about fifty. The truck was having no trouble keeping up. Kelly settled down when we stopped having to turn corners.

"How do you like the car?" she asked. I noticed she didn't say 'my' car, but referred to it as 'the' car. It was a white 1965 Mustang with a red interior.

"Nice," I said, looking it over.

"It was Frank's. I hate some things about it. I don't mind shifting gears, but I still have to reach hard for the clutch if sit far enough back to have the steering wheel off my chest, and white cars always look dirty ten minutes after they're washed. But Frank just had to have it. He practically lived in this damned car when he wasn't on duty."

Anne stared straight ahead for a moment or two.

"Sorry," she said, "I didn't mean to unload on you just now."

She busied herself with driving for a time. After a few moments she said, "You always seemed to be somewhere else in class. Or reading something other than the textbooks," she said. "No steady girlfriend?"

"No. I have about four close friends. I don't get along well enough with most guys to have many as friends, Anne. All my friends are female except Jim, and I don't let any of them monopolize me. Michelle wanted to go steady once, but it caused too much trouble. I tutor English and History for pocket money, and she wasn't very trusting of my privately tutoring the other girls. After a month I felt like a possession instead of a friend. I'd rather just be a tutor."

Anne looked at me with a grin. "She's history, and you still teach the subject?"

"Yup. I get along well enough with the exchange students, too. They're usually fairly interesting for a while. They've been somewhere other than Texas, and most of them are here because they're particularly bright. The local girls seem mostly to be in continuous mindless pursuit of each others' boyfriends. Exchangers aren't."

"I see," said Anne, "You hate PE, too, but you don't look as if you're out of shape. Some of those boxes were full of books."

"Walking everywhere helps, I guess. And I go out to the lake a lot."

"What's at the lake?"

"Fish, people," I said, "Snakes."

She laughed, remembering Jim's snake story.

"Outdoors," I continued, "Small animals. Trees. Sky."

"I hadn't thought of Mountain Creek Lake as some sort of Walden pond," said Anne. "While Frank was stationed at the Navy base out there, about all I saw of it was the Base Exchange. The lake was their emergency crash site."

"I know. When they dropped a jet out there last year and there was fuel all along the shorelines."

Some sort of ice had been broken, and we chatted the rest of the way to Mesquite. Her new home was at the end of a dirt lane that led off the main road. The house was a rough construction of stone and wood that had been



topped with a shake roof.

A nearby barn looked to be in serious need of paint and repair, and an old Aermotor windmill that once pumped water to troughs for cattle stood unmoving in the breeze.

The circular gravel driveway was full of potholes. She steered around the deeper holes to the front porch. Jim backed the truck into position beside us and dropped the tailgate.

"At least we can get to what needs fixed," I said, pushing some wires that dangled from where the porch light had been back into the fixture.

I stamped on the porch boards and listened for looseness. Some of them rattled. Anne carried Kelly into the living room. I followed with her big ice chest. Jim and Judy carried in some chairs.

We spent some time poking around and discussing where to put things. The electricity wasn't on yet, but the phone worked and water came from the faucets. The house had been cleaned when the previous owners left, but a light layer of dust coated everything. We opened windows in all the rooms while Anne called the electric company.

"...but I need electricity out here. I have to be out of my apartment by tonight, so I have to be moved in here by tonight. Yes. No. I don't care. You have my money and I would like electricity out here tonight."

This went on for a time before the phone landed heavily in its cradle and Anne stomped out to the car. She came back with a folder and rooted through papers until she found one in particular.

"Damn, damn, damn," she muttered.

"Not today, huh?" asked Jim.

Anne pitched the folder into a box. "On Monday. Before noon, she thinks." She made a face and said, "Wonderful. A fine first night in my new home."

We managed to transfer all of her belongings in three tiring trips across the Dallas area. Somewhere around 9:pm the sun was setting and a breeze blew through the house as the four of us lounged on the floor, couch, or boxes in various states of exhaustion, soaking up soft drinks and talking.

After some mutual- and self-congratulations about finishing the move in one day, there seemed little more to say. Jim and Judy were ready to leave, but Anne kept them a moment longer.

"I keep thinking how much this would have cost me in rentals and paying for the help," said Anne, "and although you all volunteered, I want to give you something."

She produced three envelopes with our names on them and distributed them. "I don't know how to thank you enough," said Anne. "No arguments. You worked hard for me today."

We opened our envelopes. Judy saw her two crisp new twenty-dollar bills and started crying. A single twenty was a day's pay for many people in 1966.

Jim said thanks a couple of times as he tried to calm Judy. Anne put an arm around each and walked them to the truck, thanking them again. Judy hugged Anne goodbye, still crying.

We watched from the porch as they left, waving back to them, then went inside to fish in the boxes for candles before it became too dark to see. We used jar lids and saucers as candleholders and placed them strategically around the kitchen and living room. I heard a rather exasperated sigh from Anne.

"To hell with this," she said, "We've had a hard day. Let's go find a steak dinner and rooms with air conditioning and hot water."

Anne used the phone while I put our gear in the car and locked up. Kelly was already in his carry-cage; he wasn't about to be left behind in a dark farmhouse in the middle of nowhere if he could help it. His food and water dishes and cat food went in a paper bag and the bag went in next to his still-unused scratch box with some new litter. Anne came out as I installed Kelly and his stuff in the car.

"I found a restaurant. Do we have everything we need, there?" she asked.

"Yup. We have Stuff, Other Stuff, Cat Stuff, and Specifically-Needed Stuff

to go with the Absolutely Necessary Stuff."

Anne grinned at that. "Okay, then. Six miles to the turnpike service road, right at the hilltop, cross the turnpike and go one mile north to the restaurant."

I watched her smoothly shift gears as we accelerated. If she was having trouble reaching the pedals, it wasn't obvious to me. Her long legs switched back and forth effortlessly on the pedals, as far as I could tell.

Anne drove confidently, with one hand near the top of the steering wheel and one atop the shift bar. Her hair was rather dramatically aloft in the wind from the open windows and her grin was back. She turned on the radio and made a face as the sounds of someone's nasal whining about failed love filled the car.

"Fix that noise, please," said Anne, "I don't like reaching around the dash when the car's moving, and the radio is as far away as everything else in this car."

"What do you like?" I asked, turning the dial.

"I'll let you know if I don't like it."

"Good enough," I said, walking the needle slowly across the numbers. I found the opening bars of the Beach Boys' "Little Deuce Coupe", and the station jingle blared slightly louder just before the song really got going, "K... L-I-F... Eleven-ninety!"

Anne became more animated, tapping the shifter in time to the music and bouncing slightly in her seat, so I left it there and slouched back in my seat to rest a bit. I drummed on the dash and watched the road go by for a while, then studied her features in profile until she noticed me looking and gave me a questioning glance. I reached over and plucked an imaginary piece of lint from her shoulder and made a show of letting it go outside my window.

"What was it?" she asked.

"Don't know," I said, grinning at her, "But it wasn't moving."

"Well, that's nice," she said, grinning back at me.

We found the restaurant with no problem. A big red sign high above the turnpike guided us like a beacon into a rather empty parking lot in front of the building. The place looked as if it could seat a hundred people, but there were only two other cars in the lot as we pulled into a slot near the doors.

Anne checked her watch. "It's already nine," she said worriedly, "But the woman said they'd be open."

They were open. The restaurant had only two other customers at that hour; a pair of truckers finishing meals and inhaling coffee before climbing back into their rigs. We found a booth near a window and scanned menus for a few minutes until a short blonde waitress ambled over to our table. She looked and sounded as tired as we were.

"What can I get y'all?" she asked, fishing in an apron pocket for an order pad. We ordered steak dinners and iced tea and sat back on the overstuffed vinyl seats to wait. The waitress left with our order. She looked back at us rather quizzically on her way to the kitchen. I smiled and nodded back at her.

"I didn't think she was that cute," said Anne, noticing my actions. She was grinning at me when I turned to face her.

"I didn't either," I said, grinning back at Anne, "But it was an expected response. Who am I?"

She smiled. "An expected response, huh? You're you, I think. You may want to verify that, though."

"Ha, ha," I said, "I mean, am I your brother, a cousin, or what? That's what our waitress was trying to figure out just now."

I stirred tea and stared into the glass as I waited for Anne's response. She poured some sugar into her tea and stirred. There were a few moments of silence at the table. When she spoke, it was with considerable irritation.

"That sort of routine nosiness is one of the reasons I bought that farm. I was tired of being under a microscope all the time."

Anne set her spoon on her napkin and took a sip of tea. A little more time passed before she wearily rubbed her face with her hands and leaned back. Anne

picked up her spoon again and tapped on the napkin-covered surface, then put it down and picked up the tea glass. Her finger drew little patterns in the condensation on the sides.

"Teachers are supposed to be perfect," she said. "No vices beyond coffee or cigarettes. Married, preferably with children of their own. Quiet people who have no obvious difficulties in life which could ruin the fine example they're supposed to be setting for their students."

She looked up at me. Her face was grim as she gripped the glass with both hands. "But we aren't."

Anne leaned forward and set the glass down firmly and glared intently at me.

"Some of us are beset with special little problems. Like widowhood. Like a small matter of no longer being able to have children. And having everyone know about it because being carried to an ambulance from the middle of a class generates insurance questions. Like being almost six feet tall and female."

I was surprised to see that she was trembling a little with anger.

"Some people see me as crippled, physically as well as emotionally, for these reasons. Oh, yes, some sympathize with me publicly and some pity me privately, but most don't trust their husbands around me, so they'd love to see me gone."

Anne shrugged as she gave a little sigh.

"They're women who can't envision life without being a Mrs. Somebody and having children to prove it and who think I'm too attractive to be trusted. They're men who make bets about who will be the first to get in the widow's pants and men who have to look up to see your face and hate you because it's difficult to be condescending to an Amazon."

She finished her small diatribe by thumping her spoon on the table.

I asked softly, "You want to know what I think?"

"Why would it matter what you think?" she snapped, "You can't do anything about anything. You can't even vote to get the idiots off the school board."

Anne's eyes widened in shock as she heard her own words to me and her hand flew to her mouth.

"Oh, God," she said, "I'm sorry, Ed. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to say that..."

I repeated the question. "Do you want to know what I think?"

"Yes, please," she said, "I'm sorry..." She sounded both apologetic and patronizing as she averted her eyes.

"Then just listen for a minute," I said, "And stop apologizing. I'm not injured, just a little bruised. I'll probably live."

I took a sip of my tea to get my bearings. I was a little irritated, but as I said, not incapacitated.

"Anne, I think you probably have always done your best as a teacher. My Dad has always said that your best is all anyone can expect of you. I know you as a teacher who kept kids from failing at times, not by passing them to get rid of them, but by putting out lights along the paths they couldn't seem to find for themselves. That's what my aunt called it. 'Pathlighting'. She taught school back in Pennsylvania."

"Thank you," she said, "I always..." I stopped her with a raised hand.

"I also saw someone who seemed to be wearing a backpack full of rocks all the time. Sometimes I thought you were going to start crying for no apparent reason. When my aunt lost her husband, she looked like that, too. She'd had close to forty years with him, I think. It absolutely wrecked her; for almost a full year, we were afraid she might try to join him. Nobody knew how to reach her to let her know she was loved and needed, and that's the way things were when Mom and I went up there for Thanksgiving last year."

I took another sip of tea. Anne was waiting politely to hear the rest of my speech. She probably intended to take me straight back home after dinner.

"She didn't know me. Hadn't seen me since I was in diapers. When everyone got together at someone's house to shoot the breeze about the family, my cousin James was assigned to me for the day. My aunt was on the front porch in

her usual state. Nobody else was there." I paused again as the waitress came by to refill our teas.

"And..?" Anne prompted me to get on with the story.

"And," I said, "James wound up rescuing his cousin Ed from the pond, which was all of about 8 feet deep at worst. We'd taken some boards and nails out to see about reinforcing the ancient little fishing pier for future use. James went to the house for something and the end of the pier collapsed under me."

I paused to stir another packet of sugar into my tea, then continued.

"I was freezing and screaming and not making much progress toward getting out of the pond. My aunt saw the situation and caught James as he came out of the tool shed. She shoved him toward the house with orders to call for help, ran down to the pond, and was ready to splash to my rescue on her own. James barely got there in time to keep her dry. He dived in off the side of the pier and dragged me to shallower water, where I managed to recover enough to be helped up to the house. My aunt then gave us a very long lecture on common sense and safety."

Anne was drumming her fingers impatiently. "You're saying that an emergency brought her out of her funk," said Anne, as if to cap off the story quickly.

"Oh, it did," I said. "It also made a hero out of cousin James at a time when he needed some extra leverage with his father. His Daddy had been a jock in school and had a hard time with the fact that James wasn't one. James had asthma; it kept him out of a lot of things. The incident made the local paper. The pier was replaced. My aunt took a sub-teaching position and got back among the living."

"That's a wonderful little story," said Anne, gazing at the table while fiddling with her spoon. Her tone was slightly patronizing.

"Damned right it was," I said.

Anne looked up, startled.

"Others thought so, too, Anne, and therefore never mentioned to anyone in the family up there that I swim as well as most fish. They understood exactly what I had been up to. It also did something for us just now."

I reached for her hand and continued, "It provided us with the time to back away from a bad moment. All we have to do is relax a bit, eat dinner, and go on with things. I really don't want to go home."

Her expression was one of surprise. Her face reddened slightly.

"So we're telepathic now, are we?" She smiled weakly.

"We're just making a very easy guess," I said. "You were embarrassed about the outburst; the first thing embarrassed people usually do is look for an exit."

"Heh. Now I'm even more embarrassed," she said, blushing slightly.

"No doubt," I said, "That's because you have a conscience. But my opinion of you hasn't changed, Anne. You're no different from before we came in here. Neither am I. Not one damned thing is different for or about either of us."

She sat silently, not looking in my direction. Each of us needed a few minutes to ourselves, so I got up and prowled the place looking for maps, real estate guides, and the like. I brought the loot back to the table when I saw the waitress coming through the swinging doors with plates of entrees. She set them down and went back into the kitchen.

Anne looked more than a little thoughtful as I sat down. After a couple of false starts, she gave a little laugh and tossed her spoon on the table.

"What planet did you say you were from?" she asked me.

I smiled at her and handed her a brightly-illustrated guidebook of Mesquite, Texas. Anne had something on her mind; she was animatedly but aimlessly flipping through the booklet and avoiding my eyes.

I didn't say anything. My tea seemed to need stirred again. One of the pamphlets about Mesquite's local industry looked interesting, but I noted that the cars in the pictures were all from the mid-fifties and looked fairly new, which meant the pictures were fairly old.

"Ed, I have to know something. It's really begun to bug me."

I put the booklet down. "Shoot," I said.

"Well," she faltered, "You don't act or talk like a sixteen year old. You never really have, that I recall. You have always talked as if you keep a dictionary and perhaps even an encyclopedia in your head."

"Are you annoyed by my confident familiarity, my candor, my fine facility with English, or my modesty and sense of humor?"

"Yes to all of the above," she said, "And sometimes by your mildly sarcastic nature and attempts to be witty. Just like now."

"Just AS now," I corrected her, "And I know exactly what you mean. I've annoyed lots of people that way. I mentioned that my aunt was a teacher. Two more of my aunts are teachers, and my grandmother was a principal. In that house, you learned proper English, major historical events, and geography by osmosis if by no other means."

"I see," said Anne, "Weren't there any other children your age in your family? Or were you surrounded by adults?"

"There were other kids in school. None who mattered to me. Our nearest neighbors were Amish, about two miles down the road."

"I see," she said again. "That would explain a lot, wouldn't it? Did you ever even have a childhood?"

"Not in the traditional sense. It didn't suit me at the time," I replied. "What's wrong with that? I didn't like being around children when I was one."

"How about the way you talk to people twice your age?"

"You've only got about ten years on me. Age. Status. Socially-imposed differences that set people apart, impede communication, and prevent getting along easily."

"THAT's exactly what I mean!" she said. "You tossed that back without even a little hesitation or reservation. You act as if we've known each other for years. You act as if there weren't any differences between us at all."

Anne was pointing her spoon at me. She noticed this and put it on the table. I sighed as I realized that our age difference was still a problem for her. I hoped my next words would help her past it.

"There aren't really any differences between people like us, Anne. We don't fit society's easy, accepted patterns that work for everyone else. We're different from the herd, for whatever reasons."

I sipped my tea and continued, "To some we're pariahs because of widowhood, height, or brains; to others because the grades they have to bust ass to get fall on us without much effort and we're bored spitless by team sports."

I paused to give her a wry grin.

"Football," I said, "A game in which twenty-two guys in short, tight pants to try to damage each other for the privilege of putting something that resembles a gigantic suppository in an end zone."

She rewarded me with a chuckle and a grin.

I continued, "We're people who go our own ways in life, Anne, sometimes because we want to and sometimes because we can't go the normal, socially acceptable ways." I aimed my spoon at her. "You're tall, strong, and intelligent. So am I. You have an education. So have I, even if it's osmotically acquired. All I need are your terms."

"Osmosis is definitely an unofficial way to educate people," said Anne. After a moment, she grinningly asked, "Terms? Terms for what?"

"Terms for personal acceptance." I met her gaze and waited.

Anne leaned back and looked up to the ceiling, rolling her eyes. She laughed as softly as she'd spoken before. "Damn, damn, damn..."

Suddenly she sat straight in her chair and said hurriedly, "I'm NOT laughing at you, Ed. I'm truly only laughing at me."

"So let's go back to your original offer for a minute," I said, "Do I stay and help you with the farm? It would be my pleasure to help you repair and create your new home, Anne."

Anne regarded me strangely for a moment or two. Her spoon tapped on the table as she thought. I remembered seeing her do the same thing with a pencil

many times when faced with a difficult student.

"And if things don't work out?" she asked, watching me closely.

"THEN I go home," I said, "But first let's find a good reason."

I could almost hear the wheels of thought turning in her head. Her eyes never left mine as the silence stretched on. I leaned my elbows on the table and propped my chin on my knuckles and gazed back at her, taking the opportunity for what I realized could be the last time to study her features.

She broke the silence with a small smile and the words, "Okay! You're re-hired. Welcome aboard and all that. You're going to work your butt off this summer, boy. I want everything fixed and shining like new. We're going to have to find a way to get two horses down from Frank's family's place in Virginia, so the barn has to be watertight soon. We may have to build a new shed, too. That pile of junk behind the barn has to go away right away. Do you think the windmill's fixable?"

I just grinned at her as she went on that way for a while, animatedly listing all the things needing doing right away, soon, and someday. Her chatter trailed off while she was saying something about the derelict tractor in the barn. She smiled a nervous little smile at me and picked up her tea again, sipping at it and peering at me over the rim.

"I must have sounded pretty silly just then," said Anne.

"Enthusiastic," I corrected her. "And that's great, if you're going to try to get all that done in one summer."

"You're being kind, sir. I thought it was silly of me."

"I disagree. It was entertaining to watch, but hardly silly."

As her blush moved up a notch, I held up my steak knife, flipped it over, and offered it to her handle-first across my left forearm.

"My lady," I said, "I would be most pleased and honored to be of assistance to you in founding your empire. You have but to make your wishes known."

Anne was laughing as she took the knife and tapped me on each shoulder once, then on my head as she said, "I dub thee Sir Edward, and I charge thee with never telling how easily one can achieve a knighthood around here. And don't ever let me catch you attacking my windmill."

"The name's Edward, not Quixote, Ma'am," I said, saluting her.

"Ha!" said Anne, "The only difference so far is that his life was ending, while yours is just beginning."

"Are y'all okay over there?" asked the waitress from across the room.

"Oh, just fine," I said, "I was hired and promoted at the same time, that's all."

That sent Anne into a small fit of laughter. The waitress eyed us dubiously for a moment.

"Yeah, well, that's real nice," she said, "Y'all's steaks'll be right out soon."

She turned back to her register with a only two backward glances at us. Anne thought that was hilarious and tried to contain herself from laughing aloud again. We were winding down when the steaks arrived with more tea. The sight and smell of the steaks put laughter on hold for a while as we dug into the meal. We were more than half finished when I tossed out something else to consider.

"So," I said, not looking up, "Now I'm a knight. I don't think I want to identify myself in that manner to a motel clerk, though, so we're back to 'who am I?' What do we tell the natives?"

"Uhm," said Anne, "That does need some more thought, doesn't it? You can be asleep in the car while I sign in, I suppose."

"Anne, I'm sixteen for one more week, and trouble comes cheaper and easier than anything else in this world. By tomorrow there won't be a soul for miles who hasn't heard about the two loonies here tonight."

I cocked a thumb in the direction of the waitress. Anne froze with a forkful halfway to her mouth, staring at me.

"We could just go back to the farm, Anne. Heat a pot of water for bathing."

Dust things off some, get comfortable, put a few things out for tomorrow. I really don't think a motel is a good idea tonight."

She looked at me with a pained expression, but nodded her agreement. We finished dinner, left a fair tip, and had the waitress bag some of the leftover scraps for Kelly.

"Y'all heading east or west?" asked the waitress.

"Neither," I said, "My sister just bought a farm down the road. We got all her stuff in and came here to eat." Anne raised an eyebrow at me. The waitress asked, "Y'all from up North?"

"Not lately," I said, "Pennsylvania, once upon a time, but Sis has been teaching school on the other side of Dallas for some time now."

"Oh!" said the girl, "Are you the widow woman who bought the old Maclin farm?" She made a face at the mention of the farm, then hurriedly added, "No offense, but I been out that way, and y'all got a helluva lot of work ahead. Two of the creek fences is down, too. Billy fixed 'em last year, but they wash out again every year. If y'all see a few head of cattle, y'know how they got across the fence, now. Y'all know anythin' about cattle?"

Anne shook her head, amazed at the torrent of words from the girl.

"Well, y'just take a stick and slap 'em with it on t'opposite side of where y'all want the cattle to go. There ain't no bull out there, so don't you worry none. If y'all need help with 'em, just call this here number and ask for Billy, Ray, Tom, or me. I'm Susan. We'll come get 'em." She stopped talking while she scribbled on the back of a ticket.

"Wow," I said, "Look what time it is. We better get moving, Sis. Your cat'll have his legs crossed by now."

"Y'all better hope he's got his legs crossed," said Susan, " 'Cause you won't NEVER get the smell out if he did anything in y'all's car."

She handed me the ticket, which I handed to Anne. As I held the door for Anne, Susan bellowed, "Y'all come back now!"

"You bet," I said. "Thanks a bunch, Susan. We'll look out for the cattle."

Susan smiled and waved as we headed for the car. We smiled and waved back. Anne said nothing as we got into the car. Kelly, on the other hand, was letting us know in his loud Siamese fashion how he felt about having been left in the dark in a cat carrier on the back seat for the last hour or so. Only a Siamese can make that much noise, as far as I know.

I reached into the cage to ruffle his chin and talked to him as Anne got us moving. She was really bothered about things; ordinarily she would have spent a moment with Kelly as she had when he'd sounded off during all the moving, petting him and talking to him until he forgot what he was upset about.

Facing stiffly forward, she glared out at the road ahead and shifted gears with what appeared to be excessive force. The radio was still on; she angrily snapped it off. I noticed she had no trouble reaching it when she was angry.

I closed the door to Kelly's carrier and settled into my seat, then made a show of locating and carefully fastening my seat belt and checking to see that it was thoroughly secure. Our speed was a steady sixty miles per hour, and neither of us usually bothered with seat belts. Anne looked at me as if to ask 'What the hell was that for?'.

I gave her my best look of innocence in return, folding my hands in my lap and returning my gaze to the road.

"Why the hell did you tell her so much about us?" asked Anne.

"An orchestrated leak of modified information, to paraphrase Kennedy," I said. "You became my sister, which eliminates most of the speculation about us. I told her little that she didn't already know, but added a bit of new gossip that she will have to pass along."

"First Quixote," Anne muttered, "Now Machiavelli..." She turned her angry gaze back into the night ahead, but her grip on the wheel seemed to relax a little.

Silence reigned until we were a mile or so from the farm. Anne suddenly banged her fist on the steering wheel. "She knew so damned much about me!" she

shouted.

Anne gave me a sharp glance. "I'm beginning to wonder again if this is a good idea."

"Me, too," I responded seriously, "I don't know a lot about cattle."

Anne giggled. The giggles turned to laughter.

"I don't feel quite so tired anymore," said Anne, getting her breath.

"Me, neither," I said. "We may survive the first night after all."

"Damn right," she declared, thumping her fist on the wheel again for emphasis.

Anne's attention was diverted from road for a second as she grinned at me. Some small creature with eyes glowing bright in the glare of our headlights chose just that moment make a dash across the road.

It stopped halfway across, seeming to realize it had made a bad choice. A rabbit stared back at us as it fatalistically waited for death.

Anne stood on the brakes and violently swerved the Mustang to the right as she tried to miss the rabbit. Tortured rubber screamed and loose objects bounced wildly around the Mustang's interior as the right wheels dropped into the deeply-rutted dirt at the edge of the road.

The car lurched completely into the air, engine screaming, and slammed back to the ground well off the road. Anne fought to control the car in the high grass until we hit the flat concrete skirting of a deep drainage ditch, where the tires finally found something solid to grip. We slid screechingly to a stop with the front bumper hanging over the edge.

For several seconds, Anne sat as if frozen, staring straight ahead with a deathgrip on the wheel. The brake pedal was creaking from the pressure of her feet until she unlocked her trembling knees. She let her breath out in a gasping sob and began to tremble violently all over, then swallowed a couple of times and leaned forward to rest her forehead against the steering wheel.

### Chapter Three

"Are you all right?" I asked, unlocking my own knees. Anne nodded. I unbuckled and got out of the car, looking back along our path. Two long streaks of crushed grass marked our trail from the edge of the road in the red glow of the taillights. There was no sign of the rabbit. After some deep breathing, I stumbled back to my seat.

"Let's just sit for a minute or two," I said. Anne nodded again. Kelly's cage had ended up on it's side between the back seat and Anne's. His fearful yowling was beginning to quiet down as I put the cage back upright on the seat. In a small, quavering voice, Anne asked if Kelly was all right.

"He seems okay," I said, "But I think he's going to sue you."

Anne giggled at that, but the giggle sounded strangely high-pitched. A moment later her floodgates opened and she was crying with huge, wracking sobs. When I looked up she quickly turned away.

Her fists pounded repeatedly on the wheel as she cried, coughing and blowing and groaning as tears fell to make dark spots on her lap.

I got out and walked around to her side of the Mustang, wondering what to do. Finally I just opened the door and knelt by her, taking her left hand in mine and waiting. She turned her face from me again, but her hand gripped mine with surprising strength. I kissed her hand and just held it for a while in silence.

It seemed an awfully long time before those racking sobs began to soften. My ankles were beginning to ache, but I didn't want to move until she could, so I stayed there quietly holding her hand and waiting while she regained her composure. Soon, although she was still trembling, the sobs had changed to whimpers and sniffles.

"I need a Kleenex," she laughed weakly, fishing in her purse. I slowly stood upright on shaky legs, leaning on the car above the doorframe. Motion from within the car made me glance inside. Anne was looking up at me; she prodded my stomach gently with a finger.



"Need out, please," she almost whispered the words.

I moved aside for her. Anne swung her legs out and tried to stand. Her knees failed on her first attempt. She fell back into the seat, banging her elbow on the wheel. She held her elbow a moment, then grabbed the door frame and heaved herself out and up onto wobbly legs.

"Next time," she said, "I'll flatten that goddamned rabbit."

Anne took a couple of deep breaths and leaned on the roof of the car as I had, forearms flat, putting her head down. When I touched her shoulder, she turned her head to look at me, saying nothing.

She must have seen my empathy for her; she straightened and moved to me and took my face in her hands for a moment, then put her arms around me and pulled me to her, resting her chin on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Ed. I really am. A lot of things seem to have come together just now, and they all hit me at once."

Her voice was still rough and she was still trembling a little. Holding her had an effect on me that caused me to keep a bit of distance between my belt buckle and Anne. We stood holding onto each other for some time in the starlit darkness. At some point the tone and manner of our holding changed a little; we pulled apart enough to look at each other. I felt this was a fragile moment, so I tried humor.

"It could have been worse," I said, "The rabbit didn't die."

Anne glanced back along the road before she caught the hidden meaning of the words and eyed me sharply. I tried to look innocent and failed. Her right hand, now on the small of my back, smacked me softly.

"That was tacky," she said, but she was smiling slightly.

We didn't let go of each other, but we didn't close the gap, either. Anne seemed to be appraising me. I hoped I was passing her exam. I looked into her eyes and felt their familiar pull again as we stood in the backwash of the headlights.

Anne didn't avoid me when I leaned forward to kiss her, but there was a tenseness about her. I pulled her gently to me and kissed her again. This time she returned my kiss, albeit in a somewhat hesitant manner. A thrill raced through me and left me a little dizzy.

Motion in the corner of my vision caught my attention. Out on the Turnpike a car was stopping. I pointed it out to Anne. A spotlight was aimed our direction briefly, then disappeared as the car accelerated.

"Looks as if he's interested," said Anne. "He's probably going to take the next exit and check us out."

"It isn't far to the farm," I said, "We can be there before he can get here if you don't want to talk to him about this." I waved in the general direction of the car's trail through the grass.

We released each other. Anne slid behind the wheel and started the engine as I trotted around the car and dumped myself into my seat. The Mustang was already moving as I was closing the door. After we were again on the blacktop heading the right direction, Anne flipped a switch on the dash and slammed the Mustang through the gears.

I didn't know what her jet-jockey husband had done to the engine, but it tried to lift the front end off the ground after each shifting. Something under the hood screamed like a baby jet engine and the scenery whipped by in a long blur of trees, signs, and fences.

The few miles to the farm were behind us in what seemed like only seconds. A glance at the speedometer showed more than our speed. The gas gauge was dropping visibly. I pointed at the falling needle.

"Turbochargers eat a lot!" yelled Anne, "Screw the next dumb damn rabbit who gets in our way!"

I glanced at her. Anne was glaring intently into the night ahead. It occurred to me that she'd said 'who', not 'that'. I hoped we wouldn't actually hit any sort of animal because she didn't seem to be thinking of them as 'things'.

Kelly had begun a monotone yowling barely audible over the engine noise

and the Mustang was doing more than eighty as we rounded the hill and spotted the mailbox that marked the farm's driveway. Anne slapped the turbo switch off.

"Hey," I yelled, "Why are we running like this?"

Anne grinned at me. "I don't know! But we're here now!"

Anne braked to about fifty and downshifted, taking her foot off the gas. The starving engine dragged our speed down fast. At about twenty, Anne downshifted again and snapped the Mustang to the left into the driveway.

She never touched the brakes. Shifting down again, she turned off the lights after the worst of the potholes were behind us. The Mustang drifted up to the darkened porch and stopped gently against the split-log curbs and she put it in reverse before turning off the engine.

I unclenched myself in general. "I think the only reason you complain about this car," I said, "Is because it once belonged to Frank."

"You think right," said Anne, "One night after Frank died, I was so angry and depressed... Well, after a couple of drinks I needed some kind of release. This car was Frank's pride and joy, and I decided to get even a little by killing it. I took it out on some old roads and drove the living hell out of it for hours. I'd swear it was laughing at me. All I did was teach myself to use it."

She grinned at me and I grinned back as the symbol-covered car cruised past the driveway at about sixty. When it was out of sight around the hill, we grabbed Kelly and our bags and ran for the door. Anne fussed with her new keys until she found the right one and got the door open. We heaved the bags in and followed them, quickly closing the door.

"My god," said Anne, breathing hard, "I feel like such a criminal!"

She went to a window and peeked out for a few moments, then relaxed and collapsed onto the couch. Kelly vanished into the dark when I let him out of the carrier. I found candles and holders in a small box and lit a few of them.

"Now I'm tired again," said Anne, sprawling across the couch.

I laughed. "Your adrenaline 'turbocharge' is wearing off."

I'd started toward her when I heard something outside. Crunching gravel. I motioned her to silence and went to the window. At first I saw nothing, but the gravel continued to crunch. Then the front of a car with symbols on it crept into my line of vision.

"Cop car in the drive, coming to the house," I said, "No lights."

Anne looked panic-stricken. She stood up quickly. "Oh, damn," she whispered, "Oh, damn, damn, damn."

"We really don't need this," I said, scanning the room quickly. "Grab the bucket. We need water." I rooted in my bag for a flashlight and grabbed a small towel. Anne returned from the kitchen with the bucket.

"We can present him with a minor emergency," I said as I opened the door, "Something to take his mind off other things."

We hurried out to the car. I stationed Anne at the front of the car with the bucket, then hurriedly opened the hood and shined the light inside. The cop switched on his lights and rolled up the drive to park catty-cornered with his headlights shining on our efforts.

"That's great!" I yelled, dripping some water over the radiator cap, "Could you hold it there for a minute?"

The cop got out and strolled over. He had a flashlight, one of those heavy, several-battery types that doubles as a nightstick. He stopped ten feet away and switched it on. The bright beam touched each of our faces briefly before it settled on the steaming radiator.

"Y'all got trouble?" he asked, peering at us.

"Not sure yet," I said, reaching for the radiator cap with the towel, but the cop spoke quickly to stop me.

"You'll have some in a minute, there. I don't think y'all want to open that just yet," he said, "Burns aren't pretty."

I withdrew when he spoke as if that had just occurred to me as well.

"Yeah, you're right. But can we leave it this hot?"

"You don't want to put in cold water unless it's running anyway. Might crack the block. Prob'ly best to leave it till morning."

The cop came closer. Sharp crackling noises came from the cooling engine. A good touch, I thought.

"Is there a good garage around here?" asked Anne, setting the bucket down.

"That gas station by where you ate dinner," said the cop, "is about all there is at this end of town."

He shined his flashlight on the grass that hung from the front and underside of the Mustang.

"I seen your car at the restaurant earlier," said the cop, "And I saw y'all having a little trouble along the service road. But y'all were gone when I got there, so I came on by here to see how y'all were getting along."

He peered under the hood for a moment, then looked directly at me and continued, "Playing with the turbo out there? You might want to save that toy for the interstate. Glad it wasn't serious."

He ambled behind the Mustang and came back along the driver's side, examining the car as if it were in a showroom. "Nice," he said, snapping his flashlight off. "I guess I'll be on my way." He strolled back to his car and waved as he pulled away.

"Thanks for stopping by," I said.

When he was gone, Anne dropped to the steps and sat there breathing deeply. "He probably saw where we tore up the grass," she said, holding her head in her hands. "What's next?"

I wet my hands so I could dampen my face and used the tail of my shirt to dry myself. "I'd say there's nothing at all next tonight."

Anne looked up questioningly at my remark. "Define, please," she said in a tired voice.

"He probably thinks we were speeding when we had a close call and that we bear watching. Other than that, I'd say he's generally satisfied with what he found here."

I slung the contents of the bucket across the yard, closed the Mustang's hood, and told her my thoughts.

"We've been identified and classified. You and I and your unusual Mustang are going to be known to all hereabouts by tomorrow. He didn't ask us about the lack of house lights or check our ID's because he knew enough that he didn't feel it necessary. He probably CB'd to the restaurant when he saw us standing along the road, and Susan gave him a chatty report. Enough details matched to make him feel we just had a rough drive home. He's probably going to tell Susan all about our near-accident over a cup of coffee in the next fifteen minutes."

Sitting down on the porch step near her I continued, "After tonight, people will ask after your health and that of your Mustang, and of your brother. Maybe even Kelly's. They'll be asking how's progress fixing up the farm and offering deals on their leftover building materials. They'll offer advice. They will be dropping by, trying to get you to join churches and other organizations."

Anne just stared at me for a second or two, then looked at her watch. "Mr. Machiavelli, do you know what time it is?"

"Nope. About ten-something, I'd guess."

"Closer to eleven. And I've had enough for today."

She rose and stood over me, stretching and yawning. I retrieved the bucket and held the door for her.

"Do you want me to heat up some water in the fireplace?"

"No," said Anne, "I'm just going to sponge off and climb into bed."

"Water isn't really all that cold in summer anyway. A shower will rinse the dust out of the bathtub, too."

"Fine," she said, "Let me know in the morning how it turned out."

Anne plodded into the bedroom with a box marked, appropriately enough, "BR". I carried in her bags and the pillows. From the box she pulled a pair of sheets. Anne flapped one sheet out over the bed and I spread the other on top

of it. We shoved boxes around to improvise nightstands and put a few of the candles on the overturned metal bucket, well away from the bed.

"Okay, let's get your bed made," said Anne, reaching for more sheets.

"Tomorrow," I said, "I'll just crash on the couch tonight. Are you going to need both pillows?" A pillow sailed through the air to me in response. I tossed it on the couch, pulled up my bag, and asked, "Do you want the bathroom first?"

"No," said Anne, "I have a couple of things to do yet."

Sitting down to remove my shoes told me how tired I was. I had a strong temptation to just lie back and sleep. Instead, I laid out clean clothes, grabbed my toilet kit, and headed for the bathroom with one of the candles. I let the shower run to clear the pipes while I brushed my teeth. The spray washed the dust from the tub and walls.

I had already stepped into the shower stall when there was a knock on the bathroom door. A strip of candlelight appeared as the door was opened slightly.

"Do you have enough light?" Anne asked, "I brought another candle."

"There's enough light to find the soap," I said.

"Good enough, then," she said, "I'm going to brush my teeth if that won't bother you."

"I have two sisters and we have to share one bathroom every morning. I think I'll be okay."

Anne laughed and I heard her turn on the water at the sink. Some time later the water stopped running in the sink and I heard her putting things into the mirrored cabinet above the sink.

"You know," said Anne, "We both could have been killed tonight."

"Yeah, but we weren't. Don't let it bother you, Anne."

"I just mean," she said, "That everything came together a few minutes ago and it no longer mattered that you're sixteen for another week or that you were not long ago a student in my classes."

"Oh," I said, "Well, that should make getting along easier."

Anne laughed softly and said, "It should, indeed. I think a near-death experience can make you realize how little some things matter or how much other things matter."

Suddenly the glass door slid back and she quickly stepped into the shower stall with me. I turned to see her standing nakedly beautiful not two feet away. My reaction was immediate and very noticeable.

"It can make you damned horny, too, and you matter to me," said Anne.

I couldn't think of much to say just then, so I settled for, "God, you're absolutely beautiful, Anne."

"The water, Ed."

I quickly reached for the faucet behind me to turn it off.

"Oh, my..." she said, staring down between us. Her hands reached to surround my object of her fascination.

"Oh, my..." she repeated, "It's been a long while since I had one of these to play with."

Her eyes met mine again a couple of moments later. Her hands never stopped moving. Anne leaned forward and kissed me softly, quickly, then with greater intensity.

I began to say something. She kissed me again to stop me. "Shhh," she said, stroking me more vigorously, "Let me know when you're ready."

It was what she wanted. It was what I wanted. I very politely said, "Yes, Ma'am," and contented myself with resting my hands on her lovely shoulders as she kissed me again, then knelt before me, all the while stroking my cock and running her free hand over the rest of my body.

Anne seemed fascinated with my body as she licked and kissed my legs. Her nails traced up and down my thighs and across my chest and stomach. She took the head of my cock in her mouth and tickled me with her tongue a bit, then tilted her head back and grinned up at me.

It didn't take long. I was 16 and excited as hell and the woman of many of

my dreams had her hands and mouth on me. I felt the beginning tinglings and said "Now!" through clenched teeth. Anne quickly covered me with her mouth again and stroked me even faster.

I came with a rush of sensation I'd never experienced before, spurting heavily several times before the flow slackened. Anne kept me in her mouth as she stroked my cock to milk the last drops out of me, then she rocked back on her heels and smiled up at me, her mouth full.

She took my hand and I helped her to her feet. Standing almost eye-level before me, she swallowed a couple of times, then smacked her lips, still with that big smile.

"Tangy," she said, "Tingly and gooey and ALIVE!" She stroked me again, forcing a few drops out of me, then licked her fingers. "Now it's my turn," said Anne, reaching past me to turn the water on. "We'll be VERY clean before we're through."

I was in something of a state of shock, I guess. She laughed at my expression and said, "Get to work," placing her hands on my shoulders. I assumed she meant to return her favor and began to kneel, but she stopped me. I looked questioningly at her.

"No, not yet, Ed. Wash me. And be very thorough, please. I need a good bath after all the work today."

I was regaining my composure.

Grinning, I said, "By God, I'll do my absolute best, ma'am!"

"Oh, I'm sure you will, sir... Oh, wait!" She slid the door back and stepped out of the shower. "I'll be right back! Don't go away!"

"Not a chance!" I yelled over the noise of the shower. Moments later she was back with a bottle of shampoo. She reentered the shower at the faucet-end of the tub and wet her hair thoroughly.

"About one capful will do," said Anne. I noticed her breath smelled minty. "Mouthwash," she said, "I may want another kiss."

I looked into her eyes and said, "Anytime, anywhere," and kissed her.

Anne gave me a big smile and stood still as I dumped the capful into her hair. I put the bottle on the floor outside and found her standing just as I'd left her. She wanted me to wash her hair. I obliged her most willingly and thoroughly, rubbing her scalp and temples in the process.

"Oh, that does feel good," said Anne, "Don't hurry, please."

"I won't," I said, "If you like something I'm doing, I'm going to do it until you tell me to stop or move on to something else."

"Mmmmm, good. I'm going to tell you a few things while you work, Ed. The first thing is: this is lust, not love. The second: when we make love I want to be in control of things for the time being. Even if I'm not the first woman you've made love with, I want to show you how I like it. Okay?"

"Fine with me," I said, "And you are the first, Anne."

"Good," she said, "I think I like that very much. Very much, indeed."

Anne wrapped herself around me and moved in odd little ways as I washed her hair. Her fingernails trailed down my back and arms, then moved on to follow other contours of my body. I continued to wash her hair as I reveled in the feel of her body against mine. Anne began speaking in a tone barely audible over the shower.

"Frank was back in Vietnam almost a whole year before he went down, and that happened in November. I haven't dated. I had offers, but I just wasn't ready to deal with socializing. Don't get me wrong, please, it wasn't that I couldn't let go of Frank. That was done before he went back to Vietnam. It wasn't that I didn't want some male company, either. I just wasn't interested in the men I was meeting."

She took a moment to rinse out her hair. I felt it best to keep silent and let her talk, so I busied myself with scrubbing her back and shoulders. Anne braced her hands against the wall and made happy noises as I rubbed and scrubbed.

"I didn't know what I was looking for, or even if I was actually looking for anything in particular. I was sometimes lonely, but never enough to get

involved with anyone beyond a lunch. Then you appeared. Young, but older in many ways that made me curious. Detached, distant, but not disturbed."

Anne paused thoughtfully, as if assembling her words. "Unusual enough to get my attention, then interesting enough to hold it. I could feel it when you looked at me, but I didn't find quite what I expected. You weren't just leering. You were studying me."

My hands were finding their own trails to follow, gliding over her lovely skin from her head to her toes, making sure to touch everything between. Now and then she would catch her breath or gently sigh as my hands moved over her body; I did my best to memorize all these places, kissing each of them often to mark them for later special attentions.

"I told you about my moving here to see if I was right about you. You eagerly and instantly volunteered to help. Then you told me how you felt about me while the others were out, and in the restaurant you handled yourself well when I stumbled. Maybe I should say you handled ME well when I stumbled."

Anne turned to face me. I began doing as thorough a job on her front, still saying nothing. She let me wash her in silence for some moments before she continued. "But," she said, "Seducing you was just a little fantasy, I suppose, until our near-accident. I had doubts about your age, mostly. Do you realize I became a criminal the moment I got in the shower with you?"

"Yup," I said, "Sure do." I kissed her. "Don't care, though."

"That's kind of you," she giggled, "Don't rat on me."

"Not a chance," I said, kneeling to wash her lovely legs. I noted her reaction when my hands reached the tops of her thighs. Her slight, hissing intake of breath as I made contact with the bushy region at their juncture gave me a thrill, too. I made rather a production of washing there particularly thoroughly, relishing each touch and the effect I was having on her.

The nature of the moisture between her legs changed to a slickness that lingered on after the soap was washed away. I continued to tickle and rub the area, listening for the small, shocked sounds she made as I pleased her. At some point I became aware that she was watching me and smiled up at her.

"My turn. Please turn off the water, Anne."

I looked up into her face, smiling as she had smiled at me in the same position, and very deliberately began licking my fingers. Her grin became positively expansive. I kissed the insides of her thighs, then took a long, slow lick of her very center, tasting that slickness and finding it to be delicious. She shuddered almost convulsively as my tongue passed over her clitoris.

I loved what I was causing within her as I took another long, slow lick. She shuddered again and began to tremble. I took a moment to lick my way up the insides of her thighs, finding my way to that core of her pleasure at the top of each lick. Anne put her hands on my head as I knelt before her.

"I've done some reading," I said, kissing each of her thighs between sentences, "And I'm sure I can remember something about this."

"Your memory seems excellent so far," she breathed the words to me as she guided my face into her.

I began licking, sucking, and nibbling in earnest then. I so very much wanted to please her that I would have cheerfully stayed there until my knees bled, but that was thankfully unnecessary.

Anne started to tremble until it became almost a spasmodic shaking. Her hips bucked to place her in even firmer contact with my lips, nose, and tongue, and I worked even harder to bring her to her ecstasy. It became my fondest desire to give her the best climax she'd ever had; I think I wanted her pleasure as much as she did.

Anne suddenly stiffened all over, trembling hard, and a long, low moan escaped her. I licked and nuzzled her almost frantically. Her right hand shot up to grab the shower head for support and her moan became louder and higher in pitch as she began to slowly buck against my mouth a few more times, driving herself a little farther along each time my tongue stroked within her.

Her moan became a series of sobbing gasps and my face was flooded with her juices as she came hard. I continued to lick and managed to capture her nubbin in my mouth to suck on it, my arms wrapped around her thighs to hold myself tightly against her.

She screamed softly when I sucked on it, momentarily making me think I'd hurt her, but when I let it go to look up, she grabbed my head and shoved my face back in there hard enough to surprise me, so I stayed at my post, working her little button with my lips and tongue.

Anne came again and again. It was a truly delicious moment for me in all ways. I knew I'd pleased her immensely and the taste of her pleasure was etched in my brain. I wanted nothing more than to have the experience continue forever, but after some moments she relaxed a bit and eased my face away. I felt somewhat lost. I felt driven to please her. I sat back on my heels and looked up at her questioningly. I somehow hadn't realized that she wouldn't continue indefinitely.

"Oh, God!" said Anne, "You look so deprived! Poor Ba-by!" She pulled me to my feet and kissed me, then held me close. "It's getting too sensitive, Ed. You can have more later, lover. Oh, yes, indeed, lots more. Oh, that was SO nice!"

#### Chapter Four

We soon decided we were clean enough. I dried her while she dried me and we stumbled into the bedroom together, leaning on each other all the way to the bed. Anne draped her towel over the back of a chair and let herself fall flat backward on the bed, shaking her head furiously as she laughed.

"I HAVEN'T FELT LIKE THIS FOR AGES!" she bellowed.

I couldn't stop looking at her sprawled, lovely form. A part of me was aiming itself directly at her. Anne giggled and reached to touch and fondle the tented area of my towel.

"WHY haven't you felt like this for ages?" I asked her, "I can't imagine it any other way with you. I don't want to imagine it any other way with you. Why should something like this change?"

Anne reached under the towel, took a firm grip on me, and gently pulled me to her.

"Well, first," she said, smiling, "There has to be someone else in the shower."

"Oh, gee, wait a minute," I said, "I'd better get my notebook for all this."

Anne's free hand smacked my thigh. "Just try to keep up. You can make your notes from memory later."

Anne's expression turned somber as she continued, "Relationships age. To you and me, right now, it's new. It will still be fairly new a week from now, maybe even months from now. Probably not much longer than that. People become too familiar to each other."

She ran her nails from my knees up to my chest, then back down as she spoke.

"Frank and I had just about three months of really great sex at first. One of the reasons we married was the great sex. It went from great to good to not so good over the next couple of years. Petty and not so petty things chipped away at us. The Navy sent him overseas for a whole year. He hated me working and I hated not working. He wouldn't talk about our problems; wouldn't even try, and he'd get so angry when I tried to reach him... and there are more reasons, but they can wait. I guess they can wait forever, now that he's gone."

I sat down next to her on the bed and pulled her gently into my arms. The feel of her against me made my skin tingle. I kissed her shoulder and traced the lines of her face and body with my fingertips.

"Does it bother you when I talk about Frank?" she asked.

I looked into her eyes, then softly kissed her. "You probably won't be

able to avoid Frank for a while," I said. "He'll turn up now and then."

Anne gazed back at me for a short time before speaking. "I still wonder about you," she said, "That's not what one expects to hear from someone your age."

"We covered all that at the restaurant," I said, kissing her again. "You shouldn't mistake simple observations for deep wisdom."

I marveled at her form in the candlelight, tracing the outline of her face with my fingers. Kissing her neck and letting my tongue linger there to taste her, I nuzzled her throat. I leaned into her a little, wanting to be closer than possible.

Anne lay back on the bed to let me reach more of her. I stroked her legs and traced her lines and teased her nipples with my tongue and nuzzled her neck and shoulders some more.

"Anyway," said Anne, "I kept hoping I'd meet someone. Then you came along. Just about the last thing I'd have expected..."

Being propped up on one arm was beginning to hurt, so I leaned back to rearrange myself a little. Anne must have thought I was stopping. Her arm flashed out and pulled me back down to her.

I put a hand to her cheek and kissed her. "My arm hurts, Anne. I just need to get off this particular elbow for a while," I said, lying flat on my back and rubbing the sore spot. "But I know what you meant."

Anne looked at me for a moment, then rolled up into a kneeling position and straddled me, guiding me into her and inching down onto me, her eyes locked with mine. She stopped and held herself still while there was still a little more than an inch of me exposed, closed her eyes, then let herself drop abruptly. Anne's eyes and mouth flew open and a gasping little moan came out of her.

She was fully impaled, her hands splayed on my chest, as she leaned back a little and whispered, "Aaahhhh, yeesss..."

I watched and waited and savored every moment, absolutely fascinated. For long moments, she didn't move a muscle other than to meet my eyes again. My own excitement had me throbbing inside her, and I knew she could feel the beating of my heart within her.

We said nothing and held quite still as we relished our moment of joining. Then her eyes closed and she began to move on me. Anne's eyes opened now and then as she rode me, but her gaze was distant. When she looked down I sensed she wasn't really seeing much.

Anne wore an intent expression as she drove herself; she labored at her satisfaction until her breath became ragged and her movements began to speed up. Her body suddenly seemed to vibrate and she froze, letting out a sharp little "Hhhaaahhh..!" cry that seemed to touch my heart.

Every muscle I could see was strung tight; Anne closed her eyes again and clenched her teeth. She let out a series of soft little screams as she drove herself repeatedly and forcefully down onto my shaft.

Suddenly she made a sound as if she'd just slammed the winning point over the net and froze again, the full length of me inside her. Those final sounds and movements triggered my own orgasm, but I was so engrossed in what was happening for her that mine was little more than a pleasant afterthought.

A few seconds later Anne collapsed against my chest as if someone had cut her strings, her eyes glassy from her completion.

I just held her and stroked her arms and back and kissed her. She returned my kisses distractedly, as if she weren't altogether awake yet, so I continued stroking her hair and kissed her forehead and lay back to relax a bit without disturbing her.

Some time later she quietly asked, "Well, what do you think of your beloved English teacher now?"

"Well, I'd have to say that she's a goddess come to Earth," I said, "This was my first time ever, but I rather liked being involved."

Anne giggled hysterically. "You rather liked being involved?" she quoted me.



"Got a giggle out of you, didn't it? I loved every second of it. I love holding you and knowing I helped you. Don't be embarrassed."

"Things can look different when the heat's gone," she said.

"Heat comes and goes," I said, "Keep the memories of it."

Anne pushed herself up and just stared at me for a moment, then rose off me and went to the bathroom, glancing back at me once by the door. I used the time to straighten the bed and consider what she might do.

When she returned, she seemed surprised to see the bed neatened, but she said nothing as she crawled under the covers. I took a turn in the bathroom and returned to her.

"No funny stuff," she said, pulling the sheet back for me, "It's already almost three in the morning. Now we sleep."

I slid in behind her and planted a kiss on the back of her neck. My hand found hers and I lightly squeezed it. I kissed her again, inhaling the scent of her in the darkness, and squeezed her shoulder.

"Anne," I said, "Nothing is different. Pleasing you was my greatest-ever pleasure, and there is nothing I'd rather be doing."

She turned enough to kiss me and said, "I'm just a little confused right now. We'll talk in the morning, Ed."

"We covered all that at the restaurant," I said, quoting myself, "Let me be anything you need for a while."

"In the morning," said Anne, kissing me again, "Goodnight."

My position was simple. I was a precocious misfit who fell hard for his beautiful teacher; hardly a unique event. That my teacher chose to return my attentions was unique; this I realized even as I first kissed her. Incredulity had flooded me as our lips met and it never really left me all that summer.

There's much more to this story that I hadn't known at that time. Anne had money beyond her salary as a teacher or her insurance settlements. She came from a family capable of buying the town in which she taught. An inheritance in 1964 had provided her over four million dollars in various assets, including a home in Plano, Texas, that she hated.

Anne was something of a black sheep in her family due to having eschewed Pennsylvania high society for a Navy pilot of average lineage. The discord resulting from their elopement had created a rift between Anne and her immediate family, but her father had been a pilot in World War Two and had eventually come to accept Frank to some degree. The two men had spent many long hours talking about changes in aircraft and the Navy since the nineteen-forties.

When Anne's father died of cancer in 1964, he had requested that certain items pertaining to his wartime flying go to Anne. His leather jacket, knife, pistol, boots, medals, pictures, and documents of certification and discharge had been delivered to her by the family lawyer, along with some of the more fiscal inheritances.

This disposition of such symbolic items enraged Anne's mother. Anne discovered it was no good trying to give any of them to her; the meaning of their possession could not be given with them.

Her mother's rage turned to frost, and that frost had apparently not abated one whit by 1966. After several rejected attempts to mend their relationship, Anne told her mother to contact her when she came to her senses. Neither woman visited or spoke to the other except by way of the family attorney.

Moving out to the farm meant that friends Anne had made while teaching or during Frank's Navy duty were all far enough away that casual visiting was out of the question. Even the closest, from Grand Prairie, would have had sense enough to call before driving more than forty miles each way.

By purchasing that decrepit farm, Anne had created a place in which to hide and heal herself while also creating her own place in the world. I had somehow, very luckily, become part of Anne's healing process.

I was ignorant of these things then. I viewed my position simply as a knight-errant to this lovely woman; some kind of strange and exciting

temporary commission that could vanish with the light of a new day, and it was with that trepidation that I awakened Sunday morning.

## Chapter Five

Sounds from another room woke me. A glance around the room reminded me where I was and how I'd come to be there with vivid memories of the night. I quickly rolled out of bed and dressed. My toilet kit was still on the top of the commode; I hurriedly brushed teeth and combed hair before I realized something rather fundamental.

I was either still Anne's knight-errant or I was about to be taken home. There was no reason to hurry as if I were late for school; in fact, there was every reason to collect myself and be as calm about matters as possible. If Anne was still trying to decide whether or not to keep me, a stable presence might swing the vote in my favor. If she had decided to take me back to Grand Prairie, I wanted her to remember me well. Primped and prepped, I left the bedroom.

Anne was in the living room, half-hidden by the end of the couch as she sorted the contents of a box of books into several piles. She wore jeans and a blouse and looked as if she'd been up for some time already.

When she raised her mug to sip her coffee, she saw me and froze for an instant, then waved me over to her with the book in her other hand. As I approached her, Anne raised a hand for me to help her to her feet. She was smiling at me. I smiled back.

"And how are we this morning?" she asked.

"We're fine, I think," I said cautiously.

"You're not sure?" she asked as we stopped by the kitchen table.

"If I'm still a knight, I'm fine," I said.

In the kitchen, Anne released my hand to reach into the cabinet above the coffee pot and retrieve another mug, filled it, and handed it to me. I took it, then the spoon that followed, and stirred in a little sugar.

"You're still my knight," she said, taking a seat at the table and sipping her own coffee.

My relief must have shown for all my efforts at composure. She smiled at me and reached for my hand again.

"I thought about things this morning," said Anne, "And came to the conclusion that much of last night was just a loss of control. On my part," she added hastily, "Only on my part. There was nothing you could have done for me that you didn't do." She grimaced at her own words.

Anne stared at the table for a moment or two while I stood there stirring my coffee to death. I realized that sugar dissolves only so far and stopped stirring to pull out another chair. I looked at Anne as I sat down.

"I'm just very glad to be here, Anne."

She looked up at me and smiled again. "Still," said Anne, "You should know that you were fired and rehired about four times this morning. I was so confused about things. Then it dawned on me that I couldn't have been in better company for a mini-nervous breakdown."

"I'll write my first resume around that reference," I laughed.

"No, dammit, I'm serious," she said, laughing with me. "Nothing seems to shake you. I needed that stability last night."

"Maybe I just don't understand enough of whatever's going on to be scared to death at the right times."

This made her laugh even harder; her fist hit the table and I grabbed my cup to avoid wearing my coffee.

"I love it," said Anne. "I'm going to write that one down. Where the hell do you get those lines? Dammit, shut up for a minute so I can stop laughing and try to tell you something. What you said last night," she said, "About being there for me. After, I mean."

The conversation lagged as we sipped coffee.

"Uhm," she said, "Okay. Anyway, I realized that you WERE there. In every

sense, all evening long. Completely, with no reservations, you were there. You said things to me that no one ever said before."

She paused, then, "This is very difficult for me, Ed. I'm trying to thank you somehow for being with me last night. All night, not just..."

"Not just..." I said, "Is good enough." I had to grope for words, myself; an unfamiliar feeling for me. I decided to settle on the plainest truth and looked up at Anne again as I spoke. "Anything you want. Anything you need. Whatever I can possibly manage. Yours for the asking, Anne."

She stared across the table at me. Her mouth opened a couple of times, but no words came. I reached to touch her hands with mine.

"Just ride with it, Anne. It's how I've always felt about you. I don't need any other reasons to be with you."

Anne began to tremble. Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked at me. One big droplet trailed down her cheek and splashed on the table. She rose and went to the sink and pressed the towel she found there to her face. I quickly rose to place my hands on her shoulders.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I didn't meant to make you cry."

"I seem to be doing a lot of this lately," said Anne, mopping her face. "Don't worry. It isn't your fault. A lot of things have come together or fallen apart or just not worked out, that's all. When you showed up as something more than I was truly prepared for, that was one straw too many. I think the only reason I could let go like that was that someone was there to catch me."

Anne turned around. She put her arms around me and held me tightly, her face pressed wetly against my shoulder as she continued to cry softly. I put my arms around her and held her as tightly. Time passed, but it did so without much notice.

Once in a while Anne would take a deep breath and let it let it out in a long, shuddering sigh. I gave her a little squeeze and just stood quietly with her.

"Weird," she said into my shoulder.

"What's weird?"

She backed off a little and looked at me for a moment, then kissed me lightly. I touched her face.

"You," said Anne. "You are. You have no idea how weird it is to be with you sometimes. You tell me something like that as if it doesn't matter that I may not be able to agree with you."

"It does and it doesn't. Be great if you could, but if you can't, then you can't. I'd feel the same way."

"Don't you even want to know why?" she asked.

"Someday. If it becomes an issue for you and you want to tell me, fine. If it will hurt you, I don't need to know unless you really need to tell me."

She broke our embrace to reach for the towel again. I tasted my coffee and leaned against the sink next to her.

"I'm just afraid you're going to get hurt, Ed. Or hurt yourself, really, by expecting too much of both of us."

"You're afraid you'll get hurt, too, Anne," I said quietly into my cup. "Or that I'll become unmanageable, obsessive, or spiteful."

You'd have thought I pinched her butt. Anne gave me an astonished look and she started to speak. I put a hand up between us.

"Uh, uh," I said, "Don't bother. If you hadn't thought about that, I'd be wondering why."

The look of amazement left her face. She settled back against the counter next to me.

For some moments she said nothing, then, "You may not be typical for your age, Ed, but I wonder if you know yourself as well as you think you do. Do you really think you know how something like this can affect you?"

She picked up her coffee and finished it, then refilled her cup before she spoke again.

"You're wide open, yet apparently invulnerable," said Anne slowly, "While

I'm all walled up inside and still hurt like hell from old wounds. To be with you, I have to drop all those carefully constructed walls. I can't completely ignore your age, either. God, I could go to jail for last night! I really could. And what would your family say? My God, if they found out..." she trailed off.

"So I'm jailbait for six more days. I think my parents would tell me to be careful," I said, "And to return with my shield or on it."

Anne giggled. "Oh, great! Am I some kind of conquest, now?"

"No, no," I said quickly, "I only meant they'd want me to conduct myself well, use some common sense, and do my best."

She eyed me carefully. "You mean that, don't you? Is that how they've sent you off to other experiences?"

"Yup. An example would be the 1964 Dallas Junior Chess Tournaments. I had a lot of confidence. Dad warned me that I might lose." I laughed. "I knew I could lose; hell, I expected to come in about third place in that crowd. I was shooting for third, not first. It confused him to hear that, so I reminded him of what he'd told me about choosing goals."

"And what was that?" asked Anne.

"If, knowing yourself as well as you can, you think you can achieve something," I said, "You should try. If you fail, just figure out why and try again."

"Did you consider me a goal, then?"

Her eyes narrowed. I quickly put my cup down and put my hands on her shoulders as I realized she was misunderstanding me.

"No, Anne. No. Every circumstance to survive or overcome is a goal at the time of its occurrence. Most of yesterday was a series of goals for each of us. We survived and overcame them. My only goal was -- and is -- to stay with you. Please, please, believe that."

She put both hands on my chest. "Okay!" she said, "I believe! Relax! This is the first time I've ever seen you get upset about anything!"

"Staying here with you is important to me," I said simply.

"It's just the whole idea," she said, "When you were starting third grade, I was in my last year of high school."

"Why dwell on the obvious? It's a slight disadvantage today, but what about later? When you're ninety, I'll still be a mere child of eighty."

"You think you'll still love me then?" she laughed.

"Won't know till we get there," I said, "But it gives you time to work on those societal roadblocks and walls, doesn't it?"

Anne, her face serious, said, "I still think you don't know what the hell you're getting into. I think you may wind up getting hurt."

I took her in my arms and hugged her to me. "Who has loved and not been hurt? That may be a quotation," I said, "I'll survive, I guess. Are you in a hurry to finish unpacking? Could it wait?"

"I suppose it could. I wasn't going to push it anyway. We'll pull what we need from the boxes for today," said Anne, "What's on your mind?"

"You are," I said, draining my cup, "But I was thinking we ought to have a look around the place and take time to get to know each other."

"Just a tour?" she asked, "That could be arranged."

"Then lets arrange one," I said, "And take some notes on the way. It's time I learned 'what the hell' I've gotten into."

## Chapter Six

What appeared to be a heavy-duty extension cord had been suspended between the barn and the house about ten feet from the ground, but it was frayed and broken where it met the barn roof. Tracing the wires led us to an old portable generator in a small room of its own near the front of the barn. Close to the back doors sat the old tractor.

"They said the generator would run but that it didn't make any electricity," said Anne. She brushed off the nameplate and read it aloud,

"125-V-A-C."

"It makes house current, then. If those wires outside are touching, it isn't the fault of the generator. Unless shorting out damaged it, it may be able to power some of the house stuff. Let's play with it some."

I got her tools from the house and disconnected the leads that fed the outside wires. The only other set of wires was apparently for the barn, and to be on the safe side, we disconnected those, too.

Anne brought a lamp from the house as I siphoned some gas from the Mustang. She plugged the lamp into one of the sockets on the side of the generator as I put some gas in the tank and primed the carburetor, then flipped the ON switch and got a grip on the starter cord.

The engine was a small Briggs & Stratton like you'd find on a lawnmower; the kind that will last twenty years with any reasonable care. On the fifth pull or so it cleared it's throat with a cloud of smoke and settled into a very rough idle.

Anne cheered and clapped as the lamp cast a cone of light toward the ceiling through the cloud of dust and smoke. The generator was making a phenomenal amount of noise, but I let it run a while to clear itself as I made a quick inspection of the barn wiring.

There didn't seem to be any problems in the barn, so I turned off the engine, reconnected the barn wiring, and restarted the engine. Anne plugged the lamp into a socket on the far wall; it worked fine. She tested some of the other wall sockets and switches before declaring a success. I shut off the engine.

"Looks as if we pull those outside wires down or fix them up there," I said, "And I didn't see a ladder. Did you?"

"Not one I'd trust. If you take off your boots you can stand on the car," said Anne.

She almost ran into the house for the keys. It wasn't long before the Mustang was parked next to the barn and I was standing on the edge of the car's roof.

Rubbing against the barn had worn away the insulation in a few places on the house cable. I used half of a roll of black tape to cover the exposed copper wires. There weren't any other visibly bad spots along the cable, so I reconnected the wires to the generator and started the engine again as Anne ran to the house to turn something on.

A few moments later Anne gave me the 'OK' signal from the kitchen window with a big grin. She ran back to the barn and gave me a bear hug and a kiss and stood bouncing like a cheerleader as I shut down the engine and filled the tank for the night ahead.

The tractor was a certifiable antique, manufactured sometime in the thirties, that had been included in her purchase of the farm. No key, naturally. Just a place where wires had been touched together while pressing the starter button. The battery was one of the huge old six-volt type that aren't in use in farm equipment any more.

"Junk, huh?" she asked, eyeing it from the back.

"Not necessarily," I said. "Let me ask around. Volkswagens use six-volt batteries."

"If you say so," said Anne.

She wandered over to a door in the side wall, where a room-sized portion of the barn interior had been walled apart. A layered-steel padlock secured a hasp about four feet above the ground. Anne checked her keys, but none of them matched the lock.

I looked into the keyhole. It was the kind with a simple cotter-pin spring gripper inside. Maybe two springs, but I doubted it. I looked around the barn for a piece of wire and found a chunk of coathanger hung on a nail.

Wedging it in a hinge plate, I closed the other door on the end of the wire to create an eighth-inch bend. Rubbing it on the concrete wore the sides down enough to fit the keyhole. After some probing and twisting, the lock fell open. Anne was mildly amazed. She arched an eyebrow as I handed her the lock

with a small flourish and bow.

"Would you mind telling me where you learned to pick locks?" she asked.

"Quite honestly learned, Ma'am," I said. "I once lost the key to my bike lock."

I opened the door and felt the wall for a light switch. There was a string hanging down, so I pulled it. An overhead bulb illuminated a room full of odd tools, an engine block on a stand, a grinding wheel, and multitudes of metal parts that could only be for vehicle repair.

After a thorough prowl of the room, I made a proclamation. "We should be able to get the tractor back on its feet."

"Do you mind if I put the tractor on the last part of our list? It really isn't very important," said Anne.

"Put it last, if you want. But if we want to use the barn's back doors, it has to be moved, and I don't think you want to haul things in from the fields with the car."

"Okay," she said, "I'll add it to the middle."

The next part of the tour involved driving around the farm in the Mustang. Old farm equipment dotted the landscape and there was a rusting car body down by the creek that bisected the property.

At the bottom of a gully with gently-sloping sides, a few strands of barbed wire crossed the creek. One pole was lying on its side, probably knocked over by a side-scratching cow.

The car was a late-forties Ford, mired to the bumpers in the mud flat. It had no wheels, no doors, and no glass that wasn't broken, and people had used it for target practice so often that it was liberally speckled with dents and holes.

We added it to the growing list and moved on, following an ancient set of vehicle tracks in a circuit around the property. The tracks crossed the creek in three places; North, South, and in the approximate middle of the property, where the water looked deeper than a couple of feet. Anne stopped the car.

"I don't think I want to try driving through that," said Anne.

We got out to have a look. Minnows and other small creatures were scattered by our approach to the streambank. Something moving in the weeds along the opposite bank caught our attention. The water exploded as a good-sized bass grabbed something near the surface.

"There's been flooding here," I said, pointing at a gap in the weeds, "The water overruns the bank right over there."

"That's just great," said Anne, gazing out at the creek.

"Maybe not so bad. We can dig the curve out of the creek bed down there." I indicated the area. "Water takes the easiest path. Right now, the path isn't easy, so the water backs up a little here. Let's go have a look at the other end, where the cattle come through."

We drove back to the other area, where we spent a few minutes propping the fence pole back up and examining the shallow gully that surrounded the creek. The gully narrowed from about thirty feet wide to less than ten feet where the fence crossed. There were bottles, cans, and other trash littering the area.

"Cleaning this place up," said Anne, "Could take a week by itself."

"No doubt about that," I said, "How would you like having a pond up here?"

Anne looked at me oddly. "Don't we already have a flooding problem?"

"I was thinking of carving a straighter course through the flood area to here," I said, indicating the fence, "And making this spot deeper and wider. Wouldn't take long with a bulldozer."

"You just happen to know how to run a bulldozer, too, Ed?"

"Lots of room to learn," I said. "Up, down, left, right, and stop. We don't need finesse, Anne. We just need a trench in the creek."

"Right," said Anne. "How about we discuss things a bit more first?"

"Fine by me," I said, grinning at her.

Anne gave me a wry smile and looked at her watch. "Lunchtime."

"That's fine, too."

## Chapter Seven

Lunch amounted to cold cuts from a cooler, canned vegetables, and some Dr. Pepper. Kelly turned out to welcome us back and stayed to mooch some lunchmeat as we put sandwiches together. We ate and talked about things we'd have to do to the place until a knock at the door interrupted us.

I opened the door to find the same cop who'd visited the night before. His truck and jeans told me he was off-duty. He looked to be about forty in daylight.

"Well, come on in!" I said, "Hey, Sis! Look who's here! Come on back to the kitchen and have some lunch."

"Well, I just came by to see how y'all were getting along since last night," he said, "I've had lunch already."

"We're fine," said Anne, on her way from the kitchen.

"Yeah, well, I thought I ought to drop by and check," he said, "By the way, my name's Don. Don Vine."

We shook hands all-round and took seats in the living room. After some moments of conversation about nothing in particular, Don came to the point of his visit.

"I make a point of knowing who lives where and what they drive," he said. "I try to get to know people so they can talk to me when there's a problem."

"Is there one? A problem, I mean?" asked Anne.

"Oh, say that someone's cattle wind up in your barn because that's what they've always done if the weather got bad while they were on the wrong side of that fence. Since you're new here, that's something you might not expect."

"We were told about wandering cattle," I said. "No problem. I don't have to mow what they eat, and the waitress at the restaurant last night said someone would come for them."

"Well, that's just it, y'see," said Don. "The reason those cattle come over here is that there ain't much grass over there, so it probably won't stop happening anytime soon. That's why my uncle asked me to visit with you."

"Oh," said Anne. She looked a little confused.

"Yeah," said Don, "I came by to see if we couldn't work out a deal. Y'see, those are my uncle's cattle."

"What kind of deal?" I asked.

"Well, I don't rightly know," said Don, "Uncle Red don't have much money, and he's up in his sixties, so he has to be careful what he does for work."

"Can he fix a tractor?" I asked.

"He can prob'ly fix most anything around a farm."

"There's a dead tractor in the barn," said Anne. "Ed was going to try to fix it. If we supply parts, and your Uncle Red can get it running, I think that would cover a few cattle grazing the property indefinitely."

"Well, I reckon he could try," said Don. "But what if it ain't fixable?"

"Then he tried," said Anne. "And it's always good to be able to call for help with other things. Not to worry."

Don was beaming. He stood up and shook hands with us again and was about to take his leave when I asked him to take a walk with us to the creek. I told him what I thought about bulldozing it and creating a pond. He looked the landscape over and considered the idea.

"Sounds workable," he said, "but why go to all that trouble?"

"What do you mean?" Anne asked, "I want the derelict car and the garbage gone, and we could see where the creek had flooded before."

"Well, I just meant..." Don looked at us for a moment, then said, "Damn. I forget you aren't from around here. Y'see, everybody around here is just about poor. We don't think about hauling stuff like this off 'cause it costs money to rent equipment or pay somebody to do the work. Anything we can't do ourselves just don't get done, and some things don't seem too important after a while."

He stopped talking as if he thought he'd been telling the family secrets.

"You see where the gully narrows on the other side of the fence?" I asked

him, pointing. "I could trench the creek and doze the car into that gap and make a barrier. No more flooding over here, and by next year there'd be good fishing on both sides of the fence."

He looked at the gully as if seeing it for the first time. He thought a while and seemed to make a decision.

"I just happen to know somebody who has a D-4," he said, smiling at us, "And she by God owes me a favor or two."

"If a D-4 is a bulldozer, would she rent it to us for a few days?" asked Anne. "And maybe show Ed how to run it?"

"Hell, yes! Prob'ly do the work, too, instead of letting young Ed, here, try his luck with it. Before Sally's boy went in the Marines, he got in a little bit of trouble over in Dallas. I saved his butt from jail and kept his record clean enough so the Marines would take him. When he came back for Christmas last year, his momma was so proud..."

Don clapped his hands together, grinning at us, "I don't think it'll be a problem!"

"All right!" I said, "One lakefront property, coming up!"

"By God," said Don, "I'm gonna have to get me a boat!"

"Someone else has to clean the fish," said Anne.

Don suddenly seemed eager to get going. We parted at the porch so he could go talk to Sally about how her Marine was doing these days and give her a chance to express her gratitude with her bulldozer. Anne and I went into the house for cold drinks.

"We'll call it Lake Edward," said Anne. "How's that?"

"Sounds ostentatious," I said as we went into the house, "Maybe even pretentious. It's fine with me, though." I grinned at her.

"I never would have thought to talk to Deputy Don about ponds and bulldozers and tractor repair," said Anne.

"You heard him; he knows everybody around here. Who better to ask?"

Anne kissed me. "That's for being bright enough to think our way out of a great deal of work," she said, smiling.

"Well, gee, lady," I said, "Aren't a bulldozer and a lake worth a little more than a kiss and a hug?"

"Hah!" said Anne. "You're my knight, remember? You'd do anything for one of my kisses."

She held me close and grinned at me as she added, "But since it's Sunday, you're getting double time and a bonus." She kissed me again.

"That's better," I said. "I'd work overtime for you anytime, Ma'am. Want a little kickback?" She laughed.

"Would you like to discuss fringe benefits now?" she asked, her lips close to my ear. Her breath sent chills down my spine and caused bumps on my arms.

"I think I'm getting better at innuendo," I said, reaching to tickle her, "We're about to pull the blinds and go to the bedroom?"

"We are," said Anne, leading me to the bedroom, "I can only go to jail for corrupting you once, so we may as well make the most of it."

"Absolutely," I said, grinning. "Definitely. Fine with me."

"Everything is fine with you, Ed," she laughed, taking her clothes off and tossing them on a chair.

I took a long moment to admire her as she lay back on the bed and grinned at me.

As I climbed in and lay alongside her, she said, "I don't want to be overly romantic right now."

"You don't, huh? You don't call this romantic?"

I ran my fingertips over the surfaces of her within my immediate reach and leaned to kiss her breast. Anne laughed again and had to catch her breath as my fingers trailed ticklingly from her belly to her upper thighs. She grabbed my hand and giggled.

"Not at all," said Anne.

"What is it, then?" I asked, my lips touching her cheek near her ear.

Anne shuddered at my tickling touch and held very still as I continued



lightly kissing in a line down her throat to her shoulders. She suddenly rolled upright on an elbow and held my face and kissed me.

"It's called horny, and you know it," said Anne, grinning at me, "So quit screwing around and mount up."

"Yas'm," I said, rolling above her. "Right away, ma'am."

"Knock off that 'ma'am' stuff, too," She giggled.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, sliding myself into position and finding ready dampness. She reached down and gripped me tightly for a moment before guiding me in.

"We'll discuss the respectful titles later," said Anne, moving her hand to the small of my back as I eased into her. "I kind of like 'goddess', you know."

"Seems to fit you, as I see it," I said.

Anne giggled again and closed her eyes. "Ohh, that feels good," she said, pulling me tightly to her as I sank myself slowly into her. "That's something else that seems to fit me well."

"It feels like my whole reason for being," I said, kissing her.

"You're 'being' very well," she said. "Oh! Oh! Hold it right there for a minute! Don't move! Don't move!"

"A special spot?" I asked her, freezing in place.

"Must be something special about it," she said, "Every time you hit it, I get warm shivers all over."

I backed out a bit and hit it again. Anne's hands were fluttering up and down my back as if she couldn't decide where they belonged, but as my last couple of inches of me slid into her, those hands locked onto my shoulders and squeezed hard, her nails digging into me. She sucked in a deep breath and held it for long seconds before releasing it in a slow sighing as she relaxed.

I was looking down there, marveling at the entire phenomenon of having a portion of my body disappear into hers. I started to move, but Anne locked her arms and legs around me.

"Hold still," she whispered, "Just be there. Just fill me, hold me, kiss me."

I was already filling her and holding her, so I kissed her. Softly, but firmly, I kissed her lips, her face, her throat, and then trailed my lips softly over any of her skin I could reach. I tasted her and let her hear me enjoy inhaling the scent of her as I buried my face in her hair. I heard her chuckle softly and raised up to see her face.

Anne was smiling as she leaned upward to kiss me. I smiled back and kissed her in return. She chuckled again.

"You're being very patient, Ed. By now, Frank would have been fidgeting to get moving." She grinned at me.

"I'm fine," I said, "Moving will eventually make me go off, and I'd just as soon stay like this for quite a while. We can move later."

I kissed her again.

"You're saying you're close already?"

"Nope. I don't want to get close, either."

I kissed and licked her shoulder.

"MMhmm...It does feel SO good, being filled. I guess it feels as good to be the filler as the fillee. We could move a little now, I suppose."

"Up to you. I just don't want to go off before you do."

"You think you will? I don't mind, really. There's always later."

"I'd mind," I kissed her face and lips softly several times. "I'd mind. I want very much to please you every time I touch you."

Anne chuckled again. "You please me every time you say something like that, Ed, but it could be a rather unrealistic goal."

I gave her a mock-serious look and asked, "You wouldn't mind if I try anyway, would you? I really feel I should make an effort, particularly since pleasing you before was such a wonderful experience that I'm considering making it my life's work. I need to practice, you know..."

That made her giggle, which made us move a bit.

"Oooohhh," said Anne, "Maybe it IS time to move a little." She did something inside herself that seemed to grip me for a moment and shimmied underneath me. It was suddenly very wet inside her. "Oooohhh... Yes... Yes, Ed, I do believe it's time we moved."

Her legs loosened their grip on me a bit, so I moved. A few minutes later Anne held me very still again as she brought her legs together and crossed her ankles under me.

It changed my angle of penetration upward and I could feel her clitoris rubbing hard against me on each stroke.

Anne took my face in her hands, pulling me down to hers for a long, hard kiss, and said, "NOW we move, Ed! Now we just plain fuck each other hard until we come!"

Her words made me feel like saluting and saying, "Yes, Ma'am!", but I settled instead for immediately doing as she demanded. I pounded into her, making sure I stayed in solid contact with that little button of hers on every stroke. I lost myself in trying to please her. That's really the only way to put what happened.

Anne's gasps and moans escalated. I could think of nothing but taking her over the edge as gloriously as possible. It became my mission, my goal, my passion.

I whispered in her ear, "Yes, please, Anne, come for me," and continued pounding for her.

Maybe my words helped triggered her; maybe it was just her time. She wrapped her arms tightly around me and made some rather animalistic noises as she began to buck to her completion against my body.

Anne suddenly grabbed my head again and kissed me hard, sobbing and groaning into my mouth. I just returned her kiss as best I could and kept pounding away until she threw her head back and let out an "Aaaahhhh!" that seemed to go on for quite a while before she started to relax her grip on me a bit.

I stroked into her a few more times before burying myself as deeply as possible and feathering her lips and face with soft, quick kisses. She smiled and turned her head to the side to give me access to her neck and ear.

"You didn't come?" she asked.

"Guess I forgot," I said, kissing her more, "You kind of distracted me, and I was too busy, anyway. It's all right, Anne. I didn't seem to notice until you mentioned it."

"Those little kisses are nice," she said, turning her head the other way. "Do this side, too?"

I did that side, too. Anne turned her face up again, touched her lips with a finger, and said, "Here, too."

I kissed her lips in more of the fleeting little brushes.

"You, sir," she drowsily mumbled, "Are very good for me, I think..." and with those words, Anne dozed off underneath me, still impaled.

I stroked slowly a few times to see if I was close enough to consider trying to finish, found I wasn't ready, and instead withdrew from her. I found a towel, pulled the covers over Anne, and retired to the kitchen to avoid waking her.

## Chapter Eight

Half an hour of reading and coffee later, Kelly hopped up on the table and sat on my book. I said hello. He answered conversationally, then he put his head down and dozed off as if I were boring him, which I probably was. I propped my chin in my palm and sat studying the cat for a moment or two before Anne stepped in.

"So you talk to cats, too," she noted, tying a light blue terry robe shut as she pulled out a chair for herself.

"Sure," I said. "They like to be kept informed."

"You seem to have informed Kelly to sleep."

"Well, maybe I wasn't all that informative, then," I said.

"After all, I don't know every why and wherefore."

"Why are you sitting out here? Is anything wrong?"

"Wrong?!" I laughed at that. "Hell, no, Anne! I'm with the woman of my dreams! I was just wondering how the hell I ever got so lucky."

"How you came to be here, and maybe how long all this will last?" she asked, "I've been wondering about some of that, too, really."

I said nothing as I looked up at her. Anne sat down in silence and remained so for a moment as she gathered her thoughts. Her voice quavered when she finally spoke.

"I'm going to tell you how I think you came to be here, Ed. I hope you'll want to stay when I'm finished. Frank was my first sexual encounter. I was twenty-three, almost old age for a virgin in this era. He was the only man I'd ever had. I learned that was not what anyone would call a frigid woman. I discovered that everything about sex turned me on, from start to finish."

She sighed and gave me a small, wry grin.

"For a while I thought it was only because I was so in love with Frank, but that didn't make sense after I caught myself getting horny around other men. I held myself back. I didn't cheat on Frank. For a while I was actually afraid I wasn't normal because I wanted it all the time. I lived for the time Frank and I could spend together during those first years of our marriage."

She paused to look at me closely, as if to see how I was receiving her words. I stood, kissed her lightly, and poured her a coffee. Anne needed to talk, so I said nothing.

"We were in base housing, so he came home for lunch. I was usually part of lunch. It was like that with us for the first couple of years. Any time we had time to ourselves, we were usually having sex. I became thoroughly addicted, though even a supposedly good psychiatrist couldn't tell me then or later whether I was addicted to the sex or the attachment and affection it represented."

Anne again glanced at me as if to see how I was absorbing what she was saying, then continued, "The nights that he had to be gone for training, or was assigned to some detail, I actually suffered physically. Cramps, headaches, nausea, sleeplessness. When he returned, I pounced on him, doing whatever it took to get him up and then driving myself silly on him."

She sipped her coffee and then stared into it as she said, "At first he thought I was kidding about needing him so often. He made jokes about being the luckiest man alive, about having a beautiful sex slave to come home to. Later, he didn't joke anymore. He begged off more often, leaving me feeling as if my insides were going to explode. That's the way things were when he got his first orders to Vietnam. I spent months in misery, sometimes wondering if I missed him as much as his dick. When he took leave time in Hawaii, I met him there and we screwed like animals for a week."

Looking up at me questioningly, she asked, "Is my language bothering you? Don't let it. I'm not trying to be crude, just candid. Anyway, he was gone another six months until his time was up. When he came back from carrier duty, he actually avoided touching me for a week or so. I finally found out he'd picked up a case of something over there and was being treated. While I was angry as hell with him about that, I was still stupid and naive. I even made excuses for him. It was curable, and he had been in a war zone, after all. I expected him to fall all over himself trying to make it up to me."

She took a sip of coffee before continuing.

"But he didn't fall all over himself. He didn't want to talk about it, either; nor Vietnam, how things had gone in his absence, or anything else. He drank a lot and spent most of his off-duty time with some other guys who'd been on carrier duty. They were like an exclusive little club. I thought I was losing him and looked for ways to hold on. What I didn't know was that I'd already lost him by that time. I talked to the Chaplain, to other wives, to practically anyone who would listen who I thought could offer advice. I even stopped taking my pills to try to make a baby for him."

Anne's bitter bark of laughter was startling. She paused to compose herself.

"I made a complete fool of myself for months, trying so hard to keep us together. I finally realized it when I found out the bastard had volunteered for a second tour of duty in Vietnam before he'd finished his first tour."

She said nothing as I got up to refill her cup. Kelly stepped into her lap and went back to sleep. Anne had a grip on her cup when I reached for it. She visibly tried to relax herself and continued her story as I poured for us.

"Frank wasn't planning to be home for Christmas. One night after his new orders arrived he threw a party for his friends. He and most of the others got so drunk the SP's had to come break it up. One of his pals was between bases, so Frank put him on the couch before he went to bed. The apartment was a wreck, and I knew I wasn't going to be able to sleep, so I started cleaning up a bit. I was in the kitchen when Frank's friend grabbed me from behind and pulled me to the floor. He was nearly as drunk as Frank had been."

She stopped for a moment, her hands fluttering aimlessly. When she began again, her words came so quickly they almost ran together.

"Nothing stopped him; not words, not fighting him. He just picked me up once and slammed me on the floor to make me hold still and shut up, then he raped me. My head hit the counter on the way down. I just lay there half-conscious while he mounted me. When I came to and realized what was happening to me, I started fighting him again. I tried to scream but he hit me twice so hard I almost passed out again and he didn't have too much trouble keeping me there. Frank appeared just as his guest was finishing with me. He hit the guy with a half-full bottle of Jack Daniels, they told me later, and nearly killed him. Me... well, he just beat on me until the SP's came back. The neighbors called them."

Anne stopped talking for a while, petting Kelly and avoiding my eyes. I said nothing. There was nothing to say. After some moments of quiet, she continued.

"The Navy hushed matters and rushed new orders through. Frank left immediately for Vietnam and I never found out what happened to the other guy. I didn't even know his name, and the Navy had classified the incident because of their jobs, it said, so I couldn't even press charges. I was in the hospital for two weeks, and Frank was gone when I got out. He must have packed in a hurry or been rushed by the Navy."

Anne had been twisting a napkin. It snapped between her fingers, startling her to momentary silence, then she continued.

"I found a lawyer's card and unfinished divorce papers in one of his drawers. I packed a few things and left everything else in the apartment for the Navy to clean up. They put it all in storage. I didn't want to go home to mother and I didn't want to hang around the base, so I took a job I'd been offered, teaching at your high school and staying with friends until I found an apartment."

Her head came up and she looked directly at me.

"When Frank was shot down, I had to play grieving widow for a while. One day I got a letter asking me to come to the base and get our stuff at my convenience. It hasn't been convenient yet and may never be. The Navy moved everything to a civilian storage facility and settled up with me about insurance and medals and all that. I sent the medals to his family and used the money to buy this farm. News of his crash hit the papers, of course. For weeks, everyone was 'so sorry' for me. I tried to act appropriately widow-like and waited for the sympathy to die down. I found out I was pregnant not long before I miscarried at school. Then this farm turned up in a lunch conversation with a friend in real estate. She must have thought I was crazy; I barely looked at the place and bought it."

"That decision may turn out pretty well," I said.

She looked up at me, fingering the collar of the robe. "You don't have to say anything," she said, "I mean... you don't have to..."

"I know. I meant what I said. You have the time and this farm gives you a

private place. You wanted that; you got it."

"I suppose," said Anne, "But how do I make best use of the place and the time? I can't just sit around feeling trampled by life."

I looked her over as if searching for damage. "Trampled? Things can change, Anne. Finish your story," I said, touching her hand.

"I thought I had finished," said Anne.

"Nope. I'm here. Last night you used me without mercy. Today you allowed yourself more pleasure. Trampled people don't do that."

Anne grinned at me and said, "Well, maybe not trampled, exactly. After I settled down from our near-accident, I discovered I was so horny I could have screamed. I used the thought that we could have been killed to justify practically raping you."

"Oh, that. Well, I'll probably survive," I said, grinning. "You just found yourself again after being lost for a while. You told me to mount up in there. I didn't tell you to lie down. That means it's something you wanted to do or felt you needed. If you don't follow your desires with me, it could be a long while before you allow yourself another chance to leave things behind and play."

"Oh, I don't know about that," she said defensively.

"You DO know, Anne. As a teacher, you've seen this sort of thing happen in various ways to people more often than I have. All I know is that things pile up and people get snowed under. The farm was the first step out. Maybe I'm your second step, and I can't thank you enough for granting my wishes and dreams of you."

Anne didn't say anything to that. After some thought, she held out her hand to me. Instead of just taking it, I kissed it.

"Someday," she said, "I'll find out you were sent here to help me straighten out. I'm going to hand-wax your halo when I find it."

"You won't find one," I said, grinning at her. "I haven't finished earning my wings yet, and halos come after wings."

"We could take the rest of the day off," said Anne, "And just lie in bed, snuggling and talking."

"Or even take another shower first?" I asked, "We need one."

"You like showers, don't you?" she teased me, "Actually, that sounds like a good idea. We can snuggle when we're clean."

Anne moved to the bedroom and I followed her, much to Kelly's disgruntlement. She untied her robe and let it fall from her shoulders to the floor, then she turned to face me with a grin.

"Well?" she asked, running her fingers through her hair and holding the pose.

"Well, what, exactly?" I asked. "Well, how do you look, or well, why aren't I ready yet?"

"Yes," she said as I took off my pants. "Both."

"You're still a goddess to me," I said, grinning as I moved to her, "And I'd like to apologize for keeping you waiting so long."

## Chapter Nine

It was then that I discovered something that has affected me all my life since. Anne's scent, to me, was much like a steak dinner - a freshly cooked steak - except that there was something about it that made me hungry in a way that had nothing to do with food.

I took a deep whiff of her in the region of her neck. The effect was immediate; my mouth watered and my dick became rock-hard. A strong tingle passed through me from head to toe. Goose bumps raised on my arms and legs. I took another whiff. It all happened again.

"What ARE you doing?" she asked, turning to look at me.

"Take a look, Anne," I nodded downward, where my dick was standing at it's full, best attention. I held my arm out to show her the bumps. "Do people develop fetishes that quickly? Damn, you smell wonderful!"

"I did that? I mean, that happened to you just from smelling me?"

She wrapped her hands around my evidence.

"Well, why not, Anne? It works for the animals, doesn't it? And we are animals, aren't we?"

I told her how the smell of her affected me. I also told her that a steak dinner wasn't known to have the same effects on me, so I could be trusted not to be an embarrassment at formal dinners. She laughed.

"Oh, I'd be the envy of all the girls, wouldn't I?" she said, "Women who can't get their men up when they want to. I can just see Sue Blake with a steak hanging on her neck."

We had a laugh at the mental image of the bureaucratic, vastly overweight vice-principal trying to entice her husband into bed that way.

For long moments we stood at the bedside holding and kissing and exploring each other. Impatience replaced her initial tenseness with tremulous little motions that made me realize it was time to move on to other matters.

For all the intensity I may have felt, I believe Anne may have needed me more. Her trembling hands and mine roamed freely and we traded the quick, flighty kisses of exploration and desire as our legs tangled and slid against each other. It had begun to seem as if we were trying to see who could most arouse the other when Anne pushed me, causing me to fall back on the bed.

She grabbed my legs and swung them around so that all of me was on the bed, then she giggled and kissed me, pouncing up onto me to straddle my legs. She sat staring into my face while stroking my dick for a few moments, then slipped forward and up a enough to lower herself onto me. With her eyes on mine she slid me into herself all the way to the bottom and held completely still.

"I like being on top," she said, wiggling a bit.

"I can see that," I said, running my hands along her thighs, "Sort of makes it hard to kiss you, though."

"When I'm on top, kissing isn't what concerns me," said Anne, "I do this to drive you as deep into me as I can and control the motion."

"I sort of figured that much out on my own. Do you have any idea how gloriously beautiful you look up there?"

Anne giggled. "Glorious?"

"Yeah, that's the word that came to my mind. Like one of those art deco statues of a proud, happy woman standing tall as she marches forward to accomplish a purpose, except that you're sitting, of course."

She chuckled. "Well, I'm sort of like those women, I guess. I'm about to accomplish my immediate purpose, I feel great, and I'm happy."

She gave a little bounce and made that little "Ooohhh" sound as she hit bottom. Anne repeated the move, her eyes never leaving mine as she experimented. After some moments of this, she smiled and leaned over to kiss me soundly, then began the steady, posting strokes that had taken her over the top the night before.

I held onto her thighs and fondled whatever I could reach of her as she stacked sensation upon sensation within herself. Anne had again the sort of half-dazed look of preoccupation with her efforts that told me she was approaching climax.

It was amazing to watch her; she was panting and sweating and at that moment she was more beautiful than ever to me. Whenever her efforts brought her face or breasts close enough, I kissed or licked what I could reach of her.

One of her hands suddenly left my shoulder and reached forward as if to take something invisible from the air above my head. I was watching that hand slowly clench into a fist when I was startled to hear a sound almost like that of pain well up from deep within her.

Through clenched teeth Anne let forth a moan such as you hear from someone in agony. Long seconds passed as she almost seemed to force the sound from herself, both her hands now grasping at the air before her as she used her legs alone to drive herself closer to her goal.

Until then, I'd been so fascinated with Anne that I'd forgotten myself, but an urgent tingling made caused me to grasp her hips tightly. I felt the rush and my dick stiffened and swelled slightly more inside her.

Anne recognized my nearness to climax and became absolutely frantic in her efforts, replacing her hands on my shoulders and slamming herself against me in quick, hard strokes.

She suddenly gave a soft scream and froze above me, mouth open and eyes staring as she reached her own pinnacle. Her breath came in small gaspings and her arms stiffened against my shoulders as her nails dug into me.

The soft scream turned into a long, sobbing moan as her orgasm took her over and I splashed myself within her.

A feeling of vast pleasure washed over me as what was happening to her seemed to flow into me even as I flowed into Anne. As her head tilted forward and droplets of sweat fell from her breasts to my chest.

Anne's arms were shaking and her thighs trembled, but she held herself in place. Her gaze descended to my face. Anne's expression held a combination of shock and gratification as she lowered her lips to mine.

It wasn't so much a kiss as a tender, brushing touch that lasted only a few seconds before she let herself collapse sprawling across me.

I wrapped my arms around her and gave her a firm squeeze as I put my lips to her throat and returned her lightly-touching kiss with several more of my own.

When Anne started to roll off me, I stopped her.

"If you aren't uncomfortable up there, just stay put for a while," I whispered, running my hands from her elbows to her hips and enjoying the feel of her.

I traced her with my fingertips and massaged her back and tightly embraced her. My hands found their way to her thighs and slowly traced from hips to knees and back again.

"There's magic in the feel of you, Anne," I whispered, "In the touching and the holding and everything else about you. The sound of your breathing and the scent of your hair and the taste of your skin. To me, there's nothing about you that isn't pure magic, and I do so love giving you pleasure."

She said nothing, but her lips touched my shoulder and lingered before touching again several times until she'd worked her way back to my jawline. She propped herself above me and looked into my eyes for a moment before placing a soft kiss on my lips, then she let her head down to rest on the pillow next to mine as she spread herself against me from our joining to our shoulders. Anne wriggled herself entirely back and forth a few times and softly laughed.

"I seem to have captured a young man's fancy," she said.

"Are you just realizing that?" I asked, laughing with her. "Lady, you caught me the minute I first saw you."

Her answering chuckle dislodged our softening connection, which only made us laugh more. Happiness and laughter only breed more of the same; soon we were breathless from it. Her laugh had a quality to it usually found in those who have only barely escaped or survived disaster of some sort.

"You're going to spoil me," said Anne, "I may come to expect this every time."

"You mean it doesn't happen every time?" I asked with an innocent grin.

"Oh, Sir Ed," She said, "Not always, I'm afraid. Sometimes it's just a nice sort of feeling and sometimes, when I'm lucky, it really hits me hard."

"Let's hope your luck holds, then," I said, "but I'm not going to be disappointed with 'just a nice feeling' if you aren't. You have no idea how phenomenally lucky I feel just being with you."

"In that case," said Anne, "I'll feed you once in a while and see if you stick around. Speaking of food, we need to go find some soon."

Anne suggested that we make a trip to town for groceries before whatever stores there were closed.

"We don't know where they are, and it's a Sunday," she said, "And we've

eaten almost everything we brought."

We took a quick shower that almost got out of hand and dressed. Anne asked if there was anything I liked that we should add to the list. I told her that a couple of watermelons might be a good, since we were likely to have drop-in visitors over the next few days. Anne looked at me strangely for a moment.

"Are you suddenly feeling psychic?" she asked.

"No more so than usual," I said, "but we got Don fired up about adding a pond. He's going to be reporting back soon."

After consulting the real estate guides, we set out in search of groceries. Anne shuddered as we passed the spot where we'd nearly hit the rabbit and just as nearly wrecked the car.

## Chapter Ten

Finding an open grocery store was as simple as staying on the main road. There were two big-name chain stores within sight of town. Anne picked the kind she had used in Grand Prairie and found a parking spot.

We were strangers. From the moment we got out of the car, we were noticed, of course. People watched us as they would watch someone in a wheelchair, with quick glances in front of us and long stares from behind as we shopped.

I asked about watermelons when I saw none that appealed to me. The manager said the store was out of watermelons due to a big church social, then proceeded to tell me that he'd be happy to invite us to the social, seeing as how we were new in town.

Anne smoothly switched the topic of the conversation to check-cashing and my showing up now and then to get a few things using one of her checks. The manager had her fill out a card for the office and we managed to escape without further mention of the church or the social.

An hour and two full shopping carts later, we headed back to the Mustang. Wolf whistles tracked Anne like sonar across the parking lot. They emanated from a pickup truck parked about six spaces from the Mustang. As we unloaded the bags into the Mustang, one of the whistlers decided to come over and "help".

"Hey, Honey," he drawled, "y'all need any help, there?"

I looked over to see a guy about a head shorter than me but about a hundred pounds heavier approaching us. He had on a feathered high-top cowboy hat and grubby cowboy boots that might once have been either brown or black, but were now the color of used motor oil. I looked at Anne to see how she wanted to handle things. She gave me a look that said "be cool" and reached for another bag.

"I think we can manage," she said. "Thanks anyway."

The guy stopped by our basket. "Hey Jimmy," he called back to his buddy in the truck, "She says she thinks they can manage."

"What the hell does she know?" yelled Jimmy. "Ain't no woman on earth that don't need help with stuff."

"I have help," said Anne, putting a bag in the trunk. I saw her hand closing around the tire tool. "Thanks, anyway."

"Lady," said the first guy, "If'n we want to help y'all, that's what we're gonna do. We're even thinkin' about maybe helpin' you unload this stuff later, Honey. Now, why don't you just move outta the way, here."

He reached for a bag and shoved himself past her to almost toss it in the trunk, in the process brushing as much of himself as possible against Anne. She didn't recoil from him in the least.

While he was still leaning into the trunk, Anne put the pointed end of the tire tool against the side of his stomach and leaned into it a little. He couldn't straighten without pushing against the bladed tip.

"Listen to me," said Anne, "and listen carefully. We don't need your help. We don't want your help. I'm absolutely sure I'm speaking English. Do you understand English, cowboy?"

"Billy, what the hell..?" Jimmy could see something was going on, but



couldn't see what. He got out of the truck and started in our direction.

"The bitch has a tire tool, Jimmy! She's gonna stick me with it!" yelled Billy from his crouched position. Jimmy began to hurry.

An empty cart stood between Jimmy and Anne. When he grabbed it to move it, I rammed our cart against his hands. He swore and jumped back, then came at me. When he grabbed for me, he extended himself a little too far. I placed a hard kick on his leading knee and felt solid impact.

The knee twisted with a small snapping sound, sending him to the pavement. The empty cart he grabbed on the way down started to tip over onto him, so I gave it a helpful shove. It landed mostly on his head and shoulders.

When Anne glanced up to see who was screaming, Billy made a big mistake. He tried to push the tool away from his ribs and grab it at the same time. Anne pulled the tool out of his grasp and snapped it across the back of his hand, then slammed it into the side of his head as he tried to straighten up.

There was a dull 'whank' sort of noise as it connected with his head. Billy went down very suddenly and didn't get up. Anne switched the tire tool to her right hand as she came over to me. I was staying well clear of Jimmy's reach as I pushed our cart back to the Mustang.

"Are you okay?" she asked me. I looked up and nodded.

Jimmy was holding his knee and making pain noises. He rolled onto his one good knee for a lunge at Anne's legs, but she stepped back a pace and swung the tire tool again. With the same dull 'whank' sound, the tool snapped Jimmy's head back and he joined his pal Billy in sleep.

People from the store began to appear, asking what happened. Anne very clearly told someone with a store badge that she would tell her side of the story when Deputy Don Vines dropped by her place with his uncle to discuss grazing arrangements. I said nothing to anyone as I finished loading the car.

Someone in the small crowd was apparently happy that Jimmy and Billy had "got what they had coming to them". The sentiment was echoed by a few others. Nobody made any move to stop us as we got in the Mustang and drove through the empty parking spot ahead of us. As we cleared the space, Anne handed me the tire tool she'd kept in her lap until we were moving. I put it on the floor of the car as she took us out onto the main road.

"Are you really okay, Ed?" asked Anne, looking at me as if to see if I had told the truth.

I held my arms out and shrugged at her. "He never touched me," I said. "How about you?"

"Except for feeling a little shaky, I'm fine," said Anne.

She flashed me a grin. I caught her grin and returned it. We said nothing for several moments as we rolled out of town. When we turned to take the service road, she spoke again.

"I was surprised at both of us," Anne said. "My father showed me some things once, but where'd you learn to go for the knees?"

"My father showed me some things once, too," I said.

"They may come after us," said Anne, "or their friends."

"Most likely they'd come with their friends. What are you leading up to, Anne? Do you think they'll come to the farm?"

"I don't know," she said, "But I think we ought to be watchful, don't you?" She looked across at me. I nodded agreement.

"On the farm, on the roads, in town," I said. "Everywhere we could meet them again."

"We'll see what Deputy Don thinks," said Anne, "When he drops by."

We didn't say much more of any consequence on the way home. Instead of parking in the front, where the car might be seen from the road, she parked behind the house near the kitchen door. We had to wade through unmowed grass with the bags, but the car would be sheltered a little.

"Where the hell are the cows we were warned about?" asked Anne, gazing disapprovingly at the high grass behind the house. "You didn't see a lawn mower in the barn, did you?"

"No mower," I said. "We have to depend on stray cattle for a while, I

guess. Anne, can you use that .45 your Dad left you? Do you have ammunition for it?"

"Two boxes," said Anne. "I've never fired it, but I know how it works, and I watched Dad clean it many times over the years."

"Good," I said. "I've shot .22 pistols and rifles, but nothing else. I think we should set up a range against this hillside and practice a little."

Anne looked out toward the creek. There was a pile of old lumber between the creek and the house about seventy feet from the back porch.

"Is it legal, do you think?" she asked.

"As legal as anything they might do to get even, Anne."

"That's then, this is now. We're talking about shooting out here."

"Is a truckload of good ol' boys tearing up your place and maybe trying for some other types of personal revenge legal?"

"Do you really think..." she let the question trail off.

"I do," I said. "I wouldn't mind being wrong just this once, but those guys never outgrew their urges to fuck with other people."

She looked hard at me for a moment. I met her gaze.

"A few rounds fired now and then will call attention to the fact that we aren't unarmed. Certain people will know that it could be dangerous to come here uninvited."

"You're serious," she said. "You expect them to come out here, don't you?"

"Did either Jimmy or Billy look like the kind who would call a cop because a woman kicked his ass?" I asked her rather bluntly. "Or would they just want to get even with a little interest?"

"Set up some cans," said Anne. "I'll get the gun. Are you going to call home and talk to your Dad about this?"

"I could do that," I said, "And either give them reason to worry about me or be told to come home immediately, where I'd worry myself sick about you out here alone. I think if we just bone up on shooting and stay alert we'll be okay."

I could tell from her dubious expression that my answer hadn't satisfied her, but she said nothing and went inside for the gun.

I set up a row of cans along the bottom of the lumber pile and returned to the porch, where Anne had the .45 and a box of ammunition waiting. She took the weapon apart and put it back together again as her father had so often done and showed me how the safety worked. I filled one magazine as she filled the other.

"Who's first?" she asked.

"It's your gun," I said. "Let's see you hit a can, ma'am."

Anne pushed the clip in and worked the slide to seat the first round. I covered my ears in anticipation as she aimed using both hands and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. She looked blankly at the gun. The safety had been on.

"The safety works," she said, grinning at me sheepishly. I gave her a big smile in return and covered my ears. This time the gun went off.

Dirt flew into the air about a yard short of the cans. Anne adjusted her aim and fired again. The bullet hit the lumber to one side of a can, then her next shot hit the can.

She kept firing, aiming each shot carefully. When the last round was gone, she gave me the gun. She'd managed to hit four of the cans.

"We aren't keeping score yet, are we?" she asked, rubbing her ears.

"Fine by me," I said, releasing the safety and aiming. The .45 was heavier than any of the pistols I'd shot before and had a hefty kick.

I expected my first shot to miss as hers had and I wasn't disappointed. The bullet dug up the dirt about a foot shy of the can.

My next round hit, as did all but two others. When I was out of ammunition, I pushed the clip release and caught the magazine as it fell. My ears were ringing fiercely, as I guessed hers were.

"Got any earplugs?" I asked. She shook her head.

"But if we do this much more, we'll need some," she said.

I was handing the .45 back to Anne when there was a series of shots that sent three cans flying in seconds. We saw Deputy Don standing by the Mustang, gun in hand. He unloaded his gun, pocketed the empty shells, and reloaded as he approached the porch, smiling all the way.

"I was in the neighborhood," he said, "And y'all were making too much noise back here to hear me knocking, so I thought I'd just come on back here and visit a while."

He holstered his revolver and just looked at us for a second before sitting on the porch steps. He fished out a cigarette and a lighter.

"You ought to hear some of the stories I heard today," he said, grinning, "About some woman and a kid beating up the Story brothers in the Saveways parking lot. Can I see that for a minute?"

He indicated the .45 Anne held. She passed it to him.

"Ho, that's nice," he said, hefting it, "I haven't used one of these for a while. Carried one everywhere in the Army."

"Can you help us with it?" asked Anne, "How about a glass of tea?"

"Tea's fine, Ma'am," he said, "But there don't seem to be anything wrong with this gun. What y'all need help with?"

"We'd like to be able to use this thing before dark," I said.

"Seems to me you were doing just that," said Don, "Both of you. It takes time and practice to quick-fire, though."

He handed the gun back to Anne. I loaded the clips for another shooting session. Don waited until Anne returned with our teas to continue speaking.

"I got called to the Saveways store. The manager said some woman and a kid beat up Jimmy and Billy Story and drove off in a fancy white Mustang. They said the woman said she'd be talking to me later. The Story boys were gone when I got there, so I came out here."

He took a drink of tea and looked at our target range. "When I heard the shots from way down the road, I got a little worried, though. Don't suppose you'd care to tell me what really happened?"

Anne told him most of it. He drank his tea and nodded as we described the incident.

"Sounds about like I expected," said Don. "The Story boys are no damn good, never were, and never will be. What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to wire cans with rocks into the fences and some other places," I said, "and practice some more."

Anne looked surprised. "Cans with rocks?"

Vines answered for me. "Noise makers. Hide a few wires and anyone stepping on one is announced."

He looked at me and said, "You got enough cans for that?"

"Enough cans to cover this area," I said, "And there's obviously not much point in shooting at a distance yet."

I gestured to the target cans with the tea glass.

"Guess so," said Don. "A few hidden wires and cans could cover the house and barn. O'course, if you're heavy sleepers, it could be a waste of time anyway."

Anne and I looked sharply at Don. He picked up Anne's gun and examined it again.

"Mind if I take a few shots at the cans?" he asked. I handed him one of the clips. He pulled out his revolver and handed it to me. "Try this," he said, "it's a .38. Less kick and a little lighter."

I accepted his gun and looked it over for a moment before standing to take aim at a can. It felt more like the .22 revolver I'd used a few times. I cocked the hammer and fired. It didn't buck like the .45, but it still had a healthy kick compared to the .22. The can jumped, though, so I cocked and fired again, hitting the same can, then switched to one that had been knocked a little farther away earlier.

All six shots were hits. Don whistled. I turned to hand him back his gun, but he was already aiming the .45.

Anne had a surprised look for me. I shrugged as if to say "that's what's

supposed to happen, isn't it?" and turned back to watch Don shoot.

He fired once at the nearest can and then at each of the others still in the general area. Dirt and cans flew as the rounds came in quick succession. He missed four times, but none of the rounds missed by more than a couple of inches. It was obvious that he was showing us something more than an ability to hit a can with careful aiming.

Don turned back to face us. Anne still had her hands over her ears. He gave her the .45 and took the .38 from me, reloading it.

"If you're shooting small things that stand still for you," said Don, "Aiming carefully makes it easier to hit your target. If you're shooting at something the size of a man with a gun like that .45 at this range, all you have to do is hit some part of him as quickly as possible."

He sipped tea before continuing, probably to give his words about shooting at man-sized targets time to sink in.

"The .45 has a lot of impact. A hit in the upper arm can knock you out cold and spin you around. If you're sure you have to shoot, though, don't fire just once and look to see if you hit him. Fire twice, quickly, at the center of mass. The chest. Try to be behind something solid or out of sight before and after you shoot. Assume your target is dangerous until you can safely go out there and make sure he isn't."

He stopped and looked at us as if to see if his words were penetrating.

"Last, but not least; anyone you shoot needs to be armed with something when I get here or you go to jail. Make sure his prints are on the weapon, too. I just hate complicated paperwork," he grinned.

We all sat silently for a few moments on the porch.

"That sounded more military than police," said Anne.

"It was," said Don, "The military teaches people to fire fairly effectively without frequent retraining. Police have to take prisoners whenever it is humanly possible to do so. Armies take prisoners when it's convenient or unavoidable, using quickly-trained troops who may never have been under fire before. Troops as green as you two."

"How is it your Texas accent seems to come and go?" I asked Don, "Texas one minute and no accent at all the next?"

"I noticed that, too," said Anne, busy loading one clip while I loaded the other. She didn't look up as she spoke.

"I wasn't always a Texas cop," said Don. "Traveled some before I wound up here."

Don's brusque tone told us more than the words. He didn't really want to talk about where he'd been or why. We let the matter drop. I rose to get the tea pitcher as Anne took her place on the back porch firing line and began firing almost immediately.

Don was watching her shoot, but I noticed his gaze was on Anne as much as her shooting. He wore a wedding ring, so as soon as Anne had stopped shooting, I asked how his wife felt about having a cop for a husband.

He realized I'd spotted his interest in Anne and managed to look a bit sheepish as he replied.

"Well she doesn't like it all that much, but she liked it a lot less when I was a cop in Houston."

"She worries about you a lot, I suppose," I said.

"Yeah. Her biggest gripe is the hours. Three shifts; three deputies. If anything comes up, one of us has to slide back into uniform to help out, and things seem to happen most in the middle of the night."

Anne looked at me quizzically for a moment before she realized the reason I was showing an uncharacteristically keen interest in Deputy Don's family life. She gave me a wry little grin and picked up the thread of the conversation.

"She probably doesn't want anything happening to the father of her children, either," she said, sipping her tea.

"Yeah," laughed Don, "those were her exact words, too, by damn. Well, folks, unless you need some more help killing those cans, I guess I'd better

be going. Remember what I said about two quick shots to the body mass from behind cover AND what I said about being sure he's armed. I don't want to take you to jail, but if we don't find a weapon, that's where you go."

We shook hands all around and Don left. Neither of us said anything until we heard his car crunching down the drive. Anne handed me the .45 and a full clip and sat down.

"Show me how it's done, mister. We're keeping score now."

I aimed and fired two quick shots at one of the cans. One hit, one very close miss. I went through the clip that way, firing twice quickly at each target, barely taking time to line up the shots. Anne was watching my progress.

"He's right," she said, "For what we may be facing, this would be more effective. You hit four and only missed the others by inches."

I ejected the empty clip, reloaded, and gave her the gun. "Try it that way," I said. "It feels better, too."

Anne hit four of the cans, as well, and missed the rest by about the same margin I had. After firing another clip apiece, we cleaned the gun and reloaded the clips with the last shells in the box. Each magazine had only five rounds in it, but she said that would be better for the springs that pushed the shells up if the gun sat unused for a while.

## Chapter Eleven

Over dinner we discussed the stringing of wire and cans around the barn and house. Anne was balking.

"Are you sure we aren't just being paranoid? Going to extremes?"

"Why are you worried about how things seem? We blasted at cans for an hour with a .45. Was it silly of Deputy Don to come out and show us how to shoot for best effect on a human being? Or does stringing cans make it seem as if we're playing war in the back yard?"

I touched her hand as I said, "That's how it feels to me, too, but I'm going to do it anyway."

After dinner, we strung wire a few inches off the ground in the grass around the house and barn. Care was taken to avoid the cowpaths, in case one of the so-far mythical cows should wander into the yard.

We tied the ends of the wires to poles in places sheltered from the wind and were tying the last can onto the last pole as the sun was going down. After testing the system at several points, we declared it a success of sorts and went back in the house.

About two hours later we were in the middle of setting up Anne's stereo when we heard cans rattle. I had jumped up to go for the .45 when they rattled again, more than once. I stopped and looked at Anne, who was looking back at me with the same quizzical expression.

"It's got to be either an animal or an attempt to make one or both of us go out there to take a look around," I said.

Anne distractedly nodded agreement. All of a sudden, the cans didn't seem so silly to either of us.

I took the gun from behind the cookbooks and seated a round in the chamber before peeking out the kitchen window. Nothing. Going to the side window, I repeated the furtive peek. Nothing. I went to the front and looked carefully around the area. Nothing was out of place or moving around. I shrugged at Anne.

There was one window left to check on the south side. We'd left the previous owner's dark blue curtains up because we found we had more windows than curtains from her other place. I had to grope to find the pull-cord and Anne was right behind me as we crouched at the window.

There was a grunting noise from outside as if someone were trying to lift something. I pointed the pistol and yanked the curtains back, expecting to see someone or something just outside the window.

There was nothing out there. I lowered the gun and Anne let out a little

sigh of relief.

Then the huge head of a cow suddenly appeared at the window as if from nowhere, with one mildly curious eye gazing in at us. Anne let out a screech and nearly fell backwards in surprise at the apparition. She grabbed my belt to steady herself and I had to grab the window ledge to remain standing.

The cow quickly lost interest and her head dropped back below the window's edge into the darkness. I realized I'd been pointing the gun at the cow the whole time and let it fall back to my side. Anne was laughing at our reactions.

"Didn't we go out of OUR way to keep the cans out of THEIR way?" she asked. "I seem to remember giving it a lot of thought and planning."

"Well, we thought so at the time, anyway," I said.

"I'm glad you didn't shoot the poor thing," said Anne.

I put the gun back and we went outside to check the wires. The cow was standing well away from the house, as we had expected. The cow was also cropping grass right over the wire, shoving it out of her way to reach the grass she wanted.

"Well, so much for that idea," said Anne, pulling up the pole at the corner of the front porch and dragging the wire back along the wall away from the cow.

"Don't give up on it yet," I said, patting the cow. "We can try running the wires in other directions."

"It's starting to seem silly again, Ed."

"Yeah, but not silly enough to keep me from finding another way to string 'em."

"I don't see how you can if we let the cows wander around as lawnmowers."

Anne came over to pat the cow, which soon decided that two people were too many and moved a few feet away from the crowd. It munched for a while as we talked, then moved off in the direction of the barn.

"Whatever you want to do about cans is fine with me," said Anne.

We went back inside the house and finished assembling the stereo, then hooked up her TV to the roof antenna. The reception was lousy on all but one channel.

I told her that the antenna was likely out of alignment. When I looked at her, she was making a vacant-eyed and slack-jawed face at me.

"What?" I asked, mimicking her expression.

Her face became normal. "Of course the antenna's out of alignment," she laughed, "What else could it be?"

I gave her a wry grin and said, "I'm not the one who bought this pile of sticks and stones and had to grant knighthood to get cheap hired help. How was I to know that you had a degree in television repair?"

Anne grinned and threw a sofa cushion at me. Before I'd caught it she had another on the way. As she grabbed for another, I tossed them back at her and followed them in, keeping low and grabbing at her ankles.

She squeaked and fell back on the couch, using the remaining cushions to thump me repeatedly as I worked my way up to get my arms over hers.

"Hah!" she said, "You think you've got me, don't you?"

"When you say things like that," I said, "I won't take it for granted. Gee, lady, you get mean around sofa cushions."

Anne laughed and kissed me. It was a wonderful, warm, delicious kiss that lasted a while. When it ended, I quickly ducked away, rolling off her and across the floor. The sofa cushion in her hand missed me by mere inches.

I had to laugh at the expression on her face as the unchecked momentum of her swing dragged her off the couch and ungracefully dumped her on the floor.

Anne sat there glaring and grinning at me for a moment, then put everything she had into heaving the cushion at me. She was only a split-second behind it as it hit my chest, having used her legs to shove away from the couch.

She wrapped herself tightly around me; her legs twined around mine and her arms seemed to lock around me. She grinned wickedly down at me before she

kissed me again.

When she broke the kiss, she was still grinning. I broke the grin by using my limited range of arm motion to begin tickling her. Anne tried to pretend my fingers were having no effect, but lost the pretense to a sudden burst of laughter and had to disengage. As she tried to roll away, I stayed with her and kept tickling until she was breathless.

"I hope you know I'll get you for that," said Anne, raising herself to a sitting position.

"I know you'll try," I said.

"Oh, I'll get you," she said. "Count on it."

"I don't suppose I could appeal to your better instincts?" I asked.

"Not a chance," she said, grinning again.

"I didn't think so," I said. "You've already been out here too long. The thin veneer of civilization is already peeling off you, isn't it?"

I grinned back at her as I got up to go to the kitchen. She grabbed my belt to pull herself to her feet and came with me, taking a seat at the dinette table as we entered the kitchen.

"Well, at least I started out with a veneer," she said. "Unlike someone who took rather extreme advantage of a lady in distress last night, as I recall."

I turned and gave her a shocked look.

"Oh, wait just a minute, here, lady! If anyone should feel used, it's me. My first time ever turned into a marathon because of you, you know. You tried to turn me into an old man in one night!"

"You held up your end of things," she said, laughing at her turn of words. "You survived well enough."

"Yeah, well, maybe it was the company I was keeping," I said. "You brought out the best in me, Anne... then... well, you grabbed it."

Anne was in tears from laughing. She had to try twice to say, "You make it sound like I'm some kind of vampire."

"AS IF," I corrected her, "And you are. You have obviously lured an innocent young man into your den and obviously intend to drain him dry after making him fall in love with you."

"You don't mind too much, do you?" she asked, full of saccharin solicitude. "I could release you back into the wild, you know."

"Oh, no, don't do that," I said with equal graciousness, "Would that I had more to give! Knights are supposed to give their all for a lady."

"Damned right they are," said Anne. "That's why I knighted you. That and a need for cheap labor around the castle, of course."

We talked for hours that Sunday night. Opinions about the politics of the Vietnam war, demonstrations that were becoming daily occurrences on campuses, the space race, places we'd been and things we'd done, and possibilities concerning the farm floated back and forth across that kitchen table until well after two in the morning.

Plans for the farm filled three pages of her yellow tablet and things were going just fine until the subject of bringing the horses down from Virginia came up.

Anne didn't really want to deal with Frank's family, but this didn't become obvious to me until she'd listed about a half-dozen reasons for not taking the trip that summer. Time, driving, getting a trailer, expenses, accommodations throughout the trip, caring for the horses on the way, and other such details were the gist of her self-argument.

As she wrapped up her list, I brought up another item that I considered too obvious to ignore. All of her planning excluded me.

"I have a driver's license," I said, "And I've hauled a trailer before. Horses need stops about twice an eight-hour day on the road, but three are better; time for walking, feed, water, and a stretch. Why were you talking as if I weren't going to help you with that, too? Two days up and back and probably a day or two there to visit and get the trip back organized properly. Did I miss something?"

Anne just looked at me for a moment. She doodled on the pad and tapped the pencil on the table.

"How do I explain you to people?" she asked. "Would your parents let you go? Speaking of your parents, I don't know if I could face them at this point."

"Call me a friend's son who was free for the trip," I said. "And you've already talked to one of my parents, who let me come here for as long as I'm needed. If they didn't like you, I guarantee I wouldn't be here for any reason. Why would there be a difference between forty miles or a thousand? I have people nearby in Pennsylvania and the bus could bring me home if it came to that."

"What if there was an accident?"

"Insurance covers us anywhere and there are hospitals all over the country," I said, "And we could have an accident here just as easily. Although I've no doubt you could make the horse trip by yourself, Anne, there's no reason to. What's really bugging you about it?"

"You're quick, aren't you?" It wasn't really a question. After a moment, she continued, "Frank's family didn't know how he changed, and they know nothing about our last months together or the reason he shipped out early or why our stuff is still in storage after all this time. They idolized him, Ed. If I go up there, they'll be expecting to see a still-grieving widow and they'll want to talk about things I don't particularly want to talk about."

I gave that some quick thought.

"We can call ahead with arrangements that would get me back here in time for something important. That would cut the visiting short."

Anne was angry. Very angry. She rose from the table and filled her glass, then turned to face me. Her voice was barely audible at first.

"Oh, that was a very good idea," she said. "Except for the fact that you seem to think you can now tell me how things are going to get done. Did it ever occur to you that I may not want to deal with the things in storage? That I may not want the horses badly enough for even a short visit with Frank's family to get them?" Her voice rose a notch. "Just don't tell me how to handle my own affairs, thank you."

I sat in startled silence as she strode quickly toward the bedroom. Anne was right, sort of. I had sliced and served up to her what represented the complete ending of her life with Frank, never considering that she might not be ready or able to close that book.

She may even have viewed it as a personal failure; a failure to somehow save her man from himself, and thereby keep him from volunteering to go back to Vietnam. It occurred to me that she probably blamed herself, at least in part, for his death.

Since there didn't seem to be anything I could say or do to rectify matters immediately, I decided to look through records until something selected itself. I settled myself on cushions before the stereo as the music filled the room with Brahms' Second piano concerto.

It was smooth, dynamic music that, like all music to some degree, contained repetitions of certain scores, so it wasn't too difficult to capture the melody of it and whistle along softly.

Perhaps ten minutes passed before I realized I was no longer alone. In the plastic of the stereo cover I could see Anne sitting on the couch behind me, staring at me as I softly whistled along with the music.

She got up and came to stand over me from behind, listening closely. When a portion came up that was particularly difficult to follow, I pretended to notice her presence and held the record cover out to her.

"Brahms," I said, "His Second piano concerto is one of the best."

Anne took the record cover and continued to stare at me in mild amazement. I reached for my tea and sipped it so as not to have to say anything more specific about either classical music or Brahms.

"You never mentioned liking classical music," said Anne.

"The question never came up. Is it so amazing to you that I could like



good music? I can be brilliantly insensitive about things like your old life in storage, but something like this music needs no discussion."

"Brilliantly insensitive," she said, "is almost an understatement."

"Didn't take me long to figure that out," I said, "I'm in here because I couldn't think of anything that would make you feel better and couldn't just sit at that table doing nothing."

Anne kicked a cushion over and sat next to me, then quietly gazed ahead at nothing in particular until the music of side one ended. When I returned from turning the record over, she put an arm around me and laid her head on my shoulder. I put my arm around her in return.

When the soothing music ended again, I started to ask what else she'd like to hear.

She was nearly asleep. I slipped the record back in it's sleeve and helped her to her feet, then turned out lights and followed her to the bedroom.

Anne lay on the bed fully dressed, snoring softly. I slid in next to her, but I soon realized I wasn't quite tired enough to ignore her presence in the bed, and it was almost two in the morning. I got up, put on my pants, and took a pillow for the couch.

## Chapter Twelve

As it turned out, it was just as well I'd slept on the couch Sunday night. We were wakened by an insistent knocking on the front door, then on the little window in the top of the door.

A woman was peering in as she tapped on the glass. I groggily waved to her from the couch in acknowledgment and heaved myself upright. Anne answered the door in her robe, so I stayed sitting on the couch as the woman was let in.

The heavysset woman introduced herself as our nearest neighbor, one Wanda Mae Vines, and proceeded to tell us her life story while apologizing for waking us and simultaneously excusing herself because it was already almost noon, after all.

Wanda Mae had come calling because one of the cows couldn't be found, but she hadn't wanted to go prowling on our property without our knowledge, she said, waving a rope halter.

Kelly came up to check her out and found her to be very acceptable. He got in her lap when she sat on the couch, standing and sounding off in Siamese fashion as Wanda Mae petted him.

Anne suggested they become acquainted while we got ready; I told everyone there'd be coffee in a few minutes and went to make it while Anne prepped herself.

Some thirty minutes later we trooped out to look for the cow. Wanda Mae marched and chattered amiably as Anne and I followed along behind.

After a look around from the back porch, Wanda Mae headed for the barn with us in tow. We found the cow in the barn, as Wanda Mae had expected. She slipped the halter on the cow's face and led it out of the barn. We again followed, lacking anything better to do. Wanda Mae was trying to maneuver the cow to stand near a stack of wood.

"I'm gonna ride this dummy back to the house," said Wanda Mae, "Y'all really ought to keep that barn closed up. No telling what could get in there. Well, thanks, y'all, I guess I better get going now."

We watched her ride her cow off toward the gap in the fence by the creek. As the cow swayed back and forth, so did Wanda Mae's substantial rump. It was comical enough to elicit a giggle from Anne.

"Let's do something about breakfast," said Anne, heading back to the house, "or lunch, as the case may be."

It turned out to be a breakfast menu, after which we shoved furniture around and continued unpacking. Last night still bothered Anne; she and I worked for a couple of hours with little conversation other than asking me where something should be put or suggesting we use some of the boxes for trash and flatten the others for storage in the barn.

Having sorted the more-battered boxes for trash, I was flattening the others when Anne called a break. I said I'd go ahead until finished, but she was insistent about stopping for a while, so I got a soda and joined her on the couch.

"Last night," said Anne, "You said some things that hit me right in the gut. No, don't apologize."

She waved away my attempt to speak. "We did that last night, too. I just wanted you to know that you were right. Insensitive, blunt, and thoughtless, but right. Sooner or later I will have to finalize Frank's death and the death of my marriage, and dealing with the storage stuff is a first step. Getting what I don't want of it to Frank's family is another step, and getting the horses down here is the third step."

"There are good horses in Texas, Anne. If the ones in Virginia aren't family pets, why not just sell them and shop for horses locally? I didn't mean to push you last night and I don't mean to push you now."

"I know there are horses in Texas, and I know you weren't trying to push me. You weren't trying to hurt me, either, but hurt was unavoidable on that subject, and the subject would have come up sooner or later." Anne paused, looking down at her folded hands. "So let's just do it. I'll have someone sell the horses and save the trip."

"If you aren't ready," I said, "Don't. Another way to handle things would be to donate what you can to charity. Ship the rest to whomever. Or just let the Navy do whatever they usually do with stuff left forever in storage."

"No," said Anne, "There are things I shouldn't have left behind. Minor heirlooms and pictures. Stuff I should have taken when I ran out and stuff that should go to someone else. I'll ship them."

"Ran out?" I asked. "Don't say it that way. You didn't desert or go AWOL, dammit. He alienated you for months, brought home a rapist, and put you in the hospital. Give yourself a break, Anne. Frank more than helped it happen."

"I suppose so," she said, staring at her hands again.

"I only know what you told me," I said.

Anne's head came up at that. "It was the truth," she said, "All of it."

"If it was the truth then it must still be true. So why continue to feel you did something wrong? Frank was going his own way without you anyway, and it didn't sound to me as if you or anyone else could have prevented him from it. Maybe there's something about flying in combat that makes anything else seem dull. Maybe he just couldn't face his own changes and wanted out to protect you. Maybe he thought he was forcing you away to save you."

"I thought of that," said Anne, "but it seemed to be such a self-serving cliché back then. Having someone else suggest it seems to make it sound better. More believable, I guess."

"Without Frank here to tell us why he did it," I said, "It's as good a reason as you'll find. Let it do."

I touched her face and gave her a "well, what else is there to say?"-type look. She took my hand in hers.

"You know," she said, "If I couldn't see you, if I could only hear you, I'd probably think I was with someone in his seventies. But when I look at you and see a recent high school student, I wonder how the hell any of this ever happened."

"Simple. You said last night that I'd taken advantage of your distress, or something like that. The truth is more that your distress took advantage of me, and us, but I'd never quibble over details like that." I grinned at her.

"So my distress took advantage of you, hum? I hate to admit such a thing, but that's the way I felt about what was happening before, during, and right up to about ten minutes ago, Ed. I don't know exactly what's changed, but something has. In the future, I don't think it will be my distress taking advantage of you." She grinned back at me, then gave me a quick kiss. "It'll be me."

"I can live with that," I said.

We sat grinning at each other. Kelly jumped up to see what the humans were

doing, and having seen, he curled up on Anne's lap, gazing up at me, so I petted and spoke to him.

"No sweat, Kelly. Nobody can take your place," I said.

Anne and I sat there for a while, talking about things like finding a horse trailer and how best to wrap things to take to Frank's family, and when to make the trip.

After a bit, I found myself gazing into her eyes again and realized that neither of us had said anything for some time. Kelly got up, breaking the spell, and trotted off to the kitchen.

"I see what you mean," Anne said softly. "You really do get lost, don't you? How would it make you feel to know that the same thing happens to me?"

"I hadn't thought about that," I said, "I guess because I didn't expect it. How does it feel to you?"

"It feels nice," she said, "Nice enough to be a little disturbing. I want to like you, Ed, not love you. When you leave I want it to be on happy terms, not a cause for more sadness."

"Don't worry so much," I said. "Let some things take care of themselves. Get done what we can and play hard in the meantime. How's that sound?"

"It sounds pretty fatalistic." Anne shifted on the couch and leaned back a bit, sipping tea and looking at me.

"Should we gaze ahead with starry eyes and pretend the end of summer won't happen?" I asked her, "As if I won't go back to school in the fall, and you won't ever meet another man you want to go out with? One who is old enough to have a drink with you legally? That isn't even a risk, Anne. It's a certainty."

## Chapter Thirteen

Anne's look was one of appraisal as we sat for some moments in silence, until the sound of crunching gravel let us know a car was arriving. Anne leaned forward and kissed my cheek as she got up. We opened the door as Don was coming up the steps. He cocked a thumb back the way he'd come.

"Where can we park a bulldozer?" he asked, grinning widely as he shook hands with us.

A truck and trailer were just beginning the turn into the driveway. A few moments later, we met Wanda Mae for the second time that day.

"Hi, y'all! " she yelled, jumping down from the truck.

We off-loaded the bulldozer near the house and Wanda Mae drove it up to the creek area. After a brief discussion and a look around, Wanda Mae revved the bulldozer and pushed the old car hulk onto its side.

Ignoring damage to the fence, she shoved the car into the gap until it would slide no farther, then backed up in the creek bed and approached the car again, scraping up a load of water-washed rock. She dumped the load into the car, went back for more several times until the car was buried completely, then paused to survey her work before moving on.

In the space of perhaps thirty minutes, Wanda Mae had created a dam. After looking around again, she raised the blade and drove the bulldozer out of the creek on the other side from us, then headed upstream. We all followed along on our side of the creek to watch.

Wanda Mae re-entered the stream at the farthest possible point and began trenching it out to a depth of about five feet on the sides and eight feet in the center, depositing the scrapings on the low side to enhance the streambank. In two hours or so, she'd worked her way back down to the area that was to become a pond, then scraped some more until the pond area was about ten feet deep in the center. Water was already backing up to fill the pond as she brought the bulldozer out on our side up by where the stream entered the scraped area.

"Now we wait," she said, "Should be about full by tonight, I'd say. Anybody else want a beer? It's in the truck."

With that, Wanda Mae drove the bulldozer down the hill and parked it close

enough to the truck that she could stand on a tread to reach through the truck window for a small cooler. She hopped down with it as we approached and handed each of us a beer. I started to refuse, but Don jokingly said he wouldn't arrest me just this once.

Anne said something about cops who contribute to minor delinquencies of minors, then we all toasted Wanda Mae's talents with a bulldozer.

"What if it still floods?" asked Anne.

"Then we lower the dam a touch," said Wanda Mae, "I made a place for overflows where the water won't flood anything down here and the top of the dam is lower than the sides of the pond. From the way the land runs around here I think things will take care of themselves."

Wanda Mae and Don opened the last two beers of the six-pack after offering to split them with us, then we headed back up the hill. The water was within two feet of the top of the dam, but Wanda Mae didn't think it would reach the top too soon. She pointed to the other side of the dam, where several streams of water came from the sides.

"Until things settle a bit, some water is gonna get through the dam, even with the mudpack I gave it. Stuff'll wash into it and plug the leaks after a while. May not really be full up 'till Wednesday. It'll fill enough by then to tell for sure what it's gonna do. I'll leave the 'dozer here 'till the next job on Thursday or Friday, okay?"

The bulldozer was moved behind the house and Wanda Mae left with the trailer. Don said he had things to do and left soon after Wanda Mae.

Anne and I got some tea and sat on the back porch for a while. As I looked around the porch, something occurred to me.

"Are you going to let Kelly run loose out here?"

"No," said Anne, "He's been a house cat all his life and for all I know something would eat him out here. Why?"

"I was looking at the porch rails. Some need to be replaced, so why don't I just screen the porch and install a doggie door for Kelly?"

Anne looked around. The porch was nearly a yard off the ground and had three-foot high railings except where it met the steps. An extension of the roof was supported at the corners of the porch by six-by-six posts. She nodded.

"Kelly will be eternally grateful," said Anne, slapping her arm. "And maybe then we can sit out here without being eaten alive."

We sat a while longer, not talking much. Anne looked as if she had something on her mind, so I didn't disturb her.

A big bird of some kind circled the pond a few times and landed on the branch of a nearby tree. Some moments later it glided gracefully down to the water's edge and began to drink.

"Our first customer," said Anne, pointing at the bird.

We watched until the bird finished investigating the new body of water in the neighborhood and flew back to the tree, where he appeared to settle in for the night. Anne rose and stretched and said it was time to think about dinner.

Anne was as unusually quiet throughout the meal as she had been on the porch, so I put on some records and lay on the couch to keep out of her way. Kelly jumped up and made himself comfortable on my chest and the two of us half-dozed for a while as the music played.

## Chapter Fourteen

Sometime later I became aware of a presence near the couch and looked up to see Anne standing over us wearing her robe over a sheer, mid-thigh length nightie and holding a small glass. As she reached to pet Kelly, my eyes traveled the length of her, unabashedly following her contours.

She laughed softly at my expression as I turned on my side and sat up to make her a spot on the couch, displacing Kelly. He gave me a disgruntled look and stomped away.

"I loved your reaction just now," Anne said as she sat down. She waved her

glass and said, "Made myself a gin and tonic."

I'm afraid I was so busy staring at her legs that my mind was a little out of gear. When I tore my eyes away to look up, she laughed again and trailed her fingers along my jaw.

"I've been thinking," said Anne, after taking a sip from her glass, "And I've come to a decision of sorts. You said I bought privacy and solitude, and you're right. Out here it's just us, and all we really have to do is be discreet about things."

"Discreet is fine," I said, running my fingers along the tops of her thighs, "but did it really require making a decision after everything we've already done together?"

"What we've done together so far has, as you put it, been the result of my distress. This is a conscious decision based on our feelings for each other. I like you a lot, Ed. I can't call it love and it isn't just lust, so I'm just going to drop the reins and let things go their own way for a while."

She made a show of standing and stretching, then padded off to the kitchen, looking back at me over her shoulder once on the way. Anne made a tall, glorious sight as she strode to the kitchen, but the real show was her slow walk back to the couch. I think the very intensity of my watching her caused her goose bumps to appear. She thoroughly enjoyed my gaze.

"Well, okay," I said to myself. "Happy birthday to me and I just love my present."

I took a sip of the tea Anne had brought for me. She laughed and took a sip of her own drink.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked.

"I think you're gorgeous," I said. She laughed again.

"Thank you, but I was referring to my last comments."

"They sounded a lot like a self-emancipation speech to me." I looked into my glass and back up at Anne. "Isn't that what we're celebrating?"

"Freedom," said Anne, "An end to my widowhood and the idea that I might have been responsible for it. You. Me. Us, for however long."

"To freedom," I said, touching her glass with mine. "To a beautiful beginning without end, and to a lady's courage."

As we lay sprawled on the couch I blatantly ogled Anne as she told me a little more about her decision.

"I wanted more," she said simply, "More of you, more of sex, more of the way things have been going this weekend. I realized that being out here alone would likely degenerate into more of the same life I had in Grand Prairie. I'm not going to let that happen. You're good company, you can ride with a punch if I snap at you once in a while, you can figure things out for yourself, and you're great for my ego."

She sat up to sip her drink. I tickled the small of her back and let my fingers trail from there to her knee. Anne nearly spilled her drink when my fingers crossed that special spot just below her ribs.

"And," she said, hastily putting a hand over the spot, "You seem to be a fast learner. You've got a talent for fixing things that extends to people. I haven't felt better about myself in a long damn time, and you're the obvious reason. I could hire people to renovate the farm, Ed, but not to help me fix me."

"Okay," I said, kissing her shoulder, then her neck.

"Okay? That's all you have to say?" Anne turned to look at me.

I kissed her lips and smiled at her.

"What's to say? You feel as you feel about things. If my being here is good for you, then it's just wonderful for me. Why do you think I want to be here? I told you the other night, Anne. For you. I lucked into knowing you, then helping you move, then into all this. Now you tell me I'm more than a sex toy to you. A smart man would shut up and smile and guard this status-quo with his life."

I stopped talking and gave her a big, dumb smile.

Anne just continued to look at me for a moment. Her lips moved slightly as

she tried to keep herself from laughing, but she couldn't. The laugh came rolling out of her, one of those laughs that bring tears and sore ribs and breathlessness.

A little tickling and another of the smiles kept her laughing until she had a case of the hiccoughs. Anne moaned and groaned and tried to keep from giggling between hiccoughs for a while, then downed the rest of her drink and ran to the bathroom. I heard water run as she filled her glass a few times, then only her deep breathing.

Anne reappeared some moments later, apparently cured, but the moment she opened her mouth to say something, she started hiccoughing again.

I patted her shoulder and then stroked her leg and gave her a look of exaggerated sympathy; she began to laugh again as she hiccoughed and groaned and slapped my hand away.

"I know what'll cure it," she said, turning to face me.

Anne pulled me to her and kissed me hard and long. It didn't work. I could feel her fighting the hiccough that finally made her push me away and gasp for breath.

She muttered, "Ohdamnitdidn'twork," and I laughed. She glared at me and laughed and hiccoughed at the same time for a few moments, then gave a loud groan and shoved me back on the couch, hands on my shoulders, shaking me with exasperation before she rolled off me.

I was laughing hard enough to risk a case of hiccoughs of my own by then. Anne lay there for a short time, then got up and padded into the kitchen. I reached for my own glass and realized was empty, so I got up and followed her.

Anne was making herself another gin and tonic. She asked if I wanted one. I shook my head and poured myself an iced tea. I could feel her eyes on me as I put things back in the refrigerator.

Anne was sitting at the table when I turned back around. I pulled out a chair and joined her. We sipped our drinks in silence for a while, just looking at each other as if for the first time. Kelly wandered in, surveyed us, decided things were a little too strange, and wandered back out.

"He thinks we're nuts, I'll bet," I said.

"Probably only because of the ruckus in the living room and the fact that we're sitting in the kitchen just about naked," said Anne.

"Just about naked looks good on you, ma'am."

"You too," she said, getting up. "Any ice left?"

She squeezed by me to get to the fridge. I pulled my chair over a bit and half turned to let her open the door. She started to squeeze back out, but I stopped her, looking up at her face and eyes and hair and the lines of her.

"You're so beautiful," I said, wrapping my arms around her waist and pulling her to me. I kissed her just above her navel and hugged her for a moment. When I relaxed my hold a bit, she surprised me by settling on my lap with an arm around my shoulders. Anne smiled, then kissed me warmly.

"I'm going to use you up," she said, "And then I'm going to nurse you back to health and do it again. Oh, my, look there! I do believe I've started something."

Anne moved to "discover" my erection, then put her drink down and rose enough to bring one leg around to sit astride my lap and kissed me again as she maneuvered to join us together, sliding me into her.

Having accomplished this, Anne broke the kiss, leaned back a bit, and gave me the same big, dumb smile I'd given her earlier. I couldn't help laughing, which she made worse by tickling me.

"A smart woman," said Anne, "Would smile and do her best to make it one hell of a status-quo. Let's just sit here in the kitchen for a while and talk, Okay? Just let me know if you get uncomfortable or need to move."

"Great idea," I said, pulling her close. "An absolutely great idea."

She wiggled in my lap and said, "I knew you'd like it."

Anne did most of the talking. I mostly just ran my hands over her and answered when necessary between nuzzlings and kissing whatever part of her was closest to my face. She told me about her dream of someday putting together a bookstore and some of the places she'd been and how she'd decided to become a teacher.

When her drink was gone, she was able to barely reach, with a lot of stretching, the countertop for the ingredients to make another without leaving my lap.

"You really add something to a chair," she said as she put her drink together and took a sip. I kissed her shoulders, then her lips.

"That's nice to hear once in a while," I said, taking the sip she offered me. It tasted different, somehow. I noticed the bottle on the table said 'bitter lemon' instead of 'tonic water'.

"You're holding up pretty well, you know. By now, Frank would have been absolutely suffering from impatience." She handed me my drink.

"I'm impatient sometimes," I said, "But not where you're concerned. I know there's an end coming, Anne. Not exactly when, but obviously around the end of summer. I'm in no hurry."

"Weren't you the one who told me not to dwell on the obvious?" She bounced and wiggled a little for emphasis.

"I'm not dwelling on it," I said, "Just not forgetting, either. I want to minimize damage to myself when the time comes."

"You came into this expecting to be hurt, didn't you?"

"I let this happen knowing there'd probably be some hurt at the other end, yes," I said, "And I still expect it."

"I don't think you know what kind of hurt or how much can come of things like this," said Anne. She put her arms around my shoulders and looked hard at me.

"You're right, Anne. I don't, really. And it's too late to let that bother me, just as it was too late when I first held you. I can only try to soften the inevitable blow."

Anne's eyes were brimming with unshed tears as she pulled me to her in a hug. She sniffled near my ear; a moment later she sat back and grabbed a napkin to blow her nose and wipe her eyes.

"Damn you, Ed, you could have just said 'Oh, I'll be okay' or something like that." She giggled and sniffled. "Any little thing sets me off these days."

I caught one of her hands and kissed it, then pulled her close again, massaging her back. Anne relaxed and maneuvered herself so that my fingers found the right places; her small sounds of pleasure let me know when they found one.

"All right," I said. "Oh, I'll be okay."

Anne smiled slightly and kissed me, then wrapped her arms around me and put her head on my shoulder for some time.

Somewhere among the myriad sensations of holding her we became unjoined. Nearly half an hour had passed unnoticed and the continual closeness had taken the urgency from my desire.

That didn't seem to matter to either of us. The beast lay snoozing between us as we continued to discover each other in other ways.

When the phone rang, the sound seemed to be coming from far away. We ignored it at first, but after more than a few rings, Anne finally got up to answer it. A moment later she called me.

"It's Jim," said Anne, "Your friend has a wonderful sense of timing." She handed me the phone. I took it and admired her as she strolled back to the kitchen.

"Hi, Jim. What's up?"

"Just calling to see if you'd be around here next weekend," he said. "Do you know what Saturday is?"

"Saturday?" I had to think. "What's today, then?"

"Figured you wouldn't. Forget all that," said Jim. "Saturday is the

eleventh. What's special about the eleventh?"

"Must be a Saturday, I guess," I said. "What about it?"

I could hear the exasperation in his voice. Judy was with him and decided to hurry things along by yelling from somewhere nearby. "Saturday is your birthday, dummy! Are you coming back here for your birthday?"

"Judy doesn't believe me," said Jim. "I told her about last year when you forgot and went fishing."

"Put her on a minute," I told him. He did.

"I'm here," said Judy, "Hi, Ed."

"It's true," I said, "I forgot my birthday. They don't mean a helluva lot to me, so I forget them. I don't know when anyone else's are, either, so don't be upset if you don't get a card."

"We just wondered if you could pry yourself away for a party."

"Not willingly," I said, "Are you serious? You know me, Judy, and so does Jim. When did I ever want a birthday party?"

"Okay," she said. "So we'll find another reason to party next weekend. How are things going out there?"

"Oh, fine," I said, "We're getting a lot done around here. You need to come out and see the new pond out back."

"A pond? I don't remember any ponds out there."

"There wasn't one till yesterday," I said. "That's why I said 'new pond'. One of the neighbors dug it out with her pet bulldozer."

"HER bulldozer?" exclaimed Judy. I could hear Jim asking what was going on.

"Yeah, HER bulldozer."

"Okay," she said. "You gonna tell me a little more about it?"

"Sure, next time you're out here," I said.

"NO! Call us back after you talk to your folks."

"Okay, I'll do that instead. Geez. Pushy women."

She giggled and we chatted a while, then Jim came back on the line. He said he'd get a briefing from Judy and asked if planned to call home before Saturday. I said I'd do it that evening. We said goodbyes and hung up. Anne had come back into the room. She settled on the couch and looked up at me as I joined her there.

"You didn't forget your birthday," she said. "You told me about turning seventeen on Saturday two nights ago."

"Not the same thing," I said. "Selective amnesia. I had to make a point with you about soon becoming legal and that was ammunition in my favor. This is something else entirely. I don't like birthday parties."

"Why?" Anne seemed truly surprised.

"In a nutshell," I said, "I hate being the center of attention for so silly a reason, but always had to endure them until last year. Jim and I went fishing on my birthday. We left early and returned late. Dad was really pissed and thought I was lying about forgetting."

"It is rather difficult to believe," said Anne, poking me in the chest.

"I know, but that's what happened. Could be I hated the idea so much I had selective amnesia, but I really forgot."

"So what now? What are you going to do?"

"Call home and make sure nobody else has anything planned."

Anne went into the bedroom for something as I dialed. When my Dad answered, I told him I was just checking in and told him about the pond, the generator, and some of the day's events. He seemed appropriately impressed. He asked me how Anne was, and I said she was fine. When Dad asked to speak to Anne, I handed her the phone and went to the kitchen to make drinks.

I had no taste for the gin, so I poured another glass of tea and waved to catch Anne's attention. She waved her own half-full glass and shook her head as she talked. Some minutes later, she motioned for me to come take the phone.

"You two are sleeping together," stated Dad. I almost choked on my tea.

"Uh, huh," he said, "I thought so. You people be careful with each other."

I looked over at Anne. She smiled slightly at me, then turned her



attention to Kelly, who was nosing about her legs. What else could I say? "We will, Dad," I said.

"Okay," said Dad. "Have your birthday there, then. Keep in touch."

"Will do," I said, "And thanks, Dad."

We said goodbye. I turned to Anne. She looked back at me innocently for a moment before the small smile returned.

"He guessed, didn't he?"

"He guessed," I said. "I didn't confirm or deny."

"You just inhaled your tea when he mentioned it. A very noncommittal reaction, don't you think? What did he say about it?"

"He said to be careful."

"Anything else?"

"My parents have never been too nosy. They care, but they don't smother."

"God," said Anne. "I wish I could have traded with you. Mine had to know every little detail about everything. They practically planned my dates for me and sometimes they checked to be sure we were on time and on course. Once they called to see if my date and I had arrived at a party. We were dealing with a flat tire when the police found us. My Mother panicked over the twenty minutes or so and used the family clout to have us found and escorted straight home."

She finished her drink and stood up.

"Young man," she said in a mocking tone as she shook her finger in my face. "My daughter will NOT be going out with you again! If you can't keep decent tires on your car, you don't deserve to be with her! Blah! Blah! Blah!"

Anne switched back to her own voice. "Mom wouldn't hear a word in his defense. His tires were only a week old, the nail was in his hand, and none of it made any difference whatsoever to her. I only saw him at school after that."

"Well," I said, "It sounds as if they worried about you, anyway."

"Huh! My Dad was in politics then, but my Mom was the real politician. Looks were everything. No questionable activities. People could get the wrong idea if my date and I were out too late. She took every opportunity to display the perfectly-kept house and kids, and god help us if a hair was ever out of place."

"And you said I had no childhood... I know some kids in Grand Prairie who live on display like that, Anne. A few have been pretty much ruined by it. How'd you deal with it?"

"I didn't. I just lived the picture-perfect role until I married Frank and got the hell away from there. She even tried to use Frank in some political campaign or other. He was flattered as hell; it was one of our first and worst arguments."

"You didn't go along with the idea?"

"I threatened to leave him if he got involved and I meant it. Then Dad died, and her political career was dead in the water, so to speak, so it never came to that."

"She didn't run for office on her own?"

"She wanted to direct," said Anne dryly, "Not act."

Anne got up and went to the kitchen. I patted Kelly a bit and stretched out on the couch. When Anne came back, she had tea instead of booze and a plate of sandwiches.

"Here," she said. "Keep your strength up, mister."

"Yas'm," I said. "This was a good idea."

I used too much mustard. A blob of it squeezed out of the sandwich and fell in my naked lap. Anne giggled and fingered it up, then licked her finger, then leaned over to lick the mustard off me. The thing immediately stood straight up for her, making her giggle.

Anne said, "Mustard on a meat roll... very appropriate, but that's why civilized people put napkins in their laps, you know. How's the rest of your sandwich? All I brought out was what was open."

"You like mustard and you seem to like the effect you have on me," I said. "I'll use a napkin when I'm wearing clothes, if you don't mind."

She shrugged. "Fine by me. Got enough sandwich?"

"It'll be enough if Kelly leaves any for us." I nodded at the plate.

A paw had snagged a slice of the meat at the edge of the plate. The paw and the meat disappeared over the edge. Anne moved the plate to the couch between us. When the paw reappeared, it padded around a little, then eyes followed ears into view.

Kelly looked around, saw the plate wasn't where it had been, and maybe even realized that one slice was his limit. He hovered around the cardboard-box coffee table, but made no more moves on the plate and wouldn't lower himself to begging.

As I neared the end of the last sandwich, I tore a small piece of meat from the edge. Anne was laughing. I looked up to see she had done the same with her sandwich. We put the pieces on the plate and left it near the table edge where it could be reached by someone short, furry, and surreptitious.

"We seem to think alike sometimes," said Anne. "I like that about you, Ed. Some people never quite have that together."

The same thought had occurred to me. I smiled at Anne and munched the rest of the sandwich as I made the promised return call to Jim and Judy. By the end of the call we had made arrangements for them to come out to the farm Saturday morning to see the changes and help with a few things requiring more people.

"Well," said Anne, "that takes care of a few big things on our list and leaves us Tuesday through Friday for work on the small stuff if we feel like it."

"If we feel like it? Anne, I think we need to talk a little more about my being paid for working here. I'm not used to being paid for not working, and now that I consider it, I'm not sure I'm comfortable about being paid at all for being here. Circumstances have changed, I'd say."

"Put your scruples away, Ed. We just have to work out an agreeable method of accounting. How much would you say it would have cost me to install a pond and get the creek fixed? Or to get the generator working if someone had to come out here? Certainly other people were involved with the creek and pond, but who created the ball and got it rolling? That's worth something, Ed."

"I find it difficult to put a price tag on an impulsive idea, Anne. I just thought Don might know where to find a bulldozer around here, so I asked him. The generator was a matter of luck. If the problem had been worse than a little wiring, I probably couldn't have done it without more parts and tools."

"There'll be other things, Ed. Other ideas and more work than you could foresee, that's for sure. If you feel the need, keep a log book of the work you do here. You'll be damned surprised at how much you've accomplished when you look back."

Anne grinned at me and slipped her robe off. "But some of the work pays only in job satisfaction," she said, pulling me close. "I like you more than enough and I'm damned tired of being alone."

Anne held my face in her hands, and her grip was gentle, but rather firm. We were eye to eye as she spoke again.

"Let me explain something to you right now, Ed. It had been over a year and a half since I had sex. My husband flew off to war. HE never came back, but a sexless airplane part that sort of fit his description replaced him for a few months. Then even that goddamned airplane part was taken from me when he died. I've dodged a lot of various types of invitations from all kinds of men since Frank died. When you showed up, some things happened to us in a rush, but for the first time in a long time I don't feel the need to dodge."

"Partly because we can already see the end," I said.

"Yes," she said softly.

"I mentioned it for a reason," I said. "This couldn't have happened if it were otherwise. I just wanted you to know that I accept it. Now it's my turn to make a speech, Anne. I'm yours for the duration. That was the speech."

Anne hugged me silently for several seconds. "You're stuck with me, too," she said. "For the duration, as you put it. Let's make the very, very best of it."

We stood holding each other for quite a while. Somehow a part of me already felt sharply the loss of her. I think Anne knew it. The humor in her voice was strained as she spoke.

"If the mustard stain hasn't set yet," she laughed, "it probably never will, but that's no reason to take the chance."

"You're suggesting a bath?"

"I am."

"I can think of no better reason to get wet, ma'am."

Anne laughed and led the way to the bathroom.

## Chapter Sixteen

Anne and I spent most of the rest of our first weekend at the farm in bed. Hers was a voyage of re-discovery of all the pleasures she'd missed for so long, and I think she probably tossed in a few she'd never had the nerve to try before, thinking I wouldn't know the difference. I wouldn't have, nor would I have cared, since everything about Anne was new and wonderful to me.

We worked by day on the most immediately-needed repairs and spent our nights making love. Sometimes desires would come upon us in the middle of a project. We didn't let the projects interfere with such important matters. They would just have to wait a little longer until we managed to get back to them.

Don showed up the following Saturday evening just before dark in his pickup truck. He'd used painter's plastic drop cloths to make a liner in the bed of the truck and tied on a plywood lid to cover the makeshift portable fishtank, then gone fishing with his two sons.

Don's 8-year-old son proudly announced that 41 of the fish were "his", while his 10-year-old brother had only caught about 37 and he'd even beaten his father's score of 28. Anne and I couldn't believe the number of fish they'd caught.

"Yeah, he caught a few. The sandies were running hard," said Don, "But \*I\* was trying to catch REAL bass. BLACK bass, and SMALLMOUTHS."

"Hey, Dad! MINE are real bass, too! They ARE!" yelled his 8-year-old.

"Yeah, well, I guess so," conceded Don with a wink, "But mine were harder to catch! Now, let's get these fish into their new home."

Anne said she'd be along in a few minutes, so I jumped on the truck's running board and hung onto the door for the ride to the pond. The poor old truck was sagging from the weight of the lake water as we slowly negotiated the rutted trail to the new pond and backed the truck into position at the water's edge.

Anne finished whatever she was doing and caught up with us at the pond in time for the opening.

The weight and pressure of the water made it impossible to open the tailgate. Don took the lid off and both boys climbed in with buckets to bail some water out.

"Watch out for the cats!" yelled Don, grinning as he opened a beer. He opened three folding chairs next to the front of the truck and we sat down to watch the show.

"Catfish clean the bottom and give a good fight," he told us between sips, "They breed fast, too, so there'll be food for the bass."

Don's youngest boy piped up. "We didn't count the catfish, though."

"You know," I said softly, "We could use a hose to siphon off water."

"Yeah, we could," said Don. "But neither of them thought of it, so let them figure it out later and maybe learn to think things through first. I'm interested in seeing how they open the tailgate, too. This way the boys'll be worn out when we get home. A good meal will be all it takes to put them to sleep. See, I have this plan that involves my wife."

"The tailgate?" asked Anne, "Oh. You mean someone will be standing there..? Oh, my..."

"Yup." Don was grinning from ear to ear. "Unless they're smart enough to

lean over and open it while they're standing in the truck," he whispered, "And if not, a few fish won't hurt 'em, but I don't want 'em to turn into typical dumb-assed, know-it-all teenagers."

The boys labored valiantly at getting the water out of the truck. When we saw fish flying out of the buckets, we looked in to see a seething mass of fish more than a foot deep, barely covered by water, in the bed of the truck.

As Don stood by the door, apparently tuning the radio, he casually opined that the tailgate would probably open, now that all that pressure was off it.

The younger boy jumped down and went around to the back of the truck, but the older boy seemed to have reservations.

"Wait!" he said. The younger boy froze, his hand on the handle.

They looked at their dad, who gave them a relatively innocent look and peered into the bed of the truck as if suddenly very interested in the thrashing fish, then they looked at Anne and me.

We tried to give them innocent looks, as well, but Anne giggled, and that started Don and me laughing, too.

The kid looked around himself to see what was... well, ...fishy... about the situation, then he smiled and waved to the younger boy.

"Okay! Go ahead!"

But the younger boy was now suspicious, too. He backed away from the tailgate as if it were electrified and looked around at us. If it hadn't been his older brother saying, "Go ahead," the kid probably would have done it.

"No," he said, "YOU do it."

The older boy shrugged and yanked up on the handle, but the water weight still held it tightly against the mechanism. The younger boy climbed into the truck to help. Together they yanked the handle upward, and this time it moved. Oh, boy, did it move...

Water pressure slammed the tailgate down. The boys were both pulled off the truck, dumped flat on the muddy ground, and inundated with water and fish. As soon as we were sure neither boy was hurt, it was impossible not to laugh, of course.

Don stepped up to them, toeing stray fish toward the water as he spoke, "You boys were smart enough to figure out not to stand in front of it, but not smart enough to realize you'd have to let go of the handle, and we could have used a hose to drain off some of the water. You stopped thinking just a little too soon, fellas. ALWAYS think things all the way through."

After making sure that all the fish had made it to the water, they piled in the truck and left after promising another load of fish the next weekend. Anne and I stood watching the fish recover and disperse into their new home for a while, then headed back to the house in the twilight.

"Those are probably already as many fish as this pond will support," I said, "Don must be using this to make contact with his boys."

"Nope," said Anne, "Those fish were your other birthday present."

I stopped and gave her a wry grin. "I hate cleaning fish, Anne, and I told you how I feel about overly-celebrating my birthdays."

Anne laughed. "Well, then, you'll probably hate the cake, too."

She kept walking. I didn't know whether to believe in the cake or not. I couldn't remember when she might have had an opportunity to sneak a cake into the house, but you never know...

"I know what you're thinking," she said, "Wanda Mae brought it over while you were working in the barn."

"Sneaky."

"That's not the worst of it, sir. You also have to endure a small party AND be gracious when accepting gifts."

"Oh, come on, Anne! You didn't really...?"

"Sorry, Ed. This birthday of yours is mine." She stopped and turned to face me on the path. "It may be the only one you have with me."

I had nothing to say to that. I simply held her close and kissed her. When we entered through the kitchen door, there was a watermelon on the table with a single candle stuck in the top.

"You said you didn't like cake," said Anne, "Will this do?"  
I laughed. "This is better than fine, Anne. I love watermelon."  
She was grinning as she lit the candle. "Well, then, make a wish, blow out the candle, and cut your cake, sir. We're all waiting for a piece of it." She kissed me and said, "I'm the party. Just me."  
"That's absolutely fine. I'm not at all disappointed, Anne."  
"I'm your present, too."  
I looked Anne over carefully from head to toe and kissed her again.  
"Even better. I always wanted one of you," I said softly, "Thank you."  
"A suggestion, then," said Anne, "Unwrap your present now. Watermelon can get messy. And let's take it out on the back porch." I must have looked at her oddly. She giggled softly.  
"That's right. We're going to eat watermelon naked on the back porch and make love under the stars in the open air, Ed."  
"I'll bet I never, ever get a better present," I said.  
"We may even go swimming in the new pond later."

## Chapter Seventeen

I kissed her once for each button as I unfastened her blouse and jeans. Anne was becoming impatient, so I deliberately took my time with the buttons as I kissed her. Her blouse had barely settled on the chair behind me before her hands began to undress me.  
"You know just when to be too damned slow, don't you, Ed?"  
"I was having such a good time..." I began, but Anne grabbed my face in her hands and looked right into my eyes as she firmly repeated, "You know just when to be too damned slow, don't you?"  
"Gee, lady, promise not to hurt me and I'll confess."  
"Your confession isn't what I'm after," said Anne, squeezing a handful of me through my jeans, "But now you're going to have to EARN that watermelon because you kept your birthday present waiting."  
"A-ha!" I said, "I was warned about power-crazed women like you."  
"Were you, now?"  
Anne worked at my shirt. I was already kicking my jeans off.  
"Yup. Always hoped I'd meet one, too."  
I pulled her jeans down and knelt to help her remove them, my face inches from her belly. I ran my hands over her thighs and took a deep breath of her as I kissed her just under her belly button. The scent of her flooded my senses and kissing her bush seemed the only thing to do about it. She was damp and I knew that the watermelon was just going to have to wait.  
I pretended to be moving Anne's legs in order to get her jeans off and suddenly buried my face in her, taking a long, slow lick on her swollen clit. It caught her completely by surprise, and I can only call Anne's reaction a subdued scream.  
I started to look up, but Anne had frozen against the kitchen counter. She grabbed my head in her hands and whispered, "Oh, no. You've started something, mister. Don't you dare stop doing that now."  
So I didn't stop. I didn't stop when at one point she locked me to her so tightly I thought for a moment that I might suffocate.  
That moment was the beginning of a climax that rocked Anne to her very core. I was trying to continue while trying to breathe, but I mostly just marveled at her as she came so hard her knees gave out. Anne slid to the floor in front of me, winded and trembling and glassy-eyed.  
I kissed her deeply while she was in that dazed state, then gently turned her so that I was behind her, leaned her over, and as quickly as possible entered where I'd been happily lapping her earlier.  
Something deep inside Anne offered momentary resistance as I pushed to imbed the last inch or so of myself. The breath gushed out of her in an "Ohmygod!" as whatever it was let me pass to go that last bit deeper.  
I held still a moment to see how she was taking it, then started pulling

back for another deep plunge.

Anne was breathing like a winded runner as I slowly moved myself in and out of her, savoring every sensation, and every time I hit bottom deep inside her she let out a low moan.

I figured it had to be a moan of pleasure, because when I slipped out once she made another kind of frantic little moan and fumbled me back into her almost instantly.

I took my time, too, to admire and taste and kiss her back and shoulders. I held myself deep within her as I ran my fingertips over the muscles of Anne's back and trailed them down her thighs, marveling at the form and feel of her.

Anne began making little bumping motions against me, prompting me to move, so I renewed my plunging strokes. She moved with me a while, but after a few moments, she harshly whispered, "Faster!"

I know an order when I hear one. I moved a bit faster, but it seemed to suit her for only a short while.

The second time she spoke, Anne didn't whisper. She took command. Her left hand ringingly slapped the floor and she yelled at me, "FASTER! Make it happen, Ed! DO-IT-NOW!"

I began ramming into her as deeply and quickly as possible. For a time I heard nothing but our hard breathing and our mutual groans of effort and felt nothing but our battering together.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. Anne told me later that all the little ripples and shocks seemed to blend together into one huge force inside her.

A groan that sounded almost like one of deep pain came from her and continued as Anne held herself firmly in place before me. I tried to keep pounding into her as fast as I could, and that was having an effect on me, too. The tingling in my legs started and I knew I was getting very close.

A woman knows when a man is about to come. She feels the extra bit of swelling and length inside her and the sense of intensity about him.

She'll know, and if it's what she really wants, this knowledge can trigger some very primeval responses within her.

Anne knew I was close even before I did. She began to spasm along the length of me and her groan became a songlike "Aaahhh" that seemed to go on and on, rising and falling somewhat in pitch and volume as we repeatedly slammed together.

My climax was suddenly only a few strokes away. Anne realized it the moment I did. She softly shrieked and bucked against me and gushed in her own orgasm, all at once.

I came hard, almost painfully so, ramming myself deeply into her in a couple of slamming strokes, then instinctively holding myself deep into her as deeply as possible for the impending spurts.

At the first great, heavy-feeling splashing of my semen within her, Anne gave another of those soft screams and froze in place before me, then rested her face on the throw rug and reached behind to grasp the backs of my legs, effectively preventing me from moving.

Since my arms were locked around her waist, it seemed only fair to me. Anne and I held ourselves tightly together for some long moments as more of my spurtings found their way into the depths of her. My dick was throbbing even as it began to soften.

When I was finally squeezed out of her, Anne let herself very slowly down off her knees. I soon found out why. When I tried to move, my knees fairly screamed in pain. I couldn't believe that I hadn't somehow noticed the pain before then. I lowered myself to the floor beside Anne.

"Ow," I said. "Ow-ow-ow."

"Poor, crip-pled BA-by," said Anne, grinning, "Hope I was worth it."

"I was just going to ask you the same thing," I said, "I saw how you hit the floor rather slowly just now, too. It took you almost 30 seconds to get flat."

We lay there recuperating in silence for some time. I pushed myself up far enough to plant a kiss on her lips, then fell back to the floor.

Anne laughed. "A valiant knight giving the last of his all?"

"It definitely feels that way. You're a very demanding woman, Anne."

"Do try to suffer gracefully, sir."

"Will do, Ma'am. And how are you doing?"

"Exhausted. Knees hurt, but the rest of me wants to purr."

"It feels wonderful to hear that. Thank you."

We lay there for a bit, pulling ourselves back together. When we finally got up, we noticed the candle still burning on top of the watermelon.

"Well, I didn't need this," I said, blowing the candle out, "I got my wish with my present. Oh, wait! Damn, I could have wished for new knees..." Anne laughed, kissed me, and headed for the bathroom.

## Chapter Eighteen

I had two slices of watermelon on plates when she returned. She noted my tee shirt wadded in a chair and chose another chair.

"You're going to spoil me," said Anne, digging into her melon.

"Only when I can," I said, "Whenever it's at all possible."

"An admirable sentiment." Anne looked thoughtful. "I wish..."

I waited, but she didn't finish the sentence. I had the feeling I didn't want to hear it, anyway, so I didn't ask her to.

I took her hand and kissed it.

"Be very, very spoiled, then. You'll have to let me spoil you thoroughly, as often as possible, and vigorously."

Anne laughed softly. "I believe that's a reasonable request."

"Excellent. Now, do you really want to swim in the pond after all this melon, or would you prefer to be thoroughly scrubbed in a shower?"

"Shower," she said around some melon, "And maybe after a walk. But we never made it to the door, did we..?"

Anne quickly stood and opened the kitchen door. She took our plates out and set them on the porch table, then came back for the melon. I joined her on the porch. She quickly cut and placed two new slices of melon on our plates.

"Okay. Ready," she said.

"Looks like it. Um... there is one thing, though," I said, as Anne took her seat by the porch rail.

She looked at me questioningly. I didn't speak immediately. I couldn't. I was about to laugh, instead. Then the cow's damp nose made contact with Anne's butt through the porch railings. Anne shrieked and jumped out of her chair, almost toppling the porch table.

The cow backed away, startled and confused. I grabbed a few chunks of melon rind and caught up with her quickly, rubbing the rinds under her nose until she took some, then dropping the rest on the ground near the porch. She looked as dubious as a cow can, but she came over for the rinds, keeping a mildly wary eye on us.

"You could have told me," said Anne, glaring at me.

I laughed. "Didn't see her in time. Are you going to make up with your bovine lawnmower? Toss her some rinds. Let her know it's all right."

Anne speared her new slice of melon and held it as she dumped her plate over the side. The cow didn't hesitate even a second to accept the gift. Watermelon rinds outweighed caution.

"There you go, Ed. The lawnmower's all fixed."

Anne moved her plate around to my side of the table and sat down next to me. "Let's skip the walk for a while," she said.

"Whyzat?" I asked around some melon.

"We're getting sticky and I'm worn out. I think I need a long, hot bath worse than a walk right now."

"Tub or shower? Alone or accompanied?"

"You really have to ask that?"

"I probably should now and then, just to remind you that I know a bath can be a way of having some personal time to think or relax."

"Not this time, but I see what you mean," said Anne, "I'll tell you if I need some time to myself if you'll do the same."

"It's a deal. I was wondering how to bring this up without difficulty. Everybody needs a little time alone at some time. I was actually expecting you to need some in the near future."

"And why is that?" asked Anne, with one eyebrow arched at me.

"You have the farm, the bills, friends and family, and a pile of other things to consider. I don't. I'm just here to be whatever you need. My life is a simple little dream compared to yours."

Anne didn't say anything for a moment, then, "Just be sure to tell me when you need some time to yourself, too, Ed."

"Want the truth? I can't envision that. You're too special and there's too little time in a summer. But if it should happen, I'll mention it."

We finished our melon slices and tossed them to the cow, then leaned back in our chairs and just soaked up the moonlight for a while.

Words weren't necessary; there wasn't much to say. After a while, I heard a soft sound and looked over at Anne. She tried to wipe the tear away before I could see it. I said nothing.

A few moments later, Anne busied herself taking things back into the kitchen. I waited by the porch rail.

When she came back out, she had her sandals and my sneakers. We were taking that walk after all, it seemed. Pushing past the cow near the porch steps, we made our way along the path that led past the barn in silence. I picked up a rake and a broom at the barn and gave her the broom.

"What's this? Am I supposed to fly, now?" She laughed.

"Only if you think you can," I said, "These give us the reach on snakes if we run into any along the way."

I tied an old burlap feed bag over the rake's tines.

Anne looked around quickly. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. Snakes hunt at night. Make noise as you walk and you'll probably never see one, but if you do, keep the broom between you."

I showed her how to use the broom as a shield, close to the ground about a yard away from her feet.

"Hold it still, don't move, and let the snake decide when it's safe to leave. If he strikes at the broom, use that moment to jump back, but don't lose the broom." I showed her what I meant by jumping backward and extending the broom to keep the imaginary snake as far away as possible.

Anne tried it. "You're sure this system works?" she asked.

"The guy from the zoo demonstrated it with three snakes at the Tyler Rattlesnake Roundup last year. He got away clean."

"How nice for him. Do we really need this walk?"

"You seemed to a minute ago. I'm just taking precautions."

Anne just looked at me for a moment, then shouldered her broom like a rifle and led off down the path. I caught up quickly and tapped her shoulder to get her attention and showed her how to keep the broom ready for use.

"Look at us," she said, "Stark naked outdoors in the night, carrying a broom and a rake. I'm going to feel silly if we don't see a snake."

"You won't if we do, though, and you'd feel something else entirely if you met one without the broom."

We walked up the trail to the pond. As we rounded the hill the angle was just right; the entire pond surface was glowing silver in the moonlight. I heard Anne's sigh at the sight of it.

"Oh, my..." she said, stopping to stare. A fish jumped, drawing her gaze, then another jumped at the other end of the pond. Anne was mesmerized.

I moved closer to her and then kept still as she absorbed the view. I, meanwhile, was enraptured with absorbing the view of Anne standing by the pond as if bathing in the moonlight.

A slight film of sweat reflected the light so well she seemed to blend



with the pond as if rising from it. She looked like some kind of goddess to me, and I softly told her so.

"You look like the silver goddess of the lake, Anne."

She turned to see me staring at her, and her eyes widened. "Oh, wow! You're all silvery, too! How wonderful!"

I stepped close, took her in my arms, and kissed her.

"I'll remember this for the rest of my life, Anne. Every time I see moonlight I'll see you again, glowing like a goddess by the water."

I held her to me and kissed her again. Her hands met behind my neck as she pulled me tightly to her. A part of me grew quickly between us. I heard Anne's knowing "Uhm-hum..." and found myself being guided.

Anne didn't allow the kiss to be broken as she pulled me down, then pushed me gently onto my back.

Anne stretched out on top of me, straddling me. She broke the kiss long enough to stare into my face for a moment, then reached back to guide me into her. She worked herself back and down until I was completely within her, placed her hands on my chest, then gave me another long kiss and slowly began to move herself upon me.

Sometimes her eyes were open, sometimes closed, and sometimes they were staring directly into mine. Now and then she would lean down to kiss me or lick my face or neck or shoulder.

Not one word was spoken as she pleased herself on me. I had the feeling that I was being taken or claimed in some manner. Anne smiled knowingly at me and continued smiling as she rode me.

I ran my hands over all of her that I could reach, sometimes pulling her slightly so she'd bend down to kiss me again. Anne would afterward straighten herself and lean back a bit, then slowly move herself up and down my shaft. Her smile, her movements, and her overall manner let me know she was thoroughly enjoying herself.

I couldn't have been happier. A gorgeous silver goddess was using me to pleasure herself under the moon and stars and she seemed in no hurry about it. As far as I was concerned, that moment could have lasted forever. I was so lost in the experiencing of Anne that I forgot completely about myself.

Anne had a series of gentle climaxes. Sometimes they were evidenced by only an overall tensing and a slight hissing of breath. A few caused her to kiss me and moan as she pushed down hard to drive me as deeply as possible, and a few simply caused her to arch her back and sit completely motionless for long moments. I was in absolute awe of her, wrapped completely in the spell of her.

She commanded me when she was ready. She placed a hand to my face, then leaned down to kiss me and allowed a softly whispered, needful, "Nowww..." to escape her.

She then kissed me hard and began forcefully and quickly moving to achieve her goal. It was her time and she wanted it, and that knowledge was all it took to cause the familiar tingling to begin within me.

I held her head in my hands, kissed her deeply, then spoke for the first time in a whispered, "Yes, Anne. Yes, yes, yes..."

Anne moaned and began slamming herself down onto me as she neared her peak. I felt the rush as I prepared to gush myself into her. She felt it too, and gave a little shriek as she moved even faster. Suddenly I couldn't hold it. I grabbed her hips and drove myself into her as I came.

As I splashed inside her, Anne yelled her release to the world. It wasn't one of her soft screams, it was a real yell of release and pleasure that filled the night and was repeated a couple of times as she pounded against me another few strokes, tapering off to a short string of sobs as she spasmed above me.

When she collapsed forward, breathing hard, to rest her face on my shoulder, I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her shoulder, then the back of her neck, and then lay my head back. We didn't move at all except to breathe for what seemed a very long time.

## Epilogue

Cyndi was still reading as I drowsed next to Vickie. After lovemaking, Vickie and I had sat up talking for an hour or so about how to get my stories published. I told her that the paper presses represented the old, hard way of it, and that I wanted to see my stuff on CD's, being sold as E-books on the internet, as I developed it.

"Isn't that a rather limited audience?" she asked.

"For now. Computer prices fall a little more just about every time someone cranks out a new model. Then there are the hand-held types. Every yuppie out there will have to have one to keep up appearances in the office, just like they have to have pagers and cell phones now. Commuters and lunch-hour readers will have them. You won't need a computer or laptop to check your email or do the basic communications chores."

"I dunno," she said, "I've always thought of books as being, well, BOOKS. You know, with pages and covers and all that."

"Those won't disappear. In fact, there will probably be more than ever."

"That doesn't quite make sense to me," said Vickie. "Isn't the E-book going to be competition? If it's successful, won't it make a dent in paper publishing?"

"Vickie," I said, "E-books will make a dent like a hammer on a wad of clay. There'll be all kinds of them everywhere."

She looked at me questioningly. "And how is that going to help the paper people?"

"The paper publishers have been buying each other up for decades. Now there are only a few big publishing houses and relatively few little ones. The big ones can no longer afford to take a chance on publishing a book that won't sell hard and make big money fairly quickly. A book has to promise blockbuster sales or they won't publish it as anything but a tax drop. The bigger a publishing house becomes, the more it costs to feed it. At the moment, they tend to want to ignore E-books or they fear them as a minor form of competition that will merely chisel away extremely tiny pieces of their empires. BUT... let's say an E-book suddenly becomes big news and a big seller and the paper publishers don't have a piece of it at all. What will they do?"

"Probably try to get a piece of it."

"You got it. That one will be the wake-up call. All of a sudden a bunch of smiling lawyers will descend from the paper publishers' Mount Olympus to make a deal and the financial success of E-books will become a screening mechanism instead of a threat. Soon after that, a successful E-book will almost automatically be published in paper. Much of the editing and marketing of the book will have been done before the paper people grab it, so not only is there less risk, there's less work and less expense."

"And you think this is definitely the future? You don't think you're taking a chance by not sending your stories to real publishers?"

"Real? Real doesn't only mean paper, Vickie. Real is when you have an ISBN number on your work and it's being bought all over the world on CD's, just like music. How many of those music CD's in the living room did you buy off the internet this year? How many come with music sheets or covers? They don't play themselves. All require a reading device."

"That's a little different, Ed."

"Only a little, Vickie. Fifty-eight percent of the U.S. population plays or works with computers. If I began submitting my book to paper publishers today, and the first publisher grabbed it out of tomorrow's mail delivery, it would still be eighteen months to three years before I could see a copy on a bookshelf. In that same span of time, the E-book will have become a serious presence in the on-line marketplace."

"What about money, Ed? Wouldn't you make more with paper books?"

"Only IF your work is published, and even then, only maybe. Authors make an average of only fourteen cents per paperback sold. Current chances of

getting published are slim as hell, too. Editors are backlogged with vast piles of manuscripts, good and bad, from aspiring writers. It can be a year or more before your manuscript is even read by an intern and it may be rejected by that intern, and then you have to submit it somewhere else. I'm fifty years old, Vickie, even if I don't act it most times. I don't have time to wait for years."

"Is that what this is really about? You think this is your only chance at publication?"

"I think some really good manuscripts by writers better than I'll be if I live another fifty years are gathering dust in publishing-house inboxes. They desperately dream of being published by a name company and having a logo on their covers and can't envision their work in any other but the traditional format. They wear their rejection slips with pride, like dueling scars, and speak fatuously of 'paying their dues'. They keep sending their manuscripts back out in new envelopes, and they wait to be discovered like all the wanna-be's who go to Hollywood to become stars."

"So instead of waiting to become a discovered star, you're making your own movie?"

"That's about the size of it. A couple of years from now, when the paper pubs are smiling instead of sneering and fearing, wide new parameters will open. Maybe one of them will pick up my books and print them. I don't much give a damn. The E-book market will be so large it won't really matter. I have five books ready to go now. In another couple of years I can have another five as good as "Anne" or better."

"Back to the money, Ed. What's the overall difference in dollars?"

"Crass and greedy woman! This is ART!"

I sat up straight and tried to look shocked.

"Yeah, yeah. Right," said Vickie with a grin, "How much?"

"Don't know," I said, "Per book, a helluva lot better than paper, even though E-books are often much cheaper than paperbacks. Just gotta sell a whole bunch of E-books."

I was almost asleep when I heard a noise from the front room that started me awake. Vickie was already sound asleep and an artillery barrage wouldn't have wakened her.

"Jeez!" said Cyndi softly. I heard her chair scoot back and the slap of her bare feet on the kitchen floor, then the opening and closing of the fridge and the pop/hiss of a beer or soda being opened. For several moments there was silence, then more footsteps.

"Hey, Ed, are you asleep?" Cyndi came in to stand by the bed.

I opened my eyes without looking up. "You have lovely legs, Ma'am."

"Thanks, so do you. I have a question." She sounded serious.

I sat up and swung my legs off the bed. "Shoot."

"Are you gonna write about us someday, too?"

"If you want, I will. If you don't, I won't."

"Okay. I'll think about it and let you know. I feel so dirty right now."

That startled me. "What? Because of my story?"

Cyndi grinned. "Hell no, dummy. Because I haven't had a shower yet."

I grinned back. "Would you like some assistance, MiLady?"

"You're so helpful, Ed. Yes, I think I'd like some assistance."

\* \* \* \* \*

That wonderful moment by the moonlit pond is where I chose to end this story. Summer ended, as summers do, and we parted, as people sometimes must, and I have carried Anne in my heart forever after.

I saw Anne again many times during the school year and shared a wonderful weekend with her just before I went into the Army in March of 1967, but that magical, silvery moment by our pond has always seemed to be our pinnacle for me.

That night I had pleased her to her very core and doing so had fulfilled

myself to my own core of being. It seemed to justify my existence in the universe.

No woman I've met or married since has quite been of her stature in my mind and heart, although several have made their own marks very high up the wall. I guess the first is the one we all cherish.

Anne set my course in love and filled my sails at the beginning. She set the standards of all my future encounters with women, and I don't just mean sexual encounters.

I had to be what she needed OFF the farm, as well. An element of maturity in a man, however young and in whatever public role, was necessary. Being with Anne meant being whatever kind of man she needed.

I still have that need and desire to bring forth a woman's pleasure and will probably die happily in a valiant effort to reach the last tiny ounce of pleasure in a woman. Hopefully I'll succeed first...

End ANNE

For my other Ebooks, Articles, and Undefined Works,  
visit Abintra Press! - <http://abintrapress.tripod.com>  
or WiccaWorks! - <http://www.wiccaworks.com>  
FILE SOURCE: Abintra Press, <http://abintrapress.tripod.com>