

Carlie
by oyster50

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Description: The world comes tumbling down on Carlie but a random encounter brings her to a better place, gives her time to breathe, to look around, to make choices.

Tags: Ma/ft, Consensual, Fiction, Cream Pie, First, Oral Sex, Petting, Safe Sex, Geeks

Chapter 1

I'm cussing. I don't know why my brother Jimmy insisted on shipping the box via Greyhound. On second thought, I DO know why. He's an idiot.

He'd finished cleaning out the old shed at Dad's place, only a year after Dad left us, and the box carried a bunch of things that apparently didn't match Jimmy's penchant for shiny objects. The box was probably heavy, containing Dad's equipment for handloading ammunition. Since I played some of the same games, I wanted the stuff.

FedEx would've dropped it on my doorstep. But nooooo. Greyhound. Not the best part of town at all. Walked into the place surreptitiously checking a concealed pistol on my hip. This might not be the South Side of Chicago, but it's not a Sunday School picnic, either.

I presented myself at the counter, showed some ID to the gentleman behind the counter.

"Yeah, lemme look." He punched at a terminal. "Uh, we gots it. Lemme find it."

While I'm waiting, I scan my surroundings yet again. Late afternoon. I'd not relish being here after dark. Two African-American gentlemen were chatting up a white girl. She appeared to be a teen. She kept glancing at her cellphone nervously. She put it to her ear. I heard her say "This is Carlie. Call me when you get this."

The flashier of the two men said, "Shee-it baby, you ain't gotta sweat dat shit. I gots a fine crib. You kin stay dere..."

"No. Please leave me alone."

"Doan' be dat way, baby. We offerin' you sumpin'," the other one said.

The guy from behind the counter came back, rolling my package on a dolly.

"Please, just ... As soon as my UNCLE..." she looked at me pleadingly, "Gets finished..."

I detected that a little call for help had been made.

If you know me, you know I'm all about rescuing damsels in distress. I carry a card. I fix flats on the side of the road, that kind of thing.

She didn't have 'trouble' written on her. Dressed normal. Little blonde thing.

"Girl, you looks thuteen ... you be hot stuff..."

"Carlie!" I said. "Ready to go..."

"She din't come in 'ere wit' you," the taller of the two said.

"No, but she's my niece and I just came to pick her and her box of stuff up. So if you don't mind..."

"Marcus," the shorter guy said, "Let 'im be..."

Carlie was up with a bounce and came right to my side. I walked her outside, unlocked my truck, put her inside. Started it. Air conditioning.

"Lock the doors. I'll be back with my box. I hope you'll let me in."

"Sure..."

I went back inside, signed, got the guy to loan me the dolly to get the box to my truck and stuck in the bed. Returned the dolly.

Well, she's still there with my truck running. I call that a good sign. I walk around to the driver's side, hear the door unlock. Another good sign.

"Buckle in," I said. "Bob Newman. Robert, actually. And you're..."

"Carolina Williams. You must've heard me. Carlie."

"Who were you trying to call? Can I take you somewhere?"

"Nobody. And away from here."

"Nobody?"

"Phone's dead. Battery's dead. No charger. Wouldn't matter. It was on Gramma's plan and that's run out. I was playing, trying to get those guys to leave me alone without makin' a scene."

"Not friends?"

"No. And when I got off the bus and the dude behind the counter saw I was gonna hang around, THOSE two showed up."

"Where were you going?" I asked.

"I was gonna walk downtown, find a church 're something ... shelter."

"Heck of a plan."

Heavy sigh. "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley."

I did a double-take. "Huh?"

"Never mind..."

"Did you just quote Robert Burns?"

"Yeah. And you KNOW that?"

"Waifs from bus terminals are not noted for scholastics."

"Nor are men with big ol' pickup trucks."

"Good point. Now ... your plan, the one that took off for the heather..."

She smiled. "I dunno. Gotta get something going..."

"Where'd you come from?"

She named the town.

"You left there and ended up HERE? And that's a PLAN?"

"You have no idea of the mess I was in..."

"Uh, fugitive from the law?"

"No."

"Am I to assume that your backpack's everything you own..."

She hefted it. "Sad. Look, Mister Bob..."

"Just Bob."

"You're older..."

"You're younger. Uh, how old?"

"Does it make a difference?"

"Kinda does. Hauling young girls around is a good way to meet the wrong kind of law enforcement."

"Sixteen, then."

"For real?"

She rummaged through her backpack. "Driver's license."

I glanced as I drove. Math works out.

"Okay. Now, what do you wanna do?"

"I don't suppose you know where those places are that, like, give out free lunches for the indigent..."

I noted 'indigent'. I noted the blonde, blue-eyed creature sitting there and...

"You're sitting in one of 'em."

"No, seriously. That kind of place, I get a meal, they'll probably have people who can set me up with shelter and help..."

"Oh, okay ... You're sitting in that, too."

"Seriously..."

"Look, Carlie, I'm a thirty-two year old engineer. I'm divorced, wife's two states away, I have a two bedroom house to myself in a nice neighborhood. You can crash there ... Phone. Internet. Computer. You can look up the proper agencies at your leisure..."

"Uh, I just left a couple of dudes who had 'pimp' stenciled on 'em. So I'm outa the pan. Is this the fire?"

"Carlie, if you scream and holler for help, my next door neighbor will come running and chop me to death with a garden hoe. He's decent people. I promise..."

"You make it sound like a sane option. What others do I have?"

"Drop you off at the big church downtown. You walk in and talk with them. They may have room at one of the shelters."

"Okay. Others?"

"Marcus is probably saddened that you didn't accept his offer in the personal entertainment industry..."

"Marcus can learn to live with disappointment. Carlie's a good girl. Intends to stay that way."

"Okay. So what's your choice?"

"Lunch budget will allow the dollar meal at Mickie D's or such."

"Do you mind if I counter that choice with 'yechhh!' and offer a meal at a little diner instead? My treat?"

"Uh, Bob, I could ... if it's not expensive..."

"Carlie, I just said 'my treat'. That means I pay. Okay? I can afford it."

"I'm not doin' quid pro quo here..."

"Okay, now I'm taking you to lunch because I'm intrigued. Since I met you twenty minutes ago, you've dropped a Burns quote and a Latin phrase. These are not behaviors one might normally associate with the odd indigent teen."

A smile crossed her lips. "I'm not odd. Much, anyway."

"Talkin' about professional cephalopods to strangers..." I muttered loud enough for her to hear.

Giggle. "QUID, not SQUID."

"Ah, so you know the difference."

"I do. Bob, you're ... What do YOU do for a living?"

"Point at things and holler..."

"Seriously."

"Engineer. I just finished a nine-month project in Africa. I'm between jobs right now."

"Unemployed?"

"In the broad definition of the word. More accurately, I'm NOT seeking employment. Got savings at just the level I want. Taking some 'me' time."

"Oh..."

"Oh? Like something's WRONG with that?"

"I thought a full-time job was kind of a goal..."

"Miss Carlie, I'm full-time whenever I want to be. I can make a phone call right now and tell you where I'll be working in six months."

"And in that six months?"

I smiled. I know the answer. "I'd have everything I need. House's paid for. I can be quite content. Might travel, might just sit on the bank of the river and fish..."

"Wow."

"Hardly wow-worthy," I said. "I just had goals..." I headed towards the outskirts of town.

"Where're we going?"

"Gonna go to the house and drop this box in the garage, come back to town and find a place to eat..."

She watched the scenery change. "I thought you said 'nice neighborhood'."

"River road's as nice a neighborhood as you can ask. I inherited this place. It's mine."

'Mine' was a cabin built on stilts, concession to the frequent floods. The area under the house was partially enclosed as storage and a workshop. The remainder, open, functioned as carport and the storage for a few toys – a two-holer kayak and a fifteen foot aluminum boat with a fifteen horse motor. And my OTHER car, a neat little SUV.

When I pulled off the public road I punched the button on a controller to open the gate to the six-foot chain-link fence, letting us in.

"Hmph! Where's that helpful neighbor?" she asked.

As we pulled in, she could see the adjoining property. There was a

cabin there, and there was a man working along the fence line between us. When we stopped, I waved. He waved back.

"Let's go do an introduction," I said. "If you want."

She regarded me warily. "Sure. Why not."

"Come on."

We walked to the fence.

"Heyyyyyy, Bob!"

"Hi, Art. Meet my niece Carlie. Carlie, this is Art. He's an attorney but we don't hold that against him."

"Hi, Carlie," Art said.

"Hello, Mister Art."

"Bekkaaaa!" Art said, "C'mere!"

Disembodied female voice from behind a big bed of gladioli. "Just a minute, honey..."

Bekka appeared, wiping her brow. "Oh, hi, Bob. Who's this?"

"This is Carlie. My niece. Carlie, Bekka. Saint."

"Saint?" Carlie queried.

"Yeah, because up to this point in history Art hasn't woken up with an icepick in his earhole."

"Now, Bill," Bekka cooed, "you know that the only domestic friction here is his dislike for flowers..."

"Shoulda planted asparagus," Art grouched. "Ornamental AND delicious."

"I like asparagus," Carlie said. "And it is a beautiful plant. I've seen it."

That adds a question to the stack forming in my head. Exactly how does this tiny blonde creature get exposed to asparagus other than the produce section of the grocery market?

"Carlie may be hanging around here for a few days, getting her stuff together," I said.

Kinda felt bad about lying to my neighbors. They were GOOD neighbors.

I'd spent many a lazy evening chatting with them inside the screened patio of their house, or them doing the same at mine. We've charred meat and abused fish together. Proper neighbors.

Carlie and I took off. I off-loaded my box onto a little wagon and trundled it into the enclosed shed. Carlie looked around.

"I don't recognize a lot of this stuff."

"Shooting stuff," I said. "I load my own cartridges. It's a hobby."

"Interesting," she said. "You're, like, that gun culture they talk about?"

"Depends on who 'they' are and what 'they' say."

"Oh, you see the news, don't you?"

"That 'they' is wrong. I shoot for sport, for personal challenge. I keep guns to support that, and to protect what's mine."

"Oh."

"Scary, ain't it?" I said.

"You don't look scary."

"Thank you. Now, let's lock this place up and go find food."

"Kay."

This time we got in the SUV.

"Nice car," she said.

"More economical than the truck, but sometimes I just need a truck."

"Understand."

"Uh, Carlie, YOU get a say in this. I didn't pick up a teen girl so I'd have somebody's life to run."

"Nobody's running my life, Bob. You got me out of a tight place. I appreciate that."

"Just helping where I could."

The diner I had in mind for lunch wouldn't be open for another half an hour, so we drove the long way back into town. She kept her head swiveling, taking in the scenery.

"Lot of nice houses," she said.

"And then there's mine," I returned.

"Yours is nice. Maybe a bit smaller..."

"It's just me. Don't need much. There're two bedrooms. You get one for tonight if you want."

"That's nice of you to offer. Bob, you don't know anything about me, though..."

"You appear intelligent and the possessor of good personal hygiene. Lack of tattoos and body piercings indicates you've avoided some poor life choices."

"That's just it. Up to this point, I didn't have any choices."

"If you wanna talk, I'll listen," I said.

"You sure?"

"I got time."

"Okay. Three months ago I was living with Gramma..."

"I'm listening."

"Mom never grew up. I'm more mature on my worst days than Mom was. It was all about immediate fun with Mom. I'm a result of some of that. I was a whole two weeks old the first time I ended up with Gramma while Mom went to rehab in lieu of sentencing."

"Wow. Not good."

We pulled into the parking lot, about the third car there. "Let's go get us a corner where you can talk..."

She looked at me warily.

"Or not. Carlie, you don't HAVE to..."

"Somebody needs to know..."

We got seated, got drinks ordered, plus a couple of the daily specials.

"So," I prodded. "Gramma..."

"Nice thing about it is that there were TWO of us to cry over Mom. Gramma never understood where she went wrong, and I never understood either. Maybe she didn't – do wrong, I mean. People make choices."

She looked rather sad. I guess I'd be sad, telling the tale myself.

"It was like that a bunch of times – live with mom for a while, then end up at Gramma's. Jail. Rehab. New guy who was IT this time. Not like that last one, or the one before that. When I was twelve, Mom gave up, signed parental rights to Gramma. Four months ago, Gramma had a stroke. Big one. Hospital. Coma. And..."

Tears. Real ones. "Dammit, Bob, SHE loved me. Cared for me. Me and her in that little apartment, we were makin' it ... she had an annuity from my grandpa. He got killed in an offshore accident, she got the settlement, stretched it to raise Mom, then was doing okay with me. And she had that stroke."

"I'm sorry, baby..." Then realized that I said 'baby'. Okay, crying female. Soft names are warranted.

She noted the name, smiled a little. "Thank you for acting like you care."

"I DO care. Not much I could've done about it but I do care."

"I know ... But when Gramma died, that meant I had ONE option – Mom. She and I went through Gramma's apartment, me crying my eyes out, Mom putting a dollar sign on everything in the place. Me, praying that just maybe this would be the catalyst for Mom to change. Mom, figuring out how the windfall would pan out in her ongoing quest for whatever Mom was looking for. I wasn't it."

She continued. "I knew when I walked into the apartment. It was a wreck. A crash pad. Like something out of one of the police shows – the ones that have a camera following the cops around when they have to go into those houses to arrest druggos and whatever. Two days, two nights, Bob. That was enough. I took the money I had in cash and bought a ticket heading west and this is as far as I could get. I have four dollars and change..."

"And you thought I'd let you spend your money on your own lunch. Geez, lady, what kind of animal am I supposed to be?"

"Compared to ol' Marcus back there?"

"Well, I gotta be an improvement over that."

"I hope so. I think I could've been makin' some real mu'fuckin' money tonight, though, to quote his business model."

"He said that?"

"Not to me. To his buddy. I guess I wasn't supposed to hear that, maybe..."

"Maybe not. There's a certain population that thinks that's not a bad deal..."

"I'm sure that it's a better deal if your pimp's not trollin' the Greyhound station."

"Perhaps. I never gave it much thought."

"Safety net," she said. "I always heard about a social safety net, but I have no idea ... I just ran. I can't go back. And I..."

Plates arrived. Conversation moderated a bit as we ate.

After the meal, though...

"You said you had a computer at your house."

"This is 2018. EVERYBODY'S got a computer..."

She gave me a sideways glance. "Opener for conversation, Bob."

"Repartee, Carlie."

"Oh, you're FUN!"

"Yes, I have a computer. Or two."

"I can start looking at things. Options."

"Yeah, options ... Like maybe asking what clothing and supplies you have in that backpack."

"Jeans. 'Nother T-shirt. Couple changes of undies. Socks. Hairbrush."

"And that's it?"

"Everything else I owned was on a pile in the kitchen in front of the washing machine. Mom was supposed to buy detergent so I could do the laundry. She was passed out on the sofa with some dude I don't even know, and I don't know what they were on, but they didn't move a muscle when I packed up and left."

"And you're gonna start your new life with that?"

She sighed. "I heard that some of the shelters will give you a stipend and help you with necessities..."

"Uh, part of the problem, Carlie, is that you're a minor. You're liable to end up in a foster program or something. I dunno ... You can't do a whole lot. You've got a parent..."

"If I had a parent I wouldn't be sitting here having this conversation."

"Well, there are legal things ... Tell you what, when we get back, lemme get Art to come over and talk with you..."

"I'm screwed, huh?"

"Nope. Not screwed. First, you're safe. Second, you've got shelter and food. Third, I got time on my hands so I can run you around doing what you need to do to get on with life." I glanced away from the road to check her.

Serious look.

"Although I have NO idea what you might want to do. Sixteen. I'd hope finishing school was on the list..."

"How? School. Requires a place to stay, a place where food and shelter is provided. School's five days a week ... I guess I have all summer to work, though..."

"Yeah, minimum wage, maybe a buck or two more. You're not going to get food and shelter on that. Sorry."

"Dammit, Bob..."

"Sorry, Carlie. Truth. Reality."

Chapter 2

Still Bob's turn:

So I'm sitting across the table from a sad young girl who doesn't have a lot of options and her eyes are starting to get moist. Those eyes bored into me.

"What do I do, Bob?"

"You get people to help you who know things, who intend to HELP you, not exploit your situation."

"Where do I find those people?"

"You're sitting across from one. Those people you met across my fence are a couple more."

"Why would you do that?"

"Why wouldn't I? I can. You need it. Seems like the thing to do."

"What if I'm some kind of psychopath?"

"What's the chance of TWO psychopaths sitting at the same table in this restaurant?"

She broke a smile. "That's a horrible joke. What if I was?"

"I'll take a chance."

"I could be, you know..."

Our waitress dropped the ticket on the table, took my credit card.

"When we leave here, " I said, "I need to go talk with Art. Kinda fibbed to 'em, 'my niece' and all that..."

"Yeah, but what do you tell 'em then? I mean, you and me, we look like a poster for exploitation..."

"Carlie," I told her, "the fact that we're going to be open about your status, that we're talking about helping you, that ought to temper their thinking. Art's a pretty decent lawyer and his wife's an actual saint. They'll help."

I signed the delivered ticket, adding a hefty tip. I keep coming back to this place. I know this waitress, and she's good to me. Carlie eyed it.

"You're generous."

"Doesn't hurt. Let's go."

A bit later, we pulled the SUV back into the carport underneath my house.

I picked up my phone. "Hey, Siri! Call Art Aucoin, mobile."

A couple of rings and Art answered. "What's up, bud?"

"Uh, you got a bit of time? I need to talk with you."

"Your place or mine? I got beer."

"I got beer, too, Art. How about you and Bekka come over here?"

"Be right over."

"Okay."

Carlie followed me into the kitchen. I put a block of cheese, then another, on a cheese board, dumped a stack of crackers.

"Cheese?" she asked.

"Yeah. Goes good with the beer."

"What kind of cheese is that?"

"We're doing England today. The orange one's a cheddar, the splotchy one's a Stilton."

"I know what cheddar is. Never saw Stilton."

"Just another blue cheese. The blotches are colonies of mold."

"Yeachhh..."

"I love it. Art and Bekka do, too."

Knock on the door.

"You wanna go let 'em in?"

"Sure." She took off as I was pouring beer into glasses to go with the cheese and crackers.

I heard her greet them, then I saw them as I made my way to the living room with the tray.

"Is that Stilton?" Bekka asked.

"Yep! Thought it'd go good with the beer. Have a seat."

They got comfortable. I took a deep breath.

"Folks, I told you a lie this afternoon."

"Huh?" Bekka blurted. "What about?"

"Carlie's not a blood relative. She's a girl in a tight spot. I pulled

her out of one, but she's in..."

"Bob's trying to help me," Carlie interrupted. "He's not sure how to handle it."

"What kind of trouble, dear?" Bekka asked.

Carlie related the same story she gave me, complete with the tears over her grandmother, and I noted that at least if she was lying, she was consistent with it.

"So let me get this straight – you're basically on your own?" Art asked her.

"Yessir. Mom signed away parental rights. Gramma was doing the parenting. Now she's gone. I tried with Mom again, but I can't stay there – drugs 'n' stuff."

"Well, m'dear, you're old enough for us to get you emancipated. That's an easy one. I can have a document signed by a judge tomorrow. But then what?"

"Sir, I need to find a place to stay and I need to get back in school. There's no way I can support myself..."

"There're programs, Carlie," Bekka said gently. "We can work with you..."

"She will be in a bind for the short term," I inserted.

"All we got's a sofa," Bekka said. I knew that. They have a cozy cabin, a retirement place whenever Art really retires. Now it's a getaway, although he gets away for weeks at a time.

"Carlie, you've walked through the place. Second bedroom's yours if you want it." I had two, three if the occupant of the third one settled for a single cot and a little dresser.

"That's an idea," she said. "Aren't you worried about how that looks, though?"

"Only people who'll look are Art and Bekka, and they know why you're here."

I could tell she was thinking, so I continued. "You'll have groceries, transportation, there's a school bus coming by here at the end of the street..."

"Gosh, Bob. I have four dollars and one change of clothes."

"One – there's the laundry room. Two," I reached in my pocket for my billfold, extracted a card. "Here. This has a thousand bucks on it. Can you get what you need?"

She gasped. "I can't pay that back."

"Think kind thoughts about me. Now, I think that Bekka will be glad to provide transport for you to do a shopping trip. Right, Bekka?"

"I certainly will. If you don't mind going shopping with an old lady."

"Me 'n' Art'll go fishing, then."

"Can't," Art said. "Gotta get Carlie's paperwork done. Carlie, I do hope you have birth certificate, driver's license, social security card..."

"I do. In my backpack."

"You and Bob come over for breakfast at 7:30 tomorrow and give me that stuff, and we'll get this all started."

Art and Bekka left us to our own devices.

"What do you have to sleep in?" I asked.

"Got an old nightshirt," she said. "Where can I bathe?"

"Hall bathroom's yours. Uh ... let me get you some shampoo. Probably not what you want, but it's all I got..."

"Bob, you're being too nice to me."

"Am not," I protested. "Just trying to make you comfortable so you'll be able to relax a bit. Gotta be a hard day for you..."

"Oh, gosh, it was ... has been ... is..."

"Quit worrying, Carlie. It's taking an upward turn."

She stepped up, gave me a hug. "Thank you for everything so far, Bob. At least you're trying."

"Everybody's trying, Carlie. Take your shower."

When I got out of my own, I donned pajamas, uncharacteristically for me. Usually I'm clad in my drawers until bedtime, but this is a concession to a perceived need for modesty. I went back into the living room, turned on the TV, started flipping channels.

Sounds from the hall bathroom went away and a Carlie with a towel around her head entered the room. Her old nightshirt was a big knit T-shirt hanging loose on her, down to her knees.

"I feel better," she announced, flouncing onto the sofa, choosing the end next to my favorite recliner. "So this is what Bob does in the evenings?"

"Something stupid on TV, following the news on the Internet, then it's..."

"Porn?"

"Oh, how stereotypical," I said. "No, NOT porn..."

"Mom's last boyfriend was kinda open with it. 'Accidentally' used to leave some on the screen so I'd 'accidentally' see it, like I was supposed to get uncontrollably aroused or something..."

"I don't do that. I have a few friends – former co-workers – that I track on Facebook and a few forums. I check the news in a few places. I track what's going on with international projects in case I feel like going to work."

"You only work overseas?"

"That's been my bread and butter."

"How's that work?"

"People know me. They know what I do. If they need that, I go to work."

We talked a bit about living accommodations, the food, opportunities for exploring the local area.

"Some of the places I've been, you don't want to go outside the security areas," I said.

"I don't think I'd like that," she opined.

"I'm liking it less and less," I said. "I saved a lot. Invested. I could just about be comfortable..."

"Must be nice."

"It is. Has been. When Dad passed away, he left us this place and his regular house. My brother and I did a split. I got this, he got the house."

"This is a house."

"Well," I said, "Dad and Mom had it as a fishing camp. It worked for me as a house because it stayed here idle while I was overseas. It'll work for me now."

"It's cozy," she observed.

"'Cozy'? That's a positive word. Negative word is 'small'. Last lady I dated said that she'd never live in something this size again if she had a choice. Her apartment was this size, maybe a bit smaller – two bedrooms, one for her, one for her son, father unknown, and only SLIGHTLY over compensated..."

"Rotten, you mean..."

"Yeah, that too."

"I wasn't spoiled, Bob."

"You don't act spoiled."

"Gramma loved me, she told me, but she said that love meant proper training."

Commercial on TV. She stood up. "Show me your kitchen and laundry room."

"C'mon," I said. I showed her the place, opening cabinets, closets.

"And if you use something and the supply's low, write it on this whiteboard so we can get more."

"Organized," she commented.

"Habit," I replied.

"Usually when people talk about habits, they mean bad habits."

"That's true," I said. "But habits can be good. Or neutral."

"Neutral?"

"Would you call drinking coffee a bad habit?"

"No."

"A good habit?"

"Well, there's nothing wrong with it."

"Neutral, then."

"I'm gonna have fun talking with you, Bob," she said.

I think it was the first real smile for me and me alone.

"It's kinda nice to have somebody to talk with in the evening," I said. "Was thinking about getting a kitten."

"Wouldn't be fair," she said. "About the time you have it bonded to you, you take off for Nigeria or something..."

"One reason why I didn't. Of course, I could give up my international work to take care of a kitten."

"Something to think about."

In the dark recesses of my mind a little light blinked. I'm an engineer. Formulae are part and parcel of my bread and butter and a new one just appeared – Carlie = kitten.

Go out, stupid little light.

"D'ya have laundry? I can wash stuff with mine," she said.

"I'll get it. There's a laundry basket inside the door to my bedroom if you're ever doing laundry and I'm not here."

"Why would I be here when you're not here?" she asked.

"Because, one, this is now YOUR home, too, and two, we may be in separate places during the day, so..."

"You're serious."

"Serious enough to ask about your driving record. Any violations?"

"No. Why?"

"In the morning I'm calling my insurance company and getting you put on as an authorized driver for the car and the pickup."

She squealed. "Really?!?"

"You're living here, Carlie. I love the place, but one of the things I love is that it's kind of remote, off the beaten path. If you do need anything, you have to drive into town. I guess you could wait on me or one of the Aucoins to bring you, but it's easier for you to just take off and do it yourself. Besides, if you're going to school, that gets

you out of a bus ride. Gives you an hour more sleep in the morning.”

“An hour?” she asked.

“Bus picks up here right before seven. School starts after eight. An hour.”

“You’re putting thought into this, Bob,” she said, raising her voice as I came around the corner with my contribution to a load of laundry.

She knows what to do. “Hmmpf! Colored underwear. At least we don’t have a load of whites,” she observed.

“You’re not supposed to be paying attention to my drawers.”

She giggled. “I was sorting laundry, not developing a prurient interest in your underclothes, sir,” she said.

“What kind of sixteen-year-old girl uses ‘prurient’ in everyday conversation?” I asked.

She shut the lid on the washer, studied the controls, set it for a normal load. “The kind who noted the length of bookshelves when she walked into this house. Now I’d like to see what it is that you read.”

“You’d be better put to look at my iPad or my Kindle. I don’t buy many hard copies any more.”

“I’ll start with the shelves.”

“You read a lot?”

“I do.”

“You know how to use an iPad?”

“I think it’s genetic,” she smirked.

“Hang on.” I rummaged through the bottom drawer of a desk, came out with the previous generation’s iPad. “Here!”

“That’s a BIG one.”

“Bigger IS better, sometimes,” I laughed. “It’s at factory settings. You can set it up yourself. Lemme see your cellphone.”

She handed me a generic-looking Android device.

Same drawer, another box. Last generation of the iPhone. “Here!”

"Uh, that's nice, but I don't have..."

"You will in the morning. I'm gonna put you on my plan. No big deal."

"You're serious."

"Are you? Carlie, if you're not, say so. If you're just using this place as a temporary waypoint, that's fine, but Art and Bekka and me, we're under the impression that you want help."

"Why?"

"Uh, okay ... I saw you in a stressful circumstance today, thinking on your feet. You have an easy way with an expansive vocabulary, you don't display the markings of bad choices. You comport yourself well in the face of total strangers, and you seem to remain in control of your emotions in tough situations. All those add up to somebody that I'm glad to know and whom I'd be glad to help." I gazed into her blue eyes. "So, am I wrong?"

"No, Bob."

"Then let's go back in the living room and you, know – live."

Back to the previous positions, I in my recliner, she at the end of the sofa next to it.

"If you get stuck on those, let me know..."

"I helped Gramma set hers up," she said. "Apple's pretty easy to use."

Then, "Uh, I had an iTunes account."

"See if it's still active."

"It is, but..."

"You don't have money..."

"I'm sorry. I can skip that part."

"No, hang on." I keep a little 'burner' credit card for when I need to buy something in 'iffy' surroundings. It's got a \$750 limit, so if it DOES get compromised, the thieves won't drain me. I tossed it to her.

"Uh, this is YOUR credit card."

I explained the limit. "Use it. And we can keep it paid down when the bill comes in."

"Are you sure?"

"Are YOU sure?"

"You can trust me, Bob."

"I do hope so."

"'Course, I coulda taken Marcus's offer and be makin' some REAL muh-fuckin' money right now."

"After a suitable period for 'training', no doubt," I said.

"They'd have to start from scratch. I'm ... Well, let's just say that I didn't have practical knowledge of that."

"I'd like to say that was the norm..."

"It isn't. I'd guess at least two out of three, maybe more, of my classmates already did it, and some of them, if they were charging, could be making that real muh-fuckin' money."

I didn't say anything to that. The use of 'muh-fuckin' was not her normal speech pattern. I detected her tongue tripping to get it out.

"Why would anybody do that, Bob?"

"Money's money to some people. I guess, desperation, laziness, entrapment, I dunno..."

"No, I mean the other – uh, what's the term I'm looking for – uh, serial sexual partners..."

"Nicer than saying 'sluts', I guess."

She looked at me. "I wonder if 'slut' fits any more. It just doesn't mean things – having sex, I mean. Girl told me it's just hookin' up, like it was sharing a cold drink..."

"I always considered it differently."

"How so?"

Why am I talking about this with this girl? "In interpersonal relationships, that's the _inner sanctum_."

"You think that's it? The ultimate intimacy?"

"I don't know about the ultimate. A good foot rub's up there. Like that prostitution thing. You can buy sex easier than getting a good

foot rub. People don't hook up to give foot rubs. But there's more to it than physical contact."

She developed a wry smile. "So you're saying that you never..."

"Carlie, I don't want to talk about my sex life with a sixteen-year-old girl."

"I was being mentored, sir."

"Uh..."

"So what you're saying is that if I plopped down in front of your chair and gave you a foot rub, it's MORE intimate than smashing nasties?"

"'Smashing nasties?' Where'd that come from?"

"It's just language. A less euphemous euphemism."

"Okay."

"Back to that foot rub," she pushed.

"That's not what I said and you KNOW it. it's just that nobody asks for footrubs. Nobody twists and manipulates and coerces for footrubs."

"Or backscratches."

"Yes, backscratches."

Her eyes sparkled. "And the ultimate – popping zits..."

"Ewww!" I blurted.

"So there you are, your female friend has this zit, and she thinks YOU could do a better job ... faces inches apart, your hands, her face, physical contact..."

"You oughta write prose," I laughed.

She smiled. "I like writing. Too bad that most people don't read..."

"Sometimes you do things for your own benefit. If others benefit, that's just a plus."

"Every now and then, though, it's nice for somebody to say 'I like the way you wrote that.' I see your laptop. Uh, do you have a spare one of those?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. It's Apple, too, though."

"Is it hard to use?"

"Nope. Apple doesn't make money by making things difficult. Lemme get it."

I rummaged through a closet and retrieved a computer bag, brought it to her. "MacBook Pro. I have a newer one, just because I like shiny new stuff sometimes. Nothing wrong with this one. The charger's in there."

"What software?"

"Just the operating system and a web browser and the little things Apple gives you. If you want to write, we can download..."

"I know. _LibreOffice_. I used it at Gramma's. My computer kinda 'disappeared' at Mom's. One of those straws that broke the camel's back."

We spent an hour setting the computer up – email, my home wi-fi, and... "You got the whole Internet, Carlie. I don't need to warn you..."

"About what? Porn? Puh-leeze, Bob. My previous exposure was enough to make me spew."

"There are predators out there that are much more subtle than Marcus, Carlie."

"I'm aware, Bob. I managed to retain my virtue in the face of Marcus and real muh-fuckin' money. I've avoided Kason and his new car and primo weed all the way from Colo-freakin'-rado. And I'm here. I'm safe."

Chapter 3

Carlie's turn:

Hello. I'm Carolina Angele Williams. My friends call me Carlie.

Two weeks ago I was at the end of my rope. I had four dollars and some change to my name, the rest of my 'savings' having gone to a bus ticket. Grandma told me that buses used to be a very common form of transportation between cities, that a lot of normal people used them.

I think that things have changed since she experienced inter-city bus

travel.

The clientele was sketchy, right down to a runaway teen with a shoulder bag.

I guess I looked the part because when I got out at the city at the end of my financial range I pleasantly greeted the station manager, told him that I was looking into social services for the night.

Wasn't ten minutes later that two black guys showed up, one of them flashing an impressive amount of gold – chains, watchband – and when he smiled, his teeth. They call it a 'grille' but no self-respecting person would drive a car with that stuff hung on the front of it.

Shortly after they arrived, a middle-aged white guy showed up. I overheard him negotiating about a box sent to him.

The two black guys, one of them named Marcus, were trying to talk me into leaving with them.

"You doan' need no shelter, baby. I gots a fine crib ... You can stay wif us..."

I tried fending off their verbal assault. Put my dead cellphone to my ear, faking a call.

"Yeah, Mom, this is Carlie..." I said, loud enough for the white guy – the ONLY white guy in the place – to hear. I'd caught HIS name. I hoped he caught mine.

"No, please leave me alone..." I told my assailants.

"Gurl, you looks thuteen ... We's offerin' you sumthin..."

"Please ... As soon as my uncle gets finished..." I looked over at the white guy. I'm starting to get a bit desperate. I hope he sees that.

"Carlie," the guy said, "Ready to go!"

"She din't come here wit' you," one of the black guys said.

"No, she's my niece. She just came in here. I'm pickin' 'er and 'er stuff up. So if you don't mind..."

I could tell that the black guy was weighing options, but his buddy called him off. My new benefactor hustled me out and put me in the cab of a big ol' pickup truck.

"Lock the door. I'll be right back."

And that's how I met Bob Newman.

You know how they say that if you save somebody's life among the Chinese, then they owe you a life-debt? I don't know if it's true, and saying 'Chinese' sort of assumes that the one point something billion Chinese are a completely homogenous group, and I doubt that they are, any more than 'European' covers French and Italians and Germans and Bulgarians, but it's a thought that tells me what happened in my head.

I'd been rescued. Of course, the guy's six-two, maybe two hundred pounds, and he could have the same sort of plans for me that Marcus and company had in mind, but I bought myself a little time. At least that's what I thought.

By the end of the day this guy knew my story, I'd met the neighbors, there was a plan to emancipate me, making me legally able to run my life, and Bob had given me a place to stay, a cellphone, an iPad and a laptop.

By the end of the week I was back in school.

I mean, you read the news, a teen girl in my shoes is supposed to find herself chained in a basement until Stockholm Syndrome makes her compliant to her new life as a sex slave, right?

I found myself in a home where there's food available, the place is clean, the conversation is intelligent, and on Saturday morning I find myself sitting in the bow of a little aluminum boat with a fishing rod because 'the red's'll be running in here when the tide goes out and starts pulling bait out of the marsh.'

First time I've ever been fishing. After we brought several, 'a mess of reds', into the boat, we headed back in.

"Now you're gonna clean them?" I said.

"Yep. Kinda messy. If you've never done it, there's scales and blood and guts ... You can go back in the house and let me do it."

"Or you can show me how. Doesn't seem right to have the fun of catching them and the fun of eating them and to skip this part."

"This ain't the fun part," Bob said.

There's a sink to clean fish right there on the dock where the boat comes in. The first scraps of fish hit the water and hundreds of little fish show up to gobble up the scraps.

"Circle of life," Bob says. "Those little guys're one of the main foods of the ones we caught, so they're kinda getting even."

At the end of the exercise, we had a bowl of fresh fish filets, enough for us and...

"You did pretty good for your first try at fishing, Carlie," Mizz Bekka said. "I wasn't sure if you'd like it."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"So many young people are thinking it's cruel and heartless..."

"I know some of those people, Mizz Bekka. They can feel all haughty about it while they're eating hamburgers, and even the vegan ones, they haven't a clue. Bob just gave me a little bit of exposure to how the food chain works."

That evening we dined on fish I caught. Baked, with herbs, lemon, an interesting pilaf.

"I ate a lot of different cuisines over the years," Bob said. "Tried to re-create some of them. I'm kind of successful."

I'm the new girl at school. There are a lot of people to meet and learn about. I immediately note the insiders and the outsiders and the groups and the cliques and I'm not committing to any of that. I'll just see how it shakes out.

Academically, the school takes the easy path. They get records from my old school, stick me in equivalent classes, offer help if I find myself in over my head.

Puh-leeze! This is a modern high school. They'll graduate just about anybody short of a mass murderer, and he'd have a chance if he was an athlete.

There's the 'dance'. Put a few hundred hormonal teens in a confined space and it's all about pairing up, probably 90% hetero. I'd be one of those.

I'm reasonably pretty. Blonde, okay, but I'm not one of those girls that has to have just the right look of make-up, and we're ALL in uniform. At least Bob saw to it that I had funds to get good stuff. Mizz Bekka helpfully took me shopping on the second day I was here.

"Carlie," she said, "I hope you're serious about staying around."

"No place to go, Mizz Bekka," I said. I looked at her. In demeanor, she kind of reminds me of Grandma, except a little more refined, socially speaking. Attorney's wife, you know. Her circles were much different than the ones Grandma ran in. She's nice, though. A little

more wary of me than Bob is, I think.

So I'm well-dressed within the guidelines of the school uniform policy. I'm clean. My concession to fashion is a pair of earrings – tiny little spheres, one in each pierced ear. I care for my hair by keeping it clean and brushed and letting a bit of natural curl frame my face.

Let's run the inventory – reasonably good to look at. Female. Unknown quantity being a new girl. So I get hit on immediately. Female and having a pulse would've probably worked.

More than one noticed that I'd driven myself to school.

The subtlety and the prospects weren't much improved over Marcus at the bus terminal.

I had talks with a lot of girls, too, and I learned that telling some of these girls something is a pipeline to having guys find out the same information.

Two high school students, a girl and a boy, live in the little waterside neighborhood near me. The boy has his own truck. The girl, well, she doesn't want to ride to school with him.

"Some things are worth a bus ride to avoid," she said. "Jerrod's about six of 'em."

"Gee, Jess," I said. "Is he THAT bad?"

"Yes. He's free with his hands..."

"And you learned this how?"

"Accepting a ride to school in his truck instead of waiting on the bus."

"So ride with me..."

"You've got a car?!?"

"My guardian says I can use his to get back and forth to school."

"How do you have a guardian?"

"By not having known living relatives," I said. "Except a mom who's kind of out-of-pocket for five to eight years."

"Ouch," she said. "Didn't mean to get nosey..."

"Not nosey. But it'd be better if that bit of news didn't get spread. Guardian? Dude rescued me."

"That's Bob Newman, right?"

"You know 'im?"

"A little bit. Dad's fished with 'im. He's some kind of high-powered engineer, is what Dad says. I thought he was single."

"He is."

"So you're, like, LIVING with 'im?"

"I have my own room. I take care of the house with 'im, we cook meals together. But that's it..."

"Oh ... Kinda thought..."

"No. Jess, Mom burnt me out of tradin' sex for anything."

"I didn't mean THAT, Carlie. Don't be so edgy."

"Sorry. I'm just not really sure of what I'm gonna do."

"What's Mister Bob say to do?"

"Go to school. Give things a chance to sort themselves out. Don't rush into something ... Or out of something..."

"Sensible. So why's he doing it?"

"I'd like to think he's a good person."

"Has he put any moves on you?"

"Not even the first one," I said.

"D'ya think he's GAY?"

"Oh, come on, Jessica. We've gone out to eat together. I asked about other women. He says he got out of the dating scene. That's all."

"Just tryin' to figure out ... I mean, some guys at school asked me what I knew about you..."

"And you told them?"

"I said I didn't know, and that they should ask you themselves."

I snorted. "Tell 'em I'm a raving militant lesbian."

"Won't work," Jessica said. "We already have two of those ... So you don't, like, wanna date anybody?"

"The right one ... Let's see, criteria ... Shaven. Good hygiene. No fakey affectations. Intelligent, as evidenced by actual grades ... Like that."

"Uh ... well..."

"I'm sure there are a couple out there."

"I ... I'm not so sure."

"Then dating? No. I will be sociable, not gullible."

That conversation was the middle of my second week living with Bob, and that's how I acquired Jessica as a steady companion on the drives to school in the morning. She was a hundred percent reliable going. Getting home, though, sometimes not. Sometimes she made arrangements with other friends, sometimes I saved Bob a trip to a grocery store on the way home, but in the mornings our half-hour ride to school was a window into the goings-on.

The intelligence thus gathered was interesting, a window into recent history and social interactions with the students, occasionally with the school staff.

I slid right into class, saw immediate success.

First time I brought home a bit of graded work, I asked Bob, "Do you want to see this?"

"Sure, I do, Carlie. But I'm not forcing my way into your education. I kinda trust you to do the right things. How bad is it?"

I haven't figured out Bob. I don't think he's figured out me. What's he supposed to be? I initially thought 'pseudo-Dad' and yes, he does some of that.

Friend? He's a bit OLD to be in close friend range, but he's easy to talk with.

My side of the deal? Like Monday evening of the first week I was here.

"Where you goin'?" I asked him as he tossed an old towel over his shoulder.

"Yard work," he said. "Grass mowed, weed-eating..."

"Want me to help?"

He looked at me with his blue eyes. "Happy to have help, but I'm not trying to make you pay for room and board. You're not my slave."

"Two of us," I said. "House. Share work. Not slavery."

He gave me a smile. "Come on, then, punkin'..."

"Punkin?!?"

"Friendly name."

"Then I can call you just plain 'Bob'?"

"I was hoping it'd get to that," he said.

"Why the towel?"

"Sweat. Dirt."

"Let me get one."

A few minutes later I'm looking at his lawn mower and a gas-powered string trimmer.

"You familiar?" he asked.

"I can push a lawn mower," I said.

"Here, then. Earplugs. Stuff 's loud. Protect those ears."

It didn't take long for me to mow. The lawn's tiny. Took him longer with that blattting string trimmer. He was still at it when I stowed the mower. I walked up the stairs to the house, grabbed a couple of cold drinks from the fridge, came back down, watched hm finish up. When he turned around I pushed a cold can at him. He looked at me, smiled.

"Thank you, Carlie."

"You're welcome. Sit. Cool down out here, then we can go back upstairs and shower." When I said it, I realized immediately that my statement could be taken incorrectly, but okay, the guy's decent, so...

"Who goes first?"

I snickered, relieved. "Rock, paper scissors."

His rock defeated my scissors. That's fine with me. He doesn't take long to clean up.

We passed at close proximity in the hallway.

"You smell nice," I said.

"Thank you. Every now and then I like to spiff up a bit."

While I was showering, working the grass clippings and dirt from my hair, I was thinking of how nice he DID smell.

Soap. Hot water. I felt rejuvenated when I got out of the shower, toweled off, left my hair wet. Dressed in shorts and a plain cotton blouse, I entered the living room. He was playing on his laptop.

"What's on tap for the evening?" I asked.

"No homework?"

"Nope."

He cocked his head. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. I'm getting my feet down. Teachers said they'd like to get a feel for where I am?"

"That's an interesting question. We've talked, but seriously, where are you?"

"Seriously, I'm in high school. Think about it, Bob. The least common denominator in modern education. What did you tell me when we were talking about college degrees?"

"That everybody thinks they're entitled to college, so it's taken the place of a high school diploma."

"'S what I mean. I'm good. Without seriously trying, I'm good."

"Figured that," he said, a hint of confidence in his voice. We'd known each other a week.

"How?"

"Watched you. Listened to you. Your speech, your mannerisms, the choices you make in music and TV, the way you interact with Art and Bekka and others."

"I'm just trying to be a decent person, Bob."

"Doesn't look like 'trying' to me, Carlie. Looks like 'is'. And people can be decent without your vocabulary."

"I can't help that. I like words. Reading. It's fun to me."

He's the one who brought the subject up. "So what about socializing with your peers?"

"Peers?"

"People your age. I enjoy having you accompany me, or for me to accompany you, but we're the odd couple. Not a couple, really, but the age difference is obvious."

"Well, I've thought about it," I said. "Had offers. Requests. Suggestions. Didn't know how to handle that with you."

"How so?"

"Dunno what our relationship is. You got me emancipated, so really, you're not even my guardian. I'd be stupid to cross you, though..."

"Uhhh..."

"You're providing me with room and board. If you threw me out, the best I could hope for was the sofa at Mizz Bekka's place. I mean, who builds a cabin with only one bedroom?"

"Art and Bekka do. He had fantasies about 'roughing it' in his little cabin on the water. Went for small and cozy. It's a neat place. Might've seen myself building one like it, if I built from scratch, but I bought this place already built."

"Yeah, they're roughing it, all right," I giggled. "But Mizz Bekka was so honest about offering me..."

"You're an upset to the circle," he said. "They've never seen me hauling women in and out of here, and all of a sudden, I got you..."

"I know. She and I had a very private conversation about my status. I told her that I was a virgin and I intended to save that bit of me for THE guy, and not some boy who's cute and available."

I watched Bob's face, saw a color change. Occurs to me that I've never discussed any really intimate parts of my life, other than to deny Marcus the chance to manage me while I was making 'some real muh-fuckin' money'.

"Art asked me the same thing. I guess when we started out introducing you as my niece, then immediately having to roll that back, he asked

me if this was a sex thing. Said he wasn't signing on to help supply me with teenaged pussy."

"I'm sure you explained..."

"I did. You're emancipated. And I'm giving you a place to stay because, one, it makes me a decent human being, and two, you're good company. But I'm not running your life. I know that when I was your age..."

I can't resist. I inserted, " ... and dinosaurs roamed the earth..."

"Dammit, Carlie! That's the smart part."

"Smart assed, maybe," I countered, "but do proceed. Excuse my interruption."

"I just hold the thought that you might want to congregate with those your own age..."

"How would I get there?"

"You have the car. You're on my insurance. I've seen you drive, so I'd imagine that would play into it."

"Just like that, you'd turn me loose?"

"Uh, again, I don't have any real standing to say it, so I have to operate on the assumption that you'll be sane. You're sixteen. I know I bristled when my folks told me I had an eleven o'clock curfew on Friday and Saturday nights, and had to be through the door by eight thirty on the odd school night."

"Those make sense. I won't even try the 'but everybody else gets to stay out until midnight' approach."

"Truth is, Carlie, that you can legally do that, but nothing good happens to kids after midnight. Adults, either, for that matter. So there's the rules for curfew. You violate 'em, you don't get the car."

"Truth is, sir, that I live here on your good graces, and I totally understand. I've heard about foster homes, and now that I'm emancipated, I don't know if I'm even eligible for one of those. What's that term that Mister Art used? 'Don't shit in your own nest'? I'm not doing that."

"'Nuther thing. No more than ONE passenger in the car."

"That's a state law," I said. "And along with your curfew, that's another state law. I have an intermediate license, and I can't drive

by myself between eleven at night and five in the morning.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I just told you.”

“You did. I guess, Carlie, that I leave it up to you. If you wanna go meet with friends or whatever...”

“Thank you, Bob. I note that you did not mention drugs or alcohol.”

“I’d hope I didn’t have to.”

“You don’t. I see how you’re blowin’ through that twelve-pack of Shiner you bought the other day. You ‘n’ Mister Art. TWO beers with the grilling the other day.”

“Go on, you,” he laughed. “Carlie...”

I think he started to say something, but stopped, then “You go be a normal teen. Well, maybe not ‘normal’. No crime. No angst. But you know...”

“I know, Bob,” I said. “I won’t be the one to cause problems for you. You’re great.” And I kissed his cheek before I went to bed.

Chapter 4

Bob’s turn:

Trophy-grade kid there up the hall.

Not a lay-about. When she IS laying around, there’s usually a book, either a paperback or on her iPad, involved.

She helps around the house and in the yard.

She keeps bringing home papers with great grades on them, often has herself somewhere with textbooks open, working over a homework assignment.

It’s been three weeks now. She’s gone out a few times, a Friday, a Saturday, once on a Wednesday. We talked about curfew, she doesn’t push curfew. How much of it is because she’s a good girl and how much of it is because she knows that I pay the gas? I don’t know.

But today, she’s in school. Art’s in his yard. A round of golf with some other attorneys didn’t pan out, so he was puttering around the

yard. Art and I often had synchronous putter fests, usually ending in synchronous yakking and consumption of a couple of beers apiece.

"She comes and goes," I told him of Carlie. "Good student. Decent person. Can't complain."

"Boy, you hit the lottery there. One in a million..."

"I know. Pleasant human being. Goes fishing with me. Somebody to eat with, talk with."

"You know, buddy," he said, "a thought occurs to me."

"I'm glad we're buddies," I laughed. "A thinking lawyer is seldom a good thing..."

"Oh, sure ... lawyer jokes..."

"Sorry," I laughed. "So what's on your mind?"

"Our mutual friend Carlie. I wonder if she's looked into her Grandma's legacy. Will. Insurance."

"She never mentioned it. We can ask her."

"My idea, Bob, is that YOU'RE paying her way..."

"And it's nothing, Art. A pittance. Well, the bump for the insurance, but seriously, not a problem."

"Yeah, but if she's got a little something, she might feel better."

"Art, you 'n Bekka talk to her all the time. That's a pretty happy girl."

"She does mention living off your good graces," he said.

"She's mentioned it to me a time or two. I tell her to stop worrying."

"Well, when she gets in this afternoon, maybe we can talk."

We talked. Carlie swears that her grandma was on a fixed income, but gave up as much identity information as she had.

"Let me do a little digging."

That evening, we're sitting in the living room.

"Homework ... it's mostly rote, you know."

"Repetition helps learning," I said.

"But when you already know, it's just painful."

"What're you doing?"

"Algebra."

"Horrible stuff."

"How many times do I have to factor polynomials? I get it!"

"Sorry. I got it, too. The answer's 'entirely too much' ... How about other subjects?"

"I sit there and watch the teacher go over things time after time. I get it. She goes over it time after time ... Just for the others."

"I understand. I endured..."

"D'ya still USE any of this?" she asked.

"Lots of people don't, but some of us do. Knowing the relationships between multiple factors, that's that polynomial stuff. The English, the writing part? I have to transmit findings and recommendations in clear and understandable fashion. Science? Some parts more than others, but it's a sad engineer who only knows his discipline, bereft of others. And Art. His whole life is built around words and how they apply to the world."

"But the girl tidying up the displays at WalMart?"

"Her? Maybe not so much. But I've known more than one who've slid into jobs and as they rose in rank, found out that they actually started needing some of that stuff that was just stupid to learn in high school."

"Poetry," she posed.

"Some of school's like a wine-tasting or one of those food festivals. You get to sample everything, and heaven knows, you might find something you like..."

"I do like some of it, but poetry is not exactly mainstream..."

"You know, Carlie, YOU get to decide. If you LIKE something, LIKE it for yourself. Maybe you'll find a friend or two who share your feelings about it. That helps..."

She shook her head. "The only other girl in my English class who seems

to get into it is a big whore..."

"In high school?"

"Well, maybe not in the stricter sense of the word, but, okay, slut?"

"They still have those?" I asked, trying to lighten up things.

"Oh, yeah ... Makes me wanna study sociology and psychology, just to understand why..."

"They can't figure it out either, Carlie..."

"I saw it close up with Mom," she sighed. "And I see it close up with people at school. Why?"

I shrugged. "You don't need my opinion."

"Yes, I do. I need the opinion of my friend Bob, who has NO evidence or indication of sexual profligacy in his life."

"Uh, Carlie, I'm not sure I wanna talk about that with you."

"What? Contemporary social mores? Or your history?"

"Both. Especially the last one."

"Okay. Sorry to make you uncomfortable."

"No, don't be sorry. Conversation is okay. It's just that on the first, I'm opinionated, and on the second, well ... personal. And probably why I'm opinionated."

"Then I'm pushing you out of your comfort zone," she said.

I tried to read her face, came up short. "Comfort zone?"

"Yeah. Believe me, Bob, it's outside my comfort zone, too, but I'm not getting valid data from my peers. That leaves me with what I got from Mom and from Grandma. I write off most of Mom's. Grandma's, well, delivered with love and understanding, but, just one set of data."

"I'm an adult male..."

"Most of the boys at school think they're adult males. I have doubts."

"When I was seventeen, I thought I was adult, too. And I was dealing with others I assumed were adults."

Her eyes flashed and a little smile passed across her face like a

fleeting shadow. "And therein lies the story..."

"Ain't tellin' you that story, Carlie."

"Why not?"

"You're. Well, you're that same age."

"Just the one time?"

"Oh, no, dear," I said. "One thing I did well was make the same mistake quite often."

"Now we're getting somewhere."

"I just said I didn't want to go there, lady."

"Comfort zone. "Okay, then let's switch to general terms."

"In general terms, desires mature a lot faster than the emotions to support them."

"Elaborate," she said, watching me more closely than I expected.

"Sex. The desire for sex shows up early..."

"Twelve?"

"You? I dunno about girls. Twelve's about right for me."

Enigmatic smile. "When I started my period. Pretty easy for a girl to determine."

"Not quite the same for boys, but somewhere around twelve," I said. "But that's just growing into basic reproductive capabilities. The ability to properly handle the relationships with another person – the intimacies outside of sexual function – Those..."

"Those never show up for some people," she said. "Like Mom."

"I dunno," I said. "Thought it used to be something that only the male practiced..."

"I think you're right, incrementally speaking," she said. "But I still think that more girls are still wanting something more permanent."

"I read about the 'hook-up' culture..."

"Grandma said that the Sexual Revolution was like that – 'free love' isn't the natural state of mankind. Or maybe that should be

'womankind'."

"I'm tainted by my gender," I said.

"Maybe not you in particular, but I think more guys're perfectly happy with a 'no strings attached' tumble than girls are." She looked sideways at me. "Not that there aren't plenty of girls on that list."

I gave her a look.

"I'm not one of 'em."

"I think you said that. Not that you haven't been offered..."

"'Make you some REAL muh-fuckin' money!'" she tittered. "Or do ol' Benjy for free ... Yeah ... I guess that's why I sorta soft-pedal the going out. I don't mind meeting people at the mall or whatever, but I have MY wheels, I've got MY escape hatch. And I've already dislocated one thumb at the movies."

"Dislocate a thumb?"

"Yeah ... He thought that being in the seat beside me, us talking, all that was permission for him to get his hands on my ... touch me. 'No' and a push didn't work. I guess he thought I was playing a game. I grabbed his thumb. He jerked back. Oops!"

"Ouch!" I said, subconsciously flexing my own thumb, at the same time contemplating that boy's goal. Not worth the risk to me now, but when I was her age...

"So Carlie's gotten a reputation. If I REALLY wanted to enhance it, I'd just go out with a group of girls ... After I repulsed Benjy, the rumors started. Apparently you're providing a home to an up and coming lesbian."

She watched my face. "I'd rather go with 'asexual', truth be known."

We descended further into conversation, talking about the mating game, not from a sexual vantage, but rather the investigation into compatibility and personality.

"So you've got plans for Friday and Saturday?" I asked.

"Normal stuff. Nobody's going to be in a tux, waiting for me to show up at the mall, if that's what you mean. Why?"

"I'm getting cabin fever. Was thinking of an excursion."

"Houston's a destination."

"Houston's a destination? That's like saying 'let's visit Europe...' "

She giggled. "I'm sure the Europeans would beg to differ..."

"I meant, Carlie, that there's a lot to do ... What would YOU like to do?"

"Museums. I can go to museums." She eyed me. "I assume such things are not repugnant to you."

"No, not at all. Art? Natural history?"

"Bop down to Galveston. Architecture. All kinds of stuff. You're a guy. Ship? Airplanes?"

"Seafood..."

Smile broadened. "That, too."

"Down side," I said.

"What's the down side?"

"Hotel."

"Two beds. We already wear pajamas and so far I've successfully restrained myself."

"Well, just wanted to get that out there."

"Thank you. We seem to have managed a decent relationship so far..."

"I try," I said. "Figured you had enough on your plate without having some old guy trying things..."

"You're not THAT old. And you've been nothing but proper to me."

"And vice versa, Carlie."

Two days later, Art called me.

"Yeah, buddy," I said.

"Uh, did a bit of research into our mutual waif."

"And..."

"Her grandmother was apparently very thrifty."

"How so?"

"She was living on social security survivor benefits and an annuity. The annuity's part of a legal settlement, and looks like half a million bucks. Records say she hasn't touched the principal."

"Shit!" I blurted. "I'm gonna take a bet that Carlie didn't know that."

"She couldn't have. And Bob?"

"Yeah?"

"It's Carlie's. A hundred percent. Apparently the old lady side-stepped her daughter entirely."

"Carlie said her grandmother saw her mom as a waste of money after a few tries."

"Well, there's language to put it in Carlie's name, but it's worded to where it has a board of trustees – local attorneys – and that's bullet-proof until she's eighteen. I would've shot for twenty-one, myself, but that's what's there."

"So we need to have a talk with Carlie."

"Yeah. It's complicated. We emancipated her for reasons we all agree on. If they start her with a monthly payout, allowed under the terms of the trust, she's on her own."

That's when my heart took a plunge off a high cliff.

"Uh, time's not an issue here, is it?"

"Well, no," he said quizzically. "Why?"

"Carlie and I were heading off to Houston Friday after school. Museums and such. I don't want her worrying about this stuff."

"Boy, if I was gonna worry about something, a half-million dollar trust would be high on my list."

"Me too. But I just want to let 'er be Carlie for the weekend."

Another wry look, and then he said, "I can understand that. Bekka thinks the world of 'er, you know. She's opened up to Bek about her life before her trek. Girl's a survivor."

"She's a good kid," I said.

The 'good kid' did her normal Wednesday foray, showed back up at a bit past eight, well before our agreed eight-thirty curfew.

"Oh, and the oil needs changing in the car," she said. "The display says..."

"Okay. Take the truck to school in the morning. I'll get the oil changed. We'll take it to Houston this weekend."

"We're still goin'?"

"Yeah, unless you'll miss the gang at the mall."

"Uh, lemme see ... stand around the mall, speaking inanities, or go visit museums with my best friend. Hmmm ... Whatever shall I choose?"

I just heard her say 'best friend'.

I countered her comment with "Hang out with some old guy at museums or meet exciting people my own age and do interesting stuff..."

"Yeah, I know what some of 'em's interested in. I have refused to leave the mall and go to somebody's house. 'Uh, Carlie, we got weed 'n booze 'n nobody's gonna bitch if you kinda get curled up with somebody..."

"Okay. Just checking."

"Looking forward to it."

As evidenced by carefully packing the night before, and, "Why don't you drop me off at school in the morning, then you can pick me up after school on the way out of town."

"You seem to be kind of excited about this trip."

"I am. I may not sleep much tonight, but I can sleep all the way to Houston."

"You do and I'll find a rap station on the radio..."

"You go all out on your threats, don't you?"

Plans. We had 'em. We were working them. I was waiting for her a short distance from the school when it let out. She hopped in, obviously excited. Short drive to the interstate highway, then her seat flopped back.

"What're you doing?"

"Just drive. I gotta change out of this uniform."

"Carlie!"

She was stretched across the back seat, taking off her shoes.

"Just drive. I'm okay."

She fished through her overnight bag, pulled out jeans and a blouse, set them on the seatback, then...

In the rear-view mirror, I saw her take off her uniform shirt, a pullover, then shrug into her blouse, buttoning it up.

She caught my eyes in the mirror. "You're NOT supposed to be looking, you know." Smirk. "Besides, I have bikinis that show more..."

"Yeah, but context means things..."

"Context?"

"Yeah, you already wearing a bikini, walking around the beach or the pool, that's one thing. Surprising a guy in his rear-view mirror, that's an entirely different thing."

"Ohhhh, sorry. Then don't look again."

Yeah, that works. I felt the car bounce as she rolled back on the seat, feet in the air, stripping her uniform pants off. Okay, I'm familiar with those legs. For weeks I've seen them walking around the house in shorts, or showing under the hem of her nightshirt. Again, context. Another bounce and a pair of jeans slid down them.

A bit more and she was back in the front seat beside me. "There! Is this better?"

"Your uniform isn't bad, m'dear."

"Thank you."

"Blue sets your hair off."

"Oh, you DO pay attention!"

"Difficult not to."

"You never say anything."

"Don't want you to think I'm perving on you."

"I'd never think that of YOU, Bob. What about THIS shade of blue?"

"Even better."

She carries off a 'natural, fresh-washed look' well.

The GPS took us straight to the planned restaurant for dinner.

"Imagine!" she giggled. "A Mexican restaurant in Houston, Texas..."

"This one's been around for decades. It's a stop almost every time I come to Houston."

"What's your other choices?"

"If you can't find it in Houston, nobody on the planet eats it," I said. "And we have a plan, right?"

"Plans are made to be broken, sometimes," she said. "Grandma said _envie_. That's Cajun for..."

"I know what it means."

"So if, like, we're watching a movie on TV tonight and I get an _envie_, you'll indulge me?"

"Within certain geographical limits," I said. "The weekend's yours."

The dinner was a success. "That was the absolute BEST I've ever had, from the salsa on..."

"Told you so," I said as we wended our way to the hotel.

I checked in. She stood demurely in the background, her bag at her feet. Then,

"Fourth floor. 412," I said.

Her head swiveled when we entered. "First time I've ever been in one this nice," she squealed. "Very nice!" She walked further in, dropped her bag and flopped back onto the bed. "Glorious! My own queen bed!"

Okay, for weeks I've done a pretty good job of maintaining a wall in my mind, telling myself that I was helping the person who needed help, and the fact that she was sixteen, cute as hell, female, that was of no effect. Even my frequent masturbation sessions NEVER pulled HER from my list of material.

Carlie lying on the freshly made bed, fully clothed, completely happy.

What wall? Okay, Bob. Start piling the bricks back up.

She sat up, breaking the spell.

"Shower. Me first, okay?"

"Okay."

She has a make-up case. I know that's what it is because I saw the label. Make-up? Maybe a smidge of eyeliner. Or not. She's already got eyelashes that many women envy, and I personally think she needs no enhancement. Still, the make-up case is like my own shaving kit – necessities. It goes into the bathroom with her, the door closes.

I stretch out on the bed after kicking off my shoes and socks, turn the TV on. There's fifteen or twenty minutes of water, thumps, bumps, a spate of the hair dryer, then the door opened, fragrant steam came out.

Girl has good taste in perfume.

"Let the fog clear," she said. "It got steamy."

"My beauty regimen isn't as long," I said. "And I seldom use a hair dryer."

"Smartass."

Her eyes flashed. "I'm learning ... Master."

"TV's yours. I'll be back in a bit."

A bit included a shower, slightly prolonged for a pressure relief exercise. This was NOT the night I wanted full arousal capabilities. I shaved. Aftershave of the 'you oughta buy this one. Doesn't hurt to smell nice' variety. And pajamas.

Stepping out of the bathroom did feel good. The humidity was at saturation inside there.

I noted that one, my bed covers had been turned down and two, so had hers and three, she was propped up in MY bed on a huge stack of pillows.

"Thought it'd be nice to be close to somebody this evening, since I'm missing my customary soiree at the mall," she smirked.

"Uh, Carlie, you're..."

"Snuggling with my friend. That's all. TV. Here's what's coming on.

You got your iPad. I got mine. Quiet evening together, just like at home."

"At home you're on the sofa and I'm in my recliner."

"No recliner here. I hope this is acceptable." She patted a stack of pillows. "Arrange them yourself."

I did, carefully managing the pile so there was a bit of distance between us. I think she smiled when she noticed it.

I settled in, cranked up my iPad and opened the Aubrey/Maturin novel I was reading. It didn't take long for me to find myself in the middle of Napoleonic Era intrigue on the high seas.

I don't know what she was reading, but presently, "The movie's starting. You don't mind, do you?"

"Nope. First time I ever saw you choose a romantic comedy."

"A little romance can be a good thing, I think."

Chapter 5

Carlie's turn:

Kind of brave of me, I think. I'm talking about taking Bob out of the normal surroundings, his house, his comfortable relationship with neighbors, Mister Art and Mizz Bekka, Jessica's Dad and Mom; that's Mister Chris and Mizz Jamie.

Bob's just nice to people, even when it's somebody he's probably not going to have to mess with again.

I find it especially telling when we go out to eat, something we do quite a bit.

"I get tired of my own cooking, okay?" he told me.

"Well, just so you know," I countered, "I think you cook good, and I'm NOT tired of it, so if you think you need to go out just to feed me, you're wrong again."

"Again?" he looked at me, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, friend, again. I've come to understand that in the realm of hardware, you're a very reliable source of correct information, but when it comes to what it takes to cause us a harmonious existence,

you're often wrong. You err on the side of caution."

"Thank you for that assessment, friend," he said using a stilted tone.

I giggled. "See?!? Another flaw. You get upset when confronted with your own inadequacies. Seriously, though, you're spending a lot of money on me."

"Worth it, Carlie. Just to have somebody to talk with in the evenings."

"And in the mornings," I snickered, "AFTER we each have coffee, right?"

"Oh, yeah..."

I wasn't much of a coffee drinker until Bob hooked me on the good stuff – home-roasted, freshly ground, French pressed, and on Saturday morning, taken in the screened patio area at ground level. Half the time, Art and Bekka show up. We provide coffee, she provides a coffee cake that matches the coffee like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

It CAN be a magical time if nobody's up early cutting grass, disturbing the sounds of the neighborhood slowly coming to life.

When it's just him and me, the transition into day is about reflection, soft conversation, noting the sounds of birds, watching a somewhat feral cat making his rounds, the excited yip of another neighbor's Pomeranian noting the presence of the cat while he's out on his morning constitutional.

The first time Bob urged me out for this, I thought he was crazy, but hey, the guy's giving me a place to live, so I ought to humor him. It was a revelation.

"You used to do this by yourself?" I posed to him.

"Yep. Sure did."

"And the idea of bringing me into it, you didn't think I'd mess it up?"

"Did I make a big deal out of it? Did I say this was almost a religious moment for me and you'd mess it up if you did it wrong?"

"No, I think it was more like 'grab a mug of coffee and let's go downstairs and sit'. I had no idea."

"Well, if you'd've wrecked it, I wouldn't invite you again. You didn't. You fit."

"I didn't know I was being tested," I said, pushing a little bit of huffiness.

"Life is a test, and as tests go, that one wasn't important. Some people can't sit still for very long."

"Sometimes it's nice. Quiet conversation, maybe. I like it."

I LIKE it. That's why it's the last hour of school on Friday and I'm well, 'giddy as a schoolgirl'. After all, I AM a schoolgirl, but I know that a five minute walk from school will get me the passenger seat of a two year old SUV with a guy who's going to take me off for a weekend of museums and dining.

Several of my friends asked what accounted for my apparent excitement. I told 'em 'weekend in Houston and Galveston' and avoided questions about who was accompanying me. I can't think of a way to explain how the relationship seems to work between me and Bob.

Mainly because I can't explain how the relationship works between me and Bob. I really spent a week nervous because I figured any night I was going to wake up with him touching me.

Nope.

I can't even find him staring at me, or even sneaking looks other than the eye contact that two people have when talking.

I talked with Mizz Bekka, you know, the two of us, me, sixteen, her, fiftyish, about Bob.

"I've never seen him keep a woman there overnight. Or a man either, for that matter." She shook her head. "You? I think he's serious about wanting to help, and that's all he wants. Hard to find people like that, especially men when it comes to young girls."

"Maybe he doesn't think I'm pretty or whatever."

"Hon," she said, "I know that's not it. Probably makes him even more careful about what he says or how he acts around you."

There's a quandary, you know. I have exposure to a couple hundred boys of appropriate age at high school. That's just THIS high school. At the mall with the group I interact with students from several local schools – potentially hundreds more boys, all of an age that if I were to pair off with one of them, nobody'd raise a question that they wouldn't already raise about the mating rituals of young Americans.

Not a buzz. No tinkling of bells. Nothing.

Oh, yeah, okay ... Girls're off the table for me. Yeah, kinder, gentler, gender fluid stuff? Not Carlie.

Teachers? Nope, none of them.

Just the one man I shouldn't be ... thinking about.

He likes me as a person. That's obvious. I'm very happy about that. I was sinking fast and he pulled me right up and put me on my feet, as evidenced by me being in this classroom, daydreaming and watching the clock creep towards the final bell. It finally rang. I dumped books and detritus into my locker, headed up the hall towards the door, freedom, and the weekend.

Denise was walking in the same direction. We share a class as well as home room.

"You're walkin' fast," she said.

"Gotta meet Bob at the 7-11."

"Thought you said you were goin' away for the weekend. Houston, Galveston..."

"Yep. He's my ride."

"Uh, Carlie, this ain't one of those THINGS, is it? I mean, you ... we talked a little bit."

"No, this isn't one of those things, 'Neesie. He's a nice guy, is all."

"Well, be careful, Carlie. You're a good friend."

"Thank you, Neesie. You're a good friend, too."

As we neared the parking lot of the convenience store, I pointed out Bob's SUV. Silver.

"Preferred transportation mode of child molesters everywhere," I told Neesie.

"You're not a child, Carlie. You know what I mean."

"I do, Neesie. I really appreciate you worrying. The guy's an engineer, though, and he's got a lot to lose. He has friends. Now I have friends – the neighbors. One of 'em's a lawyer. Helped me get my stuff together."

"Just be careful."

"I'll be careful."

Snicker. "Invite me to the wedding."

"You're evil, girl. No wedding."

"Better not be a baby shower, either..."

"Almost a month. He hasn't TOUCHED me. I've kissed his cheek. That's all. Wanna introduction?"

"Sure. Why not? That way I can be a witness at his trial."

"Really evil."

Walked up to Bob's window. He smiled when he saw me. Kept smiling.

"Bob, this is my friend Denise Wilkerson. Denise, this is Bob Newman. He's sorta my guardian."

"Hi, Denise," Bob said. He extended a hand. Took Denise a second but she shook it.

"Hello, Mister Bob..."

"Just Bob. That's what Carlie calls me."

"Denise and I have homeroom and English together."

"And I have a mom who uses the next parking lot up the road. She works there. Paralegal."

"Very good," Bob said.

"We'll see you later, Neesie," I said. I climbed into the passenger seat. I waved at her as we pulled away.

"How's that work?" he asked.

"'He's sorta my guardian'?"

"About like you'd expect. I'm living with you, you're single, so most people think ... She said I need to invite 'er to the wedding." I watched his face. Saw a subtle change, but I couldn't decipher it.
" ... and said it better not be a baby shower."

"Oh, yeah, that's the only reason a man and a woman live under the same roof, I guess."

"It's one of the more common ones." I started to say 'popular' but I think that portrays a different set of conditions.

"Yeah. Platonic relationships are mostly a literary device."

"Except when they aren't. But we're rare, aren't we?"

"We are."

"Rare is good. For steaks," I said.

"Are we protesting?" he asked.

"No, just thinking..."

"Thinking is sometimes good."

"I'm ... well, you and me. us. We talk, right?"

"Seems like that," he said.

"Honest, now, am I a burden?"

"Carlie, you're no burden."

"Okay. Is it better with me around?" I'm getting gutsy.

"Yes. Better. You're interesting. Good conversation."

"Nice to know. But looks..."

"Uh ... you're pleasant to look at, okay? I'm not supposed to notice."

"I noticed that you haven't said a thing about my looks since we met. I begin to think I'm inadequate."

"Definitely not inadequate. Kids your age notice. You tell me..."

"Kids!" I snorted. "Yeah, they do notice. But I see you every day, and I thought..."

"Why are we having this conversation?"

"One of my friends at school asked what this relationship was about," I said.

"Ohh-hhh," he sighed. "From the outside, it's curious, right? I mean, that ninety-eight percent of male-female living under one roof, assuming it's not some son or daughter living with a parent, there's

sex involved.”

“Seems to be the common assumption.”

“So tell me – a lot of those, uh, cohabitations...”

“Shack-ups. Friends with benefits ... Uh, there’s a phrase that I hate.”

“What phrase?”

“‘Friends with benefits’. I guess that if sex doesn’t mean anything then sharing it with a friend...” I stopped talking.

“I never said sex didn’t mean anything. Probably why I stay single.”

“You never said,” I told him.

“Looking for the right one.”

“Oh.”

“And too much of today is ‘try before you buy’. That might not be bad until you realize how long some of the goods have been on the market.”

“Yeah, I can see that point. A lot of my classmates are pretty good about giving out free samples, too.”

“Silly me,” he sighed. “I’m a relic. A dinosaur in a world of mammals. Asteroid shoulda got me.”

“Yeah ... no. Then I’d be with Marcus makin’ ‘im some real muh-fuckin’ money...”

“You LIKE that phrase...”

“Memorable,” I said. “Girl’s gotta have memorable phrases in her life, like ‘I love you’ and ‘will you marry me’ and ‘I do’ and ‘it’s a boy’. And I got ‘makin’ some real muh-fuckin’ money’.” I giggled at the change in conversational tone. “Lotsa girls don’t have that one. So I’m glad the asteroid missed.”

“Thank you. Maybe you’re the good deed that makes my life meaningful.”

“And all I had to was show up to validate your life.” I paused. “You’re kinda full of it, Bob.”

“And exactly how did you arrive at that assessment?”

“Mister Art and Mizz Bekka think highly of you. So does Jessica’s dad,

Mister Chris." I snickered just a tiny little bit. "'N Jessica says you're kinda hot for an old guy." Okay, maybe a giggle. "Says you look good when you're out jogging in those shorts."

"Yeah, I have to stop doing that," he laughed. "All those wimmen standing at their fences drooling, waiting for me to run past 'em so they can check out my ass."

Okay, Carlie, be a tiny little bit forward. "That might happen a bit more than you think." Unspoken, but just possibly implicit in the comment – I'm one of them. The guy's on the higher end of the distribution, as far as looks.

"Well, if it's the neighborhood women, they're either married or too young."

"Looking's okay," I said.

"Yeah, I guess it is. Unless somebody thinks you're perving on them."

"Is that why you don't look at me?"

"I look at you."

"When we're talking, you look at my face."

"What am I supposed to be looking at?"

"Me."

"I look at you."

"All of me."

"Well, I've done that. Counted to make sure you had two arms, two legs, two ears..."

"You're being silly."

"Okay, Carlie, you're a quite attractive young lady."

"Thank you. It's important for you to say it."

"Why?"

"I wish validation from a man who's important in my life. That would be you."

"Nice to be considered important."

"More of that bullshit, Bob. Anybody with more than a room-temperature IQ would think that another human who provided them with food and shelter is important."

He grinned. "Back to that 'it's important for you to say it' thing."

"You are. Good friend. Benefactor."

"You make it sound like something out of a Victorian novel."

"Maybe the Victorian Age had it right, Bob," I said. "This beats the daylights out of a government shelter or one of those charity-run things. I asked around at school. Got a few first-hand reports." Another little giggle. "Couple of girls said that if you were in the benefactor business, they'd've taken you up on it."

"Yeah, that's what I want – the Bob Newman Home for Wayward Girls."

"Uh, yeah ... one of 'em's five months pregnant right now. The other, well, remember that comment about givin' out free samples? She's one of those. Can't get along with 'er step-mom." I paused. "If you had a spare bedroom." Giggle. "For that matter, you might just let 'er have half of yours..."

"Oh, yeah, that's what I want."

So that's what the conversation was like all the way to Houston and straight into the restaurant he swears is a great experience.

"Go ahead, have a margarita," I told him. "One won't hurt you. If you have two, though, I'm driving to the hotel."

He got one. I got a sip.

"Kinda stout," he said.

"Uh, I have no point of reference," I said. "Grandma didn't drink, and nothing around Mom's house ... no ... They didn't exactly give me an idea that I wanted anything they did."

He was right. The food WAS good, from the chips and salsa all the way through. We're kind of relaxed here, so we shared bites off each other's plate.

"This one goes on my list," I said. "For next time."

"Oh, you're thinking there's gonna be a next time?"

"You bet. Unless you toss me out on my butt to make room for Secretia..."

"Secretia?"

"That girl I was talking about."

"Her name's Secretia?"

"No, not really. Her name's Alexis, but the story is that in addition to the happy little bounces, she's been distributing a few bugs."

"That's horrible..."

"What? That we call 'er Secretia, or..."

"That a young lady in high school is carrying VD."

"They're STDs now. VD is archaic."

"I prefer VD. An STD is a particular protective device used in older power systems."

"I'll file that in my list of useful information," I snickered.

"Don't. They're obsolescent. Modern stuff's more capable."

"A window on your world, Bob. You ought to show me some of it."

"Oh, I dunno, Carlie. Most people couldn't care less."

"Robert Newman," I hissed. "I just TOLD you I was interested."

"Okay. I know some people I can call. Get you into a utility substation. I'll tell 'em to bring an extra couple of hard hats."

"Now, see?!? Was that hard? I mean, what am I supposed to be interested in? The fry vats at Mickie D's?"

"You have a mean streak."

"I have all manner of streaks, sir. I am not a one-dimensional being."

He and the 'not one-dimensional being' parked as close to the entrance at the hotel as we could, each of us grabbing bags, me following him into the lobby.

NOW I'm getting a bit nervous. Hotel room with a man. All the stereotypes in the world, right?

It's a nice hotel. We're on the fourth floor, the room is big, airy, clean, and there are the two beds.

I turned to him. "Well, now you've done it. First time I've ever gone to a hotel with a guy..."

Part of me wanted to kiss him, just to underscore the moment, but honestly, I looked at him, tried NOT to think about what it would be like to have him hold me close and kiss me.

Where'd THAT thought come from? I mean, I DO have daydreams, even fantasies, about a man holding me, caressing me, making me feel...

This is the first time there's been a face on them.

One thing about it, I'm quite used to seeing Bob in his pajamas and he's used to seeing me in my nightshirt, so that part's just, well, normal, after we both showered. Almost. Dammit! He smells good.

Of course, I put a little of my own cologne on. Just as well, after all, HE paid for it.

TV. Laminated card with a list of channels. He tossed that and the remote at me. "You choose."

Giggle. "Lifetime Network, here we come!"

"Go ahead. Some of those battered women're HOT!"

"That's just WRONG!" I squealed. "Watchin' Lifetime for the titties..."

"Didn't say nothin' 'bout no titties," he retorted. "Dammit, Carlie, we're sleeping in the same room. Don't get me to thinking about titties!"

I had to smile. I started the day wondering if he paid attention at all. Now I know that not only does he pay attention, but he doesn't WANT to pay attention.

I'm not a tease. Never have been, and I am NOT going to start being a tease with this guy, the most wonderful man I've ever met.

Did I just say that?

Yes. I did.

I was propped up on pillows on my bed, flipping through channels.

"Horrible choices," he mumbled.

"Yeah, I know ... Here we are in Houston, Texas, as American as we can

be, and the best thing on TV's the BBC."

"Naw," he sighed. "It's all GOOD stuff. We're just weird."

"Me and my weirdo benefactor," I replied. "Hey, d'ya have a deck of cards?"

"Yeah."

"Rummy." We played a few games on the odd evening.

"Okay." He got up, rummaged through his bags, came back with the cards.

I plopped down on his bed. Smirked bigly. "Well, now you've finally got me in your bed."

"Carlie..."

"Oh, lighten up. You're not like this."

"Nervous."

"Why?"

"You're young..."

"Age of consent. Worst they could do is look at my driver's license and then high-five you."

"You really do have an evil streak."

"That's one of the reasons you're fascinated by me."

"I am, you know," he said as he dealt the cards. "You're a very pleasant surprise of a sixteen year old girl."

"And you're a surprise for a grizzled old meteor-dodging dinosaur," I returned. I watched his face. "What? I was supposed to forget what you said?"

When we turned the lights out, I didn't go to sleep as fast as he did. I could hear his even breathing. Comforting sound.

Me? Mind going like marbles in a blender. What's happening to me? Oh, I know what's happening. But it's supposed to be about one of the guys I met at school or at the mall, not a guy who rescued me from a bus station.

And how would it look? I mean, it's got 'sugar daddy' written all over

it. I haven't got two nickels of my own to rub together. 'She's with him because he pays for everything in her life. All she's gotta do is sleep with 'im.'

I can't be that.

Go to sleep, Carlie.

Oh, maybe THAT will help. And now, guess whose face shows up, smiling.

Chapter 6

Still Carlie's turn:

First time THIS ever happened. I woke with the light leaking into a hotel room, looked over into the bed next to mine and saw a MAN there.

He's mostly asleep, I think, laying on his side facing towards me, hugging a pillow to his chest.

I can be still for a bit, and I do that, just sort of studying.

Hugging a pillow. I find myself just a little bit jealous of that stupid pillow.

Oh well ... ease out of bed silently, pad to the bathroom, relieve pressures, wipe my face with a warm washcloth, turn around, jump out of my skin because he's standing there.

"You startled me," I said.

"Heard the water running. Kinda triggers some processes."

"Lemme get out of here," I said, stepping out, closing the door behind me. I heard the 'process' that was triggered.

He came out. "Bathroom's yours. I'll get dressed out here."

I grabbed my day's jeans and blouse, shut the door behind myself, donned them, opened my makeup bag, which is woefully bereft of makeup. Hairbrush. Perfume, just a little ... Grandma said 'just a hint, baby.'

I brushed my teeth. Looked at the girl in the mirror. Gonna need a trim of my hair in a week or two. It's touching my collar. I like it short. Brush, brush, brush ... Shake my head. Brush some more. Straighten my bangs. Open the door.

He's sitting on a chair pulling his socks on.

My turn to do the same. Five minutes, we're dressed, bags packed, and out the door.

Breakfast is at a little diner. I miss OUR coffee, but this is good enough. We drag around a bit before hitting the first of the day's museums.

Art. It's a personal thing, a person's tastes. We looked at a lot, talking quietly between ourselves, finding that he appreciates realism over abstraction. Surprise. Practical Bob.

We're looking at an abstract painting.

"I can't get my head around that," he said.

I smiled. "Dude walked into his studio one morning. Thought 'Speckles. I think I'll do speckles. Now, what colors do I have left?'"

He smiled at me. "And somebody calls it 'art'."

So yeah...

Lunch at a hole in the wall restaurant, then the _Museum of Natural History_ and that's just the place you want to go with a polymath engineer.

Wasn't hard to notice that another couple along with their kids caught our conversation and started tagging along. Next thing I knew, the kids're asking questions of Bob. He looked to their parents.

"I hope you don't mind," the dad said. "Katherine and I are schoolteachers. We're getting educated today along with Devon and Laila."

"Please, I don't mind at all," Bob said. "I just don't want to come off as a know-it-all ... Engineer, by the way ... Bob Newman. My friend Carlie..."

We exchanged handshakes.

'Another couple'. That makes US the first couple. Interesting thought, there, Carlie. Let's look at the dinosaurs.

Five o'clock, we're headed south to Galveston.

"We're pushing too hard, Bob," I said. "Either of those museums, I could've spent a whole day. Or more..."

"If it's YOUR thing, this doesn't have to be the last time," he told me. "I didn't want to drag you through something you didn't really like..."

"Maybe it's a matter of discovering what I like. Never been to a REAL museum like these..."

"I like 'em. Just sometimes it's kinda sad to go by myself. If it's YOUR thing..."

"I think I'd like to explore more..." I looked at the little smile on his face. I'm discovering another facet of this guy. And me.

Galveston. Seafood restaurant that was really good. So was the view of the Houston Ship Channel, one of the busiest waterways in the country. After our meal we walk out on the wharf and watch together.

Yeah ... I see it as 'together'. Standing side by side. Not too close.

And then another hotel room. I could like this.

"It's a lot of money, Bob," I tell him after we've checked in.

"Same amount of money if I came here by myself," he said. "But I wouldn't do that, because it's just kind of sad doing things like this ... Just like that meal. I enjoy good food, but having a friend to share it with, that's two or three orders of magnitude better."

"Orders of magnitude?"

"Factors of ten," he told me. "Thousand times better with you..." I think he caught himself. "With a friend."

I looked at him. "Me?"

"Yep. It's great being here, doing things with you, if it's things YOU enjoy..."

"I am enjoying myself, Bob," I said.

Half a movie on TV after we took our showers. Dammit! Aftershave, cologne, whatever it was, he smells great, face a little red from shaving, sitting there on his bed in his pajamas challenging me to a few hands of rummy again.

That's TWO nights ... I'm definitely in the arena of wanting him and my logical side is telling me all the things wrong with that idea.

I'm half his age. That's a pretty big one.

I'm broke. I can just see people thinking that the reason I'm with Bob is that I was hopelessly broke and I saw him as a sugar daddy. Distribute a little of the nookus, get a place to live, with amenities ... he's already given me full use of the car. Or the truck. Run of his house. Come and go as I please.

Bob wouldn't buy that. Shouldn't buy that. I can't do that to him. 'Benefactor', okay? Carlie, push the thought out...

Sleep. Waking. This time he's first out of bed. I'm hopping on one foot when the bathroom door opens and he comes out.

"Move! Emergency!" and I push past him. Bathroom. Door shut. Sit. Ahhhhhhh. Then a tingle because I rubbed against him.

Okay, Carlie. Cool yourself.

Breakfast again. We're loaded up for the trip home when we leave the hotel.

"If it weren't for school, I could spend a week doing this." Then, "I guess I need to cool it. I'd run you broke."

"You're not gonna run me broke, Carlie, and I've been hanging around the house looking for a bit of incentive to get out and do what we're doing."

"You sure?"

"Sure sure."

We took a big scenic loop around the city, coming back up the street along the seawall, heading for Moody Gardens, our museum for the day.

"Stop, Bob. Park."

"Sure. Why?"

"I wanna get out and look..."

"Okay."

We parked. First time here for me. Standing on the sidewalk at the top of the seawall, looking out over the Gulf of Mexico. Off in the distance I could see ships, some of them anchored, some heading off, some coming in, and I could feel the stiff, damp Gulf breeze hitting my face, when I was set upon by a roar.

I twisted, looking. Big old twin-engined plane, clawing for altitude, then swinging right, looping back around.

"Mygawd, what's that?"

"World War Two bomber. B-25," Bob said.

"Seriously?"

"Absolutely. Lone Star Flight Museum."

"Where?"

"Used to be right back on the road to Moody Gardens. Dunno what that ol' guy's doing here."

"Forget the penguins, Bob. I gotta see THAT!"

"Seriously?"

"You don't want to?"

"No, I really do, but..."

"But what? I'm a girl and that stuff's not gonna interest me?"

"Well..."

I tossed a little attitude into my tone. "We've been living under the same roof for weeks. Haven't you paid ANY attention, Bob? I AM interested in things. Mechanical things. Electrical things. Technology."

"Okay, then ... Let's go look at aviation history."

We DID that. Drive back towards Houston, destination Ellington Field. History. Up to my gills. Form and function has a beauty of its own. State of the art – 1942. All aluminum and iron and Bob's a history buff and I am his acolyte.

Fascinated is a good word. Things I saw and read about in books are more alive when I see the machines in front of me.

We looked. Asked questions. Talked with a couple of guys working on a restoration.

They go all the way from a B-17 bomber to a Piper Cub – TWO of those, one in the color known in the aviation community as 'Cub Yellow' and another in the olive drab of the World War Two Army service livery.

I caught Bob's smile. "That's more my speed."

I can tell when a person's eyes light up. Lit, were his.

"You could have one. Or maybe something just a little newer and faster. I mean, look. Two people and twenty pounds of luggage. Two hundred miles, and if you fly along the Interstate, you'll get passed up."

"Baby doll," he said, "sometimes the journey IS the destination."

'Baby doll?' He really IS happy to let THAT slip out.

"Wait?!? Do you know how to fly a plane?"

"I haven't been at the controls since my first job out of college, but yes, I do. Did."

"That's a piece of knowledge you haven't given me."

"Subject never came up. I also am classified by the NRA as 'expert' class rifleman. What else? Let me think."

"Now you're being smart..."

"No, not really. I've lived a lot of years, done a lot of things. Some I kept up, some I didn't."

"Okay," I said. I pulled my iPad from my backpack and started a search.

"What're you doing, Carlie?" he asked, eyeballing me as we drove.

"Google search."

"For what? Or should I even ask?"

"J-3 Cubs."

"Carlie..."

"Bob ... killin' time."

"Okay."

Doesn't take long to frame some data, you know.

"Bob?"

"Yeah, sweetie?"

"Got fifty thousand sitting around?"

"Dollars?"

"No, silly! Avocados. I want a really BIG guacamole..."

He snorted. "Good one.! What's fifty thousand get me?"

"Ninety percent of the Cubs on the market. Maybe more. They start at the mid to upper twenties."

"And why would we want that?"

"Wings."

"You ever see a Cub? Fly a Cub?"

"Well, no. I thought that was something YOU would show me."

"I haven't flown in years."

"If you were gonna start again, what'd you have to do?"

"Go get a physical. Find an instructor, get checked out again. Renting planes is expensive these days."

"Oh. I have no idea..."

"Neither do I. Have to call around."

"You'd do it?"

"Might look into it. Why not?"

"Could be fun."

"It'd have to be fun. There's not a lot of practical use to it."

"So," I countered, "like skateboarding..."

"More useful than that."

"Like a skateboard you could share with a friend and go places..."

"If you don't mind going slow and ending up at some little airport on the edge of town with your twenty pounds of luggage."

I giggled. "Next weekend. Me and you. Twenty pounds of total luggage."

"Oh, so you DO want to do another weekend like this?"

"Of course. I had a wonderful time."

We stopped midway through the trip home for lunch. Iconic Texas _Whataburger_. Then home early afternoon, hit the house and took care of business, retired to share Mister Art's barbecued ribs and Mizz Bekka's baked beans and potato salad.

Lots of good conversation. I brought up the choice of Galveston museums which lead to conversations about Bob flying. We stayed there chatting until after twilight, then went back into the house.

Time to do some reading, okay?

I thought that the age of consent was sixteen. It's not. Not here in Louisiana. Not over in Texas. It's seventeen. And my flippant remark about cops high-fiving Bob if he'd been caught having sex with me, well, they'd've been handcuffs.

Emancipated, my current status? I don't see where it makes a difference. Stupid. A number tied to a calendar, and things change when I turn seventeen. Which is a month away.

I'm still a virgin, and in this state if I choose to give up that status, I make somebody a felon.

I don't think Bob should be a felon, and I just realized that I actually conceded to myself that he was more than the face to add to my nightly fantasy.

So amid thoughts of him and me in a yellow Cub over the countryside in South Louisiana, I'm running a program to develop a plan. What do I have to do to get THIS guy? What's he like? What do I have to be?

What do I change?

Answer better be 'nothing'. Should just be me and let him be him and if it's meant to be, then there will be a time when HE realizes that it's supposed to be.

Go to sleep, Carlie.

Alarm goes off in the morning. I have the hall bathroom. He has one off his bedroom. I hit mine, he hits his, then he's in the kitchen, doing pancakes and that means I get to do the coffee.

Easy. Beans in the hopper, water into the reservoir of his coffeemaker, fresh ground coffee into the filter, then put the carafe into position.

Coffee's ready for after the pancakes. Breakfast sitting across from

one another, me in my school clothes, him in shorts and a pocketed T-shirt.

And I'm off. I beep in front of Jessica's house, she's right out and hopping in.

"How was your special weekend?" she asked.

"Great! Art museum. Natural sciences museum. Aviation history museum. Couple of GREAT restaurants..."

"What about HIM?!?" Jess pushed. "Details..."

"Benefactor, Jess," I told her. "I'm serious. No hand-holding. No kissing. No making out. No hooking up. Nothing but the kinds of things that a couple of friends do."

"In the same hotel room for two nights ... He's gotta be gay."

"He's not gay, Jess..."

'Not gay' and I slipped back into the routine. I came home on Tuesday, found him at his desk, tapping away at his keyboard.

Okay, Carlie. Measured escalation. I came up behind him, put an arm around him from behind, gave him a little kiss.

Startled him, I think.

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Making money. Former employer asked if I'd clean up and revise some specifications. That's easy enough. Don't want to get bored." He paused. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"That hug and kiss..."

"Just a 'thank you'. For the weekend. For everything else. You're something, Bob."

"He smiled. "You're something, too, Carlie. Let me save this file. We have to go do something."

"What?"

"Art did a little checking on your grandmother's estate. He asks that we meet him at his law offices."

"Uh ... okay..."

Now I'm running through memories. 'Grandma's estate' sounds official. I didn't know Grandma had anything but Grand-dad's survivor's pension and social security. It was plenty enough for us because her little house was paid off and she espoused a thrifty lifestyle.

I dropped my backpack on the end of the sofa and shook my head to rearrange my hair. Reached in the backpack, pulled out a brush, ran it through my tresses, put it up. Turned.

Bob was almost staring.

"I'm ready. Let's go."

We got in the car, headed out. I shouldn't laugh, but I need to get into the habit of pushing the seat back after I drive. We're severely different sizes.

On the road.

"So what'd he tell you?"

"He didn't tell me much, Carlie. That he had some research done, found some things..."

"I didn't think there was much, Bob. Grandma and I – you know the term 'austere'?"

"Yeah."

"She wasn't quite there, but thrifty, careful. Social security. Grandpa's pension was set up with a survivor benefit. Said they made do with less while he was alive so it'd keep going after he passed on."

Into the older part of the bigger nearby city, where it's obviously an older upscale neighborhood. Mister Art's office is a converted wood-frame house, a BIG house, now a law office. We present ourselves to the receptionist.

"Let me show you into the conference room," she said. "And I'll get Mister Aucoin to meet you." She pronounced his name properly – 'Oh-kwan'.

Nicely put together collection of a big table and well-upholstered chairs. The walls were wainscoted, and one wall was the stereotypical volumes of law books, just like in the movies.

Mister Art walked in, shook Bob's hand, hugged me in a grandfatherly

fashion. First time I ever saw him in a suit. He caught my covert stare.

"See, Carlie darlin'. I can clean myself up."

"You look really good, Mister Art. Very professional. Inspires confidence," I smiled. "I see why Mizz Bekka hangs around."

Premeditated. Kinda want to toss little snippets about relationships around in the presence of Bob. Yeah, it's not much of a plan, but it's a plan, nonetheless.

"Sit down," Mister Art said. "Carlie, let's talk."

"Yessir," I said with some small amount of trepidation. I was thinking, though, that nothing in this room would hurt me or make my situation worse. Bob in handcuffs would make things worse, but that wasn't this.

"I had one of my assistants look into your grandmother's estate, Carlie. We found quite a bit of information. She kept good records through a family attorney over in your hometown."

"We never talked about that stuff, sir," I said.

"I can understand that. Her attorney's somebody I knew from law school at LSU. We talk from time to time. He's got a great goose lease in south Louisiana."

He watched my face. I don't know if I'm okay with hunting. Fishing's okay, but hunting...

He continued. "Joe Landry's one for taking notes and your Grandma went into some detail about how she wanted things in her estate set up. You weren't let in on a lot of it because your grandma was trying to protect YOU from your mom – her daughter. She told him that if her daughter got any money, she'd blow through it on herself."

"That's Mom," I said.

"So the way things were set up, you were supposed to get this package of papers when your grandma passed away. Apparently you didn't."

"No, sir."

"That's okay. You should've been curious. I guess your grandma thought that if you knew, though, you'd leak it to your mom..."

"Maybe so. I got to where I didn't tell Mom anything, though."

"Your grandmother worried, Carlie. But she wanted to make sure you could survive. So..." he pushed a paper towards me. Columns of numbers.

"There's a little life insurance policy. You're the beneficiary. There's the house. You're the heir. He has a record of the last appraisal. Not much, but something..."

"Little house in an older neighborhood. It's past its prime. So's the neighborhood."

"Looks like eighty to a hundred K there. If you sell it."

"No reason to keep it, sir. I figured it'd go to Mom."

"Something needs to be done right now about it. Unoccupied."

"Let me and Bob figure out how best to do that..."

He eyed Bob. Bob wasn't acting surprised, so ... He KNEW!

Mister Art continued. "You're eligible for social security survivor benefits. Your grandma was your legal guardian and no paperwork was filed when she died. You're due that as long as you're a minor child. You're due a lump sum, uncollected, then a monthly check. I'll get my associate to work with you on that."

I'm NOT broke, leaning on Bob to put food in my mouth. I looked at Bob.

"I can offer to cover my expenses, Bob..."

He smiled enigmatically. "You already do, darlin'. Pure joy having you around."

Mister Art's eyes twinkled. "Uh, now, here's the surprise, Carlie. Last line."

I took a studied look at the page before me. A lot of digits on that last line. Seven of them. And a decimal place. And a couple of zeroes.

"Ol' Toejam, that's what we called Joe in college, he was your grandma and grandpa's family attorney for decades. He sent them to a friend who was an investment advisor. Your grandparents were savers, Carlie. They saved, they invested, they accumulated, all their lives. I dunno what they were waiting for..."

"Retirement," I said. "Grandma said they wanted to travel after he retired. He ... lung cancer ... I asked her about travelling. She said that she just couldn't see herself looking at those things without him

right there beside her."

"You know, Carlie, that's noble. Kind of sad, though. I always thought that if I left before Bekka, she'd still see the sunrise like we do, and she'd know I was there with her anyway."

That caused me a tear. I loved my Grandma.

"But right there, sitting in the bank ... well, not a bank, but you know ... There's about two million dollars. I have the copies of the terms of the trust she put it in, Carlie, just in case you were still a minor when she passed on. You were to get a monthly distribution based on advice of Ol' Toejam..."

I snickered. "That's a HORRIBLE name."

"Darlin'," he said, "college boys are not noted for sensitivity. I can't tell you what they called me."

"Tell me. Ain't nothing I haven't heard." I looked at Bob. Another thing he knows, apparently. He tried to hide a smirk.

"Bull-pussy," Mister Art said. "I was big and strong, but one day I got a splinter under a toenail and went to the doctor..."

"That's pretty bad," I said. "I can't imagine Mizz Bekka using it at tender moments."

"Bob, didn't you teach 'er respect for elders?" he laughed.

"Haven't had enough time. 'Sides, now that she's a woman of independent means..."

I shook. It's true.

"And," Mister Art continued, "We sort of derailed things when we emancipated you, Carlie. Since you're not officially a minor, the terms of the trust are under question. A case can be made to abrogate the language and allow you access to the entire amount. I'd advise, though..."

"Not to run wild..." I inserted.

"Yes. Don't. You don't NEED it. It's there. You seemed perfectly happy to get along with what you and Bob are doing."

Flopped back against the chair. "Oh, poor Bob. All that he's spent on me..."

"And if you didn't have a dime to your name..." Bob started.

"Which I didn't, as far as I knew," I posited.

" ... I'd happily keep doing it. Maybe from a Piper Cub..."

Yellow wings glinting in the sunshine.

And Carlie's NOT in need of a sugar daddy.

Chapter 7

7

Bob's turn:

First step to recovery is admitting that you have a problem.

I admitted it to myself before, reinforced it after this past weekend. I like having Carlie around.

Check that. I LOVE having Carlie around. To the point that a week ago, BEFORE we found out about her financial situation, I turned down a six-month overseas contract.

I told myself that it was because most of the overseas venues, now in sub-Saharan Africa, were less and less secure with each passing day.

The real reason is, 'where would that put Carlie?'

It's not like I HAVE to work right away, and even more, I don't have to chase the dollars that go with those overseas contracts. Money's just money. Carlie, on the other hand...

Dammit, it would be entirely different if she wasn't, well, CARLIE. I could've left a druggie or a slut-puppy or some other version of a teen horror to the tender mercies of the state. Hell, she's emancipated. She gets to make her own choices.

Trouble is, she IS who she is, and she's intelligent and pleasing to look at and to deal with, and while before she showed up, I thought myself satisfied with my mostly solitary life, now...

She goes out. Usually one night during the week, home by nine, and one night on the weekend, with a curfew of eleven PM. She never has pushed those limits.

Me, on the other hand, I find that I am not reacting well to the newly-found experience with solitude. What was formerly quiet and

relaxing was now fuel for loneliness.

I was ready, at least in my own mind at first, to provide shelter until she got on her feet, got through school, thought vaguely that she'd meet somebody, marry, move away, not necessarily in that order.

This weekend, though ... so pleasantly surprised at her reaction to museums, even more surprised that she passed on the penguins at Moody Gardens to go look at aviation history, even more surprised when she went off the deep end over, of all things, a Piper Cub.

"Get one," she said.

And I'm thinking that if she wants me to get one, then she's thinking of being around to benefit...

So. Friend? Quasi-daughter? What?

Well, one thing is apparent – I need not be concerned that she'd be shelterless and starving without my help now.

I knew about it in a vague way before the weekend. Now she knows.

Windfall. Now let's see what she does about it.

We're driving home from Art's law office.

"You're not talking." I glanced over at her. Tears.

"Baby?" I blurted.

"Oh, Bob ... she took CARE of me. I had no idea..."

"And you're crying?"

"I miss 'er, Bob. She was my rock. My anchor. She left, my world caved in. Mom ... what a disaster. Mom hadn't a clue about Grandma's finances, and now ... Grandma knew better..."

Sniff. "You called me 'baby'."

"I know. Reflex. Protective instinct. Whatever. I sort of felt the need to take care of you..."

"You've been doing that, Bob."

"I saw that you needed ... I could provide. It's worked out well, money or no money..."

"So do I have move out now? Get a place of my own?"

Here's where it can go off track.

"I'd really rather you didn't, Carlie."

"How long do you want me to stay?"

I took a deep breath. "Forever works..."

"Seriously." She gave me a stern look.

"Look, Carlie. Now that I know you have enough money so that you won't starve if I scare you off, I can tell you. I really like having you around. Really. If you stay the same Carlie that's shared my universe for the last few weeks, I want you to keep doing that."

"You mean, like friend slash daughter slash whatever?"

"Yeah."

"You're good with that?"

We got out at the house, walked upstairs and inside.

"You didn't answer."

Carlie's turn:

His head bobbed. "I'm good with that. You're sixteen, emancipated or not, what would you do if you weren't here?"

I sighed. "Sit in an empty apartment wishing I was here."

"So stay."

"I'll stay. You're inexplicable, Bob. I ain't sure what to do about you."

"In what way?"

"Bunches of ways. I like what we have, though. But male and female is complicated, sometimes I feel like a bubble balancing on a razor blade."

"How so?"

"Bob, you're male and I'm female. Sometimes I feel this tension..."

"About me?"

"Yes, about you, Bob."

"I'm twice your age."

"I'm excellent at math. I'm sixteen, you're thirty-two. In sixteen years, I'll be thirty-two, you'll be forty-eight. Only thirty-three percent older. It only gets better."

"Better for what?"

"This, silly." And I kissed him.

The girl's supposed to be the one all upset and frightened. I guess I did it wrong. He looked scared. I still had my arms around him, his were loosely around me, he wasn't pushing me away.

Silent.

"Bob?"

"Yes, Carlie."

"You okay?"

"Very confused now, Carlie."

"Don't be. I tried to be unambiguous."

"I tried to be disconnected, aloof, friendly. Correct. Protective."

"Your arms just added a layer of comfort and protection, Bob. I know that's what you are. Protective."

"One of the things I need to protect you from is me."

"Bob, that kiss was because I want you to know that I am not here because you provide food and shelter. Now, I can provide for myself. I'm here because I LIKE being here. I like having you in my life. You reek stability and safety and assurance."

"Boring ol' Bob," he said, although I really don't think he believes that.

"Not boring. Very interesting and mature best friend. Can you live with that?"

"Does it mean I get to live with you?"

"It does." I had a little smile on my face. Maybe a hint of smugness?
"Yeah."

No commitment. I kinda got ahead of myself with the kiss, but I don't want this to go off track here, and I'm working very hard to determine how the track is supposed to work.

I don't want to come off as cold and calculating, but as I see myself, I have made a decision on a goal, and I must take steps to gain that goal. I know that it's a two-way street. It has been, so far in our relationship. I never made him feel like he was carrying me, other than the obvious financial angle. I found it easy to relax and be natural with Bob. He's got a sense of humor that I can identify with. He's intelligent, an excellent conversationalist, well-read, likes his history.

Like me.

I'm basically a sixteen-year-old Bob. With girl parts.

I know something. If I did what I think is inevitable and did not pay heed to the time line, he'd be guilty of a felony.

Yes, I admit it. I see myself in Bob's bed, which will then, by that act, become OUR bed.

And I don't see me being Bob's teeny-bopper shack-job.

The mission then is to make HIM see US as inevitable and desirable.

By the end of the week I was the possessor of paperwork identifying MY personal bank account and investment accounts that made me one of those evil rich people.

Just like Bob.

Behind me was the last time that I will go out with my friends. Wednesday evening when I left, I could read something in his face. When I got back, I noted a change for the better.

We went fishing on Saturday. All day. Caught a few. Talked, because that's what's good about fishing when you don't work at it.

"Bob, I'm rich."

"I suppose you could say that. If you played your cards right, you could live off that nest egg, unless the stock market does something stupid."

"Personal question. Is mine bigger than yours?"

He gave me a wry grin, catching the double entendre. "We're in the

same ballpark.”

“Why are you working? Those documents...”

“Design and construction standards,” he said. “Because I need to think about it to keep my skills up.”

“Oh.”

“And I enjoy it.”

“Oh. So...”

“Not going back to Africa, Carlie. That last one was THE last one.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. Didn’t have a reason NOT to do that,” he said. “Money was good. Interesting. But the political situations are getting more and more questionable. I didn’t have a reason to stay here. Art and Bekka were always waiting for me to come back, but they’re good friends. Now I sorta don’t want to leave...”

“What’s changed?”

“Just told you. Politics.”

“Is that all?” I’m pushing. Might be too soon.

“No.”

“What then?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Kinda want to be here for you.”

Okay, Carlie, a careful nudge. See where it goes. “For me. Not with me.”

“There’s a difference?” he asked.

“Is there?” I replied.

“Obtuse little thing, ain’t you?”

“If I can’t be obtuse with my best friend...”

"Okay, let us say you win. I want to be around here because you're here, and the very thought of packing my bag and taking off for a few months where you wouldn't be is not pleasant."

"You LIKE me."

"I like you."

"We look weird together, you know," I said. Just a little poke. See where it goes.

"Yeah ... when people find out I'm not your dad or your uncle. Together? Are we together?"

"What do you think?"

"Yeah, Carlie, part of me thinks we're together."

"What do the other parts think?"

"That I'm riding for a fall, that you're too young, teens're notoriously flighty..."

"Speaking of flight..."

"Flight, as in I wake up one morning to an empty house or..."

"Flight, as in yellow wings pattering along over the marshlands..." I sighed, reeling in my line to check the bait. "That other ain't happening. You have to throw me out. I worry too, you know..."

"What do you worry about?"

"You'll get a phone call from some old girlfriend, you'll bump into somebody that meets your eye in line at the grocery store ... And there's not room in your life for me AND your new age-appropriate prospective mate. I talked with Mizz Bekka. She admits they've set you up a few times."

"She did try," He said. "None of 'em were what I wanted. First, I was still doing my traveling thing. Second, every one of 'em came with kids from previous marriage or youthful indiscretions, sometimes both. Third, there was no commonality of interests. Of course, that's hard to do when you're over-compensating two kids by different daddies..."

"Oh. I see."

"You showed me more Saturday and Sunday when you didn't think I was watching than your words told me. And your words matched what I saw."

Now this is a development. "So I'm in competition with all those other women?"

"No competition. Both ways."

"Both ways?" I queried.

"Both ways. First, in the fashion that there is no contest going on with me as the prize. Second, that you'd be in a class all your own if there was."

"Separate class, like I'm the kiddie car on the Indy track?"

"Other way around. Some guy's gonna be lucky when he gets you. If 'gets' means 'understands and knows the person he's getting', not 'gets' as in, well, any other way."

I noted my line was straight and moving slowly. "Darned crabs," I said.

"We oughta gather a couple dozen and boil 'em," he said. "Messy to eat, but damned well worth it."

Giggle. "Did I change the subject, or did you?"

"No subject, Carlie. Truth? I want you around."

"Uh ... in what way?"

"You're too young for me to marry or anything else. I looked. Thought it was sixteen here. Ain't. It's seventeen now."

Inside, the inner me was jumping up and down saying 'he LOOKED because he wants ME'.

"I know. I looked, too."

"Why'd YOU look?" he asked.

"Same reason you did. To see who was legal. You're right."

"I know."

"Did you stop to think that I might not be amenable to such a thing?"

"There hasn't been a day that I haven't asked myself that."

"I know," I repeated. "I actually thought I'd be accosted the first night I was here, but when the first thing you did was introduce me to Mister Art and Mizz Bekka, I started thinking that maybe I was wrong."

I trusted you. Still do."

No fish. We went back in. That's okay. I think I'm catching something more valuable than dinner.

Puttering back across the little bay from our fishing spot, the outboard's too loud for conversation, so we're both alone in our thoughts. We pulled the boat out of the water, stowed the motor in the dockside box, then walked to the house carrying tackle boxes and rods.

"What was that conversation about, darlin'?" he asked.

"About me changing status from 'random rescued waif' to 'darlin'.'"

"You want that change?"

"I want what we've got. Friendship. Understanding."

"So basically, nothing changes..."

"Except," I pointed out, "we've established that we like each other a whole lot and this is essentially a permanent relationship."

"That's awfully close to marriage."

I smiled at him. "In marriage, the husband would have brought home bacon. Or fish. No fish. Marriage is on shaky ground."

"I have cheese, home-made bread. Soup."

"And that's supposed to be a substitute for fresh fish?"

"Sometimes we must bear burdens."

Inside the house, door closed behind us. I kissed him again.

"Are you going to make a habit of that?"

"I might."

"It's not fair, Carlie."

"Why?"

"Because I tried very hard NOT to think of you like that."

"It's a kiss, Bob."

"What's it mean?"

"People kiss all the time, Bob." He looks confused. Probably needs a hug.

I hugged him, one of those friendly 'Hi! How ARE you?' hugs.

"Dammit, Carlie..."

"C'mon. Let's get something going for dinner. I didn't see our neighbors' car. We'll do our own thing."

We put dinner behind us, a simple meal of grilled cheese sandwiches and soup.

"American quesadillas," Bob observed.

"Never looked at it that way, but you're right."

We cleaned the kitchen up together. He was silent. I'd say 'strangely silent', but I did this to him.

"I'm going to take my shower," he said.

"Me, too. Put that aftershave on that I helped you buy."

He looked at me quizzically as he left.

Half an hour later I'm back in the living room wearing my long night shirt, a towel around my wet hair.

He was sitting there with his laptop.

"Whatcha looking at?"

"Airplanes."

I squealed inside.

He closed his laptop. "You and me, we need to talk some more."

"Ohhhhh, serious..."

"It is, Carlie. Forever's a long time."

"I know."

"You can't tease me like you're doing."

"I'm not trying to tease you, Bob."

"Kissing. Hugging."

"I suppose that sitting on the chair looking at airplanes with you is out of the question, then..."

"Carlie..." he sighed, exasperated.

"I did that stuff because first, you're safe and attractive. Second, I ... I wanted some physical contact. I mean, I could get that easy enough, but forgive me for being picky about the source."

"I am not sure if you realize the limits of MY self-restraint, Carlie. On a purely physical level, you're very easy to lust after."

"That, sir, is the most clinical manner of saying 'you're cute' that I've ever heard."

"You know what you are."

"Wondered if YOU noticed."

"Trying not to give in to my baser instincts. You're vulnerable. I'd be a dog if I took advantage of you..."

Let's see if he can shift gears. "Did you find any?" I said.

"Huh?"

"Airplanes..."

"There's one that looks good in Texas, off southwest of Houston."

"Show me."

He opened his laptop. I perched precariously on the arm of his chair, leaning into him.

He sighed.

I shouldn't've giggled, but I did.

"You ... why are you pressing this?"

"I love you..." There. It's out. Words don't retract.

"You..."

"I love you, Bob. You're a good guy. Not unattractive. Not stupid. Civilized. Mature. And since I'm living with you, loving you sort of validates the reasons I've chosen this path."

"I love you back, you know."

"I know. Now that we've crossed that bridge, show me the airplane."

If you've seen one Piper J-3, you've seen most of them. Cub yellow with a black accent. Funny-looking front end because the cylinders of the engine are hung out in the breeze to cool. Fat little tires.

This is one of those. Lots of pictures. Looks like it came out of the factory last year.

We read the specifications. Yep! It's a Cub. No electrical system. The sole concession to modernity is that it says it has an external antenna for a portable handheld radio.

"So?" he said, turning his face towards me.

"Buy it for us."

"Us..."

"You and me. Partners. Forever. You already know how to fly. I will learn. And we'll have this thing tying us together..."

"Fifty-five thousand dollars..."

"If you don't buy it, I will..."

"One of us is supposed to have good sense, Carlie."

"Bob, Bob, Bob," I sighed. "I've been here for weeks. You haven't seen me as extravagant..."

"You thought you were spending MY money. Now you've got your own..."

"I wasn't raised that way, Bob. I don't know what your financial picture is, but I get the impression that it's good, seeing as how you travel around the countryside rescuing waifs and orphans. You don't seem to waste money or you wouldn't have that boat or that car or that truck or this house."

"But fifty thousand on a toy..."

"Something for us, Bob. Tell you what. You pay half, I'll pay half."

"No, I'll buy the whole thing..."

"Uh, okay ... but you'll share with me, right?"

"Of course. You're the impetus for this."

"But you think it's an excellent idea, don't you?"

"I do. But you promise YOU want to do this."

"I do. Call the guy Monday. Find out what the deal is. Might be a suitable goal for a road trip."

"I think I'll do that."

"And we'll do the road trip. Now..." and I sort of fell into his lap.

"Carlie ... you're killing me."

"I'm killing me too, Bob." I kissed him, this time just a smidge longer, still no tongue, but gosh, I wanted to ... and I bounced up.

'Carlie girl, you KNOW what you're doing,' I told myself. If I'm that close to going crazy, what am I doing to Bob?

Birthday's a month and a week away.

I'm a virgin and I'm having some decidedly unvirginal thoughts.

Monday I go to school, immediately walk into the school nurse's office and declare my need for birth control.

I endure the 'these will keep you from getting pregnant only if you take them religiously per the instructions' and 'these do not protect you from disease, Carlie. I've heard that there's an outbreak of chlamydia and that there's gonorrhea loose... '

"Mizz Essex," I said, "I will not be sleeping around."

"Doesn't matter about YOU, Carlie. Your partner can bring all that with 'im." She gave me a referral slip and sent me to a doctor. I walked out of the doctor's office with a prescription. No, that's archaic. I walked out and drove to the nearest pharmacy where they'd sent the prescription.

This is the ONLY thing I'll keep secret from Bob.

Chapter 8

Carlie's turn:

One of the techniques I learned in Grandma's kitchen was the art of simmering. It's a technique to turn a hearty selection of ingredients

into a truly memorable dish.

We're on simmer.

My smiles are deeper, unrestrained. I said I love him. He says he loves me. It's like my heart is free now.

We share the sofa now, me lounging inside his arm, leaning against him for a while every evening after we shower.

There's a kiss before bed.

There's me watching him go to his bedroom while I go to mine, and the little girl inside screaming to follow him and find out for sure about all the things I've heard and read and seen about sex.

Didn't, though. Did some vigorous diddling of the little ol' button. Man, it goes fast if you put the right face to the fantasy.

Thursday after school I jumped into the car, hustled home, dropped off Jess, then caught Bob standing in the carport with two bags, mine and his.

Destination? Southwest of Houston to look at a nasty ol' yellow airplane.

And I was going to be sleeping in the same room as he was.

"You're in a good mood, Carlie," he said.

"Always in a good mood around you, Bob. Ever since I found out you weren't gonna rape me and leave my dismembered body in the woods somewhere."

"Never once did I consider disposing of your dismembered body," he laughed. "I was gonna keep it in the freezer, under last year's shrimp."

"But I was gonna get raped first, right?"

"Oh, yeah. Definitely candidate for a good raping."

"You'd'a had to do it the first week, you know..."

"First week?"

"Yeah, after that first week, I was starting to reconsider whether it would've been rape."

"There's always statutory. Tender teen led astray by charming older

man..."

"Even if the old man has only the noblest of intentions..."

"Even if the teen's emancipated."

I smiled, loving the game. "And has a birthday coming up..."

"Yes. I have it circled on the calendar. Half a Piper Cub for a birthday present?"

"That'd work. What else would you give me?"

"I dunno. Half an airplane's pretty significant."

"I want more."

"Jewelry?"

"I'm not a 'jewelry' kind of girl," I said. "I see women with all these rings. I think 'nahhhhh'."

"What about when you're married?"

"I think when that happens my mate will know what I want..."

"A rock that looks like a refugee from the ice-maker?"

"Yeahhhhh, uh, no."

"Wedding in the big church downtown, half a dozen bridesmaids in matching purple taffeta, a train bigger'n my shrimp trawl."

"I dunno. I haven't seen your shrimp trawl."

"When did you decide to be evil?"

"Sir," I said with a stilted tone. We ARE playing a game, after all. "When I decide to be evil, you will be the very first to find out."

I watched his eyes change. Little crinkles in the corners. Little smile, like he was thinking.

"Evil Carlie. Now that's a thought."

"I could be, you know. I know girls at school who use guys all the time..."

"And vice versa," he said. "Stories as old as time."

"There's evil and there's EVIL, too."

"Oh, really? How evil would the evil Carlie be?"

"Moderate levels of evil. NO dismemberment. No poisonings. No property crimes."

He smiled again. "Sounds more like fun than it does evil."

Laughter and lightness between us made the miles fly by. I actually hardly remember bypassing the middle of Houston, taking toll roads to stay out of traffic, and then the scenery changed from strip malls, subdivisions and apartment megaplexes to farmland.

The voice of the GPS turned us this way and that, finally coming to a sign denoting a little remote county airfield.

"He said he'd be in a blue pickup truck by the T-hangars," Bob said.

There's the blue pickup truck. When we pulled up, an older guy got out, introduced himself as Tom Henschel.

Bob introduced himself and me.

The doors to the T-hangar behind us were open, displaying the Cub we'd seen on the Internet.

"There she is. Hate to sell 'er, but..." he touched his glasses. "Eyesight's going fast."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Mister Tom," I blurted.

"Is what it is, young lady," he said. "Had a good run. Let's wheel 'er out in the sun..."

That's an easy task.

He showed us logbooks. "Had 'er annualed a month ago," he said. "Engine's got good compression. Couple hundred hours since a major overhaul. Airframe's tip-top. Fabric's five years old. You're getting a gem."

"Looks like it."

"You ever prop a plane?" he asked Bob.

"A time or two."

"Well, if you'll do the honors. Can I give the young lady the first ride?"

I squealed. Started to get in the rearmost of the two seats.

"Uh, no, ma'am," he said. "Passenger rides in front."

I buckled in. Actually, Mister Tom showed me how the harness worked, so I got buckled in.

I never thought about starting an airplane that way, the pilot in the pilot's seat, manipulating mixture and throttle and magnetos, some guy standing in front, flipping the propeller over with his hands, but Bob and Mister Tom acted like it was normal. Couple of tries, the eighty-five horsepower engine was running.

Okay, it should've been Bob, because this is one of those 'first times' in my life, but Mister Tom handled the Cub with easy familiarity, got us off the ground, made a couple of wide circles around the area, then returned me.

I was smiling when I got out. This is gonna be MINE.

When we got back to the hangar, the other thing that's gonna be mine was standing by our SUV, waiting.

I almost leapt out of the cockpit, ran to him, kissed him. "I love it!"

Mister Tom was grinning. "She's happy. Bob, you've got your license. You get in the back seat."

My turn to wait. Oh, it was almost the stuff of poetry, the yellow-winged little plane against the blue sky punctuated with a few clouds.

After a bit they came back to the airfield, but didn't come right back to the hangar. Instead, they spent some time practicing take-offs and landings. Bob says he's rusty. I read that the Cub is just the right plane to scrape rust off with.

I looked into licensing, too. I'm old enough – sixteen at the moment – to get a student license, and at seventeen I can get any of several licenses. Some are more restrictive than others. Sport and recreational licenses restrict what I can fly and when.

I know. Basic Cub, right? NO electrical system, so no lights, so no night flight, and a handheld radio and being glacier slow, we won't be going into busy airports, but I'll have the license so that if this flying thing develops further, I'll be ready.

'Gotta get a physical', I made a note to myself.

Lots of notes to myself, lately.

Finally I heard them land and the sound wasn't followed by the crescendo of another takeoff. The little plane came taxiing up doing lazy S-curves, came to a stop in front of the hangar.

Bob pulled his billfold, took out a check, filled it in.

"Here you go, Tom. Five thousand. That's a ten percent deposit. I'll have a bank transfer the rest when we get back."

"That'll work," Mister Tom said. "And she's good in this hangar until the end of the month, so..."

"If the weather's good next weekend..."

"Any time," Mister Tom said. "Just give me a call..."

We parted ways with Mister Tom.

"Well, since you gave 'im a check, I don't need to ask how it went."

"Seriously. Next weekend..."

"What if I can't wait that long?"

"Patience is a virtue," he countered.

I thinking, 'Bob, you have no idea how much patience I'm generating.'

"How're we gonna do that? Get it back?"

"Thought we could drive over here together, and I could fly 'er home and you could drive back."

"Hate it," I said.

"Why?"

"Never drove in Houston, Bob."

"Oh."

"Besides. It's OUR airplane. We should fly 'er home together." Yes, I dump 'we' and 'us' on him a lot. He needs to get that imbedded in his mind.

"I guess we could drag Art and Bekka in on this. Get 'em to drive us..."

"Maybe drive over to Houston, have a special evening, us and them, and then do the trip back the next day."

"Well, it's not like they don't know about us spending nights together in a hotel room," Bob said.

Yes, they knew. Pretty basic detective work, really. Car's gone, with both of us, for the weekend. Mizz Bekka asks me in private conversation.

"One hotel room. Two beds, Mizz Bekka. We're not sleeping together." I didn't add the 'yet' that formed in my mind.

"Bob's a good guy," she said. "I thought that you'd be more temptation than he can stand."

"Never laid a finger on me, past holding hands in the museums or whatever. I like to think we're connected. Holding hands, that just sort of shows that we're good friends."

"You consider Bob your friend?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "He's my friend. My rescuer. My benefactor. A truly great guy. The universe delivered him to me. Or vice versa."

She smiled. "He seems to be a bit brighter – happier – with you around, Carlie. I know you're sixteen and I know you go out, but be careful if you start getting serious about a guy. Lots of 'em will say anything at all to get in your pants..."

I gasped a little. "Uh, yes, ma'am. Already had dealings with one that thought that paying for popcorn and a movie would gain him ... uh ... liberties. He got a sprained thumb for his miscalculations."

"Good girl. You get to say 'no' and no means no."

"Yes, ma'am."

"There's another facet, Carlie. Jealousy. I think Bob likes having you in his life and accepting that you're dating and viewing prospective mates, that's not going to be easy for him."

"You know, Mizz Bekka, I've thought about that. Goin' out with friends a couple of nights a week, that's just sort of getting me into the whole thing at school. It lets me observe my classmates and others around my age. You know what?"

"What?"

"Bob looks really good compared to any of the guys my age. I can trust him. He's not a poser."

"No, he's not a poser. But, Carlie?"

"Yes?"

"Guys do this thing about being all tough and hard, but deep down..."

"Bob's like that. I saw him get upset over stray cats behind a restaurant. He's tender."

That was a few weeks ago.

Forget those guys at school and those guys at the mall.

Now I'm getting ever closer to the day that I just say 'screw what everybody else thinks. I love BOB!' and shout the fact from the rooftops.

Riding along, we're skirting Houston, headed home.

"I need to go get my flight physical. That'll get me a student license," I said.

"I'll see who can do it. You'll have to go online and apply for your student certificate," Bob said. "They used to give you a student license with a physical."

"Not any more," I said.

"Yeah, you researched. We'll make it happen. Next step is finding an instructor who can teach you in the Cub."

We got lucky on that last one. One of the names on a short list of instructors had some time in agricultural aviation and was versed in tail-draggers.

The same instructor signed Bob off for a 'biennial review' so he could legally retrieve our new plane. Once it's here, Ross Taylor will troop over to the little airfield where we'll keep the Cub, and he'll start MY lessons.

That's what's going on with flying.

School's another thing. I do well at school. I'm neither stupid nor disruptive, so when the teacher says 'homework', it's done. My style

is to try and determine why I'm doing it. Math, actually Algebra Two, is a progression of slowly building abilities based on previous steps.

I think she's too slow, but that just means that when we get to a new chapter, I'm spinning at full speed while she's still standing in front of the class going over the work for the umpteenth time.

English? I can speak it. I speak it well, and when the teacher's discussing the mechanics? Oh, come on. It's high school.

Same things with history. What's he trying to get us to think? What's he think is important here? Find that out, feed it back to him.

First progress report, I was laughing softly as I got into the car. Jess always runs a little behind me. She gets in and we start the grinding process of getting out of a parking lot filled with other student drivers.

"This is gonna cost me a week," Jess said, waving her report.

"What'd you do..."

"More what I didn't do. Pay attention in Algebra. Now I got a 'D'. Dad's gonna go off the deep end."

"How'd you do that?" I asked.

"When I missed two days with that tooth extraction, I just never caught up."

"You're plenty smart enough to pass high school algebra, Jess," I stated. "Come home with me after school. We can work on it together."

"Seriously?" she smirked. "I wouldn't wanna disturb your little love nest."

"You KNOW better, Jess. Just do it. Tell your folks. Maybe your dad'll go easy on you when he sees you're working on it."

"Dad'll see me visiting YOU as another excuse for a two-hour gossip-fest."

"Just do it, Jess. Your grades will show him different."

"Hate to do TOO good," she said. "Next thing you know they'll be ragging on me about my potential..."

"You have an absolutely horrible life, you poor thing," I laughed.

"'Cuz I don't have a benefactor," she snarked.

"You got two parents who're doing a darned good job, though..."

"No wheels..."

"These ain't mine."

"Yeah, but Bob lets you..."

"Because he knows I'm not going to abuse that..."

"Okay, that ONE time..." Jess ran a stop sign, totaled out TWO cars.

"Baby steps. Be contrite, and try to keep that look off your face..."

"What look?!?"

"That one that says 'If I can fool you just this once'."

"I do NOTTTT!" she whined.

"See?!? I've known you for two months and I know that look. I'm sure that anybody with half a brain..."

"You're just evil, you know..." she laughed. "If it's okay, let's plan for a study session tomorrow."

"I'm pretty sure that'll work."

I dropped her off, went home (yeah, okay. It's 'home' to me now. I intend on that being permanent and I am holding in my hand one more step up the ladder.)

I walked in, dumped my backpack on the sofa. Bob was on his laptop, leaned halfway back in his recliner.

"Put the computer down, Bob. I need to show you something."

"What?"

"Report card."

I positioned myself to let him view it by the expedient of flopping back into his lap, to his surprise. I'd never done that.

Playing 'excited little girl, beside herself with joy' is my excuse if he revolted.

"Must be good," he said.

"You're not the keeper of a dumbass," I squeaked. "Look!"

He gazed at the paper. "All 'As'. Impressive. Never thought you were stupid, little girl. And speaking of ... why are you in my lap?"

"Because I am very happy and I wanted to share it with the main human being in my life."

And I kissed him. The first one was a quick one, kind of a test run. When he didn't recoil, I laid one on him like those that the few guys I've kissed thought would have me peeling my clothes off.

After the third, I pulled my face back to look at his.

"No protest?"

"I told you I loved you, Carlie. You told me you loved me. Kissing, well, if YOU want to kiss..."

"I do, sometimes, Bob. Sometimes I can't stand it."

First time. He caressed my head with a free hand, smoothing my hair away from my face, tenderly, lovingly.

"You know you're cute. Just plain attractive. I can't help that I look at you and want this..."

"Thank you, Bob. You're good-looking, too. But this isn't a physical thing, you know."

"It can't be."

Oh, yeah ... I don't think kisses count, though. Yes, I'm pushing. Truth? This man is going to be the one.

I tossed my head back. "Bob, I so much want to be held."

"We can do this," he said. I understand. He's got a lot of the same feelings I've got. His arms wrap around me, that piece of paper floats to the ground, and we fit into each other.

Okay, there's a difference between Bob's face being in my mind while I'm releasing tensions in my own bed at night and Bob's face mere inches from mine, lips still moist from our kiss.

I'm burning. If he said a word ... he wouldn't even have to say anything, just sort of start unbuttoning – his, mine, no difference. I'd be naked and doing anything he wanted.

Breathe in short panting snorts. Flushed. I was touching his face, his

chest.

"Hold still," he said.

He carefully cradled my face in his hands. "Carlie, I love you, lady. I ... Never leave me." A heavy sigh.

"Won't, Bob. Here forever. Is that really what you want?"

"I do."

"Those words..." I started.

"Marry me, Carlie. I know I'm twice your age, but I love you beyond ken."

"I will marry you. I dunno how that will work. I'm emancipated, but I don't know if that applies to getting married."

"Ask Art."

"I'll do that. He and Mizz Bekka need to know. I know they're concerned about us. They don't want you corrupting my morals or vice versa."

"We haven't corrupted each other yet..." he smiled. "Maybe a few more kisses..."

Oh, yes. I've been kissing pretty much on a serious basis since I was fourteen. No, I'm not a tease. If that's a tease then it's from the perspective of a guy who thinks that one thing leads to another. Okay, it does, right? But there are a lot of intermediate steps, and Mister Robert Paul Newman just took the last one.

"We can talk to them tomorrow," he said. "They probably see this as one of several inevitable paths since you showed up."

"Several?" I asked.

"Yeah. Once they figured out that you weren't gonna charge out in the middle of the night screaming 'rape'. Or that the sheriff department wasn't gonna show up for a drug bust. I think they learned real quick that you weren't any of that and neither was I."

"Telling them we're getting married might realign their thinking, you know."

"Yeah, maybe," he said. "But the fact that we want a legal union ... I mean, a lot of people just shack up and never give it a second thought."

"Don't wanna do that. That's Mom's way. Not Carlie's way."

"I think I like Carlie's way better."

"Bob, I'm not a flake, you know."

"At no time since I met you did I look at you and think, 'That's Carlie, the flake'."

"Not a slut, either."

"Never saw that in you, either."

"Truth. Nothing, nobody's been in me."

"Seriously?"

"Truth," I said.

"And you want me?"

"Only forever."

Chapter 9

Bob's turn:

Succumbing to the inevitable. A few weeks of taking care of Carolina Angele Williams and I'm solidly in love. Would be the makings of tragedy if not for one fact.

She loves me. My soulmate. Way young, sure enough, but horrible punster, bright, funny, happy, curious.

Devoted. She used to go out to meet friends on Wednesdays and Saturdays. She quit that.

"Why aren't you going out?" I asked her.

"Because what I want to see is here, Bob."

We're getting married.

That's the latest. She's sitting in my lap, lame excuse was her report card. I've wished...

I would have never made the first move. I could wish, I could imagine,

I could want, but no ... had to be her move.

Once the ice was broken, a layer at a time, then I possessed it, but I didn't initiate. She said, "I love you." Now, 'I love you'. I'm free to say it. Between the two of us, I have that freedom. Blonde, blue-eyed, that sleek hair tossed in a carefree way across her forehead. I'm free to love that.

Now, we've passed the 'holding hands' stage and the 'friendly kiss' stage. My arms are around her. Bad. Her arms are around me. Good. Better. A kiss. Best.

A date on the calendar. She turns seventeen. That's legal age of consent. Somewhere in the nearest future, we'll get married. She's not trying to gain a sugar daddy or whatever. I was with her when we set up a bank account and an investment account, and if she plays things conservatively, she won't have to work unless she wants to.

The happy girl didn't stay on my lap long. We both have things to do. Acquiring dinner is one of them.

"Why don't we go out and celebrate?" I said. "You're the winner today, so you choose..."

"That little Italian place. They have great lasagna."

"Lasagna it is, then."

"I'll be right back."

When she returned, her already sleek hair was brushed to perfection and a wisp of perfume assailed my senses.

"Let's go!"

We headed up the road and into town. Pleasant meal. Conversation about her school activities. She asked about the work I was doing.

"Neat, working from home."

"Yeah, I kinda like it. A decade of cubby-holing every document I could lay my hands on. I can pick and poke and put together some things pretty fast."

"Pay's good?"

"The pay is pretty good for sitting in my own house."

"Our house," she corrected.

"Yes, our HOME. It was just a house until you showed up. Like a den so I had someplace to get in out of the cold..." I smiled. "And then one day I went to the bus station..."

She giggled. "Once upon a time..."

"Almost is, baby."

"I like being 'baby'. It's different being 'baby' to you than it was with Grandma."

"I love you differently than your Grandma."

"I hope so, Bob," she said.

We paid the ticket, left, had a discussion about whether we needed to stop anywhere on the way home.

"Nope. Take me home."

Not that much of a discussion.

Once home, we went in separate directions, me to my bathroom, she to hers. I'm fast. Shower, shave, etc. Okay, she likes this aftershave, so a splash ... I like the way it feels.

When I get out, she's still in her process. I hear the hair dryer running. Sometimes she dries with it, sometimes not.

I turned on the TV, not expecting much to be on, certainly giving her the chance to make a choice.

I was in my recliner, wearing the pajamas that had become de rigueur since Carlie moved in. Carlie bounced out wearing her customary knit cotton nightshirt, loose, down to just above her knees. I'm happy with that choice. She has others. She bought a couple of pairs of thin cotton pajamas like mine.

"Men's clothes are cheaper," she laughed when she bought them.

Wearing them that night, she observed that they didn't fit exactly right.

"You have protrusions where the average guy doesn't."

"I see that now..."

"Too uncomfortable?"

"Noooo," she said. "How's it look?"

"Good. Suitably chaste. Cute." Also gives a man with normal libido a whole checklist of things to think about. The top was loose over her breasts. She's not big-breasted, by any measure. 'Perky' is the operative term. A safety pin from my stash took a hitch up in the waistband so they'd stay above her hips. She's slender, sylphish.

Tonight, though, in the nightshirt, she's a fantasy in a different wrapper. Knit cotton has the ability to stretch and form if it's not given the chance to flow on its own. As she sat back on the sofa, that fabric formed over a titty in perfect display.

The kissing and snuggling earlier caused me to think that I could take a little more time to actually view and appreciate the joy of having a pretty young girl around the house.

"You're staring..."

"People stare at the _Mona Lisa_," I said. "And she is but a shadow, compared to you."

"Stoppitttt!" she squealed, her smile showing what her words meant. "And why are you in that recliner?"

"I've been in this recliner every evening since you've known me. You have the sofa. I have the recliner. Order in the universe."

"I could understand that when I first got here, before we figured each other out," she said. "Now, though, I wouldn't mind being close to you. If you came over here..."

I tried hard not to skip, crossing the room.

"Where do you want me?"

"You stretch out on this thing, then I'll make myself fit."

As she stood, she 'bumped' into me. Octopi don't throw arms around their prey that fast.

"Mmmmm. I love that scent."

"You oughta. You told me to buy it."

Giggle. "And you follow instructions well. Lie down."

I positioned myself on my side, my back solidly against the back of the sofa. A quick assessment of the amount of room left in front of me meant this was going to result in close contact.

She looked at the same space and she smiled, wiggled her butt into place, pressed her torso back into my chest, grabbed the hand of the arm that was underneath her.

"Hold me so I don't fall off while I get comfortable." And wiggles. Entirely too many wonderful wiggles.

Ol' Dickie thought life was taking a definite upturn, so he did his thing – full, diamond-cutting erection. I shuddered, wiggled myself, trying NOT to poke him against her.

Got, "Be still!" and she wiggled all the way back against him. At least he was pointed in the right direction.

The giggles that accompanied the wiggles told me that she knew.

"Feels good to be held again, Bob."

"I was just holding you a while ago."

"You know what I mean." She dragged the hand of the arm I had over her waist tighter, using her free hand, looking for a place to land it. finally, her fingers laced into mine, she put it between those perky breasts. "Mmmmm. You feel so good, holding me."

"You do realize..." I started.

She wiggled in response, adding, "Yeah ... I kinda am, too. Wonderful glow..."

"You KNOW what you do to me?"

"I'm not stupid, Bob. I know that guys get aroused. Do you know that girls get aroused?"

"I've heard that."

"You do that to me. It's only fair that I do that to you."

"Just so you know..." and I nuzzled the back of her head.

"You really do love me, don't you?"

"I do," I said. "But right now, there's an awful lot of lust..."

"I know. I'm not teasing you, baby," she stated. "I really do like this. Just being held. Being important to you."

"Important? Try 'essential'. You do understand, sweetness, that while my head and my heart are trying to be all high-level about us..."

Giggle. "That thing's got other plans?"

"That thing doesn't have a plan at all."

"But we're not subject to those parts, right?"

"Trying not to be," I sighed.

"Couple of weeks, baby," she said. "You have to know that I've thought all this through. Every part of me will belong to you and every part of you will belong to me and it will be wonderful." Another wiggle. She released my right hand while it was right on top of her right breast. Patted my hand. "Watch TV."

"TV?!? With this?" I gave the object of my immediate adoration a gentle caress.

She patted my hand again. "Don't get radical."

Okay. I'm being granted a privilege. Bob, it's not time to act like a pig. I settled down. I can do this. Watching dinosaurs eat random employees is calming.

Commercial.

Giggle. "You did settle down, didn't you."

"I am master of my universe," I said. "Against insurmountable odds, I have prevailed." I paused. "And you stopped wiggling."

"Oh. So if..."

She wiggled a quite attractive heinie. It's not one of those exaggerated round ones, it's actually a bit of the lithe, dancer-like variety.

Ol' Dickie woke up and said 'Hi there!'

"I feel that. I'll stop."

"Why'd you do it?"

"Just seeing if I really have the power."

"You have the power."

She twisted around, kissed me, then at the roar of a dinosaur, rolled back over.

It ain't over until the T-rex screams. We came to that part, having swapped ends once and having swapped places, well, kinda. She ended up lounging halfway up the sofa with my head in her lap, but it's bed-time.

The good-night kiss before she headed to her room was hotter than last night's.

I have a perfect mattress, it's my bed, the room is cool, a little fan provides white noise to ease me into sleep very easily.

I didn't even hear the door open. Didn't feel the bed move. Realized what was going on when I rolled over and there was...

"Carlie?"

"Yes, Bob?"

"You're in my bed."

"I'm aware of that, Bob."

"This isn't supposed to happen, Carlie. Not yet..."

"Nothing has happened, Bob. Go back to sleep. I may snuggle, is all."

"Dammit, Carlie."

"Dammit?!? 'I love you, Carlie' would be better."

"I love you, Carlie."

"G'nite, Bob."

And she snuggled.

Fact: I wake up with an erection. The alarm went off. I jumped up, drawers tented out, hit the light, THEN remembered my bed partner.

A bleary-eyed Carlie, mind spinning up from sleep. Opened her eyes as I was grabbing my PJ bottoms.

Saw the little darlin's pupils actually dilate. I stepped into the bathroom, closing the door behind me.

By the time she was dressed, I was in the kitchen whipping up French toast for breakfast.

"You have a lot of confidence in my self-control, little lady," I said.

"I know my Bobby," she smiled. "Besides, worst that woulda happened is we'd've lost the fun of waiting until our wedding day."

"You planned that?"

"Noo-ooo. Not when I went to bed, but after not being able to get you out of my head, I figured that I needed proximity."

"Carlie..." I sighed. "I really am trying to be honorable here."

"We're getting married, Bob. If you're telling me the truth."

"Always the truth, baby."

"When are we gonna talk with Mister Art?"

"After you get back from school, I guess," I answered.

Time for her to leave. Kiss at the door. I watched her drive off, went back into the house, stripped the sheets off the beds, tossed them into the laundry, then went to the river's edge and put the boat in the water.

Forty-five minutes later I had half a meal's worth of crabs. That's easy enough. The crabs went into a box made of hardware cloth, half-submerged. They'd survive for a long time like that, at least long enough for me to gather another couple of dozen, fodder for a crab boil for me and Carlie and the Aucoins.

Next on my agenda was to drive myself into town to visit the guy who handled my investments. Got offered a cup of coffee, sat for a few minutes, chatted about MY finances, which are doing well under his advice, and we also talked about offering Carlie the option of moving her accounts.

Grocery shopping got me the makings of my version of Mom's banana pudding. Nope, mine's not as good, but my trying will surely have Mom and Dad smiling down from heaven. It's something to do during the day.

I catch Art working on his gate, offer to help, go to the house, come back with MY tools which are better than HIS tools, and we fix the gate.

"Need to talk with you after Carlie gets home, Art. We have a question. Lawyer stuff."

"You 'n Carlie."

"Yeah."

He smiled. "Finally got to you, did she?"

"What do you mean?"

"Bekka says it was a matter of time."

"What?"

"That Carlie'd snag you."

"Bekka knows? Carlie told her something?"

"Bekka knows because she's a woman. Their brains work different. Said Carlie watches you when ya'll're in the same vicinity, and it's not 'look out for the predator', it's that other thing..."

"Oh."

"So do I tell Bekka she's full of crap?"

"No."

"Good. Tellin' Bekka she's wrong is never a good idea."

"Well, that's gonna be the conversation. She and I have decided. Seventeenth birthday..."

"She's emancipated, Bob. Lemme talk to a judge, but I tend to think that she's good to go on a marriage license."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, I think so. I'd have him call the clerk of court, make sure one of those front-desk types doesn't kick, but yeah..."

"Gonna make Carlie happy."

"That's good," he said, "but is it gonna make Bob happy?"

"She MAKES me want to be married to 'er, Art. Do things right for the girl." I smiled at the thought. "Life's better."

He laughed. "She did get you to expand your territory. Airplane. At least it's not another stinkin' dressed-out Harley."

"Harley's faster," I said.

"Bekka and I can't wait to see y'all fly that thing home."

"Well, you and I never had this conversation, Art. When Carlie gets in from school, we'll come over..."

"Lookin' forward to it. Always liked telling a woman something she wanted to hear."

Went home and made a banana pudding, complete with vanilla wafer-lined bottom and oven-browned meringue topping. I dunno if Carlie'll like it, but I know I sure will. So will Bekka and Art.

At a quarter of four, Carlie pulled the SUV into the driveway.

"Hi, honey," she said, exiting.

"Hi, love," I replied. "How was school?"

"It was school. I told 'em I was taking off Friday."

"Any kick?"

"Nah. I'm not the problem. I get to do a make-up on an algebra test on Monday but the others just said they'd let me slide."

"Nice," I said. "Never asked. You like banana pudding?"

"Home-made?"

"Real bananas and all," I said. "Got the produce guy at the grocery store to hunt down some ripe ones..."

"Luvit!"

"Good. Art's doin' burgers. Puddin's dessert."

"So they're expecting us?"

"Told 'im we needed legal advice. We're trading boiled crabs on Sunday."

"Well, let's go talk, Bob. I wanna KNOW..."

We met Art in his yard, a beer, a book, watching Bekka poking around a flower bed.

"Hi, Mister Art," Carlie said. "Hi, Mizz Bekka."

"Come sit down, Bek," Art said. "Flowers before friends."

Bekka stopped at the garden sink, washed her hands, got a kiss on the cheek from Carlie.

"So what's up?" Art asked. "Bob says y'all need legal advice."

"I'm emancipated, right?" Carlie dove in. "So if I want to get married, what do I need?"

"Uh, a husband," Art laughed.

Carlie didn't miss a beat. "That's him, right there..."

Bekka smiled. "I thought it was a matter of time, y'all. When you made it through three weeks, I just knew..."

"Well, Mizz Bekka," Carlie said, "he kinda makes sense, doesn't he?"

"Hon," Bekka said, "people go through their whole lives and never make sense."

"I don't wanna do that. Neither does Bob. So? Marriage? What do I need? I mean, I know it's sixteen in this state with your parents' permission, but I'm emancipated."

"Easy, Carlie. You get to sign for yourself. When you go to the clerk of court to get your license, bring a copy of your emancipation. Yours is signed by a district judge, so you're good to go." He grinned. "Bob, you'll need a certificate of sanity ... and a physical..."

"He won't," Carlie squealed. "I looked it up." She glanced at her watch then at Art. "What time's the clerk of court office close?"

"Five," Art said.

"Can we put the burgers on hold, Mizz Bekka? We got a mission..." She fixed me in her eye. "This is your time to run for the hills, Bob..."

"Nope. Let's go get the papers..."

"Call us when you're on the way back," Art said.

Up the stairs and into the house. "You're serious about this, aren't you?"

"I am, Bob," she said. "Are you?"

"Rest of my life, babe."

Copies of my documents – passport, birth certificate, social security card, others, – reside in a briefcase. That makes mine easy. I grab the briefcase. She's right beside me, a manila envelope in hand.

I get seriously, SERIOUSLY kissed. "C'mon, baby," she says.

And off we go.

The nice lady at the desk pulls up short over Carlie's age. We get a senior supervisor. "That's legal," he says. "Not common, but legal."

We walked out with the license in her manila envelope. The envelope's in one hand. My hand's in the other. The smile is epic.

Back in the car.

Giggle.

"What're you thinking?"

"Birthday. Doesn't matter. No statutory rape if we're married."

"We're not married."

"Mister Art knows judges, right?"

"Well, yeah..."

"D'you think he knows one who has an opening on his calendar tomorrow?"

"You're on a roll, ain't you?"

"Should I NOT be?"

"I love you, you know..."

"An important piece of the puzzle," she said. "I also love YOU. Bob, I want to be YOUR Carlie..."

"How positively archaic and sexist," I said.

"Yep. Got my own caveman."

"Thank you."

The girl is definitely happy with herself.

By the time we'd assembled hamburgers at the Aucoin manse, we had a nine A.M. appointment at a judge's chambers and Art and Bekka lined up as witnesses.

The banana pudding's reception was about the second-happiest thing for the day, right up until we headed for our house.

Who is this nutcase and why's she smirking so much?

Inside, I deposited the pudding dish in the sink, turned and got positively immobilized by Carlie.

"Tomorrow," she squealed. "You and me, tomorrow!" she formed against me. "This'll be RIGHT!" and she wiggled.

"Carlie, you keep that up and I won't live until tomorrow."

"You will. And tomorrow..."

"Honeymoon," I said.

"We'll work something out, I'm sure. What's wrong with this place?"

"Well..."

"Well, baby," she said, "Friday we're going to go get the Cub. We'll be in a hotel room that night. Call that a honeymoon. Other than that, me, you, tomorrow night, right here." She smiled. "No, me, you, half an hour after we say 'I do', right here. Doors locked. Mister Art and Mizz Bekka will know what's happening and won't bother us."

"You're gonna kill me, aren't you?"

"I'll die right there with you."

Chapter 10

Carlie's turn:

I'm winging this, you know ... Never had The Talk, not the official one, from Grandma, nor Mom. And here I am lying in my bed on the last night that I'll be a virgin, a single girl.

I know a few things. I listen, even read a little. I know anatomy, and heaven knows, I've explored my own enough.

The unknown is my partner's parts.

I do know something, though. Kinda pushed up the intimacy the last few days, just to get a handle (oh, is that oblique enough?) on arousal of the male of the species.

Found out a couple of things. First, it doesn't take much to get my guy excited. Second, I have just barely enough self-restraint to NOT

roll over and grab that thing with both hands and find out exactly how it works.

Nope, he's up the hall in his bedroom, I'm here in mine, and tomorrow we will be in the same bed and that's what I want.

I toyed with the thought of just giving up and going into that room – tomorrow it will be OUR room – and doing what parts of me want to do to parts of him that would be all too willing, but no, Carlie is NOT going to get this close to the goal and not cross the goal line.

Sleep.

Get woken up by a gentle kiss on the cheek. "Today's the day, love," he says.

"Are you sure, Bob? Tell me you're really sure..."

"Absolutely. I don't want to imagine life without you, Carlie."

"Good," I replied, tugging him against me.

I'm feeling freedom now, freedom to enjoy the sensations that being held by this man bring me.

Today's the day. I think about what other people are doing this week – Spring Break – and how consequential much of it is. Mine is.

After my teeth get brushed and my face is washed he gets a REAL kiss.

A quick phone call gets us Mister Art and Mizz Bekka for breakfast at the diner up the road. He's working today, but he's a senior attorney and doesn't exactly have to do nine to five. We follow them to the diner, have breakfast, and then Mizz Bekka rides back home with us while he drives to his offices.

Ten o'clock is the appointed hour. The judge who'll perform the ceremony is an old friend of his, and we'll go to that guy's chambers for the event.

What to do in the interim? Go look at the hangar for the airplane we're getting at the end of the week, okay? Isn't that what EVERY bride does on the morning of her wedding day?

I'm a bit giggly.

"Happy?"

"Delirious, baby," I said.

"About marriage or the Cub that's supposed to come with it?"

"Both," I laughed. "I got a guy who loves me enough to marry me and who gives me half a seventy-year-old airplane for a wedding gift."

"I like to think of it as a pedestal of widely adjustable height," he said.

"Be careful about putting me on a pedestal, buddy," I snickered. "You have no idea what I wanna try..."

"I only hope you aren't disappointed."

"Ain't gonna be, Bob. We've snuggled. Those were promising feelings..."

"We can go slow, princess. Ease into things..."

I shouldn't tease him. "'Into' is the operative term, right?"

"Baby," he said gently, "we don't have to do anything..."

"Baby," I retorted, "we have to consummate our marriage. I've heard that sex is quite a popular activity. I'm looking forward to us..."

"As fast or as slow as you want to go..."

The hangar thing was to leave our lock on the hangar and to drop off a check for a year's rent. Easier that way, Bob says.

Carlie says, "Let's go home, change clothes, and go get married."

"I like the way you think."

So I wore a dress to my wedding. Bob wore a business suit. We met Mister Art and Mizz Bekka at the courthouse, went to the judge's chambers.

It's that simple. The judge was an old friend of Mister Art's. I think they talked about my situation before the ceremony.

"Miss Carlie, I've signed some serious paper work for you, with your emancipation, but I consider this next oath to be the most serious of all. Do you understand why?"

"Yessir, Marriage. Putting us together in the sight of God and friends and the state. It's supposed to be forever."

His old eyes smiled. "Art, you warned me, didn't you."

"That's why I was smiling when I asked," Art said.

"D'ya mind if we start this proceeding with a prayer, then," he asked us.

"No, please do," Bob said.

A prayer. Rings. A kiss. Two signatures.

I'm holding Bob's hand so tightly I'm probably impeding blood flow, but I can FEEL myself become different.

"I guess we're expected go somewhere now," I stated.

"Come on, baby," Bob said. "Folks, thank you and bless you all."

The judge shook our hands, accepted a kiss on the cheek from me, and my HUSBAND and I walked out to our car.

NOW I'm getting nervous.

Before, it's been some kind of 'future', not real. Now, the guy sitting next to me is my husband and we're going home to consummate a marriage and a million thoughts rush through my mind.

"Wanna go home, or wanna go get lunch?" he asked.

"I think we could work up a good appetite for dinner."

"I'm just offering. Trying not to drool, you know..."

"Myself. Bob ... you almost got me last night."

"I wondered, punkin," he replied. "That bedtime kiss was awfully promising."

I never thought a drive home could drag on like this one, but finally we're in the carport under the house, the gate's closing behind us, and Bob's following me up the stairs.

I unlock the door.

"You don't go walking through it this time," he said, opening it. He scooped me up. I squealed.

"How positively archaic and sexist," I said.

"Archaic? I didn't drag you in by your hair. And sexist? You wanna carry ME?"

I'm kissing him as he navigates sideways through the door.

He gently sets me down.

"Now, what's on TV?" I ask with a smirk.

He eyed me.

"I've never watched TV naked before..." I pushed against him, felt him wrap me in strong arms. "I suppose you have..."

"Never with anything like you, dearest. I don't think I could see TV..."

"Forget the TV, then ... bedroom," I told him softly.

"One more time, Carlie," he said, kissing me. "I love you. We don't need to hurry."

I kissed him back. "Bob, you protected me from the very first time you saw me. This is about us. You didn't listen. I almost didn't make it through last night without this. Now it's time. I love you and I want you."

"God, I want you, Carlie..."

I can tell. I slide a hand down to gauge the lump that's pressing against me. He shudders and I have an avalanche of thoughts. First, what I do here seriously affects MY Bob. Second ... not having any experiences or previous knowledge other than snatches of overheard conversations, how BIG is normal? Is HE normal? Am I normal? I know about hymens and my own is pretty much gone – tampons, the occasional finger or two or three (mine) and an active lifestyle, but still, it's the first time. Is it gonna hurt?

I'm unbuttoning my dress and I don't care...

He's faster than I am. He stands up, completely naked before me.

"Let me help."

I would've pulled the dress over my head. Bob didn't. He spread it past my shoulders, guided it down my sides to puddle at my feet.

Me. Bra. Panties.

"Step closer..."

I did. He reached around behind me, Unhooked the two hooks of my bra, eased the straps over my shoulders. Instinctively I covered myself,

then realized ... I dropped my arms, a voice in my head saying 'Please, please PLEASE don't be disappointed...' because I'm small-breasted, but then I realized that he's got eyes and I'm sure he knows that.

Explosions. Lightning. Ice and fire and feelings that twenty-six letters of the alphabet aren't sufficient to describe and he KISSED first one nipple then the other.

I exhaled with a hiss. "OhgodBob!"

"Beautiful, beautiful Carlie," he sighed. His fingers eased inside the waistband of my hip-hugger light blue panties, eased them down past my hips. They slid down my legs to join my dress.

"Beautiful, beautiful Carlie," he softly repeated.

Okay, Carlie. It's time to get serious here. I pushed him backward onto the bed, pressing against him with my whole being, kissing him like his lips were the source of my life. His arms around me, his shudders, his moans, all those told me that this was a good move.

A minute of that.

"We really need to move the bedspread, darlin'," he said. "You're too much and things are gonna get very liquid..."

"Now, one good kiss, husband..."

Was very good. I put my hand down.

"I gotta see this thing," I said. "First one I ever saw in real life."

"Okay..."

We've had a discussion of my lack of sexual experiences. It's pink and purple and six inches long and fills my hand and it's hot and the skin's ever so soft but it's like an oversized sock sliding over a hard core.

And it's leaking a clear fluid. I touch that droplet as it's starting to run. Viscous. Sticky.

Oral sex. Heard a lot about oral sex. Girls giving their boyfriends blowjobs. So ... Salty...

"OhgodCarlie..."

"I love you, Bob." Damn, I'm erudite. "This is ... we ... in me..."

"Straddle me, baby. I'm afraid that if I get on top, I'll lose control and hurt you..."

I can do that. Whole new set of sensations. My body's one big nerve ending and when I stretch atop Bob, his hairy chest is a million little sensations on my titties. A wiggle here. A million more sensations.

His hands cup my head. "I love you. Your hair..."

"I offered to grow it out..."

"You're perfect..."

The hands that were cupping my head moved down, one grasping each cheek of my butt. He pushed that hard thing up against me.

"Needs to be someplace," I told him. I raised up. Fingers. I've never been this wet in my whole life. He's ... hard. Erect. And when I raised up the angle was almost perfect. I rocked back just a little, then a little more and my fingers guided that spongy head right into the center of my existence at the moment.

Okay, is this gonna hurt or not? I'm thinking ... A push, bit more, and I am in possession of HIS thing ... Further ... Oh, god, so THAT'S what that thing's for. One more push and my pubic bone mashes against his.

"Bob Newman, I love you..."

"I love you too, Carolina Newman. Are you okay?"

"I am the most okay I've ever been in my whole life. Are you..."

"Heaven's not gonna be this much joy," he said.

"I'm full. It's perfect."

Then I moved. Oh, that's GOOD. Pull up a little, he slides out. Push back down, he goes back in, and it's lovely. I can do that. And about the third one, I find that just a little adjustment and my button's found an automatic stimulator...

"It feels good when I do this," I said.

"It feels beyond words, baby." His hands are on my hips, encouraging my movement. I guess he likes it as much as I do.

Some more. I'm really liking this. How about Bob?

"Baby, I'm trying hard to last but..."

"But what?"

"But I'm about to..."

"Come? Me too ... Hang on..." I heard the term in overheard conversations between Mom and a boyfriend. 'Orgasm' just seems out of place here. I keep battering my little bean against his, well, his dick. Correction. MY dick. I'm in possession and using...

A couple more...

"Carlieeeeeee!" and he rises off the bed, lifting me like a feather and that shove is what it takes.

"Nnnnghhhhhh. Ohhhhahhhhhhh!" First time I ever verbalized an orgasm. And what's this hot wet ... fire inside me?

And dammit, Carlie, keep going ... Good. Better. Push. Best. Push again...

I wake up to gentle kisses.

"Baby, are you okay?"

My verbal abilities ended with a purr. "Mmmmmm."

"I think that's a yes."

Deep breath. "Yessssss. Bob, I was made for you. Or you were made for me. Together. Ohgod..."

"I love you, Carolina."

"I love you, Robert. I felt it. When you did it, I was right there, and there's never been anything like that in my life before."

"You're perfect."

"Words ... I ran out of words, Bob. We should've ... weeks ago..."

He kissed me, caressing my face. "No, this is perfect timing, and we'll be together forever after."

"You better believe it, buddy," I said. "I only get one husband. You're it."

He was holding me. My hands, though... "Oh, is it hard again?"

"Appears so."

"I want..."

"Whatever you want..."

I pushed him over on his back and this time I wasn't tentative. I know how it feels and where it goes and "Ahhhhhh..."

I looked down at my man. He's smiling.

"You're perfect..."

"THIS is perfect, baby..." and I started rocking, forward, push, back, slide up, back down, forward ... Oh, I'm on my WAY.

He's hunching up into me, too, so I know...

This time he lasts a little longer and I ride a wave, then another and then he gives a big push and I can feel him throbbing, pulsing...

Oh, that's GOOD! I'm glowing all over. He gently holds me to him. Apparently he likes me right here.

"Not disappointed, are you, baby," I queried. "Dumb, inexperienced teenager..."

"All the wonders of the universe, I walked right past them and found you. You're perfect."

"Am I?"

"I love you."

"Good enough. Does it bother you if I kinda play with this?"

"Luvit," he said. "May take a while to recharge, though."

"Kinda like this way, too..." I looked down. "Cute. Wanna play?"

"Play?"

"This is all very new to me. Wanna play. Tell me if I do something wrong."

"Okay."

"Are you one of those people who thinks oral sex is sinful?"

"Are you?"

"No."

And I was shocked at how fast he moved, my legs spread reflexively, and I was shaking as he showered kisses on my pussy. Then his tongue...

"Ohgodohgodohgod..."

"You don't like this?"

"I meant for me to do you."

"Want me to stop?"

"Don't. Stop."

"Good. You're delicious."

A few more laps of his tongue and, "I'm ... COMING!"

My hands fluttered. I've never experienced. I mean, what do I DO?!?!? He didn't stop. I usually stop when I'm enjoying myself, ride it down, you know. He didn't stop. I writhed, the fire never went out, just ebbed a little and "GODDDDDDBOB!!!!"

Two.

The third one rendered me catatonic.

Bob stopped, scooted up, gathered my limp form into his arms, brushed his sticky lips gently against my face. I know some of the smell. That's me. Yeah, I've tasted myself. Part of my exploration, okay? Other part. Bob?

"You okay, little princess?"

"I've never been this okay in my life, baby ... Hold me. I'm paralyzed."

"You're okay."

"Toes. I can't feel my toes."

"Can you feel this?" he asked, a finger touching, dipping...

"Ohgodyessss."

"You're okay. I hope this is all good for you..."

"Kiss me..."

Like souls exchanging bodies. Long, wonderful kiss, because I have a hand behind his head. Won't let him go.

We uncurled, lying down together.

My turn. Already have an idea of taste. After all, he's got me and him all over his face. And I'm looking and feeling and that thing just begs to meet my mouth.

"What're you doing?"

"Got a goal..."

"You sure?!?"

"Definitely. I'm playing. First time, and all that."

I went there. I've heard about blowjobs all my life, well, not exactly, but I've heard. What I'm regarding at close range is interesting and I know that messing with it makes Bob feel good, so...

No tentative lick. That head is just made to fit perfectly in my mouth. Got a little ridge that seems to say, 'at least THIS much'. So...

Bob goes "Gahhhh" and bucks. "Babyyyyyy."

I giggle. It's kind of muted because I've got a mouthful. I pull him out. "Want me to stop?"

"Nonononono..."

"Then let Carlie play with her new toy..."

"Shoulda let me wash..."

"Uh, nooooo. That's me and you." Suck. Tongue. Okay, Carlie, be brave. You know you want to ... Nibble. He shakes. Hisses between his teeth.

"Too hard?"

"No, but be careful..."

"I like it."

"Really?"

"See me smiling?"

He looks down. I have the lightest of bites on the tip of his dick. I'm smiling. Transform that into a suck, and I love the way it moves under my tongue.

Oh, look! Balls! I've heard that these are delicate, so let's see ... Just push my face there and sort of turn, feeling them against my cheek, then...

"Gentle."

"Yes, master..." Kisses. They're big. I wonder. Open wide. Yeah, one fits. Gotta try the other. Don't wanna risk a jealous testicle.

"I heard a guy can come from this," I said.

"You keep that up, you'll find out..."

"You just sent me to the Andromeda Galaxy. I owe you..."

"Baby, I squirt..."

"I know. Just sucked a bunch off you." I emphasized that point by sucking him again. Okay, I'm good for about half of it before I start to gag. Carlie needs practice. Further exploration.

Okay, question at hand. Or mouth. Yeah, definitely at mouth. What makes Bob come ... In and out works with other tight orifice, so ... and add some tongue, because it probably feels good to him and definitely makes me happy. Mix things up. Add a bit of teeth, you know, and since I've got a free hand here, bouncy balls, okay.

Guy's getting crazy, thrusting into my mouth. Other hand, wrap around thing, form an end stop so I don't gag at an inopportune time, and hey, I can slide the skin up and back in time with my...

"OHgod baby..."

"Mmmmmm." Salty juice. Lots of it.

Sack in my hand starts drawing up. I can FEEL the head actually expand in my mouth, then the pulses start with a jet of thicker, tangy, not totally unpleasant shot of goo. I'm supposed to suck this, so I do. More surges in time with whimpering sounds from a Bob who may well be in a different universe. Five. Six. And then it slows to a stop. Swallow. Suck some more. Swallow again. Giggle.

"Did I do good?"

"The universe didn't exist, baby. You did very good."

"Will you still kiss me?"

"Only for the rest of my life."

I slid up into his arms. "Baby, I heard some girls don't really like that..."

"How's Carlie fare in that regard?"

"We're made for each other. I really like it. Like, just you wait..."

"You know what?" he said.

"What?"

"You're really beautiful, naked."

"You're good, too ... wasn't prepared to find out how my titties feel in your chest hair."

"Beautiful titties."

"Small."

"Perfect. Really perfect."

"I'm here to make you happy, Bob."

"I'm very happy."

"And now I'm hungry. How about something to eat, like a hamburger?"

"Let's shower, then get us one."

I have to giggle. First time we've showered together. I don't think I'll go back to solo showers willingly.

And I'm definitely keeping Bob.

Chapter 11

Bob's turn:

Should've known better. Figured that for all the sass and the last two days' worth of teasing, that when it came to the actual act of crawling into the bed together, I'd actually get an apprehensive, if willing, new wife.

Boy, was I ever wrong.

As the old boy said, 'I got attackeded.'

It was like she's been storing up all these ideas and expectations and the ideas all worked and the expectations were exceeded.

No tears. No pensiveness. Nope. Blonde, blue-eyed bundle of happiness.

We took a break for a hamburger at a place that builds them on-site with really good components. And for an additional fee, they'll put a chocolate malt right there beside it and a batch of onion rings, and they don't have ferns and nothing on the menu is labelled 'artisanal'.

Came back home, Carlie waved at Art and Bekka who were working in their yard, and she and I climbed the steps back into the house.

"Round Two?" she asked.

"Lord, yes..."

"Don'tcha think we have too much clothing?"

"Yes, ma'am." And I was stripping.

Giggles. I love the giggles. Not 'giggles' like I'm being judged and ridiculed, but 'giggles' like 'I've found some really neat new ways to entertain us.'

Fact that I determined in the next couple of days – she's NOT insatiable. She's quick to reach orgasm. She just LIKES us coupling, mating, stimulating, touching, caressing, snuggling.

"We CAN, Bob! Any time we want."

So we did. For the next few days we saw sunlight long enough to meet dietary requirements. We'd dash out to eat, dash right back home, and find out things about each other.

I have limits. Blonde, blue-eyed, hundred pounds, a fingertip (not the one she has me wrapped around) flipped my depleted dick.

"Baby, I think we killed it."

"No, sweetness, I think it'll be back. It's NEVER had days like the last ones."

"Are you happy with me, baby?" she asked.

"Deliriously," I answered.

"You got enough strength left to pack bags for tomorrow?"

"I think so. Knees might be wobbly."

Giggle. "I'll be gentle with you later."

She twisted out of bed, stood up.

"Ouch!"

"You okay?"

"I have sore muscles. Wow!"

"See?!? Too much of a good thing."

"We'll both have to be gentle, huh?"

"Hug me, with our old tired selves."

Yeah, that works.

"Try something new," she said. "Clothes."

We got dressed, checked our overnight bags, added a few things for the next big adventure.

I gave Art a call.

"Oh, there you are ... Figured the vultures'd start circling any day now."

"It was a close thing, buddy."

"Hey, look, Bekka's in town. How about I tell 'er to get some good steaks. Maybe some fat, juicy rib-eyes. I got the makings of a pan of potato casserole. I'll get Bekka to get salad stuff."

"You're worth your weight in gold, buddy."

"Figured you need to keep your strength up."

"I'm lucky I can move at all," I laughed.

"How's our girl?"

I looked over in her direction. She was putting ice in glasses, preparatory to pouring each of us a root beer. She bit her bottom lip

in a smile, eyes twinkling.

"One word. Perky."

"Figures. I remember 'perky'."

"Yeah, sell that to somebody else. Bekka's worth her weight in gold, too."

"Lot more gold than when we got married. 'Course, there's more Bekka, too, and if you tell 'er I said that, I'll deny it first and kill you later."

Forty-five minutes later we walked downstairs and over to the Aucoin yard.

"Hi, Mizz Bekka," Carlie said.

"Hi, hon. You're an old married woman now. I can be just plain 'Bekka' if it's okay with you."

"That's wonderful, uh, Bekka ... I guess I'm sort of adult now. Still sixteen, though."

"If you can stand the separation, wanna join me in the kitchen? Salad stuff."

"Sure," wife said. The two of them walked off.

"Yep," Art said. "'Perky' fits."

"Always did. Some rift in the universe lets me experience a whole different dimension than just the joy of seeing her in my life."

"I get the feeling that she's real, Bob. Not one of those common variety teens I see all over the place."

We enjoyed the meal, talking about tomorrow's trip, Bekka and Carlie thinking they were terribly clever in exchanging thinly veiled double entendres. Final plan was to meet at seven in the morning, take breakfast at a diner near the interstate highway and then get on the road to the next adventure.

Carlie led me home, tugging my hand, waving and giggling.

"Oh, calm down, you," she said. "We're newlyweds. They KNOW what we're gonna be doing, and it's OKAY."

Inside the door, she turned to me. "You, sir, are over-dressed." She was shedding clothes as I chased her to the bed.

You can't rape the willing. That's one view. Another is how do you tell in that mess who was raping whom? It's like I fell into a teenaged boy's sex fantasy. I'm no love machine. I guess as males go, I might be on the soft end of the bell curve in actual experiences, and I know my partner was virgin at the beginning of the week, but for two novices, we sure do enjoy each other.

In the sticky rest period after the second session of the evening, I've got her in the crook of my arm. I'm on my side, my left hand idly tracing the strands of blonde hair flowing behind that pink conch of an ear.

"I wasn't boring before, was I, baby?" she asked.

"Before what?"

"Before we decided we'd be married."

"No, you weren't. I worried. I mean, I didn't have a wide selection of stranded waifs to choose from. I got very lucky. You could've been stupid, or regretting that you turned down ol' Marcus and company."

"What makes you think I'm not stupid?"

"Bright. Inquisitive. A 4.0 GPA on your report card. The fact that the school didn't kick when you told them you had to take a week off to take care of family matters."

"I am, you know. You might have to write them a note telling them that I have properly taken care of you."

"It'd read like erotic literature..."

"Not all of it. There are friends ... Art and Bekka. Food."

"Art and Bekka," I inserted.

"And tomorrow a foray into applied sciences." She giggled, pulled my head down for a kiss. "Of course, this has all been very educational. Physics – that whole 'friction' thing. Anatomy. Ergonomics. Physiology ... And I think we're the perfect combination of eager student and able teacher..."

"I think we've learned from each other."

"D'ya know how much I love you, Bob?"

"Enough to last the next few decades, I hope..."

"See?!?" she squeaked, "You're just thinking of ONE lifetime. I'm planning on reincarnation, coming back, finding you, and doing this all over again."

That did it. Time for a squash hug. I rolled over on top of her.

"Mmmmm. You know, I like feeling possessed like this. A piece is missing, though..."

I raised up, new-found erection and all. Pushed down.

"Ahhhhhh. There it is." She pulled me all the way down, her lips against mine.

"Absolutely wonderful," she sighed. "I'm all yours."

I wrapped her in my arms, rolled sideways. Now she's on top. "I'm yours, too."

After that one, we had a period of lassitude, then a shower. I can get used to showering with an angel. She's in a good mood, giggly, insistent on washing me thoroughly, as I am about her.

Squeal! "It's CLEAN!" she said.

"Wanna make sure we didn't get soap in it."

"Fresh water only," she said. "Soap irritates. Mine's not like yours..."

"Thank god," I said.

"Yours is easy to rinse." Her statement was emphasized by her hand stroking me. "Mine isn't. but YOU rinse and start things..."

"But I LIKE things."

"Mmmm," she grinned. "Me, too."

Ran out of hot water. That's a sign of things – one, check on getting a larger water heater, and two, get out of the shower and towel off. Third thing – towel shopping. Bigger and fluffier. And damn! She looks good naked.

Squeak! "You're hard again."

"Little naked blonde girls turn me on."

"If I'd've known that earlier..."

"You might take advantage of me."

"Only in the worst fashion," she giggled. "Make you my sex toy."

"A horrible, horrible fate," I sighed dramatically.

"Now, we do some research," she announced.

"What are we researching?"

"If wet hair turns you off. You know I don't blow-dry every night. Want my hair to look nice in case some guy's interested."

"I've never slept with a girl with wet hair."

Giggle. "By the time sleep takes place, it should be dry."

It was still just a tiny bit damp when she and I pulled into a pre-sleep snuggle, her cheek against my chest, and I do believe I heard her purring.

We had the alarm set. It woke both of us up. Morning breath? Apparently not an obstacle. Morning wood? Opportunity.

A happy finding is that quickies are not as exploitive when both partners climax. It's especially satisfying when your little blonde muffin rolls away and says "Wow!"

Shower. Dressed. Out the door at a minute before seven, just in time to see Art opening his front door.

Bekka followed him. We all loaded into Art's big SUV and off we went. Had breakfast, per the plan, and a bit after noon, we were signing papers at the little airfield.

"It's yours," Gary Caston said. "Hope you have as many happy hours with 'er as I have." He kissed the old plane on its yellow cowling.

"One more flight?" I asked.

"You got time?" Gary asked.

"Sure. I need to give Art and Bekka rides, too, because they brought us here."

"An' you married this little doll," Gary observed. "You get HER and my Cub?"

"Life is good," I shrugged. "What can I say."

Gary and I made a wide circuit of the field, him in the back seat – “Many an hour here, Bob.” – and landed, taxied back to the hangar where everybody was waiting. Carlie gave him a hug and a kiss.

“We’ll send you pictures of ‘er new home, Mister Gary,” she said.

“I ‘preciate that, darlin’,” he replied. “And if ever, for some odd reason, y’all end up back over here, gimme a call.”

“We’ll do that.”

It was kind of sad watching him drive off.

The warm engine started on first try for me to take Bekka, then Art, for a little flight. After that, we topped our little yellow angel off and put her back in the hangar.

This is Texas in general, and that part of Texas in specific where barbecue approaches religion, so what the four of us did for dinner was a given. Brisket, sausage, beans, sweet onions...

Back at the hotel, I told my little wife “Onion breath.”

“Me, too, so don’t be flakin’ out.”

“All those nights I managed to be in a hotel room with you...” I started.

“And it was only the greatest self-restraint that kept me from crawling in your bed in the middle of the night and molesting you,” she laughed.

“Yeah. We’d’ve collided in the dark.”

“Maybe we should have.”

“We’re making up for it, and our karma’s the better for waiting.”

“Wait on this,” she said, insinuating her body against me, taking a kiss.

“Oh, yeah...”

Shower. Kinda crowded. Hotel showers are recreational only at the vestigial level. We worked on it, though.

Since she donned her night shirt (no panties!) I surmised that immediate sex wasn’t happening.

“Now, let’s look at our chart again. Trip home.”

I laid the sectional chart on the bed. "Here's where we start. We won't plan on more than a hundred fifty miles range, so..."

"Two legs," she said. We'd been over this before. "Big lump of problems in Houston. There's Pearland, right under the Class B airspace, so..."

"Altitude?"

"2000 feet. Refuel at Pearland, then stay low until we get to Galveston Bay, and we keep a little bit south of the direct route so we bypass Beaumont's traffic area and then it's straight to the home field."

"Very good," I said. "What are we REALLY gonna do?"

"Get past the bay, hit Interstate 10, fly on the south side of it, and when we get close to home, the field's five miles south of the interstate."

"IFR," I laughed. "I Follow Roads."

"I'm excited," she smiled.

"Me too. And tomorrow we're gonna fly home."

"I meant about the plane."

"Ohhhhhh, I thought..."

She started folding the chart. "Baby, that bit of excitement is a constant. Now..."

"Y'know, I've watched you so many times in this stupid night shirt. I always wanted to raise it..."

"I'm here to fulfil your lurid dreams, sir."

I lifted it up. "No panties. You always wore panties."

Giggle. "Maybe I did. Maybe I didn't."

"You did. I looked..."

"You DOGGG!" she squealed.

"Can't help being a human male, darlin'. Had you bouncing around my house all day. Couldn't help but look."

Giggle. "You know I looked, too."

"I thought I caught you once. I really tried not to have an erection, but temptation..."

"I think we were both careful. For me, it had to be right. I knew it was gonna be, but the timing..."

"Has been perfect. And I like it better when I can see it..." her hand reached, "... and touch it..." and she slid down in the bed, "... and ... mmmmm." She sat up. "Let's get the covers down. I need..."

"What do you need, little girl?"

She was on hands and knees. "Do you like my heinie, mister?"

I growled. Perfect little round thing, puffy pussy lips there, already slick.

"A peach," I said. "A perfect, juicy peach."

"Don't ... Oh, please lick it a little, but I want..."

I licked it. Licked everything within range. I mean, just out of the shower, clean, fragrant.

Then... "I would like you in me..."

Yeah, experimentation. We'd worked every position we could envision. She liked...

"Doggy style."

"You know I can't..."

"And your point, sir? Go ahead, come your brains out in my poor little pussy, then I get what's left, and when I get you hard again, I will wear myself out on you..."

Slid right in. To the hilt. Happiest six inches in the universe.

"I love the feel of you pushing your way in. Feels like I'm being filled." Wiggle. "Push!"

I pushed.

"I feel your balls. You're..." I pushed. "... so deep..."

"Can't last," I hissed.

"Do it ... I wanna feel it spurt."

Like I was shooting fire.

"Lay down, you..."

"Yes, ma'am."

She kissed me. Fingers touched my depleted dick. "Poor thing. So sad. All sticky. Maybe if I kiss him he will feel better."

Like I was gonna stop her. Of course, 'kiss' turned into 'suck Bob inside out'. Bob's just fine with it.

"Get your little tootie in range, dear," I said.

She tossed a leg over me. My personal view of nirvana. I ain't gonna come from this, but she is. Twice.

And the third for her arrived in conjunction with my second. That was enough, though. Alarm set for seven.

"Change it to six-thirty," Carlie said. "Need a shower in the morning."

We did. Because somewhere around two AM I was awaked by a foul succubus working her sin on me, draining my essence.

Of course, I gathered her essence all over my face.

"Always wanted my very own succubus," I told her in the aftermath.

"I'm a SUCCUBUS? I thought YOU were a horrible incubus, working your seductions within my dreams."

"Well, to be a proper incubus, I must insist on penetration. Since you've been succubusing me pretty good, I must incubus you equally artfully."

Yeah. It's fine fun.

A little more fun before we rolled out of bed the next morning, packed up, met Art and Bekka in the lobby and set out for breakfast a couple of notches up from the hotel's freebie. Then it was off to the airfield. I unlocked the T-hangar, Carlie and I rolled the old girl out into the sunlight, did the pre-flight inspection. Yep, it's got oil. Fuel? I filled 'er up yesterday, so we're looking at twelve gallons, as evidenced by a wire sticking up through the fuel cap. The wire's all the way up, so we're full. It's connected to a cork float, so as the level drops, the cork follows, and the wire goes down.

At cruise, we'll burn four of those gallons an hour while making seventy-five miles an hour, so our two hundred twenty miles prudently includes a fuel stop, and a 'stretch your legs' function is inherent in that stop. 1930s aircraft are not notoriously comfortable and it's not like you can get up and walk up and down the aisles.

With Carlie in the cockpit, the little engine started on the second try. I got in the back seat – that's where Cubs are soloed from – and waved bye to Art and Bekka, and we were off.

She's a Cub. Off the ground before we hit '60' on the airspeed, holding 65 for climb, got to 3500 feet, pointed generally northeast, and watched as the miles slid by at a stately pace, chatting over the simple intercom. Without it, engine noise, wind noise together make conversation a yelling match and she's facing the wrong way anyway.

We take turns flying. The only concession to ease of control is the elevator trim. It allows you, with careful manipulation, to fly hands-off, but if one of us leans sideways, we start gently turning. Same thing for leaning forward or sitting back. It's not drastic, but the two of us are a significant percentage of the total weight and equilibrium takes a bit of a beating.

With the aeronautical chart in my lap, we followed US Highway 59 to Rosenberg, dropped down to two thousand feet, headed east and put our wheels on the ground at Pearland.

I felt almost guilty pumping five gallons of avgas into the tank. Still used the restrooms, though. Next leg is the long one.

Out of Pearland, we headed east until we got to the middle of Galveston Bay, then climbing, we got to our 3500 foot cruising altitude and angled northeast to catch Interstate 10. That's our navigational aid for getting past the airspace around the airport next to Beaumont, Texas.

"Bored to death?" I asked.

"Not hardly. I feel positively historical," Carlie laughed.

We looked down on the highway off to our left and there are indeed cars passing us.

At this altitude, you're almost participating in the lives happening below. You see people, their homes, yards, the places where they work. Carlie and I kept a running conversation, stream of consciousness to go with the terrain streaming leisurely below us.

We crossed the swamps that paralleled the Sabine River between Texas

and Louisiana, knowing we were twenty miles from home.

Carlie called Bekka to check on their progress. Oddly enough, we were pretty much parallel, their progress impeded by Houston traffic, ours by our cruise speed and the fuel stop, and per the plans they were heading to the new home for our plane, providing us with the ride home from the airfield.

This time it's EIGHT gallons of gas. The Cub's put away in her new hangar, and we're on the way to the house.

"That's TWO big adventures this week," Carlie trilled. "Wonder what's next."

Chapter 12

Carlie's turn:

A few months ago there was a scared, worried girl at a bus station.

Seems like a fairy tale.

A few months ago, a poor little unfortunate princess found herself a prince. He presented her with a weird little castle on stilts next to a lake in Louisiana, married her, and gave her wings.

No, really! WINGS! They might be over seventy years old, bright yellow, and slow, but in my entire high school class I am the only one in possession of a student pilot's license. I am also in possession of a 4.0 grade point average since I showed up.

And another thing. I have a wedding band, a husband who can support me (but doesn't need to) and I don't have a positive pregnancy test or a toddler running around.

I didn't hide the fact that I was married, nor did I flaunt it. It was known amongst a few close friends, and from there it leaked out.

Naturally, Jessica's the first to know.

"I won't be going to school next week," I told her before the wedding.

"Something wrong?"

"Noooo," I said. "Something perfectly right. I'm marrying Bob."

"Uhhh," she said, exasperation rampant, "Are you bein' exploited, Carlie?"

"No, Jess. Bob'd never hurt me in any way."

"He's too old..."

"Nope," I said. "He's perfect. Good to me. YOU said you thought he was good-looking..."

"I didn't mean marry him."

"Well, we are gonna..."

"Seriously..."

"I've decided..."

"I knew it. You were living there. I knew there was..."

"There hasn't been, Jess. Swear. I'm a virgin."

"And you..."

"Have kissed him. That's all. Even went out of town, stayed in the same hotel room. Nothing. He respects me and he respects the institution."

"And you're marrying him. Like in 'forever'."

"Yes, I am."

"When?"

"As soon as HE asks me. It won't be long. Then we have some legal things. But next week."

"He hasn't asked yet?"

"I know he wants to. He's scared. Trying to be honorable about me bein' there. I think the honorable thing is for us to get married. He'll do it."

By the time the week was over, the news was all around school.

I picked Jess up Monday morning.

"Girl, you're sooooo pregnant..."

"I am?"

"Gotta be right. It's the consensus."

But I wasn't pregnant, showed up at school every day, smiled at people, even a few that didn't actually rate smiles. I did my work, helped out a few who wanted help. But social life? That begins when the bell rings at the end of the day. It's almost always Jess and me. Occasionally we'll drag another.

"So is today a flying day?" Jess asked me.

"Yep. Instructor's gonna meet me after I drop you off and get to the airport."

"You got a problem with me comin' along, watchin'? Never saw anybody learning to fly."

"Tell you what – today's a day I don't fly MY plane. I can call Bob, have him meet us there, if you want to go up in my airplane."

"Your airplane. That's just cool..." she laughed.

"Yeah, when people think it's a Gulfstream or something. Seventy-year-old Cubs are another thing. Nobody knows what I'm talking about."

Jess got her airplane ride. I'm on track right now. Instructor says I'm ready to go. All I have to do is stay proficient until I turn seventeen, then I get my private license. In the meantime, I can go drag the old airplane out and fly by myself, but that seldom happens. Sometimes I make Bob sit in the front seat because I like flying from the back seat, like I do when I'm solo.

Only time I'm solo, though, is for specific training purposes. I learned to fly because Bob opened that path for me. He's who I'm meant to fly with.

We got crazy, flew down to the coast, landed on an isolated stretch of beach. Romantic walks on the beach? Did it. Pulled a silly little tent, a couple of sleeping bags, an air mattress and a meal out of our hats to camp overnight.

Bad idea. Salt water makes you sticky. Uncomfortable. But we did it and we laughed about doing it together. We flew back home, put the Cub away, drove madly to the house.

I can't ever remember a shower being more welcome as we sluiced the salt off ourselves.

Spent the rest of the day naked. Had nothing to do with salt.

"Okay, the salt water's a mistake, baby," I laughed. "But try this on for size."

"What?"

"No water. Desert. We work our way west. Figure out an itinerary, call up the airport, tell 'em to expect a UPS package from us. That'll be a couple of days' supplies. We fly there, taking a couple of days like we did, camping. Get our fresh stuff, ship the old stuff home."

"One problem, Sunshine," he said. "You're a student. By the time school's out, the desert'll be too hot to be fun..."

"So we'll do a little one for spring break..."

Come spring break, we did exactly that. Little country airports. The only criteria was they had to have an FBO so we could buy fuel and they could receive and send packages. Most of them just smiled when they found out that we were air-camping in a J-3 Cub.

"Like something out of the fifties," one old guy said. He pointed out the waterhose. "Nobody around after I leave, most evenings," he said. "We ain't got a shower, but you're welcome to the hose. And I'll leave you a key to the office so you can use the restrooms."

"We'll wait until you show up tomorrow," Bob said.

"Nah, if you wanna leave early, just slide the key under the door."

"Well thank you, sir," Bob said.

Nice thing is that springtime is when the desert blooms. Air is crisp, necessitating zipping two sleeping bags together and doing power snuggling. There are other ways to generate heat as well.

Oh yeah, sex hasn't slowed down a bit. If anything, we're more into each other now. It's almost like breathing to us. Oh, I love it. It's us in our most basic level, no set time nor place, but honestly, the ones in bed are really the best. The guy has mastered me. He knows about the little spots just above my nipples, the ones behind my ears. And below my waist, there's this thing he does with his tongue that has me bucking like a rodeo horse in three minutes.

Of course, there's the converse. I can render him catatonic. Ask him about getting sucked off in the middle of the lake when the fish weren't biting. Well, if the fish wouldn't, then Carlie certainly would.

"Somebody could've seen us, baby..."

"Oh, sure," I said, making a show of wiping a non-existent drop from the corner of my mouth. "Now you complain..."

"Well ... Okay, stinker. Wow! Just holy wow! I adore you, and it's stuff like this..."

I giggled. "You finally admit that you married me for sex."

"Never said I didn't, darlin'," he smiled. "Just so you realize there are OTHER things. But this was memorable."

"I bet so. How many times in a man's life does he expect to get blown in the middle of the lake?"

"I can die happy," he sighed.

"Oughta get a boat with a cabin. I think water makes me horny."

"There's NO WAY we're gonna get our bare asses showin' out here," he declaimed.

Fifteen minutes later.

"There WAS a way..." I sighed. "Now I got goop all up in my panties."

I started the boat's little outboard up, heading us back home. Poor Bob. He's still sitting there shaking his head.

Hard to talk over the buzz of the outboard. We put the boat away and I walked up the stairs. I think I was squelching. Bob was behind me because "You have no idea how mad I used to get at myself for watching your heinie climbing stairs."

Door closed. "Shower!" I said.

"Next time you accost me in the middle of the lake, make sure we have more paper towels or something," he laughed, stripping down.

Love him in the shower with me. Soap and water enhance the worship of my body by loving hands. Reciprocal.

Hot shower. Best way to cool off is to lay out on the bed, completely naked.

Tuned. We're tuned to each other's wavelength. We lay flat, side by side for a bit, cooling off, then his fingertips touch mine.

"It's been an hour," I said.

"What do you have in mind, little girl?"

"Are you cooled off?"

"I am."

"Perhaps you could give me a gentle eating. I will ... Sixty-nine?"

"Wonderful."

When I rolled over towards him, I kissed him. He still cradles my head when I do that, and it's pure reverence.

"You're so damned beautiful, Carlie."

"You make me feel like it, Bob." I touched. "You're so hard."

"Orgasms on the lake don't count," he laughed.

"We start at zero. I like the first one," I laughed.

"So do I," he countered. "Pure, sweet Carlie." He brushed his fingertips across my cheek.

"Would I still be pure and sweet if I planted my coochie in your face?"

"More so."

I find it beautiful. My guy. His dick. Mine. Kissed, sucked the head into wet lips, shuddered when he started.

Okay. Morning fishing trip. Now, afternoon delight. And a nap. How did you spend YOUR Saturday?

Phone call. Grilled burgers. A chilled watermelon. Art and Bekka and Jessica and her folks, Mister Chris and Mizz Jamie. Beers for the adults, cold drinks for me and Jessica. Good conversation.

"Y'all know it looks weird," Mizz Jamie said.

"I know," Bob admitted. "Got exploitation written all over it."

"That's what I thought," Bekka inserted. "When he first brought 'er home ... Then she just seemed to be at home there. And then she pops up and wants to get married."

"Married," I said. "Bob's my hero. Rescuer. Friend. But you know, you have a friend of the opposite sex, you kinda start thinking, is 'friend' all there is to it?"

"That's how Chris and I ended up together."

"Is not," he laughed. "I won 'er in the lottery."

"Daa-addd!" Jess squealed. "Be nice."

"I AM nice," he laughed. "Her or a new pick-up truck. I'd've gone through four or five pickups. Still got the same Jamie." The connection they made with their eyes over that exchange was easy to decipher.

Jess and I had talked more than once about how many kids in school with us still had both the original parents married to each other. The number's sadly smaller than you'd think.

"I intend for that to be me and Bob," I told Jessica.

"He's older, though."

"He's healthy. He'll live to eighty, easy. I intend to push his cardio workouts..."

"Carlie!" she squeaked. "I don't wanna talk about y'all having sex!"

"Jessica Carrick!" I squeaked back. "YOU have a dirty mind. We bike. We kayak. Couple or three or four times a week."

"Yeah, uh-huh," she smirked. "That's exactly what you meant."

"I did." Well, maybe I meant the other stuff, just a little bit. I shouldn't do that. Jessica's a good girl. She's admitted to some heavy petting and giving a hand-job, but that's it. Bob's gotten a handjob or two, or a bunch ... When I'm on my period, I want to ... I WANT to do things to – for – him.

Up until last month when I just couldn't stand it.

He walked into the bedroom, right before we shower.

"What's that?"

"Brown towel."

"We don't have brown towels."

"We got one. So if ... Bob, I need you..."

"Thought that was off the table."

"It's on the table. You have a horny wife, Bob. Whatcha gonna do about it?"

"Use that towel."

My knees were still weakened from the orgasm as we hit the shower, me with the towel clinked between my legs, him smeared with reddish-brown, even though I tried to wipe off the worst.

"Miracle," I giggled, soaping his dong. "It washes right off." Then, "Ahhhhhhh! Dammit, Bob, you know exactly where to go."

"You're my Carlie."

"That's true. And you're my Bob, and I hope I didn't gross you out..."

"No way. I always want you, baby, any way I can get you."

"You got me good..." his fingers circled, slid. "You're ... Oh, dammitttttt," I hissed, sagging against him. He was holding me up with one arm. The hand at the end of the other one... "OHYEAHHHHH!!!!"

He's very happy when I'm happy.

Summer crept up slowly for me. I think it did for Bob, too. We sat down one night a month, looking at the investment accounts, his and mine.

"We're not rolling in dough," he said, "But..."

"But I don't want you to go to work and leave me this summer, Bob."

"Oh, I'd wait until you went back to school and then I'd get a staff job at one of the engineering houses, and we'd both be gone during the day."

"If you WANT to, Bob. How about you keep doing that free-lance thing? As long as you don't leave me..."

"I might have to go to out-of-town meetings."

"I guess I could get Jess to come stay with me."

"Or you could come with me, spend a day in a hotel reading or whatever, then..."

I giggled. "I dunno. Hotel rooms make me horny. Even that first time."

I'd confessed to diddling myself silly with him asleep in the bed next to mine.

"I think my heart can stand it."

"We'll see. We don't have to be too frugal. Not really."

"We got summer vacation plans," I said. "Mountains. Cooler climes."

"And I can't wait," he smiled.

Bob's turn:

I knew it when I gave in to the idea that I really DID love Carlie 'that way'. 'Wife', not 'ward'. Do they even do wards any more? I knew that the easy-going, bright girl I found would be an equally easy-going wife. With a bit of adventure in her head.

Pushes ol' Bob outside his comfort zones. The Cub sees us two or three times a week. As summer creeps in, it's late in the day, after the heat, in that little narrow gap between getting beat to death by the sun and twilight, when all good Cubs (that don't have electrical systems, therefore, no lights) must go to bed.

My old aluminum boat has been joined by a pontoon boat that is perfectly at home on the lake, and the silly thing has a vestigial cabin so...

"Drop the anchor, Bob. Water makes me..."

I dropped the anchor over the side. Yee-hah!

She comes in from school, showing me signs of success. We're looking at an academic scholarship, and there's a local college.

"Major in whatever, baby," I told her. "You don't need a job. We got that covered."

"Talk to me about options."

"Do what you love..."

"Besides you, I don't know what I love. I love reading, I love writing..."

"There you go. Do what you love."

Okay, I guess I can get by with that phrase only a limited number of times before she's grinning, kneeling between my knees, fishing my dick out through the loose leg of my shorts.

I gasped, even though I knew what she was going to do. Bright blue eyes. "I love this."

"You do that, you won't have to worry about a living. I'll keep you

around...”

“You’ll keep me around just to see what happens next,” she giggled.

The giggle. I’m weak. It gets me, and she’s gotta be careful, because it triggers a strong desire in me to roll her onto her back and severely kiss her, and if it leads to more, oh, well...

Today she came in after school, dumped her backpack, found me at my computer, typing into a document for an industrial client who needed some engineering work. Arms went around me, her face nuzzling my neck.

“Your day as exciting as mine?” I asked.

“Looking at the document, probably so. Finals next week. Teachers are reviewing for most of the class. They need it. I don’t.”

I did a document save. “Cub afternoon?”

“Yeah, exactly. And we’ll catch dinner when we finish.”

So it’s life, you know. Late evening – damned daylight savings time – it’s still daylight at eight PM – we’re sitting outside listening to the end of the day, a lawn being mowed in the distance, a ship far away on the deepwater ship channel, frog chorus, which often means rain coming.

We’re side by side, sideways across our big hammock, swaying gently.

Pensive.

“Still what you want, little girl?”

“Only forever.”

The End

If you liked the story, please take time to email me:
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