

Bawdy Talk
By
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Chapter One

Julie kicked a beer bottle to one side and stepped behind the dust covered counter. Her eyes surveyed the dismal scene – row after row of empty shelves, rusting refrigerated units and ancient signs on the walls advertising tobacco products and soft drinks, many of which were no longer available. She glanced to the left at what used to be the small adjoining restaurant. She pictured the smiling face of her blond-haired mother, moving from table to table taking orders, then rushing to the grill and back to the tables; arms loaded with plates of delicious food.

She pictured her dad, pumping gas and ringing up sales on the old cash register. She ran her fingers over the typewriter-like keys of the huge, outdated monster. She pushed the No Sale key and grinned at the "ca-ching" sound as the cash drawer popped open.

"That'll be four fifty," she said to an imaginary customer. She stretched out her hand to receive the offered ten-dollar bill. "Four fifty out of ten," she said, placing the phantom bill on the ledge of the cash register and pulling nonexistent change from the drawer. "Thank you, Mr. Brewster," she said and she imagined her father looking up from the shelf he was restocking.

"Come again, now. Ya hear?" he would have said.

Those were good days, Julie thought as she squatted to examine the all but empty space under the counter.

"Anybody home?" a male voice boomed.

Julie screamed and jumped to her feet, her hand pressed against her pounding heart.

The sandy-haired man grinned sheepishly. "Take it easy," he said. "I'm not going to molest you. I just need some gas."

Julie forced herself to chuckle. "You startled me, mister. Rape is one disaster I never have to worry about. As far as gas is concerned, you're out of luck. There hasn't been any gas in these tanks for years."

"I ... I didn't realize you were closed. I saw the car outside and just assumed..."

"The little town of Dot is down the road about fifteen miles. You'll

find a couple of service stations there."

The stranger shifted his weight uncomfortably and looked at the floor. "What I really need is a restroom."

Julie smiled at his obvious discomfort. "You guys have it all over us gals when it comes to that kind of problem." She gestured towards the door. "Just hide behind a tree next to the building and have at it. I promise I won't peek."

His eyes remained focused on the toes of his shoes. "Sometimes it isn't that simple, even for a guy."

"Oh," she said as she felt her face coloring. "There are restrooms in the back of the restaurant, but there may not be any toilet paper. Hell, I'm not even sure the water is running." She retrieved her handbag from the counter and produced a small packet of tissues. "Better take these with you, just in case."

The man accepted the tissues while avoiding eye contact. "I'll check the water before making a mess," he muttered.

Julie smiled at his embarrassment, roamed to the dingy glass front of the store and peered out at the old Ford pickup, parked next to her new Cavalier. She noted that the bed of the pickup was loaded and covered with a tarpaulin. She fantasized briefly about the man, trying to visualize him as the handsome hunk he was, but all her mind's eye could envision was his muscular body sitting on the porcelain throne with his pants around his ankles.

She heard water running in groaning pipes and turned towards the entrance to the restaurant area. She grinned when he appeared through the opening. "Everything come out okay?" she joked.

He looked away, but he, too, was smiling. "Pounds lighter," he replied. "Water works fine. I flushed twice just to be sure I didn't leave any, uh, souvenirs behind. I appreciate it," he concluded as he moved past her towards the exit door. He paused.

"Forget something?"

He turned, faced her and cocked his head to one side. "I know it's none of my business, but you said something earlier that I can't seem to shake. May I ask you a personal question?"

"You may ask, but I may not answer."

He nodded. "Fair enough. I'm sure you read the papers and watch TV news. There are a lot of crazies running around in this old world of ours. Even kids rape kids these days. Why is it that you are not afraid of being sexually assaulted?"

"You thinking about proving me wrong?"

"Of course not. That's not what I meant at all."

"Look at me, Clyde. You're not blind, are you? I'm six feet tall, skinny as a toothpick, my face looks like a mule and I'll bet your chest is bigger than mine. I can't find a guy willing to be caught between the sheets with me, let alone take me on a public date. My physical appearance is better protection than mace, pepper spray and a shotgun combined."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. I was not expecting that answer. You didn't impress me initially as a woman with such low self-esteem."

"I'm not, damn it," she shot back. "Man cannot live by bread alone, but a woman sure as hell can live without a man. For your information, Clyde, I put myself through college and make a damn good living as a freelance illustrator."

"I'm impressed," he said as he looked into her green eyes. "The name is Cliff – not Clyde."

"All men are Clydes to me."

Cliff nodded, no longer smiling. "Thank you for the use of your facilities." He turned, placed his hand on the doorknob and hesitated. Again, he faced her. "May I kiss you?"

Julie's eyes widened. Her throat was suddenly dry and her feet seemed nailed to the floor as she watched him approach. She felt his hands on either side of her face, saw his lips drawing closer, and felt them on her forehead, her left eyebrow, her right eyelid, and her nose. What was she supposed to do? His hands moved to the small of her back and pulled her closer. His brown eyes seared her brain. His lips touched hers. They tugged on her lower lip, then the upper. Hell, in the movies, lovers touch tongues, she thought. Is that what I should do? She parted her lips slightly, but it was too late.

Cliff stepped back with a serious expression on his face and eyes

locked on hers. "You either need to buy a new mirror or have your eyes examined," he said softly. "Man can live without woman too, Pretty Lady, but it's not much of a life."

Julie was speechless. She watched him walk through the door to his pickup. As he opened the truck door she recovered and stepped outside. "Julie," she shouted. "My name is Julie, not Pretty Lady."

He climbed into the pickup, closed the door and rolled down the window. "All women are pretty ladies to me," he replied with a smile on his face that caused her to tremble. He touched his finger to his eyebrow in a parting salute, cranked the engine and drove away.

Julie watched the truck disappear and stepped back inside the decaying building. They say a girl never forgets her first kiss, she thought, and I'll bet they're right. She shook her head sadly. Thirty-seven years old and a total stranger gives me my first real kiss.

She wandered through the restaurant area and, with childhood memories flooding her mind, could not suppress the tears. The restaurant and motel have been closed for fifteen years, she recalled. God, how I'd love to restore everything. She shuddered when she saw the filthy men's room. Sorry, Clyde. It's the best I had to offer.

She sat in the corner booth where she ate her meals as a child and reminisced. They worked so hard all those years – twelve, fifteen hours a day seven days a week – but there was so much love. I worked hard too, she silently recalled, but it seemed like play. It wasn't play, though. Not for Mom, at least. She worked herself into an early grave. Now Dad is resting beside her.

A horn sounded in the parking lot and Julie glanced at her watch. "Right on time," she mumbled. She walked to the front door and watched a nice looking man hold open the door of an old, restored, red Mustang convertible. A gorgeous woman, about Julie's height, emerged. Damn, Julie thought. She's as flat chested as I am. I wonder if I fixed myself up a little... She laughed. Naw.

She extended her hand as the couple approached. "I'm Julianna Wilson," she said. "Please call me Julie."

"Tim Dollar," the man said, firmly gripping her hand. "This is my wife, and the brains of Dollar Enterprises, Sandy."

"The place is filthy," Julie apologized, "but please come in."

"Our condolences, Miss Wilson," Sandra said sincerely. "Are you sure you want to discuss business just hours after your father's funeral?"

"I mean no disrespect for my father, Mrs. Dollar. He knew how much I loved him. I visited every weekend the three years he was in the nursing home and was by his side the two weeks he was in the hospital. I was holding his hand when he went to be with mom. Now it's time for me to wrap things up here and get on with my life."

"You live in Charleston I believe you said," Tim offered.

"I'm a freelance illustrator, so it doesn't matter much where I live. Charleston is an artist's dream with its old mansions and hanging moss." Julie motioned with her head towards the open archway. "I've cleaned up the back booth in the old restaurant area," she said as she turned and led the way, "but I'm afraid I don't have any refreshments to offer you."

"Not a problem," Sandra replied while sliding across the torn plastic seat.

Tim coughed and pulled a small notebook from his pocket. "On the telephone you mentioned an offer I once made to your dad."

Julie nodded. "In the hospital, Dad said you offered to buy the entire place. It's been in the family for generations and I know he would prefer for me to keep it, but I have no desire to reopen the business and I can't afford to pay taxes on land I don't use."

Tim nodded. "Miss Wilson, after your telephone call, I looked up my notes on your property. I hate to tell you this, but it just isn't worth much. You have one thousand acres, the motel, service station and restaurant – all in a terrible state of repair. When I initially made an offer to your dad, I was thinking of building a housing complex on the land. Your dad refused my offer, so I went in another direction."

"Our only interest at this point, Julie," Sandra said, "is in tearing down the buildings and putting up a new service station and, perhaps, a gift shop."

Julie's brows creased. "I don't understand."

"We have no use for the restaurant and motel. Frankly, it will

probably cost less to tear down the structures and rebuild than it would to remodel."

Julie shook her head. "What I meant was, why would you want to own a service station on Highway 13? The Interstate took all the traffic off 13 and destroyed Dad's business in the process."

Tim nodded. "It did, but things have changed. Sandy and I built a large recreational complex on the other side of Dot. It is very successful and draws people from several states. Those coming from the east have found 13 to be a shortcut to Dot, Lake Norman and Charlotte. That's why the highway department upgraded and repaved the road."

"Then all the traffic I've noticed on the highway is not my imagination."

Sandra smiled. "Would you consider selling us about ten acres of highway frontage?"

Again, Julie frowned. "According to Dad, you wanted the whole thing."

"That was then. This is now," Tim said apologetically.

"But I wouldn't accomplish anything by selling just ten acres."

"I know," Tim sighed. "Sandy and I discussed it at great length. We just don't know what we would do with all this land, but if you must sell it all, we are prepared to offer you a hundred dollars an acre."

Julie stared in disbelief.

"That's one hundred thousand dollars, dear," Sandra cooed.

"That's an insult," Julie replied without thinking. "Oh, wait. I'm sorry. That didn't come out right."

Tim smiled. "Yes, it did, Miss Wilson. Our offer is an insult, but it's the best we can do. You said it doesn't matter where you live. Why don't you move here permanently and reopen just the service station? Hire somebody to run it for you and see what happens."

Julie was near tears. "I appreciate you coming out here today. I really do. It's just that I think the land should be worth much more. I'm going to have to rethink the whole process. Just so I can consider all angles, what will you offer me for the ten acres of road frontage?"

"A thousand dollars an acre," Sandra replied.

"But that's the same total you're offering for the whole place."

Sandra reached across the table and placed her hand on Julie's. "Think about it, dear."

What I think, you bitch, is that I'd like to cram my foot up your scrawny butt, Julie thought as she forced a smile to her lips.

Julie watched the Dollars depart, paying particular attention to the extremely short shirt the woman was wearing and the way her buttocks swayed as she walked. She moved towards the dingy counter, trying to imitate Sandra's sexy gait and burst out laughing. "I don't have a tail to wag," she said to the empty room.

She looked once more at the familiar surroundings and saw things as they used to be, not as they actually were. There must be somebody in Dot who will give a fair price for Dad's ... my land, she thought as she turned off the lights. She chuckled when she remembered a realtor's ad in the *Dot Courier*. "Creasy Green Real Estate and Insurance," the ad proclaimed. Well, Mr. Creasy Green, I think I'll see what you can do for me.

She locked the door, climbed into her Cavalier and headed for her motel room in Dot. The FM station on the car radio was fading in and out. She punched the "seek" button and listened to the next station just long enough to realize it was a National Public Radio broadcast. She again punched "seek," and listened to the concluding familiar strains of a Budweiser commercial.

"You are listening to the voice of Dot, North Carolina, WFNS, your friendly neighborhood station."

Damn, Julie thought. Dot has it's own radio station. How about that!

A sultry female voice caused Julie to turn up the volume.

Okay, boys and girls, it's time to turn off the radio and go watch cartoons on television. The next four hours are for adults only.

Julie grinned, turned the volume up another notch and noticed in the rearview mirror a car quickly overtaking her.

This is Delilah Delight with another four hours of Bawdy Talk. Thanks for turning me on. Now all you guys stuck in Charlotte traffic,

honk your horns if you want the delicious babe in the car next to you to flash her breasts.

The approaching car with horn blaring whipped around Julie and then slowed to keep pace. The driver pointed at his chest and then at her. Julie shrugged her shoulders, pretending she didn't understand and, as the car zoomed ahead, she thought, I wish there was something to show you, Clyde.

Here's a letter drawn randomly from today's fan mail. J. T. writes, "I have something I'm willing to share with you, Delilah. It's thirteen inches long with a diameter of a silver dollar and, believe me, it's really a delight."

Sounds tempting, J. T. but thirteen is my unlucky number. Sorry, Sugar. Tell you what, send me a photo and I might change my mind.

Now let's see. Here's one from Baby Doll. "Please don't read this on the air." Hmm. Sorry, Baby Doll. Scuse me a minute everybody while I see what Baby Doll has on her mind. Dum, dum, dum, de dum. Okay, Baby Doll, here's your answer. Of course I enjoy doing it. Guys do. Why shouldn't us gals? And I'll bet you're delicious down there, aren't you?

Julie blushed when she realized what Delilah Delight was talking about. She reached for the "seek" button but changed her mind.

I know you guys and gals have your speed dials programmed, but just in case we have new listeners today, Delilah's number is 555-WFNS. You horny toads on the highways, be very careful. Today's topic is going to raise a bumper crop of boners and soak some panties too.

As I sit here with earphones on my head and a microphone just inches from my lips, I am stroking the naked flesh of my left arm with the fingertips of my right hand. It feels soooo good. Sometimes we just have to pleasure ourselves. Right guys?

Give me a call and tell me when and where you do it and, if you're brave enough, tell me how you do it. Remember, my horny friends, the FCC may be listening and they don't like naughty words used on the airways. Make up a word if you need to. Delilah will understand.

Uh, oh, the phones are already ringing. Let's take this one first.

Hi, there. You're on the air.

Delilah? Is that you?

Yes dear. What's your name?

Uh, Candy.

Oh, that's sweet. Tell Delilah all about it, Candy.

Well, I don't have a boyfriend right now so I spend a lot of time in the shower.

Does that help?

Yeah, if you shower my way. I have one of those pressure things on a hose and I start off spraying my, uh, boobs.

Which one first, Candy?

Uh, usually I start out with the left one.

And?

I wait until it gets all tingly and then move to the right one. When it feels like it's on fire I move back to the left and change the spray to a fine stream and squirt it on my, uh, thingee.

You may say nipple, Candy.

I don't mean nipple. I focus on my areola.

Ah! The sensitive parts of the breast horny toads always overlook. Go on, Candy. You're getting to me.

Well, I switch back and forth until my legs get weak.

What happens to your nips while you're doing this?

Oh, God, Delilah. You wouldn't believe how long and hard they get.

What next, Candy?

When my legs will no longer keep me upright, I sit on the shower floor and direct the stream slowly down my stomach low enough to tease. Then I go back up to my boobs. I repeat this until I can stand it no longer, spread my legs and...

When Julie realized her hand was between her thighs, she snapped off the radio. "I can't believe they allow that," she said aloud as she mopped perspiration from her forehead. "Damn, where am I?"

She pulled to the side of the street and chuckled. How the hell did I get into downtown Dot? I must have turned right instead of left at the traffic light, but I don't remember going through the intersection. Talk

radio sure isn't what it used to be.

Since the Dot Baptist Church was at the end of the street, Julie decided to visit her dad's grave one more time while it was still daylight. She eased back onto the road, passed the BB&T Bank, the Dot Pharmacy, the Post Office and turned into the church parking lot. What's he doing here? she wondered as she parked beside Cliff's pickup.

Chapter Two

Julie sat in her Cavalier for several minutes, watching a motionless Cliff, standing at the foot of her father's grave at the far end of the church cemetery. He just stood there with head bowed. Somehow it set a mood of sincere reverence and Julie closed the car door as quietly as she could when she emerged from the vehicle. Not wanting to startle him, she walked on the flagstone path, rather than take a shortcut through the neatly manicured grass where her footsteps would not be heard.

He turned as she approached and smiled. "Hello again," he said softly.

She nodded. "I didn't expect to find you here."

"I asked a lady at the Korner Kafe about you. She told me your father's funeral was this morning. I'm so sorry, Pretty Lady."

Again she nodded. "Thank you, but why are you here?"

"Somehow I wanted to pay my respects to the father of a unique young woman."

"I consider myself neither unique nor young."

"You may not be unique. I barely know you. I'm often guilty of reading into a person's body language things that are not there, but I think we must be about the same age and I consider myself young."

"Same age? Hell, Clyde, you can't be a day over twenty-five. I'm thirty-seven."

"Twenty-six," he corrected. The magic smile returned to his face. "You *are* an old lady."

"And you're just a baby."

He glanced back at the mound of red clay, partially covered with flowers. "I guess you would like some time alone, Julie. Again, I'm sorry for your loss."

Without thinking, she placed her hand on his arm. "Cliff, it was nice of you to come here. Most of Dad's friends died before him. There were only a dozen people at the funeral this morning and I didn't even know the pallbearers. The preacher looked after that."

"The congregation didn't know him?"

"Dad didn't spend much time in church. He was always working and the last few years he was in a nursing home in Charlotte."

Cliff nodded and turned to leave.

Julie delayed him by tightening her grip on his arm. She looked into his eyes, placed her hands gently on his ears, stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "Thanks again, Cliff."

She watched him slowly walk towards the parking lot and, as he approached his truck, she faced the new grave and sat cross-legged on the ground.

"Hey, Dad. Guess what? A man kissed me today. It wasn't the kind of kiss you used to give mom, but hey, a girl's gotta start somewhere. Wherever you are, I'll bet you're holding mom in your arms and covering her with kisses right now. Be happy, Dad. You deserve it."

She crawled on her knees to the side of the mound and rearranged the flowers. "I don't know what I'm going to do with the place, Dad. Like you said, Mr. Dollar offered to buy it, but he admitted the offer was an insult. I think I'll put it in the hands of a real estate broker tomorrow and see what happens."

She sighed. "I know you would like for me to keep it. Sometimes I think maybe I should. It's been in the family for what, five generations? A ton of tobacco has grown on that land, but, as you know, there's no market for tobacco these days. Running the store, restaurant and motel was fun, but it was hard work with long hours too. I'm just not up to that, Dad."

She sniffed the air and began to salivate. "I must be hallucinating, Dad. I thought I caught a whiff of Mom's barbecue. I wish I had the recipe. Boy, that made a great sandwich. I remember standing with you at the barbecue pit and watching the pigs turn on the spit. Somehow you knew just when to add hot coals to the fire."

Julie dug into her handbag, looking for a packet of tissues. Cliff must have used them all, she thought as she stood and wiped away the tears with her fingers.

"I have an appointment with your lawyer in the morning, Dad. There are papers to sign and I suppose I'll find out if there was any

money left in your bank account. I love you, Dad. I always have and I always will."

She turned and screamed.

"I'm sorry, Julie," Cliff said, handing her a key ring. "You dropped these in the parking lot."

"How long have you been standing there?"

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, Julie."

"You must be punished for your transgressions," she said, hooking her arm in his. "Take me to dinner."

He nodded solemnly and they headed for the parking lot. "Yes, ma'am. I looked around the town a little today. We have a choice of dining at Papa John's Pizza or the Korner Kafe."

"I've eaten several times at the Korner Kafe. They have a delicious country style steak special."

"Then the Korner Kafe it is."

While waiting for their meals to be served, Julie said, "You seemed embarrassed when Maggie Bennett showed us to our table."

He nodded. "I made a big 'fox paw' this afternoon. I came here to apply for a job and talked with the owners, Maggie and her husband."

"So?"

"They have the same last name and he must be twice her age. I assumed he was her father."

Julie laughed. "I take it that you didn't get the job. Is age that important in a relationship, Clyde?"

"They said they have no openings at the moment so, no, I didn't get the job. I don't suppose age matters much. I haven't really thought about it."

"I assume you are an unemployed chef. Where did you come from? Where are you headed? Why in the world would you be interested in locating in Dot?"

Cliff sat back as the teenage waitress brought their order and thanked her politely when the last plate was on the table. He reached for the salt. "I don't consider myself a chef," he said, "but I have some experience in a kitchen. Let's see now, where did I come from? Raleigh. Where am I going? Well, I don't know exactly. I want to

get away from Raleigh. I spent several unsuccessful days looking for work in Greensboro, High Point and Winston-Salem. I was on my way to Charlotte when I stumbled on this little community. I asked about work at the Super Save but they don't have any openings either, so I think I'll spend the night in the motel and go to Charlotte in the morning. Any more questions?"

"Hell, yes," she replied as she picked up her glass of iced tea. "You have me thoroughly confused. Why did you want to get out of Raleigh so bad? You said you are a chef, but the Super Save is a service station and garage. What am I missing here?"

Cliff eyed the ceiling for a minute before looking back at Julie. "I ... I'm kind of a loner, Julie. I don't like many people, but I do like you. Somehow, years from now when I think back on our brief encounter, I'd like to think that you like me too. Now I must make a decision. Do I lie to you so that you will remember me kindly, or tell you the truth and have you despise me like everyone else does?"

"Cliff, I didn't mean to get this personal. Do you think it will rain tonight?"

He chewed slowly, swallowed, sipped his tea and blotted his lips with a paper napkin. "I have no idea who my father is. We lived on welfare – Mom and me. There were plenty of men coming and going while I was growing up. The day I graduated from high school, Mom left with one of them. I haven't heard from her since. I started running with the wrong crowd while I was still in grade school. I'm not offering this as an excuse. It's a statement of fact. I began using drugs and had to find a way to pay for them. We did some housebreaking, but that wasn't very lucrative. People don't keep cash in their homes and fencing VCRs and televisions is not very profitable. We robbed a few gas stations, but that wasn't profitable either. They don't keep much cash in their registers. Finally I started pushing drugs and got caught."

Julie reached across the table and gripped his wrist. "You don't have to do this, Cliff."

He looked at her and nodded. "Yes, I do. I served three years of a five-year sentence. I was on parole for three years. That ended

roughly a year ago. Mr. Keaton became my sponsor and gave me a job as a mechanic in his Crabtree Garage. He's a good man, Julie. He could have worked me at minimum wage, but he didn't. He paid me a competitive salary. That's why I stayed with him a year after my parole ended."

"What happened?"

The Crabtree Mall wanted to expand and his property stood in their way. They made him an offer he couldn't refuse. I spent three horrible years in Central Prison in Raleigh and another four years living in its shadow. I had to get away."

"While you were in prison, were you, uh, abused?"

He smiled thinly. "Was I a victim of homosexual rape?" He shook his head. "I know that happens sometimes, but nobody bothered me. Having your freedom taken away is more horrible than I can describe, but my years in prison were good for me. They got me off drugs. I worked in the kitchen for a year and in the garage for two years. I read everything I could get my hands on."

"So that's how you can be both a chef and a mechanic."

The thin smile returned. "I never said I was a chef, but I can make a mean hobo stew for 600 people."

"Being an ex-con makes it hard for you to find a job, doesn't it?"

"Would you hire me, now that you know?"

"Have you gone back to using drugs or smoking pot?"

"No, and I never will. I enjoy a beer once in a while, but that's it."

"Then it's a shame I don't have a job to offer, because I would hire you in a heartbeat."

"It's kind of you to say that."

"I mean it."

He studied her sparkling green eyes and took a deep breath. "I believe you and, since an honest account of my life history didn't scare you off, I'm going to stretch my luck."

Julie arched her eyebrows.

"I want to make love to you, Julie."

"Don't joke about that, Clyde."

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

"I'm ugly as a Tasmanian Devil."

"I've already told you that you need glasses or a new mirror."

She dropped her eyes and softly said, "I don't know how." She looked up. "You found out earlier today I don't even know how to kiss a man."

"It was a beautiful kiss, Julie."

Julie forced a smile to her face and tried to turn the conversation into a joke. "I have a porno channel on cable at my apartment in Charleston. I could imitate the actions of the huge breasted women in those triple X films."

He shook his head, refusing to return her smile. "That's exaggerated animal sex, Julie. I didn't say I wanted to screw you. I said I want to make love to you."

"There's a difference?"

He nodded. "Making love and intercourse are not necessarily the same thing. I can teach you, Julie. Let's get out of here, go somewhere, do something and see what happens."

"Do what?"

"I don't know. I heard someone say there is a nice swimming pool just west of Dot."

She laughed aloud. "I don't own a bathing suit and I wouldn't let anyone see me wearing one if I did."

"You staying in this motel?"

She nodded.

"Me too. We can go to your room or mine."

She pushed back her plate, no longer hungry, and she gulped the remainder of her iced tea, hoping it would cure the bitter dryness of her mouth. "Do you have prophylactics?"

"Rubbers?"

"I'm not on the pill."

"I have some."

"Will you do it with the lights off? Total darkness?"

"No, but we can have dim lighting if you like."

She reached for his glass of water and drained it. "I hope I don't hate either you or myself in the morning, but more importantly, I hope

you won't hate me." She looked at him for several seconds with her mouth moving, but saying nothing. Finally the words came. "Teach me tonight."

Cliff paid the bill and Julie's mind was reeling. His hand on her hip as they walked to her motel room sent shivers up and down her spine. Taking the key from her, Cliff unlocked the door, reached inside and snapped on the light. She closed and locked the door and watched him close the blinds and turn off all but one lamp on the desk opposite the double bed. She took a deep breath and, in an almost inaudible voice, said, "Do you want me to take off my clothes now?"

"Would you like to take off your clothes?"

"No."

"Then don't. What would you like to do?"

"I ... I want to brush my teeth."

He smiled broadly and she felt her knees weaken. "Go for it."

Julie stood at the sink, squeezed toothpaste onto her brush and, while scrubbing her teeth, looked into the mirror. He was standing behind her, still smiling. She felt his hands on her hips and shuddered as they slid to her lower stomach. She sighed when his lips touched her neck. He tightened his grip, pulling her into him and, although it was her first experience, she knew what it was that pressed against her buttocks. The sense of power she felt came as a total surprise.

She leaned over, pressing her bottom more firmly against him, spit out the toothpaste and collected a handful of water with which to rinse. She straightened up and moaned as his hands traveled up her stomach and cupped her breasts.

"You lied," he whispered. "Mine are not nearly this big."

She turned for the expected embrace but he sidestepped and reached for her toothbrush.

"Do you mind?"

She shook her head and, as he began to brush his teeth, pressed against him and circled him with her arms as he had done.

"Don't be afraid to let me feel them," he said with toothpaste drooling from the corners of his mouth.

She leaned forward and nibbled his ear.

He rinsed, turned and pulled her to him. She closed her eyes and parted her lips as his lips descended. She tried to concentrate on the sensation of his tongue gently probing her mouth, her breasts flattening against his chest and his hands tenderly fondling her buttocks. She gave up, sagged into him and let her tongue chase his deep inside his mouth.

He pulled his lips away and flashed his special smile. "Some things just come naturally, Pretty Lady." He clasped her hand and tugged her into the bedroom.

Julie watched him turn back the coverlet and prop the pillows against the headboard. "I'll take off my clothes now if I must."

"Just your shoes," he replied, moving to the opposite side of the bed.

Confused, she watched him sit on the bed, remove his shoes and scoot onto the mattress with his back against the pillow and headboard. She joined him and allowed his arm around her shoulders, tugging her closer. She rested her head on his shoulder and felt his hand stroking her hair.

"You loved your parents very much, didn't you Pretty Lady?"

"Yes, but since he raised me from the time I was fourteen, I was closer to Dad."

"You love the home-place too."

Julie nodded against his chest. "I have a brain full of wonderful memories."

"It's going to take some work to fix it up. Are you going to open the restaurant and motel?"

"Oh, no," she replied. "I ... I'm going to sell the whole thing. My life is in Charleston now. Tim Dollar made me an offer today, but I'm going to try to find someone who wants it a little more than he does."

"Tim Dollar?"

"He and his wife, Sandy, own half of Dot."

"Rich dudes."

"Yeah."

"Tell me about your mom's barbecue."

"It's not like anything you ever tasted. Dad would roast a whole pig

in a coal-fired pit out back."

"Coal?"

Julie chuckled. "Sounds terrible, doesn't it? He actually used two pits. He let the coal burn to hot, smokeless embers and then shoveled them to the barbecue pit. When the meat was done to perfection, he would slice it off the bone and grind it up – not chop it. Then he would mix in Mom's special sauce that turned the meat a burgundy red. However, that's only part of the story. Mom had a great bread recipe. I think it had a lot of yeast in it. She rolled the dough on flat tins, cut it into squares with a pizza cutter and baked her own buns. They would slice those buns, spoon on a healthy serving of meat and top it off with mom's special slaw. God it tasted so good."

"It sounds good." He cupped her chin with his strong hand and tilted her head back. "I'll bet it didn't taste as good as your lips."

Julie saw no reason to argue. She sucked hungrily on the tip of his tongue teasing her slightly parted lips. His hands roamed her back and toyed with the brassiere strap beneath her blouse. Her hand found his thigh and her fingers sizzled as she tested the relaxed muscle beneath his jeans.

He broke the kiss. She nestled her cheek to his chest and wrapped her right arm around him. His hand found her buttocks.

"Pretty Lady," he said softly, pausing to kiss her hair, "you're the college grad, but if it were me, I'd think long and hard before I sold something that meant so much to me."

"You sound like my dad."

"I take that as a compliment." Swinging his legs to the side of the bed, he sat up, twisted around and pulled her close.

Julie rested her head on his shoulder and wrapped her arms around him. She knew her breasts were tight against his chest. She wished he would fondle them. She remembered the Bawdy Talk radio program and longed to feel his fingers on her areolas.

"Your hair smells delightful. Special shampoo?"

Julie giggled. "Ivory soap."

He pushed her back and looked deeply into her eyes. "Do you trust me, Julie?"

She nodded and closed her eyes. His fingers began to pry apart the buttons on her blouse. Oh, please, God. Don't let him be too disappointed, she prayed. She felt him tug the blouse from her slacks. He pushed it back and she shrugged her shoulders, letting it fall to the mattress. She ran her fingers through his hair as he dipped his head and pinched the puffy flesh above each cup with his lips.

Suddenly his lips were again on hers, his tongue thrusting inside. His right hand cupped her neck and his left rested on her lower back. In one graceful move, she felt her body sliding down the bed and her shoulder blades touching the soft, white sheet.

"On your tummy," he commanded.

She obeyed and felt him crawling over her prone body. She slid towards him as he sat on the edge of the bed. His fingers found the snap of her bra and he gently bared her back. She sensed him leaning over her and felt his lips on her hair.

"Such beautiful ears," he said, stroking them between index fingers and thumbs. His kissed her neck and his talented fingers began to massage her back. "I've never seen such a graceful neck, even on magazine models."

His words sent her spirits soaring. Graceful, she silently repeated. He said graceful – not skinny.

"Does this feel good?" he asked, his fingers massaging the top vertebra and then moving to the next.

"Umm."

"Your skin is so soft and smooth."

He kissed her left shoulder blade and then the right. He worked his way down to the waistband of her slacks. His thumbs lingered on her spinal cord and his fingertips splayed out. Slowly he worked his way up, gently pleasuring each rib in turn.

He's doing something to the small of my back. He's kissing it. No. That's his tongue. Oh, God. His fingertips are pressing the outer flesh of my breasts. Fondle them, Cliff. Squeeze them. Pinch my nipples. She tried to lift her shoulders to accommodate him but she was suddenly too weak.

His hands were on her arms, stroking up and down. Her mind

drifted, concentrating only on the pleasure his fingers offered. It felt so good. She felt so content – safe – happy – happy – happy ...

She easily caught the ball and flung it back with all her might. She laughed with glee and clapped her hands as Dad made a diving catch.

"Come and get it," Mom shouted from the back door.

Dad rushed to her side and swept her up in his arms. "Barbecue tonight, Julie. Let's not keep your mother waiting."

Chapter Three

Julie blinked awake as sunlight crept across the bed. She sat up, rubbed her eyes and reached for her watch on the bedside table. Her bra slipped down her arms.

What the hell? she thought. Then she remembered, wrapped her arms across her chest and stared at the window. He must have opened the blinds before he left. Why did he do this to me?

She stripped, showered, dressed quickly, grabbed her handbag and threw open the door. He was propped against the hood of her car, grinning like a jack-o-lantern.

"Good morning, Pretty Lady."

"Bastard," she hissed. She slammed the door and headed for the restaurant.

He quickly caught up and fell in step. "Whoa, here, Julie. What's wrong?"

"You said you were going to have sex with me last night, but you didn't even take my bra off."

"I said I was going to make love to you and I did."

"Bull."

"Did you enjoy it?"

Julie refused to reply and reached for the restaurant door handle. He covered her hand, keeping the door shut.

"You asked me to teach you how to make love. That was lesson one. The first time you, uh, go all the way should be with someone you love. When that time comes, it will be different, but I promise you it will never be better than what we experienced last night."

He pulled open the door and waited for her to enter.

"Black coffee," she said to the waitress. "Lots of it. Two eggs over light, bacon, toast and orange juice."

"Ditto," Cliff said, sliding into the booth opposite her.

They remained silent through the first cup of steaming coffee. After their cups were refilled, Cliff softly said, "I like you, Julie. You're special. I want your first time to be special."

"Nothing could be more special than last night."

He smiled. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. When you've had time to think about it, you'll realize just how special it was."

Again, silence reigned as they ate breakfast. After consuming the last bite of toast, Julie said, "I have an appointment in a few minutes with Susan Kimel – Dad's attorney. It shouldn't take more than an hour. Meet me back in my room and do it right this time."

"I did it right last night," Cliff insisted. He reached for her hand. "One day you'll thank me."

"I'm not a child, Clyde. I know about mutual masturbation. Couldn't we at least go that far?"

The magic grin returned to his face. "I do believe I've created a monster. It's time for me to move on." He slid out of the booth, picked up the check and strolled to the cashier.

"Bastard," she hissed under her breath.

Julie quickly walked back to her car, cranked it and backed out of the parking space. As she eased by the restaurant door, Cliff was emerging. He waved. She ignored him.

She parked in the lot between the Dollar Building and Papa John's, climbed the steep steps beside the pizza restaurant and entered the attorney's office.

The white-haired receptionist welcomed her with a smile. "You must be Julianna Wilson. Mrs. Kimel is ready for you," she said, moving to the office door and opening it.

Julie had a mental image of a middle aged, shriveled up woman with black hair tied in a bun. She was totally unprepared for the young beauty that approached with outstretched hand.

"I'm Susan Kimel, Julie. Your dad talked so much about you that I feel I've known you all my life. Please have a seat. Coffee?"

"No thank you, Mrs. Kimel," Julie said as she sat in the padded leather chair across from the attorney's massive desk.

"Please call me Susan, Julie. Mrs. Kimel is my husband's mother."

Julie chuckled. "I believe you have some papers for me to sign."

Susan slid a small stack of legal documents across the desk and offered Julie a pen. She moved the top document to one side. "This is your father's will. As you know, he left everything to you. The next

document officially transfers the title of the land and buildings into your name."

Julie signed on the dotted line.

"This is simply an accounting of fees charged against the estate including my fee as executrix. Your signature indicates your approval of the accounting. You should read this document carefully before signing."

"I trust you," Julie said as she signed. She glanced at the receptionist and wondered why she was still in the office.

"The last document transfers your father's checking account, certificates of deposit, and business account into your name."

"I didn't know he had any CDs or a business account."

Susan smiled gently. "I told you to read the previous document carefully."

Julie picked up the accounting sheet and scanned it quickly. There were three ten thousand dollar CD's, a little over a thousand dollars in the personal checking account and fifty thousand in the business account. She looked up at the attorney. "I thought Dad was practically broke except for the land."

"Your dad remained mentally alert right up to his death. He managed his financial affairs beautifully and, during his later years, he became something of a genius with stocks. He played the bull market perfectly, buying low and selling high almost without exception." Susan flashed a confidential grin. "If I didn't know better, I'd think he was guilty of insider trading."

Julie signed the final document and watched the receptionist gather up the papers.

"Mrs. White will notarize your signatures and we'll be done."

As Susan picked up a sealed envelope, Julie asked, "Where are Dad's checkbooks and CD's?"

Susan looked concerned. "I assumed you picked them up from the nursing home."

Julie nodded. "I told them to give away Dad's clothing and personal effects, but they had a couple of boxes for me anyway. They're in the trunk of my car. The checkbooks and stuff are probably

in the boxes."

"If not, you let me know. We'll have to stop payment on the blank checks if you can't find them."

"Susan," Julie asked, sliding towards the edge of her chair, "do you have any idea why Dad kept the business account and why he put so much money in it?"

"I frequently advised him to put those funds in CDs, but he always refused without explanation. Perhaps the answer is in this letter," she replied, handing Julie the envelope as she stood.

Julie realized she was being dismissed and she stood up also, accepting the letter and putting it into her handbag. As the women shook hands, Susan said, "Julie, if I can be of any further help, please give me a call."

Julie returned to her car, popped open the trunk and opened the boxes. There were letters, newspaper clippings, scribbled notes, bank statements and check stubs. The CDs and checkbooks were also there. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she flipped through the pages of her dad's personal checkbook. She closed the trunk lid, propped against it, and pulled her dad's letter from her handbag.

"I can't handle this right now," she mumbled as she stuffed the envelope back into her bag. She entered the Dollar Building, consulted the directory, and rode the elevator to the second floor.

The door to Creasy Green's office was open. A chubby man was sitting behind a cluttered desk making small talk with a well-endowed young woman. Julie cleared her throat to get their attention. "I'm looking for a Mr. Creasy Green," Julie said apologetically.

The man stood, flashed a smile and extended his hand. "You found him, ma'am. This is Mrs. June Skinner. She shares the office suit and runs the best accounting service in Dot."

"The *only* accounting service in Dot," June joked as she shook Julie's hand. "I must get back to work," she said, approaching her office door. "Be careful, lady. Creasy will talk your pretty ears off."

Pretty ears, Julie repeated to herself. Cliff said I have pretty ears. "I'm Julie Wilson," Julie said, settling into the offered straight-backed chair. "Perhaps you knew my father, Randolph Wilson."

Green settled his heavy frame back into the creaking desk chair and shook his head slowly. "Fraid not, Miss Wilson."

"He was in a rest home for the last few years."

"Passed away recently did he?" When Julie nodded, he continued. "My condolences, ma'am. What may I do for you?"

"I inherited a thousand acres about fifteen miles east of Dot. It's been in the family for generations but my life is now in Charleston. I have no use for it."

"You're not talkin' 'bout the old gas station and motel are you?"

"As a matter of fact, I am. There's also a twelve-room house on the estate several miles off the road. It's probably in bad condition. I haven't had the heart to look at it in recent years. My mom died when I was fourteen. After I went to college, Dad moved into a motel apartment. He said the house was too big for him to rattle around in and contained too many memories he longed to relive."

"A thousand acres you say?"

Julie nodded.

"Any other improvements?"

"It used to be a tobacco farm. There are forty, maybe fifty cleared acres and two or three barns. The rest is pine, cedar and maple trees. Oh, there's a big pond also. I believe I remember Dad saying it was about five acres."

"How much do you want for your place?"

"Mr. Dollar offered a hundred dollars an acre, but I think it's worth much more than that."

"Tim Dollar?" Green frowned and muttered something under his breath.

"Excuse me?"

"What I said I shouldn't have said, Miss Wilson. In many ways, Tim Dollar is a fine man, but business always comes first with him. He was trying to steal the place, ma'am. Tim Dollar likes buying land as much as I like eating T-bone steaks and mashed taters. When he finds out I'm looking for legitimate buyers, he'll make a decent offer. I guarantee it."

"That would be nice, Mr. Green, and I'm in no hurry to sell the

place. I would like to get rid of it before taxes come due."

Green nodded as he reached for a document in his bottom drawer. "This here's a standard realtor agreement. Fill that sucker in for me and sign on the bottom. That makes me your official exclusive agent. My fee is a straight six percent."

"Sounds fair," she said and she hunched over the desk.

"I'll go to Charlotte tomorrow and look up your land in the Register of Deeds office and then I'll take a look at it. I'm a right fair judge of land values, but I'll clear it with you before I advertise a price."

Creasy Green would sell the land and get a fair price. There was something about the man that assured Julie that he knew what he was doing. There was no reason for her to stay in Dot any longer. She returned to her motel room, packed, went to the office and paid her bill. She circled the Korner Kafe and Motel. Cliff's truck was gone. As she headed east on Highway 13, she knew there was no reason for her to stop at the old home place, but she also knew that she would.

It required a lot of jiggling to make the rusty old padlock open. She snapped on the overhead florescent lights and noticed that half of them were burned out and several more were flickering. She sat in the corner booth of the old restaurant, pulled the envelope from her handbag and stared at it for several minutes before summoning the courage to rip it open.

Dear Julie,

First, I want to thank you for being the wonderful daughter you are. Mom and I couldn't have asked for a more perfect child. I know that your weekly visits to me in the nursing home were inconvenient, but I also know you came because you love me.

I love you too, Julie. More than words can express. And I am so very proud of you. I think you are reasonably happy in your current lifestyle and I would not want to do or write anything that would change that.

I know you have no need of the old home place and that it is probably in your best interest to sell it. Use the money to make you

even happier, Julie.

I confess that I wish you would keep the place. It's been in the family for five generations, you know. Sometimes I amuse myself by daydreaming of you, your Prince Charming and your children again filling the old house with love and laughter. Do you remember our annual treks into the woods to find the perfect cedar tree to cut, put in the living room and decorate for Christmas? Of course you do. I can almost smell your mother's Moravian cookies baking in the kitchen stove.

They tell me that traffic is once again building up on Highway 13. I dream of the motel rooms being filled with travelers like they once were, the gas pumps spewing out their precious fuel, minor automobile repairs being made in the garage and your mother's barbecue being served in the diner.

That's my dream, Julie, not yours. I'm not trying to influence you. Follow your heart. I just don't want you to forget your mother and me and the good times we used to have.

Love,
Dad

"Pretty Lady, are you in here?"

She tried to answer, but the words wouldn't come.

"Julie?"

The voice was coming nearer.

"Oh, there you are. Julie," Cliff said as he approached the booth, "please don't turn a cold shoulder to me."

She held out the letter. He slipped into the booth opposite her and slowly read it. Julie watched him read and thought she saw moisture building in his eyes.

He looked up and smiled gently. "He writes well. The letter got to me and I didn't even know the man."

"I thought you were going to Charlotte."

"I did. I've never seen so many cars in all my life. I drove down Tryon Street and as soon as I could figure out how to do it, I turned

around and got the hell out of Dodge."

"Why?"

"The place is too damn big for me. Besides, I couldn't think about anything other than the way we parted. Pretty Lady, what you think is important to me. Please try to understand."

"I forgive you, Cliff."

"I didn't ask for forgiveness. I asked for understanding."

Julie ignored the comment. "What are you going to do now?"

"I have a few bucks saved up – enough to live on for a couple of months. There's something about Dot that appeals to me. I think I'll hang around and see what happens. There must be a job open somewhere. I don't have to be a cook or mechanic. How about you, Pretty Lady? Did your meeting with the lawyer go okay?"

Julie nodded affirmatively while stuffing the letter back into the envelope. "Dad had more cash in his estate than I thought – about eighty thousand dollars." Why did I tell him that? she wondered. "I also put the place on the market with a realtor. He thinks he can sell it with no trouble – maybe even to Tim Dollar but for a lot more money than Tim originally offered."

"You're really going to sell it?"

She smiled and waved the envelope in the air. "I think so, in spite of the pressure Dad applied."

"Aw, Julie, he was just sharing his dream with you. He wasn't trying to pressure you."

Her eyes twinkled. "Then why did he have most of his money in the old business checking account? He was hoping I'd get sentimental and use that money to reopen the businesses."

"It's not a bad idea, you know."

"I know. It's just not right for me."

"So you're going back to Charleston?"

"Yeah." She slid to the edge of the seat. "In fact, I'm on my way."

"Julie, since the power is still on..."

She sighed and her shoulders sagged. "I didn't think about the electricity. There's no use in paying a power bill. I guess I'll have to go back to Dot to have it shut off."

"Don't."

"What?"

"I need a place to stay until I decide what I'm going to do. I can't afford the Korner Kafe and Motel's rates for an extended period of time. Let me stay in the motel apartment your dad used for so many years. I'll pay the electricity bill and a reasonable rent too. When you sell the place, I'll skedaddle."

Julie snickered. "Skedaddle was one of dad's favorite expressions. Clyde, the apartment hasn't been used or cleaned in years. It's bound to be filthy. There may be roaches and rats. The roof may leak. There's no linens for the bed. There's..."

"I'll clean it," he interrupted. "I have linens on my truck. I'll spray for bugs and set traps if necessary."

She sighed again. "You beat all. You know that?"

"Let's see what the apartment looks like."

The expression on his face reminded Julie of a puppy, begging for a treat, and her heart melted. She hooked the strap of her handbag over her shoulder and led the way.

"Hold on a minute," Cliff said as they walked towards the first motel unit. He rubbed the dingy glass with his handkerchief and peered inside. "This must be the garage your dad mentioned in his letter."

"In the heyday of the business, Dad kept a mechanic on duty all the time. He pumped gas, changed wiper blades, radiator hoses and fan belts, installed new batteries and minor things like that."

"The more I hear about Mr. Wilson, the more I like him. He was my kind of man."

"He never did drugs or served time." The hurt expression on Cliff's face stung. "I'm sorry, Cliff. I shouldn't have said that."

"Why not?" he replied, jamming his hands into his pockets. "It's the truth."

Julie pushed the master key into the lock and was surprised when the tumbler moved effortlessly. She pushed open the door and groped for the light switch. "Ugh. It stinks in here."

Cliff stepped past her. "Just a little musty. All it needs is airing

out." He smiled when he saw the window air conditioner. "I wonder if that thing works?"

"I doubt it."

He pushed the switch and the monster roared to life. He disappeared into another room.

"Cliff, the place is filthy and there are rat droppings. My God, look at those spider webs."

"It's perfect, Julie."

She followed the sound of his voice and found him in the kitchen.

Without warning, he pulled her close. "A living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen and completely furnished."

Her heart began beating too fast and she knew he could feel it. "You think you can make this place livable?"

"I know I can. If I start right now, I can sleep here tonight." He pushed her back but clung to her hips. "I'll box up all your dad's personal things and store them in the second bedroom."

"I don't think you'll find anything. Dad and I did a thorough job when he moved to the rest home." She chuckled. "The old house is another story. Heck. My paper dolls are probably still there. I know when I sell the place I'll have to go through everything. I dread it, but I'm not going to cross that bridge 'til I come to it."

She pulled away, placed the padlock key and the master key on the counter and turned to face him. "Clyde, you're welcome to stay here if you think you're man enough to make it livable. I don't want any rent, but I'll take you up on your offer to pay the power bill." She glanced at her watch. "I really should get on the road, but I suppose I could help you do a little cleaning first."

He laughed. "I appreciate the offer, but there's no need for both of us to get filthy."

He placed his hands on her shoulders and slowly pulled her against his chest. His lips found hers and his hands stroked her hips. She neither resisted nor participated.

"Don't go, Julie," he whispered.

She pushed back and, for a brief moment, their eyes locked. "There's no reason for me to stay," she replied.

Cliff followed her to the door and leaned against it as he watched her walk to the Cavalier. "Have a good life, Julie."

If she had heard him and turned around, she would have seen tears glistening on his cheeks.

Chapter Four

Cliff walked through the motel apartment, making a mental list of the cleaning supplies he needed. On the way to Dot, he snapped on the truck's radio.

You're on the air.

Delilah, is that you?

Cliff gnashed his teeth as a loud squeal blasted from the truck's single speaker.

Turn your radio down, dear. You're causing feedback.

Oh. Sorry. Uh, is that better?

That's fine. Now, who are you and what's on your mind?

I'm, uh, Jane. I know today's topic is pillow talk, but may I ask something entirely off the subject?

Sure, Jane.

I've been listening to your program for several weeks now and it, uh, appears most of the ladies who call in, uh, pleasure themselves. Is that normal?

Sure it is, Jane. Don't tell me that you've never been intimate with your finger?

I ... I don't know how.

Jane, tell me something. How old are you?

Twenty-one.

How old?

Well, almost twenty-one.

Jane.

Thirteen.

Sweetie, come back when you're eighteen. This program is for adults.

This is Delilah Delight and the name of the game is Bawdy Talk. Kiddiepoos, go away. This is for the big guys only. Hello Caller, you're on the air.

Delilah, this is Betty.

Hello again, Betty. What cool things does your guy whisper?

Lot's of things but right now I'm pissed.

What's wrong, Betty?

I don't like the way you treated Jane. If she's old enough to ask she's old enough to answer.

I agree, but the Federal Communications Commission may not. How old were you when you started enjoying yourself, Betty?

Ten.

That early?

Yeah, and I was more fortunate than Jane. An older person taught me how to do it.

Who?

A babysitter.

Female?

Yeah – a teenager. I asked and she showed me.

Tell Delilah about it.

She took me to the bathroom and told me to take off my shorts and panties.

Did she play with you?

No, of course not. She asked me to sit on the toilet seat with my legs apart, strategically placed a mirror and showed me where that magic dot is.

Did she touch it?

She didn't molest me, Delilah. She taught me. She showed me how to wet my finger with saliva and touch my clit. She taught me how to rub it until the fireworks go off.

Cliff chuckled and snapped off the radio. "Too bad you didn't have a better teacher, Betty. That way works sometimes, but it's much better to stroke the shaft gently, gradually building pressure. When the clit is swollen, then work on that bundle of nerve endings."

He pulled into the Discount House parking lot and thirty minutes later emerged with two large sacks of supplies and an upright vacuum cleaner. He added to his purchases four bags of groceries from the Bi-Lo store on the corner. As he headed back to the old motel, he again turned on the radio. The caller was laughing.

My guy is a lot like Sue's. As soon as he's done he starts snoring, but Delilah, during the warm-up he's a honey-voiced sensuous orator.

He really turns you on with his pillow talk during foreplay?

You bet. He's the greatest.

What does he say?

I can't quote him, Delilah, but he says different things. He tells me what he's going to do to me and then does it. The anticipation is sometimes better than reality.

I know what you mean, Tonya. Do you ever whisper sweet nothings to him?

Sometimes.

Give us an example.

Well, last night we were going pretty good and I was feeling ... uh ... kinky I guess you'd say. He told me he was going to ram his thing in my throat. I said okay, but please don't spank me. He turned my bottom pink and then took me doggie style. Man, it was great.

"Ugh," Cliff grumbled as he snapped off the radio. "To each his own."

He scrubbed the refrigerator thoroughly before loading it with perishables. Since he was already working in the kitchen, he stuck with it until it was spotless. Next, he turned his attention to the bedroom. When it was clean to his satisfaction, he unloaded his pickup, made the bed, placed his clothes in the dresser and closet and stored the remainder of his possessions in the spare bedroom.

Having skipped lunch, a gnawing hunger attacked as he completed the bathroom, but before heading for the Korner Kafe, he searched for and found the hot water heater. He dreaded taking a shower in cold water, but feared the heating element was burned out. The heater switch was in the "on" position, strengthening his suspicion that the heater had major problems.

As an afterthought, he checked the fuse box. He breathed a sigh of relief when he found the appliance plug inserted in the "off" position. Guess the old man was trying to save a few pennies, he thought as he reversed the plug.

Since the parking lot of the Korner Kafe was full, he pulled into a space intended for motel patrons and walked back to the restaurant.

"Good to see you back," Maggie Bennett greeted, offering him a

menu.

"Didn't care for Charlotte," he explained.

"Have you checked into the motel yet?"

He shook his head. "I'm staying at the old motel on Highway 13 until Julie Wilson decides what to do with the place."

"You guys aren't planning to give us competition, are you?"

Cliff flashed his magic smile. "Yeah. We're going to run you out of business. Serves you right for not offering me a job."

"If you don't get eaten up by roaches and rats first," Maggie laughed.

"I fired off bug bombs before I left and I plan to set some mousetraps tonight."

Maggie smiled. "Cliff, I'm sorry but we're full right now. You shouldn't have to wait too long."

He chuckled. "As the owner of the place, I'd think you would be delighted to have standing room only."

Maggie winked and walked away.

As Cliff opened the menu, a movement caught his eye. He looked up and saw a black couple sitting at a table for four. The man was beckoning. Cliff pointed at his chest and the man nodded affirmatively.

"Pull up a chair and have a seat," the man said as Cliff approached. "Name's Carl Elliott. This is my wife, Sarasue."

"Cliff Baker. You sure you folks don't mind?"

Carl offered his hand and a toothy smile. "Don't think I've seen you before, Mr. Baker."

Cliff laughed. "I was just passing through, but when I got on the other side, something drew me back like a magnet."

Sarasue placed her hand on his arm. "Dot effects some people that way, Mr. Baker."

"Please, call me Cliff. I think I would like to settle in Dot, Mrs. Elliott. You don't know of any job openings, do you?"

"If I'm going to call you Cliff, you must use our first names too," she said.

"What's your trade, Cliff?" Carl asked.

"I'm a cook and a good mechanic, but I'm not choosy. I'll try most anything."

"You any good at changing diapers?" Sarasue joked.

Carl chuckled. "Sarasue runs a childcare business. I'm in construction."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about babies," Cliff admitted.

"Carl is too damn humble," Sarasue said, beaming at her husband. "He has his own construction company and is so busy it makes my head spin. Can't you use another big strong man like Cliff, Carl?"

"Not right now, but I'll keep you in mind, Cliff. Where are you staying?"

"I'm in the old motel on Highway 13 right now, Carl. I guess I'll stay there until Julie Wilson decides what to do with the place."

Carl's expression became serious. "I heard about Mr. Wilson passing away. Tim Dollar has had his eye on that land for a long time."

"You know Mr. Dollar?"

Sarasue snickered. "Tim Dollar owns the damn town, Cliff. He's building housing developments right and left. He's Carl's one and only customer."

The trio ordered and engaged in small talk as they enjoyed their evening meal. After desert was served, Cliff asked the question that had been on his mind during the entire time.

"Carl, what would you charge to come out to the old motel and look it over?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"The buildings are old and need a lot in the way of repair and paint. What I want to know is, are they structurally sound? Are they worth repairing?"

"You thinking of opening the old motel?" Carl asked, his mouth full of apple pie.

Cliff nodded. "The gas station, food mart and restaurant too."

"Can't do it," Carl said.

"Carl!" Sarasue hissed.

"Honey, you know Tim wants that land and you said yourself he's

my one and only customer. I can't risk ticking him off."

"You'll have your black ass out there first thing in the morning or it'll be a cold day in hell when you next crawl between my chocolate thighs."

Julie let herself into her apartment, tossed the keys on the table and noticed them slide under a stack of mail. She hurried to the bathroom and pushed her panties down just in time. Good old Mrs. Ferguson, she thought as she sat on the porcelain throne. She brought in my mail as I asked. I'll bet she kept my flowers watered and the fish fed too.

My God! I've been gone for over three weeks. The poor fish haven't had their water changed in all that time. She flushed, scrubbed her hands and rushed to her studio. The light on the fifty-gallon tank was on a timer and illuminated the murky water. Three guppies, having succumbed to the acidity in the tank, floated on the surface but the angelfish and other guppies seemed okay. Air bubbles escaped from the gravel and wiggled their way to the top as the lid of the treasure chest opened slowly, allowing a large bubble of air to escape. Thank goodness the aerator is still working, she thought.

Julie yearned for a long soaking bath and a good night's sleep in her own bed, but caring for her tropical fish was a greater need. Wearily she sank into her desk chair and picked up the telephone, noticing the blinking message light on her answering machine. She speed-dialed the closest Little Caesar's and ordered a pizza. She pressed the button and leaned back to listen to her messages.

"Julie, this is Mark. Call me as soon as you come in." Beep.

"Julie, this is Mark. Where are you? Call me!" Beep.

"Damn it, Julie! This is important. Call me!" Beep.

Why is it my agent is the only one who ever calls? She snickered. Because no one else knows I exist – or cares.

"Julie, I don't know what kind of game you're playing, but this is serious. Call me, damn it!" Beep.

"Okay, here's the deal. Wal-Mart has offered a super opportunity for illustrating Sunday supplements with line drawings and

watercolors. It's the biggest deal I've ever been able to put together for you. If you don't call today, I'm going to accept without your prior approval." Beep.

"Damn, Julie. Are you okay? I'll bet it's your dad, isn't it? Look, sweetie, I hope I didn't make a mistake. I signed us up for the deal, but time is running short. They want the first four supplements ready in just four weeks. I dropped the particulars in the mail to you this morning." Beep.

"Julie, this is Mark. I called the nursing home in Charlotte. They told me about your dad. I'm sorry, kid. Call me when you get home." Beep.

Although she was exhausted, Julie's adrenaline was pumping. Wal-Mart, like all big chains, handled their advertising through large agencies. If Mark had lined her up with one of these outfits, this was the chance of a lifetime. She rushed to the table, threw aside the junk mail and retrieved the bulky padded envelope marked "urgent."

She rushed back to her studio, but the aquarium again caught her attention. First things first, Julie, she admonished herself.

Using the special tool, Julie cleaned the inside glass. She siphoned off a third of the water, being careful to suck up fish droppings and other crud from the bottom of the tank. All six angelfish followed her as she moved outside the tank. She floated a clean square of thin plastic on top of the water and slowly poured in the properly heated fresh water she kept in reserve. She frowned when the indicator light on the tank heater came on. She tested the water with her finger. Seems okay to me, she concluded.

The doorbell rang and she pulled a twenty from her purse before answering it. The pimply-faced teenage boy smiled broadly when she told him to keep the change. She returned to the studio, placed the pizza box on her desk and ate one slice before returning to the aquarium. Julie carefully removed the filter, took it to the bathroom, drained it, emptied the charcoal in the trashcan and scrubbed the container. Returning to the studio, she filled the container with fresh charcoal, slipped it in place behind the tank, plugged in the cord and smiled as the pump hummed and the container filled with water.

She stooped and pressed her nose to the glass. The angelfish took turns kissing her from the other side. "I missed you too," she said. "Oh, you think you deserve a treat?" She searched the shelf on the bottom of the wrought iron aquarium stand and found the small tin of brine shrimp. She stood, sprinkled a few flakes into the water and watched all the fish gobble it down. "You're welcome, guys."

Julie pulled a large paper cup of iced tea from the sack on her desk, removed the top, inserted a straw, pulled another slice of pizza from the box and sat at the desk, eating and examining the contents of Mark's package. The urge to create drove from her mind all thoughts of the bathtub and bed.

The telephone rang. Damn, I didn't call Mark, she scolded herself. "Hello."

"Julie, I'm sorry about your dad."

"Thanks, Mark. I just got in. I was about to call you."

"Did you get my package?"

"I'm looking at it right now. I didn't know Wal-Mart carried such stylish clothing for women."

"A lot of people don't. They're hoping your unique talents as an illustrator will change that."

"I'll give it my best shot."

"Julie, you have to get it back to the agency by the end of the month."

"Mark, that's just two weeks away."

"Thirteen days."

"Can't you get an extension? I was burying my dad, for goodness sakes."

"I tried, Julie. The agency won't budge. Since they don't know your work, they want plenty of lead-time in case they have to find another artist."

"Who's the agency?"

"Are you sitting down?"

"Yeah."

"It's the Holder Advertising Agency – located in Dot, North Carolina."

"Small world. Who would have thought a major ad agency would call Dot its home. Look, Mark. I'll do my best on this thing."

"I know you will."

"Let me get off the phone and get started."

"Julie, I'm truly sorry about your dad."

"Me too, Mark. Goodbye."

She ate another slice of pizza, stuffed the half-full box into her refrigerator, put on a pot of coffee and moved to the worktable opposite her desk. She strategically placed the four copy boards and sorted the accompanying photographs, matching picture to ad layout. Rapidly she sketched a rough draft of the first ad and just as rapidly discarded it. Think, brain. This must be special – fresh – eye-catching.

Well past midnight fatigue won. Julie settled for a quick shower, but as the soothing water coursed down on her aching body, she remembered the radio program. She grinned wickedly as she pulled the nozzle from its holder. After adjusting the spray, she aimed it at her left breast. It felt good, but nothing special. She tried the right breast with the same result. She felt her face flush as she widened her stance. Again, it felt good, but that was it. She forced the nozzle back into its clamp. Maybe my plumbing just doesn't work, she concluded.

She dried quickly, slipped into a nightgown, padded into her bedroom and her reflection in the full-length mirror caught her eye. She faced the silver-backed glass and smiled as she remembered Cliff's admonition: "You either need glasses or a new mirror."

If I did a little something with my hair, shaped my eyebrows a little, maybe... She pulled the nightgown up over her head, again faced the mirror and frowned. I'll be damned if I'll ever wear falsies. She grinned as she pulled the nightgown back on. I wonder if Wal-Mart sells padded bras? She again studied her reflection. My legs look pretty good, she observed. They need shaving, though. She bent over and ran her hands over her shins. Could my leg stubble be what turned Cliff off? She chuckled as she straightened up. No way. He never got that far in his examination of my anatomy.

Slowly she lifted the hem of the nightgown and concentrated on the

triangle of tangled, curly chestnut-colored hair. I wonder what it looks like. Is it like those shaved things I see on the adult channel? She snickered. Who can tell with all that fur down there? I wonder if Cliff would like it better if I shaved.

"Cliff," she said aloud. "Why do I keep thinking about that convict? He had his chance and he blew it. Still..."

She turned back the covers and crawled into bed. I wonder if there's anything else of importance in the mail. Once the question was raised, Julie knew she could not sleep until she found the answer.

She went to the living room and picked up scattered circulars and envelopes from the floor, separating them into two groups. "Junk, junk, bill, bill, junk, hello, what's this?" The return address was "Sunrise Tower Apartments." She tore open the envelope and read the letter with mounting alarm.

Dear Miss Wilson,

As you know, your apartment lease expires on the last day of the month. We regret to inform you that we are not renewing leases. As the new owners, we have extensive plans for remodeling and turning Sunrise Towers into condominiums. Please arrange to vacate the premises on or before the expiration date of your lease.

Sincerely,
Stoker and Wellington Enterprises

The letter fluttered to the floor as tears cascaded down her cheeks. "This is too much, damn it. My dad died. I threw myself at a man and he ignored my offering. I have a career chance of a lifetime but there is a severe time constraint and now I have to find another place to live. I can't handle this, damn it." She sighed. "Yes I can, but there's nothing I can do tonight."

She turned off the bedroom light, slipped beneath the sheets and longed for someone to embrace her – to kiss away the tears. She imagined Cliff holding her in his arms, one hand stroking her hair,

fingers of the other hand twirling one nipple while his tongue played with the other. Her hand found her thigh and traveled upwards, but it was not her hand. It was Cliff's. Her hips began to undulate as his fingers stroked and probed.

The tears stopped and her eyes opened wide. "By God, I think I found it!"

Chapter Five

Cliff clamped the pillow over his head but he could still hear the incessant pounding. He tossed the pillow aside, and shouted, "All right, already. I'm coming." He pulled on his jeans and stumbled to the front door.

"You wanted me here first thing this morning and here I am," Carl Elliott grouched.

"It was your wife that said that," Cliff muttered. "What time is it?"

"Almost five." Carl grinned. "You look terrible. Tie one on last night?"

Cliff ran fingers through his shaggy hair. "Nah, man. I was trying to get this place livable. I kept finding one more thing to do. It must have been three before I got in bed."

"Well, do you want me to check the place out or not?"

"Yeah. Come on in, Carl."

"Just gimme the keys. I don't need you. Go back to bed."

Cliff was tempted, but instead put on a pot of coffee, showered, dressed in clean jeans and a tee shirt and smeared jam on two slices of toast for breakfast. He found Carl coming out of the store.

"What's it look like?"

"I'm not done yet," Carl replied brusquely.

"Look man. I didn't mean for Sarasue to put the squeeze on you. I offered to pay you for your time."

Carl opened the first motel unit next to the apartment and snapped on the light. "From the looks of things you can't afford me and for your information, I'm not henpecked. Sarasue could never carry out her threat. If she had to go more than twenty-four hours without making the bedsprings bounce she'd be climbing the walls."

Cliff watched Carl stomping the floor and pounding his fists against various spots on walls.

"Place is filthy," Carl commented as he moved to the next unit. He worked quickly but efficiently as he went from unit to unit on the highway side of the motel and moved hurriedly to the six units on the back.

"Well?" Cliff asked as Carl locked the door to the last room.

"You're an impatient young fellow, aren't you?" Carl grumbled. He pulled a large tape measure from the tool pouch he wore around his waist. "Make yourself useful. There's a flashlight in the glove box of my truck."

Cliff nodded and jogged to the front of the motel. When he returned, Carl was on his knees behind the store. The concrete well cover lay to one side and Carl was peering into the hole in the ground.

"Something isn't right here," Carl said. "Gimmie that light."

As Carl aimed the light down the black hole, Cliff noticed that the tape dangled down the well shaft. Carl handed the flashlight back to Cliff, sat on the ground and began reeling in the tape. "This here's a hundred foot measure. It never hit bottom. Holy cow. Would you look at that."

"Look at what?"

"See how the tape is wet at the thirty-two foot level? There's at least thirty-two feet of water in this well. There's no tellin' how much more since my tape never made it to the bottom."

"I take it that's a good thing."

Carl laughed as he removed the rock tied to the end of the tape. "Boy, there's enough water in that well to serve half the homes in Dot without ever running dry. Does the pump work?"

"I guess it does. At least there's running water." Cliff bent over and helped Carl replace the well cover. "You going to give me your decision now?"

Carl yanked the flashlight from Cliff's hand. "Boy, I'll give you my decision when I'm done. Keep your britches on."

Cliff silently followed Carl to the back of the motel and watched as the black man removed a crawl space door, lie on his belly and slither under the floor like a snake in the grass.

"Damn," Carl's muffled voice muttered from under the building. "Spider webs."

For over an hour Cliff paced along the outside of the structure, following the pounding sounds that periodically came from under the floor. Carl worked his way to the end of the restaurant, back to the

end of the motel units and returned to the crawl space entrance.

As he slithered back into daylight, Cliff started laughing. Carl was covered from head to toe in spider webs.

"I'm not real bright, you know," Carl said as he wiped his face with a red bandana. "If I was, I sure as hell wouldn't be doing this for a total stranger."

"I appreciate it, Mr. Elliott," Cliff replied, unsuccessfully trying to quit laughing.

"Now I have to go home and take a bath. You have any coffee?"

"Yeah," Cliff replied, still laughing, but you can't come into my apartment looking like that. Come on. I think I can help you out."

Carl followed Cliff who chuckled all the way.

"It ain't funny, Sonny."

"Yes it is. Now, you stand right here in front of the door. I'll be right back."

Cliff quickly returned with the vacuum cleaner and used the upholstery tool on Carl. After a second swipe on the seat of Carl's pants, Cliff chuckled, "Now you may come in."

Carl sipped the steaming hot coffee and asked, "Make this with water from the well?"

"I think so. It's whatever came out of the pipe."

"Powerful good water."

Cliff stared silently at the man for a full minute but when Carl continued sipping the coffee, he said, "Are you done yet?"

Carl grinned. "Reckon so. The building is sound. I didn't see any evidence of dry rot. The roof ought to last a few more years. You need an electrician to check out the wiring, but it seems okay to me. You also need a septic tank expert to check it out. You'll probably need to put in new lines if not a whole new system."

"But you think all the place needs is a good cleaning and some paint?"

"If it was me, I'd push the whole thing down and start over."

Cliff, in the process of refilling their cups, nearly dropped the pot. "But you said..."

"I know what I said. Cliff, this place was built in the forties or

early fifties. It's old fashioned. Who'd want to eat in a restaurant that looks like this one does? Even if you do fix it up, nobody will want to rent one of these tiny motel rooms with window air conditioning units."

"What if we serve the best food in the whole dadgummed state, sell gas cheaper than anyone else and charge ten dollars a night for the motel?"

"You're a dreamer, Son." Carl checked his watch. "I've gotta get my butt moving."

"Uh, Mr. Elliott, there's one more building to look at."

"Where?" Carl asked irritably. "I didn't see anything else."

"I'm not sure where it is. Julie said the old home place is a few miles off the highway."

Carl stood and took his empty cup to the sink. "When you find it, let me know."

"Julie said something about a graveled road leading to it."

Carl turned, leveled his eyes at Cliff and sighed. "I saw what I thought was an overgrown logging road leading off from the parking lot behind the motel. You think that may be it?"

"It's worth a try."

"I'm not driving my truck on that trail."

As he headed for the front door, Cliff said, "We'll use mine."

Cliff's old truck pushed through briars and brambles. A quarter of a mile up the trail they stopped and drug a fallen tree to one side. Two miles later, just when the undergrowth seemed too dense to proceed, the trail erupted into a field of broom sedge.

"Holy cow," Carl said softly and reverently. "You didn't tell me it was a log cabin."

"I didn't know."

Carl jumped from the truck before it came to a full stop and rushed to the structure. Cliff caught up as Carl ran his fingers over the logs at one corner of the house.

"Look at this craftsmanship, Cliff. See how the grooves dovetail? Hey, look at this."

"I'm looking, but I don't know what I'm looking at."

"Hand hewn dowels, Cliff. They used them to tie the logs together. I'll bet there isn't a nail in the entire structure."

It was all Cliff could do to keep up with the energized man as he made his way around the massive home, climbed the porch steps and waited impatiently for Cliff to find the key to the front door.

Carl rushed inside. "Hot damn, Cliff. They didn't screw up the internal walls."

Cliff looked at the dust-covered, cloth-draped furniture and cobwebs hanging from the ceiling as Carl dropped to his knees beside one wall. "The walls just look like logs to me."

"That's my point!" Carl exclaimed. "Usually when someone occupies an old log house like this, they cover the walls with wallboard, plywood or even plaster. These people knew better. Look at this."

Cliff squinted. "It's a heat duct."

"Yeah. Look how carefully they added it in the bottom log. You can hardly see it."

"What makes you think it wasn't part of the original structure?"

Carl stood, shaking his head. "Sonny, this house was built in the eighteen hundreds. There was no such thing as central heating back then. You see that rock fireplace? I'll bet there's one just like it in every room. That's how the house was originally heated."

Carl moved to the wall and tried the light switch. The overhead chandelier glowed. Carl clapped his hands and pointed. "It looks just like an oil lamp chandelier, and look at this light switch, Cliff."

"I'm looking."

"When they added electricity, they bored tunnels through the logs for the wiring."

"How do you know that?"

"You don't see any exposed wires, do you?" Carl explained as he rushed to the next room.

Cliff tagged along behind. He, too, liked the house and Carl became increasingly ecstatic.

"Hey, Sonny. Come look at this."

Cliff followed the sound of Carl's voice, went through what must be

the kitchen and walked through an open door onto the back porch.

"Look down there," Carl urged.

Cliff followed Carl's pointing finger and saw, perhaps two hundred yards away, the large pond Julie mentioned.

"That's a beaut, Cliff, and it'll be even prettier with the banks cleared. I'll bet it's full of fish."

They explored the remainder of the ground floor and then the bedrooms on the second floor. In the basement, Carl insisted that the obvious water leakage could be easily fixed. "You'll need an expert to check out the condition of that oil-fired furnace," Carl said, "and it'll be easy to add central air."

Eventually they emerged onto the front porch. Cliff sat wearily on the top step while Carl, with eyes dancing, propped against the porch rail.

"While you get the place cleaned up," Carl said excitedly, "I'll check out the chinking. Some of it will need replacing. I'll get my buddy, Al Fox, to check out the chimneys and fireplaces for safety and he can take a look at the furnace for us too. Then we'll replace the screening on the porches. Unless we run into something unexpected, we can have this beautiful home fully restored in a month or two."

"Hold on, Carl. I don't own any of this, remember? It belongs to Julie Wilson and right now she's got the whole thing up for sale – probably to Tim Dollar."

"You tell that young lady this house is worth a fortune. She'd be a fool to sell, but if she insists, I'll top any offer Tim Dollar makes. I'll find the money somewhere."

Cliff stood and stretched. "I hope to convince Julie to reopen the businesses and let me run them, but I haven't mentioned it to her yet. She probably won't go for it and if she does, we can't afford you, Carl."

Carl narrowed his eyes to tiny slits. "If you don't let me help restore this place, I'll whup your white ass 'til you can't sit down. Did you hear me say anything about money?"

When they returned to the motel, Cliff frowned and asked, "Who belongs to the white Caddy?"

"Creasy Green."

"The realtor?"

"Yeah."

Both men stared with disgust at the "For Sale" sign newly nailed to the storefront.

"I wondered where you were, Carl. I seen your truck," Creasy Green shouted as he emerged from the wooded area on the other side of the restaurant. He grinned sheepishly as he approached the men. "Had to shake the dew off the Lily."

Carl motioned to the "For Sale" sign with his head. "How much?"

"Asking price is \$250,000."

"Bull! You'll never get that kind of money."

"Do you know there's sixty acres of cleared land with a nice stream running through it?"

"Really?" Cliff asked.

"That's what the county records show."

"Even so, nobody's interested in farm land these days."

"A body could grow some mighty fine melons and maters in the bottom land. If it was me, I'd plant Christmas trees – you know, Canadian firs, cedars and white pines. A body could make a fortune in a few years and if he keeps plantin', that fortune would continue forever."

"Hmm," Carl said, rubbing his chin. "You might have something there."

"You interested in buying it, Carl?"

"Might be. I know Tim will make you an offer and I know you set the price so high in order to give you bargaining room. Once you have Tim's best offer, you let me know. I just might surprise you."

"You have another job lined up, Carl?"

"No, but I don't want to build Tim Dollar houses the rest of my life. Tree farming might be fun."

"You bid agin Tim Dollar and you won't have to worry none about building any more of his houses. He'll drop you quicker than a baked potato right out of the oven."

Both men laughed and Cliff toed the ground.

"Who are you, young fella?" Green asked.

"Cliff Baker," Cliff replied, extending his hand. "I'm a friend of Julie Wilson. I'm sort of looking after the place for her until she decides what to do with it."

"Looks to me like she's done decided," Green said, eyeing Cliff warily. "Funny she didn't mention you to me. Where was you fellas when I drove up?"

"Mr. Elliott was good enough to check out the structural safety of the buildings for Julie," Cliff explained. "We were looking at her daddy's old house when you arrived."

"Yeah, she said something about a house being three or four miles off the highway. How do you get there? I suppose I should have a look."

"I can save you some time," Carl quickly replied. "It's a death trap. Roof is caving in and the foundation is about ready to do the same. I told Cliff the best thing Miss Julie can do is let the volunteer fire department use it for practice."

"Too bad," Green said, easing towards his car. "A nice house would make the land more attractive to prospective buyers." He pulled a large sign attached to a metal stake from the trunk of his car. "Reckon I'll drive this sucker in the ground beside the road and be on my way."

"I need to make tracks too, Cliff. I'll talk with you later."

Cliff shook Carl's hand, and, noting the warning in Carl's expression, simply said, "Thanks for everything, Mr. Elliott."

He watched Carl drive away and chuckled as he noticed Creasy Green wrestling with the sign. "Let me help you with that," he shouted.

Cliff held the sign while the Santa Claus shaped salesman pounded away with a small hammer. "Mr. Green, I spent all day yesterday cleaning up the motel apartment so I can live in it for a few weeks. I'm afraid in the process I threw out Julie's telephone number in Charleston. Would you happen to have it?"

Green's face was bright red and he was wheezing badly. Cliff took the hammer from him to finish the job as Green said, "Yeah. I think I

have it in the car someplace."

After Green's departure, Cliff stretched out on the bed to rest a few minutes, feeling smug about the subterfuge that gained Julie's telephone number. He woke up in the middle of the afternoon, jumped in his truck and headed for the Korner Kafe.

He found Maggie in her office. "Mrs. Bennett, I have a huge favor to ask."

Maggie pushed back from her desk. "Cliff, in Dot everybody is on a first name basis."

He grinned. "Okay, Maggie."

"What do you need, Cliff?"

"As I told you, I am staying at the old motel and looking after things for Julie. Something has come up and I need to call her in Charleston. I don't have a telephone. I know I could use a pay phone, but it's a pain in the butt to feed the thing coins and I hate to call Julie collect. I was wondering if I could use your telephone. I'll pay you for the call, of course."

Maggie stood, still smiling. "Don't make it a habit, Cliff." She headed for the office door. Cliff settled into the desk chair and dialed the number.

"What!"

Cliff laughed. "That's a strange way to answer the phone. This is Cliff."

Julie paused before continuing. "Sorry. I'm a little stressed out right now. What's on your mind?"

"Your land, your dad's businesses, the old house. Julie, I've spent the morning with a contractor. You have a gold mine in that land. You don't want to sell."

"I don't want to hear it, Cliff," she said irritably. "I have all on my plate I can handle. My agent has landed the biggest deal of my career, but it requires a massive amount of work and I have less than two weeks to complete it. On top of that, I received a letter saying they won't renew my apartment lease. I have to find another place to live."

"Damn, that's tough, but Pretty Lady, this is important. Just listen to me for five minutes."

"Not now, Cliff. Whatever it is, it'll keep."

"But Julie..."

"Clyde, are you hard of hearing? I said not now!"

Cliff fumbled for words.

"Cliff?"

"Yeah."

"You call all women 'Pretty Lady' but you said you think I really am pretty. I thought it was just a line to get me naked, but I gave you that opportunity and you didn't seize it. The assignment I have is to illustrate some of the ladies clothing that Wal-Mart features. Cliff do you think that I..."

"Think what, Pretty Lady?"

Her voice was so soft he strained to understand what she was saying. "Would new clothes help? Do you think there is anything I can do to actually become an attractive woman?"

"Yes," he replied with kindness in his voice. "Yes, I do."

"I mean something other than buy a new mirror and have an eye exam."

"Julie, all you need is an attitude adjustment. You don't need fancy clothes and gaudy makeup. You just need to admit to yourself that you have an attractive, unique physique unmatched by any other woman in the world."

"Are you sure you didn't go to college and major in psychology?"

"Julie, please let me tell you what I have discovered about your land."

"Cliff, try to understand. I don't want anything else on my mind right now."

"You think you might be willing to listen tomorrow?"

"Back off, Cliff. Hey, I just thought of something you can do for me."

"Name it."

"The advertising agency I am under subcontract with is ... wait, I have it here somewhere. Uh, here it is. It's the Holder Advertising Agency. They're located in Dot but I don't know where the office is. I am working on four separate ads. Go by there, explain my situation,

and see if they'll give me an extension."

"I'll ... I'll do what I can. Julie, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You just didn't understand. When I get these two monkeys off my back, we'll talk about the land."

"That's not what I meant. I'm sorry I didn't finish what I started in your motel room."

There was a long pause before Julie responded. "Changed your mind, did you? You said the first time should be with someone I love."

"Pretty Lady, do you think ... never mind. I'll try to find this agency and call you later. Goodbye."

Stupid ass, he thought, his hand still on the telephone receiver lying in its cradle. There's no way she'll ever love you. You're from the wrong side of the tracks; you're uneducated and just too damn young.

Maggie told Cliff that the Holder Advertising Agency was located in the Dollar Building and that the telephone office was in the same building as the Post Office. Installation of the telephone was promised for the next day. Rita Holder was not as sympathetic as he had hoped, but she did agree to give Julie one extra week if the first two ads were submitted on time.

As Cliff headed back to the Korner Kafe, his face brightened. That's a great idea, he thought. I know she'll go for it.

Chapter Six

Julie hung up the telephone and allowed herself a moment of reflection. Change of attitude, indeed, she thought. That would require a brain transplant. I wish I could crawl into Cliff's mind – any man's mind. What is it about a woman that turns a man on? That's easy enough to answer – big boobs!

She pushed back from the desk, returned to her easel and paged through the day's rough sketches, comparing them to the flyer storyboards. She knew she was on the right track for the first two inserts. Should she work on rough drafts for the last two inserts or get started on detail art? She didn't want to do either.

Julie hated herself at times like this. There was so much work to do and so little time to do it. From past experience she knew there was no point in remaining at the easel, hoping the creative juices would soon flow. The faucet was off.

She moved to the worktable and shuffled through the photographs she was supposed to turn into creative line drawings and watercolors. Maybe it would help if I saw some of these things in person, she thought. Besides, I need to swing by the complex office.

While driving to the Sunrise Tower office, Julie rehearsed a speech in which she would beg for a few week's leniency in vacating her apartment, but as she stood before the double glass doors, she took a big breath and resolved that if a polite explanation did not yield the desired result, she would kick some butt. She grinned as she approached the receptionist. Dad was a mild mannered man, she reminded herself, but he could raise hell when he needed to. So can I.

"May I help you?" the receptionist asked.

The young woman's friendly manner surprised Julie. "I've been out of town for over three weeks. My dad was critically ill and passed away. When I got home last night, this letter was in the mail."

The receptionist glanced at the letter Julie placed on her desk, obviously recognizing it.

"I am a freelance artist with a critical assignment due in two weeks. I just don't have time to find a new apartment and move. Isn't..."

The woman held up her hand, picked up the telephone and punched a button. "Mr. Bondurant, there is a tenant here with a complaint about the lease renewal notice. Could you possibly see her now?" There was a pause and the receptionist said, "Thank you."

The sympathetic woman smiled, stood and led Julie to an office door.

"Pete Bondurant," the gray-haired man said as he greeted Julie with a handshake. "Please come in."

Taking the offered chair, Julie explained her plight. Bondurant returned to his desk and rustled papers. "Apartment 36G?" he asked.

Julie nodded.

"Would an extra month help?"

"You mean it?"

His eyes remained on the desktop and his index finger ran down the lines of a spreadsheet. "Yes, ma'am. We can work with that." He reached into the middle letter tray on the corner of his desk, pulled out a single page document and scribbled on it. Looking up at Julie, who was now standing on the opposite side of the desk, he said, "I'm sorry about the inconvenience we're causing everybody. There's just nothing we can do about it."

"This will be a big help," Julie gushed. "How much do I owe you?"

"No charge," Bondurant said with a gentle smile on his lips. "That's not a very good business decision, but it will help me sleep better at night."

Julie felt as if a great weight had been removed from her shoulders and she sang along with the Cavalier radio as she drove to Wal-Mart. She hummed happily while browsing through the ladies clothing section. She held up an embroidered blouse and gasped audibly when her eyes fell on the shopper across from her.

The woman's green eyes locked on hers. "Is something wrong?"

"I ... I'm sorry," Julie said. "Please excuse me for staring. It's just that ... for a moment there I thought I was looking into a mirror. We have the same eye and hair color, the same height and build. We could be twins except that..."

"Except what?" the woman asked, chuckling.

Julie replaced the blouse and kept her eyes down. "Except that you're beautiful and I look like something the cat dragged home."

The woman smiled and walked around the table. "Do you really think I'm beautiful?"

Julie avoided eye contact while nodding. The woman was wearing the shortest skirt Julie had ever seen and her long legs were wrapped in black hose. Shiny black pumps adorned her tiny feet.

"Ma'am, I don't mean to be insulting, but I'll bet your bosom is no larger than mine, and yet..."

The woman laughed. "My name is Allison Thomas. My friends call me Ally."

"Julie Wilson."

"Do you really consider yourself unattractive?"

Julie tried to laugh. "Isn't it obvious? I have a friend who says I need glasses or a new mirror, but he's just being kind."

Ally's expression became serious. "If you don't like the reflection in the mirror, it won't help to clean the glass – you have to change the image."

Julie nodded. "How can I change the image? I don't have much to work with."

"Julie, it's all in the way you display your charms. My blouse, for instance, does not cling, but hangs just right. It announces to the world that I have small but tantalizing breasts and the way it pops open from the neck to the bust line allows any guy who's interested to have a nice little, discrete peek."

"You must spend a fortune on clothes."

Ally again chuckled. "Everything I'm wearing came from right here at Wal-Mart."

"Would you ... would you help me pick out some things?"

Ally glanced at her wristwatch. "Sure. I have a couple of hours free. What are you interested in?"

"I'm interested in looking like you."

Ally smiled sympathetically. "I mean what items of clothing are you interested in?"

"Everything."

"Everything? From the skin out?"

Julie nodded.

"Then I need to know what we're working with." She glanced over her shoulder, nodded and headed for a dressing room with Julie obediently following.

Closing the dressing room door behind them, Ally turned to Julie. "Let's see what you look like in your birthday suit."

Julie gasped while clamping her hand over her mouth.

"I'm not going to bite," Ally joked.

"I ... I just can't do it."

"Look honey," Ally said, "I'm not a lesbian. This was your idea."

"I ... I can't take my clothes off in front of you."

Ally shrugged her shoulders. "Suit yourself." She reached for the door.

"Wait. I'll ... I'll do it."

Julie's fingers trembled as she pulled the turtleneck over her head. She turned her back while her fingers searched for the clasp of her bra between prominent shoulder blades, hoping Ally would not see wadded tissues fall from the much too large cups. When she unsnapped the fastener on her slacks, they slid to her feet before she could slide down the zipper. When Julie stepped out of her panties, she knew her skin was flaming red from the top of her head to the tip of her toes.

Ally examined Julie as if she were a priceless statue, turning her this way and that. Julie shuddered when Ally's fingers tightened on her bony shoulders.

"This is going to be easy," Ally said, sitting on a stool in the corner. "You have a lovely figure. Slip your things back on, Julie. It's time to begin shopping."

While Julie dressed, Ally softly offered her assessment. "You want to emphasize your strengths, and you have many. Your long legs are shaped perfectly and your skin is smooth and without blemish. Your breasts are a little larger than mine are, and your thick nipples give you a big advantage over me in that department. It looks like what Mother Nature withheld from one part of your breasts she added to

another. Believe me, with a bra that doesn't hide those jewels and the right blouse, male heads will turn every time you walk into a room."

"I wish I could believe you."

"I'll bet your boyfriend goes nuts over your large outer labia."

"I ... I don't have a boyfriend. Never have."

Julie grinned. "You will after I get through with you."

For thirty minutes, the two women happily filled a shopping cart. Without warning, Ally placed her hand on Julie's cheek. "You know what, honey? We need to pay some attention to your headbone."

Julie snickered. "Headbone?"

"One of my dad's expressions."

"Are you close to your dad?"

"Was. He passed away a couple of years ago."

"My dad died this week. We were close also. What were you saying about my headbone?"

"Your face is a little long, Julie. You have beautiful shoulder-length hair, but it seems pasted to your scalp. A trim, a bit of a curl and a perm to make it fuller will give a more proportional look. I love your full eyebrows, but they need a little shaping. A touch of mascara will bring out those gorgeous green eyes and lip gloss will highlight your sensuous lips."

"You think I have sensuous lips?"

Ally laughed. "Believe me, I'm not coming on to you. Look, my sister runs a beauty parlor just down the street. Let me make a call. I'll bet she'll work you in this afternoon. She owes me."

"What about my clothes?"

"Give me your credit card. I'll finish shopping while you get the works."

Julie frowned.

"Oops. You're right. You don't know me from Adam's housecat. I'll put everything on my card and you can write me a check."

The call and appointment were made. The finishing touches were being applied when Ally walked into the beauty parlor. "You look fantastic, Julie!"

"Your sister is more than a beautician. She's a gifted plastic

surgeon. I feel like a new woman."

Julie paid for the transformation and accompanied Ally to the parking lot. As they transferred sixteen bags of clothing from Ally's car to the Cavalier, Julie said, "Ally, I can't thank you enough. I don't mean to be crude, but let me pay you for your time and advice."

Ally laughed. "A hundred million dollars would be about right, but I'll settle for a steak."

"You're on."

"First," Ally said, reaching deep into the trunk of her car for the last package, "go back into the beauty parlor and put on some of your new duds."

Julie admired her image in the bathroom mirror as she clipped on the silver earrings Ally bought for her. She liked the thin silver necklace, barely visible where her blouse popped open. Do I dare go out in public wearing this skirt? Julie asked herself. It barely covers my crotch and there is no way I can sit down without showing off these red panties. God, they feel good – like a second layer of skin.

After the hostess seated them, Ally leaned forward and whispered, "Want to have some fun?"

"Sure."

"When the waiter comes to take our order, lean forward, show him a little boobie flesh and keep your eyes on his crotch. I'll pay for dinner if he doesn't have an erection in your honor."

"You're on," Julie said, watching the young man approach.

"Good evening, ladies. My name is Kevin and I'll be your waiter tonight. May I suggest the Cornish hen? It is simply fabulous."

Julie leaned forward. "What do you think, Ally? Cornish hen or tenderloin?"

Ally snickered. "I'm in the mood for some real meat. Bring me a T-bone."

When the waiter departed, holding menus over the crotch of his pants, Julie clapped her hands with glee. "I can't believe that," she laughed. "It must have been the lacy red half bra that got to him."

"Don't sell yourself short, honey. You have what it takes to own any man you desire."

It took an hour to put away the new clothes and Julie, energy restored, was anxious to get back to her easel. For a while after first meeting Ally, Julie thought her benefactor would serve as inspiration for the Wal-Mart illustrations, but as she admired her body in the bedroom full length mirror, clad only in red lingerie, she knew she would be her own mental model.

She cupped her breasts, causing the cherry red nipples to peek out the top of the lacy brassiere. They are long, she observed. She stroked them with her thumbs, watched them grow and shivered as she pulled the bra over them. She felt wicked as she padded barefoot to her studio, still wearing the sexy bra and panties. She just wasn't ready to part with them, although she did look forward to putting on the new baby-doll pajamas.

The blinking light on her answering machine caught her attention. She propped on the edge of the desk, pressed the button and immediately recognized the irritated voice.

"Julie, if you're under such severe time restraint, why aren't you at home? The advertising agency is in the Dollar Building and the owner's name is Rita Holder. She agreed to a one-week extension, but only if you can get two of the ads to her by the end of the month.

"Damn it, Julie. We need to talk. I'm having a telephone installed tomorrow. I'll call as soon as they put it in. Look, Pretty Lady, you need a place to stay. I know Charleston is beautiful, but so is Dot. I saw the log cabin this morning. It's fantastic and the view of the pond from the back porch is almost as beautiful as you are. Pretty Lady, come home. I have the apartment looking decent. I'll fix up one of the motel units to stay in and you can have the apartment until we restore the cabin. Think about it, Pretty Lady.

"I'll ... I'll call you tomorrow."

Julie grinned mischievously as she erased the message. "If I had been dressed like this, Cliff, would you still have been content only to massage my back?"

She squatted beside the aquarium. "What do you think, guys?" The fish rushed to her side of the tank. She placed her lips on the smooth glass and received their kisses. She grinned wickedly, pushed down the skimpy bra and pressed her breasts against the warm aquarium glass. All but two of the fish swam away, but the two male angelfish fought for position to nibble her nipples.

Smiling broadly, Julie pranced to the kitchen, put on a pot of coffee and returned to her easel. She had a long night ahead and looked forward to it.

It was four o'clock in the morning when she slipped on the new pajamas. She sleepily admired the image in her full-length mirror and slipped between the sheets. Three times she awoke. The dream that interrupted sleep was the same on each occasion. It was a love scene, but there was something wrong. Her lover was not Cliff or any other man she ever admired. The arms wrapped around her aroused body belonged to Allison Thomas.

When the dream popped open her eyes a fourth time at seven thirty, Julie gave up and crawled out of bed. As the warm shower splashed over her breasts, she remembered Ally's eyes on her naked body in the Wal-Mart dressing room. "I'm not a lesbian," Julie remembered Ally saying. "I'm not either, Julie thought as her hand soaped the tangled curly hair at the apex of her thighs. I'm not, damn it!

She patted her body dry with a fluffy cotton towel, slipped on the new pink robe and pushed her tiny feet into the new, soft, light blue bedroom slippers. Julie hugged herself and breathed deeply while looking into the bathroom mirror. "I am beautiful," she said aloud. "Ally said so." She pursed her lips. "Ally thinks my lips are sensuous." She closed her eyes and kissed the back of her hand, wondering what it would be like to feel her lips pressed against Ally's.

Julie put on a pot of coffee, poured cereal into a bowl and added sugar and milk. Sitting at the kitchen table, she tried to construct a plan for the day's activity. She made good progress the previous night. In another three or four hours, she could complete the first flyer.

She almost missed with a spoonful of cereal and glanced down to

see if she spilled milk on the new robe. It gaped open and she found herself looking at her proudly upturned left breast. Tentatively she slipped her hand inside the robe and toyed with the nipple, which sprang to attention. She squeezed her thighs together, not certain whether she was trying to stem the tingle between her legs or make it more intense.

"Should have taken a cold shower this morning," she mumbled as she placed the now empty bowl in the kitchen sink and filled it with water. She refilled her coffee mug and made her way to the studio. Glancing at last night's efforts, she smiled, sat at the easel and reached for her sketchpad.

She was eating a toasted pimento cheese sandwich for lunch when the telephone rang. She pushed back the chair and pulled the receiver from the wall-mounted kitchen extension. Cliff must now have his telephone installed, she thought. "Hello."

"Julie, this is Cliff. Man it's great to hear your voice."

"Good morning, Cliff. Well, I guess it's afternoon now. I got your message last night. Sorry I wasn't at home. I do appreciate you contacting the Holder Advertising Agency for me. I just finished one of the ad layouts and I have in mind what I want to accomplish with the second. The extension of time you obtained, along with the one-month extension of my apartment lease is working out nicely."

"Whoa, slow down, Pretty Lady. I'm paying for this call. You don't need to give me the bum's rush."

Julie chuckled. "I do that when I'm excited – talk too much and too fast."

"You're excited?"

"Yeah, Cliff. This Wal-Mart assignment means the world to me and I feel like I'm off to a great start."

"And you have an extra thirty days to find a new place to live?"

"Rent free," she laughed.

"But you still must find a new place to live, Julie. Just say the word and I'll get started."

"Get started on what, Cliff?"

"On fixing up your place in Dot. It'll take a couple of months to

restore the cabin, but I figure I can make one of the motel units livable in short order. I'll move into that and you can have the apartment until the cabin is ready."

"Cliff, what's gotten into you? I thought I made it clear that I want to sell the Dot property."

"Julie, do you remember the large room with fireplace that overlooks the pond?"

Julie smiled as the picture formed in her mind.

"It would make a great studio and, if you plan to hitch your wagon to the Holder Advertising Agency, it makes sense to move to Dot."

"Who's going to pay for all these renovations, Cliff?"

"I have five thousand dollars saved up."

Julie laughed. "Big Man, that's your money. Use it on yourself."

"It's enough to fix up the motel, store and restaurant, Julie."

"No way."

"Yeah. All it needs is a good cleaning and some paint. It won't look modern, but that'll be a drawing point. It'll be quaint – rustic. What the hell are you laughing at?"

"Big bad Cliff – ex-con – using words like quaint and rustic."

"I'm not joking, Julie. If we can find your mom's barbecue recipe, we can serve that as our only menu item. Add beer and gas and we should make a decent living."

"You're serious."

"Damn right, I'm serious, and I know you have the money to do this and fix up the old home place as well."

"I never should have told you about that."

"I have a name for the business, too."

"I'm listening."

"Dad's Place."

The tears surprised Julie. "That's a low blow, Cliff."

"Your dad would like it."

"Cliff, if Creasy Green can find a buyer, I'm selling. That's all there is to it. Go find yourself a job. Forget about this dream. Forget about me. Get on with your life, Cliff."

There was a long pause before Cliff responded and when he did, his

voice was soft and low. "I can put the dream behind me, Julie. It won't be the first time. But I can't forget about you."

"What? What did you say?"

The line was dead.

She replaced the receiver and the telephone immediately rang again.

"Don't you ever hang up on me again, Clifford Baker," Julie barked.

"Who's ... who is Clifford Baker?"

"Oh, hi Ally. He's a nobody. It's wonderful to hear from you. What's up? You sound a little funny."

"Julie, I'm in a bit of trouble. I'm in the emergency room, but they're ready to release me. I'm going to ask a favor. Please, don't hesitate to say no. I can stay with my sister, but that's the first place Frank will look."

"Ally, what's going on?"

"My husband was out of town on business yesterday. He was supposed to come home today, but the meeting ended early. He was waiting for me when I arrived home last night after eating dinner with you. He accused me of being out with another man. He worked me over pretty good. It's not the first time."

"I'll be there within thirty minutes, Ally. Hang on, honey."

Chapter Seven

The hospital complex was confusing. Julie circled the tangle of tall buildings three times before finding the visitor's emergency room parking area. As she made her way into the waiting room, she was relieved to see Ally's sister sitting beside her wheelchair-bound new friend.

"My God, Ally! Are you okay? You look terrible!"

Ally grimaced when she tried to smile. "Thanks for the encouragement."

"The guy needs to be locked up permanently!"

Ally's sister leaned forward. "He *is* in jail, but he'll be out on bond before the day is over. We must move quickly. Jim is at Ally's apartment now, packing her clothes."

"Jim?"

"My husband – the salt of the earth."

"Julie," Ally interrupted. "Are you sure you want to do this? If Frank finds me at your apartment, there's no telling what he might do to you."

"I guess you told Frank about me last night, but he doesn't know where I live, does he?"

"That's the point," the sister agreed. "The first place he'll look is my house."

"Julie," Ally said, "I promise it'll be just a few days."

"You're welcome to stay as long as you like," Julie said, patting Ally on her knee. She turned to the sister. "I'm sorry. I just can't recall your name."

The brunette smiled faintly. "Peggy. Peggy Freeman."

After the women agreed for Ally to go home with Julie while Peggy joined her husband to finish packing Ally's clothes, Julie hurried to her car and drove to the emergency room entrance to pick up the battered woman.

"I guess this is a stupid question," Julie said as she pulled onto the Parkway, "but are you in a great deal of pain?"

"They gave me a shot and a bottle of pills." Again Ally grimaced

as she tried to smile. "I hurt, but mostly I'm numb. It's a weird feeling. Julie, I need another favor."

"Name it."

"Swing by the South Carolina National Bank. If I don't get my half of our checking account balance now, Frank will take it all when he gets out of jail. That's what he did last time."

Julie nodded. "Why do you stay married to this jerk?"

Ally's response was so quiet that Julie had to ask her to repeat it.

"We're not really married. I divorced him two years ago. He broke my arm and two ribs on that occasion."

"Why in the world did you go back to him?"

"A glutton for punishment, I suppose. You know the routine. He stayed after me, professing his love and how sorry he was. He promised he would never do it again and I wanted desperately to believe him. Three months ago my little restaurant failed. I was worse than broke. I owed thousands of dollars. Frank said he'd pay off my bills if I'd come back to him." Ally turned and looked sadly at Julie. "Does that make me a prostitute?"

"Here's the bank," Julie announced, avoiding an answer. She turned into the parking lot and pulled into the first open space. "Why don't you write a check and we can go to the drive-through window?"

Ally fished in her purse for the checkbook and Julie supplied a ballpoint pen. When they were again on their way to Julie's apartment, Julie asked, "Where are you working now? We need to contact your employer."

"I haven't found a job, Julie. The five hundred bucks I just got from the bank is all there is, but somehow I'll pay my share of the rent and food."

"Don't be silly. I'm not rich by any means, but I have enough for us both to live on for the foreseeable future."

"What is your line of work?"

Julie smiled. "I'm a freelance artist – illustrator. I do line drawings and watercolors for advertisements. Right now, I'm working on an assignment for Wal-Mart. If I don't screw it up, I have a lucrative career ahead. Tell me about your restaurant."

"There's not much to tell. It was just a little diner. I soon found out it takes money to make money. Business was good, but not good enough."

"What role did you play?"

Ally again grimaced as her lips turned towards a grin. "I was the cook, waitress, cashier, bookkeeper and janitor. I worked twelve hours a day, six days a week."

"Damn. That was a grueling schedule."

Ally nodded. "I loved every minute of it."

"Where was your diner? What did it look like? What was on your menu?"

As Ally answered the questions, Julie pictured a large sign featuring a man's likeness and the words, "Dad's Place."

It was difficult getting Ally from the car to the apartment. Ally was in such pain that Julie practically had to carry her. Ally wanted to soak in a hot tub of water and Julie found herself disrobing her new friend. As Ally sat on the commode, tears coursed down Julie's cheeks when she gently pulled the blouse from Ally's shoulders, revealing deep, purple, swollen ribs and breasts.

Julie knelt, removed Ally's shoes and slipped off her skirt. Ally wiped tears from Julie's cheeks as her new friend tugged at her panties. "It's not as bad as last time, Julie. At least there are no broken bones."

Julie helped the abused woman into the tub as water poured from the faucet. She knelt and briefly held Ally's hand. Without thinking she reached for Ally's head, pulled it to her and, while stroking her hair, pressed her lips to Ally's. She jerked back when Ally cried out.

"Oh, Ally. I'm so sorry. I just..."

Ally placed her finger across Julie's mouth. "I wasn't complaining about the kiss. Just watch out for my swollen lip."

That night, with Ally's personal possessions scattered about the bedroom, Julie lay in her bed, arms wrapped around Ally and Ally's head resting on her breast. She stroked the drugged, sleeping beauty's hair. "I'm not a lesbian, damn it. I'm not," she muttered beneath her breath.

This is Delilah Delight with another four hours of Bawdy Talk. Thanks for turning me on. Now all you guys stuck in Charlotte traffic, honk your horns if you want the delicious babe in the car next to you to flash her breasts.

Cliff grinned and turned up the volume on the portable radio so he could hear over the roar of the vacuum cleaner.

In today's mail, we have a challenging letter from Unfulfilled. It's a long letter, so I'm going to summarize it. Unfulfilled says she's thirty something and has had four intimate lovers during her sexually active years. She says that not one of these guys has a clue as to how to satisfy a woman in bed. Each of her lovers rushes to his own reward and then loses interest.

How about it gals? Are all men like Unfulfilled's lovers or are there a few who can ring a woman's chimes?

Boy, did that hit a responsive nerve. The phones are already ringing. Hello there. Tell Delilah all about it.

Delilah, this is Debbie. I didn't write that letter, but I could have. Guys seem to think all they need to do is plant a few kisses, squeeze selected areas of my anatomy and then do it. I've never enjoyed an orgasm with a man.

You ever tried it with a woman, Debbie?

Ugh! Excuse me, I shouldn't have said that. To each her own and all that.

Debbie, what would the perfect lover do that your previous lovers have not done?

Talk to me.

Talk? Dirty talk?

Not really. He would tell me how beautiful I am and things like that.

Do you talk to your lovers, Debbie?

How can I? Most of the time they have their tongues or something else in my mouth.

So from your experience, all men are lousy lovers?

Absolutely.

Okay, folks. This is Delilah Delight and the program is Bawdy Talk. Unfulfilled and Debbie think all men are lousy lovers. Let's see what the next caller thinks. Hello, you're on the air.

Delilah, this is Mythrill. I agree that men are just after their own pleasure. I happen to have big boobs and guys seem to think that I enjoy all the squeezing, tugging and twisting that gives them pleasure. Hell, some of them even...

Careful, Mythrill. Remember the FCC.

Well, you get the idea.

Tell me something, Mythrill. When making love to your man, do you moan and groan a lot?

Of course.

But you're faking it.

Do you like to have your nipples twisted off?

My question is, why do you fake it? Why do you let the guy think he is giving you pleasure when he's not?

All guys like to think they're God's gift to women. If you don't fake it, you'll never hear from them again and it won't be long before rumors circulate about you being frigid.

Thanks for your input, Mythrill. This is Delilah Delight and the program is Bawdy Talk on WFNS – your friendly neighborhood station. Hello Caller, you're on the air.

Good afternoon, Delilah. My name is Bruce and I'm mad as hell.

Talk to me, Bruce.

Do you gals think that guys' mamas teach us how to please a woman in bed? It just doesn't happen. If we don't light your fire, it's your fault, not ours!

How do you figure that, Bruce?

It's simple. Somebody must teach us. Big Boobs says she moans and groans when her lovers pay attention to her breasts, and yet she gets no pleasure from it. The guy doesn't know that. In fact, because she is pretending to enjoy his attention, the guy thinks he's doing just what she wants.

Good point, Bruce, but what do you suggest?

It's so simple, Delilah. You gals need to tell us what you like.

Debbie said she likes a guy to talk to her – tell her how beautiful she is. Well, does she talk to her guy? Does she tell him what she wants? I doubt it.

How about you, Bruce? Do you please your women?

I hope so. That's my point. Sure, I'm after my own pleasure but I want my lover to be pleased too. Unlike your previous callers, I think most guys are after mutual joy, but if you women keep faking it and refuse to teach us, how can any of us succeed?

"You in there, Cliff?" Carl Elliott bellowed from outside the motel room door.

Cliff snapped off the radio before punching the power button on the vacuum cleaner. "Yeah, Carl. Come on in."

"Damn," Carl said as he came through the door. "This room certainly looks different from the last time I was in here. I kind of miss the spider webs."

Cliff sat on the mattress and smiled. "This is the last room. A thorough cleaning makes a ton of difference. I need to drag all the mattresses outside, strip off the plastic covers and let them air a little and then I'll be ready to start on the store and restaurant."

Carl sprawled in the chair next to the dresser. "Needs paint, Cliff."

"Yeah, but that'll have to wait."

"On what?"

"On Julie."

"You mean she hasn't decided to keep the place?"

Cliff shook his head. "I haven't given up. I'm still working on her. What's on your mind this afternoon, Carl?"

"Two things. First, I wanted to see if the place is still for sale. Second, Sarasue thinks you need a home cooked meal. Can you join us tonight about seven?"

"Hey, man, I appreciate the invite, but I'm afraid I don't make a very good dinner guest. I never learned which fork to use."

Carl chuckled as he stood. "Won't be a problem at our house. We don't put but one fork on the table. We, Sarasue and me, have something we want to discuss with you. I do hope you'll join us."

"What's on your mind?"

"I have a couple of things to check out before I spill the beans. See you at seven?"

Cliff grinned. "You've got my curiosity up. I'll be there."

Determined to complete the day's plan, Cliff picked up the pace, drug mattresses into the parking lot to air amid trips to the washer and dryer where he was giving all the linens and coverlets a good cleaning. He folded and put away the last sheet at six fifteen and jumped into the shower.

As he washed the days grime from his muscular body, his thoughts turned to Julie. He knew she would be proud of him if she could see the work he was doing. He knew that once he cleaned the store and restaurant, she would want to open the place. Somehow, he must find a way to get her back to Dot just as soon as he finished the work.

Following Carl's directions, Cliff easily found the Elliott's house, but its size and beauty surprised him. He felt as if he somehow accidentally crossed over to the right side of the tracks. Making small talk was not his long suit. He expected the table talk to revolve around whatever it was the Elliotts wanted to discuss with him, but instead, both Carl and Sarasue attacked the delicious pork chop meal with little conversation at all.

"You ever play Monopoly?" Carl asked as he pushed back from the table and wiped his lips with a paper napkin.

"Sure, but only if I can be the racecar," Cliff joked.

"That'll work out just fine," Sarasue beamed. "I'm the thimble and Carl is the high hat."

The trio adjourned to the den where the board game was already set up. Sarasue served frosty bottles of beer as Carl explained their special version of the game that allowed it to be completed in a couple of hours. Property was divided and then the swapping and trading began. Cliff was not pleased that he wound up with Boardwalk and Park Place. He wondered if Carl would ever get around to the promised conversation.

"I'll trade you Boardwalk and Park Place for the Pennsylvania Avenue and related sites along with your railroads," Cliff offered Carl.

"Now why would you do that? Boardwalk and Park Place are the most valuable properties."

"Just being neighborly," Cliff joked.

"Sweeten the pot."

"Say what?"

"If you get Pennsylvania Avenue and the railroads, it'll give you the whole side of the board."

"Yeah, but if you have Park Place and Boardwalk, you'll have the entire corner."

"A thousand bucks or it's no deal."

"Five hundred," Cliff countered.

"Oh, give the man seven fifty and let's get on with the game," Sarasue joked as she reached for the dice.

Cliff hadn't played Monopoly since his days of incarceration, but it came back to him quickly. He always won when playing with other prisoners, but Carl and Sarasue proved to be more worthy adversaries. Two hours later, the contestants agreed to declare a three-way draw.

Sarasue went to the kitchen for another round of beer while Carl and Cliff put away the game.

"Carl," Cliff said. "I've been very patient, but damn it, I can't hold my peace any longer. This afternoon you said there was something special you and Sarasue wanted to talk with me about."

"There sure is, honey," Sarasue said as she came back into the den with a tray of Budweisers. "After all these years of looking after other people's young 'uns, I'm soon going to be looking after my own."

Cliff jumped up and took the tray from Sarasue. "That's great!" he said with genuine excitement. "I hope to have children myself one of these days."

"That ain't all," Carl grinned as he helped himself to a beer. "Sarasue sold her little daycare business to Tiny Tots. You ever heard of them?"

"Can't say that I have," Cliff replied, sitting on the sofa with a beer in his hand.

"They're a national chain of daycare centers," Sarasue explained, sitting beside Cliff.

"They bought several acres beside the schoolhouse on Highway 13 and plan to begin construction next week. I didn't get the job, but Sarasue got a right nice sum for her business."

Cliff grinned, not knowing what else to do or say.

"How come you didn't tell us you are an ex-con?" Sarasue asked.

Cliff's mouth went dry at the unexpected question.

"There's a private detective in Dot. He's an old-timer, but very good at what he does. I engaged his services to check you out," Carl continued.

"There was no reason for me to mention it and as far as I can tell, it's none of your business."

"Maybe, maybe not," Sarasue said.

"Borders says you've kept your nose clean since getting out."

Cliff stood and placed his half-empty beer on the table. "I thank you for the meal and game," he said coldly.

"Sit your butt down, Big Man," Sarasue said. "We ain't done yet."

"The Monopoly game was another test," Carl explained. "You appreciate value and money. You're willing to take a risk only if there's a good chance of positive return. I like that."

"You're honest, too," Sarasue commented. "That's important."

"Knowing that I've done time, what makes you think I'm honest?" Cliff asked, sitting back down on the sofa after retrieving the beer.

"During the game we gave you all kinds of opportunities to cheat. You refused them all," Carl explained.

"I still don't understand what you're driving at."

"We want to make you a business offer," Sarasue said. "Honesty and an appreciation of value and money is of utmost importance."

"What kind of business offer?"

"We're going to make an offer on Julie Wilson's land," Carl said. "I had a long talk with Tim Dollar. He really doesn't want the land after all. He even offered to loan me the money to buy the place."

"You going into the Christmas tree business?"

Sarasue chuckled. "Carl knows how to build houses, not grow trees."

Carl coughed. "We might use some of the land for that, but right

now we're thinking of making a subdivision out of the place, fixing up the log cabin for us to live in, and reopening the businesses on the highway. I'm going to see Creasy Green first thing tomorrow and offer two hundred thousand for the place. My guess it that Miss Wilson will take it."

"It's a fair price," Sarasue said.

"We want you to run the businesses for us. We'll pay you a decent salary and cut you in for a piece of the action. What do you think of that?"

Cliff drained his beer and glanced first at Sarasue and then Carl. "I think that if you have the capital to back it, you have a gold mine of an idea."

"Are you coming in with us?" Sarasue asked in a tone of voice that implied she knew the answer.

"No."

Carl's eyes bulged. "Say what?"

Cliff chuckled. "My answer surprises me too."

Carl's lips curled. "You think you're too good to work for black people?"

"African Americans," Sarasue corrected.

"I ain't never been to Africa and sure as hell didn't come from there," Carl barked.

"I thought that opening those businesses was what I wanted to do, but now I realize there is no appeal if Julie isn't a part of the deal," Cliff explained.

"You sweet on Julie or something?" Sarasue asked.

Cliff smiled. "Yeah. I guess I am."

Chapter Eight

Julie's brush lashed the page with a vengeance she seldom experienced. The creative juices were flowing with a welcomed vigor and she knew exactly the reason why – Ally Thomas. Perhaps Ally was only a friend. Maybe one day they would be lovers. For the moment, whatever the significance of their relationship might turn out to be, a huge spot in her life that had too long been empty was now filled.

When they crawled out of bed, there was no touching, no sensuous looks or verbal expressions, but there was definitely an as yet undefined something that brought joy to Julie's heart.

Ally felt better too. She ate with gusto the breakfast Julie prepared and read quietly as Julie mounted the stool in front of her easel. Now Ally was in the kitchen and the aroma that drifted into Julie's studio promised a delicious lunch.

"What is it?" Julie asked after sitting at the kitchen table and inhaling deeply the pungent fragrance of the steaming bowl before her.

"Chicken and lumplins," Ally responded as she sat at the opposite end of the table. "It's my own recipe – thick chicken soup with secret spices." Ally's eyes sparkled.

"Lumplins?" Julie asked.

Ally chuckled. "Instead of rolling out the dough to make dumplings, I spoon little lumps of dough into the simmering soup – lumplins."

"Umm," Julie moaned as she savored the first bite.

"Salt and pepper?" Ally asked, pushing the shakers towards Julie.

Julie shook her head as she swallowed and spooned a second bite. "It's perfect the way it is. Is this one of the dishes you served in your diner?"

"It sure is. I specialized in simple, rib-sticking food. Pinto bean soup, beef stew, hobo stew, turkey tetrazzini and hash – things like that."

Julie closed her eyes in sheer delight. "With food this heavenly,

how in the world did your diner fail?"

"There were plenty of customers and sales, but you can charge just so much for bean soup," Ally explained. "There simply wasn't enough margin to pay the bills."

Julie helped herself to a second and then a third serving. As she carried her empty bowl to the sink, she asked, "You miss the diner, don't you?"

Ally moved to the sink, reached for the faucet handle and replied, "More than I can say, but I'll never go down that path again."

Julie placed her hands on Ally's shoulders and gently turned her lookalike to face her. "Why not? The second time might be the charm."

Ally shook her head and gently touched Julie's cheek. "I don't like failure, Julie. I put my heart and soul into that business. A big part of me died when I closed the doors for the last time. I won't ever risk it again."

"What if you have a partner?"

"You?"

"Don't sound so astonished. I'm not much of a cook, but I do have a few bucks salted away in the bank."

"Julie, I couldn't..."

A knock at the door interrupted.

"You expecting someone?" Julie asked.

"It could be Sis. I'll get it."

Julie watched Ally move through the kitchen door. Twenty-four hours earlier Ally could barely move. Now, thanks to the pain medication and the healing hand of time, there was only a slight limp slowing her pace and Ally was having a much easier time of masking her pain. As Julie made her way back to the studio, she heard soft voices coming from the living room. One voice seemed masculine. Maybe it was Jim with more of Ally's clothing.

She sat at her easel and reached for the brush, curious as to why the voices suddenly stopped. She dabbed the brush in red paint, wiped the excess off on the side of the container and poised it over the flowing robe of the sketched model. She turned and gasped as the

door to her studio opened.

"You make a sound and I'll blow her head off right now."

Julie knew the man, whose hand was tightly wrapped in Ally's hair, must be Frank. The pistol he held to Ally's temple was cocked. Pure terror registered in Ally's eyes.

The gunman grinned evilly. "Did you ladies know, when you got up this morning, that this is the last day of your worthless lives?"

Ally's voice quivered when she spoke. "Leave her alone, Frank. It's me you want."

"Dead men tell no tales," he said, tightening the grip in her hair. "Neither do dead women." He glared at Julie. "Get down on all fours or I'll kill you right now."

Julie couldn't find her voice. She obeyed.

"You emptied my bank account," he snarled.

"Our bank account," Ally countered, "and I only took half."

"I want it."

"It's in my purse – in the bedroom."

Frank pushed Ally next to Julie and released his grip on her hair. "If you're not back in two minutes, she's dead."

"Please don't hurt her, Frank. I'll do whatever you say."

"You now have a minute and a half."

Julie felt helpless as she stared at Frank's shoes. "How did you find us?" she managed to ask.

"Wasn't hard. You're listed in the telephone book."

"But how did you know Ally was with me?"

"Lucky guess. When Ally came home two nights ago after seeing her lover, she claimed she simply had dinner with you. I happened to remember your name. Damned if you aren't as flat chested as she is. Strip for me, bitch."

"Leave her alone, Frank," Ally pleaded, returning to the room with a roll of bills in her hand.

"You gals show me a good time and I might let you off with a good beating," Frank grinned. "That's it. Show me a good time and I'll let you live. When I'm done with you, I'll tie you up nice and secure. By the time you get free, I'll be out of the country." He kicked Julie

savagely in the ribs. "I said strip, damn it."

Julie tumbled to her back and gripped her side as she screamed in pain.

"Get your clothes off, bitch!"

Julie lifted her head, glanced at the open door to the living room and forced her eyes away from it. She sat up. Her fingers flew to the buttons on her thin blouse and she fought to remember the triple X movies she had watched on TV. "You're right, Frank," she said as she pulled the blouse from her slacks. "My breasts are small, but, judging from the bulge in your pants, you're huge where it counts."

She glanced at Ally. "I'm sorry, Ally. Frank turns me on."

Her gaze, as sensuous as she could fake it, returned to Frank's rapidly glazing eyes as she let the blouse fall to the floor.

"Damn, bitch. That's a sexy little bra."

"Wait 'til you see my panties," she crooned while getting to her feet. She could feel Frank's eyes burning into her flesh as she pushed down the slacks. "I have a talented mouth, Frank. I want to lick you from head to toe."

"You know what I want licked, bitch. Let's see those tits."

She inhaled, jutting her breasts forward, and closed her eyes. "Rip the bra off me, Frank. Tear off my panties."

Frank grinned as he moved to her. "You like your sex rough, do you bitch?"

"God, yes, Frank. Be my monster. Slap me around like you do Ally."

Frank literally drooled as he shifted the pistol to his left hand and dug the fingers of his right hand under the bra between her breasts.

"Now!" Julie cried, slamming her knee into Frank's groin.

In less than a second, Cliff hit Frank with a diving tackle. The gun fell from Frank's hand and slid under the table. All four scrambled after it and struggled for possession. Cliff's fingers closed on it, but Frank tried to yank it away.

There was an explosion. Frank tensed, grunted and fell on top of Ally, soaking her with his blood.

"Don't nobody move!"

Julie rolled over and tried to find the source of the voice, not caring that she was dressed only in loafers and lingerie. Two uniformed officers stood just inside the door with weapons drawn.

"While in the bedroom I dialed 911 and left the phone off the hook so they could trace the call," Ally breathlessly explained.

Cliff answered Julie's unasked question as he folded her nearly nude body into his arms. "I drove down last night – actually early this morning – to try to prevent you from making a big mistake. I found your apartment about four this morning, but I didn't want to wake you. I dozed off in my truck. It looks like I woke up just in time."

"An ambulance is on the way," one officer said to his partner, who knelt beside Frank.

"There's no hurry," the second officer said, standing. He glanced first at Julie and then Ally. "Detectives will be here shortly. They may want to take you all to the station for questioning. In either case, perhaps you ladies would like to, uh, freshen up."

Everyone was exhausted and the girls were talking nonstop. They were saying more or less what Cliff wanted to hear, but decisions were being made too fast. He glanced at the throw rug covering the bloody spot on the carpet in Julie's studio. He had offered to clean it, but Julie insisted that the apartment was soon to be remodeled anyway. There was no need to clean the spot.

"I can help Cliff clean up Dad's Place," Ally insisted. "It'll take my mind off the pain."

There was an awkward moment at the police station when Cliff told the detectives he once served time, but suspicion was quickly removed when the girls explained the events leading up to the death of Frank Thomas.

The expected call from Creasy Green was on Julie's answering machine when they returned. Cliff explained Carl Elliott's offer and begged Julie not to accept it. Her willingness to listen to his arguments came as a surprise and he was not certain he liked the fact that it was Ally's enthusiasm that caused Julie's unexpected interest.

Ally was certainly a fine looking female specimen. Cliff could not

help but notice her bedroom eyes and sultry voice, but the image of Julie, clad in sexy lingerie, and the memory of her fragile body quivering against his, impeded his ability to concentrate on the conversation.

Julie's voice interrupted his reverie. "You can serve all your rib-sticking dishes."

"No!" he blurted.

The women fell silent and stared at him.

He tried to smile. "Dad's Place should feature your mom's barbecue, Julie," he explained.

"Cliff, the recipe is lost. You know that."

"We haven't looked for it. It's probably in the log cabin."

"What's this about barbecue?" Ally asked.

Julie handled the explanation and Cliff drifted back into private thought. Julie was certainly far more attractive than when he first met her. It was not just the new clothes. Her entire attitude was different. He was delighted that she was making such good progress with the Wal-Mart ads. He was happy that she now looked with favor on moving permanently to Dot to be close to the Holder Advertising Agency.

"Huh?" he said, sensing a question had been directed to him.

"Have you searched the house for the recipe?" Ally repeated.

He shook his head. "Other than check out the house with Carl Elliott I haven't been in it. It's full of, well, things that might be private. I didn't think I should be nosing around without Julie's permission."

"But you have the motel rooms ready for occupancy?"

"They're clean, but need painting."

"But they're liveinable?"

All three laughed at Ally's coined word.

"You can live in one, Cliff. I'll live in another and Julie can have the apartment."

"No," Julie disagreed. "The apartment has two bedrooms. You can stay with me, Ally, until we get the log cabin fixed up."

"But you need to use one of the bedrooms as a studio."

"There are a dozen motel rooms. I can use one of them as a temporary studio."

"That would be inconvenient."

"Okay, how about this. We're sharing a bedroom now. Why not share a bedroom in Dot? I don't snore do I?"

Ally smiled and the decision seemed to be made.

That's it, damn it, Cliff thought. That's what's wrong with this picture. They're sleeping together, for crying out loud. If it were another man I'd know how to go about fighting for Julie's affection, but how do you compete with a woman?

"Aren't we getting ahead of ourselves?" Cliff objected.

"Isn't this what you wanted?"

"Yes, Julie, but Pretty Lady, you're moving too fast."

"It's me, isn't it, Cliff?" Ally asked. "You want Julie all to yourself."

Before Cliff could respond, Julie laughed. "I don't think so, Ally. Cliff had his chance with me and blew it. He's a nice guy, Ally. He's paid his debt to society, as they say, but finding a decent job is difficult for an ex-con. Cliff is solely interested in opening Dad's Place."

Cliff retreated into his inner thoughts. No, Julie, he thought. I want to be the fulfillment of your dad's dreams. I do want to open Dad's Place. That's true enough. But I also want to be the father of your children, filling the log cabin with laughter just like your dad wrote in his letter.

"Huh?" Cliff asked.

Julie laughed. "You want a beer?"

"Yeah, maybe that'll help."

"Three beers coming up," Julie joked, "right after I get rid of the last two I drank."

As soon as Julie left the room, Ally sat beside Cliff on the sofa. "This has to be quick, Cliff. There's no time for playing games. Do you want to screw me?"

Cliff's eyes widened. "You're a lovely lady, Ally, but..."

"Julie's wrong about you, isn't she? You desperately want to get

into her panties."

"No! Yes. Damn it, Ally. I'm confused. I want to marry Julie but it looks like you and she have something other than friendship going."

"You love her?"

He nodded.

"But she doesn't know?"

"You keep your mouth shut, Ally."

She nodded. "I don't think either Julie or I are lesbians, Cliff. There has been no sexual contact between us, but things may be heading in that direction. Last night a nightmare woke me. Julie was fast asleep, her body pressed close to mine and her hand on my breast. I liked it. Say the word and I'll bow out."

Their eyes locked for several seconds before he responded. "I believe you really mean that and there's nothing I, personally, would like more, but..."

"But?"

"I love Julie enough to give her up if, uh, she finds greater happiness with someone else. Let's let this thing play itself out. Just allow me to have some role even if it turns out only to be that of a secret admirer."

"You have a deal," she said, offering her hand. "There's one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"You turn me on like no man I've ever known. I don't love you. I just want it to be my legs wrapped around you the next time you have sex."

"Hey, you two," Julie said as she came through the door empty-handed. "Let's sit at the kitchen table and write down our plans. I don't think I've ever been so excited in my entire life."

Two days later, thirty miles from Dad's Place, Cliff glanced at the passenger in the shotgun seat of his pickup. They hadn't spoken since leaving Charleston. "This isn't right, you know."

"I won't rape you."

"It still isn't right."

"You agreed to it."

"I didn't have much choice. You should have stayed with Julie."

"She'll join us in a week."

"You should be spending the week with her. You have a relationship to work out."

"I think," Ally said, tugging on the jeans that fit just a little too tight, "I have a relationship to work out of."

"What do you mean?"

"Julie and I have known each other for a very short time. Circumstances threw us together and a bond developed. I won't deny that. It's just that, well, the relationship is moving in the wrong direction. Believe it or not, after thinking it over, I'm on your side, Cliff. I want to be Julie's friend, not her lover, and I want to be your friend too."

"I wish I could believe that."

"Give it a chance, Cliff. Julie is an artist. You and I are, well, business people. The thought of opening and running Dad's Place turns both of us on."

"You don't seem too happy about it."

"You're wrong. Give me a little time, Cliff. I am excited, but..."

"Frank?"

Moisture accumulated in Ally's eyes as she nodded. "I loved him once, Cliff. He wasn't always mean to me."

Silence again reigned. Cliff snapped on the radio and smiled as the familiar voice came from the speaker. "She calls herself Delilah Delight," he explained. "The show is Bawdy Talk. The things some people will say on the radio is unbelievable."

I think it goes back to prehistoric days.

I don't follow you, Candy.

You know. In those days when a guy wanted a gal, he clubbed her over the head and drug her unconscious body back to his cave.

Are you saying that cave-women liked being bonked over the head?

Sure. It was the way of things back then. A good bonk was the prelude to a good boink.

You may be right, Candy. Thanks for calling. This is Delilah

Delight. You're listening to Bawdy Talk on WFNS, your friendly neighborhood station. Hello, Caller. You're on the air.

Delilah? Is that you Delilah?

Sure is, honey. What's your take on S&M?

This here is Betty Lou and that ain't no made-up name. I'll tell you right now, some of the women what's been callin' you today is tetched in the haid. Any man tries to put clothespins or mousetraps on my nipples is gonna get his ass whapped. You can count on that.

Betty Lou, tell Delilah something. Have you ever whipped a man's bottom?

Sure have, Delilah. More than once.

Did you enjoy it?

Huh?

Did you enjoy hurting these men?

Ain't never thought on it, but I reckon I did. That don't make me no sadist, though. I jest give them men what they deserved.

Did they like it?

Huh?

Did the men you beat up like it?

Hell no, Delilah. When Betty Lou puts a hurtin' on you, you don't ask for no seconds.

I believe you. Thanks for calling, Betty Lou. Hello, Caller, you're on the air.

Delilah, I'm not good at expressing myself, but I have something I want to say.

Who are you, honey?

Just call me Mouse.

Okay Mouse. I take it you like mousetraps.

Sometimes. A little pain at the right time and under the right circumstances gets my juices flowing. The problem is, some men just don't know when to stop.

"She's right, you know," Ally said quietly.

"You're kidding. You are a masochist?"

"Sometimes. That's what initially brought Frank and me together. Sometimes he just didn't know when to stop."

Delilah, or whatever your name is, my name is Reverend Ralph R. Rice, pastor of the Idols Road Pentecostal Holiness Church. I hope you and all the people who call in and listen to your program enjoy pain because you are all predestined to hell and eternal torment.

Sorry, Reverend, you reached the wrong number. This is Delilah Delight and the program is Bawdy Talk. We'll be back after these messages.

Cliff snapped off the radio and pulled into the parking lot. "Home, sweet home," he said as he set the parking brake. "I know it doesn't look like much, but a coat of paint will do wonders."

She rested her hand on his thigh. "Cliff, it's beautiful!"

Chapter Nine

Cliff opened his eyes, still half asleep. Something wasn't right. The green numerals glowing on the alarm clock on the bedside table revealed it was six in the morning. He sat up, stretched and inhaled deeply. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee caught his attention. He slipped out of bed and glanced down at the protrusion in the crotch of the boxer shorts he wore as pajamas.

That won't do, he thought. Quietly he slipped into the bathroom and emptied his bladder. That seemed to return things to normal. He pulled on a white T-shirt, slipped into his customary jockey shorts, and tugged on blue jeans. Barefooted, he opened the bedroom door and smiled at the sound of Ally whistling a tune he did not recognize.

"Other than the seven dwarfs, I've never known anyone who actually whistles while she works," he joked as he entered the kitchen.

Ally turned from the stove and grinned. She reached for the coffeepot and asked, "Did I wake you?"

"The coffee did."

"Good. That was my plan. How do you like your eggs?"

He took the steaming cup from her. "Cooked."

"Fried or scrambled?"

"If you're doing the cooking, it's your choice," he joked as he sat at the kitchen table and watched her crack two eggs and expertly empty the contents into an iron skillet. "Where did the frying pan come from?"

"It was in one of the boxes you unloaded last night. I never have been able to cook a decent meal in a non-stick pan."

"Not that I object, but how did you get in? I know I locked the door before I went to bed last night."

"The key you gave me is a master. I think it probably opens all the motel doors."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Like the proverbial baby. Ally, I'm glad you're feeling better."

"What makes you think I'm feeling better?"

"You were whistling earlier and now you are grinning. The swelling in your lip has gone down."

She nodded as she flipped the eggs. "This is the first morning I have awakened without excruciating pain." She placed a plate of bacon and eggs in front of him along with a tub of butter. She nodded towards the toaster. "Should pop up any second."

"I think the first thing we need to do this morning is move you in here and me into the motel unit. We really should have done that last night, but I was just too damn tired. Driving does that to me. Then we should clean out the spare bedroom for Julie's studio."

Ally glanced briefly in his direction. "May I offer an alternate plan?"

"Sure."

"Let's don't waste daylight. You get started on painting and I'll tackle the cleaning of the store and restaurant." She brought her own breakfast plate to the table. "We can work on your project tonight."

"Suits me, but may I offer an alternate to the alternate plan?"

Ally laughed.

"I like company when I work. Besides, your cleaning project will involve lifting and moving heavy furniture and fixtures. I'm not saying you're a weak female, or anything like that, but I don't think your physical recovery has progressed to the point where you can do all that heavy work."

She nodded, swallowed and said, "You're probably right. Okay, what do we do first – paint or clean?"

"Your choice."

"You know where my interest lies."

He nodded and sipped his coffee. "Ally, we got off to a bad start and it was my fault. When I went to Charleston, I didn't know about you. The way you and Julie looked at each other threw me a curve. Can we start over?"

Ally smiled, but did not answer.

"Did you mean what you said?"

"Probably. What are you talking about?"

"Well, for instance, you said you just want to be Julie's good friend,

not her lover."

Ally nodded. "And your friend too, Cliff."

He looked at the ceiling for a moment. "Did you also mean it when you said I, uh, turn you on?"

"I also said I wouldn't rape you."

Their eyes locked. "You turn me on too, Ally, but damn it, I love Julie. It's ... it's been a long time since I've been with a woman. We're going to spend a lot of time together for the next seven days. My willpower is going to need some help."

Ally's eyes beamed. "What a wonderful compliment. What can I do to help – wear a bag over my head?"

His eyes dropped to his empty plate. "Put on a bra."

"You're kidding."

He kept his eyes down as he shook his head.

A pounding on the door and a booming voice interrupted. "Hey, Cliff. You up yet?"

"Crap."

"Who's that?" Ally asked.

"Carl Elliott – the guy that wants to buy Julie's land. He's going to be mad as hell that I talked her out of it." He took a deep breath and shouted, "In the kitchen, Carl."

Ally stood as the muscular black man showing a mouthful of perfect white teeth entered the kitchen. "Carl Elliott, ma'am," he said, extending his hand. "I reckon you must be Ally Thomas."

Ally allowed her hand to be swallowed in his. "I am, but how did you know?"

"Miss Julie called me last night." Carl turned to Cliff and frowned. "I ought to whup your scrawny white butt but I can't very well do that with this lovely little lady watching. Besides, I know something I don't think you know just yet."

"How do you like your coffee, Mr. Elliott?"

"Black is beautiful, ma'am," he said as he reversed a chair and straddled it. "Name's Carl."

"Look, Carl," Cliff said apologetically. "I know you wanted to buy Julie's land, but you know I wanted her to keep it. I had to do what I

could."

"Yeah, I know. But that don't mean I like it."

"Julie is winding things up in Charleston and will join us in a week or so. In the meantime, Ally and I are going to work towards reopening the businesses."

"Thank you, ma'am," Carl said, accepting the steaming mug of coffee from Ally. "Dad's Place," he said, turning his attention back to Cliff.

Cliff smiled. "How did you know that?"

"You have wax in your ears, boy? I told you I talked with Miss Julie last night. I have a painting crew that ain't got nothing to do for the next couple of weeks. If it's okay with you, I'll send them out here this morning. I'll send along a gofer too. He might be of some help."

Ally laughed. "What's a gofer?"

"Guy's name is Roger Bruister. He's about Cliff's age, I reckon, maybe a little older. Might make a fair carpenter one day but right now he goes for whatever anybody needs."

"Carl, you know we can't afford professional help."

"Sorry, Cliff. I keep forgettin' you don't know what me and Miss Julie talked about last night. She called to tell me she decided not to sell the place and filled me in on her plans. Sarasue got on the extension and put in her two cents worth."

"Sarasue?" Ally asked.

"Carl's wife," Cliff explained.

Carl went to the coffeepot for a refill. "One thing led to another. Miss Julie agreed to sell us about two-thirds of the land for a subdivision. We'll work out the details after she gets here. Me and Sarasue will pay for it with both cash and services."

Ally, now washing dishes, turned to face the men. "Services?"

"We're gonna help you and Cliff get the motel, store and restaurant ready to open."

Cliff grinned. "I'll bet you let her twist your arm and force you to agree to remodel the log cabin too."

Carl chuckled and looked at Ally. "Cliff knows I'd pay Miss Julie to be allowed to work on that classic house." Turning back to Cliff,

he continued, "Miss Julie is gonna let us have a little piece of land on the opposite side of the pond to build our own log cabin."

Late in the afternoon, Ally and Cliff, sipping Budweisers, perched on stools at the counter with perspiration seeping from every pore of their bodies.

"If they bother you so damn much, don't stare at them," Ally said with a hint of mirth in her tone.

"You may as well not be wearing a shirt," Cliff mumbled. "You said you'd put on a bra."

"No I didn't. You asked but I didn't reply. When I am doing physical labor, I don't like the restriction of a bra on my chest. Live with it."

"You look like the winner in a wet T-shirt contest."

"You calling me a prostitute?"

"I'm calling you a sexy lady."

"Why don't you try looking at another part of my anatomy for a change."

"When you helped Roger drag out that last box of trash, I *did* look at another part of your anatomy – your bottom." He lifted his eyes and grinned. "It didn't help any more than looking into your bedroom eyes."

"You're coming on to me, you know."

"I'm just stating facts."

Ally's eyes focused on Roger, across the room, scrubbing the stained pine wall behind the row of booths they had laboriously tugged to the middle of the dining area. "Speaking of bottoms, that guy has worked his off today."

"Doesn't have much to say, does he?"

"Quiet as a church mouse, but I have an idea he has something on his mind."

"If you would dress decently maybe he could concentrate on his work."

Ally grinned. "You think I turn him on too?"

"You know damn well you do. You've been flirting with him all day."

"Jealous?"

"No, just pizzled."

"Pizzled?"

Cliff chuckled. "Yeah. That's a word my boss in Raleigh used a lot. It's sort of a combination of puzzled and pissed off."

"Want to talk about it?"

He spun the stool 180 degrees and rested his back and elbows on the counter. "You wouldn't be interested."

"I asked, didn't I? If you don't take advantage of my offer to listen, we have no excuse to continue resting."

"Well, first Julie was hot to trot and I was hesitant. Now I'm ready for a meaningful relationship and she's not interested. I don't know her very well, I admit, but I swear it threw me for a loop when I saw her making goo-goo eyes at you."

Ally snickered, but covered by taking another sip of her beer.

"First she was hell bent to sell the place and wouldn't even listen when I tried to talk her out of it. The next thing I knew, she wanted to keep it all and for the three of us to be partners. Then Carl showed up this morning and says she's going to sell most of it to him and he has his people working furiously on the place even though there is no contract."

"With some people," Ally ventured, "a verbal agreement is just as binding as a notarized legal document. I understand your confusion, but why are you pissed off?"

Cliff scuffed the sole of his shoe on the floor and muttered, "She's making all these decisions without consulting me."

"Why should she?"

He searched her eyes for several seconds. "You're right. Why should she? I'm just an ex-con who wandered into the peripheral of her life unwanted and uninvited."

"Cliff," she said, her voice softening. "I didn't mean it like that. Give it time. Julie doesn't know your interest in her has deepened. She thinks your only interest is in finding employment."

"I'm not through."

"There's more?"

"Out of the blue you tell me that you want a physical relationship with me and I ran away like a scared jackrabbit. Right now I want to hold your naked body in my arms so badly I can taste it."

Ally grinned. "Taste it?"

Cliff smiled weakly. "Your perspiration smells like a two inch sirloin sizzling on a charcoal grill."

Her countenance became serious. "So have a bite. Who's stopping you?"

"I am. Julie is. Damn," he said, getting to his feet, "I told you I'm pizzled."

"Scuse me, folks."

Both Cliff and Ally turned towards the sound. One of the painters stood in the entranceway.

"Just thought I ought to let you know we're leaving now."

Cliff glanced at his watch. "I didn't realize it was this late. How much did you get done?"

"We scraped 'er good. Most all the old paint was a-peeling off."

"Then you'll start painting tomorrow?"

"Nope. Gotta recalk all the windows first. They's a few panes missing. You might wanta go by the hardware and buy replacements first thing in the mornin'. We'll most likely get done by quittin' time tomorrow. We don't work Saturdays or Sundays, so the paintin' won't start 'till Monday."

"How long do you think it'll take 'til you finish the outside?" Ally asked.

"Three, maybe four days. She needs a primer coat, ya know."

"Well, thanks for all your help and have a good evening," Cliff said.

The painter turned, paused and again faced them. "What color you gonna use on the inside?"

"Off white," Cliff and Ally said simultaneously.

"Good choice," the painter grinned, showing three empty spaces where teeth should be. "Makes the room look bigger and besides, the hardware has a sale on off white."

"I suppose I should be going too."

Ally gasped and slapped her hand to her chest. "Damn, you're quiet, Roger. You shouldn't slip up on people like that."

"Sorry. I think the walls turned out real good."

Ally agreed. "When we get all the old soft drink and tobacco signs cleaned and back on the wall, the place will have real ambience."

Roger nodded. "I could come back after supper if you like."

Cliff smiled. "I don't suppose we're in that much of a hurry. Besides, you need some rest. You're the only man I've ever seen who works harder than I do."

"No charge," Roger offered.

Ally cocked her head to one side. "Now why would you do that?"

"I don't have anything to do tonight."

"I think there's more to it than that."

"No ma'am. It's just that ... Never mind. I'll see you in the morning." He walked towards the entranceway and stopped. Without looking at them he asked, "You folks planning on running this place by yourselves?"

"Along with the owner," Cliff replied.

"I doubt that Julie will have much time to help out with all her artwork and stuff."

"You know Julie?"

"Long time ago. She wouldn't remember."

"Roger," Ally said pointedly. "You do have something on your mind. Spit it out."

He turned with his head bowed. "I think I'd like to work here."

"Doing what?"

"Whatever."

"We couldn't pay much, Roger," Ally said.

"I don't need much – trailer rent and food are my only expenses."

"Carl told me you are well on your way to becoming a good carpenter."

Roger looked up. "There's just one thing wrong with that. I don't want to be a carpenter. I want to be a handyman – a jack-of-all-trades like my daddy. He never made much, but he was happy. I think that's what counts."

"I agree with you. Your dad used to work here, didn't he?" Ally asked.

Roger nodded. "A long time ago. He did odds jobs for Mr. Wilson – kept the place up, pumped gas, waited on customers in the store, helped with the barbecuing." He paused. "I'm talking too much."

Cliff smiled. "Ally and I have something else to do tonight, but if you want to come back and work on the signs, we'll leave the door unlocked."

Roger smiled. "You going to serve Mrs. Wilson's barbecue when you open the restaurant?"

"If we can find the recipe."

"I might be able to help there. As many times as I watched Mrs. Wilson prepare the sauce and helped Dad with the pits, I should be able to remember it."

"You worked here too?" Ally asked.

He shook his head. "No. I was just a kid. I kind of hung out after school while Dad worked. I'll tell you one thing, though. That barbecue is the most delicious food any man ever put in his mouth."

As Roger made his departure, Cliff said, "I'm getting hungry, Pretty Lady. How about you?"

Ally nodded her agreement. "If I'm going to cook, we'll need to make a run on the grocery store."

"The Korner Kafe in Dot serves good home-style meals. Let's grab a bite and get started moving you into the apartment."

"Give me ten minutes for a shower. I'm not going out in public looking like this," Ally said, slipping off the stool.

As they walked towards the motel units, she continued, "Cliff, let's leave things the way they are for now."

"I'm not following you."

"I don't think it is a good idea for Julie and me to share a bed. Sometime before she arrives, we'll move you to another of the motel units, but I think I should stay where I am."

"Julie's not going to like that."

They paused in front of the apartment door. "We'll see." She grinned. "I hate to mention it, but you could use a shower too. You

stink."

Cliff chuckled and watched her buttocks grind as she walked away. The telephone rang as he entered the apartment.

"Yo?"

"Where the hell have you been? I've been calling all day. I was worried sick."

"We've been working on the restaurant, Julie. Why were you worried?"

"You should have called when you arrived last night to let me know you were safe."

Cliff grinned and shifted the telephone to his other ear. "You worried about me, Pretty Lady? I'm touched."

"I was concerned about both of you. Let me speak with Ally."

"She's, uh, temporarily staying in unit number one and, at the moment, is taking a shower. We're getting ready to go to Dot for supper."

Cliff frowned when he heard Julie sigh. "Ask her to call me when you get back."

"Will do. Carl Elliott came by early this morning and said you are going to sell most of the land to him."

"Yeah. It was Creasy Green's idea and I think it's a good one."

"Maybe, but I wish you had discussed it with me first."

"Why?"

Cliff paused and then replied, "I thought we were partners."

"I'm keeping the land with the businesses and log cabin. I thought that's what you wanted."

"It is, but ... oh, never mind."

"Is Ally feeling okay?"

"Yeah. I think she's still pretty sore, but she's not complaining. Her lip is much better today."

"That's good. Well, uh, be sure to have her call me later."

"Julie, do you know somebody named Roger Bruister?"

"Spunky?"

Cliff laughed. "That could be his nickname. He goes by Roger now. He said his dad used to be the caretaker here."

"God, yes I know Spunky. He used to hang out at the restaurant. I had a huge crush on him. All the girls did. What's he doing in Dot? The last I heard, he was working for the FBI."

"We must not be talking about the same guy. Roger is working for Carl Elliott as a common laborer and Carl sent him out here this morning to help out with the restaurant cleaning."

"It has to be the same man if his dad used to be the handyman – tall, dark hair, gray eyes?"

"That's Roger."

"Cliff, what in the world could have happened?"

"I don't know. Maybe you're wrong about the FBI thing."

"No, I'm not."

"Well, at any rate, he wants to work for you as a handyman like his dad."

"Hire him, Cliff. Offer him a good salary."

"Julie, I don't think we can afford..."

"Just do it, Cliff. Maybe we should cut him in on the profit."

"Damn it, Pretty Lady. You've already stretched this partnership thing too thin by bringing Ally onboard."

"You tell him we'll work something out when I get there next week."

Cliff stared at the telephone receiver and listened to the dial tone.

Chapter Ten

The aroma of freshly brewing coffee again woke Cliff from deep sleep. He rushed to the bathroom to take care of necessary bodily functions and, as he washed his hands, looked at the man in the mirror who was in bad need of a shave. Quickly he lathered up and scraped away the stubble. As he splashed on after-shave, he thought he should also attempt to rid himself of morning breath. He scrubbed both his teeth and tongue thoroughly. He quickly pulled on clean clothes, rushed to the kitchen and broke into near hysterical laughter.

A tall, slender person of undetermined gender stood at the stove dressed in baggy bib overalls. A brown paper bag with cutouts for the eyes covered its head.

When he regained control, he grabbed the figure by the shoulders. "Who are you and what have you done with Ally?" She snickered as he removed the bag. Their eyes locked. Their lips touched. Their bodies pressed tightly together.

Cliff backed away. "I'm sorry, Ally."

"I'm sorry you're sorry," she muttered.

He poured a mug of coffee. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Put bread in the toaster."

They ate in silence and, when they were through, Ally put her dirty dishes in the sink and left without washing them.

Boy, is she pissed, Cliff thought as he watched her depart. He moved to the sink and ran water until it became warm. He closed the drain, adjusted the temperature and added dishwashing detergent. It's my fault, damn it. I must keep my hands off her. He shook his head and grinned. She lights my fire no matter what she's wearing.

When he joined her in the restaurant, Ally was scrubbing the stainless steel, double sink. Without looking up she said, "Check out the stove and grill. There's no point in cleaning them if they are not operational."

He studied the appliances for a moment. "Looks like they work on propane. There's probably no fuel in the tank and, frankly, gas scares me. I'll go back to the apartment and call in a professional."

She did not respond.

"Ally, I said I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say."

"We need more Brillo pads."

He nodded. "I need to go to the hardware store and buy panes of glass anyway. I'll pick up a box while I'm there."

Again, she did not respond.

The propane company promised to send a technician during the afternoon. Cliff measured a pane in a motel window and then counted the broken ones. When he returned to the apartment for his truck keys, the telephone was ringing.

"Yo."

"I've changed my mind."

"Good morning to you too, Julie. What now?"

"If I have a good day, I can finish the third Wal-Mart ad. I'm going to see if I can find a moving company willing to haul my junk to Dot tomorrow."

"Great!"

"It will probably be late when I arrive."

"It'll be good to see you again."

"Is Ally there?"

"She's in the restaurant. Want me to get her?"

"No. How about Spunky?"

Cliff chuckled. "Roger is a quiet, mild-mannered guy, but somehow I think he'd knock my block off if I called him Spunky."

"Is he there? Have you offered him a share in the business?"

"He's not here yet, Julie. Hell, woman. It's only eight o'clock. He came back after supper last night. I can't wait for you to see what he's done. The restaurant walls sparkle and he cleaned and polished all the old signs and put them up. It looks ... well ... Ally says it gives the place ambiance."

"As soon as he comes in, you tell him he is welcome to join us as a partner in this venture."

"Julie, we need to talk."

"There'll be plenty of time for that later."

"Julie, damn it. I love you."

"Bullshit."

The line went dead.

When Cliff returned from Dot, one of the painters helped him unload the windowpanes. "Feller's inside lookin' fer you."

"Oh? What does he want?"

"Can't rightly say – somethin' 'bout gas."

"Oh, yeah. I wasn't expecting him until this afternoon."

Cliff wandered into the restaurant. Roger was on a ladder, cleaning one of four chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. A short, overweight, middle-aged man was behind the counter talking with Ally.

"Hi," Cliff said, extending his hand. "I'm Cliff Baker."

"Bud Zegra," the man replied, gripping Cliff's hand firmly. "The lady here says you folks are going to open the place soon. Keeping it rustic, I see. I like that."

"It'll probably take us a month or two, but we'll get it open eventually. I guess Ally showed you the stove and grill. I think the tank is out back."

The man cocked his head to one side.

"You are with the propane gas company, aren't you?"

Bud smiled. "I'm a gas man, all right, but not propane. I sell automobile go-juice." He handed Cliff a card that identified him as a representative of the Charlotte based Riteway Petroleum Company. "If you haven't already hooked up with a company, I'd like for you to consider us. We can give you a deal that will allow you to be competitive with the stations in Dot."

Cliff glanced at Ally who winked her approval. "We haven't signed with anybody yet. We'll listen to your pitch."

"There's no pitch, Mr. Baker. We'll make you a fair offer on installing tanks, pumps and signage and we'll give you a competitive deal on gas and other products. I'll put it in writing and you can compare it with other offers."

"I'm sure there are already tanks in the ground."

Bud nodded. "Probably, but they'll have to come out and new tanks installed. Old tanks leak and that isn't good for the environment."

North Carolina recently enacted new, very strict laws about underground tanks. Let's go outside and check things out."

Cliff nodded and led the way.

"Those old pumps have to go. The way I see it, you need two islands with eight pumps each."

"One island with two pumps is sufficient," Cliff argued.

Bud shook his head. "The company won't go for that. The minimum is one island with four pumps."

"Two underground tanks?"

"Three."

"Why three?"

"Regular, hi-test and diesel."

"We don't get many big rigs through here. We don't need diesel fuel."

Bud nodded. "If the restaurant is good, the trucks will come, but we can add that later. I'm thinking of a nice tall sign right here in the middle, next to the road."

"What's on the sign?"

"Riteway, of course, and a place to post your regular and hi-test prices. It comes with all the letters you need and an extension pole to use in changing prices."

Cliff shook his head. "It's okay to have Riteway on the sign, but the biggest letters must say, 'Dad's Place'. And I want it to be a lighted sign."

"They're all internally lighted," Bud said. "I'll see if I can get 'Dad's Place' on the sign, but the company may not do it. I can't promise."

"No 'Dad's Place' means no deal."

"You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Baker." Bud smiled. "Now, of course, we want a covered island and we can put credit card readers on the pumps. Your customers won't even have to come inside."

"We're not going to be using a sophisticated cash register system, and besides, we want the customers to come inside."

"Of course," Bud said, writing a note on his pad. He glanced at the closed bay door. "I noticed a work bay when I got here. You going to be making oil changes and minor mechanical work?"

"Probably."

"We can give you a good deal on oil, tires and standard parts like radiator hoses and windshield wipers. The tires and parts are a part of our consignment package."

"What's this going to cost us?"

Bud glanced at his notes. "Like I said, the tires and parts are on consignment. You pay for them after the sale. Removing the old tanks, installing the new ones, the pumps and signage – that's going to run you forty thousand."

Cliff sputtered. "We can't afford that."

"If you agree to an exclusive contract, we'll spread the payments over a ten year period with no interest. That makes it only four thousand a year."

"What's the gas and oil going to cost?"

"Three, maybe four thousand."

"Whew. I didn't realize it was going to cost so much to get cranked up. I'll have to run these figures by my partners."

Bud stuffed the pad in his hip pocket. "Of course. I'll bring you a written offer, contract really, late this afternoon or first thing in the morning. You folks study it and when you're ready, give me a call."

"If we decide to sign a contract with you, how long will it take to get everything done?"

"A week should do it, but when that week starts depends on the availability of our crews."

"You have any idea when they might be available?"

Bud shook his head. "I'll find out and let you know when I bring the contract."

The two men shook hands and Cliff watched the salesman drive off in the direction of Dot in his shiny silver and black Taurus. He remembered the Brillo pads, retrieved them from his truck and returned to the restaurant.

"What's that racket?" he asked Roger, who was working behind the counter.

Roger nodded towards a swinging door. "Ally's doing something in the back room."

"The dishwasher works!" she shouted.

Cliff frowned when he realized Roger was cleaning the gas grill. "I thought we were going to wait on that until we find out if the damn thing works."

Roger dropped his eyes. "I'm sorry, Cliff. It isn't all that dirty and won't take but an hour or so. Ally wants me to go to Dot for pizza about noon and I thought I'd pick up some light bulbs for the chandeliers and varnish for the booths. Until then, I don't have anything else to do."

"Hell, Roger. We haven't even started cleaning the store."

"I'm sorry, Cliff. I'll get on it right away."

"Hey, you guys own the place?" A young man clad in hunter green shirt and slacks stood in the entranceway.

"More or less," Cliff responded as Ally came through the swinging door, grinning from ear to ear.

"Name's Dave Doogin," the man said as he approached. "I'm with Allen Wholesale Supply."

"What's Allen Wholesale Supply?" Ally asked as she poked Cliff in the ribs. "Do you believe it," she said under her breath. "The old dishwasher works like a charm."

"Ma'am," Dave replied, "we can fix you up with just about everything you need for the store from snacks to greeting cards to canned goods."

"Somebody must have left the door open," Cliff muttered.

"As a matter of fact," Dave replied, "it was open. I saw all the activity and thought I'd drop in."

"You handle beer and soft drinks?"

Dave smiled. "Almost everything but. You have to go to the individual companies or distributors for beverages."

"What's it going to cost us?" Cliff asked.

"Depends."

"On what?" Ally asked.

"On what you stock and how you choose to pay for it."

"Fella, we have more on our plates than we can chew right now. Maybe you should come back next week," Cliff suggested.

"Let me give you my card," Dave said. "I work on commission and your business is important to me. I promise we can give you as good a deal as anybody and I'll give you better service than the other guys."

"Hold on, Cliff. Let's hear what the man has to say." Ally turned to Dave and asked, "What do you recommend?"

"Well, we can sit down and go over a product list or you can trust me to stock the store using my experience and best judgment. Here's the thing. If something doesn't sell well, I'll take it out and give you credit. It doesn't help either one of us if a product sits on the shelf gathering dust."

"Things are moving a little fast, Dave," Cliff injected. "We don't have much capital to work with."

"What's our cut?" Ally asked.

Dave chose to answer Ally. "Depends."

Ally snickered. "That seems to be your favorite word."

"If you buy the goods outright, your cut is forty percent. If you put them in on consignment, it's thirty percent."

"That's stiff interest," Cliff muttered.

"Not really. With the consignment deal, you not only operate on our money, but I do all the inventorying and stocking of shelves. When you buy outright, those delightful chores are all yours."

"So, with the consignment deal you decide on which products we sell, stock the store, do the inventorying and restocking and we pay only for the items we actually sell."

"You got it, ma'am."

"What happens if we start out with a consignment arrangement and later want to switch?" Cliff asked.

"No problem. We take an inventory, sign a new contract and you write us a big check."

Ally looked at Cliff. "Why not?"

"When can you set us up?" Cliff asked.

Dave smiled broadly and nodded towards the entranceway. "When can you get that pigsty cleaned up?"

"We haven't given it much thought," Ally admitted as she started towards the store area of the building. The others followed.

"What do you think, Roger?"

Roger, obviously startled by being asked for an opinion, replied, "Uh, I'd guess two days to clean it up and another two days to paint the walls and fixtures."

Dave nodded. "Sounds about right. Let's see. This is Friday, so you're looking at having it ready next Friday."

Roger shook his head. "I was thinking Wednesday." He glanced at Cliff and dropped his eyes. "I don't mind working Saturday and Sunday if it's okay with you."

Cliff studied the ex-FBI agent for a moment before replying. "I don't know much about wage and hour laws, Roger. I don't want to get into trouble."

"I'd like to do it, Cliff."

"Okay, Mr. Allen Wholesale Supply man. Set us up next Wednesday."

"You've got it." He whipped out a pad. "If you don't mind, I'll make a few notes."

"Help yourself."

"I'll need your North Carolina Sales Tax number."

"My what?"

"Mecklenburg County doesn't require a vendor's license, but you do need a tax exemption number to buy wholesale."

"Where do I get that?"

"There's an office somewhere in Charlotte. Look it up in the phone book."

"I'll take care of it, Cliff," Ally said. "I had to have a similar license for my diner in Charleston." She grinned. "You get to file the quarterly sales tax reports. I hate those things."

"It's none of my business," Dave interrupted, "but you don't want to get in trouble with the tax people. There's a lady in Dot who runs a bookkeeping service. I can't think of her name right now, but you might want to check her out."

"Every time I turn around this thing gets more expensive," Cliff grumbled. He glanced at the large van parked in front of the store. "That your truck?"

Dave nodded.

"Mind if we have a look at the products you carry?"

"Be my guest."

"I'll just get started with the cleaning," Roger said.

"Have you already finished the stove and grill?" Ally asked.

Roger glanced at Cliff who shrugged his shoulders sheepishly.

"Sorry, ma'am," Roger said. "I'll get right on it."

Cliff followed Ally into the parking lot. "It looks like a United Parcel Service truck," she observed as Cliff opened the rear doors.

"It's a big sucker, all right," he agreed. "Damn, would you look at all that stuff."

Ally giggled. "I wonder how he ever finds anything?"

Cliff propped on the tailgate. "What am I going to do, Ally?"

"About what?"

"About Julie, you, me..."

"Spit it out, Cliff."

"Julie called this morning as I was preparing for my run to Dot."

"Oh?"

"She's changed her mind again. If she can find a mover willing to do it, she's coming tomorrow."

Ally grinned. "She doesn't want to miss out on all the excitement."

"I don't think that's it. She seems, well, obsessed with this Roger guy. She calls him Spunky. She insists that I offer him a partnership."

"You have a problem with that?"

"Our agreement is that Julie gets fifty percent and you and I split the other fifty. To be honest, I'm not happy with that, and if we bring Roger in, our cut will be down to, uh..."

Ally grinned and helped with the math. "Sixteen point six, six, six, six, six, six..."

"Whatever."

"In some partnerships, the working partners are paid a salary plus a cut of the profit," Ally said. "Maybe we should talk with Julie about that."

He nodded. "Ally, I ... I told her I love her."

Ally's expression became serious. "And?"

"She cussed and hung up on me."

"Ouch."

"Yeah."

Ally propped beside Cliff and draped her arm around his waist. He looked at her and, when she refused to make eye contact, placed his hand on her cheek and gently turned her head.

"Do you ... do you have feelings for me, Ally?"

"Don't go there, Cliff."

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Separate love and sex."

She placed her hand on his crotch and pressed her palm against his erection. "You don't seem to have a problem with it."

He did not attempt to remove her hand. "Do you think it's possible to love two people at the same time?"

"Are you saying you love me as well as Julie?"

"I'm asking a question."

"I don't have an answer. I loved Frank, and look where it got me."

"So you don't love me but yet you want to go to bed with me."

She stood up and grinned impishly. "Not if that kiss you gave me this morning is an example of your best." She turned and started back towards the building.

"Damn it, Ally. Wait a minute."

She stopped. Cliff joined her. "I just bared my soul to you. Please don't turn your back on me."

She searched his eyes for a full minute before replying. "In another world, perhaps you could have both Julie and me, Cliff, but not in this world."

"Are you saying I need to chose between you?"

"Hell, no. I want you to marry Julie, have a house full of children and live happily ever after."

"But?"

She nodded. "There is a but, Cliff. I'm not going to get emotionally involved with a man who's heart belongs to another and,

like you, I'm afraid there is a serious connection between Julie and Roger that we know nothing about."

"Why do you say that?"

"When I talked with Julie last night, I told her I was going to live in one of the motel units, not in the apartment with her. I expected an explosion, but instead she said that arrangement was fine with her."

"And you were disappointed?"

She dropped her eyes. "Yes, damn it."

"We're both screwed up, Ally. You know that?"

She nodded and lifted her eyes. "Cliff, except for what we've been talking about, are you happy? Does the work we are doing and the excitement of opening the businesses give you pleasure?"

He nodded. "Yes, it does – I think it is both the happiest and most miserable time of my life."

"Then let's just enjoy it, Cliff – enjoy each others' company – and see what happens."

He smiled, nodded and took her hand in his. "There's something I want to show you that I spotted in the van." He led the way, climbed into the truck and helped her in. He pulled her close and closed his lips on hers. He tickled her upper lip with his tongue while slowly massaging her back. He nibbled gently on her lower lip. He felt her sag into him. He cupped her buttocks and slipped his tongue between her moist lips. Their tongues met. She chased his tongue with hers and moaned as his hands tightened on their prey.

He broke the kiss and pressed her head to his shoulder. "That was a sample of my best," he whispered. He gently kissed her forehead. "Now, let's get back to work."

He jumped down from the back of the van and held his hand out to her. When she was safely on the ground, she said, "I'll join you in a minute."

"You okay?"

She nodded and, without a hint of a smile, said, "I need to change my undies."

Chapter Eleven

Cliff swallowed a bite of pizza. "I still say things are moving too fast."

"I love it," Ally responded, "but we do need a plan. Jumping from one project to another may not be the best approach. I say we finish the restaurant today and concentrate on the store tomorrow."

"Don't forget we must get the apartment ready for Julie."

Ally nodded. "Can't we do that tonight or maybe in the morning. You did say Julie will get here late in the afternoon."

"Julie is coming tomorrow?" Roger asked.

"Yeah, unless she can't find a moving company or changes her mind again. It wouldn't surprise me if she shows up tonight, or calls and says she's decided to sell the place after all and remain in Charleston."

Ally grinned. "Don't be so hard on the woman, Cliff."

Roger selected another slice of pizza and looked at it as he said, "The booths, tables and chairs need minor repairs and a coat of varnish. I can easily complete that this afternoon if that's what you want me to do. Tonight I can work some more on cleaning the store."

Ally turned up her bottle of beer and guzzled it in a most unladylike fashion. She belched and grinned. "Scuse me. Yeah, Roger. It won't take long to slide the booths back in place in the morning."

"Since you're handing out work assignments, boss, what do you want me to do."

Ally grinned at Cliff. "Mop the floor and clean up the workroom while I wash all the dishes, silverware, pots and pans."

"I want to try out the coffee maker and get the stove working. From now on, we'll have to make breakfast in here. We can't very well barge in on Julie every morning," Cliff replied.

"I already tested the coffee maker. It works, but needs serious scrubbing. There's something else you need to do, Cliff, and now is as good a time as any."

He looked at her quizzically and she cut her eyes towards Roger.

Cliff finished his slice of pizza and leaned back in the chair.

"Roger, I don't want to tick off Carl Elliott, but he seems to be okay with you working with us and leaving him. Are you sure that's what you want to do?"

"Thank you, Cliff – Ally. I'll do a good job."

Ally smiled. "There's no doubt about that."

"I ... I think there's something you should know before you make a commitment," Cliff continued. "I served time for pushing drugs. That's behind me now, but I thought you should know."

"None of my business."

"Maybe. Roger, in a telephone conversation I told Julie you are helping us. She remembers you. She said she thought you were an FBI agent."

Roger rubbed an imaginary spot from the tabletop. "I was – once."

"I suppose I have a suspicious mind, but, well, are you working as an undercover agent, trying to catch me pushing drugs again?"

"Cliff!" Ally said sharply. "You're paranoid."

Cliff continued to look at Roger.

"I've been back in Dot for about six months, now. How could the FBI have possibly known you would show up here?"

"Good point."

For one of the few times, Roger looked Cliff directly in the eye. "It's something I don't like to talk about. Let's just say the FBI wasn't my cup of tea."

"Get on with it, Cliff," Ally demanded.

"Here's the thing, Roger. We can use your help. As I told you before, we can't pay much."

"It doesn't matter."

"Yeah, well, it matters to Julie. She wants you to be a partner in the business. When she gets here, we're all going to have to sit down and work out the details. You can split a pie into just so many slices."

Roger looked at Ally who smiled and nodded. "I just want to work here like my dad used to. I didn't ask to be a partner."

"I know. It was Julie's idea and she's adamant about it."

"No. I can't do that. Just pay me minimum wage, at least until the business is on its feet."

"Fine by me," Cliff said with obvious relief in his voice, "but please let Julie know we made the offer."

Roger nodded. "Julie's a fine person. I do appreciate the opportunity."

"Well," Cliff said, pushing back from the table, "we have work to do, folks. Let's have at it."

"I, uh, do have an idea you might want to consider," Roger said as he tidied up the table.

"Sure," Cliff replied. "How much is it going to cost?"

"Cliff!" Ally reprimanded.

"It's just something to think about. There seem to be a lot of good ol' boys in this neck of the woods. I take it from what you've previously said that you plan to sell beer in the store. A couple of pool tables in the restaurant and draft beer might draw a crowd."

Ally beamed as she looked around. "There's plenty of room. I wonder if we can find an old-fashioned jukebox. We could set aside a little area for dancing." She glanced at Cliff, who seemed troubled. "Okay, Scrooge. So it will cost a few bucks."

He grinned. "Maybe both of you should sit down for this. I like the idea. Video games are real popular too – especially that poker thing."

"Gambling's not legal in North Carolina," Roger commented.

"I know, except for churches running bingo games and Lumbees running casinos. I think there is a version of the poker game that's just for fun. It's worth checking out anyway."

"Video games don't interest me, but pinball machines do," Ally said.

For one of the few times, Roger smiled. "I haven't played pinball since I was a kid."

Leaving Roger to work on restaurant furniture, Ally and Cliff headed for the workroom.

"Didn't realize this room was so large," Cliff commented. "Somehow, it doesn't seem as filthy as the rest of the place."

"I gave it a lick and a promise," Ally explained. She began loading the dishwasher.

Cliff tugged open the door of the upright freezer. "I sure hope this thing works. It'll cost a fortune to replace it. Seems, clean though."

"It looks like Mr. Wilson cleaned and defrosted both the freezer and matching refrigerator when he closed the restaurant, but it still needs a good scrubbing."

Cliff chuckled. "Damn, I thought I'd found a way to get out of it."

"Use plenty of Clorox. The health inspector will pay close attention to the refrigerated units."

"Health inspector?"

"You don't know much about running a restaurant, do you Cliff? You can't open a public eatery until the state has inspected and approved it."

Cliff chuckled. "Eatery? I like that. Whew," he continued as he poured the pungent fluid into a large bucket. "Clorox stinks."

Ally started the dishwasher, went back into the restaurant and began washing the coffeemaker. When satisfied that it was clean, she went to the apartment and returned with a can of coffee and filters, which didn't fit exactly but were close enough.

Cliff came through the door rubbing his eyes. "Those fumes burn," he complained.

"You probably have the mixture a little heavy on the Clorox side. Try adding more water to your bucket."

He inhaled deeply and grinned. "Coffee smells great."

"I forgot to bring sugar," Ally apologized.

"I take mine black," Roger said.

"Go get some mugs out of the washer, Cliff. It just cut off."

"Yes ma'am."

Each took a mug of the steaming brew to their work areas. Ally put a second load of dishes in the washer and began the task of cleaning under the counter.

Cliff finished scrubbing the freezer and rinsed it thoroughly. He wanted to test out the unit to see if it worked, but he felt he should leave the door open for an hour or two to air out. He emptied, rinsed and refilled the bucket, putting in less Clorox this time. He removed all the racks from the refrigerator and attacked its interior.

An hour later, Ally joined him and whispered, "There's a giant black dude out front who wants to see you. He doesn't look very happy."

Cliff pushed through the swinging door and introduced himself.

"There are two large propane tanks out back," the man said. "Both are sound, full and, thank God, turned off. I tested the line with compressed air. There's a big leak somewhere. If you had tried to light your stove, you'd have blown the place up, yourself included."

"Can you fix it?"

The man nodded. "I'm not looking forward to it. The line runs through the crawl space. There's not much room for a man to work and it's full of spider webs. After I find the leak, I can patch it, but I recommend running an entirely new line."

"What's it gonna cost?" Cliff asked.

"The cost doesn't matter," Ally said. "My question is, can you do it this afternoon?"

The man nodded. "Unless I run into something unexpected, like a huge, hungry spider." The man was not smiling. "I hate creepy, crawly things."

"Can I help?" Roger asked as he approached the group.

"Not much to it if you don't mind working on your back in the dark with a bunch of snakes crawling all over you."

"I think that if I help with the installation, it should reduce the cost."

"I work by the hour. The quicker we get done, the less it will cost."

Ally and Cliff watched Roger and the repairman walk out of the restaurant. "Am I getting soft, Ally?"

"What are you talking about."

"I think I am on the verge of liking old Spunky."

She grinned. "I'll give you a backrub tonight if you call him that to his face."

Shortly after five, the trio stood in the middle of the restaurant, assessing their work. "Looks good to me," Cliff said.

"I can't think of anything else we need to do," Ally agreed.

"All right, boss lady," Cliff kidded, "what next?"

"I'm pooped and hungry. Let's grab a bite at the Korner Kafe before we tackle another project here."

"I'll, uh, come back about six thirty if that's okay," Roger said, looking at his shoe tops.

"It's not okay," Ally replied. "Have dinner with us. Cliff's buying."

Cliff grinned. "Why not?"

"Well, at least let me run home and shower. Your vacuum cleaner got the spider webs off my clothes, but not out of my hair."

"Aw, you look okay to me, Spunky."

Cliff tensed as Roger looked up and locked eyes. Slowly, a hint of a smile crossed his lips. "I haven't been called Spunky since I was a kid. Julie must have told you my nickname."

Cliff relaxed and grinned. "Why did they call you that?"

"I was always into something. I couldn't sit still. I'm not sure who first hung that name on me – probably my dad."

"The years haven't changed you much, have they?"

"No ma'am. I guess not."

"All right, Spunky. Meet us at the Kafe." Cliff glanced at Ally. "And you, Pretty Lady, are at least going to change clothes. Damned if I'm going to be seen in public with you dressed in bib overalls."

The trio walked to the parking lot and, as Roger drove away, Ally commented, "Sure is a nice car he drives. That's a new Chevy Blazer, isn't it? Wonder how he can afford it. Crap, what now?" she said as a Taurus pulled into the lot and circled towards them.

"That's Bud Zegra, the Riteway salesman."

Bud stopped beside them and rolled down the window. "Here's the specs and contract," he said, poking a thick folder through the open window. "If you have any questions, give me a call tomorrow at home. I'm running late and my wife will skin me alive if I don't get home soon. We have a dinner date tonight."

"Thanks, Mr. Zegra. We'll study it carefully."

Bud pulled away, stopped and backed up. "I almost forgot. I'm not trying to rush you, but if you can make a quick decision, let me know tomorrow. The crew can start working on your place Monday. Otherwise it may be a month before they can get to it."

Ally took the folder from Cliff and glanced through it as they walked to their motel rooms. "Damn, look at this, Cliff."

Cliff glanced at the open folder. There was a sketch of a rectangular sign. The first line, in large red script outlined in black read, "Dad's Place."

"What was it like?" Ally asked as she kneaded Cliff's right shoulder.

He moaned with pleasure and mumbled, "What are you talking about?"

"What was it like in prison?"

"A paid vacation. What was it like to have your old man beat the crap out of you?"

She slapped the back of his head playfully. "I don't want to talk about it either. Cliff, I'm as tired as you are. I can't keep this up."

"You welching on your bet?"

"I'll give you a rain check."

"Ten more minutes. Work down to my lower back."

"How low?" She snickered. "We can move the rest of your stuff in here in the morning."

"Speaking of morning, I'm going to miss being awakened by the aroma of your coffee."

"The restaurant looks good, Cliff, and Roger has half the store area clean."

Cliff chuckled as he rolled over. "He would have it all done by daylight if you hadn't run him off."

"There's something not right about that man."

"I agree, but he's a likable cuss."

"Nice looking, too." She grinned as she slid her hand up the inside of his thigh.

"Have you checked out his eyes?"

She shook her head. "He won't look directly at me."

Cliff nodded and pretended not to notice the area she was gently stoking. "Our eyes locked just once this afternoon when I called him Spunky. His lips were smiling, but his eyes seemed filled with ... with

terror."

She patted the crotch of his jeans. "You really are tired tonight," she grinned. She scrambled to the edge of the bed, stretched and yawned. "If you wake up before I do in the morning, you fix the coffee and bring me a cup."

Ally turned as she reached the door. "Thanks, Cliff."

He propped up on one elbow. "For what?"

"For a good day."

He nodded. "It was a good day, Ally. You're a hell of a woman."

She smiled. "Some men like flat chests, thank goodness."

He sat up and crossed his legs. "Yeah, and I'm one of them, but it's not your gorgeous body I'm talking about."

She nodded. "That's the nicest compliment I've ever received from a man," she said as she opened the door.

"Ally?"

"Yes."

"It's a long way to your room."

She nodded. "Fifteen, maybe twenty feet."

"You could spend the night here," he said, patting the mattress with his massive right hand.

"You had to go and spoil it, didn't you?"

Cliff slipped into his pajama boxer shorts, brushed his teeth and set the alarm clock for five. He wondered what she wore to bed as he crawled between the sheets. He drifted to sleep thinking of sitting on the edge of her bed with a steaming mug of freshly brewed coffee in his hand.

"What took you so damn long," Cliff grumbled as he came through the office door, having heard her voice in front of the store.

"Quit your bellyaching and help me with this stuff," she said, but Roger beat him to it. "A bucket of chicken and a dozen beers," she explained.

Roger nodded and headed for the back booth of the restaurant.

She glared at Cliff. "That truck of yours is a bucket of bolts."

"It carried you there and back, didn't it?"

"Just barely. You have a taillight out. A state trooper stopped me and gave me a warning ticket."

As they walked towards the restaurant area he mumbled, "It doesn't take four hours to get a damn sales tax certificate."

"How do you know? Did you ever apply for one?"

She slid into the booth and Cliff sat beside Roger, opposite her.

"Didn't have breakfast, Roger apologized with a half eaten chicken leg in his hand. "I couldn't wait."

Ally smiled at him as she slid a paper plate towards Cliff and helped herself to a thigh. "We were lucky the tax office was open on a Saturday morning."

"Why did it take so long?"

"It didn't. As soon as I got to Charlotte I pulled into a service station and asked for directions. I drove straight to the office and was out of there within thirty minutes."

"Then why did it take so long? This place isn't going to clean itself up, you know."

Roger glanced at Cliff, but said nothing.

"Put some food in your mouth and hush," she teased. "I'm getting to that. On my way to the office I passed the Carolina Distribution Center."

"What's that?"

"Turns out it's a beer wholesaler. They'll be stocking us up sometime Monday." She chuckled. "The salesman must have thought I looked pretty good. The beer you're guzzling is a freebie."

"Damn, Ally. We don't even know if the coolers work."

"The ones in the restaurant do, Butthead, and I'll bet the coolers in the store work too."

Roger focused his eyes on Ally's plate. "Did you ask about draft?"

She nodded as she chewed. "They're going to fix us up either Monday or Tuesday but we can't sell it for a while."

Cliff looked at her. "Why not?"

"We need an ABC license."

Cliff shook his head.

"I went back to the state tax office and filled out an application.

The lady said it would take a week or so unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Cliff, I filled out the form honestly. Maybe I should have forgotten that you served time."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"The lady said the board is often hesitant to issue a license to anyone with a record. They'll do a full background check." Her voice dropped. "She said it could take months."

"Uh, Cliff?" Roger said.

Cliff whirled his head towards Roger. "What?" he said gruffly.

"You have a phone in your apartment?"

"It's Julie's apartment now, and yes, there's a phone in it."

"May I make a long distance call?"

"Why not?" Cliff grouched as he slid out of the seat. He watched Roger hurry across the floor, sat back down and looked at Ally. "They say I've paid my debt to society, but the truth is, that debt can never be paid."

"Cliff, what happened while I was gone? You were in such a good mood this morning." She grinned. "The coffee was delicious."

"You should have told me you sleep in the buff."

"I didn't know you were coming to my room uninvited," she countered.

"You did invite me, damn it."

Ally smiled. "Yeah, I guess I did."

"I wanted to surprise you – start your day off on a good note."

She reached across the table and placed her hand on his. "You did," she said sincerely. "Did you like what you saw?"

"I wish your damn ex-husband was still alive."

She looked at him quizzically.

"So I could have the pleasure of killing him."

"You did," she said quietly.

"That was an accident. If I knew then what I know now..."

"I know they're still discolored, Cliff, but they don't hurt much anymore. You could have touched them."

"I should have just left the coffee on the bedside table and not

looked."

"Yeah," she said as she chewed a bite of biscuit. "Now everything is out of balance."

"Out of balance?"

She nodded as she sipped her beer. "You've seen me naked but I haven't seen you."

"Do you ... do you want to remedy that?"

"There won't be any problem with the license," Roger said as he approached the booth.

Cliff and Ally turned towards Roger with guilty expressions on their faces. Roger, with his eyes on the floor, didn't notice. He waited for Cliff to get up so he could slide into the seat. "I still have a few friends at the Agency."

Chapter Twelve

Cliff came through the office door wiping perspiration from his forehead with his drenched handkerchief. "Man, it's hot in that little hole and the air conditioner doesn't work."

"I'll have a look at it," Roger offered as he admired the gondola he had just finished scrubbing.

Cliff nodded. "If we have to replace it, we're still ahead of the game. All the other window units work, but probably need servicing with Freon or something. I have tools in the back of my pickup. Help yourself."

"Freon is no longer legal," Roger commented as he wiped his hands on his jeans. "There are substitutes that work well in some appliances but not in others. Maybe we'll be lucky."

As Roger headed for the parking lot, Cliff helped Ally tug a large, heavy box from under the counter. "I've cleaned the office as best I can," he said. "The filing cabinet and desk are crammed full of papers. I don't know what to keep and what to throw out. You have restaurant experience. Maybe you should have a look."

Ally opened the cardboard box and replied, "I think that's something Julie needs to do. It's her father's records, you know."

Cliff chuckled as Roger passed on his way to the office. "I have an idea that getting Julie to do anything related to the businesses is going to be next to impossible. What's that stuff?" he asked, pulling back a flap of the box for a better look.

"Cash register tape," she replied.

He picked up a roll and examined it. "This one is defective."

"What's wrong with it?"

He fingered the edge of the paper. "Two strips of paper are on the same roll."

She grinned and punched his arm gently. "Sometimes I think you're hopeless. The top strip is the customer receipt. The bottom is detail paper. It's for our records."

The sound of a vehicle entering the gravel parking lot attracted their attention. "Speak of the devil," Ally grinned as she glanced through

the spotless plate glass at the front of the store.

Cliff checked his watch. "Four o'clock. She's earlier than I expected."

Cliff and Ally reached the parking lot as Julie emerged from her Cavalier. "Welcome home, Pretty Lady!" Cliff greeted.

Julie nodded. "Ally, Clyde. Excuse me. I have to pee." She marched to the apartment unit and disappeared inside.

"Damn," Cliff muttered. "She acts like she owns the place."

Ally grinned and jammed her elbow into his side. She peered into Julie's car. "Look at all this crap, Cliff."

Cliff joined her and placed his arm lightly around her waist. "I suppose the black metal thing is the aquarium stand and the glass thing is the aquarium, but what are all those huge sealed buckets?"

"Cliff!"

He turned towards the apartment.

"I want the aquarium set up on the side wall where you had the two easy chairs," Julie instructed. "Be careful with it. When you can get to it, bring in the red bucket and take off the top. Then bring in the rest of the stuff. Where's Spunky?"

"He's in the office working on the air conditioner."

Without another word, Julie marched to the store with Ally and Cliff staring. "Nice to see you again, too, Julie," Ally mumbled.

The aquarium stand was not heavy, but it was awkward. After setting it up in the desired spot, Ally and Cliff carefully eased the aquarium out of the back seat and gently placed it on the stand. Cliff tugged the red bucket from the floor of the Cavalier and set it on the ground. "Take this inside while I remove the rest of the buckets."

Ally gripped the handle, but the bucket did not budge. "What the hell does she have in here?"

Cliff chuckled. "What's the matter, weakling. Need help?"

"Kiss my ass."

He grinned. "You don't know just how close I came to doing that this morning."

"Promises, promises," she said as together they lugged the bucket into the apartment. She pried the top off and gazed at the tangle of

frantically swimming tropical fish.

Cliff shook his head. "I remember the aquarium, but I didn't realize there were so many fish. You think the other buckets have fish also?"

"I guess we'll find out," she said, heading for the door.

Before removing the next bucket from Julie's car, Cliff pulled off the top. "Just water," he said. "Why in the world would she bring nine buckets of water all the way from Charleston?"

"Beats me, partner. Let's get on with it."

They lugged the remaining buckets to the apartment and then emptied the trunk of Julie's car.

Ally surveyed the pile of buckets and boxes in the living room. "What do we do now? What's keeping her?"

"Beats me. I'll go get her."

Cliff expected to find Julie in the store or restaurant, admiring their handiwork, but she was not there. He went to the open office door and froze. Julie and Roger were engaged in an amorous embrace and passionate kiss.

"Scuse me," he muttered as he backed away. They didn't seem to notice.

He rejoined Ally in the apartment.

"You look like you just saw a ghost."

He shook his head. "They're playing smackimouth. Something tells me they are more than childhood friends."

The rumble of a large truck entering the parking lot interrupted the conversation. Cliff emerged from the apartment, remembered seeing Julie's key still in the ignition and motioned to the driver of the moving van to wait a moment. He climbed behind the steering wheel and drove the car out of the van's way. When he climbed out of the Cavalier, Ally was directing the van as it backed up to the apartment door.

The two workmen raised the rear door of the van and Cliff whistled. "Where are we going to put all that stuff?"

Julie rushed up with Roger trailing. "Open a couple of the motel units, Cliff. Then you and Ally get on with whatever you were doing. Spunky will help me settle in."

Cliff opened four of the units, not certain even that would be sufficient, and joined Ally in the store. "Who the hell is that woman who drove up in Julie's car?" he joked.

"Bossy little bitch, isn't she?" Ally laughed.

With an exaggerated sigh, Julie flopped into an easy chair in the living room of the apartment.

Roger studied her sneakers. "If there's nothing else, I should get back to cleaning the store."

She tried to find his eyes. "We still have a dozen boxes and half as many suitcases to unpack."

"I wouldn't feel comfortable putting away your clothes."

She chuckled. "I remember one time, on the bank of the pond, when you seem to have enjoyed handling my clothes. You undressed me and pressed my panties to your nose."

"I'm sorry, Julie. That was very wrong."

"Lighten up, Roger. We were what, nine – ten years old?"

"Still, I knew better."

"You think there's anything cold in the refrigerator to drink?"

"I'll check."

Julie watched the fish, swimming happily in their familiar aquarium.

"There's Pepsi Colas and beer," he shouted from the kitchen.

"I'll have a Pepsi."

He returned to the living room, handed her one of the two red, blue and white cans, went to the aquarium and peered through the glass as he sipped his drink.

"I wanted you to touch me," she said, "but you wouldn't."

Roger did not reply.

"Do you remember my breasts?"

He nodded.

She snickered. "They're still the same size."

He squatted in front of the tank without reply.

"Did you think that I was deformed since I had no penis?"

"I ... I thought it was the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen."

"Then why did you refuse to touch it? Why did you run away?"

He turned, but still did not look at her. "I was afraid. I knew it was my turn and I didn't want you to see my little penis that I knew was sticking out like a toothpick."

Julie chuckled. "God, how I loved you."

For the first time, he looked up. "Julie! We were just kids."

"Yeah, but my feeling just grew stronger as the years went by."

"You're kidding. We never even dated."

"With all the cheerleaders and majorettes chasing the high school football star, you never noticed me on the sidelines, but I was there, Roger."

"Why didn't you let me know?"

"I was ugly, Roger – flat chested and ugly as homemade sin as my daddy used to say."

"Your daddy never said any such thing. He's the finest man I ever knew, other than my own pop."

"No, Dad never said that about me. It was just an expression he used." She smiled at him. "Did you ever marry?"

He shook his head. "Thought about it once, but then I joined the Agency and there was no time."

"Don't tell me you are a virgin."

He sipped the Pepsi. "I didn't say that."

She chuckled. "Didn't think so. You seeing anyone now?"

He shook his head.

Julie rested her head on the back of the chair. "Boy, I used to have some wild fantasies about you. Still do occasionally, if the truth be known."

"Julie, you're not suggesting..."

"In my fantasies, you are my first and only lover."

"Don't go down that path, Julie."

"Why not? I'm not seeing anyone and you're not." She leaned forward in the chair. "Roger, look at me."

He reluctantly raised his eyes.

"You asked me why I didn't let you know I had a thing for you when we were in high school. Well, I'm letting you know now. I

know I'm not much to look at, but can't we give it a chance?"

His eyes roamed from the top of her head to the tip of her sneakers and remained there. "I'm not a virgin, but I don't have much experience. You see, there was always a problem."

Julie heard him swallow.

"Every time I was with a woman, it was your body I visualized, not hers."

"You're kidding."

He shook his head. "I never asked you for a date because I didn't think I was good enough for you."

She leaped from the chair and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Spunky, if we had only been honest with each other ... but it's not too late."

"Yes it is," he said softly, unable to resist the urge to hug her close. "I'm really not good enough for you now. I ... I'm just half a man."

"Hey, you guys in there?" Cliff bellowed as he knocked on the door.

"Come in, Clyde," Julie responded.

"Wow," Ally said as she preceded Cliff into the apartment. "Looks great."

"Ally and I are starving. Want to join us at the Korner Kafe?"

"What time is it?" Julie asked.

"After seven," Cliff replied.

Roger stood and took the empty can from Julie. "You folks have a good time. I'll grab a bite at my place and work on the store a little more."

"You'll do no such thing, Spunky," Julie responded. "You'll have dinner with the rest of us. I, uh, have some things I want to run by you all. I may as well do it while we eat."

Cliff pushed back from the table and burped. "Scuse me. That one slipped up on me. Man, that sirloin was tasty."

"They serve good food here," Ally agreed. "I know they were frozen, but my shrimp plate was delicious."

"I thought you were going to discuss something tonight while we

ate, Julie."

Julie sipped the last of her iced tea and nodded. "Since Dad's funeral, I've been on a roller coaster. My emotions and interests have been twisted and turned in every direction, but my feet are now back on solid ground. Because you, Cliff, and you too, Ally, were involved with my fluctuating life, you deserve to know what my present situation is. If my being driven by every wind that blew has screwed up your lives, I am truly sorry."

Cliff and Ally exchanged glances and she rested her hand on his thigh under the table.

"I have completed three of the Wal-Mart ads and on Monday morning will present them to the people at the Holder Advertising Agency. My work is excellent. If they don't buy it, they're amateurs."

"Hey, Julie," Cliff beamed. "That's great news."

"I like my life as an illustrator and that will continue to be my primary vocational interest."

Ally nodded. "We understand, Julie. There was never any question about that."

"I'm just getting started, Ally. Cliff, you're a good man. How you got messed up as a youngster I'll never understand. You came into my life at a very vulnerable time. I needed the tenderness you offered and the words of encouragement. You said I needed an attitude adjustment. Thanks to Ally, I've come a long way towards doing just that."

Cliff shifted in his seat. "But?"

"You awakened some emotions in me that were dormant for a long time. I'm grateful for that, but Cliff, I'm no longer interested in you romantically if I ever was."

He nodded and felt Ally squeeze his thigh.

"Ally, you came into my life quite by accident. I always wondered what it would be like to have a twin sister. Now I know." She smiled. "I think I love you – like a sister. I will not pretend that I did not consider trying to seduce you. I'm not a lesbian, Ally, and I don't think you are either."

Ally felt her cheeks flush, but remained silent.

"I don't know what life has to offer me sexually. I may wind up an old maid. I can live with that if I must. Something neither of you knows is that I was once in love with a wonderful guy who didn't even know I was alive. He knows now, but doesn't care. There's nothing I can do about it. Time tells tales that only time can tell."

Both Cliff and Ally noticed the pained expression on Roger's face. "Julie," Ally said gently, "would you feel more comfortable if I move back to Charleston?"

Julie's hand shot across the table searching for Ally's. "Oh, hell no, Ally. That isn't what I meant at all. I want us to be friends. Close friends."

"I'd like that," Ally agreed.

Cliff smiled. "I hope we can be friends too, Julie. Remember what I once told you?"

Julie nodded and smiled faintly. "I hated you for it at the time, but you were right. Thank you for caring so much for me, Cliff."

Roger seemed confused.

"Here's the part that is going to piss you off. I'm sorry, but it's a take it or leave it situation," Julie continued.

Ally's hand returned to Cliff's thigh. The muscle was rock hard.

"As you know, I am selling most of my land to Carl Elliott in exchange for professional services and a little hard cash. Carl plans a residential development, which will, in time, be good for Dad's Place. I plan to meet with him Monday afternoon to work out the details."

As if the same puppeteer pulled their strings, Ally and Cliff nodded in unison.

"I'm afraid I gave you the wrong impression about Dad's Place, Cliff. I fear I led you to believe you would be in charge. I don't blame you if you're miffed. After all, it was your idea, but it's my land and I am the majority partner. I intend to run the show."

"It was your dad's idea," Cliff corrected.

"Yes, but it was you who convinced me to make Dad's dream come true – at least the business part of it."

Cliff nodded and placed his hand on top of Ally's.

"Roger," Julie continued, turning to face him, "through Cliff, I

offered you a partnership. I insist that you accept it."

"Julie. I appreciate it. You ... you just don't understand. I want to be your handyman like my dad was for your daddy. That's important to me, Julie."

"And it is important to me that we be partners."

"Like Cliff once said," Roger objected, "the pie is just not large enough to cut into so many slices."

Julie glared at Cliff.

"He's right, Julie. We have no idea if there will be a profit, and if so, how much it will be. Even if Ally and I continue to live at the motel, we must make a little something to live on."

"I thought maybe you could work out a small salary for the partners, Julie," Ally offered. "I don't know what your financial situation is, but most new businesses do not begin to make a profit until the fourth year."

Julie took a deep breath. "I don't know exactly what my financial situation is either. I'll have a better idea after I meet with the Advertising Agency and Mr. Elliott. I'll sit down, make out a spreadsheet and run some financial projections. In our partnership, I will own fifty-five percent and each of you will own fifteen percent. Somehow, I'll also work out a reasonable salary for the three of you."

"You know how to do that, Julie?"

"No, but my computer does."

Cliff cleared his throat. "I *am* pissed, Julie. You seem to have done a one eighty on Dad's Place. Your instructions to Ally and me were to get the job done. You said you'd back any decisions we made."

"I won't go back on my word, but step aside, Cliff. Julie's back in town."

"Why so glum, chum?" Ally joked as she emptied a shelf of ancient merchandise.

Without pausing his effort to scrub rust from an old Coca-Cola cooler, Cliff replied, "I always wondered what it would be like to be screwed. Now I know."

"I think the Julie that you and I thought we knew doesn't exist. Give it time. We may like the real Miss Wilson just as well."

He tossed his sponge into the bucket. "Do you know how many women I've told I love them?"

"Fourteen billion, six hundred million, two hundred thirty-three thousand, one hundred and thirty-six."

He shook his head, but, in spite of his mood, could not suppress a grin. "Once, damn it. One time in my entire life and she threw it in my face."

"I thought she let you down easy."

"At the very least she could have told me in private. To sit there and hear it in front of you and Roger was ... was humiliating."

"Wounded your masculine pride, did she?"

"She wasn't all that easy on you, either."

"It came as a relief to me, but I agree, I would have preferred to hear it in private."

He squeezed out the sponge and resumed work.

"It looks like it's just you and me, partner. My room or yours?"

"I'm not going to do that to you, Ally."

"Do what? Make me happy? Give me physical pleasure? Make my day? Just what is it that you aren't going to do to me, Handsome?"

"You ever listen to that radio program, Bawdy Talk?"

"How could I not listen? You turn on the portable radio every afternoon – except today. Why didn't you listen to it today?"

"It's a weekday program. Have you noticed that for the most part, the callers talk about sex as if it was no more than emptying a full bladder?"

Ally placed the final box of nails on the floor, stood and stretched.

"They rarely talk about commitment, if that's what you mean."

"That's exactly what I mean. I've been there and done that as they say, but I'm beyond it now. There has to be more to sex than the old in and out thing."

"You're not going to pleasure me unless I marry you and you will never marry me because you don't love me?"

"I didn't say anything about marriage, Ally. That's a whole

different ballgame if you ask me."

She approached him from behind, wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her chest to his back. "You love me, Cliff. You just don't know it yet."

"I love your body – that's the truth. But if I want to ejaculate, ten minutes alone in the bathroom will solve that need."

"Ten minutes, huh. I'll bet you a backrub you can't go two minutes with me."

Ally staggered backwards as he whirled around. He caught her by the shoulders and shook her. "Do you want to be my plastic doll? Is that what you want? Or maybe you want me to be your dildo. There has to be more to it than that."

She stood speechless as he stomped towards the door. "Turn the lights out when you get through."

"You wait a damn minute!" she shouted.

He hesitated and heard her approaching.

"Look at me, Cliff Baker!"

He turned.

"Why did you bring me a mug of coffee this morning?"

"You asked me to."

"Liar!"

He searched her eyes. "Because I wanted to do something nice for you."

"Go on."

"Damn, Ally. I don't know. I thought you'd like it."

"And?"

He dropped his eyes. "I thought it would be, uh, romantic."

"Turn the damn lights out yourself," she hissed as she pushed past him.

He caught up with her at her room door. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Damned if I know. You want me to service you? Okay."

"Kiss my ass."

"Okay."

She snickered. "Why is it I can't stay angry with you for long?"

"Because you love me?"

"Bull!"

"I see Roger's car is still here. Wonder what they're doing?"

"Can't you guess?" she said with a wink.

"I doubt it."

"She said she wanted him to help set up a studio in the spare bedroom and put away her clothes. I wonder if they'll shower together before going to bed?"

"You have a one track mind."

She inhaled noisily. "And you need a shower bad."

He nodded. "May I come in?"

Ally opened the door, kissed him on the cheek, patted the crotch of his jeans while smiling seductively and said, "No." She closed the door behind her before he could recover.

He fingered the master key in the pocket of his pants, grinned, inserted the key, twisted the tumbler and pushed against the door. The security chain was in place. He closed the door, jammed his hands in his pockets and slumped back to his room.

Chapter Thirteen

The partners sat at a back booth, enjoying Ally's scrambled egg breakfast.

"Are you guys always this quiet?" Julie asked.

Ally glanced at Cliff. "Julie, we just don't know what to say. Things changed drastically after you arrived yesterday."

"Sorry," Julie said without conviction. "If you are no longer interested in pursuing the project, speak up before I waste more money. I can't pull it off alone."

"It's not that, Julie," Cliff said slowly. "Last night you announced that you are the boss and we accept that. We just don't know what the new CEO wants us to do."

"Before yesterday," Julie asked, "who was the boss?"

Ally and Cliff pointed to each other and they all chuckled.

"I don't know that I want to change anything, but I do know that in the future we will review ideas. Most likely, we'll let the majority rule, but as the partner with the land and money, I reserve the right to veto majority decisions. Is that unreasonable?"

"Of course not," Ally said.

"Spunky," Julie said as she held up her coffee mug and turned to the man sitting beside her, "I think we could all use a refill."

As Roger hastened to obey, Julie looked at her two friends and said, "Fill me in."

For over an hour the three partners recited their accomplishments and business decisions. Occasionally Roger clarified a remark, but not without prompting.

"Okay," Julie said when the group seemed to have no more to say, "I am in basic agreement with everything that has been done so far. I want to examine the contract with the Oil Company and give some thought to the wholesaler's offer. I understand that you are leaning towards consignment, but a ten year agreement with Riteway Petroleum bothers me a little."

She leaned forward, drained her coffee mug and looked at Ally. "If I had not come back, what would you have the crew doing today,

Ally?"

Ally smiled gently. "That's a moot question, isn't it?"

"Come on, Ally, lighten up."

Cliff cleared his throat. "We planned for the three of us to finish cleaning the store area so the painters can get started Monday morning." He glanced at Ally and continued. "There are a ton of papers you need to go through. I cleaned up the office yesterday but didn't know what to keep and what to discard. Ally thought maybe you could spend the day on that project."

Julie slapped her palms on the table. "Sounds like a plan to me."

Julie parked in the lot beside the Dollar Building, pulled the portfolio from the back seat and headed for the double glass doors. She checked her reflection in the plate glass. I look sharp in slacks, she acknowledged, but maybe for this first meeting I should have dressed more formally.

She pushed through the door, briefly studied the directory in the foyer, walked to the elevator and pressed the button for the second floor. Calm down, she admonished herself. The worst that can happen is for this Rita person to turn down your work. It won't be the first time you've been rejected.

The elevator bumped to a stop and the doors opened. She slowly walked down the hallway, reading office numbers and small placards.

"Mornin', Miss Wilson."

She jerked her head to the left and peered through Creasy Green's open office door. She smiled a greeting and he beckoned to her. She stood in the doorway. "I'm on my way to see Rita Holder," she explained.

The chubby man stood up and his desk chair toppled over. "Gonna replace that dang thing one of these day," he muttered as he righted the chair. He turned and grinned. "Easier to buy a new chair than go on a diet."

Not knowing what to say, Julie simply smiled.

"Rita's office is two doors down the hall on the right. Glad I caught you. Carl called earlier. Something came up. He can't meet with us

'til three. Hope that's okay."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I have a plot map right here if you want to take a look," he said, tugging a long roll of paper from a shelf.

"It'll keep, Mr. Green. I don't want to be late for my appointment."

Green seemed disappointed, but nodded his understanding.

Julie's clogs suddenly seemed made of lead as she forced her way to the Holder Advertising Agency. She pushed open the door and slipped into the outer office. The desk was unoccupied. Clutching the portfolio under her arm, she studied the numerous framed advertisements on the walls. Most featured cartoon caricatures and many were very humorous. Whoever did those drawings is damn good, she thought.

She turned at the sound of an opening door. "Hi there," an attractive, large chested woman said. "Our secretary is on vacation. May I help you?"

"I'm Julie Wilson. Are you Mrs. Holder?" Julie noticed that the woman's breasts shook along with her head.

"My name is Betty Hensley. I'll let Rita know you are here."

Julie watched the woman disappear through an office door and turned back to the bank of ads on the wall.

"Miss Wilson, so glad to see you."

Julie turned and grasped the extended hand of the tiny, light brown-haired little doll who greeted her.

"I'm Rita Holder and I believe you've met Betty."

Julie nodded and smiled at Rita.

"You like the caricatures?"

"They're super," Julie acknowledged.

"You just met the artist."

Betty grinned. "Afraid caricatures is all I can do."

"I'm jealous," Julie said. "I want to buy every product featured in your ads."

"Sign her up," Betty joked.

Rita slipped her hand around Julie's waist and steered her into the office. "Coffee?"

"No thanks."

"I'm afraid my time is very limited this morning, Julie. May we get right down to business?"

"Of course," Julie replied, handing over the portfolio. She sat in an uncomfortable chair and watched the sexy little bombshell spread the layouts on the desk.

The only sound for thirty minutes was that of rustling paper as Rita studied Julie's work. Finally, without looking at Julie, Rita pressed a button on the intercom. "Betty, can you step in here a moment?"

"On my way," came the reply.

Betty joined her boss on the side of the desk opposite Julie. She, too, carefully studied each layout. "Beats the hell out of my ideas and the artistry is exquisite!"

Rita looked at Julie and smiled. "I agree. Julie, Betty is my resident artist, but until now, we have had no need for this type of work. I am so thankful that we didn't send you our layout concepts. Yours are much better! Are you familiar with the terms of the contract?"

Julie could not find her voice. She simply nodded.

"Then let's sign the sucker and get on with it."

After the formal signing, the three women toasted their new alliance with small glasses of wine. "You told me on the telephone you were thinking of moving to Dot permanently," Rita said.

"I moved Saturday. I'm temporarily living in the motel apartment unit, but I plan to renovate the old home place."

Rita smiled. "I like that. I have an idea we'll soon be throwing many assignments your way."

Julie grinned. "I'm counting on it." She looked at Betty. "I really do like your work, Betty. Do you ever accept outside commissions?"

"Depends on what you have in mind."

"When I was a girl, my mom and dad ran a motel, store and restaurant out on Highway 13. It's all been closed for years now. My dad recently passed away."

"I'm sorry," Rita said sincerely.

"Thanks. It was my dad's dream that someday I would restore and

reopen the businesses. Some friends and I are currently in the process of doing just that. We're calling it Dad's Place. Looking at your caricatures gave me an idea for a sign and possible advertisements featuring a cartoon likeness of my dad. Interested?"

Betty smiled. "Of course," she said. "You want him wearing a chef's hat?"

"Maybe, but mom was actually the cook."

Betty collected the three wineglasses and said, "Let's go to my office and discuss it."

Rita placed her tiny hand on Julie's wrist. "There's something I think you should know." Before Julie could respond, she continued. "Betty and I live in a lovely home on the golf course. We're a couple. Does that bother you?"

Julie pasted a smile on her lips. "Of course not."

"I have three children and Betty has one."

Julie could not keep her eyebrows from raising.

"My husband, now deceased, is the father of my oldest two. Betty and her husband are divorced. He is the father of Betty's child and my youngest."

Julie was speechless.

Betty tried to lessen the tension. "It was a cold winter."

"I, uh, it's none of my business," Julie managed to say.

Julie stood at the foot of the grave for several minutes. The mound of red earth was covered with straw and a few shoots of new fescue were beginning to push towards the sun. She sat cross-legged beside the headstone.

"You old sweetie," she began. "I miss you."

She brushed away a tear. "You're going to get your wish, you know. At least part of it. In a short period of time I made friends with two people and Roger Bruister showed up too. You remember Spunky, don't you Dad?" Anyway, the four of us joined forces. We're going to reopen the businesses, Dad – all of them. We're calling it Dad's Place. I'm having signs made with a likeness of you on them. I remember how much you used to enjoy editorial cartoons

in the newspaper – particularly the caricatures of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. Your picture on the signs will be like that."

She brushed grass clippings from the base of the headstone. "I'm going to fix up the cabin, too. I sold two-thirds of the land to a contractor. I don't guess you like that, huh Dad? As part of the deal, he's going to make necessary repairs to the cabin."

She glanced at the fleecy white clouds and wondered if her father and mother were up there somewhere, looking down on her. "I've had a crush on Spunky all my life, Dad. You didn't know that, did you?" She chuckled. "Neither did Spunky. If I have my way, he will one day be your son-in-law. He's not married – never has been. We may not be able to fill the house with children's laughter, though. I have an idea he can't sire children. He may be impotent. He started to tell me about it – called himself half a man. We were interrupted. Later, he refused to talk about it."

She glanced at her watch and struggled to her feet. "I've gotta go meet the contractor now, Dad." She blew him a kiss. "I love you."

"That backhoe made a mess out of the parking lot," Julie said as she propped against Cliff's pickup, watching a crane lift a huge, rusty tank from the cavernous hole in the ground.

"Julie's gonna be pissed when she finds out we let Riteway go ahead with the work before she signed the contract," Cliff said.

Roger tossed a piece of gravel at the rising tank. "I don't think so. She agreed to the contract after she found the escape clause."

"This is maddening," Cliff groused.

"What's maddening, Sourpuss?"

"We worked our cans off fifteen hours a day and now there's nothing for us to do. There are painters on the outside, painters inside, beer guys installing the draft fountain and these guys pulling out the old gas tanks."

"What's your point?" Ally asked.

"We're just sitting here, doing nothing."

"I'm squatting and trying to hit a moving target with a rock."

Ally and Cliff broke up at the unexpected humor from Roger.

"You think they'll get the new tanks installed today?" Ally asked.

"Maybe. They have them sitting there on the flatbeds. I don't imagine they will tie up the crane for more than a day."

"You think Ally made out all right with the Advertising Agency?" Roger asked.

"I hope so. A rejection would burst her bubble."

"Cliff," Roger said, using his index finger to draw circles on the ground. "I didn't mean to horn in on you and Julie."

"All's fair in love and war," Cliff said.

Roger lifted his eyes. "Do you love her?"

"I'll get over it."

"I'll bow out if you say the word."

"Do *you* love her?"

Roger dropped his eyes. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"But you did. Now answer my question."

"Cliff!" Ally admonished.

Roger stood and faced Cliff. "I've loved her since I was a little boy. Pretending that she loved me saved my life once."

"Then go for it, Roger. What's important to me is that Julie is happy. You hurt her and I'll break every bone in your body."

"Cliff, damn it, back off!" Ally shouted, getting between the two men.

"It's okay, Ally," Roger said. "Of all the things Cliff could have said, that was the best. Cliff, there's something you should know."

"Sorry I got a little testy, Spunky."

"I ... I spent the night with Julie Saturday night."

"I know that."

"And you're okay with it?"

Cliff didn't answer.

"I slept in the living room with the fish."

"Do they snore?"

Roger smiled. "It wouldn't have done me any good to sleep in Julie's bed."

"Give her time, Roger. I probably shouldn't say this, but unless she lied to me, Julie is, uh, innocent, if you know what I mean."

"Cliff," Ally said softly, "I don't think that's what Roger is saying." She turned towards Roger. "Whatever you're talking about is between you and Julie. Cliff and I don't need to know."

Roger scuffed the toe of his right shoe in the gravel and watched the crane lower the first of two rusty tanks to the ground. "The three of us are Ally's friends. Unless I miss my guess, we're Ally's only friends. None of us want to hurt her, and yet, well, I think you need to know."

"This is getting too heavy for me," Cliff said.

Roger's eyes, full of terror, nailed Cliff to the side of his pickup. "Something happened a few years ago that forever changed my life. I did something that I deeply regret. The fact that I had no choice is of little consolation. If it weren't for Prozac, I'd be in an institution right now. My cowardice caused someone – my partner at the Agency – to be hurt very badly. I fear she'll never recover."

Roger again squatted. Ally knelt and placed her arms around him.

Cliff squatted in front of his two friends. "And that is why you left the agency? Were you fired?"

Roger shook his head, his eyes filled with tears. "For six months I was in the finest mental hospital in the nation. When I recovered to the point I could look after myself, the Agency gave me a medical retirement with full benefits. That's why I don't need a big salary for what little I do around here."

"When you left the hospital, you moved back to Dot?"

Roger nodded. "My dad lived a simple life, but he was very happy. That's what I want for myself. I never intended to intrude on your dreams and I had no idea Julie cared for me."

"But she does care for you, Roger, and, in a different way, so do Cliff and I."

"I cannot let an intimate relationship between Julie and me go any further without telling her. When I do, she may hate me as much as I hate myself."

Cliff stood and watched the crane lowering its chains into the pit. "Stand up, Roger."

"What?"

"Stand up."

"Cliff!" Ally protested as Roger rose to his feet.

"You ever hugged a man?"

"I'm not a homosexual, if that's what you're asking."

"Me either," Cliff said as he gave Roger a bear hug and clung tightly to him. "I never had a guy trust me enough to spill his gut like you just did. I can't describe how I feel right now, but I've never respected and loved a man so much in all my life. I'll stick with you, no matter what ... and I'll quit calling you Spunky too."

Tears streamed unashamedly down the cheeks of the trio. As Cliff patted Roger's back, Roger said, "I like being called Spunky. That's who I want to be now."

Ally wiped her nose on her sleeve. "I'll whip the bitch's butt if she turns her back on you, Spunky. If she doesn't want you, I sure as hell do."

As Roger pulled away from Cliff, his eyes seemed less terror-filled. He smiled gently at Ally. "That's a super offer, Ally, but there's one thing wrong with it. You're in love with the big lug here."

"What?" she gasped.

"Prozac slows down my thought processes and reflexes, but it neither makes me blind nor stupid."

Julie came through the door carrying four large Styrofoam boxes. "My God," she cried, "the parking lot is in shambles and now this."

Cliff stood and looked at her sheepishly. "We grew tired of standing around watching other people work. We went to Papa John's for lunch and somebody came up with the idea of painting the gondolas, shelves and counter instead of waiting for the painters to do it. We went to the hardware, bought paint and brushes and..."

"Bright red, green, blue and, for goodness sakes, orange?"

"I guess we should have run the idea by the boss first."

"You're damned right, you should." She burst out laughing. "Ally, you have more paint on you than on the shelves."

"Maybe so," Ally said in mock defense, "but there's not a drop on the floor."

"I love it!"

"Really?"

"Whose brilliant idea was this?"

Both Ally and Cliff pointed at Roger.

"And who picked out the colors."

Roger hung his head. "Guilty."

"Thank God somebody in this outfit has imagination!" Julie grinned. "Look, guys, I have country style steak for everybody. Get cleaned up and let's chow down."

"We're not sitting on my clean seats in these nasty clothes," Roger stated flatly.

"There's a picnic table out back," Cliff suggested.

"Take these boxes before I drop them, Spunky. Cliff, grab some beers from the refrigerator."

"Hold on, boss lady," Cliff said. "How'd it go with the advertising people?"

Julie tossed her head and snapped her fingers. "Piece of cake."

"And the session with Carl Elliott?"

"He was eating out of my hand in minutes. Come on guys, get with it. I'm famished and man, do I have things to tell you!"

When they were seated at the picnic table, Julie began talking excitedly before opening her Styrofoam carton. "Rita Holder has an in-house caricaturist named Betty Hensley. The gal is good. She's going to make up signs with Dad's likeness."

"What's a caricaturist?" Ally asked.

Julie bolted down a large bite of gravy-soaked mashed potatoes. "Sort of like a cartoonist. The agency is going to plan an advertising campaign for us – you know, signs around town, ads in the local newspaper, maybe even in the *Charlotte Observer*. Everything will feature a caricature of Dad. We may even be able to afford a big sign out on the Interstate just before the Highway 13 exit."

Cliff assumed an expression of concern. "Shouldn't you have run all this by your partners first?"

"Hell, no. I'm the boss, remember? Besides, I knew you'd all like it."

Ally snickered.

"Pepper up your nose?" Julie asked.

Ally replied, "No, but I was just thinking. All the advertising we need is a couple of spots on that Bawdy Talk radio program."

"Hitch up your bloomers, Ally. There's more. I ate lunch at the Korner Kafe and sat at the counter beside the sexiest looking woman I've ever seen. Hell, she has *you* beat. I recognized her voice immediately."

"You had lunch with Delilah Delight?" Roger asked.

"Turns you on too, does she?" Julie laughed. "Her real name is Shelly Brooks. She used to be an exotic dancer."

"A stripper?" Ally gasped.

"Yep. She has a little girl and an invalid husband who gets around on a walker. He baby-sits while she brings home the bacon. One thing led to another and she's going to do a daily spot on her show for us."

"Remember I once said it takes new businesses four years to begin showing a profit? Ally asked.

They all nodded.

"Well, forget it. Happy days are here already!"

"Hush up, all of you," Julie gushed.

"There's more?"

"After lunch, I stopped at the Super Save for gas. A technician was in the office, working on an electronic game. I struck up a conversation with him. His company out of Charlotte leases games and pinball machines. A rep will call on us later this week to set everything up."

"I didn't think you liked that idea when we ran it by you Sunday morning," Roger said.

"It grew on me," Julie replied. She paused, studying Roger as he scooped up the last bite of steak. "This was your idea too, Spunky?"

Simultaneously, Cliff and Ally shouted, "Guilty!"

"Let me guess," Ally joked. "You have even more good news."

"It's good news to me. Mr. Elliott offered me more cash than I dared hope."

"How much?" Cliff asked.

Julie grinned. "None of your business. He's going to blacktop our parking lot and the road to the log cabin after he cuts the streets for his subdivision and he's going to begin work on the cabin next Monday. Spunky, that gives you and me just six days to straighten the house up and store all the junk so the workmen can have at it."

"How come Spunky gets to have all the fun?" Cliff joked.

"Okay. You can all help."

"Don't you have another ad layout to do?" Ally asked.

"I'm running on high octane adrenaline, Ally. I'll get it all done."

"Spunky," Cliff said, "you have something on your mind?"

"Not really."

"Sure you do. Spill it."

"I was just thinking about the ads for Dad's Place."

"And."

"Well, if we do put up a billboard, I thought it might be nice to say, 'Dad's Place, featuring Mom's barbecue'."

"Oh, God," Julie moaned. "Hey, Spunky, the ad line is great. It's just that, well, here we are, almost ready for our Grande Opening, and we don't have mom's recipe."

"Spunky," Ally said, "you once said you thought you could remember the recipe."

He shook his head. "Sorry. I tried."

"Julie, you didn't find it in the office?"

Julie shook her head.

"It must be somewhere in the house," Cliff offered.

Julie's shoulders slumped. "I'm not certain she ever wrote it down at all."

Chapter Fourteen

"I need help moving this gondola, Cliff."

"They are heavy. I'll bet Julie's dad made them all."

"You think we'll finish painting today?"

He chuckled. "Hell, Ally, we only have two to go. You're still miffed about Julie changing her mind and dragging Spunky off to the house this morning."

Ally pretended to pout. "I haven't even seen the house."

"It's beautiful, or at least, it will be once it's finished. Other than cleaning, there's very little to be done inside. Most of the repair work is in the basement and on the outside. Carl told me he could complete it in a month or two and, at the time, he was thinking of doing the work himself. Now that he's decided to use his crews, it wouldn't surprise me if he finishes the job in a couple of weeks."

"Is it a big house?"

"It sure it! I didn't count the rooms, but there must be a dozen or more."

"How much cleaning needs to be done?"

Cliff laughed. "It hasn't been occupied in ten years or longer. Every square inch is filthy except for the furniture."

"You think the furnishings need to be discarded?"

"No. Julie's dad covered it all. I imagine it's in good shape."

"Excuse me," a female voice interrupted. "I'm looking for Julie Wilson."

Cliff gazed at the gorgeous woman who stood just inside the door.

Ally laughed. "Excuse *me*, Delilah," Ally joked, "while I shove Cliff's tongue back into his mouth."

The delightful temptress grinned. "I must have a very distinctive voice. Everyone who's ever listened to Bawdy Talk recognizes me instantly."

"You're beautiful," Cliff muttered.

"Thank you, kind sir. Is Miss Wilson available?"

"Not really," Ally explained. "She's at the house and there's no telephone."

"I'll take you," Cliff offered.

"Delilah, if I were you, I wouldn't get in Cliff's truck without a chaperone," Ally joked. "Cliff, why don't you go get Julie?"

"Yeah. Right away."

Delilah held up her hands and Cliff gazed at the cleavage as her breasts pressed together. "No need. I just wanted to look around and drop off this contract."

Delilah took the tour with Cliff trailing the two women and, when she left, he walked her to the parking lot and gallantly held open her car door.

"Did you get a good look when she slid behind the wheel?" Ally kidded as they watched Delilah's Escort disappear down Highway 13.

"Gorgeous boobs," he said. "Big, dark brown areolas."

"Cliff!"

He shook his head and grinned. "She was wearing a damn bra that covered just about everything."

"You need ten minutes alone?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You're about to burst the fly of your jeans."

"Jealous?"

"Damn right. I thought you liked small breasts."

He chuckled. "I think I just changed my mind. I've never been inside a strip joint, but if she was still active, I'd be a regular customer."

"I'll strip for you tonight if you like, and it won't cost you a dime," she joked as she patted the crotch of his jeans.

"Trouble is," he laughed, "you don't have any jugs to show me." He playfully placed his hands on her chest.

She quickly clutched her hands on his and pressed him closer. Their smiles disappeared. She moaned, closed her eyes and tilted her head. He pressed his lips to hers. His arms circled her. She sagged into him as her tongue explored his mouth. His hands eased to the small of her back. She dug her fingernails into his shoulders. His probing fingers traveled south.

Ally pushed away. "I'm sorry, Cliff. I didn't mean to do that."

Cliff followed Ally back inside the store. "Ally."

"Don't."

"Come here," he demanded.

"Are you giving me an order?"

"Yes."

She hesitated and then obeyed, resting her arms lightly on his shoulders.

He crushed her against his powerful body, forced her head to his shoulder and stroked her hair. "I like you, Ally. You know that."

"You love me," she replied.

"Everyday I look forward to being with you."

"Me too."

"I could never intentionally hurt a woman, especially not you."

"I know."

"It may not work out."

"We'll never know unless we try."

"My place or yours?"

"Hey, you two," Julie said as she came through the door, "break it up."

Cliff clung tightly. Ally lifted her head. Their tongues touched and disappeared as their lips pressed together.

"Cover your eyes, Spunky," Julie said. "You're too young to watch this."

The couple stepped apart, clasped hands and spoke to each other with their eyes.

Julie cleared her throat. "I think you two should take a cold shower while Spunky and I scrounge up something for lunch. Hamburgers okay?"

Neither Cliff nor Ally responded.

"Come on, Spunky. You're driving," Julie said.

When the lovers heard the roar of Roger's car engine, they burst out laughing.

"I'm not comfortable with this," Cliff said.

"Backing out already?"

"No," he replied, continuing to gaze into her eyes. "That's not the

discomfort I mean. I've never felt anything like this."

"Are you finally admitting you love me?"

"I'm not going to joke about something like that, Ally. I don't know what I am experiencing."

"Mine," she said.

"I don't follow you."

"You asked me a question and that's my answer."

"Oh. I don't have any, uh..."

"Don't need any."

"Oh?"

"Birth control."

His eyes narrowed. "Why?"

She tugged him towards the door. "I was living with Frank and I use the injection method. It's good for three months."

"Oh."

Cliff lay on his back, breathing hard. Julie straddled him and teased his lips with a nipple. He sucked gently. "I can count the number of women I've been with on my fingers, Ally. I've never known a woman with such long nipples."

"Frank measured them once – three quarters of an inch. He said I was a freak."

"You're a beautiful freak."

"You really *can* go ten minutes."

"You timed it?"

"No. It seemed like an hour – a wonderful hour."

"Want me to spank you?"

"I thought you couldn't hurt a woman."

"I can't. I meant a couple of playful whacks."

She kissed each of his eyelids. "Never again."

"Thank goodness. That was bothering me."

"Cliff, I just had sex for the first time."

"What?"

"I never knew it could be like this. I don't want it to ever end."

"Hey, ten minutes is my limit."

She sat up and grinned down at him. "You know what I mean."

A car horn blared and they both chuckled. "I think lunch is ready," Ally said.

They untangled and Ally strategically placed a half dozen tissues as Cliff stumbled to the bathroom. He emerged a few minutes later wearing jockey shorts. He watched Ally pull a shirt over her perky, swollen breasts. "Aren't you going to, uh, clean up?"

She smiled wickedly. "I built a dam. I want to feel you squishing inside me all afternoon."

Hand in hand, they walked to the restaurant and joined Julie and Roger who were halfway through their burgers.

"Only one?" Ally complained as she slid into the booth.

"Worked up an appetite, did you?" Roger deadpanned.

Everyone chuckled. "You're getting good, Spunky," Ally complimented.

"Can you two come down to earth long enough to discuss business?"

"Sure, Julie," Cliff said. "What's on your mind?"

"The house is filthy. I mean filthy filthy. I decided to hire a professional service to do the dirty work. I don't care what they charge. All Spunky and I can do is clear out Mom and Dad's stuff."

"Did you find the recipe?"

"No, Ally."

"We found a loose-leaf notebook full of recipes, but neither the barbecue, slaw nor buns were in it," Roger added.

"Ally," Julie continued, "you told me about the dishes you served in your diner. I think that's the way to go."

"Not much profit in it," Ally reminded Julie.

"There's good profit in beer."

"I'd hate to see the place turn into a beer joint," Roger said.

Cliff nodded his agreement.

"The simplicity of serving just barbecue appeals to me, Julie," Ally objected. "Are you certain you searched the office good?"

"The stuff I discarded is still out back. You can double check if you like."

Ally sighed. "If you think about it, bring the notebook tonight. There may be some other tempting recipes in it."

"Anybody home?" a male voice interrupted from the store area.

"In here," Julie shouted and she slipped out of the booth.

"Buster Everheart," the bald-headed man said as he extended his hand. "I'm with Games Unlimited out of Charlotte."

"Boy, that was fast! I'm Julie Wilson and these are my partners in crime."

Everheart listened intently as Julie explained their plans and showed him around.

"I agree," he said at last, "that we might all make a buck or two on a few electronic games. I'm not so sure about pinball, though." He chuckled. "We have a ton of them in the warehouse gathering dust. I'll put in as many as you want, but don't get your hopes up."

"We're keeping things kind of rustic and fifty-ish," Ally explained. "I'll bet many of our customers will love to play pinball."

"Maybe. Want my opinion?"

"Sure," Cliff said.

"Four electronic games in the store area should do well – maybe five. You get twenty-five percent of the take and we service the machines each week."

"There's no up-front cost to us?" Julie asked.

"No. Some outfits sell their machines, but we don't and we're the most successful company in the state. If I were you, I wouldn't put pinball machines, electronic games or pool tables in the restaurant area."

"Why not?" Roger asked, clearly disappointed.

Everheart answered indirectly. "If it was me, I'd add a few tables or leave an area open for dancing. I'd put an old fashioned jukebox right over there."

"You handle jukeboxes?" Julie asked.

"Yes ma'am. Same deal as the game machines."

"We had our hearts set on pinball machines," Ally said, almost to herself.

"What's back there?"

Roger followed the man's focus. "Restrooms."

"There's a large storage area too," Julie said.

"It's a mess," Cliff explained. "We're not going to need to store much of anything and just planned to block off that room."

"Let's have a look," Everheart said, leading the way. He tried the door, but it wouldn't budge. He put his shoulder against it and stumbled when the swollen wood released. He walked around the dimly lit room for a full minute as the partners watched. "It's perfect," he announced.

"Perfect?" Cliff asked in surprise.

Everheart tugged at his chin. "Rip out all the shelving. Tack up some paneling. Add a drop ceiling and florescent lights and you have a perfect game room that won't bother the diners. You can even put a pool table right in the middle if you like."

"I suppose you handle pool tables too?" Julie grinned.

Everheart smiled. "You'll have to go to Wal-Mart for a dart board, ma'am."

"How'd we get stuck doing all the hard work?" Cliff asked as he tapped the lid shut on the last paint can.

Ally let her eyes roam the room. "They look good, Cliff, but I confess I've had enough painting for a while. At least Julie loaned us Spunky while she made her telephone calls."

"Yeah. Rearranging these gondolas was hard work and that man is strong as an ox."

Ally chuckled. "Julie can talk a skunk into smelling sweet."

"When did she say they were coming to install telephones?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, and she talked Mr. Elliott into remodeling the game room. She even found a cleaning service in Charlotte."

He began washing their paintbrushes. "Did she say Carl was sending a crew out here Thursday?"

Ally snickered. "She doesn't mess around."

"That just gives us the rest of the day and tomorrow to get the room ready. She's just got to let Spunky help us."

"I think she wants to keep Spunky to herself. Did you see the look

on her face when she saw us kissing?"

"I barely noticed they were present."

"She's jealous."

"Of me?"

"Conceited cuss, aren't you? No, she wants Spunky's arms around her like yours were around me."

Cliff stretched and glanced through the plate glass windows. "Parking lot looks pretty good."

"How long before they install the pumps?"

"They want the concrete to set up overnight. I think they plan to install the pumps and the island cover tomorrow, but the sign won't be ready until Friday or Saturday." He chuckled. "That's one battle Julie lost. Mr. Zegra refused to add her dad's caricature to the Riteway sign."

"She doesn't lose many."

"Turn up the volume on the radio. Bawdy Talk is on."

So, Randy, you agree with Bob?

I sure do, Delilah. My heart went out to him. Imagine being happily married for forty years and then suddenly finding yourself alone.

Bob said he was too old to play the dating game, trying to find someone compatible for companionship. I have an idea that's not your situation.

No. I'm twenty-six, but I have the same problem. I just can't force myself to use sleazy pick-up lines. I don't mind spending time with a lady to see if we click, but it's embarrassing to approach a woman and have her give you the cold shoulder.

I take it that's happened to you more than once.

Yeah.

Randy, is it possible you set your sights too high?

Maybe. I don't think so. I'm not going to pretend that a lady's looks aren't important to me, but I never seem attracted to the foxiest gals in a bar. The thing is, I seldom get up the nerve to approach anyone. Sometimes I think a woman might be interested in me from the way she looks at me, but I never know what to say.

Keep listening, Randy. Perhaps some of our callers can give you a few tips. Hello, this is Delilah. You're on the air.

Hi. This is Spud and I have a tip for both Bob and Randy.

I'm sure they're listening. Go ahead.

Well, first of all, I agree with both of them. The dating game is ridiculous. Hell, we all know what we want. I have a line that cuts through all the small talk. I don't want the FCC to shut down Bawdy Talk, Delilah, so you'll have to use your imagination about one word. It begins with the letter F.

Tread lightly, Spud.

Well, when I see a lady I might be interested in, I just walk right up to her and say, "Hey, Babe. Wanna blank?"

If you said that to me, I'd slap your blanking face off.

That's a risk guys have to take. Hell, this big gal damn near broke my jaw one night, but she wound up in the back of my van anyway. Think about it, Delilah. Doesn't that beat offering a broad a drink or inviting her to your apartment to view nonexistent etchings?

It takes all kinds, Spud.

This is Delilah Delight. You're listening to Bawdy Talk on WFNS – your friendly neighborhood station. Listen up, everybody. Delilah is about to do something she's never done before. Instead of cutting to a recorded commercial, I want to tell you about our newest sponsor.

Now, I will never recommend a product I don't really like, so I must say up front, I've never tried this product. I don't know if it's any good or not. It's called Relief. It's an over-the-counter medication, available in all pharmacies and is supposed to give relief within eight hours for all you kiddies out there who suffer from constipation.

That's right. I said constipation. Fortunately, Delilah does not have that problem. Here's what I want you to do. If you are all stuck up, give Relief a try. Then drop me a note and let me know how everything came out.

When she managed to control her laughter, Ally said, "Cliff, I'm not constipated, but I've gotta pee. Come with me."

"You're kidding."

She grabbed his belt-buckle and tugged him to the ladies room.

Cliff stared as she pushed down her shorts and panties, sat on the throne and dislodged a soggy mass of tissues.

His eyes bulged. "I ... I've never seen a woman do that."

Ally blotted, flushed and kicked away the clothing from her ankles as she stood. "Your turn," she said, gesturing towards the toilet.

"Uh, Ally ... I have a news flash. Men don't usually sit to urinate."

She wagged her eyelashes seductively while massaging the base of her flat stomach. "I know."

"Oh. Damn, Ally," he said as he unbuckled his belt, "don't you ever get enough?"

"I don't know, Big Guy, but I intend to find out."

Cliff lay on the bed with a contented expression on his face. Ally lay on her stomach beside him, but turned in the opposite direction. She propped on her elbows while leafing through the yellowed pages of the loose-leaf notebook.

He massaged the milky white, perfect mounds of her buttocks. "That's the longest shower I ever took in my life."

"Takes longer when you soap my breasts forty times."

He chuckled. "I'll bet when I was a baby my mama never cleaned my testicles so thoroughly."

She snickered and turned a page. "Which does a better job, Ivory soap or my tongue?" She turned another page and shivered as he rubbed the tip of her spine.

He turned slightly and used both hands on the perfect round hemispheres. "Find anything interesting?"

"Pretty standard stuff." She turned another page.

He pressed the thumb of his right hand against her tailbone and let it slowly trail down the intimate valley. He paused at the small, brown, puckered star.

She craned her neck so she could look at him. "Forget it. That's off limits. It's mine – all mine. It's never been used but for one thing. Forget it, Cliff."

"Never tried it that way myself. It must hurt like hell."

She turned another page. "It's my present to you after we're

married."

"Married! Now you just wait a minute. I never said anything about marriage."

"Cliff!" she shouted. "Here it is!" She scrambled to a cross-legged position so he could read with her.

Cliff forced his eyes away from the furry triangle. "But the heading is 'Leftovers'."

"That must be Julie's mom's security method."

He chuckled. "Fooled Julie and Spunky."

She turned a page. "It's all here, Cliff – not just the sauce. Listen to this. 'Randolph insists on roasting the pork over coal embers, but it would taste so much better roasted over a hickory fire.'"

"Now if you can find the bun recipe."

Ally turned the page. "It's here, Cliff." Her eyes devoured the page. "Spunky was right. It looks like a variation on the yeast roll recipe I have."

"Damn, Ally, you're making me hungry."

She looked up. "Sorry, Cliff. I don't have anything in the room to eat."

He pulled the notebook from her hands and tossed her on her back. "The hell you don't," he said as he buried his head between her legs.

Chapter Fifteen

Julie tossed the stuffed plastic bag into the bed of the truck and sighed. "Spunky, I'm pooped. Let's take a break."

Roger closed the tailgate of Cliff's pickup. "We're going to have to make a run to Good Will. The truck is full and so is your car. You sure you want to discard all your mother's clothes?"

"Can you picture me wearing any of her dresses?"

Roger smiled and followed her up the porch steps. "No. I was just thinking."

"Thinking what?"

"It's silly."

"I need something cold to drink," she said, heading for the kitchen. "Even though the cabin is shaded, it's hot in here."

"Is Mr. Elliott going to add air conditioning?"

"Yes, and he thinks we should install a new oil furnace also."

Roger chuckled. "It's hard to think about heating the place on a day like today."

Julie pulled two Cokes from the newly cleaned refrigerator and sat at the kitchen table. "Tell me your silly thought."

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"Scout's honor," she pledged.

"Your mama's quilting frame in the upstairs room gave me the idea. Quilts on the beds would look good in the log cabin and they would be special if made from your parent's clothes."

Julie smiled gently and placed her hand on his. "It's not a silly idea, Spunky."

"I'm afraid Good Will may just throw the clothes away. They're not in very good condition and are old fashioned. They may not even accept them."

"You think?"

He nodded as he sipped the Coke.

"There's just one problem. I know nothing about quilting."

Roger focused his eyes on the kitchen window. "I do."

"You're joking."

He looked at her without expression. "Not something you'd expect a macho man to do, is it?"

"You know how and enjoy it?"

"Yeah. I could teach you, but I warn you it's not as easy as you think. First, you decide on a size for the squares. Large squares make the work go faster but, in my opinion, the smaller ones make a prettier quilt. You cut hundreds – thousands – of squares using some sort of a guide. Then you sew them together using small stitches but you must make sure the fabric and designs are complimentary. Some people use a sewing machine, but hand stitching looks better if you're careful. Once you have completed two sides, you stretch one of them on the frame, add a layer of padding, and stretch out the other side. Then you sew the two together, using a predetermined pattern of stitching. The final procedure is to add a hem."

"You really do know how to make quilts. Did you learn from your mother?"

He smiled as he shook his head. "When being treated for a mental illness like mine, you have to do something to keep your mind off your troubles. Some work jigsaw puzzles. Some get interested in stamp collecting. Some try their hands at artwork. Others, like me, turn to crafts of some sort. I was attracted to a group of women making a quilt."

"Then let's forget the idea."

"Why?"

"Wouldn't it bring back unhappy memories?"

His eyes widened as he jerked his head towards her. "No! No! No! You're thinking of stories and pictures from insane asylums back when they didn't know anything about mental illness. Julie, I love every doctor, nurse, orderly, social worker, maid and janitor. They gave me back my life! It's a most happy memory for me."

Julie brightened. "That settles it then. You're going to teach me and we're going to keep making quilts until the cloth runs out, but where do you suggest we store all the old clothes?"

Roger shrugged his shoulders. "The barn, maybe?"

"The one down by the pond? Spunky, it's ancient. It probably

leaks. There always were rats in it."

"It was just an idea."

"Uh, oh," Julie said, lifting her head and pushing back from the table. "Bawdy Talk is on."

As she hurried towards the radio on the kitchen counter, Roger chuckled. "You listen to that thing?"

"Sometimes I find it amusing," she said as she adjusted the volume. "I know for a fact that you listen to it."

"I had no choice. Cliff turns it on every afternoon."

This is Delilah Delight with another four hours of Bawdy Talk. Thanks for turning me on. Now all you guys stuck in Charlotte traffic, honk your horns if you want the delicious babe in the car next to you to flash her breasts.

"Wonder if anyone ever actually does that?" Cliff asked.

"Trust me, they do. The problem was, I didn't have anything to flash."

"You wouldn't?"

Julie grinned. "Of course not."

For those of you who missed yesterday's show, I want to do a brief recap. Bob called in with what turned out to be a major problem for many people. He is retired now, and alone. His childhood bride passed away a couple of years ago. He's lonely, but doesn't want to play the dating game. He's looking for a shortcut to companionship.

We must have had forty or more calls from people, most of them much younger than Bob, who experience variations of the same difficulty. There seems to be a real hesitancy out there in radio land to use the standard pickup lines. The dread of rejection apparently is a powerful fear indeed.

I couldn't get it off my mind, and this morning, about three o'clock, I sat straight up in bed. Maybe I dreamed it, but I think I have come up with a possible solution. Please bear with me a minute.

Someone developed a wonderful system of sign language to enable people with hearing and/or vocal impairment to communicate. And there has also developed a rudimentary universal sign language we all understand. We all know what the thumbs up and thumbs down

signals mean. A fist with index finger lifted upward means "we're number one." Point that finger at your chest, and it becomes a question – "Me?" Point your index finger at something or someone and it becomes a universally understood indicator. We all know what the extended middle finger means and if someone shrugs her shoulders, it means, "I don't know." If someone wags his head from side to side, we know he is saying, "No," but if his head bobs up and down, he's saying the opposite.

Sometimes these signals are called body language. Who started all these signs? How did they gain wide acceptance? If this were television, you'd see me shrugging my shoulders. Are you still with me? Here's my plan.

I want you Bawdy Talk listeners to initiate a new signal – the uplifted pinky finger. Now, let's don't make it dirty. The meaning is simply, "I would like to know you better." You spot someone who interests you, gain eye contact and lift your pinky – no approach, no pickup line, no embarrassment. If the object of your interest lifts his or her pinky, you're in business. If the one in whom you are interested smiles and shakes his or her head negatively, you have your answer without embarrassment. Now, this part is important. If your pinky signal receives a negative response, you must honor it and move on.

What do you think, Gang? Give Delilah a call. Oh, boy – all the lines lit up. Hello, Caller. You're on the air.

Afternoon, Delilah. This is Spud. I called yesterday.

I remember. Have you cleaned up your act?

I just wanted to say that I like your idea. If this were television, you'd see my pinky finger in the air right now.

And you'd see me smiling and wagging my head.

Then you'd see my middle finger in the air.

Goodbye, Spud. Now Gang, that's exactly what I was talking about. Let's don't make this thing obscene. Let's make it a friendly way for two people to meet without embarrassment. Hello, Caller. You're on the air.

Julie snapped off the radio. "Let's go check out the barn, Spunky."

Ally wiped perspiration from her forehead and grinned at Cliff as he returned to the game room after carrying out a load of debris. She lifted her pinky finger.

He stopped and pointed at his chest.

She nodded.

He lifted the little finger on his right hand and then extended both hands with palms up, and looked frantically from left to right.

She pointed at the floor.

His eyes widened.

She smiled seductively, turned her back, pushed down her jeans and panties and bent over.

"Looks okay to me," Roger said as they entered the barn.

"It's as if time stood still. There's Dad's tractor, the mower and all his tools."

"What's that thing?"

"A grinder. Dad kept his tools razor sharp."

"Don't see any signs of leakage," he said, gazing upwards. "What did he keep in those covered bins?"

Julie strained to lift the hinged top of the nearest container. "Seeds, mostly. This one's empty and I see no signs of rats."

"This one's empty too. We can store the clothes in these things."

"Back the truck up, Clyde."

"Clyde?"

"Sorry. That's an expression I use for all men I like."

He looked at her for a long moment and smiled. "I like you too, Julie. I've missed you." Abruptly he turned and headed for the truck.

When the plastic bags stuffed with old clothes were all stored in the bins, Julie grinned, reached out and touched his arm. "Tag. You're it." She raced out the barn door.

Roger took a deep breath and jogged after her, being careful not to close the gap between them.

Julie dashed to the edge of the lake and pushed her way through brambles onto the narrow pier that reached to the middle of the water.

Roger crept out on the pier with caution. "Do you trust this thing?"

he asked.

"Chicken!"

He stopped halfway to her. "Some of these boards look rotten to me."

She lifted her pinky finger and her smile turned to a pout when he did not immediately respond.

Roger dropped his eyes. "Julie, I want to know you better, too. It's just that..." His voice trailed off.

She pulled off her shoes and socks, sat on the edge of the pier and dangled her feet in the water. "It's just what, Spunky?"

He removed his shoes and sat beside her. "There are things you don't know, Julie. I'm not the boy you once knew."

"You're the man I want to know."

He looked away.

She placed her hand on his thigh and squeezed. "Spunky, maybe I do understand. They have all kinds of new treatments now. Surely you've heard of Viagra. Even if nothing works, there's more to sex than intercourse. Someone very special taught me that."

Roger smiled thinly, placed his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "It's not that, Julie – nothing that simple. I wish it were."

"What then?"

He stared at the distant shore. "Every night since I stumbled onto Dad's Place, I lie awake, trying to figure out a way to tell you. I did something while with the Agency – something I'm not proud of. My cowardice hurt someone badly."

"Who?"

"My partner, Kimberly Ring."

"Do you love her?"

Roger jerked his head towards her. "No. Not the way you mean."

Julie waited for him to continue.

He moved his feet in the water and watched the rings expand.

"We were on loan to the Central Intelligence Agency. Our assignment was to infiltrate a band of rebels in a South American country. They were supported by the Castro regime, but when the

economy in Cuba collapsed, their supply lines dried up. It was our job to promise the rebels United States aid and, in the process, ferret out their headquarters and ringleaders."

Julie watched tears cascade down his cheeks and slipped her arm around his waist.

With chin quivering, he said, "We were caught." He dropped his eyes. His entire body trembled. "Julie, I can't do it."

"It's okay, Spunky. I don't need to know this."

He looked at her with bloodshot eyes. "Julie, take a trip with me tomorrow."

"Spunky, I can't do that. The cleaners are coming tomorrow. We haven't finished clearing out the junk in the house. The wholesaler's coming to stock the store."

"We can finish moving your parent's stuff today. Cliff and Ally can handle the other things. Please, Julie. Go with me."

"Where?"

"Maryland. We can fly up in the morning and be back before suppertime."

"The hospital?"

He nodded.

"To visit your partner?"

He nodded again.

"I will on one condition."

"Name it."

She moved her upper body in front of him while wrapping her arm around his neck. "Kiss me," she said softly.

He pushed his feet against the unsupporting water as her weight toppled them into the pond. They submerged, flailing with their arms and laughing. He nudged her to the pier and pushed as she climbed onto it. She leaned over and offered him her hand. He pulled her back in. She pressed her hands on the top of his head and dunked him.

He came up, sputtering and watched her climb onto the pier. He swam to its edge and extended his arm. "Give me a hand," he said.

She laughed. "You're a big boy. Climb aboard unassisted."

He lifted himself effortless, stood, pulled off his shirt and wrung out the water. His eyes locked on her chest. "I thought you said you had small breasts."

She pushed the hair from her eyes and glanced down. "My wet shirt leaves little to the imagination, does it? You don't think they're small?"

For once, he did not drop his eyes. "They're beautiful."

"You owe me a kiss."

He pulled her close and greedily sucked her tongue into his mouth. She rested her head on his shoulder and shivered as he stroked the back of her head. "Spunky, some twenty years ago, right over there on the bank, I asked you to touch me. You refused. Please don't refuse me now."

With his hands on her shoulders, he eased her back until their eyes met. He placed his hands gently on her cheeks. "Julie, I'll make you a solemn vow. Tomorrow night, if you're still interested, I'll touch you anywhere you like."

Ally clutched Cliff's hand as they stood in the doorway watching a workman polish the newly installed gasoline pumps. "Looks good," he said.

"I like the canopy," she replied.

A white boxy vehicle favored by the United States Postal Service pulled into the parking lot. They watched an attractive, middle-aged woman reach behind her and then emerge, carrying a large box, open at the top. The workman smiled and lifted the little finger of his right hand.

She returned the smile, pinned the box against her hip with her right hand and held up her left for him to see the wedding band.

Cliff approached and took the carton from her. "You're going to have to put up a box if you want to continue to receive mail delivery," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," Cliff acknowledged. "I rarely get mail and I just didn't think about it. I'll get to it first thing in the morning."

As Cliff and Ally went back inside, Ally said, "Looks like Julie's

mail, and mine, caught up with us. You can have the junk mail."

They sat at a table in the restaurant area and Cliff watched her sort the envelopes. "You're covered in filth from head to toe."

Without looking up, she replied, "That, Mr. Baker, is a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black. Damn!"

"What is it?"

"You open it," she said, holding out the letter.

Cliff scanned the return address. "Alcohol Beverage Control Board, Raleigh, NC."

He took a deep breath, ripped open the envelope and grinned. "Good old Spunky." He looked up, but she was not smiling.

Her eyes were focused on another envelope. "It's from an attorney in Charleston."

He watched her open the envelope and begin to read the two-paged letter. Her expression changed to a sweet smile as tears formed in her eyes. "We weren't legally married, you know."

Cliff nodded.

"It can't be much of an estate, but Frank left it all to me. The lawyer is the executor."

Cliff continued to watch her read.

"The lawyer says the house is worth just about what is owed on it. He recommends letting it go back to the bank."

She dropped the first page and began reading the second. "He says it will take six months to a year to settle the estate. What little money Frank had in savings will cover the attorney fees."

Cliff thought he should say something, but his mind was blank.

"Oh, my God! Frank had a life insurance policy – \$250,000. The lawyer says that once all Franks' bills are settled, there should be about \$200,000 left."

"You're rich," Cliff said.

"Not rich, but it's more money than I ever dreamed of having. I wonder if a bank will loan me some money against the estate?"

Cliff shrugged his shoulders.

She looked at him. "I want to buy a car. I hate sponging off you and Julie."

"Ally, the gun was in my hand when it went off. Do you blame me for ... you know."

"Cliff, if Frank hadn't died that day, the rest of us would be dead right now."

"Maybe."

"What's eating you, Cliff?"

"You said you loved him."

"I did ... once."

"Last night you said you love me."

"Yes."

"Do you love me as much as you loved Frank?"

She leaned back in her chair and studied him. "That's a lousy question to ask."

"Forget it."

"There were times when I hated Frank and there were times I loved him dearly. I don't think I can answer your question, Cliff. What I felt for Frank and the way I feel about you are two different things. I don't think I can compare them."

"You said you wanted to marry me."

She snickered. "And scared the crap out of you in the process."

He smiled and leaned forward. "Yeah. You did. But it made me think. Ally, do you want to have children?"

Her smile disappeared. "I don't think I'd make a very good mother. Is it important to you?"

"I think you'd make a great mother."

She broke the resulting silence by gathering the now sorted mail. "We need to get cleaned up. Julie and Spunky will be wanting to go to the Korner Kafe soon."

They put Julie's mail in the office and walked to Ally's room. As he stood behind her in the shower, soaping her back, he said, "Ally, will you go to church with me Sunday?"

"You've got to be kidding." She wiggled her buttocks against him and realized he was not aroused. "You're not kidding."

"No. If you are seriously thinking of marrying me, we must both grow up."

"What does going to church have to do with it?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. I never had much to do with religion until I got into serious trouble. I did a lot of praying during the trial and my years in prison."

She turned and placed her hands on his chest. She was no longer aroused.

"I figure there are two kinds of weddings," he said. "One makes it legal for two people to have sex. We don't need that. The other ... the other blends two souls into one."

She slipped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest. "I'll go to church with you, Cliff. May I ask one question?"

"Sure."

"Did you just propose to me?"

"Yeah. I think I did."

She squeezed him tightly. "I think my answer is yes."

Chapter Sixteen

"That was a pleasant flight," Julie said when Roger joined her in the back seat of the taxi.

Roger nodded and gave the driver their destination.

"I know they say that flying is safer than driving, but I am always apprehensive when I get on an airplane."

"I know what you mean. When you are behind the wheel of a car, you at least have the notion that if something goes wrong you might be able to work yourself out of it."

"Thank you."

He looked at her quizzically.

"For finally saying something. You did nothing but grunt and nod during the entire flight."

"I'm not much of a conversationalist."

"You're going to have to tell me sometime, Spunky."

He frowned as he motioned towards the driver.

"How long since you've visited Kim?"

"I go once a month."

"Tell me about her."

His eyes focused on the back of the driver's head.

"What does she look like?"

He leaned back and seemed to find something interesting on the headliner of the cab. "Short black hair with just a hint of gray beginning to emerge, dark complexion, haunting brown eyes, about five feet eight, athletic build ... "

Julie smiled and placed her hand on his thigh. "Does she have family?"

"No."

"Nobody?"

"She was engaged once. She was nuts about the guy."

"What happened?"

"I did. I turned her into a vegetable. The guy couldn't take it and turned his back on her."

"Ouch! Does Kim know?"

"I don't know. She's been told, but there's no way of knowing what registers in her mind."

"What do you talk about when you visit Kimberly?"

"Not much. Mostly I simply sit with her. Kim doesn't talk. She just stares into space."

"Are you sure you're not in love with her, Spunky?"

"I've already answered that question."

Julie looked out the window at the passing pastoral scenery.

"It's strange," Roger continued. "When you try to talk with her, there is no indication of understanding, and yet..."

Julie focused on his eyes.

"She must have some level of awareness."

"What do you mean?"

"She takes care of her personal hygiene, dresses herself, goes to the cafeteria every day at the right times, feeds herself, finds her way to the dayroom and back to her room in the evening."

"What is the prognosis?"

"Dr. Seifret is not very hopeful."

"Seifret is Kimberly's psychiatrist?"

Roger nodded. "Mine too." He turned towards Julie. "Each month when I visit Julie I also spend a few minutes with Dr. Seifret. He asks a few questions and checks my meds."

The taxi slowed and Julie again looked out the window.

"This is it," Roger said. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Roger helped Julie from the cab, paid the driver and took her arm, steering her up the winding, pansy-lined walkway.

As he held open the glass entrance door, Julie said, "Spunky, I need to find the ladies room."

"There are restrooms in the coffee shop." He guided her in the right direction.

Roger was leaning against the wall when she came out of the restroom. "Spunky, let's, uh, have a Pepsi before we go up."

He nodded and headed for the counter. Julie surveyed the room and selected a secluded booth in the far corner.

"The time has come, Spunky," she said when he slid into the booth

opposite her.

"I know." He dropped his voice. "I can't tell you the details, Julie. It's bad enough that I have to carry those memories. I can't unload that baggage on you."

"Tell me what you can."

He fingered the side of his frosty paper cup. "It's going to be difficult for you to understand. FBI agents are a special breed."

"Try me."

He looked at her for a long moment, tears forming in his eyes. "They tortured her, Julie, and made me watch."

She reached for his hand.

"The first three days they interrogated us separately. They beat the hell out of me, but I told them nothing. I'm sure the same thing happened with Kim." He sipped the Pepsi. "Those first three days, when they weren't questioning us, we were kept in dank, filthy, tiny cells. I couldn't stand up or lie down. I could sit, though, with my knees jammed against my face. They fed us once a day and it was slop."

"You and Kim were in the, uh, same cell block?"

He sipped his Pepsi and nodded as he set the cup back on the table. "She was in a cell across from me. Early on the morning of the fourth day, they came for me. I expected more of the same, but instead, they took me to a small, dormitory-like room. There was a bed, a table, a chair and a bathroom. There were clean clothes and they ordered me to take a shower. When I came out of the bathroom, the guards were gone and a delicious breakfast was on the table. From that day forward I slept in that room and they provided three good meals a day."

"Thank God," Julie whispered.

Tears streamed down his cheeks. "It was the most diabolical torture ever invented."

"I don't understand."

"Not long after I finished breakfast, two guards showed up. They took me to a large room and strapped me into a heavy, wooden chair. Two inquisitors sat beside me as others dragged Kim into the room."

She was naked and filthy. Julie, they made me watch as they did horrible things to her."

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, dried his eyes and blew his nose. "This went on for days. I don't know how many. At some point, Dr. Seifret says my mind refused to accept reality, but I know what they did to her poor, helpless body."

"There was nothing you could do, Spunky."

"Yes, there was, damn it," he said as his hand crashed against the table. He again lowered his voice. "I could have told them what little I knew. Hell, they already knew the weapons we were providing had defects and the food staples were injected with viruses. The subterfuge was blown anyway."

"If you had answered their questions, the torture would have ended?"

"I don't honestly know, but at least there was a chance. I didn't take it."

"You were an FBI agent. You were sworn to secrecy."

He nodded and again dug for his handkerchief.

"Spunky," she said, squeezing his trembling hand, "I can't begin to empathize, but honey, I don't understand why you keep beating yourself up over this. There was nothing you could do."

"Yes, there was," he said softly. "I could have tried to overpower the guards when they came to my room. I could have refused to accept the luxuries they provided. I could have told them what I knew."

"Kimberly didn't tell."

"No. She was a brave little trooper. She endured the pain. I think her mind blanked out before mine did. There came a point when she no longer tried to resist, but her screams never stopped." He clapped his hands over his ears. "They still haven't."

"We have a problem, Spunky."

"I know. I warned you."

"The problem is not what you think. I believe you want me to forgive you for what you consider cowardice."

"Yes," he said, staring at the empty paper cup.

"Look at me, Spunky."

He raised his head.

"How can I forgive you for something that never happened?"

He again dropped his eyes. "I didn't think you could understand. Thank you for trying."

"May I ask one question?"

"Of course," he said as he dabbed the damp handkerchief to his eyes.

"You can't have an intimate relationship with me because of what they did to Kimberly?"

He jerked his head up, terrified eyes wide open. "No. That's not it. The torture was physical, not sexual. I can't have an intimate relationship with you, Julie, because I don't deserve you. Can't you understand that?"

"What I have gained from your experience is a greater respect for the FBI than I ever had before. Spunky, you're an unsung hero. How many more are there, whose stories will never be told?" She strained to hear his whispered reply.

"I wish I could believe you."

"Go wash your face, Spunky. It's time to visit Kim."

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hands. "I'm a wimp, Julie. There's nothing left of the Spunky you once knew."

"What?"

"Grown men don't cry."

"Real men do."

When he emerged from the bathroom, Julie took his arm and allowed him to lead the way up the elevator and down the long corridor towards the solid double doors.

"Dayroom," he explained as he reached for the handle. "This is where we will find Kimberly."

"Spunky, wait," she said.

He hesitated.

"Do you feel you somehow need to be punished for real or imagined transgressions?"

"I didn't say that."

"Do you?"

The hint of a smile creased his lips. "I've never admitted that to anyone, not even Dr. Seifret."

She returned the facial expression. "I'm the judge and jury. I've heard your confession and I sentence you to spend the rest of your life making me the happiest woman on earth."

"Punishment is not supposed to provide the condemned with pleasure." Roger opened the door and ushered her inside.

Julie's eyes swept the brightly lighted, large room. In one corner, a group of people watched a big-screen television. Others sat at scattered tables, reading, writing, working puzzles or playing board games. In another area, people seemed engaged in friendly conversation. Julie smiled when she spotted a group of women sewing a quilt. Since none of the attendants wore uniforms, she could not distinguish patients from professional caregivers. Even if Roger had not provided a description, Julie would have recognized Kimberly Ring. She sat on a sofa alone, hands folded in her lap and eyes focused on the unknown.

Roger squatted in front of the motionless woman and took her hands in his. "Hi, Partner. How's it going?" He did not wait for a response. "I want you to meet my friend, Julie Wilson."

Julie stood behind Roger and tried to smile. Following his lead, she sat on one side of Kimberly as Roger eased down on the other. She studied Roger's partner as he tried to carry on a meaningless conversation. Julie was not prepared for the woman's beauty. The light blue, long sleeved turtleneck jersey, dark blue sweat pants and sparkling clean sneakers Kim wore seemed perfect. There was no evidence of physical abuse on Kimberly's face or hands, the only parts of her anatomy not covered. Unlike Roger, Kimberly's eyes reflected no emotion.

"I'm living in a little town in North Carolina called Dot. Do you remember me telling you about it?" Roger said. "I've changed jobs since I last saw you. Julie is now my boss."

Julie tried not to fidget as Roger spent the next fifteen minutes telling Kimberly about Dad's Place. Somehow, she was relieved when

he began to relate childhood experiences. She wished he would tell Kimberly about their romantic involvement, but he didn't.

Roger shifted gears and talked about the weather and the pleasant flight. Then silence reigned.

Julie vainly searched her mind for something to say and ultimately remained silent. She listened to the mixed sounds of music, television, laughter and private conversations and longed to hear Kimberly say just one word.

Forty minutes into the visit, Roger pulled Kimberly's hand into his lap and stroked it. "Kim, I'm sorry. So very, very sorry." Tears again erupted from his swollen eyes.

Julie wanted to go to him, hug him, kiss away the tears, but she knew this was a private moment and she was not included.

Minutes passed and Roger controlled his emotions once more. He looked up when a hand touched his shoulder.

"Dr. Seifret is ready for you now, Roger," the smiling lady said.

He nodded and turned to Kimberly. "Kim, I have to go now, but I'll be back next month. That's a promise. Take care of yourself."

He stood and seemed suddenly to remember Julie's presence. "As I said, this won't take but a few minutes, Julie. There's a waiting room with old magazines and stuff."

Julie reached for Kimberly's hand. "I think I'll stay with Kim while you see the doctor."

When Roger disappeared between the double doors, Julie pulled a chair directly in front of Kimberly. "I know we just met, Kim, but I need to share with you some things Spunky didn't mention." She chuckled. "I guess I should call him Roger. Spunky was his nickname when we were in school."

Their heads faced, but Kimberly's eyes did not seem to notice Julie.

"You see, Spunky – Roger – and I grew up together. I had a mad crush on him when I was a little girl and that crush grew to love, although we never dated in high school. He was the big football hero and I was a mousy little nobody. After graduation, he went his way and I went mine. I thought I would never see him again and I sort of buried my emotions, but I never forgot him. Circumstances allowed

our paths to cross once more. I'm determined not to let him get away this time, unless..."

Julie smoothed her knee-length skirt. She tried without success to find some flicker of understanding in Kimberly's eyes. "Kim, do you love Roger? If you do, I'll bow out of the picture."

For just a moment, Julie thought she saw a flash in Kimberly's eyes but as she continued to concentrate her focus, Kimberly's eyes seemed as glassy and unseeing as before.

"There's something else Spunky didn't share with you. He's carrying a heavy burden of guilt. He considers himself a coward for not having tried to rescue you. I don't know what he could have done, but to Spunky, it's very real. He blames himself not only for the pain inflicted on you but also for the shell in which you are now hiding."

Immediately Julie realized her wording was poor. She leaned forward and touched Kimberly's knee. "I'm sorry, Kim. I didn't say that right. I don't think you're hiding. I think the sheer pain forced you into that shell and you haven't yet found your way out. The same thing happened to Spunky. He's out of his shell now, but the burden of guilt is almost more than he can bear. I wish I could lift that weight, but I fear you are the only one who can do that."

There was no response. Julie leaned back in the chair.

"Spunky told you about Dad's Place and the cabin. We'll have the business ready to open in a week or so, but it will be a while yet before the cabin is ready for occupancy. I don't know you, Kim, but somehow I think you'd like Dad's Place, the cabin and the pond. One day soon, I hope Spunky moves in with me, married or not." She grinned. "He's the only man I've ever wanted to ... you know. I'd like for you to move in with us." She chuckled. "Not in the same room, though."

Julie's mind filled with an image of the restaurant, teeming with customers and jukebox blaring. "You'd like Ally and Cliff too. You ever thought of working in a store or restaurant like Dad's Place? We're going to need some additional help, you know. It would be fun, Kim. Won't you think about it?"

Julie studied the motionless woman. "You look so tense, Kim.

Would a shoulder massage help?"

Knowing she would receive no reply, Julie moved behind the sofa and placed her hands on Kimberly's shoulders. "I think you would like Dot, too. It's just a little crossroads community, but it's beginning to grow. We even have our own radio station now." She snickered. "Every afternoon they have a program called Bawdy Talk. Kim, you won't believe what some people say on the air."

Julie snickered again and reeled off all the juicy exchanges she could recall.

"I'm back."

Julie looked into Roger's somber face. "That didn't take long."

Roger leaned over and kissed Kimberly lightly on her cheek. "We must go now, Kim, but I'll be back next month."

"I will too," Julie promised. Impulsively, she also kissed Kimberly's cheek.

Julie joined Roger at the end of the sofa, linked her arm in his, and headed for the double door.

"Spunky."

Roger wheeled around. Kimberly was standing.

"Did ... did you say something, Kim?"

Her eyes remained unfocused, but her lips moved. "No. Thank you. Silence. Yes."

Roger stared out the window at the thin white clouds below. "I can't figure it out."

"What's that?" Julie asked.

"I'm thankful that Kim finally said something. Dr. Seifret said it was the first time she has spoken anything at all. He said it could be a breakthrough."

It's a breakthrough all right, Julie thought. The terror in your eyes has been replaced with hope.

"I suppose that when she said, 'thank you,' she was thanking me – us – for the visit, but the first thing she said was 'no'. I wonder what she meant by that?"

"I'm not a psychiatrist, but I believe I can answer your question."

"I'm all ears."

"While you were seeing Dr. Seifret, I asked Kim if she loves you. I told her that if she did, I'd get out of the way. I believe that her first word was the answer to my question."

"You honestly think she heard you, understood and gave an intelligent delayed response?"

"I'm certain of it."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Have you ever told her that your nickname is Spunky?"

His eyes narrowed. "No. At least, I don't think so."

"I referred to you as Spunky while talking with her and when she called after us, she used your nickname. And another thing. I don't think she was thanking you for the visit. She followed the words, 'thank you' with 'silence.' She was thanking you for holding out."

"Why in the world would she thank me for prolonging her agony?"

"Although of a different kind, you were both in agony. Kim had to know that, at least while she was lucid. Yet, she maintained *her* silence. How do you explain that?"

"She's FBI."

"So were you."

"It doesn't make sense."

"Tell me, Spunky, what would have happened if either of you had revealed all you knew?"

"That's the maddening part. Unknown to us at the time, the uprising was almost over. Nothing we could have said would have changed the outcome."

"I mean, what would have happened to you and Kim? Do you really think your captors would have released you?"

He turned and looked at her. "You're finally beginning to get it, Julie."

"With no further use for you, wouldn't the rebels have killed you both?"

"Of course they would."

"Now I'm really confused. You acknowledge that your silence saved both of your lives but you still carry a guilt complex."

He put his arm around her shoulders and tugged her close. "There are some things worse than death."

"Perhaps, but Kim doesn't seem to think this was one of them."

"Maybe now I can tell you the rest of the story, Julie. Our silence resulted from more than the fact we were FBI agents. Julie and I were close – not lovers, but very close. She shared with me her most intimate emotions regarding her fiancé and I shared with her my fantasies about you."

"About me?"

"I told you."

"Yes, but I didn't think..."

"I remained silent because of my dream of one day sharing life with you and Kim sharing life with her fiancé. The guilt set in when her guy walked out on her. We went through all that misery for nothing."

"You think it's your fault that the bum chickened out?"

"No."

"You think it's unfair for you to realize your dream without Kim realizing her's?"

He didn't answer.

"Life is unfair, Spunky. There are no guarantees. You gave her a chance. How can you blame yourself?"

He remained silent.

"You think there's a possibility the guy might change his mind? Could we find him ... talk with him?"

Roger shook his head. "I understand he's married now."

Julie walked her fingers down his thigh. "A line from a poem just popped into my mind. 'Hope springs eternal within the human breast.' Perhaps Kim will create new dreams – new, attainable hopes."

"Maybe, but not unless she comes back to reality."

"She *did* speak."

"Yeah."

A stewardess served fruit juice and they sipped quietly, each lost in thought.

"There's Charlotte," he said, peering out the window.

"I felt the airplane losing altitude."

He grinned. "'Descending' is a less frightening word."

The "fasten seatbelt" sign flashed and they complied.

"Tell me, Dr. Wilson, what did Kim's last word mean?"

She smiled, hoping she knew the answer, but replied, "You can't expect me to know everything."

Julie closed her eyes, held her breath and tensed every muscle in her body until she heard the screech of tires meeting runway. She relaxed and released the seatbelt as the plane taxied to the concourse.

Julie held her last question until they were safely in her Cavalier and halfway back to Dad's Place. "We made a bargain," she said. "I kept my end. Are you going to keep yours?"

He did not look at her. "I said if you would go with me to see Kim, I would do anything you wanted, if you still wanted anything. That's a big 'if.'"

"What I want is for you to move in with me and sleep in my bed every night. If you don't want to make love to me, just hold me." She chuckled. "I don't know how to do it anyway and probably wouldn't be very good at it."

He turned and strained at the seatbelt. "You're not trying to tell me that you're a..."

"Yep," she interrupted.

"Cliff?"

"Nope."

"Nobody?"

"Nope."

"Never?"

"You're embarrassing me, Spunky."

"Damn."

"Well?"

Roger cleared his throat. "To get to my trailer park, turn left on Schoolhouse Road. It won't take me long to pack."

Chapter Seventeen

With perspiration dripping from his chin, Cliff shuffled into the restaurant area and slumped heavily on a stool at the counter. He pulled napkins from the dispenser and wiped his face as Roger joined him. "Man, that smells great," he said.

Roger nodded. "My nose tells me Ally has the sauce just right this time."

"Ally? Where are you, woman?" Cliff shouted, playfully banging his fist on the counter. "What does a body have to do to get a little service around here?"

Ally emerged from the workroom, carrying a container of ground pork.

As she sat the roasted meat beside the grill, Cliff exhaled noisily. "Must be a hundred degrees in the shade out there."

"Want a beer?" Ally asked.

"Water for me," Roger responded.

"Me too. Man, I worked up an elephant thirst and if I had a trunk, I'd give myself a shower," Cliff joked. He studied the expression on Ally's face as she filled two large cups with ice. "How'd the inspection go?"

"Couldn't have been better. He gave us an A rating, but wants a little more cleaning done in the game room."

"That's not part of the restaurant."

"It is according to the inspector. He says customers are likely to take sandwiches back there. He's right."

"Still, an A rating is good, isn't it?"

Ally nodded as she sat the cups in front of them.

"Then why the long face?"

"We can't use the barbecue pit."

"What the hell? Why not?"

"It has something to do with air quality control. The Environmental Protection Agency would have us in jail if we use the pit commercially."

Cliff drained the cup and held it out for a refill. "I wish we had

known that yesterday. Spunky and I spent the past five hours hunting for and cutting up dried hickory in the woods. Hell, we have five truckloads stacked up in back. What are we going to do?"

Ally continued the process of mixing sauce and meat. "We'll know in a minute. I prepared a pork roast in the oven and ground it up. I hope it's good enough for us to sell."

The two men sipped their ice water and watched Ally spoon the meat onto homemade buns and add the tangy slaw. She placed the overflowing buns on wax paper squares and served them.

Cliff grabbed the sandwich with his massive hands and bit off a large bite.

Roger picked up his sample and sniffed it. "It certainly smells right," he grinned.

"My God, Ally! This is fantastic!" Cliff looked to Roger for confirmation and watched him chew slowly and swallow.

"Close," Roger said, nodding his head. "Very close."

Ally prepared a sandwich for herself, tasted it and beamed. "Spunky, not many of our customers will have ever tasted Mom's Barbecue. I say it's good enough, just as it is."

"Maybe."

"Take a sandwich to Julie and see what she thinks," Ally suggested as she began preparing another bun.

"I hate to interrupt her," Roger replied.

"Hasn't she finished that Wal-Mart thing yet? We've hardly seen her the past two weeks."

"Yes, she finished that ad, but she received other commissions from her agent and has been working like crazy to catch up."

Ally wrapped the fresh sandwich in waxed paper. "She skipped breakfast and didn't come in for lunch, Spunky. She must be starved."

"We're going to have to buy a larger oven," Roger mused.

"Yeah," Ally agreed. "The Health Inspector mentioned that restaurants in Lexington use propane fired ovens for roasting pork. Seems that the temperature is hot enough to allow the addition of hickory chips without polluting the air."

Roger smiled. "You know, I think that just might do it. Cliff, we

can buy a chipper for the wood we collected."

"I just hope the damn things don't cost much. We've spent an awful lot of Julie's money and so far have little to show for it."

"I think we're going to have to delay the opening of the restaurant a week or so," Ally said, "but there's no reason we can't go ahead with everything else immediately."

"You think?"

"Why not? The store is stocked, the gasoline tanks are full, the games are just sitting there, hungrily waiting for quarters in their slots."

Roger slipped off the stool and picked up the wrapped sandwich. "I'll run it by Julie."

Cliff watched Roger walk away and turned to Ally with a wicked grin on his face. "I don't think Julie's working at all. I think she keeps Spunky up all night and sleeps all day."

Ally snickered. "That reminds me. I need to go to the bathroom. Want to join me?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

When they returned to the restaurant area, Carl Elliott was sitting at the counter, sipping a Budweiser. He held up the frosty brown bottle. "Hope you don't mind. I helped myself."

"Not at all," Ally said, moving behind the counter.

"Haven't seen you in a while, Carl," Cliff said, propping on the stool next to the huge contractor. "How about a progress report?"

"That's why I stopped by. Is Miss Julie around?"

"She's been shut up in her apartment for the past two weeks. Seems she got behind in her art work."

Carl swallowed another big swig of the beer. "I guess you can relay my message. There's no reason she can't move into the log cabin tomorrow. All the inside work is done and so are the front and back porches. The guys are scrapin' and pouring gravel on the driveway right now. We'll put down blacktop before dark. Should be okay to drive on by morning."

"You going to do the parking lot out front today?" Cliff asked.

"Yeah and in back too. It don't need much work other than tar, but

you folks are gonna have to move your vehicles into the field for me."

"What's left to do on the outside of the cabin?" Ally asked as she prepared another barbecue sandwich.

"The windows are all fixed up and the roof is painted. Sleeping's gonna be fine under that tin roof on a rainy night. We just need to replace some of the chinking. Shouldn't take more than a day or two."

Ally placed the sandwich on the counter in front of Carl. "On the house," she said.

Both Cliff and Ally expectantly watched Carl take the first bite. His eyes widened and he chewed furiously with obvious delight.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "What is it?"

"Mom's Barbecue," Ally replied. "What do you think?"

He swallowed his second bite. "I've never tasted anything like it. It's delicious!" He gnawed off a third bite and, with his mouth full, said, "Don't reckon you could spare one more."

Ally grinned and pulled another bun from the warmer. "We still have a little fine-tuning to do, but, do you think it will sell?"

Carl washed down the last bite and grinned as Ally placed the second sandwich in front of him. "You pretty thing," he said as he lifted the sandwich, "when word gets around, you'll have to take on help to keep up with the crowds."

"What do you think would be a fair price for the sandwich, Carl?"

"They charge two fifty for a big bun like this in Lexington. Course, their barbecue ain't nothing like this. It's like they are two different things."

Ally nodded. "They *are* two different sandwiches. We think we can come out okay at a buck fifty. You don't think that's too much?"

Carl shook his head as he chewed. "If it was me, I'd go for at least two dollars. It's easier to come down on your prices than go up. Hell, I think I might buy all you can make myself. You reckon you could fix two more for me to take to Sarasue?"

Ally grinned and pulled two more buns from the warmer.

"How about the streets in your subdivision?" Cliff asked.

"Huh? Oh. Finished an hour ago," Carl said as he stood, accepting the brown bag Ally offered. "Reckon I'd better get back to it after I

make a quick run home. Creasy's already sold two lots and has other people interested. That guy could sell hair oil to a bald man." He grinned. "Uh, Cliff, could I see you a minute?"

"Sure."

As they walked towards the store, Carl said, "With all this merchandise in the store, you folks are either going to have to open for business or keep the door locked. I could have stole you blind a few minutes ago."

"Yeah, we're thinking about opening everything but the restaurant tomorrow. Your paving schedule fits in perfectly."

Carl tugged Cliff behind a gondola and made sure Ally didn't follow them. "Buddy, you were either beating the stuffing out of Ally when I came in or y'all were having noisy sex back in the game room."

Cliff grinned. "Would you believe the lady's room?"

"Doesn't matter. The thing is, I never heard such moaning and screeching in all my born put-togethers. After you open the place, you're gonna have to find another spot for quickies."

Cliff grinned sheepishly. "Thanks for the tip. Uh, Carl, what are your lots going for?"

"Depends on which one you want. They start at five thousand. You interested?"

Cliff smiled. "Maybe. I don't know. Keep this under you hat, Carl. It looks like Ally and I are getting serious. We've even mentioned the M word a couple of times."

Carl flashed his toothy grin. "Marriage?"

Cliff nodded. "And the patter of little feet also. It's not definite. I haven't mentioned it to Ally, but when we get married, I would like for us to have a real home to live in."

Carl's expression grew serious. "I don't reckon you have much money in reserve, Cliff. I think Dad's Place is gonna be a huge success, but until there's a track record, you'll have a tough time getting a home loan."

Cliff frowned. "Ally has a little money coming, but not enough to build a house. It was just a thought."

Carl nodded. "Maybe you could pick out a lot and build later."

The men shook hands. Carl turned to leave, hesitated and glanced back at Cliff's sad countenance. "Look, Cliff. You know Sarasue and I like you. I'm extended kinda thin right now, but maybe we can work something out. If you will take one of the lots near the entrance and are willing to show the house to potential customers, perhaps I can sign your note or something."

"Thanks, Carl. The house and loan will probably have to be in Ally's name. I doubt if banks shell out money to ex-cons. Don't say anything to Ally about this until I have a chance to run it by her."

As Carl departed, Roger returned.

Cliff winked. "What took you so long, Spunky?"

"Julie's working too hard. It bothers me. Come on, I need to talk with you and Ally together."

Ally, bearing three sandwiches, joined them in a rear booth.

As Roger unwrapped his, he said, "Julie's under a great deal of pressure right now."

"She didn't like the barbecue?" Ally asked.

"Well, she tasted it and said it was okay, but she wasn't very enthusiastic about it."

"Damn."

"I told her about the need for a new oven. The look she gave me could have melted ice. Without saying a word, she called the propane place in Charlotte. One of those suckers costs thirty thousand and will take at least a month to deliver."

"A month?"

Roger nodded and waited until he could swallow to continue. "They don't stock them in Charlotte. The things come from somewhere in Pennsylvania. They do have a rebuilt one in stock. I think they acquired it as a trade-in. It has a year's guarantee and they asked fifteen thousand for it. Julie talked them down to twelve, including installation. She wants Cliff and me to run over there this afternoon and check it out."

"I guess we'll have to put it in the work room, maybe next to the freezer," Ally said.

Cliff shook his head as he finished his sandwich. "Too big. Apparently they are huge monsters. It'll have to go out back beside the barbecue pit."

"Won't the weather damage it?" Cliff asked.

"They're made for outdoor installation. Anyway, Julie said for us to go ahead with the purchase if we think it will do the job, and to buy a chipper, too."

"Did you ask her what she thinks about opening the restaurant tomorrow?" Ally asked.

"By the time I got around to that, I was afraid to ask her anything. She can be a bit feisty at times."

Both Cliff and Ally smiled sympathetically.

"She says she should be finished with the last assignment by supertime and wants us to bring back a bucket of chicken from Charlotte."

Cliff glanced at his watch. "We may as well get started, Spunky. You know where this place is?"

"I have the address. We'll have to stop and ask for directions."

"Give me a minute to put the food stuff in the refrigerator and I'll go with you," Ally said as she stood.

Cliff shook his head. "Somebody must stay here."

"Why?"

He chuckled. "Julie said the sign company called this morning. They want to install our new sign sometime this afternoon."

"What sign?" Cliff asked.

Roger sighed. "Sometimes I think Julie forgets she has partners. I didn't know anything about the signs either. One is an old-fashioned neon sign to go on the front of the building. The other is a simple painted sign that she wants behind the cash register."

"I remember Julie mentioning the signs, but I didn't know she had them on order. I guess I'm elected to oversee the installation," Ally said.

"Appointed is more like it. Guys, go easy on Julie. As I said..."

"Yeah, yeah," Ally mumbled. "She has a lot on her right now."

Ally decided to leave the food where it was. Who cares if it spoils?

she pouted. She watched Cliff and Roger move the Ranger and Cavalier into the field adjoining the parking lot and drive off in Cliff's pickup. She wandered back into the store, wondering what she was supposed to do for the rest of the afternoon. The rumble of a large truck entering the parking lot called her to the front of the store. Perfect timing, she thought as the "Dad's Place" sign, strapped to the open truck bed, came into view.

Before letting them begin the installation, Ally insisted that the workmen sample Mom's Barbecue. Their response was so enthusiastic that there were no leftovers to put away when they finished. During the hour and a half required to install the signs, Ally sat on the front fender of the truck and watched. An old-fashioned neon sign is a perfect addition to our ambiance and I love the caricature of Julie's dad, she thought. Spunky will like the fact that she added "serving Mom's Barbecue" to the bottom of the sign.

She smiled and shook her head negatively when one of the men caught her attention and lifted the little finger on his right hand.

The workmen showed her how to turn the sign off and on and explained that Julie refused their offer to put it on a timer. After they were gone, she spent a few minutes admiring the inside signage. "Julie must have heard the truck," she said aloud. "You'd think curiosity would bring her out of hiding."

Ally wandered behind the restaurant counter and tested the draft beer dispenser, filling a large plastic cup with the cold brew. Out of her peripheral vision, she spotted Cliff's portable radio. She grinned and muttered, "It's time for Bawdy Talk." She carried the radio and beer to a booth and made herself comfortable.

I love the Dollar's Playground. For those of you who don't know, it is a recreational complex just west of Dot on Highway 13. They have three championship golf courses, an Olympic sized pool, a skating rink, miniature golf courses, kiddy rides, two fishing ponds, rental cabins, walking trails, softball diamonds, a super picnic area and much, much more. Y'all come, and tell them Delilah sent you.

This is Bawdy Talk on WFNS, your friendly neighborhood station. Keep it decent, folks. Remember the FCC may be listening. Okay,

Caller, you're on the air.

I ... I've never done this before.

There's a first time for everything, sweetie. What do I call you?

Miserable.

Uh, oh. Tell Delilah all about it.

I don't know anything else to do.

I'm not following you, Miserable. Start at the beginning.

I'm old enough to have kids in high school, but until recently, I never...

Some of us are late bloomers. There's no shame in that.

I know but, well, there's this guy I've loved since I was a little girl. He suddenly reappeared in my life.

And?

I ... I practically forced him to sleep with me.

It isn't working out?

Ally leaned forward and turned up the volume. As the caller broke into sobs, she forgot to disguise her voice. Ally recognized her.

I don't know what to do. I take off my clothes, stretch out on the bed and wait for him to finish.

You get no pleasure from it at all?

It hurts, Delilah. It hurts bad.

Your guy intentionally hurts you?

No! Nothing like that. It's just that he's so rough and ... and when he does it, the pain is almost more than I can bear.

Miserable, I hate to tell you this, but there seems to be at least one rotten apple in every barrel. Throw the thing out and try another piece of fruit.

I don't want that, Delilah. I love the guy. Is it ... is it possible for a man and woman to be happy together without ... without ...

I suppose, honey, but it can't be much fun. Miserable, there must be other listeners who have worked through similar experiences. Maybe they can help. Stay tuned.

Ally turned off the radio, raced behind the counter, filled a carafe with coffee and grabbed two mugs. She locked the front door behind her and hurried to the motel apartment door.

"Why didn't you come to me?" Ally asked when Julie opened the door.

"Damn! You recognized my voice."

Ally led the way to the kitchen. "Sit down, Julie. We're going to have a long girl to girl talk."

"I believe we made the right decision," Cliff said as he turned onto Highway 13 at the Dot intersection.

Roger glanced out the back window to make sure the chipper was still securely fastened in the bed of the pickup. "I think they are making a hundred percent profit on the deal. I doubt if they paid a penny for the thing."

Cliff chuckled. "They probably charged the restaurant that traded it a disposal fee. Still, it looks new to me and they did guarantee it."

"Ally will be pleased that they are going to install it in the morning. I just hope we can create enough hickory chips by the time she's ready to test it."

"You want to talk about it, Spunky?"

"I thought we were talking about it."

Cliff shook his head. "You know as well as I do that it was Julie on Bawdy Talk we listened to on the way to Charlotte."

Roger took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I'm not comfortable talking about, uh, personal matters."

Cliff laughed. "Tell me about it. Okay. *We* won't talk about it, but *I'm* going to. Here's the thing. Some women like to be slapped around a little and others don't. Lay off the rough stuff."

"I don't slap her around, Cliff. I would never intentionally hurt her."

"She said you do."

"I know, but I don't. I swear to you Cliff, I don't know what she was talking about."

"Hmm. Give me an idea of your size."

"What?"

Cliff grabbed his crotch and grinned.

"Oh. I don't know. Six, seven inches maybe."

"Diameter?"

Roger shrugged. "Silver dollar."

Cliff slammed his hand against the steering wheel. "You use ready-wets?"

"What?"

"Lubricated condoms."

"Should I?"

"Check the glove box. There's a new tube of lubricant in there that does not cause irritation. Use plenty of it the next time."

Roger studied the small tube. "I put it on the condom?"

"No, Mr. FBI Agent. Put it in your ear."

"I'll ... I'll buy you a new tube."

"No need. Ally's a gusher."

"A gusher?"

Cliff ignored the question. "Use it on your finger too."

"Why?"

"You do stimulate her manually, don't you?"

Roger sighed. "I will from now on."

"Get *her* to roll on the condom and then apply the lubricant. It'll sure turn on your motor and may get hers cranked up too."

"I ... I couldn't ask her to do that."

"You want to please her, don't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I do."

"Talk with her. Ask her to let you know what she likes and doesn't like. Learn to play her body like a concert pianist plays a Steinway. Start with a slow, simple back massage with lots of gentle kisses. Every time you touch a new area, ask her if she likes it."

"What if she says no?"

"Move on to something else. A woman's body is a smorgasbord of erogenous zones. Find and exploit them."

Roger grinned faintly. "What else, Professor?"

"You drive a wide van, man. I'm guessing Julie has a garage more suitable for a compact. Ease that thing in and only when she says she's ready. Watch her eyes. If she winces, you've gone too far. Back up a little."

"Cliff, please don't say anything about this to Julie."

"Of course not."

"Ally either."

"Mum's the word. Holy Cow! Would you look at that!" Cliff said as he eased to the shoulder of the road in front of Dad's Place.

"I like it," Roger said. "She used my phrase."

"The girls must have turned it on for our benefit. Using old-fashioned neon fits in perfectly with our décor."

Ally met the men at the door. "Wipe your feet good," she demanded as she took the bucket of chicken from Roger. "The tar is still a little tacky."

Both men obeyed and followed Ally into the restaurant area.

The quartet was halfway through their meal when Julie changed the conversation from chitchat to business. "Ally told me about your idea of opening everything but the restaurant tomorrow. I remind you that everything will change once we officially open. We'll have to work out schedules very carefully and spare time will be at a premium."

"I was thinking our hours should be ten thirty in the morning until we have no more customers at night," Cliff volunteered.

"That's fine for the restaurant, but not for the store and motel," Ally countered.

"When Mom and Dad ran the place, they opened at seven and never closed before midnight."

"Damn, Julie. When did they sleep?"

Without smiling, Julie shrugged her shoulders.

"By now, you all know I don't require much sleep," Roger said. "I'll take either the early or late shift."

"I feel the same way," Cliff added. "Julie, we know you have other responsibilities. The three of us will work out a schedule."

"We're going to need additional help," Julie said.

Ally nodded.

"Yeah, but let's wait a week or two before we hire anyone" Cliff advised. "We'll understand our needs better after we have a little experience."

"Ally tells me that Carl dropped by this afternoon and says the

cabin is ready for occupancy. I could use some help. It's going to take the better part of a day for the four of us to move in."

Ally's eyebrows lifted. "The four of us?"

Julie nodded. "It's a big house, Ally."

"Yeah, but still..."

Cliff cleared his throat. "I think what may be bothering Ally is that, well, we tend to be rather noisy lovers."

Julie grinned. "I know. I thought Cliff and I would occupy the downstairs bedroom. You and Ally may have as many of the upstairs rooms as you like. With the exception of the studio, we'll share the remaining rooms and the cleaning chores."

"Sounds like a good plan to me," Roger said.

Cliff glanced at Ally. "I assumed Ally and I would move into the apartment."

"Come on, guys," Julie urged. "It'll be fun."

"Yeah, but, uh, can we think about it a little, Julie?" Ally asked.

Cliff coughed. "Maybe we should wait and have our Grande Opening on Monday. That way we can do whatever moving is necessary and get the oven installed and tested tomorrow, and over the weekend get ahead on food preparation and advertise a little."

Julie stretched and yawned. "That's what I'm thinking," she said. She smiled. "Guys, I'm beat. I'm going to turn in early." She slid out of the booth and looked at Roger. "You must be exhausted too, Spunky. Join me?"

"Go ahead," Cliff said, trying to keep a straight face. "Ally and I will clean up."

"Yeah, well, if you guys don't mind."

"Julie didn't look tired to me," Cliff said as he helped Ally clear the table.

She grinned. "I think she has other things on her mind tonight. While you guys were in Charlotte, Julie and I engaged in a little girl talk."

"Oh?" Cliff deadpanned.

Chapter Eighteen

"I don't think I've ever seen you so happy," Ally said as she flipped burgers on the grill.

"Ouch," Julie complained while pulling a tray of fresh buns from the oven and hurriedly placing it on the counter. "Hot!" she laughed.

"That's why you wear mittens." Ally glanced at the buns. "Thank goodness," she said. "The last tray I baked didn't rise. I don't know what I did wrong. You're not going to answer my question, are you?" Ally asked as she winked.

"What's not to be happy about? It's a beautiful day. We've moved everything to the log cabin and the workmen are installing our new outdoor oven." She furrowed her brow in mock anger. "I'm still not pleased about you and Cliff refusing my offer."

"I know, and I'm sorry. Cliff is right. Someone needs to be living next to the store in case an emergency should arise, but the main thing is, well, we just want our privacy. Is that so bad?"

Julie continued to slice the hot buns. "You can always change your mind."

"I don't think so. Last night Cliff became excited over the idea of building our own place. It seems Carl offered him a special deal if we build on a plot close to the entrance and allow Creasy Green to use it as a demo house."

"Talk about privacy," Julie joked. "Do you really want strangers tramping through your house at all hours of the day and night?"

"My words exactly!" Ally agreed. "I know things went well for *you* last night. You had that special glow this morning. Hell, you're still smirking."

Julie placed eight open buns beside the grill and applied mustard. "It was, uh, nice."

"Did you take my advice?"

Julie listened to the sound of a pinball machine in the game room to make sure the men were still out of hearing. "In a way I did, and Spunky made it easy."

"Oh?"

Julie grinned sheepishly. "It was as if you had the same conversation with him that you had with me. He was so different last night – so gentle. Every time he touched me he asked if I liked it."

"Were you honest with him?"

"That was the hard part. He was trying so hard to please me. I didn't want to hurt his feelings."

"Julie!"

"I'm not finished. Early on, he stuck his tongue in my ear. I hate that! He said something about me tasting good and did I like that. I told him I liked his tongue on my arm much better."

"What happened?"

Julie smiled. "He moved to my arm."

"Atta-girl!"

"Ally, something happened later. It's so embarrassing."

Ally slid burgers onto the open buns as Julie sliced a tomato.

"He eventually worked his way down to my feet," Julie continued.

"And?"

"He played with my toes. How erotic is that? I'll tell you how erotic it is. It nearly drove me up the wall. I've never experienced anything like it. He stroked my feet and worked a finger between my toes."

"What's the embarrassing part?" Ally asked as she closed the buns and placed them on wax paper squares.

Julie hung her head and softly said, "I wet the bed."

Ally guffawed.

"It's not funny, Ally."

Ally wiped tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. "Honey, you didn't pee in the bed. You ejaculated."

"Women don't ejaculate."

"Some women do. It scared Cliff half to death the first time he witnessed me doing it."

"I ... I don't think so."

"Were you pleasuring yourself at the time?"

Julie blushed. "Spunky asked me to."

"Have your finger on the G spot?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"What's holding up the parade?" Cliff asked as he approached. "Spunky and I are hungry."

"We're about ready," Ally responded. "Carry these burgers over to a booth. "What'll it be, guys, draft or Pepsi-Colas?"

Roger scooped up half the hamburgers and said, "I want a soft drink."

"Four coming up," Ally announced.

As the men walked away, Ally whispered, "I'm glad it finally happened for you."

"Three times," Julie whispered. "Ally, once I cried out almost as loudly as you do!"

Ally winked. "A dozen or more times is more like it. The motel walls are thin, Julie."

As they completed their meal, Cliff asked, "What next, boss lady?"

Julie wiped her lips with a paper napkin. "I was thinking that Spunky and I should go back to the cabin and begin putting things away. If you lovebirds can keep your hands off each other, why don't you go ahead and move into the apartment. When the guys finish installing the oven, I know Ally will want to play with it."

"Holy cow!" Roger exclaimed, glancing out the window.

"What?" Ally asked as she craned her neck to find the object of Roger's interest.

"What's a Fire Marshall doing here?" Cliff wondered aloud.

The quartet moved to the front door and welcomed the uniformed visitor.

"Oscar Thomas," the man explained as he shook hands. "I'm the county Fire Marshall. I noticed the signs in Dot that say you're opening Monday."

Julie glanced sheepishly at her friends. "I called Rita Holder this morning and told her to go ahead and post the notices she printed up."

"Well, come on in, uh, Captain Thomas."

The Marshall flipped open a notebook and carefully inspected the store, restaurant, workroom, game room and each motel unit. "Folks," he said as he tore out a carbon copy of the notebook form, "I'm sorry,

but I can't let you open."

"You're kidding," Cliff said.

"Afraid not. This place is a fire trap."

"What do we need to do?" Roger asked.

The officer studied his form. "You need an approved fire extinguisher in each motel unit, two in the store area, two in the restaurant with one behind the counter, one in the workroom and one in the game room."

"We didn't know," Ally said.

"Your electrical connections are all up to code, but your most flagrant violation is the single exit from the restaurant. If a fire broke out while the place was crowded, many lives would be lost."

"What do you suggest?" Julie asked.

"If you cut a double exit door from the game room, add lighted exit signs and install the fire extinguishers, I'll lift the ban."

"Damn," Cliff grouched. "What else can go wrong?"

"Hold on, Cliff," Julie said. "The man's right. Captain Thomas, is there some place in Charlotte we can buy these approved extinguishers?"

Thomas pulled a small notebook from his shirt pocket and scribbled on it. "I'm not supposed to make recommendations, ma'am, but either of these outfits can handle your needs." He tipped his cap, then shook his head. "I almost forgot. It should go without saying that the exit doors must be unlocked whenever the store and/or restaurant are open. You'd be surprised at how many businesses keep their exit doors locked."

"Captain," Ally said as the Marshall started for his car. "When we meet your requirements is it okay for us to open?"

He shook his head. "Not until I have done another inspection."

"When can you come back?" Julie asked.

"It's going to take a while to install that door. Would next Friday be okay?"

"I can have it done by tomorrow afternoon," Julie replied. "A certain contractor owes me a favor."

The man shook his head. "It's my first weekend off in over a

month, ma'am. How about early Monday morning?" He saw the sad countenances and weakened. "Oh, what the heck. I'll run by here late tomorrow afternoon."

The aroma of brewing coffee pried open Cliff's eyes. He grinned. Just like old times, he thought. He sat up and rubbed his sleepy eyelids. What the heck? It's still dark outside. He threw back the coverlet and padded to the kitchen.

"Why in the world are you up at four thirty in the morning?"

"Good morning to you too, you old grouch," Ally said, pouring him a mug of coffee. "I'm excited. I couldn't sleep. I want to make sure we're ready."

Cliff scratched the whiskers on his chin, sat at the kitchen table and sipped the steaming black liquid. "Ally, we're ready. You have enough of Mom's Barbecue in the refrigerator to feed ten armies – twice."

"I don't have any buns. I want them to be fresh, but it's time to start baking."

"Baby, come here."

She sat on his lap. "You kiss me with morning breath and I'll slap those whiskers off your face."

"Honey, you have the dough made. We don't open the restaurant until ten thirty. There's plenty of time."

"You want breakfast?"

"Cereal."

"Your wish is my command."

Ally put bowls and spoons on the table and pulled a jug of milk from the refrigerator while Cliff located the cereal box and sugar bowl.

"Thanks for going to church with me yesterday," he said.

She nodded. "I enjoyed it. It's been a long time – too long."

"Me too." He chuckled. "I can't believe the preacher announced the opening of Dad's Place from the pulpit."

Ally grinned. "They say Preacher McGee marches to a different drummer."

"I think the two minutes Julie spent with him before the service may prove to be more valuable than all the advertising she bought from the Holder Agency."

"You may be right. You want something else?"

"No," he said as he took his bowl to the sink. "Since I'm up, I think I'll mosey on over to the store."

Ally hugged him around the waist. "You're excited too. Admit it."

He turned and folded her in his arms. "Well, maybe just a little."

Cliff shaved so rapidly that he nicked his chin. He applied a tiny piece of tissue and forgot about it. When dressed, they walked hand in hand to the store as the sun peeked over the eastern horizon. Ally went directly to the workroom and Cliff snapped on lights. He found the long extension pole in the office and returned to the parking lot.

As he stood in front of the covered Riteway sign, extending the pole to its maximum length, he saw Roger approaching. He grinned. "What are you doing up so early? You're on the late shift."

Roger smiled. "Couldn't sleep."

"Where's your car?"

"I walked. I didn't want to risk waking Julie with the noise of the engine."

It required several attempts for Cliff to hook the end of the pole into the ring suspended from the sign cover. He pulled. Nothing happened. He pulled again. The cover remained in place. Together the two men tugged on the pole but the cover refused to budge.

Cliff sighed. "Everything that can go wrong has gone wrong. What do we do now?"

Roger removed his shoes and socks. "FBI to the rescue," he said.

Cliff watched in amazement as Roger shimmied up the support tower and tugged at the rebellious cloth until it fell to the ground.

"Did the FBI teach you to do that?" Cliff asked as Roger put his shoes and socks back on.

Roger nodded. "I owe the instructor an apology. I argued that I'd never need that particular skill."

It was shortly after six when the first customer pulled up to the gas pumps. Cliff rushed to the restaurant entrance and used a stage

whisper. "Ally, we have our first customer."

Together the three partners watched the gray-haired man fill his tank. "How long you folks been open?" he asked when he entered the store, pulling a credit card from his wallet.

"Today's our first day," Cliff replied as he rang up the sale.

"Something smells mighty good. Is that fresh bread?"

"Yes," Roger replied, "but the restaurant doesn't open until ten thirty."

"Don't guess I'd want barbecue for breakfast anyway," the man said, "but I'd give a dollar bill for a slice of that bread."

"Come on, mister. Our first customer deserves a little special consideration."

"Name's Brad Hagaman," the man said as he sat at the counter enjoying a buttered bun and a cup of coffee. "I'm a drug salesman. What are your motel rates?"

"Twenty dollars a night," Cliff replied as another customer crossed the pneumatic line across the driveway, setting off the alert.

"I'll catch it," Roger said.

"Twenty dollars is mighty cheap. I don't suppose you have special rates for longer stays?"

Ally smiled. "Afraid not."

"I'm going to be in the area all week – through Thursday night. I may as well save a few bucks and become your first motel customer." He frowned. "With the restaurant not opening until the middle of the morning, I'll have to go somewhere else for breakfast."

Ally glanced at Cliff. "How do you like your bacon and eggs, Mr. Hagaman?"

Business was steady. At nine thirty Carl Elliott demanded to be the first customer to buy a Mom's Barbecue sandwich. The lunch crowd began to trickle in an hour later. The sound of electronic games and pinball machines from both the store and game room added to the excitement and Julie was pleased that the customers choice of music on the jukebox was a nice mixture of country, rock and easy listening. She was especially happy that Shelly Brooks stopped in to sample Mom's Barbecue.

By three o'clock, the partners were exhausted and grateful for the lull in business. Ally refilled sugar bowls, salt and pepper shakers and napkin dispensers. Roger cleaned tables and the floor. Cliff picked up paper cups, beer bottles and other litter and hauled the overflowing trashcans outside. Julie sat behind the cash register, ringing up sales for the few customers in the store. Cliff joined her after emptying the last trash container.

"It's going good, partner," he grinned.

"I'm worn slap out, as Daddy used to say," she joked.

"We have a long way to go before this day's over."

"You sure you want to wait two weeks before hiring help?"

He chuckled. "I was wrong, as usual."

Julie searched his eyes. "You're usually right, Mr. Baker. I'll never forget what you did for me one night in a motel room."

Cliff simply smiled. "You and old Spunky seem to be hitting it off well."

"Cliff, I ... I didn't treat you very well. You, uh, didn't mean it when you said you love me, did you?"

"I'm afraid I did, Pretty Lady. I still do."

"Cliff, I..."

"It's okay, Julie. I love Ally, also." He smiled. "The important thing is, she loves me, too. The other night I asked her to marry me and she said yes."

"Hey, you two," Ally bellowed from the restaurant doorway. "Bawdy Talk is on."

Cliff hurried into the restaurant, but Julie lingered in the doorway so she could keep an eye on the cash register.

This is Delilah Delight with another four hours of Bawdy Talk. Thanks for turning me on. Now all you guys stuck in Charlotte traffic, honk your horns if you want the delicious babe in the car next to you to flash her breasts.

Speaking of delicious, all you horny toads out there who are standing up better sit down. If you're driving, pull over. Delilah has found something better than sex!

This afternoon I sunk my teeth into the most scrumptious sandwich I've ever tasted. Heaven could not possible provide anything that is more delicious than Mom's Barbecue. All you Charlotte dudes and dudettes, head on out to Dot. Turn east on Highway 13. Dad's Place is about ten miles away and that's where you'll find Mom's Barbecue along with your favorite beverages.

Plan to stay a while. They have fascinating electronic games, pinball, a loud jukebox with all your favorites and a nice dance floor for your enjoyment. They're open seven days a week, but don't put it off. Meet your friends tonight at Dad's Place. Heck, you may even find Delilah there.

The partners and a handful of customer broke into applause. Someone put a quarter in the jukebox and Bawdy Talk could no longer be heard.

Business picked up at four-thirty and by five-thirty, the restaurant was again crowded. Many customers ordered their sandwiches to go, but others preferred to relax and enjoy conversation, games and music.

By eight-thirty, a different group replaced the supper crowd. It was party time! Ally was exhausted. She felt as if she were a robot, making sandwiches, drawing draft beers, serving coffee and pulling bottled beverages from the large cooler behind the counter. She envied Roger, sitting on a stool behind the cash register and hoped he was keeping up with all the sales.

Cliff pushed through the crowd and emerged into the store. Julie was behind the cash register, making change for a customer. Cliff moved to her side. "You okay, Julie?"

"I'll make it."

"Do you have any idea how much money we've taken in today?"

"Thousands," she said. "It may take us all night to count it." She sighed. "We only have two vacancies in the motel. Seems that Mr. Hagaman passed the word on to other salesmen."

"You don't look very happy."

She sighed. "I suppose I'm a little tired."

"Let me spell you for thirty minutes. Go to the apartment and put

your feet up."

"I'll be okay, Cliff. You'd better get back to bussing tables."

"You sure?"

Julie nodded.

A tall, black-haired woman pushed her way behind the restaurant counter. Ally spun around. "Lady, you can't come back here."

"You need help."

"Back off, sister! I'm worn to a frazzle. I'm trying to hold my temper but I'm about ready to snap."

The lady smiled. "I worked in the cafeteria the four years I was in college. I know how to sling hash. I've been watching you and honey, you need help badly. Now point me to an apron."

The women locked eyes. Ally flinched. "Back there," she said, indicating the workroom with a jerk of her head.

Julie stood and stretched. Every muscle of her body ached. She wandered to the doorway and surveyed the scene. A smile crossed her lips as she saw the black-haired woman working with Ally, but the smile disappeared when she realized Cliff was manning the restaurant cash register. She searched the crowded room and spotted Roger, clearing a rear booth.

She glanced at a teenager playing an electronic game in the store area. "Fella," she said, "will you watch the cash register for me a minute. It's worth two free games."

"Sure," he agreed.

She edged her way through the dancers and tugged at Roger's shirt. "Spunky, there's a strange woman behind the counter with Ally. I don't know what's going on. Check it out for me, please."

Roger handed her the trash bag and pushed through the crowd. She followed. When he reached the counter, he stared in confusion as the woman finished filling a cup with draft beer and handed it to a customer.

"Pay at the register," she said. She smiled at Roger. "Hi, Partner."

"Kim!"

She cocked her head to one side. "You look surprised." She glanced at Julie. "Oh, my God. Julie didn't tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"Julie has called me on the telephone every day since your last visit. She talked Dr. Seifret into discharging me. She invited me to live with you. She said you need help with Dad's Place."

Roger turned to Julie, now at his side.

She smiled. "There's nothing I won't do to please my man."

He wrapped his arms around her as tears unashamedly rolled down his cheeks.

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