1. Christina (Mf, Cons, Rom, Slow)

# Chapter 1

Three hours worth of driving of the very worst sort. My trip was mixed in with the evacuation of parts of two states in the face of a hurricane barreling down on the Gulf Coast, and after white-knuckling a mere hundred miles, I pulled onto a secondary road thinking that maybe, just maybe, that the traffic would be less than the main highways. I was only partially correct, and I finally heeded my stomach's growling and pulled my rig into a roadside diner in a small town in north Louisiana.

I asked for, and got, a seat at a table in the corner, my back to the wall, so I could relax without dodging other clientele and also watch what was going on. Evacuations were sort of like kicking over the rotten log of civilization. You never knew what was going to scurry out into the sunlight.

I was entertaining a breakfast of steak and eggs, pretty nicely done, actually, and noticing the activity at a nearby booth. The occupants looked to be some bozo in maybe his early forties, around my age, a woman maybe five or so years younger, and a teen girl, I'm estimating maybe sixteen or seventeen at this point. They're just a little too far away for me to make out the conversation, but it doesn't appear to be too cordial, from the expressions of the participants.

I heard "mumble mumble mumble" from the guy, mumble mumble mumble" from the older female, and then "mumble mumble mumble" from the teen girl, except her voice had a tone of hurt and a bit of fright. Not my business. I forked another load of steak and eggs into my mouth.

The conversation changed. The guy's voice got loud, as in "MUMBLE MUMBLE" pause "MUMBLE MUMBLE MUMBLE" apparently directed at the teen who replied with a shake of chestnut hair, "mumble mumble".

The loudness put me on alert. I mean, country diner and all, you didn't expect to see people acting like this, and heads were turning in the direction of this one booth.

The guy got loud enough to understand. His actions made it even easier to understand. "YOU UNGRATEFUL LITTLE BITCH!!!!" and he reached across the booth table and grabbed the front of her blouse, yanking, pulling her up as he rose. His free hand was coming back. It didn't take a lot of analysis to see what was coming next.

Me.

I stood up and pushed around my table. "HOLD!" I said, in my best command voice.

The dude dropped his free hand, shoved the girl backward against the back of the booth and turned towards me. "Boy!" he hissed. "You need to mind YOUR own fuckin' business!" I outweighed him and out-reached him and was a good six inches taller. Bad odds. His right hand started into his pocket. The situation had just escalated.

My own right hand went across my midsection under my shirt-tail and came out with a compact 9mm pistol.

"Bud," I said, "if that hand doesn't come out of that pocket VERY slowly and VERY empty, you're gonna have a big hole in you."

His hand came out, slowly. The girl had slid down in the booth and was trying to get herself up from halfway on the floor. The older woman was screaming, "He's got a gun!" I didn't parse that very well. My own gun was obvious. Was she talking about her companion? The poor waitress was back behind the counter.

"Call 9-1-1," I said. "We need some law here. Fast!"

"They're on the way. I called when he raised his voice."

Indeed they were fast. Scarcely a minute and half passed, me holding the guy at gunpoint, when I saw the flashing lights and a deputy sheriff pushed through the door, gun drawn.

Three people said at the same time, "NOT HIM!" as I two-fingered the gun delicately onto the table and stepped back. A second car pulled into the parking lot, lights blinking mad blue. A second deputy was in the place in a few seconds.

"Hurley!" screamed the waitress. "It's not the big guy!" I was the big guy. 6' 2", 200 pounds. I locked my fingers on top of my head, frozen. I mean, you never know with the small town cops, who's trigger happy, who's scared shitless, and any bad move, well…

"Hurley" was apparently the deputy who was first on the scene. He kept that damned pistol of his at eye level, midway between me and the bozo who started the mess. He addressed me. "Sir! Do you have any other weapons on you?"

"Yessir," I said. "I've got a folding knife hanging in my right pants pocket."

"Carefully remove the knife and put it on the table and step back."

I'm thinking that Deputy Hurley's thinking isn't really good if he lets me step close to the table with the gun laying on it, but I drop my right hand very slowly and remove the knife clipped in my pocket with a thumb and index finger and drop it softly on the table. And I step back. Hurley steps up and sticks my pistol and knife in his thigh pocket. He's looking at his partner.

"Jim," Hurley says, "That guy clean?"

"Jim" answers, "I haven't checked."

I know what comes next. "Sir," says Hurley, "turn around and put your hands behind your back."

And there I am, in the dining room of a Louisiana restaurant, in handcuffs. They perform a similar operation on the doofus and have a lot more fun with him, retrieving a little black automatic pistol from his pants pocket. Yeah. The pocket he was reaching into. Now he's in cuffs, too, and they're marching all four of us, me, the doofus, the middle-aged chick, and the teen girl, all of us, out into the parking lot. Now comes the fun part, where they try to unravel the story.

The waitress is out there too. And half the clientele, apparently regulars. And if you're a regular at a small town diner, you also get pretty familiar with the cops, so nobody was getting run off. They were the witnesses.

They started with the girl. Deputy Hurley asked, "Miss, do you have some ID?"

"I-in my purse," she sniffled. "It's at the table."

Hurley spoke to one old guy standing nearby. "Unka Bob, can you get this young lady's purse?" The old guy left and Hurley turned his attention back to the teen. "What's your name?"

"Tina. Christina Johnson," she sobbed, still shaken by the rush of events.

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"Now, very carefully, tell me what happened." He reached in his shirt pocket and pulled out a little recorder and punched a button.

"I- We were having breakfast, and had an argument, and Mister Jeff grabbed me and started to slap me." Sob. "And that guy stood up and told ‘im to stop. An' Mister Jeff was pissed and threw me down and started to go for that pistol, ‘cept that guy (me) was faster. Mister Jeff put his hands up an' you came in."

Hurley looked at me, then the doofus. "What was the argument about?"

Tina took a deep breath. "He said they didn't have enough money for breakfast an' cigarettes, and I was eatin' too much an' to give him my money so he could buy cigarettes. An' I told ‘im "no" an' he called me an ungrateful little bitch an' grabbed me."

By that time Unka Bob was back with Tina's purse. He handed it to the deputy. The deputy eyed Tina. "Is there anything in there I need to worry about?"

Tina took another breath, trying to control her sobs. She shook her head. "No sir. My wallet. Tampons. Pictures. Little notebook. A pen."

He handed her the purse. "Show me your ID." She complied. He examined it and handed it back to her.

I was next. He stood in front of me, six feet away. "And you're?"

"Alan Dean Addison. Forty-one. From…" I named my home town.

"You heard what Miss Tina said?"

"Yessir," I said. Damned straight I called him 'sir', despite him being at least a decade my junior. The guy was small town law enforcement and I was, in my own mind, 100% legal in my actions, but also 100% at his mercy as far as resolving the situation with the least pain to me.

"Is that pretty much what you saw go down?"

"Yessir," I said. "Except I didn't hear any of the conversation before he yelled "You ungrateful little bitch" and grabbed her. He was hauling his right hand back to slap her when I told him to stop. He threw her down, turned at me and said mind my own business and started reaching into his pocket. That's when I drew."

"Uh, Mister Addison, I'm gonna undo your cuffs. I want to see your ID. Don't move fast."

Freed, I very gingerly removed my wallet and retrieved two pieces of ID, a state drivers' license and a permit that allowed me to legally carry a concealed handgun. Hurley looked them both over and handed them back to me.

"So, you're carrying legally. That's one for you."

"Hurley. Son!" Unka Bob was interrupting.

Hurley turned. "Yessir?"

Unka Bob smiled at me. "This feller," he said, pointing to me, "saved that little girl a butt-kickin'"

The waitress intruded on the scene and joined in, "Yeah, I called your cell when that bunch started gettin' loud. Before he grabbed her. This guy stepped in just in time."

Things were lining up for me. Hurley looked at me. "Mister Addison, can you wait here? I need to get back with you."

Deputy #2 was going through the purse of the adult woman, and there were some curious artifacts laid out on the hood of his squad car, many of them involving tiny plastic bags. The guy was already sitting in the back seat, behind a closed door. The woman ended up in the other police unit, still in cuffs. Their car was an older Japanese import and by the time the deputies started going through it, a state police crime lab unit was on the way. Drugs.

Deputy Hurley approached me. "What are you driving?"

"That rig over there," I said, pointing to my "on the road" rig, a big silver diesel pickup truck towing a thirty-five foot travel trailer.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "Can you follow us to the station? I'm gonna need a statement."

"Sure," I said. "I hope you have room for me to pull in. That's a bitch to back up."

He laughed. "We'll fix you up." And there was forgotten participant. Miss Tina. Hurley looked at her. She'd regained composure. Was standing there, all five-foot seven or eight (tall girl) of her, hips a little wider than a bikini model, the tiniest bit of a muffin top over her tight jean shorts, her blue cotton blouse knotted just above the beltline of the shorts. Auburn hair. Blue eyes. And pissed.

"What about me?" she asked. Hurley's eyes darted back and forth between his car and his partner's, each with a handcuffed suspect in the back seat. Hurley opened his passenger side door for her and the doofus in the back began screaming and cursing her. He took her to the other car, and got much the same treatment from the woman.

He looked at me. At her. At me. "You saved ‘er. Got any problem with giving her a ride? Miss Tina? "Is that okay?"

Tina looked at me. "I suppose."

"Wait a second," I said. I spotted the waitress and pulled out a twenty and a five dollar bill. Handing it to her, I said, "This'll cover my breakfast. And that little lady's. And your tip." I turned back to the deputy. "Let's go, then." I turned to the second deputy. "How about some flashy light stuff so I can get this thing out of the parking lot?"

"Sure," he said. "You just gave her like a six dollar tip. You gonna ruin ‘er for the rest of us."

"Yeah," I said. "But her day went all to hell. Figure she could use a boost."

Lights flashing, I followed as we crossed the steady stream of hurricane evacuees and I followed him to the sheriff's office. True to their word, they led me around in a big parking lot so I didn't have to fight that long trailer. Tina didn't say a word the whole trip. It wasn't a long trip. Just awfully silent.

We followed the deputy into the building. He motioned to a set of chairs. "Ya'll can wait here. Wanna coke? Coffee?"

"Coffee would be nice," I said. I looked at Tina. "You want something?"

"Coffee, I guess," she said.

"Coffee pot's in here," the deputy motioned, looked, then said "I'll get somebody to make a fresh pot."

About that time, the entry door opened and the waitress from the restaurant walked in. She immediately went to Tina's side. "Hon," she cooed, "Are you okay?"

Tina nodded. "He saved me."

"Uh-huh," said the waitress. "That man was getting ready to knock the crap out of you."

Tina shook her head. "He was." She looked at me. "Uh, mister, I don't remember your name."

"Alan" I said. "Alan Addison. And you're..."

"Tina. Christina Johnson. Thank you. For stopping him."

"It's okay, Tina. I'm glad I could help."

The deputy stuck his head in the door. "Folks..." and then he saw the waitress. "Hi, Debbie," he said. "Uh, folks, the coffee's ready."

Debbie laughed. "I can do without another sniff of coffee today. You got some paper for me to write my statement on?"

"Sure," he said. "Just a sec." He ducked away, then back, handing Debbie a few forms. "Just write it out in your own words. I'll come by the restaurant in the morning and get 'em." He turned to us. "Come help yourself."

We stood, and I let Tina go first. She fixed herself a cup of coffee, then I fixed mine as she watched. I took a sip, savoring the aroma of the steam.

"Gah... I still have the jitters, Mister Alan," she said.

"I'm kinda the same way."

"You pulled your gun on 'im."

"I didn't have much choice, Tina. He was... well, I didn't know what he was going to do. Gun. Knife. Whatever. And I wasn't going to stand there and watch him slap you around. Did I hear correctly? He wanted your money to buy cigarettes?"

"Yeah. Cigarettes. And Mom was mad because I didn't give it to him. I babysitted for that money. It was all I had."

"That was your dad?"

"God, no! Mom's current boyfriend. I hate 'im. He hates me. Doesn't want me around. We evacuated an' he's got friends in Arkansas. I honestly don't think I'd've come home alive. Really."

We walked back into the waiting room. "So now what do you do?"

"I don't know. Mom was all I had. I've been living with her for nine months since Grandma died. I was living with Grandma for the past five years while Mom did her thing... uh, make that THINGS. Like that guy."

"Do you have any other relatives? Grandparents? Aunts? Uncles?"

"Not that I know of. If I had something better, I'd be doing it. And it wouldn't take much to be better than Mom and her druggie friends. I'm seventeen. I'd run away, but I don't know where to run."

"Gosh."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mister Alan. I don't mean to drag you down." She sighed.

I looked a little longer. She was not unattractive, even under adverse circumstances. I mean, evacuation by car is not conducive to good hygiene or personal care, but even with her hair in a bit of disarray (being thrown to the floor will do that) and face tracked with dried tears, she was cute. Maybe not a centerfold cute, but cute.

"You're not dragging me down, Tina. Everybody's got stories."

She sighed. "So what's yours? You evacuating too?"

I smiled. "Oddly enough, no. I just got caught in it. I'm on my way to a project in Tennessee. New factory's being built, and I'm the guy they chose to build the electrical part. I'm an electrical engineer."

"And you bring your travel trailer?"

"Yeah. I researched RV parks until I found one that sounds good, willing to put up with me for a few months, off the beaten path, and I'll park the trailer there and live out of it for the duration of the project."

"Is that good money?"

"Yeah, pretty nice. They pay me a hundred and seventy five dollars a day to live there. My hour rate works out to seventy-five bucks an hour. Plus I get a hefty bonus if I stay until the project completes, plus we get bonuses if we make certain milestones on the schedules."

"Gosh. And you're just going there? Today?"

"No, I was planning on a night in a motel on the way. About halfway. But right now I'm sitting in a sheriff's office in Armpit, Louisiana instead of driving, so I don't know how far behind I'm going to be. I wasn't supposed to start for a week anyway."

"Oh."

"So what happens to Tina?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm sure there's a shelter or something."

"Or something." I was thinking. Shouldn't be. But was. After all, I'd already helped once today.

Another deputy stuck his head in the door. "Uh, could you folks come back here with me?"

Tina and I ended up in separate offices. I imagine she was doing what I was doing, getting another round of interviews about what happened.

I'm good at interviews. I interview lots of people for jobs, from shovel-jockey to engineer, so I know how to handle myself. And I was having fun, once the pressure was off. I gave them all they wanted to know. The deputy who did the interview was sympathetic to my position. Asked about my holster, my gun, my carry, how often I practiced. I took him out and showed him my travel trailer, a heavily modified floor plan I'd ordered special for MY requirements. And the truck. A nice pickup truck is like a social event in some circles, and although it was only a tool to me, I knew that some people liked seeing one well turned out. They were finished with me. I got my pistol and my knife back.

I was walking up the hall and I saw Tina sitting in an office. I saw Deputy Hurley sitting in another office. I knocked on his door. "Hey," I said. "I want to thank you for the professional job you guys did today." A little honey catches flies, you know. "Can I ask about the other people? What's happening?"

"Uh," he said, "Off the record, you know..."

"Of course," I said.

"The guy, your buddy? Outstanding warrants. A bunch. Parole violation with him having a gun. And drugs. Intent to distribute. That puts him in state and Federal jurisdiction. He ain't comin' out any time soon."

"I ain't supposed to say "he looked the type..." I started.

Hurley finished. "He looked the type. And the adult woman, damn near as bad. Parole violation. Probation for previous drug offenses. Prostitution. And drugs in her purse. She's gone."

"Uh, what about Miss Tina?"

"That's the tough part. Best we can tell, she's never been in trouble. Not even a traffic ticket. Her personal possessions are clean. I tell you, Mister Addison, I just think she was being dragged along. Not very willingly."

"So where's she go?" I asked.

"That's the tough part. She's seventeen. We're trying to find something for her. But right now, she's kind of in limbo. I mean, she could walk out the door right now and we couldn't stop her. But the sad thing is, she says she's got nowhere to go." He looked genuinely concerned. "She's just a little younger than my kid sister."

"Can I talk to her?" I asked, knowing that I could be treading on thin ice.

"Sure. But... Why?"

"I dunno. Offer to help. Again."

Hurley half-smiled. "Might be the best chance she has right now."

I walked back up the hall and stuck my head in the door where Tina was sitting. "Tina," I said softly, "you got a minute?"

When she turned there was moisture in the corners of her eyes. "Looks like I've got more than a minute, Mister Alan. Why?"

"I was talking to Deputy Hurley. He's telling me what you're up against right now. I know this may sound strange, but... don't take this wrong. I could make room for you for a while. With me. Until school."

"School's over, Mister Alan. I dropped out. Mom moved us six times in nine months. I tried changing schools three times. And I gave up." She hung her head. "Grandma'd be crying to know that."

"I'm sorry. But then, school. Or no school. I have a place for you to stay. No strings. None. I mean it. None. If you want. It ain't much. A travel trailer."

She turned teary eyes to me. "You'd... you really would..."

"I really would," I said. "You want to go tell Deputy Hurley?"

She was starting to smile a bit. For the first time since I met her. She knocked on Deputy Hurley's door.

"Come in, Miss Tina," he said.

"Deputy Hurley," she said, "Uh... Mister Alan has offered to give me a place to stay for a while. I just wanted to let you know."

Hurley looked at me. "Uh, Mister Addison. A minute, please? Excuse us, Miss Tina."

I knew where this one was going. "Okay, Deputy Hurley. I know what you're thinking."

"No shit," he said. "D'you KNOW that she's still under a lot of confusion and crap from this morning?"

"Yes I do," I said. "And I aim to reduce that a bit by NOT forcing her into a temporary home or a shelter for battered women or whatever else comes up."

"You tell me with a straight face..." He glared.

"Deputy Hurley." I glanced at the nameplate on his desk. "Bill, if I can be so bold. I am a man of honor. I stood up for that young lady this morning under threat of harm to my own body. I am not about to cart her off somewhere to turn her into a sex slave or a play toy. I'm just trying to help." I reached in my wallet and pulled out a business card. "This is MY business card. You can call it tomorrow or next week or next month. I will answer the phone. If Tina is around, SHE will talk to you. And like I told you, I am going to work for six months on a project, and my name and reputation are on the line. I am a professional, as are you. Give me your trust."

"Damn, man! What a speech. Okay. Okay! I'm sorry. Like I said. Little sister. Okay?"

"Okay," I said. "And like I said, I appreciate you doing your job as conscientiously as you've done it. Including this."

"Okay, Mister Addison."

"Alan," I said.

"Alan. Open the door and ask Tina back in."

Tina popped back in. "Yessir?" she asked.

Hurley said, "Me and Alan had a discussion about you. I understand that he's offering to give you a place to stay. But here's the deal. I don't care if you ARE in Tennessee. If you get in trouble. With him or anybody else. Here's MY card. You call me and I will personally come up there and get you and kick whoever's ass needs kicking."

"I believe him, Miss Tina," I said.

"So do I," she said. "Thank you, Deputy Hurley. You've been good to me. I'll call you and tell you how things are going."

"You do that, little sister," he said.

We were walking out to the truck. "What'd he mean, "little sister"?" she asked.

I told her, "He said you're just a few years younger than his little sister and he didn't want anything bad to happen to you."

She looked at me. "You mean, like getting slapped around by Mister Druggie this morning?"

"Or worse..."

"Mister Alan, there's no telling how much worse it would've been."

She climbed in on the passenger side of the truck and I cranked up the diesel and let it clatter at idle for a minute.

"Nice truck," she said.

"Tool," I said. "Some people treat it like a status thing. To me, it's just a good tool for what I need. And I take care of it. That's why we're sitting here for a minute, to let things get warm."

"Oh," she said. She clicked her seatbelt and I clicked mine and I shifted into gear and off we went. Considering that I was at breakfast at eight when things went bad this morning, and it was now two-thirty, I counted myself lucky.

"If you're hungry," I said, "there's granola bars and stuff in the console. Help yourself. And the ice chest behind the seat has cokes."

"D'you want one?" she asked.

"I could use a coke," I said.

As we crawled out of town with the evacuees, she was sitting there munching on a granola bar and sipping a coke. I stole a glance over at her, removing my eyes off the traffic. She wasn't exactly smiling, but she did have a satisfied look on her face.

# Chapter 2

An hour and a half later and we were out of the worst of the traffic and I had the cruise control locked in at seventy, letting that diesel engine do what it did best, eat up miles. I'd noted that, despite a cup of coffee and a coke, Miss Tina'd seen fit to doze off for an hour or so. She woke up to the rhythm of the interstate under our wheels.

"Are we gonna get there this evening?" she asked.

"Nope. If I drove straight through, maybe we'd get there sometime after midnight. I'm not up to that kind of driving if I don't have to," I said.

"I've got my license. I could drive," she said.

That was an interesting thought that I hadn't entertained. But, "No, you're not on my insurance, Tina. But I appreciate the offer. Really."

"So what are we going to do? For the night, I mean?"

"Let's see," I said. "Open this map." I still had some paper maps. She complied. "In two more hours we'll be here," I pointed to a town in Mississippi. "If you check my cellphone under "Holiday Inn" you'll see a number for them. Tell 'em we need a room with two beds, non-smoking. Uh... you don't smoke, do you?"

"Yecchhhhh!" she spat. "Uh... I have a problem," she said. "Actually, a couple of 'em."

"What sort of problem?"

"One, I'm... Uh... let me put it delicately... I'm on my period, and I have two tampons left. And two, all the clothes that I own are in that Wal-mart bag behind the seat."

"Oh," I said. "I thought you said "problem". Make the hotel reservation. That town's big enough to have a mall and we'll hit town at six or so. We go to the mall, you get what you need. No problem as far as I can see."

"Nuh-uh. Problem. I almost got the crap slapped out of me for forty bucks. That's all the money I have."

"You keep arguing," I smiled. "I got a gold card in my pocket and it needs exercise."

"But I can't pay you back, Mister Alan. At least not right now."

"Look, Miss Tina, first thing is, we get rid of this "Mister – Miss" stuff. I'll be Alan and you'll be Tina, okay?"

"Uh, okay..."

"And second, buying you a few things you need is NOT going to inconvenience me in the least. You need stuff. I'm getting you stuff. Pretty simple. And I didn't say anything about paying back. So stop worrying."

"Okay... Alan." And she smiled. Just a little bit. And it was wonderful.

I listened to her reserve us a room, reading numbers off my Visa card as I drove. An hour later we were at the mall, and I followed her part time, led her the other part, forcing her to get a few changes of clothes, bought both of us pajamas, extra bath towels, an inordinate amount of strange substances apparently needed by young ladies in the bath, a hair dryer, and as we were heading out, me carrying six huge bags, her carrying one, we happened past one of those accursed perfume counters and she got whiffed by a charming, perfectly coiffed lady wielding a sample spritzer like an artillery piece.

"Mmmmmm," Tina said. "I love that stuff. Always have."

I dropped my load of bags and reached for my wallet. She put her hand on my arm. Electricity coursed through me at this, the first touch. "No, Alan. I understand all this other stuff. I need things. But I don't NEED perfume."

"Hush!" I told her, slapping the gold card on the counter. To the lady with the spritzer I said, "Which do you recommend? The cologne or the perfume?"

And Tina added another bag. We guarded our treasures as each of us made a run at the food court for dinner.

We got back in the truck and drove up the highway away from the mall to the hotel on the side of the interstate. I checked us in and we started unloading bags into the room. I had my one overnight bag, the remainder of my stuff being stored in the trailer. Tina had two loads.

And now I began to see how sticky things might be. At this point, I was being completely non-lecherous. I was truthful when I told both Tina and Deputy Hurley that I had no intention of Tina being my sex toy. I was as serious to myself. In my own mind, she was as untouchable as a vestal virgin. And here we were in the same hotel room.

First line of business was for us to rifle through the bags for pajamas. She continued past that point to locate panties (hip-hugger, in pastel colors. I bit the inside of my mouth) and a new bra, 34-B. She also chose the next day's ensemble, jeans and of all things, a rugby shirt. Those were all carefully laid out, along with my shirt for the next day. My pants had yet to suffer to the point that I determine a fresh pair is needed.

Next, it's shower time for Tina. I plopped my ass down in a comfy chair and found TV channels to surf while she hauled her bag of goodies into the bathroom and shut the door. I heard shower for a while, then various noises including gargling sounds and then ten minutes of hair dryer. And the door opened, and out of the darkness came a vision. Clean, sweet-smelling, hair washed, dried, and brushed to a shine, her bangs glistening like jewels above those blue eyes, the slightest curl where her hair stopped just short of her shoulders. And she was smiling.

"Gah, Alan, I feel so much better."

"You look much happier," I said. "Lemme go see if the works for me."

Half an hour later I was shaved, showered, deodorized, and after-shaved. I told myself that the aftershave was because it made my face feel good. For me. I slid into a new set of pajamas, a big change since my usual bed-time garb was a t-shirt and drawers. But there I was, in PJ's, walking out of the bathroom.

To a smiling Tina. "Wow! You smell better."

"Uh... I'm sorry. I didn't know I smelt BAD..."

She smirked. "Maybe it was the adrenaline."

"Yeah... probably so." I turned down my bed and stretched out in it.

"Are we gonna fight over the remote control?" she laughed.

"Nope. Tonight I relinquish the control to you. Whatever you want to watch."

She flipped channels. Paused on "Cops". "Hmph!" she snorted. "That's where Mom's guys get their career tips." Kept flipping. "Oooooooh! Do you mind? Animal Planet. "The Blue Seas"? I LOVE this!"

I was pleasantly surprised. I figured, oh, I don't know what I figured. This was good. No, great. "You like this stuff?"

"Oh, gosh, yes! My favorites. Learn stuff."

"Well, then be my guest, little princess. We're not going to argue about TV."

"Really?"

"Really," I said.

She turned her own bed down. We watched and talked. And what I didn't hear was as important as what I did hear. I didn't hear "like" and "ya know" and "He's like" and other contemporary argot. That left me to parse the "high-school dropout" angle.

Ten o'clock came around and I noted that we needed to get rolling by 0700.

"Okay," she said. "Can I set the sleep timer on the TV?"

"Sure," I said.

She set the timer and I reached to turn out the lights, and I heard in the room, dimly lit by the flicker of the TV screen, "Alan, thank you."

"No, thank you, Tina. You've added a new adventure to my life." And that is the note I went to sleep on. And strange dreams.

The alarm woke me up from a sound sleep. I looked over at the next bed and saw the lump that was Tina. She stirred.

I turned on the light. "Owwwwww," she complained. Then, "oh, yeah..." And she sat up, rubbed her eyes, looked at me, and smiled. "Hi, Alan."

"Hi, Tina. I hate to be a party pooper, but we have to get in gear, dear."

"Yes, dear," she teased.

"You want the bathroom to get dressed, or here? I'll take the other one."

"Bathroom," she said.

"Wait," I said. "Before you take over."

I went and relieved my bladder. When I got out, there was Tina, eyebrow raised, baby-talking, "Did my widdle boy have to go potty?"

"Like a racehorse," I countered.

She took over the bathroom. I heard face being washed, teeth being brushed, and in ten minutes a Tina showed up, ready for the day. I did the teeth thing and I was ready to go, that is as soon as we packed up. Two trips to the truck. I stopped by the front desk and paid the tab, and we made a short run across the interstate to a diner for breakfast.

Pancakes and coffee, and conversation. "Maybe we won't have to shoot our way out of this one, babe," she smirked.

I noted with interest the term "babe" used in reference to me. "Gosh," I said, "At least not until next week."

Walking back across the parking lot to the truck and trailer, I noticed that there was less distance between us than before.

In the truck, in five minutes we were back on the open road, locked in at seventy. She loosened her seatbelt and turned sideways.

"So if we're gonna be living together, don't you think we should know something about each other?"

"That might be good. I figured you'd tell me what you wanted, whenever you felt up to it."

"I'm talkin' about you, Alan," she said.

"Okay. What do you want to know? If I don't want to answer, I'll tell you. Between us, that's gonna be the rule. If you don't want to tell, just say no. No lies, okay?"

"Okay. Wife?"

"Nope," I said. "Divorced four years ago. She left with a high school sweetheart. Living in California with new husband and our daughter."

"Daughter?"

"Yeah. Terri will be seven this year. Have her a month in the summer. Might fly her in for Christmas or Thanksgiving, IF the ex will submit to such horrors. You want to know what's sad?"

"What's sadder than that?" Tina asked.

"She had complications during the pregnancy and delivery and her doctor said another baby might be very bad for her or the baby, so she talked ME into getting a… uh… fixed. Of course, now that I'm forty, that's not as big a deal, but to some women…"

"Yeah, I guess some women would see that as a minus. Girlfriends?"

"Nope. Not in the last two years. Gave up on the dating scene. Don't do one-night stands. Morals, and all that."

"Really? It's been a long time since I heard that," she said.

"Besides, I'm weird. Just ask the ex. I listen to the wrong kind of music. Watch the wrong kind of TV. Laugh at the wrong kind of jokes.

"I thought you liked the right kind of TV last night." She paused. "Okay. Let's move on to the music thing. Let me guess. Hip-hop." She smirked again.

"You need a magic marker to help you make a cardboard sign for the side of the road?"

Laughing. "Okay, so what..."

"Look in the console."

She opened the console and pulled out two CD's. "Uh... if this is the wrong kind... Alan, I miss this music."

"Are you looking at..."

"Bach. Brandenburg Concertos. Beethoven. Symphonies. Oh, god! Pastorale!"

"W-w-wait! You're a teenaged girl. It's supposed to be boy bands and hip-hop."

"Not when you're looking for a little bit of theology and geometry in your universe."

"Theology and geometry? Like in "Confederacy of Dunces"?"

Squeal. "You know the book?"

"Not the kind of book I expect to be known by a high school dropout, Tina."

"About that," she sighed. "I wanted to explain. This is as good a time as any. When my Grandma was alive and I lived with her, I had a 3.8 average. When she died, and I had to live with Mom, like I said, school after school, never enough days, I gave up." She looked at me with serious eyes. "I'm not stupid. And I'm not lazy. I'm not my mother's daughter, I'm HER mother's grand-daughter, and I want to go back to school."

"That answers that question, then," I said.

"You had a question? Really? About me?"

"Yes, Tina, I did. I was quite happy to help you out, but honestly, I didn't know how much I could do if you were a dropout and done with school. Now I have some hope. 3.8? Really? Wow! I didn't do THAT good."

"So you're thinking about my school now?"

"Yeah. We'll have to figure some stuff out. Get you graduated from high school. College?"

"Was a dream. I was hoping for scholarships. Grandma was going to help, but she was on fixed income. And when she died..." she sighed. "Hope of college died too."

"Don't give up hope, Tina. Let's see where this leads, okay?"

"Okay. Now, back to Alan. You went to college, obviously. Engineering. Isn't that tough?"

"Not if you get your head into the game. And I was Army ROTC, so I spent five years as an engineer lieutenant."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Really."

"And now..." She was paying close attention now.

"And now I'm pretty well known in a small field of people who take care of industrial power systems, and that's what I'm, we're going to go do in Tennessee. It pays good if I'm willing to travel, and with no wife and kids to take care of, I AM willing to travel."

She was smiling. "And rescue young damsels in distress."

"That too. Now, tell me more about Tina."

"I turned seventeen three months ago. I should be starting my senior year in high school. I used to swim on the city team. I am computer literate. I like classical music, although I think Chopin is trying too hard to sound sophisticated and darned little good classical music has been written since 1900. Well, some of Copland's stuff, and a few others. I can stand some ragtime and some bits of other genres."

"Boyfriends?"

"I've dated a few. Nothing serious. Because boys my age, at least the ones I met, AREN'T serious. They're as bad as girls except it's pickup trucks and cars instead of nail polish and hairdos, and there's that ONE thing that's always on their minds when they're on a date and get you alone."

"Ah, yes," I said. "I remember being young and stupid. Thanks for reminding me."

She was on a roll. "So I'm out on a date with a guy I'm thinking is cute and smart and I've just finished reading "Confederacy" and I start talking about it and he's all about, "Can I touch your tits" and I'm pushing hands away. She sighed. "I want to be a MIND."

"I understand," I said.

"No you don't. It's different for guys."

"No, babe," I said. Oops. Called her "babe". Move on. "When the men and women are forty, it gets all screwed up. Women think that if they get you into bed a time or two that you're ready for marriage. And I'm thinking, "Hey, you hated my music. And I supposed to spend the rest of my life in a house without Beethoven?"

Her laughter was like tinkling bells. "Maybe you DO understand."

She continued. "And then I moved back in with Mom. SuperMom. As in, "Oh, baby you're old enough. Go out with HIM. He's got a nice car." And "You might give a little to get a little, you know what I mean?" And "He didn't mean to walk in on you in the shower. And it's no big deal if he saw you naked." And "don't be so sensitive. A lot of people ain't as picky about showing off their bodies. Get over it."

"Really? That bad.?"

"That bad. Grandma cried about how her daughter turned out to be such a, in her words, slut." She sighed. Then I saw her smile. "School. I get to go back to school."

"If that's what you want, Tina."

"That's what I want."

Lunchtime saw us parked in the back corner of a roadside restaurant, inside for a stretch and a bathroom break and a decent meal. Two o'clock saw us pulling into the RV park we'd be calling home for the next six months. That was the plan, anyway. We got down together and I signed in at the office, meeting the manager, getting the talk about the lay of the park, the amenities, the rules and we got pointed to a spot in the most remote corner, per my request.

I did the much-hated backing of a thirty-five foot trailer into a spot, then with Tina helping, got unhitched, leveled, electricity, water and waste connected, then I climbed a ladder and installed my satellite TV dish. To Tina I said, "There. Animal Planet, Discovery, History, MTV, VH1..."

"Watch it, Alan. You're falling off your white horse." and laughter.

"Okay, princess, it's time to see your new castle," I said, unlocking the door and lowering the retractable step. She stepped in first.

"Wow! This is nice! I haven't lived in anything this nice since Grandma's."

"You like it? Really?'

"Yeah," she said. "It's small, but you've got everything. Kitchen. Little washer and dryer. "Uh... just one bed..."

"And the sofa makes out into another. I had this one custom made. I didn't plan on company. The desk is where the other bed would normally be. But I've slept on the sofa and..."

"It's nicer than anything I've seen in a year, Alan. This is wonderful."

I wish I heard more assurance in her voice.

We moved her stuff from the truck to one of the two clothes closets. I showed her the bathroom. Storage space. Where to turn water on and off. Gas. Electricity. I also showed her how the sofa made out into a bed, a fairly easy operation but instead she stretched out full length on it in "Sofa" mode.

"This is a sight better than I'm used to. I had a single bed in Mom's apartment and the mattress was shot."

"I'm sorry, b…" I caught myself. "uh, Tina, but when I designed this I didn't plan on a teen girl living with me."

"That's okaaay, Alan, really. If you put up with me, I can put up with this." She got up and opened cabinets. "You got pots and pans. We need to go grocery shopping. Get stuff to cook."

"Uh," I said, "I don't usually cook much past TV dinners."

"But I can cook. So let's make a list. And then go shopping."

She retrieved the little notebook from her purse and started writing. As she wrote, she questioned me about foods I liked and disliked, studiously scribbling in her notebook in a tight and even hand.

"'Kay," she announced. "Now let's go buy groceries."

And we did. Once in the truck, I asked, "Tina, if you're serious about going back to school, I'm gonna call tomorrow and see what it takes to get you in. If you're serious."

"I'm serious. I can't imagine not having at least a high school diploma, Alan. What do people do?"

"I don't know. Some make it without the diploma, but that's not the way to bet."

"I'd really like college."

"That's what you said. Let's get you through high school first."

Giggle. "Yeah. High school."

Driving out of the park, we drove past the pool. There were two couples sitting poolside watching some kids splash around.

"I need a bathing suit. I could enjoy that pool," she said.

"Me too," I responded. "We'll see about getting suits. Maybe tomorrow."

As we drove, she asked, "What's the plan for tomorrow, anyway?"

I glanced at her. "I figured we'd find where I have to work, and see what kind of drive it is. Maybe find the high school. Go into town and get a couple of swimsuits. And YOU get to say, too, you know. I don't start working until next Monday. We have all week."

"'Kay," she smiled.

Groceries collected we retired back to our trailer. It was nearing darkness. "Tina, I'm going to walk a lap around the park. I need the exercise." I tried to do something three or four times a week. Kept the weight down and my health up.

"Uh, okay," she said. "Is this your 'alone' time, or can I walk with you?"

"Let's go. If I need 'alone' time, I'll tell you. I've had plenty enough in that last couple of years. It's nice to have somebody to talk with."

We locked the trailer and started walking. Sunday evening, there were still three other trailers in the park. Two retired couples were sitting outside near one, chatting. We stopped and exchanged pleasantries. Continuing the walk, we caught up with a third retired couple out walking like us, enjoying the evening calm. We made a point of examining the park's pool area. Looked like a good thing. At least through September, before it started getting too cool. So we had a month.

I walk pretty briskly, so I was stepping out. I noted that Tina was matching me step for step without complaint, and carrying on conversation as she did so. Healthy. Okay.

I unlocked the trailer and let us in. "Who goes first?"

"Me, if you don't mind…" she said.

"Okay, but remember to go easy on the hot water. We got a ten-gallon heater. So wet down, soap up, rinse. Same thing on shampoo."

Giggle. "I read that's how you do it on a boat," she said. "I'll leave you some hot water."

"Uh, another problem. These things aren't exactly built for privacy. I'll stay in my end with the curtain closed until you're dressed, okay?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess." She fixed me in a stare. "This is gonna be difficult, huh?"

"I'm sorry. You got a better idea?"

"Yeas, I do, if YOU'RE the kind of man I think you are. I mean, locking yourself behind a curtain…"

"What's the alternative?"

She stared at me, her lips belying a firm resolve. "You can just decide that you might see as much of a female as you would on any beach in the country. I won't flash you or tease you. And you try to be the same when it's your turn. I've seen guys before. I think we're both adults and we can restrain ourselves."

"There you go, making sense," I said.

She smiled. "I don't want to mess up your life, Alan. We just both live here, and we get along, and treat each other like adults, okay?"

This from a cute seventeen year old girl. That, yes, part of me definitely wanted to see naked. But I pushed that part back down in my head. "Okay, princess."

She huffed. "Stop calling me princess."

"You ARE a princess."

"I will carry my weight in this house, okay? Really."

"Okay," I said. "Then we'll have a couple of TV dinners. And tomorrow we'll try cooking."

"Okay." She smiled. "Alan, I appreciate what you're doing for me. What you've already done. We'll work this all out, okay?"

"Okay. Get your shower." And I went back to my chair with my back to the bathroom. I heard the water run. Stop. Run again. Stop. Run again. Then bumping and a towel-clad Tina zipped up the narrow aisle to the bedroom where her clothes were. The privacy curtain closed for a minute, then she emerged.

"See!" she laughed. "We made it. Your turn. I'm gonna dry my hair." Pajama-clad, she sat on the steps to my bed and started brushing and blowing.

I'd done enough in this trailer to have a routine, but that had to be altered at the point where I walked around nude. I brought my tighty-whities into the little bathroom and in the confined space, I toweled off and donned them, then opened the door to let the moist air out while I shaved. I emerged and Tina was sitting on the sofa.

"Oh, wow," she laughed. "Tighty-whities. I can hardly contain myself." Sarcasm dripped.

"I didn't know I was sharing a trailer with a smartass," I laughed, as I donned my own pajamas.

"One of my many talents," she smirked. Punching the start button on the microwave, she giggled. "This is another."

TV dinners and soft drinks. "We can do better than this," she said as we sat opposite one another in the dining booth. She was right. We watched TV together, me with my laptop and a wireless card, checking email and a couple of engineering websites. She looked.

"I haven't used a computer since Grandma's house. I had a laptop. It "disappeared" at Mom's."

I picked it up and handed it to her. "Use this one."

"You don't mind?"

"I gotta trust you, huh?"

"You CAN trust me, Alan. Mom didn't raise me. Grandma did. Right." She got serious fast.

"Sorry, Tina. That's YOUR computer now. Just don't erase my old stuff."

Squeal. "This is MINE? But don't you need it for work?"

"Got another one in the truck for work. I can bring it in if I need it. What'd'ya got? Email? FaceBook?"

"Uh-huh. That I haven't checked in months. Only got to a computer at the library. And I didn't get to the library very much."

I flipped through some TV channels as she concentrated on the computer screen. I heard her muttering under her breath, "Nope. Nuh-uh. Nope. No way." A pause, a flurry of keystrokes, the back to "Nope. No way."

"You sound awfully busy," I said.

"Catching up with people I don't really want to catch up with, mostly. I'm answering a couple, though."

I looked at her as she went back to her task. I didn't stare, but I was looking at a cutie who wasn't working at being cute. She just was. I went back to TV. It was safer.

Finally she looked up. "Done!"

"That was fast. How about looking up the local school board? We need to get the ball rolling on getting you back in school."

"Okay," she said. A few more keystrokes and she passed me the laptop. I looked at the website.

"That's where we'll start tomorrow," I said. I looked at my watch. "It's about bedtime. Lemme get you a pillow and some sheets." I retrieved a set of sheets and a pillow from my bed.

"But this is YOUR pillow," she said.

"I had three. I can live with two."

She unfolded a sheet and tucked it into the sofa cushions, making a clean smooth surface, then positioned the pillow and pulled the other sheet over her. "This'll work," she said.

"If you get cold, I can get you a blanket. I like sleeping in a cold room myself."

"I'll be okay," she said, smiling. "G'nite, Alan. Thanks for a nice day."

"No, thank you, Tina. You're fun to hang out with."

She smiled. I made my way to the bed at the opposite end of the trailer, turned down the covers and crawled in. I didn't close the privacy curtain. The light at the other end of the trailer blinked out, leaving a little night light's soft illumination. I went to sleep.

# Chapter 3

I woke up to the smell of frying bacon, an alien smell that my sleep-fogged mind took a few seconds to parse. I sat up. From my vantage in bed at one end of the trailer I could see all the way to the other end, and there in the middle, at the stove, was Tina, fiddling with a skillet on the stove. I guess she caught my movement.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," she chirped. "I hope grits and bacon and eggs is good for breakfast."

"Oops," I said. "I woke up in the wrong trailer."

"Whaaaat?" she giggled.

"Do you know that there's NEVER been a meal cooked in the trailer that I didn't cook myself?"

"Then get used to it. I think I like to cook every now and then."

"Me too," I said. "But cooking for one? Kind of a drag."

"So is cooking for people who could give a shit," she said. "But I thought I'd try with you. Make up for the breakfast you didn't finish Saturday. I saw this stuff in the fridge. I figured that since you brought it, it was stuff you like."

"Well it smells good enough. Lemme get dressed."

"I won't peek," she said.

I slid out of my pajamas and into a clean pair of pants and a pullover shirt, grabbed a pair of socks and headed toward her. I noticed the bacon was cooking to perfection and the grits were happily bubbling on a rear burner.

"How do you like your eggs?" she asked.

"Can you do "over easy"?"

"Piece of cake," she laughed. "Grandma showed me. I practiced."

Soon we were seated opposite one another in the little dining booth, eating.

"So how'd I do?"

"Very good. I figured burnt bacon and crunchy eggs."

"Why?"

"Because pretty teen girls aren't supposed to know how to cook," I said.

"I'm NOT pretty," she said.

"Hah. I think you are."

"Thanks," she said. "You don't have to say that, you know."

"You're right," I said. "But it's true, and it should make you happy to hear somebody say it."

"Okay. Thank you."

"I'm sorry, Tina. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I just meant that you… Oh, never mind…" Inwardly I kicked myself. This was a sticky situation, and I was still trying to figure out how there could be a good outcome.

"No, I'm sorry, Alan. You were just trying to be nice. I'm not used to having people be nice, not the last few months."

"Tina," I said, getting up from my now empty plate and gathering hers, "if we're going to exist in this trailer, we need to get along."

"I know," she said. "But Alan," she continued, "you gotta understand how it was, living with Mom and a stream of trash she brought home. I mean, guys that came home with Mom, they'd hit on me in a second if she left the room. They thought if she was easy, then I was easy. And I'm NOT easy."

"I understand, Tina," I said. "You want coffee?"

"Yeah. Lemme watch you make it. People are particular about their coffee, so I didn't try." She watched as I threw a little drip pot together and put water on to boil.

"You are NOT my maid, Tina."

"Yeah, yeah…" she said. "But two people. Little trailer. If we don't share the work…"

"I know. Can't leave anything out of place, or it gets cluttered fast."

"And we're in a tight space, so we need to NOT be sensitive. You've known me, what this is the third day? I am NOT an asshole unless somebody deserves it. YOU don't deserve it. Therefore, please don't consider me to be an asshole."

"I'm SORRY!" she said, "I just REACTED, okay?"

"That's not the point, Tina. We can make this whole thing work, but WE need to be nice to one another. And that means that I don't suspect you of ulterior motives, and you treat me the same."

The kettle whistled, thankfully giving me a stopping point. I poured the water into the drip pot, took out two mugs, the sugar canister and a little carton of half and half. I poured two mugs. "Fix yours," I said. "I don't know how you want it."

"Two spoons of sugar, and cream like you put in yours."

"How do you know I put cream in my coffee?"

"Hah. First, you got it out today, AFTER you brought it with the other stuff. So I figured you used it. Second, you put some in your cup every time I saw you drink coffee the last two days. So I trust you to put cream in my coffee." She did that little smirk thing I'd noticed several times before.

With a clinking of spoon against cup, I handed her a mug. She sipped. "Perfect!"

I sat down opposite her again. "Well, good. I did something right."

"Oh, Alan, I don't mean to be like that. Just…"

"Just a lot of changes in three days."

"In nine months," she sighed. "And things, uh, they looked so bad… with Mom."

"You're past that, Tina. If we can figure this all out." I sipped my savory brown liquid, gazing at her face.

She shook her head, flaring her hair and letting it fall in place. Her hand went up and brushed it off her collar. "Uh, Alan, how… I mean, am I askin' too much to get my hair trimmed?"

"No. Is it too long?" It touched her collar. Auburn, shiny, a little curl at the ends, it framed her face nicely.

"Uh, I like it shorter. Needs an inch or so cut off. But… I… money."

"Not a problem. I don't know how you want to do it, but find a place, and we'll get it done." I drained my mug and got up to start washing dishes.

She shoved me out of the way. "Lemme do that."

"Okay, boss," I said. I gathered clothes and started filling the little washer. "I'll do the laundry."

With dishes washed and stacked to dry, and a load of laundry in mid-cycle, we headed out of the park with the address of the jobsite on the GPS. It wasn't too long a drive through the countryside. I found what I expected, a site consisting of several acres, cleared from the surrounding woodlands, a new railroad spur and pipeline going in, and huge amounts of bare dirt and rock with curiously shaped trenches and holes and interesting formations of concrete and steel rising out of them. And a complex of temporary office trailers. In one of them was my new office, but today wasn't the day to look at it.

"So that's where you work," Tina commented.

"Yeah. They all start out as a big mess like that. In six months we ought to be ready to make stuff. Or at least I'll have the electricity on."

We drove towards the county seat. I was looking for the school board office. Nine AM. I guessed that government employees should be at work by nine. I punched up the phone number from the search the night before. I got a menu. I navigated until I got a human. "Hi, I said, "I'm Alan Addison. I need to talk to somebody about enrolling a student in your high school."

The female voice said, "Yessir. Let me connect you with Mister Jenkins."

Click. A male voice. "Dan Jenkins. Can I help you?"

"Yessir, Mister Jenkins. I'm Alan Addison. I have a student who needs to enroll. We just moved here."

"Easy enough," he said. "I'll just need the information from her last school. You wouldn't happen to have transcripts with you?"

"Nossir," I said.

"Didn't figure you did, but I thought I'd ask. We can get those. What grade?"

"Uh, that's the problem. Hey. We're on the road. Can we come by and talk to you in person?"

"Sure," he said. He gave me the address. "Just tell the lady at the front desk that you're here to see me."

"Looks like we'll see you in twenty minutes or so."

"Okay, Mister Addison," he said. "I'll be waiting."

"So we're going to see him?" Tina asked. "I'm not dressed."

"Uh, Miss Tina," I stated, "you're dressed quite nicely." She was. Jeans, athletic shoes, a conservative blouse that accented that head of hair.

"I get nervous."

"You have nothing to get nervous about. We're just trying to get you back in school. These are the people that will help us do that." I pulled into the parking lot and maneuvered the big pickup into a slot and we got out.

Walking into the office, we met the receptionist, a nicely dressed black lady who directed us down the hall after she notified Mr. Jenkins of our arrival. I knocked on the office door and heard a "Come in!" I ushered Tina in ahead of me.

"You're Mister Jenkins?" I asked, extending my hand.

He shook it. "And you're Alan Addison. And this is…" he asked, looking at Tina.

"This is Tina, uh, Miss Christina Johnson. She's needing to be in school."

"Hello, Miss Tina," he said. "You folks can sit down."

We sat.

"So what's the deal? You're her, uh.. relation?"

"None," I said. "She's, well, I don't know how to categorize…"

His eyebrow raised almost imperceptibly.

"No," I said. "Not like that. Like "foster home"."

"Sir," Tina interrupted, "I have no living relatives who aren't in jail. Mister Alan has provided me a place to stay and has offered to get me back in school."

"Okay," he said. "We'll leave that as it is. Mister Addison, what is your legal relationship? Guardian? Something that says you're 'in loco parentis', legally able to sign for her? I'm assuming she's still a minor."

"Seventeen, sir," said Tina.

"Uh, yes. Minor," said Mr. Jenkins. "Sir," he said, looking at me, "I'm afraid that you need something to say that you have legal standing to make decisions concerning her life."

"I understand," I said.

"I DON'T!!!" hissed Tina. "Two days ago this man saved my life. From that, my mom and her boyfriend went to jail. I don't HAVE anybody else to make decisions. He's the one."

"I'm sorry, Miss Tina," he said. "But that's what the law says."

My head was full of spinning gears. They lined up and clicked. "Uh, Mister Jenkins, can I make a cellphone call? I don't want to be rude."

"No," he said. "If we can get this straightened out."

"Tina," I said. "Let me have Deputy Hurley's number."

As she opened her purse I said to Mr. Jenkins, "This guy might be able to help us out."

"Yeah?" he said. "Then use my phone. Here!" He turned it around. "Punch this button if you want to use speaker. Dial nine to get an outside line."

"Thanks," I said, punching buttons. I put us on the speaker.

"I'm really trying to help," he said.

The phone rang. I wasn't sure of success on Hurley's office phone, but we were surprised to hear "Sheriff's office. Deputy Hurley. Can I help you?"

Here goes nothing, I thought. "Uh, Deputy Hurley. Alan Addison. From Saturday morning at the diner?"

"Hello, Mister Addison," He said. "What can I do for you?" His voice sounded a tad apprehensive.

"Uh. I'm here in Tennessee with Miss Tina and uh, Mister Jenkins of the school board. We're trying to get Tina back in high school."

"Oh, really?" His tone took a definite upward turn. "That's great! She doin' okay?"

"Yeah, so far."

"Hi, Deputy Hurley," Tina piped in.

"Hi, Miss Tina," he said. "How can I help you?"

I said, "Mr. Jenkins here says I… we need some sort of legal document saying that I have some standing to sign for her to get in school. Can you help us? I mean, you know the situation and all."

"I dunno exactly how that's gonna work," he said. "Tell you what, lemme call my uncle. He's the district judge. He'll know."

Mr. Jenkins injected, "How long might that take?"

Hurley came back, "I'll get off the phone with you and call ‘im. Call you back in ten minutes. Gimme a number."

Jenkins read him off one.

"I'll call you back in ten minutes, fifteen, tops."

"Okay, thanks, man! We appreciate the help."

"Don't thank me yet," Hurley said. "I haven't done anything."

"We trust you," Tina said.

"'Kay. Bye, ya'll." Click.

I looked at Mr. Jenkins. "Okay, we're working on it."

"Saturday? At the diner?" He looked interested.

"You want the story?"

"Sure," he said.

"You don't mind, do you, Tina?" I asked.

"Certainly not. We lived through it."

So I told the story, aided ably by Tina. "And," I said, "That's how a forty year old engineer ended up with a teenaged girl in Tennessee."

"Okay," he said. "Let's assume that we get something going that lets you sign for Miss Tina." He turned to Tina. "What grade are you in?"

"I dropped out in the eleventh grade," Tina said. "I was a 3.8 student. Then I moved in with Mom when Grandma died. And I dropped out."

"Hmmm," he said. "That changes things a bit."

"How so?" I asked.

"We have to do a placement test. To see where she starts back. Pretty standard thing."

Uh, okay? When? Where?"

"We can do it here. Uh, tomorrow if you get us something to fix things. Or later this week."

I eyeballed the diploma on his wall. A picture of a happy Jenkins with a pretty, if somewhat chunky wife and two kids, maybe eight and ten. And to go with the conservative haircut, a framed honorable discharge certificate from the Marines.

"Marine?" I said.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "You?"

"Army. Combat engineers."

"Chopper pilot."

"Really?!?" I said. "Gulf War?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Uh-huh. Blew one of the minefields to cut the army loose into Iraq."

"Small world, ain't it? I flew into Kuwait."

"Hah!" We laughed together. Tina was alternating her gaze between the two of us.

Jenkins saw her expression. "Sorry, Miss Tina, we're not ignoring you."

"Oh, don't worry about me, Mister Jenkins. I'm learning stuff every day. About him."

The phone rang. Jenkins answered, then punched the speaker button. "Okay, Deputy, uhhh, Hurley, is it? We're all here. So what's the good news."

Hurley's voice as tinny on the speaker. "Hi, folks! Hizzoner Judge Hurley, my dear uncle, says that I need for you two to fax me copies of your drivers' licenses so he can get the paperwork done up properly. I can overnight it to you. You both sign. Overnight it back. The judge signs. And it's back to you. We can get it done by Friday that way."

Mr. Jenkins asked, "So this is a hundred percent? No questions?"

"Nope," the tinny voice said. "Hundred percent."

"Great," said Mr. Jenkins.

"The fax number on your card works?" I asked.

"No," Hurley said. "Use this one. It's the judge's law office. And you owe me seventy-five bucks. Court costs." He gave me a fax number. Tina was already pulling out her drivers' license.

"Tell your uncle that his name goes on the list of good people," Tina said.

"Uh, Deputy Hurley, Let me give you an address for the deliveries." I gave him the RV park. Made a mental note to make arrangements for them to watch for me and call when things came in.

"I'll do that, Miss Tina," Hurley said. "I'll call ‘im back and tell ‘im to expect the fax."

"Hey, Deputy Hurley," I said.

"Yeah."

"Can your uncle fax me back a copy of the document. A draft? So Mister Jenkins will have something in his hand pretty quick?"

"Yeah. I can do that."

"Great! We're gonna fax that stuff right now."

"'Kay, folks! Let me know how things go. Bye!" Click.

Mr. Jenkins sat back, bridging his fingers at his chin. "Well!" he exclaimed, "That looks pretty good. Lemme make quick call. He picked up the phone. "Hi, Janie. Dan Jenkins. Yeah. Look, I got a young lady who needs to do a grade screening for high school. Uh, yeah. She dropped out last year in, uh, Louisiana. Wants to start here. We need to determine grade placement. Can she… Uh, tomorrow? Yeah. Wait a sec…" He looked at us. "Tomorrow okay?"

Tina nodded vigorously. "Yes, fine!" I said.

He went back to the phone. "Yeah. Tomorrow. Eight-thirty? Till, what, lunch-time? Okay… she'll be there. Uh… Christina Johnson. "'Kay. Thanks! Bye!"

"Okay," he said, turning to us. "Now, let's get these licenses copied and faxed." He took them and left, coming back in a few minutes. He handed us back our licenses.

I gave him a business card. "Cell number and email works. If you need anything. I sure do appreciate your help on all this." I stood up, Tina rising by my side.

He handed me his card. "Same thing goes."

"Thank you, Mister Jenkins," Tina said. "I'll be here, what eight-thirty? I'll be early. Okay?"

He smiled. "Good. We're looking forward to having you."

Tina was a little old to be skipping beside me, but there was a definite bounce in her step as we left.

"Are you nervous? I mean, TESTS!"

She shook her pretty head. "Nuh-uh. I'll do my best. Things will work out. Again."

"Again?" I questioned.

"Yeah," she smiled. "Things seem to have taken a good turn for ME since Saturday, don'tcha think?"

"I suppose. That is, if you can get over your living arrangements."

"I'm sorry about this morning, Alan. I'm just, you know…"

"Don't worry, Tina. Lots of changes."

"Uh, AND a period. And I get a bit edgy. I'll try to be better."

"Just be you. We'll work things out."

"'Kay, babe," she said. Giggled .

And I noted the word "babe".

We took off in the truck, went to find a good clothing store, and bought a couple of bathing suits. I left her to her own devices in choosing, and her choice as a very conservative one-piece. I'd imagined a bikini, a not unpleasant set of images, to be sure, but most disturbing to my efforts at maintaining an almost fatherly distance.

That effort put us within hitting distance of lunch. "Where do we eat?" questioned Tina.

"I got an idea," I said. I whipped out the business card from my shirt pocket and dialed the number.

"School board. Dan Jenkins. Can I help you?"

"Dan Jenkins, this is Alan Addison. We're looking for a decent lunch meal and thought we'd ask you to come along and show us one. Meal's on me."

Laughter. "How far out are you?"

"About five minutes."

"I'll be standing beside the road with my hungry look…"

Tina grinned. "Do you, like, go out of your way to make friends?"

"Life is a lot better when people are happy to see you. And the day goes better when you don't go into it pissed off all the time."

"Hmmm. Interesting." She smiled. "You're really something, you know."

"Nope, just a plain ol' engineer trying to have a good life in the middle of all the mess."

She smiled as we pulled into the parking lot at the school board. She waved at Dan Jenkins and he started toward us. As he approached, she unbuckled her seatbelt, stowed the console that separated the passenger side from the driver side of the truck's bench seat, and slid beside me. She was buckling herself in the middle as Dan got in to occupy the passenger side. Buckled in, we started back out of the lot.

"So what are you looking for?" He asked.

"Tina? Are you hungry for something in particular?"

"Oh, no," she said. "Let Mister Jenkins show us."

"Okay, Dan," I said. "take us to the showplace dining experience."

He laughed. "Uh, well… I know a place. Family style food. Good for lunch. And not expensive. Turn right at the next light."

We were early enough to beat the lunch crowd and had a very nice meal presented to us.

"So where are you working," his first question came.

"That new factory going in over east off the main highway? I'm doing the electrical."

"Engineer, again?" He surmised.

"Yep, still. I was headed this way and stopped for breakfast. Tina told you the story."

Tina smiled.

"So where are you living?" he asked.

I named the RV park. "For at least the next six months. Not quite long enough to be a resident. Too long to be called transient."

"Yeah," Dan said. "I suppose somebody could make a big deal out of your address being an RV park, but you explained the situation and I'm happy with it." He turned his attention to Tina as she worked her way through her meal with surprisingly good manners. "Miss Tina, not many dropouts go back to school like you're doing."

She put her fork down. "I suppose," she said. "But I hated to drop out, Mister Jenkins. It's just that with my home situation, I was out of school more than in."

"Are you thinking of college?" he asked.

"Yessir," she answered. "I was, before… and now I'm thinking about it again. If I have a chance."

"Good. I know the guidance counselors at the high school. Let's see how the tests go."

"We'll find out, won't we…" and she smiled enigmatically.

We continued a pleasant lunchtime conversation and then drove back to Dan's office and dropped him off. I expected Tina to slide back over to the empty passenger seat, but it was almost as if she hesitated before moving, buckling in, and lowering the console as a barrier between us. A sort of pickup truck chastity wall.

I let the GPS take us to a nearby recreational park on a lake and we walked around, savoring the afternoon, even though it was a little warm. I wiped some sweat from my brow. Tina saw that.

"Alan," she said. "We have brand new swimsuits and I know where there's a pool. Good idea?"

"Great idea! Let's go."

We drove back to the RV park. "I need to stop in at the office and tell them we're expecting deliveries," I said.

"Yeah, we are, aren't we?"

We both got down and walked into the office. The manager was an older lady, maybe early sixties, at the counter. "Hi, again," I said.

Lillian Graves was her name. She smiled. "Oh, yes. You came in yesterday. Uh… Alan, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She looked at Tina. "And Tina. What can I do for you folks?"

"I gave this address for mail. And tomorrow I'm expecting a Fed-Ex overnight. You have my cell number. Can you call me when it comes in?"

"Sure," she said. "Didn't you say you're going to be working around here?"

"Yes ma'am," I said. "That new plastics plant off the main highway."

"Oh, yes," she said. "My son in law is going to be there as a construction foreman."

"Great!" I said. "His name?"

"Rollie Stebbins. You can't miss him. He's taller'n you. ‘Bout three hundred pounds. Beard."

"I'll look for ‘im! Tina's probably gonna do high school from here. Start next week, we're thinking."

"Oh, that's good. I can get the bus to stop here to get her in the mornings."

Tina looked at me. "Uh, okay. That's good. I was wondering how I was getting to school."

"And baby," Lillian said, "you're always welcome to come sit here with me in the afternoons while he's still at work. If you don't mind sitting with us old folks."

"Oh, no ma'am," she smiled. "I loved talking with my grandmother."

I said, "Well, we're gonna go swim for a while."

"Well, ya'll have fun, then. I'll watch for your stuff tomorrow," she said.

We climbed back into the truck and drove the short distance to the trailer. In ten minutes I was wearing a conservative pair of swim trunks and Tina was in a one-piece suit that clung to sleek curves and bulged out over set of B-cup breasts. I tried not to stare.

"Grab us some towels," she said.

"Yes ma'am," I said, exaggerating my servitude.

"Oh, stop that. You're being a butt…"

"Walk or ride?" I asked.

She gaged the distance from the trailer to the pool. "Uh, with what we've been eating, I'm thinking that the walk is a good thing."

"Smart girl," I said.

We started walking, side by side. Could've been a dad and his daughter. Could've. And as far as I was concerned, that was just about what we were.

The pool was bigger than I expected. Certainly not Olympic-sized, but plenty long enough for laps to be meaningful. I stripped off my t-shirt and slipped into the pool, letting the water envelope me, then ducked my head and started laps in an easy crawl. And got passed up by a seventeen year old girl.

"This isn't the way it's supposed to go," I thought to myself, and I kicked my effort up from "recreational" level towards "Showoff". And I struggled to close the gap. Kept trying, too, expecting her speed to be a fluke. Wasn't a fluke. Back and forth. Finally she pulled up on the edge of the pool and I hit just seconds behind her, and I was breathing pretty good.

"Okay," I said, between breaths. "Now tell me why Miss Tina is whipping my butt in the pool."

Giggle. Then a little snicker. "High school swim team. I had trophies."

I heaved a cleansing breath. "Now I remember. It shows. Very good."

She smiled at me, her hair dark with water and plastered against her head. "You didn't do bad yourself," she said. "I could feel you almost catch me. You have a better kick off the wall."

"You beat me. In a regulation pool, you'd have lapped me in five laps."

She smiled. "Nice to know that I have something on you." She ducked under the water to cool off. I did the same, then watched her leggy form exit the pool and settle onto a lounge beside the walk, toweling herself off. Her height was from those long legs, not her torso, I observed.

I got out and sat on the lounge beside her, drying myself off, then laying back. I closed my eyes to the late afternoon sun, but not before I saw her eye me. She stretched back on her own chair.

"Mmmmm, this is really great, Alan. It's so much different than what I was looking at Friday night. I think I'm in heaven."

A gentle zephyr stirred the nearby trees and cooled my damp body. "Ahhhh, yes, lady, I think it's great. Different, but great."

"Alan," she said, "how do you usually do these jobs? What do you do? Work, I know, but after work?"

"That's where I part ways with a lot of guys, Tina. Lots of construction people party hard. The bars and clubs around here are going to make a fortune while this thing is being built. And there's be a lot of women chased and a few caught, and all. But that's not my thing."

"So what DO you do?"

"I find the library, or the internet, and if there's some good concerts, I go to those, and if I find friends that share my desire not to go out drinking and cavorting then I might spend the evenings with friends."

"No women?" she asked.

"Not for the sake of the standard things that men chase women for. Like I told you the other day, I don't do casual sex and I am not going to get serious with somebody who's not on the same wavelength that I am. There's too much pain in trying to fit the wrong pieces of a puzzle together."

"But…"

"But that's too serious a part of my life to compromise. Been there. It hurts. So I quit."

"Uh… I guess that's a better approach than Mom's… she kept tryin' and tryin' and then it was just for, I guess, the physical thing… and it seemed like a bad way to go through life." She sighed.

"Some people go their whole lives like that and they don't suffer consequences, but every one of those one-nighters, or short things, there's two people involved, and what doesn't bother one can leave a mark on the other."

"Yeah," she said.

"Or you end up with two people who just want to use each other, and… I don't know. I thought I was connected in my marriage, but apparently she wasn't. And when it hurt me like that, I decided I never wanted to do that to another person."

"Me neither. I saw Mom and it looked like a train wreck. People bent and broken all over the place."

"Life sucks, sometimes…"

"But then," she smiled as I looked at her, "there are days like this. Look!" She pointed upward to a hawk circling high overhead. "That's freedom."

"Yes it is," I said. "And he can do that when his belly's full and the babies are fed. If he's a good, successful hawk, he gets to circle in the afternoon skies."

We chatted for a few more minutes then I watched her form do a little knifing dive off in the deep end of the pool and I did a backflip in to join her. This time I knew better than to let her surprise me, but she still was nothing I could catch. Finally we got out again and walked back. Passing a couple of the other trailers, we smiled and greeted them as we walked.

Inside the trailer, Tina grabbed her night-clothes and hit the shower first. "Won't take long. I just need to rinse," she said. And true to her word, she was out and drying her hair.

I did a similar move, but had a few more minutes scraping the hair off my face. A splash of aftershave left my face tingly. I exited the tiny bathroom to a sleekly coiffed Tina, eyes blue and twinkling.

"Gosh, you smell good again," she smiled.

I sat in my recliner and she lounged on the sofa and we watched TV until about eight when she picked up her laptop. "Just want to see if I got any responses to my email," she said. Ten minutes later, she turned the computer off. "That's that," she said. "I sent email last night to see who wanted to keep in touch. No responses. I guess those friends gave up."

"I'm sorry, Tina."

"Oh, it's okay, Alan. You know, this is almost a new life. I mean, I had that life with Grandma, then she died, and I had that life with Mom, and it was horrible, and now that's over, and I have this new life, and you've been good to me, and I'm gonna go back to school and meet new friends and start over. Not many people get to do that."

"I know." I was parsing the "meet new friends" statement. I knew that she was seventeen and the world was there for her and a new high school was rich ground for relationships and friends and boyfriends and, I hated to think, prospective mates. I pushed that out of my mind. Hard. "Uh, do you play cards?" I asked.

"What kind of cards? Like rummy?"

"Yeah. Can you play rummy?"

"Grandma and I used to play several times a week. I like it. You got cards?"

And we sat at the table and played rummy. And it wasn't easy. She was no slouch and we each won a game and I got a lucky draw to beat her on the tie-breaking third game. And it was bedtime.

She made her bed and I retreated to mine and we went to sleep.

# Chapter 4

The accursed alarm clock went off as expected at six-thirty. We got up and dressed and because of her appointment for testing, we hit a local diner for breakfast of pancakes and coffee.

At eight fifteen she was walking in the door of the school board offices. There was a lady expecting her, and I left her with my business card for her to call me if she needed me.

"Oh, don't worry," said the lady. "These tests are timed, but she's the only one taking them today, so she'll be finished at eleven-thirty."

"Good luck, Tina," I said.

She smiled. And kissed me on the cheek. I was still standing there semi-stunned when she followed the lady up the hall.

I left, a thousand thoughts going through my head, and drove to the new jobsite, checked in the front gate and introduced myself to the people already on site. A few faces and names were familiar to me, including the engineering manager who'd asked for me by name and reputation. I looked at my new office, bare, with a desk and a large table to spread out prints and drawings, and a few chairs for the inevitable meetings and conferences. We talked about the progress so far, and the target dates for my equipment to begin arriving, and I looked at the schedule of construction, and we laughed at a few old tales, and I saw it was ten-thirty, and my cell phone rang.

I looked at the display. Unfamiliar number. I answered. Familiar voice. Tina.

"Hi, Alan," she said. "I'm finished."

"I thought the lady said eleven-thirty."

"Yeah, I know. But that's if there were others who need the whole time… but I just did what I could and then stopped and we went to the next one. So I'm finished."

"Okay, sweetie," I said. "I'm out at the plant. I'm leaving now."

"Okay. Uh… I see Mister Dan. I'm gonna go see if he has time to talk. See ya in a bit."

"I gotta go," I told the crew. "Had a kid taking a test this morning. She's finished. I'll be here bright and early Monday." And I left. Thirty minutes later I walked into the school board offices. The receptionist spotted me immediately.

"She's in Mr. Jenkins' office. Go right in."

I walked in, spotting Tina sitting in a chair smiling. Mr. Jenkins… "Hi, Dan," I said.

"Hi, Alan. I'm being surprised today."

I looked at Tina. She was smiling. "How so?"

"She took the placement tests. They're timed tests, Alan. Usually nobody finishes."

And I looked at Tina. She was smiling. And it was a self-assured little smirk of a smile.

Dan said, "Tina finished. I, uh, we, the lady who gives the tests is scoring them right now. If you want to grab lunch, she'll be finished by the time we get back."

"Sure," I said. "Come on, punkin," I told Tina. I looked at Dan. "We're gonna need directions. You up for another meal?"

"Oh, why not," He said. "I can always run it off…" He got up from his desk.

We all walked out to the truck and got in, Tina taking the center seat again. I know Dan noticed that she had to move the console out of the way. But she buckled in rather more to my side than his, and she was STILL smiling.

This time Dan directed us to a barbecue joint. "I don't go here often during work," he said, "because they laugh when I come back with sauce on my tie."

We could see why. The barbecue was good, but eating ribs was not for the fastidious. They had GOOD ribs. We ate happily and cleaned up as best we could. Dan was laughing. "They'll know where we've been."

Back at the office, Dan walked in to see a score sheet on his desk. "Wow," he said. One word. "Wow."

He looked at us. "Just a sec," he said, punching the phone. "Uh, hey, Louise. Yeah. I got'em. Thanks for doing it this fast. I know. I was curious too. Yeah. I'll tell ‘er. Thanks!" He turned his attention to us. Tina was sitting next to me.

"Well," I said, "Back in the eleventh grade?"

"Yeah, right." His tone was happy sarcasm.

Tina was still smiling. I wasn't. I was trying to interpret Dan's demeanor. "So what's the deal?" I looked at Tina. "You did your best, didn't you? You didn't just quit?"

"No, Alan. I did my very best."

Dan said, "Uh, Alan, she's twelfth grade. And I'm recommending advanced placement in all her subjects. That way she gets college credits before she graduates high school."

"You're kidding!"

"I'm NOT kidding. These scores are the best I've ever seen. Or Mrs. Conner, too, for that matter. She does our testing for us for years. Oh, and I got a faxed draft of your guardianship this morning. So we're operating like you can sign her papers."

"That's good," I said. "When do we have to give you a decision about the advanced placement stuff? And when can she start classes? Monday?"

"Monday will be fine. And we can set her schedule if you decide. I'll call the guidance counselor at the high school, but she can start Monday." He smiled back at Tina. "You're a pleasant surprise." To me he said, "Did you know any of this?"

"Uh… You know I've known her since Saturday. I knew she was bright, just talking with her, and she told me about the 3.8 GPA, but… how was I supposed to know?"

"Well now we know. Can you go to the school Friday and get with them about the schedule and stuff? Since she's a new admit, you need to go with her, Alan."

"Okay. Not a problem."

Tina was still smiling. "Mister Dan," she said. "Thank you for taking care of us."

"We're the ones who are getting lucky, young lady, if YOU work to your potential. Just one question. What kept you from getting a 4.0?"

"I missed some tests when my grandma got sick. Mom pulled me from that school and moved me and I couldn't make them up."

"Oh, okay. Uh, Alan, can you sign this release so we can get her transcripts from her old school?"

I signed. We left, headed to the RV park. She got in the truck giggling.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"That lady! Mrs. Conner. I took the first test and finished and she told me to check my work, that I must've missed some pages. And I showed her the answer sheet. And she asked me if I understood the questions. It was funny. She just didn't believe that I did the work."

"You've surprised a bunch of people today. I'm one of them."

"Really?"

"I mean, I knew you were smart. It shows in the way you talk about things. But now… it's like your swimming. Another surprise."

"I'm glad I surprise you in good ways."

"Me too," I said. "And I thought of something while I was out. Let's go get you a cellphone. I don't want you without a way to get hold of me or whoever…"

"My own phone?" Squeal!

"Yeah. I think it's a necessity, with you in school and me at work and schedules change and things happen. And I don't have to tell you how you need to take care of it."

"Nobody will touch it, Alan," she said seriously.

That was a minor stop. And the day ended in what would become routine: a walk, a swim, a dinner, TV, games, and bed. Her at her end. Me at mine.

The Friday meeting at the high school with the guidance counselor was interesting. These things were a lot more fun when you walked in with a winning hand, and Tina was an academic winning hand. "Yessir," she said. "I DO want the advanced placement classes."

"Which ones?" he asked. "Physics? Trig? English? Social studies?"

"All of ‘em," she smiled.

I smiled too.

Our last weekend before we both started acceding to fixed schedules. We abandoned the trailer and drove a hundred and fifty miles to take in a concert and spend Friday and Saturday nights in a hotel with a full-sized shower and two queen-sized beds. The concert was a very workmanlike performance of Mozart chamber pieces by the local university's strings and several times during the performance I stole glances at Tina, a young perfection in an austere little black dress, tastefully simple pumps and tiny gemmed studs in her ears. Her hair was auburn perfection. And her eyes were closed and she was smiling as the notes soared over our heads.

It was with reluctance that we headed home, talking about the museums and the concert and the sights and the food.

Monday morning came. We did a bit more hurried breakfast of grits and eggs and bacon and I headed out to the project and she cleaned up then went to wait for the bus.

My day went just as chaotically as I expected for Day One. By four-thirty I was ready to leave and I did so. I stopped by the front office and found Tina and Lillian talking. Tina had a book and notebook open on the counter.

Lillian handed me the Fed-Ex package that contained the final versions of the documents that gave me legal place in Tina's life, the power normally attributed to parent.

"She's been talking and working since she got off the bus," Lillian said. "It's nice to have young company."

"You don't mind her chatter?"

"Hah!" Lillian answered. "Half her schoolwork I don't even begin to understand, but she talks about everything. It's mighty nice."

Tina poked at her trig book. "You might have to give me a hand on some of this. I think I understand, but I want to be sure."

"Okay, little girl," I said. "Swim. Food. Homework?"

"A plan," she laughed.

We bid Lillian goodbye and went to change. Our swim was abbreviated, and we hit a local eatery for supper, and then homework and showers.

Somewhere during the evening I asked about her bus ride.

"Not exactly my favorite thing. Rowdy kids. Long. Bumpy. I wish I could do schoolwork, but that's pretty much impossible," she said.

"Then let me ask you this," I said. "I think I know how you'll answer, but I want YOU to say it. Can I trust you with a car? I mean, school and home on school days, and I know exactly where you go and who you're with at all times?"

Squeal! "A car?"

"It makes sense to me. That way you get a little more time before and after school. You're carrying a heavy load. You need the time. And you can run errands for us when I have to work. Makes my job easier."

"You're gonna give me a car?"

I got serious. After all, I'd known her a week. I knew her to be a serious and unusual specimen of teenaged girl, but… "No, the car will be in my name. You're still a minor. And I have title. So if it disappears from my control... Like if you were to take off for parts unknown…" I left that unspoken.

"Alan! I would NEVER do that! I don't have ANYTHING without YOU!"

"Baby," I said, using the term as if she were my child, "I believe you. But I also know that strange ideas come across people's minds. Just saying."

"You needn't worry. Really."

She was unusually chipper when she whipped my butt at cards before we went to bed that night.

Another day. This time I left work a tad early and picked Tina up at the park and headed to a used car dealer. I'd driven by earlier and saw what I had in mind, a little Japanese sub-compact, reliable, safe, and with good resale value. Practical, that's me. Tina looked good behind the wheel. With stars in her eyes. I'd already warned my insurance agent and the car dealer faxed him the information.

That activity cost us the day's swim. I wasn't sure that I could ever wipe the grin off Tina's face. I gave her a gas card, planning on calling the gas card people for a second card on the account to replace it. Sitting in a restaurant for supper, as in "I'm driving us to supper, Alan!" she looked at me.

"I know you're just dying to give me the speech, huh?"

"What speech? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yeah, right," she grinned. "Let's see. Obey traffic laws. Don't speed. Don't take risks. Pay attention to the road. Nobody else drives this car but me and you. No illegal substances. No alcohol. Don't leave it unlocked. Keep my keys with me."

"Okay, just do all that."

She smiled. "Alan, this is something Grandma would've done if she was still alive. It's wonderful . I never expected…"

"Just trying to make our lives better, babe," I said.

We got home. Did the homework thing. The shower thing. A round of rummy, 510 to 480, my favor. And to bed. Her at her end. Me at mine. The six o'clock alarm ruled the morning. Wednesday.

Thursday. We started our swim. She was unusually quiet. "What's up, Tina," I asked. "Trouble?"

"Well," she said, "not really. But I don't know how to ask this."

"Ask what?"

"It's a new school, Alan. And I'm making friends. And they want to get together Friday evening. They ASKED me if I'd come with them."

This was a day I knew would come. At this point, for all intents and purposes, she was like a daughter. And I was a dad whose teen daughter wanted to go out. She was seventeen, and when it came right down to it, I had only the most tenuous of holds on her. "So what‘s the plan?"

"It's not a big deal," she said. "One of the girls is getting some movies, and we're gonna meet at her house and watch ‘em."

"Are her parents going to be there?"

"Yes. She seems like a nice girl. She's in my AP English class."

"Then I guess I should let you go. You're seventeen. You know the ropes."

"Thank you, Alan," she said.

We swam our laps and then showered and went to supper. A part of me was crying inside and I couldn't tell if it was the "daddy's little girl" part or the "there goes your heart" part or if those were both the same or what. I did my best to keep conversation light.

We did homework, and I noticed that she didn't need quite the help of two days before. She beat me by a hundred and fifty points in rummy. Friday. I got tied up over a botched shipment and was still arguing on the phone as four o'clock passed. I pulled into the park at five and saw Tina's car at the trailer. Knowing she was likely doing date prep, I knocked before entering.

"Come in, silly," she said, giggling.

I wanted that to be MY giggle. I really did. "I thought you were getting ready for the big date," I said.

"It's NOT a date," she said. "There's a bunch of us."

"No special boy?" I really didn't want to hear "yes".

"Well, there's this guy. He's in my AP science. Cute. Smart. And my friend Susan says he likes me…"

Inside I died a little. Perfunctorily I mouthed, "Just go and have a good time. I'd like you to be home at a responsible hour. Say, before midnight. And if you have any trouble, call me. I mean it. That's what I'm here for."

"I'll be careful, Alan. And I planned on being home by eleven. She was standing in the door, ready to leave. "Bye! I'll see you later!"

And I let her leave. I rewarded my restraint by treating myself to a tasteless TV dinner and then I showered and stretched out to watch TV, a book in my lap. I didn't want to close my eyes for fear of seeing images I didn't want to see. Time crept. It was Friday, and I doubt that I ever felt that lonely on a Friday in my life, at least not since my divorce.

And that's why I was surprised when I heard the crunch of a car pulling into the gravel parking space at a bit past eight. And the door opened and a Tina walked in with a hugely exasperated expression plastered on her face.

Silently she stalked to the sofa and plopped down. Her face turned to me and I saw tears marring her complexion. "SHIT!!!" she said. "Fresh start, my butt!!!"

"What's wrong, Tina?"

"People LIE! That's what!"

"Uh..how?"

"Oh, just peachy. No parents at home. And a cooler full of beer. And Mister "I think he likes you" is like, "Uh, let's go someplace in your car. I got some weed…" and he's also got enough hands for a roomful of clocks and he thinks he's all IT an' everything. Wouldn't take "NO" for an answer. He's gonna walk funny tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, babe," I said.

She was on the verge of tears. "I expected different. I hoped it would be different. But I'm the new girl and therefore I'm lucky that anybody pays attention to me an' I live in a trailer park an'… I'm pissed."

"Uh…"

"Okay, sorry… I am seriously upset."

"Better."

Her eyes turned shyly in my direction and the barest beginning of a smile appeared. "Okay. So what does Alan say about crap for friends?"

"Move on. People can be depended on to be people. And the behavior you describe is, unfortunately, pretty common among your age group. I won't say 'your peers', because apparently you don't have very many peers."

"So?!?"

"So life goes on. Even when things don't go your way. You get to keep being you. Uh… why's the guy gonna walk funny?"

"I tried "NO". I tried pushing hands away. And he wrapped me up in his arms and tried to kiss me and he had his hands all over, so I reached down and grabbed. Hard. And yanked. He was on the floor crying when I left. And Susan was looking at me funny. And I came home."

"You had a rough evening. How about hot chocolate for a change." I paused. "On the floor crying?!?! Whatta girl!"

"I'm NOT going to be a slut, Alan. NOT. My first time is going to be with WHO I want, WHEN I want." She paused.

"Hot chocolate?"

Pause. "Okay."

Now that bunch of gears in my mind was really clattering. Her first time? She hadn't HAD a first time yet? "Sorry, babe," I said. "Hot chocolate is instant tonight. Remind me to buy some cocoa next time we do grocery shopping."

She accepted the steaming mug and sipped loudly. "Mmmmmm" she said, then "Dammit!"

Her cellphone rang. She looked at the display. "That's Susan," she said. "Shhhh!" She answered the call. "Uh, hi, Susan. Yes, I AM mad. I expected a nice evening of watching movies and talking and stuff, with new friends." Pause. "No, I DON'T drink." Pause. "No, I have NEVER tried pot." Pause. "Uh… No, I'm NOT a prude. I know stuff about SEX that will curl YOUR hair. And I think LOVE is better." Pause. "Oh. How is he? Walks funny? Good!!! He should. He needs to learn the meaning of NO!" Pause. "No, Susan, I don't HATE you. I don't HATE him. But HE'S not getting within six feet of me. EVER. And if you want to be my friend, then YOU need to be straight with me." Pause. "No. I don't like being blind-sided." Pause. "No. If you want us to do something together, tell me what's going down, up front. And give ME the chance to say no." Pause. "Yeah. Okay. Yeah, I'll still talk to you." Pause. "Reputation? If \*\*I\*\* get a reputation, it's NOT gonna be because I let Jeff Jamison put his hands on my tits. Or anything else." Pause. "Yeah. Okay. See you Monday." Pause. "Yeah, you can call. I'll talk."

She looked at me. "Now my chocolate's cold."

"I can fix that," I said, taking her mug to the microwave. "That was quite a speech."

"Sounds like one of those "Alan" speeches, huh?"

"You have to know that all at once I'm sorry you didn't have a good time and I am relieved you're okay and I'm proud that you can say no… peer pressure is a hard thing to get past."

The microwave chimed. I handed her back her mug. "Oh, no, Alan. I've pretty much "peered" at enough with Mom." She took a sip. "Mmmmmm. What are we watching?"

"Good movie coming on in half an hour, I said. I was gonna stay up late and watch it by myself."

"You're not by yourself now," she said.

We watched the movie and at eleven thirty she changed into her PJ's. "Bedtime?"

"Yeah. Let's do an "us" day tomorrow. If you don't have plans." I waited.

"My plans pretty much got erased."

She made her bed as I rinsed our mugs. I started toward my end of the trailer.

"Wait, Alan," she said.

"What?" I stopped and looked at her.

She walked up to me and tiptoed and kissed me on the cheek. "Thank you."

"For what?" I asked.

"For being decent and understanding. And good to me."

"You're one spectacular young lady," I said. It's easy being nice to you." And I went to my bed.

From the other end of the trailer I heard, "G'nite, babe!"

And I went to sleep. Somewhere around two o'clock I started to turn over and ran into an unexpected obstacle. A seventeen year old girl. She was lying on top of the covers and I was underneath them and I decided that chastity was being observed, so I carefully rolled the other way. An hour later I awoke again, this time to feel a pajama-clad form sliding up against me.

"Tina," I whispered, not wanting to startle her.

"Alan… I…"

"Tina, I… you're…"

"I'm… the sofa hurts my back… and I got cold laying on top of the blankets."

"Okay… "

"I'm cold." She slid closer. I didn't feel "cold". I felt heat.

"Okay," I said. "Come here." And I let my arms encircle her. And I smelled the sweet trace of perfume on her, and I breathed and she snuggled into me and said, "mmmmmm". And we really DID go back to sleep.

And that made for a very interesting wake up. I woke up first and looked at the lump in the bed beside me. Her hair tossed crazily in her sleep and ended up wreathing her face, that pretty face, asleep, looking cherubic in its innocence. Innocence! That clanked in my head. She'd told her friend that she was a virgin.

I started to get out of the bed and I felt a hand on my arm. "Noooo, babe," she said. "Stay here."

"I'd love to, babe, but I gotta go to the bathroom."

"Okaaay," she whined.

"I'll be back," I said. "If that's what you want."

"Mmmm-hmmm" she said.

I was up the hall, into the bathroom and back out. I eased under the covers and she scooted towards me. "Are you sure this is…"

"I want to cuddle."

It was my turn. "Okaaaay…"

Our bodies met. For some minutes I held her, her face pressed against my chest, my cheek against the top of her head. She moved. Her face turned towards mine. And things went horribly wrong. Or right. Because she kissed me.

I let her slide out of my arms and sat up. "God, no, Tina…"

"Alan…" she said, putting her hand on my arm. "What's wrong?"

"Tina… I… we… No…"

"What?" she asked. "D'you know that I didn't go to sleep last night? Not until I got in your bed?"

"No…" I answered.

"I didn't. It wasn't my back. I couldn't sleep. I just lay there thinking about things like how a guy my age thought that the first time he got me in a room alone that I belonged to HIM, and he's supposed to be a GOOD one, and I thought, "well, dummy, there's a guy thirty feet away that never so much as made a move, that treated me like a princess and an equal and a valuable person and SAVED me at the risk of his own life, all at once, and I said, 'Stupid girl, exactly what ARE you looking for?'. So I crawled in your bed."

"B-but… Tina, I didn't, I mean, I… I told Deputy Hurley, I didn't take you to turn into a sex toy…"

"I am NOT a sex toy. You don't listen, Alan. You treat me like I want to be treated. If you were only my dad, I'd have a perfect dad. I'd be so lucky. But you're NOT my dad. You're… well, I don't know what you are. I know what I want you to be…"

I knew what I was… speechless. "Uh…"

"Alan. Do you love me? For real? Not saying it to make me feel good?"

This one was easy. "Yes, Tina, I love you."

"Then tell me, Mister Engineer, if you love me, don't you think it might be possible that I love you?" She had an awfully serious look on her face.

"Precious, I can believe that. But then what? I mean…"

She knelt beside me. "Then this…" and she kissed me. Her lips were hot and soft and as they met mine this time mine parted involuntarily. The tip of my tongue brushed her lips softly and they parted and her own tongue gently met mine. "Mmmmmmm…." escaped her and resonated throughout my being. My arms enveloped her and she molded into me, separated from me by only a couple of layers of cotton pajamas.

Our lips finally parted. Blood was pounding in my ears. "Alan," she said, "Tell me you love me again."

"Heaven help me, darling," I said. "I love you, Tina." I kissed her this time. Finally we stopped. Her eyes were bright and blue and I could lose myself in them, and there was a satisfied smile on her lips.

"That's all I want to know. I love you. You love me. I can stop worrying." And she got up. I had a raging hard-on that I wasn't supposed to have, but I'd just been kissing a beautiful, nubile, intelligent, funny seventeen year old girl. And I wasn't dead. But I wasn't ruled by my baser urges, either. I got up too.

"So now what?" I asked.

She pushed up against me. "All things in due time, babe," she said, kissing me lightly. "Mmm-kay?"

"Okay," I said. I ran my hands down her sides. The embrace was invigorating. And I know she felt the erection I had. Still in each other's arms, her face turned to me. "In due time."

So Saturday morning we drove out for breakfast, then a ride through the countryside. Away from the home area, she pushed the console out of the way and slid beside me, wrapping my bicep with her hands, putting her chin on my shoulder.

"You're mine?" she asked.

"I'm yours," I said. "That's kind of scary, babe," I said.

"Why's it scary? I love you?"

"Because you're seventeen and I'm forty and…"

"And it makes no difference at all. I thought about that. Is love supposed to be about physical things? Like MY looks or YOUR looks? Or is it supposed to be that the real YOU and the real ME, personalities, likes, dislikes, dreams, thoughts, all of US fits. That US is right…"

"You're gonna make a habit of this, aren't you?"

"A habit of what?"

"Being all smart and right all the time…"

She kissed me, giggling. "Just let us be US…"

"Okay, smart girl," I said. "You just bought yourself a forty year old engineer."

"And you got yourself a… well, you got ME… and whether I'm seventeen or the reincarnation of Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile. And I am YOURS…" She looked thoughtful. "Uh, babe… can we do a hotel tonight? And don't get two beds… Never again."

"But, babe… we didn't pack…"

"I know for a fact, Alan Addison, that you keep an emergency bag behind your seat with a change of underwear and a shaving kit. She smiled demurely. And we won't need pajamas. Not tonight."

"Babe, didn't you say last night that you wanted your first time to be…"

She interrupted, "Don't feed me my own speech, dearest. I said, and I quote (I loved it when she got academic) 'Who I want and when I want.' And, Alan, the 'who' is YOU and the 'when' is before this day ends."

"But, Tina… you only get to do that once."

"You know," she said, sitting back, "I love you. We share this together…"

"Okay. Jackson is an hour up the road. Here's my phone. Look up either this hotel or that one. And get us a place…"

A very businesslike Tina did the reservations and an hour later we checked in with my emergency bag for luggage. And went straight to the room. And locked the door. And she pushed me back against it and almost climbed up me, kissing. And I gave up. I loved it. I loved her. And the girl I loved was tugging my shirt out of my pants…

I ran my fingers through that short, sassy hair and fastened my lips to the side of her neck, getting squeals and wiggles in response. She pulled free and grabbed my hand and we went toward the bed.

Her sloppy, floppy Saturday blouse was loose and I ran my hands under it, feeling her flesh for the first time. "Mmmmm… ohhhh, baby…" and she giggled. "You don't know…"

I turned and sat on the bed, drawing her toward me. "What don't I know?"

"That I've been wanting to do this… for you to touch me… but I tried, too, Alan. I tried telling myself that you were a nice guy who really just wanted to take care of me and it wasn't like that and I shouldn't push for anything else…"

I laughed. "Then we were both doing the same thing…"

"I know," she giggled. She started to unbutton her blouse. I helped.

"Uh, Alan… I never… before…"

"But you're unbuttoning…"

"I knowwww," she said. "But I'm… uh… bashful…"

"Then do it YOUR way."

She let out an exasperated sigh. "Okay then…" and she stopped unbuttoning and pulled the shirt off over her head, leaving me staring at her bra. She reached behind her.

"No, I'll do that, babe," and I reached around her and unhooked two hooks. Her bra slid off her shoulders. Two perfect titties…

"Your shirt," she said. I peeled my shirt off. Her hands went to my chest, her fingers clutching my chest hair. "God, I've wanted to do this every day we went to the pool," she said. She pushed me back on the bed and straddled me. We both still had jeans on at this point. More giggles. "D'you KNOW what you did to me this morning when I hugged you and felt that THING pressing against me?"

"No. What?"

"Beast!" She laughed. "D'you think you're the only one that gets aroused? I had to go swab out my… uh… THERE!" Giggle.

"I'm glad. I thought I was going to explode. And you just went "la-di-dah…" What were you thinking?"

"That we needed to talk," she smiled. "'Cuz I'm only doing this once. And you, mister, you better be forever…"

"Forever," I repeated. "Uh… little darling, you're too damned smart to be confused as to what that means…"

Naked chest to sweet, firm titties, we kissed. "I know exactly what it means." Another giggle. "There's that thing again." She sat back, still straddling me. "It's time I get to see it."

"I'm not going to ask if you're sure again."

"Good!" Giggle. She got up. I stood, started to unbuckle my belt. "Nuh-uh," she said. "MY present. I get to unwrap it." She worked my belt loose, then unsnapped my jeans and unzipped me. I was hard. Diamond-cutter hard. It tented out my drawers. She slid my jeans down my thighs. I wiggled my legs and they fell to my feet. I stepped out of them. Blue eyes turned up to me and her mouth formed a smile. "This is supposed to be fun, right?"

All I could do was nod. Her fingers hooked the elastic of my drawers and in one move pulled them out and down over my dick. Keeping her eyes fixed on it, she slid my drawers down my legs. I stepped out of them too.

"So this is the thing…"

It was. All six circumcised inches of absolutely normal. And I died when her fingers wrapped around it.

"Uh, babe," she said, looking up at me standing in front of her, "Am I supposed to think this is, uh.. like… beautiful?"

"I don't know, babe. I never thought about it. I'd settle for you not finding it too disgusting to touch.,."

Her grin was joy to behold. "Oh, yeah, it's disgusting. Like this."

Every ounce of strength I had, I used to keep my knees from buckling when she stuck the head in her mouth. She heard me suck in a sharp breath. "I… I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Oh, god, no, sweetness. Surprised, yes. Hurt? No."

"I've heard about that for years. Saw yours. Knew that I'd like it, with YOU." She stood up. She eyed me questioningly. "You want?" she touched her jeans.

"Oh, yes," I said. I knelt before her and unbuttoned her jeans, taking time to run my hands over that perfectly framed ass. "Perfect," I said.

"Glad YOU think so, baby," she said.

I slid them down, helping them as they clung to her thighs, then down past her shapely calves. She raised first her left foot, then her right, stepping out of her jeans, leaving her clad in a pair of powder-blue hip-hugger panties, her rounded mons, beckoning. Yes, it WAS beckoning. So I did the thing I thought it needed. I planted a kiss on it. It was her turn to suck in a breath. "Ahhhhhhhh."

"Did I hurt you?" I asked.

Giggle again. "No, but I'm gonna hurt YOU if you don't pull my panties off and do that again."

I slid the panties off her plumpish rounded ass and down. She stepped out of them and I kissed her mons again through a fine down of brown pubic hair. Hands held the back of my head. I eased a little lower and I let my tongue tease the beginning of her slit. "Nnnnnnn, baby…." I stood up and our bodies touched naked for the first time.

She shook her head.

"D'you know," I said, "how wonderfully adorable you are. Right down to that little head shake."

"I need a haircut," she said. "But then you might think it's too short."

"Nuh-uh," I said. "I like your neck." And I attacked it, turning her into a wiggly, giggly mess in my arms.

She pushed me backward onto the bed. "Now," she said, "this is my first time, and I know it's supposed to hurt some. So I'm gonna be on top, okay?"

All I could do was nod assent. She straddled me and for the first time in her life her pussy met a dick. My untold riches lay in the fact that the dick was mine. The wet lips of her pussy wrapped the shaft of my dick. "Ahhhhh," she said. "THAT is GOOD!" She smiled at me and slid back and forth a few times, letting her clitty ride in contact with the underside of my hard and wonderfully trapped dick.

While she was enjoying that I was enjoying the beauty of her body, tracing sweet curves with my hands, moving up from her delightful ass, up her sides, around to cup twin handfuls of firm, warm flesh, letting my thumbs tease pink strawberry nipples, circling the quarter-sized areoles.

"You're killing me, baby… and I'm loving the death…" she sighed. Finally she raised her hips and let my dick rise. Lubrication was complete. Her juices far exceeded my own, and between us, we were ready. Her hand went between her thighs and she guided me with fingertips, lining the head of my dick with her waiting hole. Her face showed concentration. She bit her bottom lip, pressing down, the head pushing against her cherry. Her eyes went full open, she took a deep breath, and pressed. She went "Mmmph!" and I was in.

"We're… You're in ME, Alan."

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She nodded. And answered by rising, letting me slide out of her a little, then she sat back down, pushing me all the way back inside. Her back arched. I put my hands on her hips and she started slow oscillations, back and forth, sitting back to angle me so her clitty was again in contact with the dick inside her. I was trying hard to keep from coming right then but her hips were, her pussy was, working against my best intentions.

"Oh, baby," she moaned. I curled forward to suck one of her titties into my mouth. My tongue played on her nipple. "Babe… tooo… Much… I… I… ohhhhh." Thrust. "I'm… I'm… doinnnnnnnn'….. it…" the last syllable was a hiss. Another thrust was all I could stand, and I squirted. Hard. Deep… Her eyes blinked open. "Is that… you're… Oh, god… I feel it… again…" she breathed. "Another… babyyyyy."

She fell forward into my arms and our lips sealed together. I ran my hands over her ass. It wouldn't be still, and active muscles in her pussy teased me through orgasm to hardness and she started humping me as we kissed. I held her in my arms and rolled her over onto her back, still inside her. Her hips pushed me deeper into her. I started plunging into her again, rolling her almost immediate second orgasm into yet another for me.

After the fire subsided for the second time, I rolled her back on top of me.

Finally we regained the power of speech. "Darling," she said, caressing my face, "everyone told me the first time was gonna hurt and wouldn't be much fun. I had fun. Did you have fun?"

"I'm returning from a parallel universe, little girl," I said.

She kissed me lightly. I looked into those blue eyes. "Tina, will you marry me?"

Giggle. "You ask me to marry you with that THING stuck in me? Uh…" her hips wiggled and I fell out, soft, spent, with a soft plop. "Okay, it's out. Now ask me."

"Tina, will you marry me?"

"Yes, Alan, I will." She got a semi-serious look. "IN fact, in SOME societies, we're married NOW."

"Good enough for me," I said. "But when you're old enough… we'll make it official."

"Old enough? I'm seventeen…"

"That's old enough for you to get married if your parent signs for you. But at eighteen, you won't need a signature."

"What about you? You're my guardian."

"Uh, I'm pretty sure that I can't sign for you to marry me…"

"So we can like, live in sin for a year…"

"I wouldn't call it sin, exactly," I said. "After all, I am not going to be with anyone else for the rest of my life. What about you?"

"You're it, babe. One. Only. Forever." And that statement was sealed with a kiss.

# Chapter 5

Of many things is a life built. Together. Things like finding out that we loved the same music. Food. Lifestyle. We didn't leave the room until we left for home the next day. Our marriage day dinner was a delivery pizza and a liter of coke.

We took our first shower together in that room, luxuriating in endless hot water and plenty of room to move and love. And dried off, we were back in bed. I forgot I ever knew a female form before Tina. Each touch of my fingers, lips, tongue, dick to her was a discovery.

And since I was her first, she had pure fun. A sharp mind, insatiable curiosity, and new-found sexuality made wonderful experience, especially coupled with her sense of humor. Her giggles weren't intimidation, they were just manifestations of the joy we experienced together, and I found myself giggling as we explored one another.

A happy discovery for both of us was that my Tina loved oral sex. From her first quick suck Saturday, she decided to do more after we showered, and she needed little coaching. All I had to do was limit the enthusiasm of her bites and how hard she squeezed and suck and bit my balls. I was in heaven watching that auburn-wreathed head working me over, especially when those blue eyes looked up, her lips smiling around my shaft. And a throaty giggle.

She pushed my head down from where I was working over her tits with my lips and teeth and tongue, urging me into her pussy, and I drank her, her juices sweet and salty and musky as I showed her the joys of multiple orgasms with my tongue and lips.

Sunday morning. Satiated. Sore. Aside from it being her first time, I know I'd come at least six times and we lost count of hers. And her pussy was as tender as my dick. And we checked out and hit a fast food drive-thru for lunch masquerading as breakfast. And she stayed plastered to my side all the way home.

Arriving back at the park, we entered the trailer. She picked up the linens from the sofa and turned to me smiling. "We won't be needing these again."

"Nope," I said. "I just started living again, baby..."

She smiled. "God, I'm sore. But there's our bed. And we need to initiate it…"

I started stripping. She beat me to nudity. She was on her hands and knees in our bed when I crawled in. She ducked her head, trapping my dick in her mouth for a languorous suck. Then she smiled at me. "That thing is made for me to suck on, Alan."

I returned the favor, kissing her lips, her tits, and then tonguing her sweet pussy. Moisture was flowing when I entered her and those muscular legs wrapped around me, pulling me in. In a matter of minutes we were wrapped in each other's arms, shuddering to orgasm. This time when I finally pulled out, I was kneeling in the bed and she was lying before me.

My dick was soft and dripping with the results of our joy and she surprised me by swiveling around in bed and taking my sopping dick in her mouth. "Mmmmmmm, baby, we taste good together. Wanna do me?"

I couldn't tell her no. Her clear juices were mixed with the translucent white of my own semen. And my lips and tongue working to empty her sopping hole brought her another orgasm. And lying in my arms, giggling.

"Are you happy, little girl?" I asked.

"Deliriously happy. Ecstatically happy." She smiled. "Are you?"

"I started living when you came into my life."

We lay in bed naked for an hour, too satiated for much more than occasional touches and caresses. Until Tina remembered her new friend. Warm lips closed over soft dick. "mmmmm," she said. Then a giggle. "Stop me if I do this too much," she said.

"Don't be selfish," I told her. "Turn around here and let me do you."

"Is that sixty-nine? I've heard…"

As a beautiful, deep pink, abused pussy opened in front of me, I said, "Yes, this is sixty nine, baby doll." I got another giggle before her lips closed around my dick and my own mouth formed to suck the juices from her pussy.

Finally we got out of bed long enough to shower and fix a quick meal, and then back in bed and more exploration and experimentation by Tina. I managed to set the alarm clock before we disintegrated into naked, drained, and sound asleep bodies.

The six o'clock alarm was still the boss, though, but instead of careful avoiding or averting eyes and trying to not bump each other, we took advantage of the efficiency of allowing nudity and touching, and we submitted each other to fondles and caresses. And it's a wonderful thing to leave for work with the warm feeling of hungry lips on your dick as you walk out the door.

Monday was the first day of school following a lot of things for Tina. By the time she walked into the halls, the news of her Friday night fiasco was coursing through the student body.

My own day at work was more like routine to me, the standard package of hurdles I'd come to expect from fifteen years of project work. I knew where the most likely screw-ups would occur, and I and my minions dove right into those. And Rome not being built in a day? Neither are plastics plants, and there was no good reason for me to extend my presence past normal hours, so at four PM I was climbing in the truck and twenty minutes later I pulled into the park.

Tina's little car was parked at the park office and I walked in to find her sitting with an open book and notebook, scribbling. She stopped when I entered. "Hi, babe!" she said.

Mizz Lillian smiled. "She's happier today than she was Friday," she said.

"Yes ma'am," I said. "Two weeks past disaster and she keeps getting happier and happier."

"It sure looks that way," Lillian said.

Tina was stuffing books into her backpack. "I guess we need to go do a swim, huh?" she asked.

"Don't you think that would feel good?"

"I do," she said. She turned to Mizz Lillian. "Thanks for putting up with me, Mizz Lillian!"

"Oh, dear girl, thank YOU for visiting. I appreciate the company."

We drove to the trailer and went inside to change. Changing was, well, would have been, a lot faster since we didn't have to work around exposing ourselves to one another. Except now we added naked embraces and teasing and caressing to the process. But we DID get out to go swim, striding through the park to the pool with towels in hand, pausing to greet the regulars who'd been in the park since before our arrival. Mid-week, the pool was deserted, afternoon swims not being a priority of the retired set who customarily stayed over the weekdays.

Tina was first splash, followed closely by me and despite the urges forming in my head by watching her butt in a bathing suit, we did our normal regiment of a few laps, finally ending side by side, hanging on the pool wall. Closer together than last week. As a matter of fact, a female hand under the water insinuated itself up the leg of my baggy trunks and gave a squeeze that brought me to instant erection.

"Stop that!" I whispered, half meaning it.

"Why? Bashful?" she giggled.

"Not in the least, little girl," I said. "I just don't wish to outrage the population."

"Uh… oh, okay… I understand…"

"I'm sure you do, babe. And believe me, I'd love nothing better than to parade through this park right now, holding your hand or with my arm around you. But we've sort of created an image…"

"Oh, yeah," she sighed. And gave me another squeeze. Her expression, biting her bottom lip, smiling, eyes twinkling… "Let's get out." She bounced out of the pool and sat on a lounge, toweling off.

I followed her. We were still alone, but I saw an older couple coming up the road, hand in hand.

"I wanna be like them, babe," she said.

"Me too," I said. "In due time. It's just that when we started in here, we were NOT a couple, and…"

"But I'm seventeen. I'm legal. I can do what I want with who I want…"

I sighed. She was right. Legally. "I know that, babe. But what's legal and what decent people think is right are quite often two different things."

"And we like being around decent people. Or we end up like Mom and her friends."

"Right. So we need to proceed gently. Let people get used to seeing us together all the time, and let them get used to thinking, 'Hey! She's nice. He's nice.' And then 'You know, they almost make a cute couple' and then 'Well, there's Alan ‘n' Tina. Kind of odd, but they're happy.' And when we get there, we'll have all but a few people accepting what WE already know. That a forty year old guy and a seventeen year old girl can be together because they LOVE one another, not because somebody's using somebody…"

"That makes sense. Uh… let's go back to the trailer, okay? I got homework to finish."

"Okay," I said. We got up and let the older couple in the gate as we left. Walking up the road, she took my hand. "Oh, you're going to make this difficult, aren't you?" I said.

And got a giggle in return.

Back in the trailer, and sad that only one of us could fit in the shower at a time. She was out first, sitting with her blow-dryer as I soaped quickly and rinsed off. I was shaving as the phone rang. My phone. Hers had a different ring. "Can you get that, babe?" I called. I was scraping whiskers off my face and listening.

"Oh, hi, Deputy Hurley. Uh… yeah, we got all that taken care of. Exactly what we needed. Yessir, I'm back in high school. Yessir. It's great! I wish we had a bigger place, but this is working good enough."

Since I didn't have to bother with dressing for modesty, I stepped out of the bathroom naked.

She said, "Here's Alan. And thank you SO much, okay?"

I took the phone. "Hi, Bill. I guess Tina caught you up?"

"Yeah, she's back in school?" he asked.

"Yeah. Damnedest thing. Since she was a dropout, they had to give her tests to see what grade to put her in."

"And…"

"And Miss Tina is in college level classes."

"Really? Great," he said.

"Did you get your check?" He'd said that fees and cost for filing our legal documents as seventy-five dollars. I'd mailed him a check.

"Hey, I was kidding…"

"Then put it in the coffee kitty. Extra donuts…"

"Hey! That's a stereotype." Laughing.

"Uh… any news on the disposition of our "friends"?"

"Momma's still in jail here. Couldn't post bail. So's the boyfriend, pending a hearing for extradition. They ain't getting' out, Alan. And if Momma was to get out, she has no legal standing for you an' Tina, what with Tina being seventeen."

"That's good to know. She's… Tina's good people."

"Uh… we did a check on her. Nothing. Clean record. Not even a traffic ticket."

"I know. We talked. She likes to talk." The little girl who 'Liked to talk' was laying on the sofa with her head in my lap, her cheek pressed against the hardening lump of my dick.

"Well," Bill continued, "She's legal, and she's out of my jurisdiction, and I was surprised when you called ME back to get the paperwork to put her in school. And now she's IN school, so I'm not surprised any more."

"I quit being surprised, myself…" I said.

"Okay, Alan, I'll let you go. But hey! Keep in touch, okay? And if you're ever back through Armpit, Louisiana, stop in and say hi!"

"Okay, Bill. And thanks again. Here's Tina." I handed the phone to Tina. "Say bye to Deputy Hurley."

"Bye, Deputy Hurley. Yeah, you've done VERY good. Uh-huh. We'll take care of each other. Yeah. Bye!" and she disconnected. She rolled over onto her stomach and smiled. "He said to take good care of you." Her head bobbed downward. Several seconds of slurping and sucking ensued.

I dragged her naked, complaining "Why'd you make me stop????" body up and sat her in my lap, kissing her.

"See, babe? That's a nice person. I wouldn't want to have him think less of you."

She kissed me. "I know, babe," she said. "but in a few months…"

"A year. When we can say "Mr. & Mrs. Addison"."

"You're serious about marrying me?" Squeal.

"I am. Are you?"

Long kiss. "Most definitely."

My hands roamed freely over her sleek body, lingering at places where a touch produced a shiver or an "Mmmmmm."

"Let's not play cards tonight, babe. I need to finish homework. And then…" she smiled, blue eyes twinkling below auburn, burnished bangs.

"You're the boss," I said.

"I'm NOT the boss. I was thinking about this in study hall today. I own Part A. You own Part B. But we BOTH own what happens when we put ‘em together." Giggle.

"I never thought about it like that. But I sure do like your Part A."

"And your Part B feels soooo good in so many ways." She smirked. "Stop that. I NEED to do the homework first, and I'm gonna be sitting in a puddle if we keep this up."

"Do your homework, little brown-haired girl!" I laughed.

She tossed her head, her hair bouncing. She knew that this drove me wild. "Okay. But I need to make an appointment to get a trim." She giggled. "And I may dye it orange." Her eyes flashed. "Like whats'er name in that movie…"

"Don't tease an old man, lover…" I laughed.

"Well, maybe not the "orange" thing. Mizz Lillian knows a hair salon. They'll do me Saturday morning."

"Sounds like a plan. Wanna do another "both us in the same shower" weekend somewhere?"

"Mmmm-hmmm… and we can hold hands in public."

"Yeah. Do your homework."

She smiled and went through the exercises. English and social studies she critiqued. We talked about the ideas behind the science. And numbers were numbers. I was on the laptop checking private email. One needed an answer. My sister.

"Dear Sis," I wrote. "I haven't heard from you in a month. What gives? Are they charging postage in Louisiana for email?"

"A lot of water has passed under the bridge since we talked last." Sis and I were not the "talk on the phone every day" siblings.

I continued typing, describing briefly the incident at the diner and the friends I found, including the one currently doing homework wearing only panties. I didn't mention that detail.

"And Sis," I wrote, "This may come as a shock, but what started out as a friendship has become more. We are getting married as soon as she turns eighteen. I hope this doesn't disturb you too much. I've been alone entirely too long, and genius females who like classical music are entirely rare creatures."

I signed it, "Love, big brother" and hit "send". I surmised a few days before I got an answer back. Apparently I need to rethink my "surmise" routines because a minute and a half later my cellphone rang. The sound shocked Tina and she put her pen down.

I punched the "answer" button. And got ready. "Hi, Sis," I said.

I held the phone away from my ear. "You did WHAT?!!?! Have you lost your ever-lovin' mind?!?! SEVENTEEN?!?! You old goat! You have nieces that age!"

Tina could hear the voice. She slid beside me and I held the phone so it was speaking to both our ears.

"Tina," I said, "Say hi to your new sister-in-law, cutie. She sounds very excited at the news. You remember? Her name is Elise."

"Hi, Elise," chirped Tina in her cheeriest voice. Elise was still sputtering. Tina took it upon herself to fill the conversational void. "He's wonderful and I love him very much. We are so alike in so many ways…"

"Babe… uh, okay, Tina," Elise paused. "he's been beat up about women for a long time. He's MY brother. Don't you dare hurt him. I have a garden. I can HIDE bodies…"

Tina's laughter pealed. "Oh, Elise, he was RIGHT. You're just like ‘im…"

Elise feigned outrage. "He told you THAT!?!?"

"Uh-huh," Tina said. "And that you're his only sister and he loves and respects you. And you'd understand…"

"I understand… might take a while to fit my mind around it."

It was my turn to speak. "Well, Sis, get your mind around it. This is the real thing."

"Okay… if you say so. Send me pictures…"

Tina's turn. "We'll take some pictures. Huh, babe?" Giggle.

"Not THOSE pictures, doll…" I laughed.

Elise's outrage was mostly still feigned. "Well, okay, brother," she said. "ya'll need to come down and visit. Let me know when, and I'll get your house all aired out."

"Okay, sis. We'll talk to you later. My fiancée has to finish her homework…" I laughed.

"Gahhhh," said Elise.

"Bye, Sis," Tina said. I ended the call. "Well," she laughed," that was rather painless."

"If I can get my eardrum back in its socket," I laughed.

Giggle. "Eardrums don't have sockets, silly."

"And I have a perfect mate who knows that," I said. "Finish your homework!"

"Beast!" she laughed. Ten minutes later she closed the books and stuffed her backpack. She looked at me, smiling and said one word: "Bed!"

She stood for me to remove her panties. My reward for performing this task was permission to kiss her on her "muffin", the name we'd given her pubic mound. We rolled backward onto the bed together. Her fingers found me erect and a couple of slow, squeezing strokes and she giggled. "You're leaking." Her fingers came to her lips and she made a show of licking them. Then she kissed me.

"Babe," she said, "you know how many times you've made me come with your mouth?"

"I hadn't been keeping count. A bunch?"

"Mmmm-hmmm," she purred. "and we've, you know, licked each other clean after we came together, so I have a good idea of what you taste like."

"Yeah, and you're delicious."

"We taste good together. And you've made me come so hard with your mouth. You…"

"I like your taste, babe. And the way you wiggle when you're coming."

Giggle. "I'm glad. I love that. But… I want to make YOU come. With MY mouth…"

I smiled. "And that's something you think you have to ask permission for?"

Her bright-eyed face nodded. Smiling.

"Babe, I belong to you. As long as we both enjoy, anything, okay?'

"Then scoot up so I can lay between your legs."

I scooted, arranging pillows behind me. "You're the sexiest creature in the universe. I want to see you…"

Her eyes belied her love. And lust. "Then watch, babe. I need to learn how to do this."

Her head eased forward and she sucked my dick's head into her mouth, her tongue prodding and swirling. "Mmmmmm," she moaned. Muffled, "Good?" she asked with me still in her mouth.

"God, yes…" my hands stroked her hair.

She pulled back, releasing me, and rubbed her hair against my balls and thighs. Smiled. "I wanna bite, Alan. Can I? Does that feel good?"

"I think it does, babe… nobody…"

"But… it's MADE for my mouth…"

I sighed. "That's YOUR mouth, baby. Apparently everyone doesn't…"

Petulant. "But I want to bite. How hard?"

"I think I can show you."

" How can you show me?"

"I can bite you…"

That thought got interpreted in that pretty head quickly. "Oh, like… I LOVE when you bite my titties…"

"That's how hard. Just like Sunday. And be careful. The head's a lot more sensitive."

Giggle. "That's what this ridge is for. So I'll know where to keep my teeth!" The feeling of my dick disappearing between those lips was exquisite. As was the feeling as he white teeth playfully caught me behind my coronal ridge.

"Ohhhhh, god, yesssss," I hissed.

I felt the giggle as well as heard it. My dick popped out. "That's better than I imagined it." Her hand continued to work up and down the shaft. "So if a guy's doin' himself, this is what he does, huh?" She looked at me, smiling, questioning…

"Yeah."

"Show me."

I replaced her hand with mine and began the old, familiar stroking. It wasn't as exciting when I did it, even though twenty-eight years of practice made me sure of what I was doing. "Like that," I said.

"Uh, yeah. You're holding the skin and sliding it up and down."

I passed my hand over the head. "And the head…"

She interrupted, "…is made for my mouth. And you REACT…" She stopped smiling. "One of Mom's guys did that in front of me one time. I guess her thought I'd get turned on and want his toothless ass… Mom walked in and hollered at ‘im."

"So he didn't…"

"No," she interrupted. Smile came back with little sucks on the head of my dick. "I've never seen it. But babe, when you're IN me, I can FEEL it." Giggle. "And I want to feel it in my mouth. And taste what I made YOU do."

And a brilliant, if inexperienced mind put hand and mouth together in concert. And teeth. Wonderful teeth. Stopped. Licked my balls. Giggle. "I love how they're all wrinkly. And they move when I kiss ‘em."

"Just be careful…"

"Yeah. I know. Excruciating pain. Neat trick." She smiled wickedly. "Funny how just a little change in pressure can make it feel good…" her lips closed over one ball and she gently sucked and washed with her tongue. "That okay?"

I shivered.

"Wanna make my guy happy while I'm enjoying him." She moved up from my scrotum to my dick, nibbling and sucking, then tilted it toward her mouth and sucked me in, her lips, tongue and teeth working magic on the first two inches as her hand, a couple of fingers of it, jacked my shaft in time with lips an teeth and tongue.

I was… pressure was rising fast. I stroked that sassy hair lovingly, causing her to turn her face to me, smiling wickedly with my dick in her mouth.

"Mmmmmm" and then a giggle. "Something's happening," and then she was back on me.

"I'm… uhhhh…. Nnnnghhhhh! I'm comingggggg!" I shook uncontrollably as the first huge spurt erupted.

"Mmmmphh!" she reacted. I felt her swallow and suck. Second spurt. Swallow. Third, fourth spurts. Swallow. Then she sucked the remainder of my coming into her mouth. I went from pulsating orgasm to hot continuous ecstasy and she kept sucking.

I realized that I was curled up with my hands on her head, not holding her, just touching this girl who was pushing me to the stars. I relaxed, falling backward. The mattress shook. Tina looked up. Grinning. A droplet of my semen had escaped her mouth. Her pink tongue slipped out, collecting it.

My breathing returned to normal. I knew that if I never received oral sex again in my life, I could die knowing that I'd been DONE.

Giggle. "I get the idea that what I did worked…"

"Like using a steamroller to crack walnuts, babe," I said.

She crawled up my torso, folding her arms on my chest and resting her chin in her hands, smiling.

I had to ask. "Did you…"

She interrupted, "I LOVED it." Her finger wiped an imaginary drop. "Every last drop." She kissed me, lips closed.

"Nuh-uh," I said, putting a hand behind her head, pulling her to me. "Real kiss." Our lips met and parted, our tongues wrestling, dancing together. Yes, I detected a taste. Me. In the mouth of the girl who loved me so wondrously just a minute before.

Our kiss broke. She smiled for me. "Did it REALLY feel good? I mean, it's my first time… you're the only one… only one there will ever be, babe…"

"Babe, it was… beyond my imagination. What you are is what I want. Forever."

"You know, Alan, I wondered. I guess girls do that. I mean, I know you were married, and I know you've been with other women, too. And I wonder how… I mean, am I as good?"

I kissed her gently. "Baby. Precious Tina. The first time you kissed me, history disappeared. Making love with you, it was like I'd never touched a woman before."

"But Alan," she asked, "Us… I"

"Let's put it this way, cutie. Before, I had fantasies. Even when I was married, it was like 'If she'd do THIS or if we did it like THAT', or 'it's good but it could be better.' And then there's you. And I find out that my most vivid imagination couldn't compare with reality with you." I kissed her for punctuation.

"Mmmmm, she purred. "I know I LIKE what we do, babe… and it's part of love. The way we LOVE each other."

"That's the way it's supposed to be, sweetie," I said. "I hope it stays that way."

"Stop worryin', Alan," she said.

"I do worry, Tina. You're in school with a few hundred people your age, and in a week you already had a date with a cute guy… and it probably wouldn't have taken that long…"

"Yeah… a guy. I thought "smart" meant decent and civilized. I was wrong. And the rest of them? besides, after news got around, people travelled from one end of school to the other to get a peek of ol' lover boy walkin' funny. And he's whinin' that all he tried to do was kiss me. So it'll be a while before one of ‘em's brave enough to ask me out. And I'm, well, I'm playin' things differently."

"Differently?" I asked.

Six inches from my face, she grinned. "Yeah. Next one asks, I'm tellin''im I have a boyfriend. And I do, you know…" she kissed me on the nose. "Right?"

"Right!" and I kissed her back. I wanted to kiss her for each of the freckles that spread across her cheeks and nose. That's a task for another day…

"What'd your friend Susan have to say?" I asked.

"Susan was sorry. At least she says… and she told people that Jeffy's lyin', that he'd bragged to HER boyfriend that he was gonna be doin' me before the night was over…" She giggled.

"That's funny?" I asked.

"Yeah. Supposedly he told his parents that he got kicked playin' soccer, that's why he's walkin' funny. And when I saw him in class, he stayed on the other side of the room. Didn't say nothin'." She smiled. "You know, I'm really glad the whole thing happened, just the way it did."

"You're glad?" I mused.

"Yeah. If it had gone the way it was supposed to go, I don't think I'd have had the same thoughts I had Friday night. At least not for a while. And I would have missed a chunk of the life we have together." Her smile was sublime. "And besides, now people are going to have to deal with me as a person who's different and not to be played with. And by the way, calculus? I aced the first quiz."

# Chapter 6

Okay, we got into a new routine. No, not an "I'm bored" routine, but rather an "I can't wait to get home to connect with my soulmate" routine. Yes, the afternoon swims were part of the routine. The exercise kept us both fit, and at forty, it would have been too easy to spread out, as many of my contemporaries and co-workers had done. Besides, I had a hundred and twenty pounds of incentive.

Another part of the routine was the homework. I took an active part in Tina's education as I noted it usually took her longer to write her assignments than it did to derive answers.

Meals were another routine. Many mornings found us eating cold cereal in the trailer, and other mornings we ended up at the diner up the road in the direction of my project. We usually sat in a corner table. The waitresses knew us as regulars, and on the odd day, we were joined by one or more of my co-workers. Everybody was indeed getting used to Alan 'n' Tina.

Our weekends… Sometimes we took off on Friday. Sometimes we waited until Saturday morning, but most weekends we were on the road, laughing, talking, and searching parks and concerts and culture. And we found it. On the advice of Mizz Lillian, we went to a bluegrass festival and Tina found pure acoustic folk music to be something that meshed with our love of classical music, and heaven knows, Tennessee has a lot of bluegrass.

But Mizz Lillian. She saw the Alan ‘n' Tina thing real quick. "You two look like you belong together," she'd told Tina one afternoon.

Tina related that conversation to me that evening, and the next day, when I stopped in to retrieve my sweetie, she was sitting in her chair in her customary spot. There was nobody else in the place, me, Tina, Mizz Lillian. Almost two months of visiting every day had me and Mizz Lillian as more than passing acquaintances. We'd shared gossip and laughter about some of the stories from her years of managing this RV park, and I guess she thought we were at a point where she could get a little personal with us.

I guess that's why I didn't hit the floor when she suggested that just maybe, Tina and I were a couple in the more traditional sense. "So the truth, Alan Addison, and don't bullshit an old lady. I have eyes, you know…"

Tina's the one who answered. "Yes ma'am. We are. And the day I turn eighteen, I'm marrying him!"

Lillian laughed. "Good for you, darlin'," she said. She looked at me. "Alan, I know what you were thinkin' but this is Tennessee and we've got a history of girls marryin' young. Even to older men. I've seen stranger stuff than you an' her. At least she ain't pregnant. And you have a good job. An' she's in school. That's a lot of "right". And I can't see much wrong." She grinned at me. "But if I was you, I'd buy her a ring."

That got a giggle from Tina. And got me to thinking. Tina and I headed out the door to the trailer and drove our separate cars. Ring? If she wore a ring and I wore a ring, we'd have US happy, but what would it be to others around us?

She'd been thinking, too, when we walked in the trailer. The door locked behind her, she was already stripping, preparatory to putting on her bathing suit for our afternoon swim. She got down to the "completely naked" part and stopped, waiting for me to get to the same state.

The naked embrace was wonderful. As were the kisses and the fondles. They didn't last, though, as we knew that sunlight was waning. Back out the door we went, towels in hand, holding hands. Alan ‘n' Tina. "So what do YOU think? The ring thing?"

I dunno, babe. Part of me says "yeah, right NOW! But then I think about what we talked about the other day, about having to live in a world where the people we want to accept us might need a little time to get used to Alan ‘n' Tina."

"The ring's already around my heart, Alan. I'd love to wear your ring. And I will. But right now, in school? That might open up a lot of trouble." She smiled.

"I know," I said. "Just as long as you know how I feel…"

"But," she said, "what about when we're NOT at work or at school?" Cool blue eyes. "Our weekends ‘n' stuff…"

"You know," I said, laughing, "there you go being right again…"

"You know you were thinking it, too…" Giggle. "I mean, you want to…"

I laughed. "That's our goal for the weekend. Go find us rings…"

We continued our walk to the pool, waving, saying hello to the regulars, laughing. It was indeed Alan ‘n' Tina. At the pool, the towels went on two adjacent lunges and we splashed in, making our laps for the evening, ending up our exercise cooling off, hanging on the side of the pool. After a cool-down we moved to the lounges and were joined by a sixty-something year old couple from Ohio. They were regulars, having been at the park when Tina and I moved in. We chatted about work (mine) and retirement (theirs) and school (Tina's and their grandkid's) for a while and then they slipped into the pool and Tina and I headed back to the trailer for homework and pasta carbonara.

The homework was just about over when the carbonara hit the table. We ate, talking about her school experiences. "I'm old news," she announced. "Susan's still my friend, and there're a few kids I talk to, but now people just walk past me in the hall instead of stopping and staring."

"Yeah," I said, "that's pretty much human nature, babe. Something new and exciting will attract their attention. Another shiny object. And life's back to normal."

"Oh, I love this normal," she cooed. "I love being loved." Giggled, too. "And I love our life together. How about a game of rummy?"

And that was usually preparatory to me getting a good workout at cards. I flipped through the steno pad we used to keep score and over that last month we were tied for winning the most games. And it was, after we became intimate, a bedtime thing. She was dressed in one of my t-shirts and panties, and I was in a t-shirt and drawers, and I don't know if that get-up did anything to her, but her in a simple t-shirt, those delightful nipples poking against the cotton fabric were visual candy. We played to five hundred points, a number she reached about a hundred points ahead of me. I put the cards and scorepad up and she turned back the covers on OUR bed.

In five minutes we were naked in the soft glow of a little night light; enough light to make out her face, her eyebrows, the way her hair framed her face, the soft curve of her waist. Loving her was pure joy, sometimes soft and tender, sometimes fast, hard, wet, but always exciting. Tonight loving Tina was the perfect cap to the day, easing from consciousness to ecstasy to blissful sleep. And wonderful sleep it was, rolling over in the night, regaining semi-consciousness to find a sweet, soft female form in the dark bed beside me.

Equally priceless was being disturbed in my sleep, waking to find that Tina had shifted positions and it was her arm or her leg pulling me closer to her.

We had the morning routine almost down pat, combining getting dressed with preparing and eating breakfast, and heading to separate destinations. To be factual, it wasn't uncommon for us to drive to a neighborhood restaurant and eat breakfast there; joined quite often by people I worked with. And some mornings my Tina was just a little bit wet between her legs from the remnants of early morning lovemaking.

That weekend we disappeared from the RV park to travel to the big city nearest us, and after an afternoon at the mall and a visit to a jewelry store, we left with a simple gold band on each of our ring fingers, her arm wrapping mine.

Chamber music. We stayed on the mailing list for the local university's orchestra and didn't miss a performance. Apparently there were several others in the same boat because when we walked into the hall, me wearing my "respectable engineer" suit, Tina wearing yet another understated dress that served well to accentuate her natural features. These people had never seen either of us without the other, and we knew several of them by name. After the concert we accepted an invitation to a late night visit to a restaurant for a light meal. The other couple sipped wine, but I explained Tina's age and she and I had soft drinks.

"But you can have wine, if you want, Alan," she cooed. "I can drive."

"Sugar," said Sandra, the wife of our friendly couple, "I'm sorry! We ordered wine without thinking! We didn't mean to be rude!"

"Oh. Mizz Sandra, that's alright!" smiled Tina. "Alan and I aren't the conventional couple. You couldn't know…"

Brad, the husband, contributed, "Yeah, Tina, we're sorry. Not trying' to be a snob or anything, here…" to me, he said, "Alan, I'm sorry, buddy."

"No," I said. "nothing to worry about. We enjoyed the concert sitting with ya'll, and this is perfect. I mean, a few appetizers, chat among friends… perfect evening."

Sandra said, "Well ya'll have to come over for a visit one day. We could do a barbecue on Saturday and then go to a concert."

Tina answered for both of us. "That would be wonderful, Mizz Sandra…"

"Please, sugar, don't call me Mizz. Makes me feel so old…" Sandra smiled.

"Okay, Sandra," Tina said. "We can certainly do that. It's good to get away from the park for the weekend."

"Park?" Brad asked.

"Yeah, let me explain our circumstances." And I told him about how I worked these projects and added that Tina was in the local high school. And the part about being several hundred miles from home. "Fourteen hours," I said.

"If you have to drive," Brad said. "Pity you can't fly."

"Oh, I can fly. I just don't have a plane. And renting one, well, they got real expensive since I got my license."

Brad grinned. He was an attorney. Mostly family and business law. But he was also a lover of the music and he and his wife were bright, bubbly people who you just knew were going to be fun to be around.

"Alan," he said, "I might be able to do a couple of people a favor."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I just finished up the disposition of an old guy's property. He passed away, left a bunch of money stuff to his kids, stock portfolio, house, land, you know… And an airplane. Cessna 182. His kids don't want to mess with it. They want it sold, in their words "NOW!" I advised them that a more timely approach might net them a bunch more money, but you know how some people are."

"Cessna 182's a nice practical plane," I said, "but a good one's six figures."

"That's the fun part," Brad said. "The old guy loved to fly. Treated that plane like his personal friend. Tip-top shape, all that, the plane, that is, and then he died. Aneurism took him. Bang! He'd been flying the weekend before, so I'm thinking it's current. I flew with him a time or two and he loved it. Said he wanted to sell it when the time comes, as he put it, "To somebody who'd love it like he did."

"Wow," I said. "I've often thought about it. But I just never pulled the trigger." I looked at Tina, who was looking at me, her chin propped up in her hand. "When can we see it?"

"We can meet tomorrow." To his wife he said, "Hon, reach into that Grant's Tomb that you call a purse and get me something to write on."

Sandra slapped a small note pad and a piece of paper on the table simultaneously with Tina's notebook.

"Ah, Alan, you're lost, you know," laughed Brad. "You're in the hands of a practical woman." He took Tina's notebook, whipped a fountain pen from his pocket and scribbled information in it. "You guys show up here tomorrow. What? After lunch? One o'clock?"

"Sounds good," I said.

Tina's turn. "Alan, you never stop amazing me. You're thinking about buying a plane?"

"No, babe," I said. "We're LOOKING at a plane. There's a lot more to buying one. Inspections and stuff."

Brad added, "Alan seems to know what he's doing, Tina. Let' see."

The remainder of the evening was spent in convivial conversation. At a bit after ten PM we all said our goodbyes in the parking lot and Tina and I headed to a slightly upscale hotel for the night.

We walked into the room knowing that the king-sized bed, and more important, the HUGE (in relation to the tiny closet in my travel trailer) shower was a happy indulgence for us. We indulged in the unlimited hot water and the space for two happy people to turn a sanitary function into an exercise in erotic stimulation. And pure fun.

After a half an hour shower, we finally got out and bumped into each other happily as she dried her hair and I shaved.

"Who gets to smell good tonight?" I asked. We'd had a discussion of her perfume being overwhelmed by my aftershave. That conversation had collapsed with me saying, "So what YOU'RE saying is that in any situation, ONE of us is supposed to smell like a goat…" Which brought us to tonight's decision.

"Me," she said. "I'm gonna put a dot of it in two places, and you get to find them."

"That's a happy task, cutie," I said, entirely meaning it.

# Chapter 7

"Find the perfume" is a fun game when the playing field is seventeen, freshly bathed and giggly. It is soft, warm, tasty, and rife with sudden bursts of ecstasy, and at the end it is very difficult to discern the winner from the loser. In our case, you couldn't have slipped a business card between us when we went to sleep.

In the morning I was drifting along between asleep and awake with outside light filtering into the room and the sound of Tina moving in the bathroom. The running water stopped, and I heard soft footsteps on the carpet. Then a soft touch and a shake. "Alan, baby," she whispered, then her lithe form slid into the bed beside me.

I was totally awake now. We kissed. "Good morning, love," I said.

"Mornin', babe," she said. "Let's shower and go find breakfast. You have to go look at my new magic carpet today."

"Magic carpet?" I shook a little grogginess off my brain, and it dawned on me. I replayed last night's conversation.

"Yeah," she giggled. "Come on! Get it in gear, dear!"

Oh, that I had to suffer through the horrors of a shared shower with Tina. An hour later we were being seated at a little restaurant for breakfast.

"Does this airplane thing make sense, babe?" she asked.

"Uh, well, depends on how you look at it. Do we NEED it? No. But it adds four hundred miles to our long weekend range. And takes us home in six hours. And the country is ours. A ten-hour day is almost fifteen hundred miles in that thing. That model is as close to a flying mini-van as you can get. But upkeep, well, there's insurance and annual inspections and maintenance, and that's expensive, so if you just run down the columns in a spreadsheet, maybe not."

There was a twinkle in her blue eyes. "Sometimes there are things you can't put numbers to, you know…"

I caught that. "Yeah, like seventeen and forty-one."

"Bingo," she said.

"So I take it that you're in favor of us doing this."

"If it's a good deal," she said. "You can fly? Really?"

"Really. It's been a while, but I flew that model before. I can fly it."

"I think we should do it, babe." Her eyes sparkled.

"And I'm thinking that just maybe a certain young lady might be interested in learning to fly?"

"It might be useful, don't you think?" She was propped on her elbows, smiling. Waffles and bacon showed up. And coffee.

After breakfast we had hours to burn, an easy task with a map of scenic highways and me driving and an analytic young mind plotting a circuitous route that would have us near the airport that was to be our after lunch destination.

We chiseled our way into a restaurant with the after-church crowd and at ten minutes to one we drove into the rural airport. Brad and Sandra and an unidentified third person were gathered in front of an open t-hangar. Inside was an unexpectedly sparkling jewel of a single-engined airplane. Okay, from a hundred yards a LOT of older planes look good, just like older women in dimly lit bars. I knew all too much about both.

We pulled up alongside Brad's SUV. Tina eagerly bounced out to stand beside Sandra.

Brad and the guy with him came to me.

"Alan, this is Charley Staples. He's the…" Brad started.

Charley stepped forward, extending his hand, "FBO, owner, flight instructor, mechanic, etc., etc."

"Hi," I said. "I'm Alan Addison. Brad wanted to show me this plane."

"And I'm the guy who's been taking care of it for the last ten years. I wish I had the cash to pull the trigger on it myself," Charley said. "Look 'er over."

I did. I poked around. I opened covers, peered underneath, inside the cowling, examined logbooks. To my eye, it looked good. But I wasn't the expert. And the expert in the immediate vicinity was Charley, who just MIGHT have a little too much interest in the sale. Still, I'd been in a lot of these things.

We walked aback to see Brad. "Brad, Charley, no doubt, that's a good-looking plane."

Charley beat me to my point. "Mister Alan…"

"Just Alan," I said.

"Alan. Okay. Look, if I was you, I'd get another mechanic to look 'er over."

"Yeah," Brad said to me. "Do you know one?"

"No, I don't," I admitted, but I was also thinking that this thing was priced well below market, too. "So what's YOUR recommendation?"

Charley said, "I already told you. If I was a little more liquid right now, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

I looked at Tina. She was doing that smile thing again. I looked at Charley , then Brad. Gears were turning in my head. I don't usually take risks, and when I do, I do it on things I know about. Time for a risk. "Brad, can you help me with the paperwork?"

Brad 's eyes darted back and forth between me and Tina and Charley. "Are you sure? I mean, you're not going to get another mechanic?"

"Nope," I said. "Somebody takes the care on the outside that this thing has seen, they're not gonna neglect the inside." I slapped the logbooks against my hand. "Charley…"

"It's everything you want, Mister Alan. But…" He shrugged. "Most people would want a second…"

"He's right, Alan," Brad said. "Most people would…"

I looked at the two of them. "Because nobody wants to trust anybody else? I have an idea… Let's go fly this thing. All three of us, right now…"

"Sounds fair to me," Charley said. "Brad?"

Brad said, "Well, guys, that sort of puts it in perspective, then."

Charlie jangled the keys. "You gonna leave Tina and Sandra here?"

"Yeah," I laughed. "If you guys are wrong, we need to leave survivors."

Charlie and Brad both laughed.

Tina said, "We can wait in the office if you're not gonna be long."

"Are you okay with that, sweetie?" Brad asked his wife.

"Sure," she answered.

We rolled to plane out of the hangar onto the apron. Yes, it was indeed a while since I'd played with a Cessna 182, but it WAS a pretty simple plane, and the preflight routine came back to me. Charlie tagged along beside me, listening to my running commentary on what I was doing.

"Just in case you wonder if I really know what I'm doing," I said.

"You seem to," he said. "Alan, between you and me, it IS a good plane."

"Yeah, I ran some numbers in my head. Even if I had to do an engine overhaul, it'd be a pretty decent deal. If the wings don't fall off…"

"I'll be sitting in the right seat beside you when they do," he laughed.

Brad took the back seat, Charlie took the right, and I took the pilot's seat on the left. Charlie handed me the laminated checklist and I ran down it, item by item. Finally, I opened the window and hollered "Clear!", then cranked the engine. It caught immediately. I watched the gauges. Everything worked exactly as expected.

We taxied to the end of the little country runway and I ran through the run-up checks. Okay, it's time.

"Last chance," I said. "If ya'll duct-taped the wings on…"

"Let's do it," Charlie said.

"Follow me close, Charlie. I'm out of a physical and a biennial review."

"I'm right here with you, Alan."

I ran the throttle forward and we rolled, then lifted off. At a thousand feet above ground I asked Charlie, "Where's the practice area?"

"Oh, south, about five miles. Give us five thousand feet above ground."

"Okay," I said. I trimmed us for climb, feeling for any unexpected tugs or unbalance in the controls, listening to the engine at full throttle, watching gauges. All good.

In the practice area, I trimmed for cruise, looking, feeling. Then slow flight. I dropped the flaps.

"Okay, I've seen enough." I turned to look at Brad. Brad. Help me with the paperwork. And to Charlie, "Who's a good doctor for a physical, and when can I get my biennial?"

Ten minutes later I was on short final, working up the landing, Charlie's hands hovering, just in case. The landing wasn’t as smooth as mine USED to be, but we were on the ground, all in one serviceable piece.

Sandra and Tina were walking out to meet us when I shut the engine down at the hangar.

Tina said, "If I can read that smile…"

I shook Charlie's hand. "Nice plane, for sure, Charlie."

"Told you so , Alan. And if you have anything major for the next six months that doesn't involve smacking stationary objects, well, Brad's a lawyer, so I won't say warranty, but…"

"I believe you, Charlie."

"Let's go in the office. I have that doctor's card." The group followed him into the office and I got the offered card. "Look," he said. "If you get your physical this week, come by Saturday and we'll get your review out of the way. Now that I've seen you fly, all we need to do is the oral review.

"I can do that."

Brad's turn. "And if you can get me a cashier's check and come by the office any day this week…"

Tina was giggling.

Sandra said, "Bradley, I think I was that excited when you bought me my BMW."

"So," Tina said, This next weekend? Wings?"

"Sounds like it, sweetie." I turned to Charlie. "Charlie, I hate to ask this, but you're two hours away from where we live."

"Oh, I understand that, Alan. Don't worry. I have a waiting list for these T-hangars. There's an airport twenty minutes from where you're at. I know the guy. It's got one of those big ol' world War II hangars. He's got plenty of space in it out there in the boondocks. I'll call 'im myself."

"Well," I said, "You're being awfully nice to us."

"Not a problem at all."

Tina HAD to sit in it. She did, after we rolled our new acquisition back into the hangar. And after a round of happy handshakes all around, we left.

In the truck, Tina was giggling. "Aren't you excited, Alan?"

"Yes, brown-haired girl, I guess I am. It felt good to fly again. And the idea of you and I being able to get away even further on weekends, well…"

Another giggle. "Alan, you said something about ME learning…"

"You're seventeen. You're old enough." I went through the procedure. "Most people, though, learn in something smaller, lighter, and simpler. But it's not unheard of to use one of these."

"Well, I don't expect you to buy me my own…" she giggled.

"Actually, that's NOT unheard of, little one. Planes like this are pretty much bottomed out and on the way up in value. You buy one, use it for whatever, like getting your license, then you sell it for what you paid, maybe a bit more. But I'm thinking, no, we won't do that."

"It's all just crazy, when you think about it, Alan. A month and a half ago, I was rock bottom, headed to Arkansas with a couple of criminals, and now I'm discussing learning to FLY." Her face was in 'full smile' mode, blue eyes atwinkle.

"Yes, little one, it does seem crazy. There I was, headed off into the woods for a few months work, all alone, and here WE are. Us. A couple."

"And that's a good thing, huh?"

I bent sideways and kissed her cheek. "The very best of things." And we drove out the gate, headed to the place we called home.

We took advantage of the return in late afternoon to take advantage of each other. The aftermath left me lying on my back with this auburn head of hair resting on my chest, fingers tracing patterns in the hair on my belly. She raised up and turned her face toward me.

"Dinner?" she said.

"I was considering it, sweetness," I answered. "Got a preference?"

"Shall we grace the halls of the local fried catfish emporium, sir?" she said.

"Oh, yes, why not? I hear there's this REAL cutie that shows up there from time to time with some old goat."

Giggle. "Let's get dressed and go, old goat."

"Okay, cutie!"

We managed to eat and get back to the park in time to get a couple of laps walking in the waning light of dusk.

Back in the trailer, I played on the computer while Tina ran through her schoolwork. She glanced up at me. "They had me sweating on this trig stuff last week, but I think I got a handle now."

"You didn't ask for help," I said. "I can help if you need it."

She chuckled. "If I hadn't gotten it on my own, I would've asked, Alan."

"Don't get in a bind, sweetness. You're in advanced placement classes. Catching up would be tough."

"I know," she said. "But according to the guidance counselor, I get three semester hours credit if I pass this class, and I AM passing this class."

"And the others? Science, English?"

"Piece of cake. I'm having fun in those. Physics? Come on. YOU do this stuff."

"I'm sure I do some of it, but you're a high school student."

"And I'm doing in it a classroom, and making a mistake means a bad grade. If you muff something…"

"It happens, baby. Some of the good ones make the news."

"Have any of yours?" She turned in her seat to look at me.

"Nope! The time I've had problems on my jobs is where they didn't build the way I drew it or they didn't install what I wanted the way it was supposed to be installed. Now I make good money making sure that those things don't happen any more. I don't do the designs myself, but I make sure that they're good and that they're installed correctly. And that's a whole lot different than your physics course."

She smiled. "So how many traps do you find because you know physics, and how many do you find because you know how things are supposed to be put together and how they're supposed to work?"

"Oh, little one," I said, "Part of it's physics and math and most of it's knowing the right way to do things because I've learned it from wise men who've gone before me."

Eyebrow arched. "No wise women?"

"There might've been some, but I never met them. I've known some female engineers, even electrical engineers, but not at the level we're talking about. Not that there couldn't be. Just weren't. For me, anyway."

"Maybe I ought to fix that." She smirked.

"Huh?"

"I was SAYING, just maybe I ought to fix that." She tossed her head. "I think I could, you know…"

"You could what?" I was grasping her intent.

"I could be an electrical engineer. Female, too." The smirk was replaced by the derisive extension of a pink tongue.

"Ohhhh, I see… dumb ol' Alan can do it, the Miss Christina can certainly do it better…" I stuck my tongue out in return.

Giggle. "Seriously, baby! I've been thinking about a major. One of the heroes in my life happens to be an engineer, therefore just maybe that's what I might want to do myself." She closed her book and stowed it in her backpack, then crossed the little aisle to plop down in my lap. Her arms encircled my neck and her lips met mine for a peck. "And you're the smartest person I've ever known, anyway."

"Thank you, my Tina can do anything she sets her mind to do," I said, and I meant it. "I'll be at your side the whole way, and I will be sitting there watching when you graduate." That got me more kisses. I considered it fair trade, really.

"You know," she said, "Grandma wanted me to get an education. When she died and I ended up with Mom, I didn't know how that was gonna happen. I didn't know how anything was gonna happen, Alan." Her head rested on my shoulder. "And then we stopped for breakfast…"

"Yeah, funny how life hinges on one thing, isn't it?" I mused.

"Funny… That's a good word. Spectacular is another," she answered.

"Nope! Can't use 'spectacular'. I save that one for you." I kissed the top of her head.

"You're so good t me, Alan." She snuggled into my chest and purred. "Why don't we get our showers out of the way?"

"One more kiss, and I'll let you go, little one." I saw her face from four inches in front of mine. My lips pushed her bangs aside and I brushed her forehead with my lips. She turned her face up a tiny bit and our lips met, softly, tentatively at first, then just melting into each other, our tongues teasing.

She pulled away, almost reluctantly. "One more like that, buddy, and we'll be showering late…" She bounced lightly. "And apparently part of YOU is having the same thoughts."

"Uh-huh," I admitted. "But…"

"But I'll be more comfortable if we're both bathed." She got up off my lap, undressing in front of me, allowing me to marvel at her youthful figure.

Okay, maybe just a little more than just marveling. I had to kiss and touch and caress.

"You make me quiver," she smiled. "Just keep that idea…" giggle.

Ten minutes later she was standing outside the tiny bathroom, drying off with a fluffy towel. When I stepped past her to get my own shower, she gave me a gratuitous squeeze. I responded with a kiss, then finished off the hot water for my own ablutions. Crap! I forgot. Now I get to shave with cold water. Oh, well, not like that's the first time. My complaints, though, were answered with only slightly sympathetic giggles as she stopped drying her hair to see what I was griping about.

When I stepped away from the bathroom sink, she was now clad in her nightshirt, stowing her hair dryer. I slapped her playfully on her upturned butt, causing a squealy giggle. When the cabinet door closed, she stood and turned around, wrapping me in her arms. I reciprocated.

"Poor baby," she chuckled. "Had to shave with cold water…" she kissed my cheek. "But I'm glad you shaved." Her nostrils flared. "Mmmmm! You smell good."

"Thank you, young lady! So do you!"

"Come sit down. Let's see what's on TV for a little while," she smiled. "Then nine o'clock. Bedtime…"

We were at opposite ends of the sofa, legs intertwined in the middle, TV on, me with a book at my end, her with a book at hers, both reading and watching something about whales on a nature show. The end credits were rolling when her foot started jiggling things. She closed her book and put it in the little bookcase.

"I suppose we need to go to bed, huh?" I smiled.

"You betcha, babe!" she stood up and stretched, her palms touching the trailer's ceiling, the nightshirt pulling taut over perky nipples.

I felt a familiar and happy stirring in my groin and closed my own book, standing up. I killed the lights at that end of the trailer as we filed to the bed at the high end of the gooseneck trailer. The little fixture over the head of the bed lent enough light so that loving this auburn-headed doll was also a visual experience.

That was a good thing, because I was pushed onto my back and straddled by a young female who was in the process of stripping a nightshirt up over her head and tossing it aside.

"Hah! YOU still have clothes on!" she giggled, sliding sideways off me.

Took me seventeen seconds to correct that error. Then all my senses were overloaded by what happened next. Twice.

Still wrapped in each other's arms, Tina sighed. "Alan, I sooo much love you."

"Miss Tina, I love you too, you know…"

"Mmmm-hmmmm… d'ya love me enough to hand me my nightshirt?"

I retrieved the shirt and passed it to her. I pulled my own t-shirt over my head, then we settled back into each other's arms.

Her nose wiggled. Giggle. "We're gonna need a quick shower in the morning, baby. I think everybody's gonna know what you've been doing…"

"And I do so love who I'm doing it with, sweetness."

"Put us some music on to sleep with." And a gentle kiss, and I rolled onto my back with Tina's leg thrown over me, and we slipped into slumber.

Six o'clock alarm. Two quick showers, a couple of bowls of cereal, a pot of coffee, and we headed in separate directions for the day. I climbed into my truck with the taste of her kiss on my lips and the sweet scent of a tiny drop of perfume still in my nostrils.

Twenty minutes later I was in my parking spot and heading to my office. Monday morning staff meeting, then out into the project's guts, talking with the electrical foreman and the crew and a couple of technicians, then back in my office, scratching notes on some field drawings, then copying them, one copy back into the field for the guys to work with, another copy for the record stack, and for me, a scanned copy on my computer.

Then a phone call to the bank. Something about a five-figure cashier's check made out to a lawyer in Tennessee. Easy enough. The administrator waited for my fax, I signed it, and faxed it back. The check was now in a Fed-Ex envelope headed to Brad's office. I called him and told him it was on the way.

Next phone call was to the doctor. Okay. Physical, Tuesday after lunch. That was enough of taking care of my own business on company time. I grabbed a coke from the refrigerator in the office trailer, took a long swallow and headed back out the door. The day's most interesting and critical activity was a short ride away on my golf cart.

Big hole in the ground. Well, an engineered hole. Here was one end of a set of pipes, a duct bank, through which cables as thick as your arm were supposed to be pulled. I stopped a safe distance away and climbed out of the cart. The foreman saw me and started walking towards me, his face grim.

"Mister Addison, we can't get a line though the pipes." The idea with these things was so actually blow a thin string from one end of the pipe to the other, several hundred feet away, then use that string to pull a heavier line, then that line pulled a strong rope, and the rope was used with a winch to drag the cable into the hole. And they couldn't get the line through.

This was matter of simple mechanics. "You tried ALL of them?" I asked.

"Hell, yeas," he said. "Can't get but a trickle of air. And no line."

"Crap!" I said. "Let's take a walk!" I had a suspicion. We put the stuff in the ground and supposedly the area was restricted to ONLY light vehicular traffic.

"You're thinkin'…" the foreman said.

"That some asshole ran heavy equipment over my ductbank, Jeff." It didn't take much walking to locate the heavy tracks across my route. "Shit!" I said. "Here's a week's delay, right here."

The foreman shook his head. We carefully paced to the next manhole, and I said, "three hundred feet. Do you have something you can push up the pipe to measure? If you find the obstruction three hundred feet from this end, we're going to have some fun…"

His chuckle came through clenched teeth. "Yeah! Fun! Because some asshole took a shortcut to save a hour… Lemme get some fishtapes hooked together. I'll call you on the radio when we're done."

"Great!" I said. "I won't say anything to anybody until you get me a measurement."

”Uh-huh," he said. "Some days it sucks to be us…"

I hopped back onto my golf cart and rode back to the office. I was reviewing some reports when the radio broke squelch.

"Mister Alan, come in." I recognized the voice.

"Go ahead for Alan," I said.

"That measurement? Three hundred feet."

"That solves the mystery," I answered. "I'll be out there in a few minutes with the project manager. He's gonna love this…" I walked into the project manager's office.

He read my face. "Ohhhh, shit!" he said. "That's NOT a 'happy engineer' face. This cain't be good…"

"It's not, Carl," I said. "Looks like somebody ran a heavy crane across the main ductbank from the utility substation between our first and second manholes. It's collapsed. Wanna come look?" There were a dozen reasons every day that this guy lost his smile, and I dearly hated anything of mine to be one.

"Sure," he said, grabbing his hard hat. "Why the hell not!"

Five minutes later we were looking at the telltale tracks and the electrical foreman had laid out his tape, showing the obstruction was under our feet, right there where the tracks crossed.

"So I guess you have a path forward already?" Carl looked at us.

"Yep," I said. "We're gonna dig down to the concrete in both directions to where we find no damage, cut this section out, put a new section in, pour it again, and then cover it back up." I looked at my foreman. "What do YOU think, Jeff?"

Jeff rubbed his chin. "It's not rocket science. Three, maybe four days from when we start diggin'."

"There's your answer, Carl. I don't like it. It's a delay. But if we don't screw up any OTHER big thing, we're not going to be your critical path."

Carl shook his head. "That's good to know… You want to get with the civil bunch and get a trackhoe over here?"

"Got it," I said. "Jeff, I'm gonna let you put your crew back in the substation. You wanna make sure that trackhoe doesn't collapse anything else?"

And we went on from there. As they say, "That's why I get the medium bucks."

Driving Carl back to the office trailers, I told him that I was going to be out on /Tuesday after lunch.

"Not a problem," Carl said. "Doctor? Something wrong?"

"Nope," answered. "Flight physical. Me and my cutie are getting a plane. I need to get myself current."

"Oh, yeah, your cutie. What the HELL are you doin' with a seventeen year old girlfriend?' The story had gone around and was common knowledge.

"Waiting until she's eighteen so we can get married. And having the time of my life."

# Chapter 8

I was in trouble and didn't know it. The guys I talked to, they were like me, from various locales around the country, brought together for this job, so news of my happy circumstance with seventeen year old Tina was a matter of interest, and with my obvious happiness, a bit of good-natured ribbing, and I was rocking away happy in my ignorance. How ignorant? You'll see...

Tuesday I got Tina out of school to meet me at the doctor's office. You see, student pilots need physicals, too. We walked out of the doctor's office, me with a valid physical, Tina with a combination physical AND a brand new student pilot license. I called Brad's office.

“Hey, Brad,” I said after I'd gotten past his office manager. “D'you get my check?”

“Sure did,” he said. “Ya'll come by tomorrow afternoon and I'll have the paperwork for you to sign.”

It didn't dawn on me that he wanted both of us there, but hey, a moment is a moment, so I made plans to meet Tina there immediately after school. That put me leaving work a little early, but I didn't see a problem. Tina and I had a perfectly wonderful Monday with not a care in the world.

The next morning I and several other people were looking in the excavated hole at cracked concrete. I shook my head. My electrical foreman shook HIS head. The project manager strung together some expletives in an innovative and extraordinary manner. There wasn't much engineering to the problem, though. It was pretty straight forward, and crews went right to work to fix it. The rest of the day? Routine. At three I took off and met Tina at Brad's office an hour away.

We're in the office, signing a bill of sale and a title transfer and Brad asks the question: “D'you want both of you to sign this?”

“No,” I answered.

“Normally, a man and wife...” he started.

Tina gave the answer. “Mister Brad, we're not officially married. In a year we will be.”

“Oh,” he said. “I never asked. I just saw the rings and assumed...” His brow wrinkled. “Uh, Alan, Tina... We have a problem.”

“Problem?” I asked.

“Alan. Tina. I thought ya'll were married. Tina, you said you were seventeen. In Tennessee, the age of consent is eighteen. Alan, you know what that means.”

Tina’s eyes widened. But we thought it was seventeen, Mister Brad.”

“It is,” he said, “in every state around us, even sixteen in some of 'em. But it's eighteen here in Tennessee.”

“Dammit!” I paused. “Sorry, Brad. I'm an engineer. I know I lot of things about a lot of stuff. I guess it's the wrong stuff. I can't believe that. I mean, seriously, Brad... where'd you and Sandra first meet me and Tina?”

“At that chamber orchestra concert.”

“Yeah. Common haunt for us child molesters, right? And what was she wearing?”

“That darned little black dress. Sandra commented to me about it.”

“Uh-huh... Brad...” I started.

“It's not a big deal, is it, for you two to get married? You need a parent or guardian's signature, is all.” He sat back.

Tina's face was ashen. I hadn't seen that look since the first day I met her. “Mister Brad, you don't understand. Alan is my legal guardian.”

That statement caused Brad's look to change.

“It's not like THAT, Brad. Can we tell you the story?”

He leaned back in his chair, bridging his fingers together. “Go ahead. I've heard lots of stories.”

I said, “It all started at a little restaurant in the middle of Louisiana...”

He did ask questions. We answered. Tina's tears probably aided our case.

“Dammit, Alan,” he said, “Sandra just thinks the world of Miss Tina. And you. Said ya'll were different, but in a happy way. And the rings. That threw us both off. We just assumed...”

“And I assumed that every state was seventeen or less...”

Tina asked the obvious next question. “B-but Mister Brad, you mean that they could put Alan in jail?”

Brad nodded his head. “Theoretically, if some prosecutor wanted to make a case... It makes me scratch my head, just thinking about it, you know... I think of all the crap that goes on today, pregnancies with no daddy, no job, no nothing... and then this... But it's the law.”

Tina folded her arms and got that little crinkle above her nose, her “I've decided” look. “I don’t want to do without Alan. He's more husband to me than you can begin to imagine.”

“Oh, no, Miss Tina. I can imagine a lot. I've seen you two together. But if you're in Tennessee, you're taking a risk. A BIG risk. Unless you get married.”

I took a deep breath. “Brad, let me sign these papers. And then Tina and I have some thinking and talking to do.

“God dammit, you two, please forgive me. I never wanted to mess ya'll up.” Brad's expression looked sincere. “I mean, as far as I'm concerned, ya'll ARE married. But the state...”

I signed the papers. I, that is, me and my not quite wife, were owners of an airplane. I wish I could say we were happy when we left. We drove back in separate vehicles. I had a million lines of thought going at once. Somewhere on the hour drive I lost sight of Tina. I was about ten miles from the RV park when my phone rang. I retrieved it from my pocket thinking it was my little girl.

“Hello, Alan Addison! Sounds like YOU have a problem.” The voice was that of Deputy Bill Hurley.

“Bill...” I started.

“Don't get started, Alan. I told you I didn't want you draggin' Miss Tina to Tennessee and turning her into a sex toy.”

“It's... I...” Words weren't coming.

“Tina just called me cryin' her eyes out, Alan. In her words, she thinks she's losin' her best friend in the whole world, and her husband. And she explained to me some things.”

“Bill, I didn't start out to do this...”

“And I believe her. And I guess that means I have to believe you, too. So she called me because I helped ya'll the first time, getting' her set up in school.”

“And now?” I asked. “What can you do? Really...”

“I can call my uncle, the judge, and talk with him and see. But you probably need to get out of Tennessee for a few days. Go to Mississippi. Heaven knows, they won't care...”

“Bill, if you can help...” I started.

“Oh, hell, Alan. Miss Tina asked me. Lemme see what happens. I'll call you back.”

I pulled up next to our trailer a few moments ahead of Tina. She got out of her car, shaking, tears in her eyes. I pulled her inside the trailer.

“Alan,” she sobbed. “I just CAN'T lose you...”

I wrapped her in my arms, cradling her against me. “I can't lose you either, dearest one.”

“What're we gonna do?” she wept.

“If push comes to shove,” I said, “I'll leave the state. I can find us a place where we can be together. Hell, this is the ONLY one like it that I know of.”

“What about your job, Alan?” she asked through tears.

“I can get another job with a phone call.” I was truthful. I could play that card once or twice, but part of my reputation was built on dependability. “I can't get another you. Never. You're an anomaly in my universe, sweetness.”

“Oh, Alan....” I was being ripped apart, seeing those blue eyes with tears in them.

I called the project manager. He answered. “Carl, I hate to tell you this, but I've got an emergency situation to take care of. I'm gonna come in for an hour in the morning, and then it's liable to be a few days...”

“Oh, shit, Alan,” he said. “Is there anything we can do to help?”

“No,” I said. “Jeff's gonna be fixing that duct bank, and I'm in good shape on the rest of the project, so I won’t put you in a bind. Not yet, anyway.”

“Is it that bad?” Carl asked.

“Yeah. It might be. It's kind of personal, Carl. I'll explain when I get some things straight.”

“You're a big boy, Alan. You haven't let me down yet. Do what you gotta do.”

Tina looked at me. “I love you,” I said.

Next phone call was to Charlie. “Charlie,” I said, “I hate to bother you this late, but d'you think you could do me a flight review in the morning. Like about ninish?”

“Sure,” he said. “You in a hurry?”

“Yessir,” I answered. “I might have to go somewhere in the next day or two.”

“Just bring your logbook in the morning, Alan. I'll have your plane gassed up and waiting for you.”

“Thanks, guy,” I said.

I turned to Tina. “In case we need to go somewhere.”

Her eyes were still wet. “You don't think somebody'll, like, turn us in? Do you?”

“Mizz Lil knows about us, and some of the guys at work. But I told Mister Carl that I was going to be married to you in a year. So I don't know who he might've told.

Neither of us had any appetite that evening. Or any joy. We sat together on the sofa, clinging to one another, my mind still running through one scenario after another.

And the phone rang. Deputy Hurley.

“Alan, I talked to my uncle,” he said.

I was hoping. “And...” I asked

“I told him what was going on. He said it was an easy fix. When can you come down here and present yourself and Miss Tina? Can you do Thursday?”

Tina was leaning her head against mine, sharing the phone. “Yesyesyes, Mister Bill. We'll be there.”

“Can we get a rental car at your airport? We're flyin' in tomorrow afternoon,” I said.

“Uh, Alan, we don't have commercial flights...”

“I know, Bill. Me an' Tina just bought an airplane today. That's when all this crap came out.”

“You just get you two here, and I'll make sure you have transportation. There's a motel in town...”

“Yessir, I got that much.” I paused. “Bill...”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks!”

“Yes! Thank you, Mister Bill,” Tina said, finally getting a little of the lilt back in her voice.

“We'll call you when we're getting close, okay?” I said.

“Ya'll do that,” Bill said. “And if you're up to it, plan on dinner with me an' my bunch. If you can stand a couple of rug rats.”

“That would be wonderful,” Tina said.

“There's you an answer, buddy!” I added. “We'll talk to you later!”

“'Kay, Alan. Tina. See ya tomorrow!” He hung up.

I fell back against the sofa and Tina fell into my arms.

“Baby,” she asked, “What do you think all this means?”

“It means, little one, that you probably need to make very very sure that you want to be married to me. Because if I'm working in Tennessee, that's the only way we can do it and stay together.”

Squeal! And a kiss. A long, hot, hungry kiss. “You'd've left this job to stay with me, Alan? Really?”

“Oh, little princess, I'd've got me a bag and started collecting cans off the side of the road to stay with you. This job? You? Oh, come on... no choice at all.” And I meant it.

I looked at my watch. “D'you have an appetite now?”

she smiled. “I could eat something.”

“Get your shoes on. Let's go.” Fried catfish soothes the stomach quite well. Back at our little home, we packed bags for the next adventure.

We got up the next morning. “Don't bother to go to school today, sweetie,” I said. “I'll be back here in an hour and a half.

“No, Alan. I'm going to go and get my assignments and tell 'em I might be out for a couple of days, okay?” Her eyes had life in them again.

“Okay, baby. You know best.” I kissed her and headed out the door.

I was still knotted up from the day before, though, despite the idea that there was a way out. I wouldn't be happy until we crossed the state line. I guess I would've made a horrible criminal. Paranoia? I had buckets of it.

My dash through the job site was mainly to talk with Jeff about his repair job and to make sure that they didn't fall behind any further.

I knocked on Carl's door. He looked up. “Alan! Come in. Close the door!”

I did. “Carl, sorry to jerk you around, buddy...”

“Look,” he said. “You an' me's been on too many of these things together to not trust each other. Do what you gotta do, okay?”

“Thanks, buddy. Just so you know, I've gotta fly back to Louisiana with Tina. I didn't know that us livin' together was illegal in this state.”

“She's seventeen, ain't she? Old enough? I mean, it's your business. You're what, forty?”

“Close enough. But in this state, eighteen's the magic number.”

“Oh, crap... Can you fix things?” Carl asked.

“I'm thinking so. Back in Louisiana, though. We should be back Friday. I'm on my cellphone if you need something. Everybody's got my number.”

Carl stood and offered his hand. I shook it. “Take care of yourself an' Miss Tina, 'kay?”

“You got it! Thanks, buddy!” And out the door I went. I picked up Tina at the RV park and told Mizz Lil that we'd be gone a couple of days.

And hour later we were at the airport.

Charlie looked through my logbook. “How many hours in this thing?” he asked.

“Eight hundred total, at least forty in a 182,” I said. “Was in a club in Arizona.”

“Oooooh,” he said. “I saw you handle this the other day. That takes care of the flyin'. Now let's review some rules an' stuff.”

Tina sat in the office as I was questioned about a variety of procedures and regulations. Charlie opened my logbook to the last page I'd used and signed me off.

“You're good to go,” he smiled. “Since Miss Tina's sitting there, I assume you two are flyin' off?”

“Yeah. Louisiana. Should be back either late tomorrow or early Friday.”

“Be careful,” Charlie grinned.

“Come on, baby,” I said to Tina. “Let's go teach you something.”

I talked her through the pre-flight inspection and then saw that she was strapped in, big headphones on for the intercom. It was going to be her first flight. Ever. Her hands were folded nervously in her lap. I knew a sure-fire way to get rid of the nerves.

“No, Tina. We do this together. Put your hands on the yoke and your feet on the pedals and follow me through this.”

“B-but, Alan! I've never...” she stammered.

“You've never been bashful with me, little one,” I said. “This is easy.”

We went through the run-up with me explaining every step. I checked the frequency on the radio and made a call to any aircraft that might be interested in what was going on at this little field, and we taxied onto the runway and I pushed the throttle forward. And we were in the air. As I banked us onto a course headed southwest, her grin was huge.

“You like?” I asked.

“I like.” So our four hour flight was instructional. Tina was a quick study, and for somebody who found no problem with high school physics, the general principles of flying light aircraft were no trouble at all. Eighty-five hundred feet over the countryside, the miles slid away at a decent clip.

By early afternoon we were close. I opened my cellphone and called Hurley up.

“Where are you at?” he asked.

“Eighty-five hundred feet over a cotton field, about twenty minutes out.”

“I'll be there waiting for you.”

I had a picture of us returning to the little town in the back seat of a patrol car, but I wasn't about to complain. Deputy Bill Hurley showed up in a departmental SUV as we were tying down our plane.

“Man, you guys travel in style,” He said, shaking my hand then getting a chaste hug from Tina. “Come on! Let me get ya'll to the motel.”

“That would be great!” I said. I let Tina take the front seat for the short ride.

In the car, we started talking. “So Tina tells me that she's in advanced placement classes in her senior year, now.”

“Yeah, you should've seen the expression on the guy's face when he showed us her placement test results. I was worried. I worried about what I could do to help a high-school drop-out.” I admitted.

Tina picked up the thread. “I told Alan that the reason I dropped out was that mom kept moving us every time I'd start school. The first thing we did was talk to the school board about me getting back in.”

Bill admitted, “Yeah, ya'll kinda surprised me with that phone call. But it worked out well, didn't it?”

“Yes,” I said. “We got her in school and I figured I was going to be the foster dad or whatever to a teenaged girl in high school. I mean, her first week, she'd already been asked to...”

“That's what I was tellin' you, Mister Bill. Alan was perfectly serious about taking care of me. He got me back in school. Bought me a car...”

“A car?” Bill queried.

“Yeah, the preferred automobile of child molesters everywhere, a Honda Civic.” I said. “Actually, it just made sense. She could run errands after school and go out and do whatever, and I wouldn't have to worry about transporting her or her depending on people I didn't know.”

“Okay,” he said. “When you put it like that, it makes sense.”

“So anyway,” Tina continued, “my first week back at school and I'm getting into the classes and since it's all AP, you know that the kids are some of the serious students, so it's pretty good. And at the end of the week, one of the girls asks me if I want to come over on Friday night to watch movies, and there's gonna be a few other kids, and this guy in one of my classes and he's smart and he's asking her if I'm coming over, and I asked Alan if I could go.”

“And what could I say, Bill? I told her to be careful and to be back by midnight and let 'er go.”

We pulled into the motel. Bill said, “Look, can I pick ya'll up about five and bring you to the house for dinner?”

“We don't want to put you out, Bill. I could just as easily take you and your wife out for dinner. Uh... and the kids...”

Bill smiled. “I appreciate that, but with the kids, it'd be a trial. Best you come over to the house. We used to have a good restaurant in town, but it's been closed for a year. That little diner where ya'll met, it's about the only other place. Or McDonald's.”

“We're your guests,” Tina asserted.

“Uh, one more thing. I hope you don't mind. Uncle, the judge, he might stop by after dinner. Wants to talk to you both.”

I guess my face gave away my thoughts.

“Oh, no, nothing bad. He got part of the story from me. He knows what he needs to do. It's just he wants to meet ya'll.”

“Okay,” Tina said. “We'll be happy to meet him. I mean, you guys have already helped us out so much.”

We checked in and hauled our bags into our room. Tina made a show of falling backward onto the king-sized bed.

“Just come lay by me, Alan. I need you near me.” she turned her face toward me, those azure eyes boring into my heart.

I lay beside her on my side so I could touch her face. She was smiling.

“It's gonna be okay, babe,” she said. “We're going to STAY together. That makes it okay.”

I bent over and kissed her. “just 'okay'?”

“Well, then, how about 'a little piece of perfect'?”

“That would be you, cutie!” The next kiss was better. Longer, hungrier, hotter, and so comforting to be delivered by this doll. Her hair was doing that thing where it was either mahogany or walnut, depending on the light. In this room... mahogany. I buried my face into it at her neck.

I felt her stir, then heard twin thumps as her shoes hit the floor. She scooted away from me, higher in the bed and motioned for me to come up with her. I sat up, untied my shoes and took them off and lay down, finding myself in her arms. Fully clothed, we kissed a few times and then snuggled together for a nap to make up for a couple of horribly sleepless nights.

At four-thirty we were up, showered and ready for dinner. Ten minutes out, Hurley called us on the phone and warned us, so we were waiting in the motel lobby when he pulled up. There was a little tow-headed boy in the front seat with him.

“Hi,” Bill said. “This is my son, William junior. He's Billy. Billy, this is Miss Tina an' Mister Alan.”

Billy offered his hand politely. We both shook it. “I'm gonna get in the back seat. You gonna ride back here with me, Miss Tina?”

“I certainly will, Billy,” she said. Tina and Billy buckled into the back seat and I slid into the front with Bill.

“Hope you can stand fried pork chops,” Bill said. “Sharon's teaching school, and pork chops are fast.”

“Pork chops sound wonderful.” Tina turned to Billy. “What's your favorite, Billy?”

Little Billy didn't misshis cue. “Today? Pork chops! An' Mom has mashed p'tatas an' gravy! And a pie!” he smiled broadly. “I like it when she cooks for company!”

Bill followed, “Folks, we don't starve our kids. The only difference between company and a regular meal is the pie!”

Billy said, “I LIKE pie!” Tina giggled.

We pulled up at the Hurley place. It was one of those homes from a bygone era, huge, wood-frame, two story, and obviously the subject of a huge amount of restoration. I commented on the age.

“My great-grandparents' house. It got it passed down to me along with a pretty good inheritance and we put a lot of it back into this house.” He sounded happy and proud.

When we walked in, I saw why. The restoration was meticulous and well thought out, combining modern efficiencies with the character of the old home. And we met Sharon, Bill's wife, a diminutive lady with a few extra pounds and blonde hair and blue eyes and that explained where Billy got that golden shock of his. And Billy's little sister, a year younger, and a couple inches shorter, and obviously Billy's sister.

Billy handled that introduction. “Miss Tina, Mister Alan, this is my sister. Her name is Bridget.”

Tina squatted to Bridget's level. “Hi, Miss Bridget! What a pretty name! You're a cutie!”

Bridget smiled bashfully and said softly, “Thank you Miss Tina! You're cute too!”

Tina stood up. “Mizz Sharon, can I help you in the kitchen or something?”

Sharon smiled. “That would be lovely, Tina.” She turned to us. “We'll be ready in about ten minutes.” The two of them disappeared.

Bill gave me a quick tour of his castle, including a running commentary on the history of the house and his family.

We returned to find the table set and ready for us. Bill sat at the head of the table, his wife on his right, I at the opposite end with Tina on my right, and the two kids on opposites sides of the table. Bill offered a brief blessing for the food and friendship and we dug into a quite decent and happy meal. I was pleasantly surprised that the two kids were well mannered. And I enjoyed watching Billy's eyes when he got his piece of chocolate pie.

Sharon and Tina and the kids cleared the table following the meal and Bill and I were talking when the doorbell rang. “That's gonna be Uncle Jimmy,” he said.

Uncle Jimmy was tall, bald, dressed in slacks and a business shirt with a tie. “I'm Bill's Uncle Jimmy,” he announced, extending his hand.

I shook it. “I'm Alan Addison. You've already rescued us once!”

“Yes, son, and if I'd have been a little bit more on the ball...” he started.

“Uncle Jimmy, ya'll come sit in here so we can talk!” Bill guided us into the living room.

We sat down. Uncle Jimmy continued. “Like I was sayin', we could've done an emancipation on 'er if I'd given it more thought, but when Bill here gave me the story, I thought that giving you guardianship was a better approach, especially with you wanting to put her back in school.”

Tina and Sharon walked in. Sharon introduced Tina to Uncle Jimmy. He smiled. “Alan, she's a charming young lady. Miss Tina, I've heard good things about you.”

It was Tina's turn to smile bashfully.

Tina sat next to me on the sofa and Sharon joined Bill on the love seat.

Uncle Jimmy repeated what he'd just said for the ladies' benefit.

“Mister Jimmy...” Tina started.

“Uncle Jimmy. Please!” he smiled.

“Uncle Jimmy, when we called about that school problem, that's all we thought we needed. Really.” she sighed. “Alan was just takin' care of me and giving me a place to live and helping me.”

I interrupted. “Like a little sister. Or a daughter. Or... I don't know. When I found 'er, she didn't have too many options. I just wanted to help out.”

Uncle Jimmy nodded. Bill had heard the story up to this point. Tina went through it from the beginning to the point of her first week of school, and the party. Sharon was following every word.

“See, Bill, THAT'S I was telling you last week. One of my straight A students, bright, smart, with a future... She's turned up pregnant. The daddy's a senior and has a scholarship to play football in college. It's like all the stereotypes in the world piled on top of them.” Sharon looked at Tina.

Tina read the question in Sharon's look. “No, ma'am. I'm not pregnant. I want to marry Alan because we're just RIGHT for each other. Look! This is how I'm being exploited here!”

I looked and almost fell off the sofa. The piece of paper in Tina’s hand, that she was shoving towards Sharon, was her brand new student pilot license.

Uncle Jimmy laughed, relieving a tension.

Sharon stammered, “Oh, Tina, I DIDN'T mean that you HAD to get married. That YOU were pregnant. I was just sayin' that kids can get off the track so easy.” She inhaled. “And you two walked in here with wedding bands an' I looked at you and you act like you belong together.”

Billy wandered into the room. “Hi, Uncle Jimmy!” he said. He hugged his great-uncle. “When we goin' to your camp?”

Uncle Jimmy mussed **B**illy's hair. “Just as soon as your daddy decides he wants to do you some fall catfishin',” he said.

Naturally, little Bridget was next. She perched briefly on Uncle Jimmy's knee and kissed his cheek then came over and squeezed next to Tina. Tina put her arm around Bridget. Big sister – little sister. Should've taken a picture.

“I love seein' your kids, Bill. Sharon sure shows in 'em, too.” He smiled at Sharon. “You kep' 'em from getting those squinty Hurley eyes, Sharon!”

We all talked for a while longer. Finally Uncle Jimmy said, “Look, Alan, Miss Tina, here's what we're going to do. You two want to be married. So tomorrow I'm gonna do some magical judge things, sorta like that magical electric stuff you do, Alan. And we're going to emancipate Miss Tina from the horrible bonds of having you as her guardian. Under state law, if she's emancipated, she's free to act as her own agent, as an adult.” He grinned. “If, upon execution of her emancipation, she doesn't high-tail it out of the parish, you two can do us a marriage license, and if you have no religious reservations, I will personally perform the wedding in my office. Then the State of Tennessee can go pound sand. Where ever it is they might need to have sand pounded.”

Squeal! That was Tina’s commentary on Uncle Jimmy's speech.

He laughed. “I wish I could say that this puts me on the plus side of the marriage game, but I sign more divorces than I get to marry folks. There's something wrong there. Seems to me that if two people wanna get married in front of a church full of people, then they should do the same damn thing for the divorce.”

Bill laughed. “Alan, you have to understand. I've heard this speech before.”

Sharon smiled. “And we're still married.”

Uncle Jimmy wasn't finished. “How long did it take ya'll to fly down here? Four hours?”

“Yessir,” Tina chirped.

“Seems to me,” he said, “That ya'll oughtta fly back one weekend and meet us at my camp. It's on the river. We'll barbecue, an' catch some catfish and have a fish fry, and feel guilty for the next two weeks about eatin' like that.”

I was thinking that this old guy was a hoot, and good company is good company. Tina spoke for us. “We'll make that happen. We need to kinda know when.”

We rode back to the motel with Uncle Jimmy, talking, listening to him assail us with stories of courtroom shenanigans.

The next morning Hurley picked us up for breakfast. “Sorry, Alan, but I had to give the shift sergeant back his SUV. You'll have to ride in the back of this thing.”

We went to breakfast in his squad car. I was in the back, behind the screen, and Tina was giggling. “Mister Bill, you shoulda put 'im in handcuffs!”

“Evil little woman you got there, Alan,” he said, laughing.

We walked into the restaurant where the whole thing started a couple of months before. Bill jogged the waitress's memory.

“Oh, YEAH!” she said. To Tina, “Hon, are ya doin' okay?”

Tina's answer was to show her ring finger.

After breakfast, we were first ones into the judge's office. Uncle Jimmy was waiting.

“Hi, folks!” he said, “Mizz Mary's got the paperwork ready. Come on into the office.”

We went in and sat in some really nice leather chairs and signed papers which his secretary duly stamped.

“There!” he announced. “Miss Tina, you are, in the eyes of the state, an adult. Able to make your own decisions. So, here's this piece of paper...” He pushed an application for a marriage license across his desk and raised an eyebrow.

Her squeal could be heard to the street.

We both filled it out.

I noticed Bill eye-balling his watch, nervously.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“No, just that Sharon wanted to be here for your wedding.” As he was finishing the statement, we heard the front door open.

“They're in the judge's office,” the receptionist announced. Sharon's face peered around the corner.

“As I was sayin',” Bill continued, “If me an' Sharon are at THIS wedding, then that's one LESS wedding I'll have to go to this year...”

“Pffftt!” as Sharon stuck her tongue out at her husband. Then she took his hand in hers and kissed his cheek.

Uncle Jimmy hollered to his staff. “Ya'll all come in here! We're doin' a wedding. No shotguns involved!”

The office filled up. Tina and I slipped our rings off and traded, and amid smiles from some people we hardly knew, we were married. A camera flashed. I kissed my bride.

# Chapter 9

Married! And Tina wrapped around my arm as we shook hands and smiled and received congratulations from a happy little crowd.

I shook hands with Bill Hurley and got pulled into a manhug. "Man, you don't know how much I owe you, Bill," I said. Next hug was from his wife, Sharon. "Congratulations, Alan," she said.

Tina was in the middle of the office ladies receiving similar noises, and worked her way out to Bill and Sharon. Uncle Jimmy waited his turn to kiss the bride, and I shook his hand.

"Alan, I was serious about you two comin' down for a weekend. Keep in touch with me and Bill so we can get together." He smiled. "I feel good about today. You two will do well together."

"Thank you, Uncle Jimmy! You don't know how much we appreciate you helping us."

"Yeah I do, son. I really think I do." He smiled.

"Folks," I announced, "this has been a great day for Tina and me. I wish we could stay and do more, but we have to get back to Tennessee today."

Bill clapped me on the back as Tina attached herself to my arm. "You know, ya'll bring excitement every time you hit town…"

Tina giggled. "Maybe our next visit will be sane, Mister Bill." She kissed him on the cheek, and then when Sharon popped into range, tagged her, too. "Mizz Sharon…"

"Please, Tina. Just 'Sharon', okay, sweetie?" Sharon smiled.

"Okay, Sharon, tell Billy and Bridget that I'm sorry they were in school today and we didn't get to say 'bye'. But we'll be back."

Sharon smiled. "Oh, I know, Tina. They'll be sad that they missed this." She sighed. "I need to get back to school myself. I so much enjoyed meeting you two."

Sharon left, and Bill did taxi service, running us by the motel to retrieve our luggage and then to the airport. We gave Bill a tour of our little plane and waved bye as he took off back to work. Before I climbed in the plane, I flipped my phone open and punched up my boss's number.

"This is Carl," he answered.

"Carl! Alan. We're getting ready to take off in Louisiana. We'll be home in four hours or so. Any problems?"

"Nope! Not on my end. How about you?"

Tina was in earshot. "I'm the proud possessor of a seventeen year old wife, Carl. Tina and I got married."

"Congratulations, I guess, bud," he said.

I chuckled. "No guessing to it. We would've waited until she was eighteen, but it was gonna happen anyway. Tina, say hi to Carl."

Tina took the phone. "Hi, Mister Carl. I'm bringing him back to you. Thanks for letting him loose like this, on short notice."

"Not a problem, Missus Addison. You two take care of yourselves. Tell 'im I'll see him Monday."

"'Kay," she said. "Bye!" she handed me back my phone. "Carl says see ya Monday."

After the pre-flight ritual, she started to walk around to the passenger side of the plane. "Oh, no, little girl. You do the left seat today!"

"Serious?!?" she squealed.

"It's not that big a deal. First, the plane controls equally well from either side. The left seat just has a better view of the instruments. Second, we're gonna take off, climb to seventy-five hundred feet and head northeast. Nothing fancy. No maneuvers to speak of, unless you want to do some, and in four hours we'll see our airport."

"You make it sound simple. Okay, then," she said. "If you say so. I mean, you're my husband an' I gotta be all obedient and submissive an' all that…" Her eyes laughed.

A few minutes later our wheels left the Louisiana runway. We climbed straight out, looked around, then banked left to our final course. I guided her into setting up a neat 'cruise-climb', cranking away miles as we gained altitude, and then we leveled off. I helped her trim us up. "That's pretty much it. A little care that you don't get too low or too high. Or too far left or too far right."

Her eyes sparkled. "Wow! I'm doin' this!"

"If you get tired or confused, let me know." I folded my arms. Okay, I unfolded them and reached over and stroked that auburn hair, held oddly in place by the headband of her headset. "You married me. You REALLY married me."

She glanced over, smiling. "Yeah I did, Alan. One of those forever things. You…"

"I will watch the stars blink out in the night sky before I leave you, Tina."

"The way it should be."

The seat of my pants felt a surge. "You're cruising, baby. Just tiny little pressures. If you're low, a little back pressure and you'll see the speed drop a tiny bit and you'll climb. Same thing if you're high. Or left or right. Tiny changes. And if you keep having to correct high or low, a little turn on the trim will get rid of some of that."

"Uh-huh. Just new, that's all…" she smiled.

We ate up miles at a satisfactory pace, crossing the Mississippi River angling across Mississippi and into Alabama. Our destination in Tennessee was half an hour ahead. I talked Tina through pulling back the power and lowering the nose to keep the speed up for our descent. A radio call on the 'Unicom' frequency alerted anyone who might care of our intent to land. Nobody cared. Traffic was sparse at little rural airports during the week.

Okay, ONE person cared. "Uh, Cessna 6-5-6-7 Golf, this is Tulla County Airport. No known traffic."

"That's Mister Charlie," Tina said.

"Good! We can top off the tanks before we put her up for the day." I thumbed the 'transmit' switch. "Tulla County, 6-7 Golf. We're gonna need fuel service in ten," I said.

Radio broke squelch. "Roger, 6-7 Golf. You know the drill."

Tina followed me through a standard landing pattern and the wheels touched down with only the tiniest of bounces. "Okay," I told my wife, "Steer with your feet. No faster than a fast walk. Pay attention to your wingtips. You're forty feet wide."

I followed her on the controls, giving a couple of helping nudges here and there. As we approached the fuel pumps, I took over. She sighed in relief. "I thought you were gonna try and make me do that," she said.

"You learn at YOUR pace. You've done great so far. Now, to stop this thing, pull the mixture back all the way. Then when it stops, turn the mags off. That's the key there."

Our engine stopped as Charlie sauntered out of his office. He was amused to see Tina climbing out of the left door.

"You don't waste time, do you, Alan?" he said.

"Thought she should get a taste of it from the left seat," I laughed. "I know we can't log those hours, but practice is practice."

Tina was beaming. We topped off the tanks. Charlie and I pushed our little chariot back into its nest after Tina pulled my pickup out of the hangar. When we walked into the office, Tina's eyes scanned his display case.

"Student pilot manual. I need that, Alan!"

"Put it on the card with the gas, Charlie."

"You know, Alan, she's got to log twenty hours with an instructor, forty hours total, and what isn't with the instructor has to be solo…"

"Yeah, I know."

"But that doesn't stop you from flyin' with her. Just means that when she gets with an instructor, she's gonna probably have more practice."

"Sorta what I figured. You got a problem with doing it that way?"

"No," he said, "but I've never did a student in a 182. I know a little 152, over at regional, that a guy's trying to sell."

Tina said, "TWO planes?"

"Remember when we talked about that, baby?" I turned to Charlie. "Okay, buddy, that 152, what kind of deal is it?"

"Pretty good one, actually. Just about what I imagine YOU want to do. He bought the thing to get his hours in, now he's commercial and all the other tickets, and he doesn't need the plane. He bought it for fifteen, he'll take fifteen. And when Miss Tina's licensed, you can turn around and sell it for fifteen. All her license costs is fuel and an instructor."

I looked at Tina. "If you're serious…"

Squeal!

"She's serious," Charlie laughed.

"When can we look at it?" I asked.

"Well, if we lock up this office, it's a forty-minute drive. And you're going in that direction anyway."

"We'll follow you," I said.

Tina skipped out to the truck.

Forty minutes later we were looking at the little trainer.

"It's so little," Tina said. "I thought ours was little. THIS is little."

Charlie said, "This was the most popular trainer around. Still probably is. Burns half the gas of yours. Weighs half as much. Goes two-thirds as fast. More responsive."

"You know this plane?" I asked.

"Yep," Charlie said. "I finished the annual on 'er last month. Engine's got a hundred and eighty hours on a complete overhaul. She's used, for sure, but like I said, it's a good buy. And good resale."

"Fifteen thousand's a good price," I said. Call the guy. Tell 'im to get with Brad. We'll make it happen."

"Boy, you're a trusting soul," Charlie said.

"You've been good so far," I said. "How much do you get if you sell this thing?"

"Ten percent," Charlie admitted.

"Yeah, and if I'd approached the owner and talked him down fifteen hundred bucks, I'd still have to pay YOU a thousand to do the inspection. I'd rather just pay him fifteen and let him pay you."

"You wanna fly it?" Charlie asked.

"That'd be nice," I laughed. I turned to Tina. "Babe, you wanna wait here?"

"I'll sit in the truck while you're gone," she smiled.

She walked with us as we preflighted the little red and white plane. "Just about like ours, except littler," she said.

"Yep! Pretty much."

Forty minutes later Charlie and I were taxiing back to the tie-down and there was another car next to my pickup truck. A guy was standing there with his arms folded, talking to Tina.

"That's the owner," Charlie said. I called him while we were on the road.

He and Tina met us when the engine stopped. "Alan, this is Dexter Stevens. It's his plane. Dexter, this is my husband," I caught the extra smile with that admission, "Alan Addison."

"Hi, Dexter. Heard you just got all your tickets.

"Yessir," he said. "Looks like I'm in agricultural aviation now."

"Great!" I said.

"Meh, it's a living. I'm hoping for something in the airlines, but this'll put money in the bank until then. You wanna buy my little bird?"

"Yeah," I said. "Tina's gotta learn to fly…"

"And you've got a 182. She told me. This'll do fine. And when she's finished…"

"Just like you did," I said. "Can you get with our lawyer to do the transaction? Charlie said fifteen…"

"I'm not going below fifteen, Alan." Dexter looked serious.

"I realize that's a good price. I do my research. And Charlie says he just did the annual."

Dexter rubbed his chin. "I'll call the guy Monday. We got a deal!"

We shook hands. I handed him a business card. "Just in case," I said.

"Thanks," he answered.

So finally Tina and I got in the truck, headed back to the RV park.

"You're nuts, you know," she giggled. "Two days ago you were a criminal in Tennessee, and now you're my husband and I'm married to a guy who just gave me an airplane."

Laughing at the absurdity of that statement, I pulled my cellphone out. "Here," I said. I think we need to share our nuptial news with my sister. Wanna give Elise a call?"

"You're gonna defend me, right?"

"Of course," I said. "I don't think it'll be too bad."

As I drove, I heard Tina. "Hi, Elise." Pause. "Yeah, he's drivin'. He asked me to call you and tell you the news." Pause. "Remember how we were gonna get married when I was eighteen?" Pause. "We didn't wait." Pause. "Oh, thank you! Yeah, here!" She passed me the phone.

"Hi, Elise," I said. "Well, lemme have it…"

"I ain't sayin' nothin', brother. You're a big boy now."

I spent a couple of minutes explaining why we'd moved things up. She was laughing. "So when do we get to meet her?"

"Well," I said, "that's another thing…" I told her about ONE plane. I didn't think her psyche could handle the idea of two.

"So ya'll could fly in on Friday or Saturday and leave Sunday and get back in time?"

"We could."

"Then you need to do that. I wanna see the girl that made you lose your mind…" at least she was laughing when she said it.

"We'll have to look at the weather, Sis," I said. "We'll call you back."

"Bye, Sis," Tina said, loud enough so Elise could hear.

"Bye, brother. Tell Tina…" Elise said.

I closed the phone and turned to Tina. "She wants us to come down next weekend."

"If the weather's good, let's do it. She sounds fun!" She tossed her head, bouncing that auburn hair.

"She's okay. All the family I had after Mom and Dad passed away. Now I have you."

"And your daughter. OUR daughter."

"That's another thing, sweetie. She's usually with me at either Thanksgiving or Christmas. It wasn't a big deal last year. I was between projects. But this year… "

"This year it's us, and I can help, if she accepts me."

"That's a phone call I hate to make, dearest. Terri's not scary, but I hate dealing with the ex."

"It's not going to get easier, putting it off, babe," she said simply. "And NOTHING she can do is going to hurt US. We have each other."

"Yeah." My Tina. Getting ready to attack things head-on. "Okay. After dinner."

We stopped at a road-side diner for dinner, then finished our trip home. Entering the trailer, first order of business was showering. Forty minutes later we were on the sofa. She was snuggled beside me, smelling sweet.

She handed me my cellphone. "Don't you need to make a phone call, baby?"

"I hate to," I said. "There's a high chance of getting pissed off."

She smiled. "First, I've never seen you pissed off, even when you had a gun in your hand, and second, if she gets to you on the phone, \*\*I\*\* get to you HERE. Remember? Me and you…"

"Okay." I sighed and scrolled through the contacts on my cellphone. "Here goes…" I dialed.

I was pleasantly rewarded by the voice of my seven year old daughter, Terri. "Hi, baby," I said.

"Hi, Daddy. Are ya still in Tennessee?" she asked. Her voice was all 'squeaky little girl'.

"Uh-huh, baby."

I heard Carole's voice in the background. "Who is it, Terri?"

"It's Dad," Terri said.

"Lemme talk to him," Carole said.

"I miss ya, Daddy," Terri said. "Here's Mommy."

"Hello, Alan," Carole said.

"Hello, Carole," I said. "Terri sounds good."

"She IS good, Alan. We take good care of her. So you're still in Tennessee?" Her voice sounded a little 'off'.

"Yeah," I said. "Project won't be finished until late spring. I may hang around longer, June or so…"

"Are you going to be home for Christmas? So Terri can come stay? She misses you."

"We ought to be home for Christmas…" I said, wondering how alert she was.

She was alert. "We? Like you and Terri?"

"And Tina. My new wife." I paused to see how THAT would fly.

"Oh!" I could see her lips tighten in my mind's eye. "When did this happen?"

"A couple of days ago," I fibbed. Tina was sitting tight beside me, listening. She stroked my arm and smiled. I continued. "We were going to wait a while, but decided not to. Would've been inconvenient when Terri came over, us not being married." That was a little dig. Carole had started running around on me while we were still married, and ran off with her present husband and my daughter before the divorce was final. They actually got married the day after the divorce was signed by the judge.

"Anyway," I continued, "I'd like to introduce her to Terri."

"Supposed I don't WANT Terri talking to her," Carole snipped.

"Look," I said, "it's hard enough trying to be a dad to my daughter with her in California. Don't be like this. You have no reason to do this, Carole."

"You could sign off your parental rights, Alan," she said. "Jeff would adopt her…"

"Look, Carole. That's NOT going to happen. We've had this talk. Let me talk to Terri." I felt my face changing colors, but I was trying hard NOT to come unglued. It wasn't easy. I don't know why Carole thought that she needed to jerk me around, especially over Terri.

"Okay, Alan," she hissed. "Terri," she called, "come talk to your dad."

I heard the thumps of my daughter's approach. "Hi, Daddy! Again!"

"Hi, punkin, again! I got news for you, baby."

"What kinda news, Daddy?" she asked.

"I've gotten remarried, sweetie," I said, as Tina's ear listened in.

"You did, Daddy? D'you still love me?" She sounded almost scared.

"Of course, baby! You're my precious little girl. I will ALWAYS love you!" I wondered what she was getting from her mom and step-dad on this subject.

"I'm happy for you, Daddy. I miss you, though."

"I miss you too, baby," I said. It was an honest statement. This little brown-haired girl had permanent hold on a chunk of my heart. "All I get to do is talk to you. But if you want, you can come be with us at Christmas. I'll pay for you to fly back to Louisiana and we'll stay at our house."

"I'd love that. Is your new wife there with you?"

"Yes she is, baby. Do you want to talk to her?" I looked at my Tina and smiled.

"I would. What's her name?"

"Her name is Tina. Here she is." I handed the phone to Tina.

"Hi, Terri," Tina said.

"Hi, Miss Tina," Terri answered. I was listening in, my head against Tina's, sharing the speaker.

"Terri, you can call me just Tina, okay?" Tina said.

"Okay," Terri said. "You sound young. How old are you?"

Tina let the cat out of the bag. "I'm seventeen, sweetie. We can be like sisters, huh?"

Little girl squeal. "I'd LOVE that, Tina! Do you have to go to school?" Terri asked.

"Yes, I graduate this year, though. What grade are you in?"

"Second," Terri said. "School's neat. I can read good, too. I like reading an' stuff."

"That's good," Tina said. "Your dad said you were smart."

"I love my dad. I miss 'im so much."

"I love 'im, too, Terri. We'll have fun when we get together, okay?"

"Okay," Terri answered. "Uh… is it okay if I call you an' him more often? Dad calls me every few days, but I wanna talk to 'im more. An' YOU, now…"

"We'll do that, sweetie," Tina said. "Now that I've met you, huh?"

"Uh-huh," Terri said. "I'd really like that."

"Okay, then," Tina said. "You want to talk to your dad some more?"

"Yes, ma'am," Terri said.

Tina handed me the phone and I put it between our heads again.

"So now you've met Tina, huh, sweetie?" I said.

"Dad, she sounds nice. I'm happy for you an' her. I tol' 'er to call me more. I miss you, Daddy."

"I miss you too, sweetie," I said, feeling a bit of my heart being torn off. "We'll call you more often."

"Okay, Daddy," she said. "I guess I'll go now. But don't forget to call me. Lots!"

"Okay, princess," I said. "I love you."

"I love you too, Daddy." And the phone clicked.

Tina smiled. "You know, babe, I feel better now. All those times you talked to her and I just sat there, I didn't feel right."

"I know, baby. But what could I tell her to explain our situation? I didn't want to lie to Terri. She's already got a strike against her living with her mom and the sleazoid."

"We're past that now, baby," Tina said.

I thought we were free and clear, but my cellphone rang. I retrieved it and saw the display. The ex. Not good. I flipped it open. "Hello, Carole…" I said.

"She's SEVENTEEN? What're you doing, trolling playgrounds, Alan?!?!" I recognized the voice as it brought up unpleasant memories.

"Yes, she's seventeen, Carole. A high-school senior," I said. "And an honor student. And my wife. And Terri's step-mom. Or friend. Or big sister."

"So, like, her parents signed for you to marry her?" I could hear the sarcasm, as could my auburn-haired wife.

"Nope. She's emancipated. She signed for herself. 100% legal."

"Your business, Alan," she said tensely. "You seem to like 'em young." Carole was ten years younger than me. I thought it was part of our problem.

"I LOVE Tina. She's amazing in so many ways. Come to think of it, ALL the ways I can imagine. Now is this gonna keep me from getting Terri at Christmas?"

"No. I guess not. Jeff an' I can go on vacation without the kid…"

The tone of that statement was incongruous when compared with her earlier 'sign over your parental rights' move. But that was the Carole that used to drive me to the edge of criminal behavior.

"You're gonna send us a ticket, right? I mean, so she can fly there?"

"Yeah, when the time comes," I said. "Anything else?"

"No." CLICK!

"Wonderful woman, Alan," Tina said. "Does she have some sort of mental issue? I mean, in ten minutes she went from 'sign over your kid' to them going on vacation 'without the kid'."

"You caught that, too, huh?"

"Strange," Tina said. She ran her hand over my head. "Uh, guy… We're home, and we got married. Today. So…" Her grin was enticing.

I kissed her. "Yes, I know." She took my hand and tugged in the direction of the bed.

# Chapter 10

Saturday morning. It was somewhat comforting to be home for the weekend after the week we'd had, even if 'home' was thirty-odd feet of travel trailer. "Uh-huh," she said. "But what a week to be tired from." Squeal! "WE'RE MARRIED!"

She rushed to me. At least I had time to open my arms. We were twisted together. "Yes, we are, little one." I kissed her.

"Alan, let's go somewhere ... Next weekend."

"And does my new bride have someplace in mind?"

"Uh-huh. I think we should visit your sister." And she smiled.

"So do we leave Friday after work or Saturday morning early?" I knew if she was proposing something, she already had her version of a plan.

"Saturday morning early," she said. "That way we can have a good night's sleep here, instead of getting to Louisiana at eleven and then..."

"Good idea, baby," I said. "Of course, the weather..."

"Of course, silly," she said. "There's always that. But ... Let's call Elise and make sure she's gonna be there."

"She's ALWAYS there, babe," I said. "Sitting in her house, bein' all domestic."

Pouty lips. "Alan, if I'm not the domestic goddess type..."

"Tina, so far in our relationship, have I found you lacking in anything? You can be as domestic as you feel like. I'll be as domestic as I feel like. And somehow, we'll manage."

"But..."

"But nothing, sweetness. We've been living together in the trailer for what, two months, and we've kept it clean, we've both cooked, done laundry. I think we do pretty good, you know..."

"When you put it like that, yes we do..." She kissed me. "You know I love you! I just want to be everything..."

I smiled. "Oh, you are, sweetie. You know that. Besides, you can cook bacon!"

She punched my shoulder. "Beast! We were having a MOMENT!"

"Life with you is a string of moments, little brown-haired girl," I said.

She then leaned her head against my chest. I nuzzled the top of her head. "Mmmmm, I love it when you hold me like this. I feel safe," she said softly.

"You should. You're my life."

"I'm sorry I'm a little weepy, Alan. I think it's that time ... you know."

"I know. I almost keep track, cutie. So, aside from that little detail, what do you want to do today?"

Giggle. "Since I won't actually START until tomorrow, how about we molest each other..."

"We can't do that ALL day..." I said.

Another giggle. "We could try, couldn't we?"

We tried. At six we finally got dressed and left the park for dinner. One of the restaurants within a half-hour's drive served a soup and salad combo. That's what we had. Returning to the park, we took a walk, a couple of laps around the place in the deepening darkness.

Back inside, I stripped my light jacket off. When I turned, she was kicking off her shoes.

"You know," she said, "that was just brisk enough to break a sweat. Now I need a shower."

"I was thinking the same thing, little brown-haired girl. You first?"

"Yeah, because by the time I finish drying my hair, you'll be done shaving, and we can relax on the sofa."

"So much for that 'all day' thing," I said.

"Oh, don't get smug, baby. I think we're good for another round before we go to sleep. After all, this is still our honeymoon." She hauled me in for a kiss.

I caught her face between my hands and kissed her again, lips, nose, forehead, and lips again. "You, dearest one, are some kind of outrageous dream..."

"Yeah, well, buster, I am now your little wifey, too, so treat me nice." She slid out of my grip and started stripping as I watched. Presented herself to me, statuesque, nude, her body a feast for my eyes, and then she stepped inside the little bathroom.

A few minutes later she was out, rubbing down with a fluffy towel, and I took my turn. Yeah, rubbing. And getting into the shower. Fifteen minutes later I was finished showering and was shaving. I saw her face in the mirror. She rested her chin against my bicep.

"Sofa?" she grinned, "or bed?"

"Surprise me," I said.

It was little surprise that when I stepped out of the little bathroom, the lights were out everywhere except the elevated bedroom. She was on her hands and knees, looking back over her shoulder at me. "Your last shot, Alan," she said. "I'm about to start." Giggle. "An' I want..."

When I climbed onto the bed behind her, I was hard. I took a moment to regard the shapely ass turned up to receive me. Couldn't resist. I bent over and kissed the rounded cheeks and she dropped her chest to the mattress presenting me with an even more advantageous angle. The engorged lips of her pussy opened slightly, showing delicious moisture that I couldn't resist. I fell on her with my lips and tongue and rolled her onto her side. Between the giggling and the fact that her left leg spread to give me complete access to my sweet goal told me that she liked this idea. She curled up, her hands on the back of my head.

"Ohgod!" Her giggle became a hiss. "YESSS!" It was just about that fast. Her juices flowed, the taste a little different than usual, and I lapped happily as she came down off a quick orgasm. Her hands left my head, and I moved up between those taut thighs. The head of my dick slid between moist lips, straight into nirvana.

"Ohgod ... Alannnnnn! Hard!" She hissed through her clinched teeth.

I could do 'hard' now because this was my third orgasm of the day and she bucked against me, urging me on. If this would've happened for the FIRST one, I doubt I could have held on for a few seconds. She fastened her mouth on one of my nipples and sucked. Then I felt teeth. And a tongue. And all that, in combination with the feelings that were happening as I plunged myself into her, that was all it took for me.

"Mmmmm! Nnngghhhhh! Baaaa-beeeeee!" I surged against her and tried to do a couple more strokes before I lost total control. I lost it. She lost it. Her arms pulled me on top of her, and I had the foresight and the tiny bit of control necessary to roll sideways, pulling her on top of me.

When I finally opened my eyes, there hers were, clear blue. "Perfect! Words fail me! I love you, Alan!"

"I love you, my Tina," I answered. I could feel my dying dick fall from her with a plop, and our combined juices started oozing over me.

"I felt that," she tittered. "You don't let THAT go to waste!" She had enough energy to turn around and start licking my genitalia clean. That gave me the treat of another go at that pink, happy pussy, and as I found to often be the case, in licking and sucking her clean, she shook through another orgasm.

We ended up snuggled into each other's arms for some wonderful minutes before she got up. When she came back she was wearing panties and carrying a warm washcloth.

"In case things start tonight. I don't want to deal with the mess," she said, wiping my face clean. The washcloth went back to the bathroom and she pulled the covers over her, climbing in beside me.

Sunday was a day dedicated mostly to domestic pursuits. Laundry had to be done. The place needed a good cleaning. We made a run to the grocery store.

Monday was back to work. I had my wedding band on, noted by several co-workers, including the boss, who nodded knowingly. Staff meeting. Report that last week's hurdle with the caved in ductbank was fixed. A few little pokes at potential problems, being all proactive. A few good-natured jabs about getting married, and one sotto voce question: "Uh, dude, she's not, you know..."

"Nope," I said. "We just wanted to do it sooner or later, and the Great State of Tennessee sort of urged 'sooner' on us..."

I got home to the smell of frying pork chops. "What is THIS?" I asked.

Tina giggled. "Oh, a bunch of things. First, since I'm havin' a period, I figure I better feed you good to keep your mind from wandering. Second, I just thought that I oughtta exercise the stuff Grandma taught me. Third, I love you and I wanted to do something from me to you..."

"All perfectly valid reasons, baby," I said. "And I appreciate it, but you know you don't have to." I stood behind her and rubbed her shoulders.

"Oh, and Wednesday is open house at school, so if you want to meet teachers and see the place, you get your chance." She flipped the pork chops.

"Sounds interesting."

"I oughtta put you in a cage and sell tickets, honey," she said. "I wore my wedding band to school today. I got questions ALL day. Half of 'em were 'Are you pregnant?' and the rest were 'Who?" and "Can we meet 'im?"

"Oh, boy," I said. "That ought to be interesting."

"We can get through it, don'tcha think?" She smiled. Uh, kiss the cook!"

I complied.

After dinner, we showered and were sitting on the sofa engaged in the eternal search for something worthwhile on TV. As was often the case, it was a nature documentary.

Commercial break. She flipped open her cellphone.

"Who're you calling?" I asked.

"Elise. Unless YOU called 'er."

"No, but I need to."

"Just a second," she said. She punched a couple of times, and held it to her ear. "Hi, Elise. It's me, your new sister in law." Pause. "No, he's still alive." Giggle. "Yeah, he's listening." Pause. Tina looked at me. "Your sister said she accepts ME. You're another story."

I could hear Elise's laugh from the phone. "Gimme the phone," I said.

Tina was smirking when she passed it to me. "Plotting against me with my own wife, ' I told Elise.

"Nah, just telling her that she's probably closer to normal than YOU are. What's up?"

"Me and my cutie're planning flying in on Saturday before lunch. Wanna pick us up at the airport?"

"Sure," she said. "Ya'll gonna stay at your place?"

"I guess," I said. "Tina needs to see it anyway."

"Okay. Lemme laugh with her a little bit."

I handed Tina back her phone. "She'd rather talk to you..."

They chatted for a few minutes before she hung up. "I like 'er!" Tina said.

Tuesday went without a hitch. As did Wednesday. I got home, finding Tina at the front office chatting with Mizz Lillian. I walked in.

"So you two DID tie the knot!" she laughed. "Mizz Tina tol' me about that. You know, I didn't know about that 'seventeen' thing, or I'da tol' you myself."

I sighed. "It caused us a bad day or two. But I like the solution just fine." I put my arm around Tina. She swung her hip against mine.

"Open house starts at six," she said. "You gonna change?"

"What!?!? This is my 'real live engineer uniform'."

"Shucks, Alan. You're several steps up from bib overalls. I think he's okay, Tina." Mizz Lillian said.

"No, she's right. I got a little mud on these pants. I'll try to look dapper. Dapper sounds good." I laughed.

"I'll pick you something," Tina sighed.

"You need to. You gotta train 'im early so it'll take..." Lillian said.

We left. Two quick showers, a couple of changes of clothes, and off we went.

"Your truck, babe! I want to impress 'em! A gray Honda ain't gonna do it! A big pickup truck with both doors the same color, that will!"

She sat tight against me, belted into the center slot of the bench seat.

I remembered the diorama from my own youth as I eyed the crowd at the high school: Parents, many uncomfortably out of their elements, kids, many of which tried to maintain a specific distance to convey aloofness.

"And that's mostly the GOOD families," Tina observed when I commented. "You gotta realize that the really messed up families aren't going to come to this."

"Interesting idea," I said. WE got out of the truck, and I noted that she slid out the driver's side door. I closed the door and clicked the remote lock. She took my hand.

"The way it's supposed to be," she said as we walked into the auditorium.

Did heads turn? More than a few. We found a pair of seats a couple rows back from the stage, listened to a greeting from the principal, a couple of numbers by the school band, and another couple by the chorus, and then we were turned loose upon the school.

We got to the aisle and got accosted by a short, plump blonde girl towing her parents.

"Mom! Dad! This is Tina!"

Tina said, "Alan, this is Susan. Susan, this is Alan."

"Hi, Susan," I said. "I've heard a lot about you!" I had. After first episode, Susan's name came up often in the 'what'd you do at school' conversations. As a friend.

Still, Susan looked a little sheepish. She turned to her mom and dad. "Tina's new this year. And this, uh ... Mister Alan, he's her husband."

Oh, boy ... Let's see how this was gonna fly. I was in the same general age range as Susan's parents, and here I was, introduced as the husband of one of their daughter's age group.

"Alan, I'm Mike. Mike Carter. This is my wife, Kathy!" His hand came out and I shook it.

"Happy to meet you, Mike! Mizz Kathy." I did my best grin.

Kathy finally regained composure and worked up a smile. "Pleased to meet you, too. And just Kathy, okay? Susan says that Tina has been very helpful in her calculus classes."

"Tina seems to have a grasp of calculus that I wish I'd had at her age," I said.

Mike said, "Well, look, ya'll. We need to go talk to teachers. I'm sure we'll see you around again!"

"I'm looking forward to it," I said. Tina smiled beside me.

There! Survived that FIRST collision. There were several others. Most of the adult expressions were in the range from confusion to bewilderment, but one was a little more into the 'disapproval' range. Tina saw it too, and tugged my sleeve, moving me up the hall towards a classroom.

First teacher. "Mister Timmerman, this is my husband, Alan." She smiled. "If you didn't catch a clue from the classroom, Mister Timmerman teaches us calculus."

I extended my hand to shake his. "I'm pleased to meet you. You have a tough job."

He smiled. "Please, Alan..." He looked at Tina. "What'd you say your last name is now? Addison?"

"yessir," Tina answered.

He continued, "we can keep this at 'mister', or I'm Russell."

"Okay, Russell," I said.

He smiled. "Tina told me she got married. It's rather a shock," he said, 'but from her ... she's a lot of surprise anyway."

"Tina? A surprise?" I laughed.

"She's more like an aide than a student, Alan. Very impressive."

"I'm proud of her," I admitted. She hadn't told me about the 'aide' part.

"I wish the others made my job as easy. Sometimes we get a little loose with screening for advanced placement classes."

"I can imagine," I said.

"You're an engineer, Tina says?"

"Yep. Just here for the new plastics plant. Ought to make the end of the school year, though, so she can graduate with you."

"Great!" Russell said. "I hate to run, but..." Another couple and a lanky boy were waiting.

Physics teacher. Wayne Graham. A generation older than me. "Son, I'm glad to meet you. Tina says you're an engineer?"

"Yessir," I said.

"I retired from an engineering company. Decided I'd get all 'kumbayah' and help the future generations. D'you KNOW that I was a licensed professional civil engineer, designed bridges all over the South, and I had to go to college to be a TEACHER?" He shook his head.

"I've heard that," I said. "I thought I'd kick back off the road and teach a semester or two, and I ran into the same hurdle. So, look, if you want a field trip to my job, let me know." I pulled out a business card. "Here! I'm serious."

"Oh, you know, that might be a thought. My kids're pretty good. They oughtta get something out of it."

We also survived social studies and English and computer lab.

We were easing towards the door when I spotted a couple of guys in suits. One was the principal. All I knew was his last name. Brady. The other was a more familiar face. Dan Jenkins from the school board. He'd been the guy who we had to deal with in putting Tina in school. When Tina was Tina and Alan was Alan, not Alan 'n' Tina, married couple.

Inwardly I was cringing again. Outwardly, hell, I'd lived through combat. I could get through this too.

"Dan Jenkins! Good to see you again!" I shoved my hand out. If somebody was going to be an asshole, it wasn't starting with me.

"Alan Addison! And according to Mister Stewart here, it's Mizz Tina Addison now!" He was smiling, but it was a rather wry smile. "Mister Brady said that Tina was already on his radar screen before she showed up married."

I turned to Mister Brady. "Alan Addison," I said.

"We share first names, Alan," he said. We shook hands. "Miss Tina's showing herself to be quite a student. I wish we'd had her for her whole high school career."

"She speaks highly of your school," I said.

Dan said "Mister Graham says she's got a student pilot license. You guys own a plane?"

"Yeah, for about a week now. An old Cessna 182. And tomorrow afternoon we're adding a 152 to the stable so she'll have something to train in. When's the last time you flew, Dan?"

"Too damn long ago, Alan."

I pulled another business card.

"No," I still have yours at the office..."

"Call me if you get the itch. We're gone this weekend, though, but..."

"I just might do that," he said.

"Ain't the same as a chopper, though. None of the parts move faster'n the rest..."

He laughed. "An itch is an itch."

As we were walking to the parking lot, I heard, "Hey, uh, Alan!" I turned to see Mike and Kathy and Susan.

"Hey!" I answered.

"Ya'll got time for a cup of coffee and a donut? The diner's right up the road." He was smiling. Kathy was mostly smiling.

I looked at Tina. Raised an eyebrow, questioning.

"Sure," she said.

"Sounds like a winner, " I said.

We pulled into a parking spot at the diner immediately after they did. "NIIICE truck," he said.

We went inside and got a table. Started small talk. My work. His work was an equipment rental business that had taken a decided uptick with the construction business from my project. Hers was an accounting business. There was some slightly awkward conversation about school, since it was their daughter and my WIFE.

Kathy said, "We thought it was difficult enough raising a high school daughter. I mean, she invited friends over. We went to dinner and a movie..."

"Mommmm!" Susan whined.

"Oh, baby," Kathy said to her daughter, "we've had this conversation and we're over it."

"I heard about it. At least Tina's side," I admitted. "I was trying to let her be a high school girl."

"I understand she had an altercation with a young man." Kathy wasn't smiling.

Mike was grinning. "Tina seems to be able to take care of herself, Susan says."

"Mike!" Kathy said to him. To us, "But yes, Tina seems to take care of herself."

"Look," I said. "I know it's ... we're an unusual couple..."

Kathy said, "In this day and age, yes, but you're aware of it. At least you're married. Oh, I didn't mean it like that. 'At least'. That sounds BAD. I meant it good. Really."

"Thank you," Tina said. "We belong together."

Mike looked at his wife. Kathy continued. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to come off as judgmental. Our daughter talks about your Tina a lot. Says she wishes she did school as easily."

Tina took a shot. "Susan, you KNOW you're no slouch at any of that stuff. You almost have straight A's in calculus, and you do in all your other subjects.

Mike shook his head. "I'm just glad she got that from her momma. I did good in basketball and track and made C's."

Kathy softened and relaxed, patting her husband's arm. "He used to be quite impressive." She winked.

"Whaaaaat?!?!? I'm STILL impressive!"

"Daaa-aaad!" Susan whined.

We finished our snack and split ways.

"See ya in school tomorrow, Tina," Susan said.

"Glad to meet you folks," I said, mostly meaning it. Tina and I walked hand in hand to the truck.

Inside, I leaned back and closed my eyes for a second.

"What was THAT?" Tina asked.

"That was people trying to figure out exactly how to deal with us," I said. "Susan admires you. That's good, her mom thinks. But here YOU are, in a relationship that obviously involves sex..."

"But we're MARRIED," Tina blurted.

"But you're the same age as her daughter, baby. And she's trying to keep her daughter from getting into a relationship she's not ready for..."

"A relationship WHO'S not ready for? Susan? Or her mom?" Tina was always interesting to converse with. She had a lot of insight.

"Actually, punkin," I said, "a bit of both, I think."

"You know, Susan and I HAVE talked about that. Sex and love and relationships. I think I pretty much told her that love better come first, or people were going to get hurt. She's not stupid, but she's unsure about herself. I told her that there were plenty of guys who'd be glad to let her prove herself as a woman, if you know what I mean."

"Kinda harsh," I said.

"I wanted her to know how serious that stuff is, Alan. Some people seem to be able to handle it better'n others. I don't think Susan is one of those who can. I told her it was just perfectly fine to tell a boy NO."

"Like you told Jeffy?"

"And then some," she said. "And do you really think you can do a tour for my physics class?"

"I've already talked to Carl about it."

We drove home, her head on my shoulder.

"So," she asked, "success?"

"Success?" I asked.

"Yeah. Tonight."

"Success. I learned that my Tina's made a bigger impression at school than she told me. 'Aide' indeed..."

"'S not that big a deal. I finish my work and I help those who're struggling. That's all." Giggle. "I tutor algebra in study hall. Two guys are still on the football team because I helped 'em pass some tests. Girls who have the football team on their side don't get bullied."

"I did the same thing, babe," I said. "Same results. I'm proud of you."

We walked into the trailer, brushed our teeth, and went to bed. "Leave the light on," she whispered.

"Okay." That was a sign that SOMEBODY wanted to play. She was on her period. After kissing me, she said, "I wish to reward you for YOUR good behavior." And she slid down in the bed.

Yes, I felt rewarded.

I took off a couple of hours early from work and went to Brad's law office.

"Another plane, Alan?" he laughed.

"Man owes his wife a wedding present..."

He smiled widely. "I was trying to ask without being nosey, buddy. Wife? How'd you pull that off?"

I explained about friends and Louisiana judges and uncles. "She should be showing up here any minute," I said. "And I need to get you to help me out with a will."

"I'm gonna have to think about that one, Alan. Your home of record is Louisiana, and that's a whole different planet as far as wills are concerned. You might want to talk to that judge."

"I'll do that. Thanks for the advice." I smiled.

"You can buy dinner next time we get together, in lieu of a bill," he laughed.

His receptionist ushered Tina into the office.

"Hi, Mister Brad, ' she chirped.

"Hi, Missus Addison," he countered. "You ready to put your signature on your wedding gift?"

She giggled. And signed.

Brad handed me the keys. "It's yours. Mister Stevens said he'd rather not be there when you flew it off. It don't suit a grown man to cry in public like that, he said."

"I can understand that," I said. "Tomorrow Tina's gonna drive me over there and I'm gonna fly it to Charlie's field."

"Sounds like a good deal. Say, there's a concert weekend after next in Nashville if you two want to meet us..."

"It's a deal!" Tina answered for both of us.

Back on the road, Tina was thinking. She told me, "I'm thinking!"

"Ooooo-kayyyy," I said. "That's usually good..."

"Just USUALLY?!?" she punched my arm.

"Owwwww! Domestic violence!" I whined.

"Just wait till I get done with this period, I'll SHOW you violence," she laughed. "No, listen!"

"Listening," I said.

"Ass!" she continued, "Tomorrow, how about we get somebody else to drive us to the airport to get my new plane, then meet us at Charlie's airport? That way I can fly with you."

"I could get one of the guys from work," I mused.

"Or I could get Susan..."

"Tell 'er we'll bring 'er home and take her and her folks out for dinner."

"That'll work!" Tina smiled.

Of course, the next day's trip took place in Tina's little Honda instead of my big truck.

When we pulled up at the flight line, our new little plane was tied down. Tina was beside herself with glee and it rubbed off on Susan.

"I've never HEARD of somebody getting an AIRPLANE for a gift," Susan said. "I don't even KNOW anybody who owns ONE. And ya'll got TWO!" Yes, she spoke in capitals. Actually, on the trip over, I listened to her talk to Tina and me, and she sounded intelligent, if a bit flighty.

"Susan," I asked, "are you SURE you know where' you're goin?"

"Oh, yes, Mister Alan. 'Sides, you put it on your GPS, right?"

"Right. But sometimes things like GPS fail."

"I know where I'm going. I'll watch ya'll take off, then I'll leave." She smiled. And ya'll need to take me flyin', too, you know..."

"It's part of the deal, Susan," Tina said.

"Pre-flight it, Tina," I said. And I watched.

Susan was still kind of incredulous. "She really knows what she's doin'?"

"It's not rocket science, Susan," I said. "She's making sure everything is in the right place and still tied on. You'd hate to take off with something broken."

"Yeah, really," Susan said.

"It's good, Alan," Tina said. "See ya in a little bit, Susan." And darned if Tina didn't climb into the pilot's seat. And stuck her tongue at me.

It was a short hop for us at a hundred miles an hour. We had the plane tied down and locked when Tina's grey Honda pulled up. And true to the agreement, I took her to dinner with me and Tina. Susan's parents met us at the restaurant.

# Chapter 11

"Mom! Dad! They've got TWO airplanes!" Susan squealed.

I shook hands with Mike. "It's not that big a deal. Really. The big one's four seats, and less than an RV, and the little one's two seats and less than a new bass boat. Or a good used pickup truck."

"Still, it sounds impressive," Mike said.

We sat around the table and ordered fried seafood and talked while we were waiting on its arrival. Kathy dove right in. "Susan said you RESCUED Tina at gunpoint?!?"

"It's not nearly as heroic as you make it sound," I said. Tina and I recounted part of the story. "She ended up with no place to go, and I offered her a place to stay until she got sorted out."

"I was stuck. No relatives. Evacuating ahead of a hurricane. And Alan offered. The deputy sheriff talked to me. Told me that if Alan treated me wrong, to call 'im. Alan…"

Kathy looked at me. "Just out of the clear blue, you offered?"

"Yeah," I said. "If it would've been a boy her age, I would've offered. I was just trying to help somebody who needed helping."

"Just sounds kind of… you know…"

"Oh, believe me, I DO know… Last thing I wanted was to take advantage of her. If you think it looks strange, you oughtta see it from my side…" I looked at Mike. "What would YOU do?"

Mike smiled. "I like to think I'm that honorable."

"You weren't when you were eighteen," Kathy said.

"Uh.. Mommmmm!" Susan squealed.

"I'm sorry, Alan. Nina. It's just, you know…" Kathy admitted.

"I know," I said. "The age thing…"

"Just numbers, Mizz Kathy," Tina said. "I've seen some absolutely HORRIBLE relationships in my life, and the people involved were the 'proper' age for each other."

"He bought her an airplane, Mom. She's in high school, an' she's at the top of her class, an' she's learning to fly. Obviously we need to see that he gets some pointers on exploitation." Susan folded her arms.

I was thinking 'Way to go, Susan!"

Mike chuckled. "Yeah, I'd say he's missing that whole 'exploitation' thing."

"Okay… okay…, ya'll made your point. I am just wrong…" Kathy said.

"No, Kathy,' I said. "You're just cautious, and that's not a bad thing."

"Thank you for your generosity, Alan," Kathy said, "but I'm afraid my motives weren't as pure as one would hope."

""But you're over it," Mike said. "Besides, here's fried catfish. That's sure to bring on benevolent thoughts."

"Tell me again why I married you?" She laughed.

Susan rolled her eyes.

"I think it's cute," Tina said.

Dinner became a lot more relaxed. We talked about college choices for Susan and Tina and my work and Mike's and Kathy's.

"And they're flying to Louisiana this weekend," Susan said.

Tina smiled. "I get to meet my sister-in-law for the first time, face to face."

I told Kathy, "If you think YOU had reservations, you oughtta hear what my sister told me…"

That got a giggle from Tina.

"My sister is woefully conventional," I said.

Mike snickered and got punched in the bicep.

"Lacking in imagination…"

Kathy eyed Mike. "Don't!"

He snickered anyway. Got punched again. "So you're flying down there in your plane?"

"Yep!" Tina grinned. "We'll leave at seven and get there before noon. And fly back on Sunday."

"Heck of a way to travel," he said.

"Sounds FUN!" Susan said. "They're gonna take me flying…"

"Is it safe?" Kathy asked.

"Mooo-ommm!" Susan whined.

"Safer than the drive to the airport, Kathy. Really."

"Safer than Cousin Robby's four-wheeler," Susan said.

Mike said, "My nephew flipped four-wheeler horsing around. Broken arm. Caved in face."

"Horsing around?"

"Yeah," Mike said. "You know the saying? 'Hold mah beer an' watch this!'? It was like that…"

"There's a lot of truth in that joke," I said. "Sometimes I look back an' wonder how I made it this far…"

"Him too," Kathy laughed. "You're looking at Mister Dirt Bike… into the door of a pickup truck." Giggle.

"Wasn't too bad. Twenty-eight stitches! That scar right here." He pointed to his forehead.

We finished our meal pleasantly and parted ways with Tina driving us home since we were in her car.

"That was interesting," she opined.

"'Interesting' is a good word for it. I thought Kathy was getting wound up."

"Me too," she said. "But she's not a MEAN person. I think she just wanted to understand…"

"Maybe that's it," I said.

The week went well. Mid-week, Tina went to the airport and came back giggling, showing her logbook with her first hour of instruction toward her private license. Milestone! Studying for her written exam became something we interspersed between her schoolwork.

Friday night we got an invite from the Carters, Susan's parents, for dinner. Kathy told Tina, "We figured you'd rather not cook the night before your trip."

We accepted and had a very pleasant meal with friends.

Saturday morning we were up early and on our way to the airport. Our wheels left the ground at five minutes to seven. With Tina in the pilot's seat. And me with my arms crossed. "Just tell me when I need to take over," I said into the headset microphone. I saw her turn to me, smiling.

"Just don't let me get in trouble," she said.

At eleven fifteen we were on the ground in Louisiana and tying down when I saw Elise's car pull up.

"Damn!, Brother! The pictures don't do HER justice! Hi, Tina!" and a hug.

Tina was grinning. She bobbed her head sideways near Elise. "Honey," she said to me, "I don't see where they cut the horns off! You said she used to have horns!"

"See, darlin'," she said. "You lived with 'im too long already. You might be ruint! "

"OH, that's okay, Elise! I'm ONLY your brother. I don't mind being ignored."

"Oh, I already KNOW you. I'm tryin' to see what you did to Tina!" Elise laughed.

I finished tying down the plane. We got in the car. Oddly, I was in the back seat with the two of them giggling in the front. "I personally do not mind being ignored by my lovely wife and my only sister," I said.

Half an hour later, Elise pulled into MY driveway.

"This is OUR house?" Tina squealed. "It's nice!"

"Smells," I said. "When we come down for Christmas, I'll call Elise and get her to air the thing out."

"I'd do that for Tina. If it was you, I'd turn a possum loose in it."

"Ni-ice!" I laughed. "Let's see if our car starts." The car in the garage was the diametric opposite of my big diesel pick-up truck. This was a sub-compact about the same as Tina's little Honda. A trickle charger should've kept the battery charged. I retrieved the keys from the key rack by the door from the kitchen into the garage and gave them to Tina.

"Lemme get the charger disconnected, baby," I told her. "Then you can start it." It cranked right up.

Elise said, "We'll see ya'll at the house around four or five, okay?"

"Sounds good," I said.

"See ya in a bit, Elise," Tina added.

Elise left. I showed Tina the house. We opened windows to let the stale air out. I went to the bathroom and when I came out, Tina was sitting on the bed with a lascivious grin on her face.

"Don't'cha think we oughta…" It had been entirely too long since there was real love in that house. Tina brought it back.

Afterward, we were lying nude together, drifting in the afterglow.

"Baby, why aren't you living here? This is a nice place. You have family…" She rolled onto her side and propped up on an elbow.

"I wanted to get out of town for a while after my wife left. I wasn't handling things real well. And there's good money out there. Besides, if I wasn't running the roads, I would have missed the love of my life…"

"Is there a university close by?" she asked.

"Close enough. Why?"

"You know why," she smiled. "Next fall, I need to start college. Can you handle it? From here?"

"There are options," I said. "I could keep being a road warrior, but only go after short-term jobs, like a week or two at a time, and spend a lot of time here."

"I don't like that one, baby," she said softly. "I'm not tryin' to be greedy or clingy, but I want to be with you."

"That's why that's a last resort," I said. "It's always an option, something to fall back on, if we needed to. But another option is to get onboard with one of the local engineering offices. If I get on staff, the work is steady, the pay is only okay, but out of town travel is low. They do contract engineers, too, the pay is better, but it's dependent on their workload, and there are no benefits. Or I could go to work in one of the local industries. That's a little more exciting than the engineering companies."

"But you do have options here?" she asked, her blue eyes soft.

"Or someplace else. There are a lot of people I know, companies that would give me a job."

"Look, baby," she said, "I want us to be together. I want to go to college, and I want to get my own engineering degree, and I want us to be together after that, too. I mean it. Forever."

"Forever," I repeated, and I kissed her. That precipitated another soft, tantalizing interlude, not as long, but very satisfying.

"It's almost four," she said. "We have someplace to be."

"If you insist."

Giggle. "You promised Elise. Don't get her an excuse to abuse you," she laughed.

# Chapter 12

Tina was dressing in jeans, just right fit, and a long-sleeved dark blue cotton shirt that set her hair and face aglow. We pulled into Elise's driveway, got out, and knocked on the door. Brother-in-law Joe met us at the door.

"Damn, Alan, she's a cutie. Hi, Tina, I'm Joe. Elise's husband. Ya'll come in!"

We walked into the house, smelling the wonderful aromas of the foods I'd been raised on. "What's she doin, a pork roast?" I asked.

"Smells like my grandma's," Tina said.

Joe laughed. "Smells like everybody's grandma's. She's gotten good over the years."

Elise stuck her head around the corner. "I heard that!" she said.

"Deb!" Joe yelled. "Come out here! Your Uncle Alan an' yer new aunt are here!" He turned to us. "Deb's here. Haley's at a friend's, but she'll be here in a bit. We tol' 'er to be home for supper."

Sixteen year old Deb popped around the corner, smiling. Her smile broadened when she saw me and Tina. Tina was two inches taller, and Deb's hair was a curious arrangement of brunette and blonde streaks, and they could've been schoolmates.

She bounced up to me and hugged me, kissing me on the cheek, then she turned to Tina. "Hi! I'm Deb. Deborah, actually, but Deb works better." And she hugged Tina. "Mom says you're graduating this year?"

"Uh-huh," Tina said. "You?"

"I'm a sophomore,' she sighed. "Haley's a senior."

"Let's go sit," Joe said.

"I'm gonna see if Elise needs help," Tina said.

I looked at her and winked.

Tina and Deb went to the kitchen. Joe looked at me. "Wow, bud!" he said. "Elise told me, but I didn't quite believe it. Seventeen?"

"Uh-huh," I said. "Damnedest thing I ever saw. Out of the clear blue." I told him how we met.

The women came back into the living room and Tina sat beside me. "I heard you talking about me, baby," she said.

"I was telling him about the day we met," I said.

She smiled. "Wasn't one of my better days, Mister Joe," she said.

"Please don't call me mister," Joe said.

"Okay, Joe, then," she said. "But Mom an' her boyfriend and I were evacuating from the hurricane, and we stopped for breakfast…" She told the story. "And after the deputies showed up, I didn't have any place to go. And Alan offered…"

"In that trailer of his?" Joe asked.

"Yeah, but you know, he didn't… he was a perfect gentleman. I was a high school dropout 'cuz of my mom, and he got me back in high school, and got legal responsibility for me so he could do it, and treated me like, well, he never tried anything. Like he told the deputy, he was just my friend."

Joe and Elise looked at me. "I was. Seriously."

"Yes. He was. Got me into school. Bought me a car so I didn't have to ride the bus, and so I could run errands after school while he was still at work. You know, so we'd have an easier time. And I thought I was just gonna be a normal school girl. But the first time I went out, I got shocked back to reality. And I asked myself what a REALLY wanted." She looked at me. "And I decided it was Alan. So here we are."

I tugged her against me. "And we're gonna stay this way."

Deb looked at her mom, eyebrow raised.

Elise snorted, "You go right ahead, little girl. You bring home a guy with a six-figure job, we'll talk about it."

The front door opened and my oldest niece walked in. "Hi, Uncle Alan," she said, hugging me. "An' you gotta be Tina!"

"I am. And you're Haley, right?"

Haley smiled. She was Tina's height, carrying twenty more pounds, her hair shoulder-length, the dark brown that ran in our family. "Mom says you're a senior?"

"Yep. You too, huh?" Tina smiled.

"Oh, god, yes! Finally!" Haley smiled.

"Sit down! Tell me about your plans!" Tina replied.

"Plans? I guess, college, huh Dad?" Haley looked at Joe.

Joe shrugged. "Baby, we've been through this. Do you have any idea what you want to do?"

"Oh, I dunno," Haley said. "I think I'm going in for mass communications. My friend Kayla's doin' that…"

"And you're thinking it's a good idea to spend five figures on 'I'm thinkin' 'cuz this friend of yours is 'doin' that'?"

I surmised that this conversation had been run through before. Haley decided to enlist a new ally: Tina. She turned to Tina, her brown eyes showing hope. "So, Tina, do you, like, have a solid plan?"

Tina perked up. "Yes, I do. I'm hoping for scholarships, but it doesn't matter. In the fall I'm starting on electrical engineering. Four years." She turned and smiled at me. "Like Alan."

Joe smirked. "That's a plan. And she actually KNOWS somebody that's making a living as an engineer. Do you know anyone with a 'mass communications' degree that's not living in their mom's house? I mean, really?"

"But it's a college degree, Dad," she whined. "What'd'ya think, Uncle Alan?"

"I think it's between you an' your daddy," I waffled. "But I do see his side. Don't you think it would be nice to go after something that makes you employable?"

"But isn't important to LEARN? Isn't that what college is about? Learning?"

"Learning is certainly honorable," I said, "and I've never stopped learning. But I had my eye on paying for my own future when I got out of high school. The wrong college degree just means you're going to have a better chance at being under-employed than somebody with a high school diploma. So you're working for ten bucks an hour after you paid a hundred thousand for the privilege."

She was a bit somber-looking. "uh…"

"No, sweetie, don't be sad. You're at the door to your future, like a few million other eighteen-year-olds are." I drew a breath. "I went right into college and then the army. Your dad went into the navy, then got out and fought a job AND school, and raising a family. It wasn't so easy. He's probably tried to explain, but I know how you are. I was eighteen once too, you know."

"Well, it's hard, Uncle Alan," she said.

"So think about it, baby. And don't just talk to your friends, because most of them are as confused as you are. And remember, a lot of people at the school are in the business of education, and you're getting out of their world into the REAL world."

Elise peered around the corner. "Looks like a funeral in here. I need help setting the table."

The girls jumped up. Joe sat back.

"You didn't go easy on 'er," he said.

"Was I supposed to?" I asked.

"Oh, god, no! She's been talking about it all year. And I've been tryin' to tell 'er, but I'm just poor ol' dumb Dad, you know… You're her successful uncle. Maybe she'll listen." He sighed. "And do what the hell she wants."

Tina came into the room. "Dinner's ready," she said. "An' it looks GOOD!"

Joe looked into the dining room. "Oh, sure," he picked, "Set the table for your BROTHER. Me, I eat off a TV tray."

Elise caught that comment easily. "Dear husband," she said, dripping sarcasm and humor, "I didn't do it for HIM, either. I did it for Tina, just to show her that I am on a higher plane of existence than the two of you."

We approached the table and Elise handed Joe the carving tools. "See," he said as he sliced up the roast. "She even got meat without bones in it."

"I'm just showin' how successful you are, babe," Elise quipped.

The meal was great, the roast tasty, and dessert was home-made pies. We managed to keep the conversation light and friendly.

After the meal, Joe and I got out of the way and let the dining room and kitchen be cleared out. When the last door closed and the dishwasher started making washer sounds, the family ended up at the table playing Trivial Pursuit.

Elise laughed. "Now, Tina, the only way we let HIM," pointing at me, "play is that he spots everybody two pieces."

I caught Tina's eyes as they flashed at me with a little twinkle that I instantly recognized. "Let the games begin," I said. I wasn't married to a dummy, seventeen or not.

A couple of hours later Tina answered the last question and won and I sat back with my arms crossed, smiling.

Elise said, "Get that grin off your face. You look evil."

"I married 'er for her BRAINS, sis," I laughed.

Tina giggled. "Well, we get to pull that stunt ONCE, huh?"

Haley was propping her chin in her hand. "How do you KNOW that stuff?"

"I read a lot. Alan and I talk about everything under the sun. D'you know I flew us here. Yeah, he's… I'm learnin' to fly."

"But what'd'ya do for FUN?" Haley asked.

Tina smiled. "I LIVE! Life is fun. Sometimes. And when it's NOT fun, you just do your best, thinking of when it was good, and hoping that it'll be good again. The day Alan rescued me; I thought it might've been my last day on earth. It got better."

Haley hadn't heard the story, or at least much of it. After all, it was about an uncle who was gone most of the time. "So he rescued you?"

"Mom's boyfriend was getting ready to slap the crap out of me in a restaurant, and Alan stepped in. Mister Jeff had my by the shirt and when Alan told him to stop, he dropped me and started to pull his pistol. Alan was faster. Then the sheriff department got there and arrested him an' Mom. And I didn't have a place to go."

"And so you married him?" Haley said.

"Oh, no, it's not like that at all. He just gave me a place to stay, and it took me a while to figure out that he needed me and I needed him and here we are."

"Amazing," Haley said. She looked at me. "Mom always said Uncle Alan was good for some unusual things."

"I'm a 'thing'?" Tina giggled.

"No, that came out wrong," Haley backpedaled. "He just does some curious stuff. D'you know he has a CANNON in his garage?"

Tina looked at me. "Uh, Alan, you never told me THAT!"

"Oh, it's NOT a cannon. It's a bowling ball mortar. Me and a buddy each made one on a project a couple of years ago. It shoots a bowling ball into the air. Not a big deal."

Joe laughed. "Unless you're under the bowling ball when it comes down. We had fun with it one afternoon. And Haley's right. Alan has always been different like that."

I patted my wife's hand. "And you're a wonderful part of that."

"Awwww," Elise said.

We returned to the living room and talked until after ten, then it was time to go. We left with plans to meet at a restaurant for a late breakfast.

In the car, Tina pulled as close to me as she could with the console between us. "Well, husband, how'd we do?"

"Good," I said. "You're a curiosity to the girls, though."

"I figured that. I am at school, too, you know… being married and all that." She sighed. "But they just sort of accept me, don't they? Your family?"

"Our family," I corrected. "And yes, I think they do, sweetie."

The bed at OUR house took another work out, as did the shower, and back in bed, we were in each other's arms, very happy.

Walking out to the car the next morning to go to breakfast, I waved to my neighbor, walked over for a quick chat, introduced Tina to him, and then we met the family at the restaurant. During breakfast, we promised to be back down for Christmas.

They followed us home and I stowed the car back in the garage, made a pass through the place to make sure everything was in the configuration I desired for our extended absence. We collected bags and everybody squeezed into Joe and Elise's big SUV. They drove us to the airport.

Tina gave her two new nieces a tour of our plane while I did the pre-flight inspection, then she slid into the left seat. She waved as we taxied to the runway, and after completing the pre-departure checklist, we lifted off for our return trip to Tennessee.

The next several weeks were a blur of her school, my work, her flight lessons.

Oh, yeah, you know how hard it is for a parent to watch his kid drive off on his own for the first time? Add an order of magnitude one Saturday when I stood on the apron with Charlie as Tina taxied the little plane away for her first solo.

"You knew it had to happen, Alan," Charlie said.

"Yeah, but it's still scary."

"Come on. Let's go get a cup of coffee. She's gonna do a couple touch and goes and then she'll be back here. And I'm gonna sign her off to go take her written, too. She gets that, some practice, a little more dual instruction and she'll get her private license."

"Yeah, I know. But still… my wife…"

"She's plenty good, Alan. She says you let her fly all the time, and she translates what she does in the 182 to the 152."

"Yeah," I said. "She pretty much pushed me out of the left seat when I told her she should learn." I poured us each a cup of coffee.

In twenty minutes I watched her taxi up. I was walking out when the engine stopped and she bounced out, ran into my arms, and gave me a wonderful hug and a kiss.

"Okay, enough of that, young pilot," Charlie said. "Let's have the shirt-tail!"

Tina's grin was epic as she turned away from Charlie and pulled her shirt out of her jeans. I held her shirt-tail as Charlie made the cut, the tradition for a first solo. The three of us pinned the bit of cloth on the bulletin board in the little office.

Charlie smiled. "It's been a long time since I did one of those," he said.

"Alan, you wanna let her go have an hour to herself? I usually do that after a first solo. Let 'em go play by themselves."

I looked at Tina. She was grinning and her eyes were atwinkle. "Don't get lost," I said.

Off she went. Preflight, crank up, and she was gone, a little white and red speck receding into the distance. Charlie and I piddled around an old aircraft he had in the back of his hangar, open for inspection.

In an hour we heard her on the radio over the speaker, notifying the non-existent traffic that she was returning to the field. This time we fueled the little plane up and tied it down on the flight line. Before we left, he laid out the plans for the next lesson.

We got that part behind us, and a week later she went to a testing center to take her written test. As expected, she passed, so now it was just a matter of time.

The rest of life was good, too. We had friends we could visit, and we stayed on the road or in the air on weekends, looking for new things, concerts, festivals, whatever. With four seats available on the Cessna 182, we took Brad and Sandra on one trip with us, and on another we brought Susan.

That was interesting. Don't get me wrong, Susan's a cutie, even if her conversation does come off as little addled at times. She's very smart, in the same classes as Tina, but sometimes I wonder about her thought patterns.

We flew into a general aviation airport outside St. Louis, picked up a rental car, and checked into a nice hotel where our room had two queen beds.

"Uh, is this gonna be a problem?" Susan asked.

"What kind of problem?" I asked.

"Us all in the same room. I mean, like, you two are MARRIED!"

Tina fielded that one. "Come on, Susan! I spent the night in the same room with Alan the first day we met, and he and I managed to be very proper and chaste."

"Did you ever stay in a hotel with your mom and dad, Susan?" I asked.

"Of course," she said. "But that's Mom and Dad. Ewwwww!"

"We'll be okay," Tina said.

"Do I need to go to the lobby for a while, or like, the GYM?"

"WHY?" I asked.

Susan smirked, "So… You KNOW…"

"Uh, Tina and I can probably make it a day or two without ravishing each other. Relax, little girl…"

We did enjoy our concert, and Mike and Kathy had a laugh when we related the events on Sunday evening when we brought her home.

Work rolled right along, too, pretty well, actually. A worker from a specialty contractor made a mistake and caused THEM to eat the costs of a very expensive piece of cable that failed from incorrect test procedures.

One of the engineers from another discipline walked in one day and announced he was quitting for a lucrative job overseas. I put my 'rotating equipment' hat on and picked up the slack until they brought in a new guy.

I got to exercise my patience AND my rudimentary German when a couple of engineers from the Fatherland showed up to commission some material-handling equipment.

And through all this, Tina and I were inseparable. Except when I watched her fly off on one of her flying lessons, or for solo work. She was on track for her private license in time for Christmas.

December came, bringing with it cold weather. We kept up our walks around the park, but added a membership in a little gym in town. After a couple of weeks we were settled in as regulars. That meant that everybody knew us and placed us together. The first couple of trips, though, well, leggy, athletic-looking, cute brunette, and she was new to the gym, and the best I can say is that more than one guy walked up to her with a winning grin on his face, spoke a few words to her, then looked in my direction with a sheepish grin.

Christmas was nearing, and life was pretty good, actually. Regular phone calls with Elise kept her updated as to plans, and we called Terri twice a week, too. She was anticipating Christmas with Daddy, and I think that she was developing an affinity for Tina, too.

We started watching the weather a week out from Tina's last day at school. That was a Friday, and it coincided with the Friday that we shut the project down for the holidays. As It drew closer, we saw that Saturday was going to be our departure day.

A call to the ex-wife confirmed the travel arrangements for Terri. She'd come in late Saturday to the big airport forty miles from home. The schedule was do-able. Tight. I made another phone call to Elise and lined her up as a backup to pick up Terri. We had a plan.

On the last Friday, we were all packed and ready to go. Dinner was a trip to a local restaurant, and we were back home before seven, the next day's clothes laid out, and we hit the shower in sequence. When I finished shaving and exited the tiny bathroom, the lights were out in the trailer, except beside the bed. And in the middle of it was Tina, the light turning her hair on the cusp of brown to red. And she was smiling. And completely naked.

I figured it made no sense to get dressed, then.

Giggle. "Tomorrow night we'll have our daughter in the house, so we'll have to be more… restrained. Tonight? Not so much."

She wiggled and I was in bed with her and she was pulling me down beside her. We knew each other. And we were already aroused. When my fingers found her slit, it was juicy, slick, her lips pink and turgid and I tore my mouth from hers to kiss my way down her body to a whole new dimension of taste, texture and smell. When my tongue touched her clit, she threw her head back and moaned, her hands on the back of my head, encouraging me.

Like I needed encouragement. She squealed through her first orgasm, recovered, and pushed me onto my back and I saw that auburn head in my lap, her mouth working pure magic on me, fingernails scraping lightly on the underside of my scrotum, her other hand gripping my shaft to keep me from plunging too deep into her mouth in my enthusiasm.

"Mmmmm," she said, pulling me out of her mouth. "I love getting you like this!" Her head bobbed back down and she bit me lightly, her teeth right behind my coronal ridge, tugging. I didn't last long before her tongue was stripping the last vestiges of my orgasm from my dick. She released me and climbed up my torso, lying atop me, smiling.

"Love me forever, Alan." She kissed me lightly on the lips, and then harder, more insistent, her tongue in my mouth where mine caressed it. She lifted her face.

"I will love you always, princess." I ran my fingers through her short hair, relishing the soft texture, stirring up wisps of perfume, sweet in my nostrils. I felt her small, firm titties pressing against my chest. My hands left her head, slid down her sleek form, and cupped the cheeks of her firm ass, pulling her against my hardening dick.

"I feel that, lover," she said.

I felt the soft hair of her pubic mound brush against my hardness as she raised up and shifted position, spreading her thighs, rising astraddle me. Only the smallest of movements and I found myself as deep inside her as I could get and she was looking down at me with her blue eyes, biting her bottom lip, the corners of her mouth turned up in a smile.

"This is where we're supposed to be," she said. "Mated."

My hands grasped her waist, pulling her down on me, my hips thrusting hard up into her, listening to her breathing and tiny whimpering sounds, gradually gaining in volume as she approached her orgasm, her hips delightfully mobile, eager. I curled up and took her right nipple into my mouth, sucking like I wanted to merge her lifeforce with mine, and I came. Hard. And as my second spurt went into her, accompanied by an upward thrust of my hips, she said, "Ohgodohgodohgod… Nnnnnghhhhh! Alannnnn!" and collapsed into my arms. I eased back onto the pillows, holding her.

A soft towel was positioned on the nightstand beside the bed. I reached over and retrieved it. She identified the motion.

"No, love," she said. "I'm still hungry for you." She turned around as I watched, skin flawless, well, except for a mole on her left asscheek that was absolutely NO distraction whatsoever. Her mouth went down over the entire length of my soft dick, sucking, lick, cleaning up the vestiges of our mutual rapture.

I found a perfect pussy in my face, a mix of milky and clear fluids oozing from between still puffy lips, and I savored every drop of me and her as I licked and sucked, taking care to apply only the lightest of flicks to her clit, no matter how much I wanted to attack it. No, she was good for a third orgasm, but she needed to be brought to it gently. When she came again, she was whimpering against the base of my soft dick.

Finally I helped her into her nightshirt and donned my own, and we went to sleep clinging together.

The alarm went off as the merest hint of dawn tinged the sky. Yesterday's frontal passage left us with clearing skies and we grabbed a fast food breakfast sandwich on the way to the airport. She was sitting in the pilot seat of the 182, the engine warming up, as I backed her little car into the hangar and then pulled the doors closed. I climbed into the right seat, buckled myself in and put on the headset.

"You know," I said, Just because you have your private license doesn't mean you get the left seat ALL the time."

"You started this," she giggled. Ten minutes later she eased back on the yoke and our wheels cleared the runway, Louisiana bound.

An hour out from home, I called Elise up on my cellphone and told her when we were going to arrive. As Tina rolled into the landing pattern, I saw Elise's SUV pulling onto the apron to wait for us. As I loaded the last of our cargo of luggage and gifts into the back the car, Tina and Elise were already in the front seats.

Climbing into the seat behind them, I said, "I should've known THIS wouldn't be any different. She didn't let me touch the controls the whole way down here."

Elise laughed. "You've met your match, huh?"

Tina smiled. "We ARE a match, huh, babe?"

At the house, we ran the load inside, promised Elise that we'd see her the next day, and then checked the groceries in the fridge. Elise had us stocked. Air freshener overcame the staleness of a closed up house, and we took advantage of a couple of hours to lay together on the bed and hug. A bit before three we got in our car to go get Terri.

We were half an hour early so we walked the terminal and then sat to watch people coming and going. The arrival of Terri's flight was announced. We eased toward the arrival gate, waiting. And we saw her, hand in hand with a middle-aged flight attendant, all four feet something of seven year old Terri, blonde hair in a ponytail, blue eyes searching.

And she saw us. "Daddeeeee!" she squealed.

The flight attendant asked for my ID. "Procedure," she said. "She's too cute to let loose to some random dude at the airport."

"Thank you for helping her," I said, fishing out a driver's license. "C'mere, sweetie!"

And I got to hold my daughter for the first time in months. She plastered herself on my hip and looked. "Are you Tina?"

Tina smiled. "Yes. And I assume you're Terri, right?"

"Umm-hmmm," Terri said. "You're pretty!"

"Thank you. So are you, sweetie." Tina said.

Terri slid down off my hip and grabbed my hand on one side and Tina's on the other. "We have to go get my stuff," she said.

We navigated to the baggage claims and got two bags full of whatever it takes for seven year old girls to live for two weeks. With me loaded down with the two bags, that left Terri and Tina holding hands as we exited to walk to the car.

Terri's head swung. "Miss Tina, you don't mind holdin' my hand, do you?"

"Of course not, sweetie. And we've been over this before. You don't need to call me 'Miss Tina'. Just 'Tina', okay."

"But it doesn't sound right. You're my step-mom." Her blue eyes twinkled. "I call my step-dad 'mister'."

"Yes, but your step-dad's older than I am. I'm closer to 'big sister', okay?"

Terri smiled. "Okay. Dad, you're okay with that, aren't you?"

"I'm happy if you two are happy." I was, too. They were walking ahead of me, seven year old Terri in jeans and a sweatshirt, her blonde ponytail swinging, the tip just below her collar, and my Tina, almost two feet taller, also in jeans and a sweatshirt, reaching into her pocket to retrieve her keyfob for the car.

I loaded the bags into the cargo compartment of the SUV, got in the driver's side, and Tina started to get in the back seat.

"No, Tina. I get the back seat. You sit next to Dad. That's where wives are s'posed ta go."

"You sure, sweetie," Tina asked. "I don't mind."

"Nuh-uh! This is fine, really!" And Terri got in the back seat.

"Okay," I said. "Now where do we want to eat dinner?"

Tina was twisted sideways in her seat. She looked at Terri. "Terri, how about you pick something?"

Terri grinned. "Pizza? That place that has the buffet?"

And the game room. Inwardly I groaned. Nothing like buffet pizza. But I realized that sometimes it wasn't about me. "That'll work," I said, knowing full well that two slices of pizza and Terri was going to tap me for a five dollar bill to buy tokens for the kid games.

Tina giggled. "I used to drag Grandma to one of those places, you know."

"No doubt," I opined.

Okay, it wasn't THAT bad. Well, the pizza was, but the sight of Tina and Terri playing games together was pretty much a fair swap for the bad pizza. We left and drove home.

Terri walked in, head swiveling. "Looks the same, Daddy," she said.

"We don't hardly live here, sweetie," I said. "We're just here for the holidays."

"Place needs a Christmas tree, Daddy." She turned to Tina. "Don't you think so, Tina?"

Tina grinned. "Can we, Alan? Grandma had a Christmas tree. I didn't have one last year with Mom."

Okay. Two bright, expectant faces. How could I refuse? "Okay," I said. "tomorrow we go get the first Christmas tree this place has seen since your mom moved out. And all three of us will decorate it."

Squeal! Twice. Terri's hug was totally little girl, unrestrained. Tina wrapped the two of us together in hers. "Thank you, Alan. Families do that."

"They do, Daddy," Terri affirmed.

I made hot chocolate while Tina and Terri pulled out a Monopoly game.

"Alan, she wants to play Monopoly." Tina was a little skeptical.

"Tina!" and the pouty lip came out. Terri said, "I can count better than anybody in my class. And I can read better, too."

"Okay, baby," Tina conceded. She looked at me as I brought a tray in, bearing mugs of hot steaming chocolate. "We'll try it out."

Tina and I were pleasantly surprised. Terri could count quite well, and with us helping her with the math, we had a lot of fun playing, but at nine-thirty we called the game a draw and put it up. I let Tina and Terri commandeer the big bathroom and I made do with the smaller one when I finished shaving, I saw the bathroom door open and Tina was behind Terri, brushing and drying her blonde hair. Terri was in pink flannel pajamas and Tina was wearing her favorite nightshirt. And panties. I saw an uncharacteristic panty line. Oh, well… we had little Terri and decorum was advised.

It was bedtime. Terri's room was a shrine to little girls. Every time she came to stay with me, we added more of the trappings of little girls everywhere, and there were stuffed animals and a few dolls and cute pictures and now there was a little blonde girl-child sitting on the bed with her new step-mom/big sister and I looked in.

Tina spoke up. "Alan, I think we can make room in our bed for her tonight. She misses her daddy."

Blue, pleading eyes. "Not EVERY night, Daddy. I know you an' Tina are married an' you s'posed ta sleep together. But just SOMETIMES?"

"Okay. Just sometimes."

Tina rested her chin on Terri's head, holding the little girl wrapped in her arms. She mouthed, 'thank you' silently to me.

Tina and I could've been perfectly happy in a twin bed. In a normal night we entwined and snuggled and spooned and caressed, sleeping together. Adding Terri to the mix, though, the king-sized bed was barely enough geography. She was an active little thing when awake, and didn't slow down much when sleeping. I remember seeing her bed in the morning, the covers a knot. Our night of 'sleep' was punctuated with elbows and knees and legs and when I got up in the morning, she and Tina filled in the gap I'd left between them.

I made a pot of coffee and started biscuits and gravy and when things were stabilized in the kitchen, I went back to the bedroom and woke the two females I loved most on the planet. Two hugs. Two kisses, one a little longer and deeper.

We sat at the table eating.

"I miss your cooking, Daddy," she said. "Mostly I just have cereal at home. This is sooo good!"

Tina was grinning. "I like it when we cook, too, baby. In that little trailer where we've been living, it's kinda hard sometimes."

After breakfast came coffee for Tina and me, and Terri got coffee milk, a little coffee and a lot of milk and some sugar. After that, we put the house in order and I was shoved out the door by two young girls in search of a Christmas tree. We visited a department store first, and loaded up on lights and ornaments, and then we found the perfect tree, and amid giggles and smiles, the smell of fresh conifer filled our house, making it a home.

While they were busy decorating, I put together the quintessential Cajun get-together dish, a pot of gumbo, and called Joe and Elise to come over for a visit.

# Chapter 13

This was one of those completely informal occasions, done the way my family had done it as far back as I could remember. There was a stack of bowls by the stove, the big cast iron pot of gumbo was barely simmering, and there was the requisite pot of rice next to it. People served themselves and went to sit at the dining room table.

That was how evenings with family were supposed to be, food, laughter, conversation.

Elise started with Terri. "Baby, you've grown so much since last time we saw you."

"Thank you, Aunt Elise," she said.

"Did you an' Tina decorate that tree?"

"Uh-huh. Yes, ma'am. I love it. Don't you?" she smiled.

"It's very pretty. Tina, I know that's you an' Terri. Your husband has NO sense of style. Not when it comes to that stuff, anyway."

"My skills lie elsewhere. I have two beautiful females in my life to help me with my aesthetic shortcomings."

"And it's a good thing," Elise laughed. "I've watched what he wears. Scary!"

"Did he tell you what we got married in?" Tina giggled?

"No, what?" Elise asked.

"Work clothes. He had a knit shirt with a pocket, cargo pants like these, THESE exact shoes."

"Don't leave out the rest of the story, baby," I said. "You were wearing that blue and gold rugby shirt that I like, and jeans, and, uh, these shoes."

She slid over and kissed my cheek. "But it still counts, doesn't it?"

"Yes it does, princess. And Tennessee won't put me in jail, either."

"Yeah, about that," Joe asked.

"I honestly didn't know. I mean, me and Tina, we were going to get married when she could sign for herself, and…"

Tina raised her hand. "Mister Joe, you need to realize that we'd already exchanged marriage vows. It was just a formality."

"Uh, yeah, so we were rockin' along, and then a friend of ours who's a lawyer broke the news. He thought she was my wife. We acted like that when we met him and his wife at a concert. So that was that mad flight from Tennessee, so we could get the judge who'd given me guardianship to fix the paperwork. And he married us."

"I never got the whole story," Joe said. "I wasn't prying…"

"Oh, no, Mister Joe," she said. "It's okay. We're kinda like a fairy tale, happy ending an' all." She stroked Terri's sleek blonde tresses. "Complete with our own princess."

The next day was pretty, one of those clear, crisp winter days. Terri and Tina were cooking breakfast. Terri came running to me.

"Daddy! I want Tina to take me flyin'."

"Can I go with you?" I asked.

"Of course," she said.

"Okay, then if Tina wants to take you, we'll go." I smiled and held my arms to receive my daughter. She was a giggly feather in them.

"Thanks, Daddy!" she called over her shoulder, "Tina! He said yes!"

That pretty much defined part of our day. After breakfast, we dressed for the chilly air and drove out to the airport. I went into the office and arranged payment for fuel while Tina taxied the plane to the pump.

"She's licensed?" the manager asked.

"Yep! Seventeen. Been flying for what, like three or four months. Just got her private a week and a half ago." I patted Terri. This is my daughter, Terri. That's Tina out there. We've been married for a month now. We're taking Terri flying. First time for her in this little plane."

"Have fun, Miss Terri," he said.

We went out to the plane and I handed the fuel nozzle up to Tina as she stepped on a little ladder to reach the wing tanks. Refueled, we pushed the plane clear of the pumps. I buckled Terri in the rear seat and showed her how the intercom headphones worked so she could carry on a conversation. Tina climbed in the left seat. I got in the right.

"Am I ever going to get to fly the left seat again?" I asked, laughing. "I created a monster."

She turned her head, the headphones doing something whimsically alluring to her hair. "Uh-huh. And I'm YOUR monster!" She taxied us to the end of the runway, completed the checklist, and we were off.

"Are you okay, Terri?" Tina asked. I looked back at Terri. Her nose was stuck against the window, looking at the ground below.

"It's like, magical, Tina!"

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," I said.

I directed Tina's route, carrying us over the fields of south Louisiana, over wintering flocks of geese numbering in the tens of thousands, over marshlands tawny in their winter phase, down to the coastline and then looped back, heading home. After landing, we pulled up to the pumps and topped the tanks off. Terri sat patiently in her seat.

When we pulled up on the flightline, I exited and unbuckled Terri, lifting her out of the door to the ground. Her grin was a mile wide. She ran around to the other side of the plane where Tina was tying down the left wing.

"Dad had his arms folded the WHOLE time! You REALLY did fly!" Terri squealed.

"I told you I could, didn't I, baby?" Tina returned. "You dad did that for me!"

"Dad's pretty cool, huh?" Terri said.

"Yeah, he really is," said Tina. "We're lucky to have 'im."

"An' he's lucky to have us, huh?" Terri said. "That's what makes us a real family."

We got back in the car and headed to the house. "What about lunch," I said.

"Grilled cheese sandwiches," Tina suggested.

"Uh-huh," confirmed Terri. "You must've had Dad's grilled cheese sandwiches."

"Uh-huh, we live in his little trailer in Tennessee. And I've eaten his grilled cheese. And maybe we can make some soup?"

"Chicken noodle?" Terri squeaked. It didn't take much to impress a seven year old, and grilled cheese sandwiches and a bowl of canned chicken noodle soup was more than enough.

The remainder of the Christmas vacation followed in much the same vein. Tina made my two weeks with Terri a much bigger pleasure than previous sessions where it was me and a seven year old, and two days after Christmas I actually regretted seeing her depart on the flight back to her mother. It was a bit of nasty winter weather, and that was enough to delay me and Tina from flying back to Tennessee.

"No sense in pressing our luck, baby," I'd told her. "My instrument rating is old and I don't want to have to go that way."

"I can't imagine it myself," she said. "And Mister Charlie says that this isn't the plane to go busting fronts with."

"Charlie's a retired air force transport pilot. He knows," I said. "So I guess we'll just have to spend a night or two down here with the house to ourselves, big shower an' all."

"Oh, I fear I am sooo abused," she tittered.

My cellphone rang. Elise. "Hi, Elise," I said.

"Well, did you get 'er on the plane?" Elise asked.

"Yes, and I was crying an' she was crying and Tina was crying and hell, the flight attendant was sniffling too," I said. "She really fits in with me and Tina."

"I was worried," Elise said. "Daddy's little girl and all that. So when are ya'll comin' over? I got plenty for dinner."

I turned to Tina. "Elise has food, baby."

"Imagine that," Tina laughed. "Let's go."

"We'll be there in a little while," I said.

"See ya then," Elise said. Click.

"Elise was worried about you an' Daddy's Little Girl," I said.

"Me too, honestly. But it was actually a lot of fun. She's a good kid. A little exuberant at times, but a good kid."

"I'm glad it went so well," I said.

"Yeah. Maybe we can do something special with 'er this summer."

"Let's think about that some," I said.

She held my hand as we drove back, ending up in Elise's driveway. We walked in. I sniffed the air. I looked at Elise. "Sausage, steak and gravy?" I asked.

"Just like Momma used to make," she said. "Joe'll be here in a few minutes and we'll eat." I was sitting on the sofa with Tina on my left and niece Haley was on my right and other niece Deb was between her and the arm of the sofa.

Haley was the gutsy one. "So Tina, my uncle's a little OLD, don't'cha think?"

Elise's face dropped and she started to say something, but Tina jumped right in. "Oh, yeah… Old. Smart. Stable. Funny." She paused. "An' if you're thinkin' about…" she left the word unsaid. "Don't. gosh… Any better and I'd DIE!"

Elise said, "HALEY! I can't believe you…"

"It's okay, Elise," Tina said. "If I was in her shoes, I'd have questions too." She turned to Haley. "We have a perfectly normal life, Haley, except that we live in that little trailer. He goes to work. I go to school. When we get home, we either cook or go out to eat. On weekends we have places to go and friends to go with. Just like everybody else. Except I'm seventeen and he's a little older."

"Mom," Haley said, "She makes it sound normal."

"It IS normal," Tina said. "We're partners. Friends. Like a marriage is supposed to be. It's about love and friendship." Tina drew a breath. "Everybody wants to think about the sex, but it's not about sex. Sex is easy to find. Try looking for love and friendship and appreciation between two people. We're lucky!"

Elise said, "I should be taping this. Joe needs to hear it for damned sure!"

"Oh, yeah, Mom," Deb interjected. "Like you an' Dad have a horrible marriage…"

"Your dad is a beast, I tell you," Elise laughed. And that's where Joe walked in. He knocked, actually, and Elise let him in, and when he entered the living room, we all looked at him and laughed.

"What?!?! Do I have toilet paper stuck to my butt?" He asked.

"No, dad," Deb said. "Mom was just tellin' us how horrible it was being married to you."

"Was not, baby," Elise said. "Your elder daughter was nosing into Alan an' Tina's private business and Tina gave 'er both barrels. You should've heard it. And when I SAID you should've heard it, YOUR daughters gave me crap about how horrible you treat us."

Haley giggled. "Dad, you KNOW how we are about you an' Mom. I was curious about Tina an' Uncle Alan. They look different, is all."

It was my turn. "Believe me, ya'll, Tina and I talked about this before we came down here. I know some folks can't handle it."

"But we CAN handle it, Uncle Alan. I was just curious…" Haley said.

Joe looked at her, "So you just popped up and asked in general conversation? You got your momma's sense of tact."

Elise huffed.

"I would've asked her in private, but I never got a chance," Haley said. "Tina, I wasn't tryin' to be nosy. I'm sorry if it came out like that."

"I didn't think it was tooo nosy, Haley. It was a good question, really. Mister Joe, she wanted to know how things work between Alan an' me."

Joe looked at his daughter. "I thought your mom gave you that whole 'Tab A – Slot B' speech."

"Daaaa-aadddd!" Haley whined, "That's not what I was wondering about. I mean, like music. You an' Mom are stuck in the Eighties…"

Tina jumped in. "Oh, Haley, that's the easy part for us. We're hopelessly lost two or three centuries ago."

Deb caught the inference. "You mean he's still on that classical music thing?"

"And I discovered it on Day One, before we even started thinking about an 'us'. What are the chances?" Tina smiled.

"Pretty slim," Deb admitted. "Although I do like some of it. Just not a steady diet."

"Bottom line is, Haley, we KNOW each other. We don't have to escape or take a break or whatever."

"And that's a good thing in a thirty-something foot trailer," I injected.

"Yeah," Tina said. "Like that!" And she gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"Yeah, but like I said before," Joe said, "before you get any ideas, Alan's got a job an' Tina's got a plan that doesn't involve magic like winnin' the lottery."

"Are we gonna talk or are we going to eat the meal that's sittin' on the stove?" Elise asked.

"Put me down as voting for eating," I said.

The food was good. Elise managed to replicate the dish we'd grown up on, and I said so. The conversation continued.

"I'm sorry about my nosy daughters," Elise said.

"Oh, don't think anything of it. It's not the first time I've been asked. I go to high school, you know, and everybody there knows I'm married now."

"Yeah, how's that working," Deb asked.

Tina finished chewing a forkfull. "The best ones were like this... But you don't have any idea how many times I've been asked if I was pregnant. And how many times I just smiled and walked off, because I knew somebody wanted lurid details or a chance to go off on me about my morality."

I'd heard all this before. Sometimes it was related to me with giggles and laughter, a few times sadly.

"One of the teachers wanted to know if I needed to go to a shelter for troubled girls and victims of domestic violence." Tina smiled. "It was so hard for me not to laugh when she said that. But I just told her that I was very happy and wasn't being beaten or exploited…" she looked at me.

"Much," I said, getting giggles.

"See," Tina said. "Exploited!"

"I got the same thing," I said, "except some of 'em weren't very subtle at all."

"Yeah, I can imagine," Joe said. "Guys on a construction site? Not exactly noted for sensitivity."

"Uh-huh. And sometimes all I do is smile… But I have HER picture on my desk. And Terri. And the few of them that have actually MET Tina, they stopped asking questions." I smiled at her. "She doesn't fit that whole 'teen bimbo' mold very well."

Tina giggled. "An' I offered to bleach my hair and wear a push-up bra an' a mini-skirt to the Christmas party…"

"You're bad," Haley said, giggling.

"Nope," I said. "I think she's pretty much perfect as she is."

Tina's nose crinkled with her grin. "Yep! That's pretty much us!"

Elise said, "Just wait, babe! The 'new' will wear off."

"Maybe so," Tina retorted, "But it's darned good right now."

"Gets better every day," I added. "Seeing her with Terri, that was a revelation. Like they connected."

"Terri's a good kid," Tina added. "We had fun! I held her up to put the star on the Christmas tree and Alan took the picture. Ya'll saw it…"

"Yeah," Elise said. "It's cute! Of course, her momma's gonna die…"

"Her mom's crazy," I said. "She bounces from one extreme to the other… I think the lady has issues."

"Yeah," Tina said. "She almost went off the deep end when we wanted to keep Terri an extra couple of days. Alan…uh... we were going to pay the fee to get the ticket changed and everything."

"Sweetie," I told Tina, "Don't sweat it. Terri knows what went on. She asked her mom and her mom acted like we put her up to it. Terri knows better."

"Still," she said, "I feel bad for Terri…"

"That's a battle for another day, little one," I said. "When her mom left with her, I was not exactly in a stable place in my life. And right now we're in a travel trailer in Tennessee…"

"Won't always be that way," Tina stated.

"No it won't, baby doll,' I said.

Elise looked back and for the between the two of us. "Ya'll are thinkin' about Terri living with ya'll?"

"It's been discussed," Tina admitted. "When Alan finishes this project and I get out of high school, we're talking about moving back here so I can go to college. And that'll be more stable. Real house an' all…"

Joe checked in. "Hah! That's a battle you can't win, Alan. I know guys who've tried to get custody of kids, and you could have film of mommy dearest givin' blow-jobs for a dollar apiece on a street corner downtown at noon, and the judge'd still give 'er custody."

"JOE!" Elise blurted. "Your LANGUAGE!"

"Daaa-aadddd!" Deb squealed.

"It's true," he said. "Dads get a bad break in the courts."

"Yeah, but if Mommy Dearest agreed…" I said.

Elise spoke, "This is the same person that wouldn't agree to let her daughter spend two extra days…"

"And I'm thinking that she's going nuts. You never know…" I said. "Her mom called me…"

"And…" Elise prodded.

"We'll just leave it at that for now," I said.

"If it happens, I get a little sister an' a stepdaughter all at once," Tina smiled. "Not what I expected. Just a possibility of a pleasant surprise."

"Wow!" Haley said. "Havin' Terri full-time won't cramp ya'lls marriage?"

"Oh, come on, Haley," Tina said. "People HAVE kids. Your mom an' dad survived havin' you an' Deb…"

"And YOU didn't sleep a whole night until you were three," Elise tossed in.

"Yeah," Joe laughed. "We could've been world travellers…"

Deb spoke up, "But instead you ended up with two spectacularly beautiful daughters…"

"For which I am truly blessed," Joe said. "Now, if you'll take your Uncle Alan and Aunt Tina's model for your weddings, I would be much appreciative."

"Mom, d'you have the video of Princess Di's wedding? I wanna look at some ideas…" Deb giggled.

"Owwww!" Joe feigned pain.

We finally got up to leave. "We're gonna look at the weather tomorrow," I said. "If it's good, we may fly out."

"If you don't, we'll get together tomorrow evening, then," Elise said. "Either way, I'll empty out your fridge for you…"

"Okay," Tina said. "We had a good evening. Thanks for dinner!"

"Oh, hon, thank YOU for draggin' him over here," Elise said.

We were on the road for the ride to the house, Tina's hand holding mine on the console of the car.

She was giggling.

"What?!?!" I said.

"I just enjoy sitting there with that bunch. The conversation. It just jumps around."

"I'm glad you like 'em, baby," I said. "I thought you'd decide they're insane."

The weather was clearing when we woke up in the morning and we both looked at the forecast maps. I had an opinion. I wanted to hear hers. "What'd'ya think, Miss Pilot?"

"We're going northeast. Looks like we'll parallel the back of the frontal weather. Our destination shows medium level overcast, but the visibility is good, and the ceiling will probably raise by the time we get there. I say we go for it."

"You don't see a risk?" I asked.

"No… Am I missing something?"

"Not that I can see," I admitted. Her thoughts mirrored mine. "Let's see if Elise can get us out of here."

Two hours later, two hours that gave the cold front additional time to move off to the southeast, and we were taxiing to the departure end of the runway. With Tina in the left seat. The trip back north was a little slower as we flew into headwinds the whole way, but we were lining up for landing before dusk. The setting sun was a spectacular view from our altitude.

That put us driving into the trailer park in the dark on New Year's Eve, our trip punctuated by fireworks from celebrating families all along our route.

We unloaded bags into our little nest and turned the heat up from a "keep things from freezing" forty degrees to a more comfortable sixty-two.

"Ya know, guy," she said, throwing arms around my neck, "it's New year's Eve an' Grandma used to say whatever you were doing on New Year's Eve at midnight, you'd do for the rest of the year…" And she kissed me.

"Am I to understand that you wish to stay up until midnight?"

"Uh-huh. Old movies. Hot chocolate. Me. You. US at midnight, and then we can start the New Year off in each other's arms.

"I can't think of a better way," she said, her blue eyes sparkling.

We got up in the beginning of a new year the next morning, me looking at the tousled auburn hair next to me in bed. I got up and hit the toilet and was headed back to bed when she stood.

"You think we could find us a breakfast somewhere, baby?" she asked.

"After you kiss me, anything is possible," I said. I got my kiss. Fifteen minutes later we were walking out into the crisp winter air, shivering in the front seat of the truck until the heater kicked in, and soon we were nursing steamy mugs of coffee, waiting on breakfast to show up. Afterward, back in the truck, I turned in a different direction than the park.

"Where're we going?" she asked.

"To satisfy the old folks, cutie," I said.

"Huh?"

"I don't know about YOUR grandma, but MY grandma said you had to eat cabbage and blackeyed peas for prosperity in the New Year."

"Uh, I wasn't gonna say anything, but you're right. Wal-mart's open."

"That's where we're heading," I replied. "No sense crossin' tradition, you know…"

"I just wonder what I did LAST year to end up like this," she giggled. "Somethin' with Chee-tos, no doubt…" My baby liked her Chee-tos.

"Ooooo-kay, then," I chuckled, "Cabbage, black-eyed peas, and Chee-tos."

And that was Saturday. New Year's Day. With the sun out, the afternoon was pretty, although a little on the brisk side, but we donned coats and walked a couple of circuits around the park in the mid-afternoon sun, meeting a few of the other denizens, stopping on the leeward side of trailers to chat.

Back in the trailer, we called Elise to exchange New Year greetings.

"Ya'll did your blackeyed peas an' cabbage," she asked.

"Yep," Tina said. "Your brother makes horrible noises, though..." She giggled.

"Oh, yeah, and you, like, whistle little happy tunes and smell like rose petals on a summer day," I countered.

Elise laughed at the two of us. "Ya'll are beginning to SOUND married," she tittered.

"Well, I'm familiar with him eating beans and rice, but this is beyond the limit, Elise."

I said, "That's why you do it on New Year's Day. Makes the rest of the year SMELL better, at least..."

After a few more minutes of banter, we hung up and pulled out computers to check email. Seeing nothing earth-shattering there, the computers were turned off and we searched for something to occupy a little time. TV had nothing, but iPods did, and we settled in for a little music while we played cards before retiring for a happy coupling and then restful sleep.

Sunday morning marked an official 'lazy day': breakfast at a restaurant, sandwiches for lunch and a drive around the countryside for the afternoon. Dinner was a mid-scale restaurant an hour away from home. Home was a walk, then early showers and a head-to-head battle of Trivial Pursuit.

"We'll never get anyone to play against us again," I laughed.

"I notice they NEVER cut you any slack," she giggled.

"Yeah, and my cutie-pie wife is a sleeper." I had to work to beat her.

We crawled into bed before nine-thirty, curled up in each other's arms.

"You know," she said, "I'm not a person to dread school, but I don't remember ever wishing tomorrow wasn't the end of vacation like I do now."

"I'm like that about work. I've enjoyed our time together, sweetie. It's gonna be hard getting back in the groove after these two weeks."

She rolled atop me. "Just maybe we should have a really GOOD one tonight to help us sleep, huh?" She tilted her head as if to listen for my answer, her auburn hair swinging, eyes aglitter.

"They're always good ones with you, little one," I answered, drawing her down to me for kissing.

# Chapter 14

Oh, the horrors of Monday after vacation. When you like your job, Mondays aren't as dreadful. I liked my job. But I liked spending time with Tina more. She was about as excited about school as I was about work. I was positively reluctant to go out the door, even absent the freezing temperatures.

Still, we did what we must. I arrived, finding that my boss was snowbound up north, half the crews didn't show up for similar reasons, and as the "responsible senior engineer" on site, I presided over a rather miserable meeting. We looked at where we were on the project for all the different disciplines, who among us actually had enough workers on site to do anything useful. I put my factional crew to work, having many tasks that needed one or two knowledgeable technicians.

Only one of the crane operators made it back, and the steelworkers were not the least bit disappointed to be relegated to inventory duties instead of hanging off I-beams in twenty mile an hour north winds and freezing temperatures.

An extra coffee pot in my main substation and passing the word around to the work crews that hot coffee was available made my techs a little set of heroes. They needed credit. I didn't.

Home was a drive through gray dusk and when I turned the corner into the park I saw Tina’s little car parked at the trailer. I walked in to something that smelled good.

"Soup," she said. "I dumped stuff into the pot an' added a little of this and a little of that, and cut up some of your precious Cajun sausage in it. I hope you like it."

"It's a soup kind of day, little one," I said, collecting a kiss form a girl in a sweatshirt with a spoon in her hand. "How was your day?"

"Nobody wanted to be there. Lots of giggling and story-telling and the teachers just sort of went along with most of it. "Mr. Barnes told us in math to just go ahead and get it out of our systems because tomorrow was 'buckle down and get it' day." She grinned. "So I guess it wasn't bad. Yours?"

I related my sad tales. The coffee pot deal made her smile.

"It'll get better. I know we built time into the schedule for this stuff."

Bleak January passed us. There was a bit of flying, a destination on a weekend, or not, as in Alan, can we just go buzz around the state? I mean, there's SNOW on the ground. Us Louisiana kids never see snow."

There were a couple of evenings with Susan and her parents. Susan was an only child and actually quite attached, despite my initial assessment of her from Tina’s party episode. Having dinner with them meant five of us socializing, Tina handling the transition between being Susan's contemporary and best school friend and being my wife and friend of her parents. Of course, Susan was a case herself, funny, sometimes sounding a bit flighty, but quite intelligent and the absolute apple of her dad's eye.

Five of us playing some silly board game as an excuse to laugh and be sociable made for pleasant evenings.

Of course, relating such forays into a wild life of debauchery to some of my co-workers was always interesting, as in, "Man, if I had a seventeen year old that looked like that, I DAMNED sure wouldn't be visiting people an' playin' board games!"

"There's more to life and love than continuous sex," I laughed.

"But that'll do until that other stuff comes along," my buddy answered.

"Uh-huh..."

Life rumbled along as life does. On bright sunny days we got out to do SOMETHING, if only a walk, and a young girl with a pilot license and yearning to fly, well, that was a frequent goal too. I considered selling her little trainer, but we just hadn't gotten around to pushing it hard. I left word with the other flyers, Charlie and a couple of other active pilots, that we'd entertain offers on it.

Tina’s school business stayed good. She brought home an application to take her ACT, preparatory to college aspirations. I found humor in that. The Tina I knew was not going to have a problem getting into college. I only wished she'd have had more time in Tennessee, just to benefit from some of the scholarships.

It wasn't a matter of needing the money. I had that covered. It was just the idea that I thought that Tina was outstanding enough that she should be recognized.

One day I came in from work to find another car next to the trailer. I walked in the door and saw Tina and Susan sitting on opposite sides of the little booth that served as our dining room table, a laptop open, papers spread around.

"What's up, ladies?" I asked.

"Navy bean soup and a social studies paper," Tina said.

"Hi, Mister Alan," chirped Susan.

"Hi, Susan," I said. "You stayin' for dinner?"

"If you don't mind. I helped Tina cook it."

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

"Dump soup," Tina snorted. "Grandma called it 'dump soup'. Open cans, dump it in a pot. Stir."

"You chopped up onions and ham," Susan said, "an' cooked 'em first."

"It's quick, and sometimes it's nice to sit at home with a bowl of hot soup instead of driving up the road to a restaurant."

"I know," chirped Susan, "I love it when Mom cooks a whole meal. But she had to work late today."

"You're always welcome," I said. "It's little, but it's home."

"I think it's CUTE!" Susan giggled. "Kinda like camping!"

Tina snorted, "Uh, Susan, that's why they call it a 'camper'..."

"Oh, yeah!" Another giggle.

Life. As it is supposed to be lived. I always heard about it, and now, for once the joy was there every day.

I didn't mind seeing Tina and Susan hanging out together. It gave Tina the ties I thought she needed between her life as wife of an older man and life as a high school girl. Like when Susan took a battering from the comings and goings of teenaged love, and Tina was the shoulder to cry on.

"I don't know that it's something I miss at all," Tina told me. "Susan's devastated."

"She'll go okay," I said. "She's cute and smart and her family loves her and that's the ground that you can build on. She knows what relationships are supposed to look like."

"That's what she said about us, baby," Tina replied. "That it works when you find the right one."

"But the guy she split up with, what's the deal?"

"He liked the way Susan looked. But her mind…"

"Oh." I scooped Tina up in my arms. "The best part of you. And that's saying something, because the other bits are pretty damned good."

Her arms went around my neck and the tip of her nose touched mine. "I'm glad you don't mind her hangin' around. She feels like she has to dumb down with a lot of other kids."

"Ah," I said. "I understand that."

"You've been there," Tina purred. Little kiss. "Me too. And if Grandma was still alive and I was in the world I left with her, I'd probably be in the same boat. I had a taste of it. It's tough being the 'smart kid'."

And other serious discussions.

And quiet times.

"Look what I found," she said on one evening when we were lounging in the trailer after dinner.

"What's that?" I asked.

"This chamber orchestra from Germany is doing a tour in the USA. They have a date in Charlotte, North Carolina in February. That's in range, you know."

"What's the menu?" I asked.

"Oh, gosh! Brandenburg Concerto. The third one! You love that one! And so do I. Live! D'you think…"

"Get us tickets, then… When is it?"

"Saturday evening, like most of 'em."

"Well," I said, "We can shoot for me getting you out of school early on Friday and flying in on Friday afternoon, huh?"

"Weather permitting. Should I make hotel reservations?"

"Some place nice, okay?" I said.

"Always," she said. "But remember that you promised we'd go camping when the weather warms up."

"Oh, yes, I remember," I said. "Wonder what warm weather feels like?"

"Oh, you remember all too well," she smiled. "We both do. Louisiana, you know…"

"Sure, you pick a day when it's fifteen degrees outside to remind me."

"So when is this thing?" I asked.

"Oh, it's like perfect," she giggled. "It'll be my reward for not coming unglued when I take the ACT's. It's the Saturday after the tests."

"Buy the tickets. Make the reservations. Worst thing that'll happen is things go off track and we have to eat the tickets. And I've never had an excuse to go to Charlotte, so we'll have fun exploring on Saturday before the concert."

"We need to spend an extra session at the gym, too, baby. You know how we tend to pig out on those little adventures. You don't need a plump little wife, you know…"

"And you don't need a fat old husband either. And forty year old guys can put on weight really easy. Especially when one of their great joys is sitting across the table with a laughing cutie, enjoying good food."

She smiled. "Monday Wednesday Friday at the gym, then, hon. And walk around the part every day it's not raining. Gotta keep your strength up." And she stuck her tongue at me.

"Hold that thought!" I laughed.

She giggled. "Why should I HOLD that thought? Are you lacking in a sense of adventure, guy?"

"I do believe I'm up for a bit of adventure…"

Squeal! She was shoving me back towards the bed at the far end of the trailer.

We loved each other enthusiastically, happily, eagerly, joyously. In the afterglow, she purred in my ear, my arm holding her soft form next to me.

"Only bad thing is that NOW we have to get up and shower, sweetie," she said.

"Oh, I know," I admitted. "Just a little while longer…"

She rolled halfway on top of me and kissed me. "Now, babe! We can get back to bed when we finish."

"Oh, you're right, but this sure feels good."

"Uh-huh. It's s'posed to."

Showers. One for each of us. One shave, one dried and brushed short auburn head of hair, and back to bed for cuddling and giggling and laughing. And sleep.

Thursday and Friday went well. It should have. We, the team at work, were professionals, and we were up to speed, looking down the road to head off difficulties. Sure, that's not going to stop all the tight-jaw moments, but it lessens their number.

Home. We called it home. We knew how to keep from bumping into each other when were were trying to get things done. I knew how she was when it was THAT time of the month now, six months into living together, and I determined that it wasn't worth the battle to try to get my own way.

On and on. Dozens of little vignettes reside in my head about how two people meet and commit and begin the process of fitting together. Some people never get through this process. Some get through it and end up with resentments and hurts that color their lives forever. And some find that the whole process is too difficult and not worth the benefit.

We laughed and frowned and giggled and fretted. And grew closer.

The period thing? I wasn't sure how manage it, if indeed it could even be managed. She got moody. She was on her period when we first met, but I figured that the emotional roller-coaster of her evacuating with mom and mom's loser boyfriend, the incident in the diner where we met, and the whole 'new life' thing sort of shoved any mood swings off the table.

Since then, though, sometimes she got really giggly, sometimes something would turn her somber, but we both recognized the hormonal change as the cause and as for me, I just backed off and let things go for a day or two. Usually, if she was a bit brusque to me, she'd come back later and apologize.

I found out that SHE got grossed out when I trimmed my toenails, something I used to do while sitting cross-legged in bed. The first time I attempted that after we'd committed to one another, I thought she was going to lose it.

"No, I don't CARE when I cut MINE! I can't stand to watch you cut YOURS!" she yelled.

"But, baby, that makes no SENSE!" I tried reason. Logic. And decided it wasn't worth the fight. I mean, she was very careful about her own conduct. I was too many years a bachelor. And DAMNED sure didn't want to go back to being one just so I could trim my toenails at my own leisure.

"So exactly WHERE does a guy have to go to trim his toenails, Tina?" I looked at her.

"He DOESN'T have to go anywhere. All he has to do is trust the person who loves him most…" She wasn't smiling.

"Wai-wai-wait! You mean to tell me that you can't STAND to watch me sit in the bed and trim my own toenails, but YOU will do it for me?"

"Yes," she said. "Grandma had arthritis. I used to do hers for her."

"You know how to do it right? Straight across?"

"I THINK I can trim your toenails, Alan. Give me a foot." And for the first time in my adult life, somebody else trimmed my toenails. And kissed me after it was over, saying, "Now, was it THAT bad?"

It wasn't.

Make-up sex. Sometimes it's REALLY good, even if you didn't REALLY fight.

On a rare mall trip, I was patiently waiting as she perused the perfume counter for another bottle of scent. I loved the tiny hints of fragrance she used, catching a sweet aroma wafting in the currents as she walked near me.

She motioned me over, extending a sample of a MAN's cologne. "What'd'ya think?" she asked.

"I've been wearing the same one for ten years, baby. What's wrong with it?" I asked. I should know better.

"I think this one's nice," she said. Her blue eyes twinkled to accompany her little smile.

Hooked. Now I smell different. I was in my office signing off purchase orders when the project administrator bent over to swap stacks with me. "You smell different," she said. "Tina?"

"Yep," I admitted.

"She's got good taste," she said.

"Yeah," I admitted. "I think she does."

I learned that Tina did not like her hair touching her neck when she was sweaty. That meant that when we went to the gym for a serious bit of exercise, she put her hair up in a couple of tiny, short ponytails, one at each ear. That just drove me wild. I told her so.

"You know I love you, Alan, but that's just STRANGE!" Giggle. And then we got finished and went home to shower. When I got finished shaving, I stepped out of the tiny bathroom and looked at the sofa, Tina's usual destination after she dried her hair. She wasn't there. She was kneeling in the middle of the bed naked, hair in two little ponytails. And grinning.

As I rolled onto my back with this sweet thing in my arms, she was giggling. "Just thought I'd humor you… Looks like it works, huh?"

"You could wear a burka, baby doll," I laughed, "but you KNOW I appreciate you paying attention."

"I can tell," she tittered, eyeing a very obvious sign of my appreciation.

I think that somewhere in the ensuing forty-five minutes I had multiple out-of-body experiences.

I walked into the trailer one day to an unusual smell from the stove.

"What IS that?" I asked.

She said, "Hamburger Helper. I had a craving." And I collected my usual 'welcome home' kiss.

"Baby,' I said. "I understand cravings. But Hamburger Helper?"

"Hamburger Stroganoff, to be exact," she said. "Call it a weakness."

"Most people get a little more, oh, I dunno, 'exotic'," I said.

"Grandma made it when she didn't feel good enough to spend a lot of time in the kitchen, you know, when she was sick."

"Okay. I'll buy that," I said. "Just surprising."

"Oh, I know," she admitted. "But it IS fast, too. I stopped by the grocery store on the way home and got the stuff."

"Well, I'm glad, baby doll," I said. I shrugged, the thoughts of a nicely prepared meal at the little family restaurant in the next town dying in my mind.

"Tomorrow's 'pork chop day' at Grannie's," she said, naming the restaurant I had in mind. "Let's do THAT tomorrow."

I laughed. "Unless \*\*I\*\* get a craving for sardines and crackers."

She put a lid on a little pot of vegetables, turned and wrapped her arms around my waist, pulling me to her. "You just do what you want, guy," she smiled. "I owe you one…"

And we grew together. We had our quiet evenings, even more enjoyable in the cool air of winter, lounging at either end of the sofa, each reading, our legs tangled between us under a cozy blanket.

We had the evening after a hard cold front moved through, dumping snow, then the clouds cleared, leaving us to walk around the park after dark in a snow-covered wonderland by the light of a full moon. I'd seen snow before, but sharing this scene with a sweet young lady from south Louisiana who'd never seen real snow, that was a bit of magic that made life worth living. Even better, we were both bundled up. She had the hood up on her parka, her face was pinkened by the harsh chill, and the kiss? Pure heaven!

Oh, back to the story…

ACT day for Tina. We got out of bed and threw together a quick set of pancakes for breakfast. I drank half my cup of coffee with her.

"Are you nervous, baby?" I asked.

"Not really, Alan," she answered. "You know schools are about tests. My math teacher suggested that I try some sample tests in one of those prep books. I should do okay. But Susan's a nervous wreck. And SHE shouldn't be worried either."

"I know. She's no dummy."

I poured the rest of my coffee into a travel mug, put the lid on it, bent over and kissed her and headed out the door to work. She didn't have to leave for school for half an hour. I was in my office by that time. As I went through the stack of drawing changes on my desk, I paused to think of my sweetie and what she was facing on this day.

When I came home, I found Tina and Susan watching a movie.

"Susan's mom is in the middle of income tax season and her dad has some inventory thing to do. I told her she could have dinner with us. That's okay, huh?" Twinkly blue eyes. Two pairs.

Like I was going to say 'no'…

The three of us went to dinner. "How'd the test go?" I asked.

Susan went first. "I was SOOOOO nervous, yaknow, but when they told us to open the booklet an' start, it's, like, 'Susan, you can DO this stuff.' An' I did. At least I THINK I did."

Tina jumped in. "That's pretty much the way it was for me. Nervous. And then it started. And I got in a zone and 'ZOOM', off we went."

"Ya'll feel good about it, then?"

Two heads nodded affirmative.

"Good!" I said.

"Tina says ya'll are flyin' to Charlotte for a concert this weekend," Susan said. "Sounds like fun."

Oops! I started worrying immediately. I desperately wanted a weekend off somewhere with Tina, and as much as I enjoyed having Susan pop in and out of our lives, I didn't particularly want her with us this weekend. But how was I going to gently convey that point?

Susan saved me the trouble. "I'd love to go, but we're goin' to visit Grandma in Jackson."

Tina said, "We'll do another one sometime, Susan."

"I'd love to go with ya'll, but I feel like a third leg or somethin'." She sighed. "It's just not Dad's thing, ya know… Maybe Mom could go with me one weekend."

"That's a thought. Does your Mom ever go places without your dad?"

"Every now and then we go do a girl's shopping trip an' a movie."

"Then maybe you and your Mom can do a concert with us one weekend. Like that time you came with us, when we flew to St. Louis," Tina said.

"Oh, yeah, that was FUN! An' this time, Mom an' I can get a room," Susan said.

"Yeah. We'll see what's coming up," I said. I didn't want to monopolize Tina. I wanted her to have some normality in her life, the sorts of friendships that a seventeen year old girl would normally have.

Our meal was as pleasant as we were used to at this restaurant. The conversation between the three of us flowed easily, although there were times that I sat out and let them carry on about some of the goings on at school, the relationship dramas, the academic battles, things of that nature. They thoughtfully tried to bring me into some of the discussions.

"It's a different world," I said.

"That's what Mom an' Dad say," Susan opined. "An' Mom said that Grandma told HER the same thing…"

Tina laughed. "Plato's dad probably told HIM that!"

"I guess," I laughed.

We dropped Susan off at her house and watched her go in the front door, then turned to drive home.

"Everything set for leaving Friday?" Tina asked.

"Uh-huh," I said. "I'm getting out of there at lunch. We'll be packed and ready to go. Take your car to the airport. Do I need to write you a note to get out of school early?"

Giggle. "Yeah! I like that! 'Dear teacher- Please excuse my wife from classes early so I can haul her off to Charlotte and have my way with her…'"

"Oh, yeah, especially when 'having my way' includes her in a neat black dress, and a concert without a mosh pit." I laughed with her.

She smiled. "And the weather's horrible tonight," she said. "and the forecast is for the front to slide through tomorrow, so Friday will be perfect for flying."

"Yeah. But Sunday might not be. It's gonna be close." I'd already given the boss a warning about the possibility.

"Uh, that'd be absolutely horrible, you know… three nights in another city, in a nice room, just you an' me…" she thought for a second. "I know Susan wanted to go, but I really wanted US to have this one…"

"I know, baby," I said. "I'm looking forward to it…"

"Long, hot showers together. UNLIMITED hot water. New restaurants. US. Bach." She smiled, eyes twinkling. "You were serious about doin' a weekend with Susan and her mom, weren't you?"

"I feel bad about leaving her dad out…" I was truthful.

"We can do a trade. One weekend we steal her mom, then another weekend you an' him go do something guyish…"

"Guyish? You mean, drag our knuckles on the ground, scratch ourselves, slay a beast…" I grunted.

"Hunting season's over, butt!" she laughed. "Soon be spring though. Fly him down to Louisiana an' do one of those guided fishing trips or something."

"Now that's something I hadn't considered," I said. "Where'd you get THAT idea?"

"I used to go to school with a girl, her dad guided fishing trips. Sounded like fun."

"Fun?" I asked.

"Yeah, sounds like fun," she affirmed. "You fly in, show up, they give you everything you need, take you out, you catch fish, and they clean and pack 'em up for you. Then you come home."

"You'd like something like that?" I mused.

"I might. You go try it with Mister Mike. And if it works, you an' I can do one, maybe." She looked at me. "I used to fish with Grandma. From the bank of the lake."

"Every day I learn something about you."

She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek as we drove. "You know EVERYTHING about me, Alan."

"Not yet, baby," I said. "You're like a kaleidoscope. Every day is different and beautiful."

We pulled into the RV park and went into our cozy little home.

"Showers," she said. "Then bed." With a telling grin.

"No hot chocolate?" I asked.

"Nope. Me. You. Bed." Giggle. "I desire stress relief."

Thirty-five minutes later I was wiping the remains of shaving gel off my face as she stowed her hair dryer. The long flannel winter nightshirt she was wearing came off before she crawled into bed. She piled it on the nightstand.

Kneeling in the middle of the bed, she faced me. On our knees we kissed.

"Mmmmmm," I moaned. "You are so perfect, little one."

"I wanna be perfect, Alan. For you. Nobody else. Ever."

I stroked her auburn hair, my hand releasing tiny wisps of delightful perfume. I kissed her neck below her ear, reducing her to wiggly delight. Her hand reached down.

"Somebody's interested in me, baby," she giggled.

"Always. Even when I wasn't supposed to be."

Her eager lips met mine, my hand sliding up her slim waist, around, to cup a small but perfect breast. I teased a nipple with my finger.

"Ohhhhhh, baby…" she moaned, her hand pushing my head downward. What she wanted, \*\*I\*\* wanted. My mouth suckled her lightly, my tongue circling, flicking, teasing her pert, erect little pink nipple. I eased her gently onto her back and then moved my mouth to the other nipple. When I released it, she released a pent-up breath.

"Oh, Alannnnnn," she whispered.

I moved lower, kissing the tiny well of her navel, not lingering, because her hands guided me further downward. I brushed my lips through the fine hair on her pubic mound, delivering a soft bite, and then I covered the pink lips of her pussy with my mouth.

"Mmmmmm, delicious," I said.

"Me… do it to me…"

I did. It was pink. Wet, delicious, savory, my tongue feeling, tasting, reveling in the uncontrolled wiggling that my attentions caused in my young lover. Her legs wrapped me, her heels digging into my back, spurring me on as I happily licked her to orgasm. After her first, she sighed as I kissed her pussy lightly and her breathing evened out, then my tongue dipped back into the musky juices and she had another.

"Come up her, lover," she said. "You're going to KILL me… And I might let you…"

I crawled up between her legs, considering this to be a perfect place, but she gently pushed me onto my back.

"Nope! Me on top this time!"

Okay… I lay back and let her straddle me and impale herself on my hardness.

She looked down on me, smiling. "I love how you fit me, baby," she said, gently rocking. I knew the gentle rocking was a prelude to the abandon that soon took her. She knew she could make me come fast like this, and if she timed things right, she would reach another for herself.

I struggled to hold my own orgasm back until I saw her biting her bottom lip, the sign that she was getting close again, her eyes closed tight, the corners of her mouth turned upward in a little smile. A couple more mutual thrusts and I was over the precipice. When I shoved upward into her in time with my first surge, her mouth flew open.

"Ahhhhhhhh! Nnnnnnnghhhhhhh! Babyyyyyyy!" She rode me down, falling into my arms. I breathed deeply, savoring the sweet perfume of my young love.

"Alannnn, every time it gets better…"

"You're amazing, little brown-haired girl." I held her, loving her atop me, and the hair wasn't brown, it bordered on red, a warm, rich auburn, and she was breathing softly and she was beautiful and I loved her.

Finally we had to move. Neither of us wanted cold shoulders, and there was a lot of juice that needed to be taken care of, and we moved lethargically to tend to these items, but the afterglow was more than sufficient to carry through. The music came on, the lights went out, and no dream would ever match what I had in real life.

After work the next day, I found Tina at the front office talking with Mizz Lillian.

"Ya'll flyin' to Charlotte," Mizz Lillian said.

"Yes, ma'am. Concert for me and Tina." I answered.

"Weather's s'posed to be good until Sunday," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," Tina interjected. "We're watching. Might not get back until Monday."

"I'll watch your place for you. Not like there's a lot of people here in February, anyway."

"We appreciate it," I said. I turned to Tina. "You ready to go get dinner, then pack up?"

She smiled at me. "Okay, baby! Bye, Mizz Lillian. You really oughtta think about coming with us one of these weekends."

"Oh, thank you, baby," Mizz Lillian cooed. "But that's just not my kind of music. But I might just try…"

"We'll pick something, you an' me," Tina said.

"Okay Tina baby!" Mizz Lillian said.

We drove our vehicles to the trailer and went inside.

"I'm serious," Tina said. "Mizz Lillian reminds me of Grandma. I can talk to her and she listens and talks to me like you do, like I'm an adult. I wanna do something nice for her."

"I understand, baby," I said. I was always happy to find this young lady considering how to make others happy.

We opened a hard suitcase and carefully packed her dress and my 'respectable engineer' suit and the accoutrements to go with them, and all our regular knocking about clothes went into our soft weekender bags. That had us essentially set up for the trip.

"Let's go find something to eat," she said. We did.

The next morning we both followed the morning routine. In late morning, I shut my computer down and picked up my coat, heading for the door.

I stuck my head into Carl's office. He looked up. "You gone?" He asked.

"Yep! Everything's lined up for today and Monday."

"You're not sure about the weather Sunday, are you?"

"It's iffy," I admitted. "But Tina's… We're looking forward to this."

"Don't sweat it. We can handle things. Ain't much happening with your electrical stuff yet."

"Yeah. Just don't let anybody… Oh, never mind. My lead tech'll beat somebody to death if they try to do something stupid…"

"Yeah, that Bobby's a big ol' boy," he laughed. "Go on! Have a good time!"

"Okay, buddy! I'll see you Monday or Tuesday." I headed out to the truck and as I was pulling into the park, I saw Tina's car already there, the hatch open, and she was hauling bags out.

"Anxious ain't we," I laughed as I got out of the truck.

"You betcha, guy!" she laughed. "I got plans!"

I went inside and took care of offloading the morning's coffee and made a pass through the trailer, making sure everything was secure, the electric heat turned on to save propane, the thermostat set at a 'don't let anything freeze' number.

She popped in the door. "Quick stop, and I'll be ready, baby," she said. Practical.

We locked the door and headed to the airport. She backed her car into the hangar after we pulled the plane out. Preflight. And we were off. She actually let me fly. "I get to fly home, though,' she said as we climbed into the clear skies, eastbound.

We watched the mountains pass beneath us. She was cute, sitting there beside me, her hair pulled in odd patterns by the bulky intercom headset, as she tracked our flight on a paper chart.

"I'm glad we're taking this trip. I love flying over this terrain," she said.

"It's different, isn't it?" I said. "Blue Ridge Mountains."

We flew on, Asheville, passing off to our left, and in a bit over two hours we were on final for a little general aviation field outside Charlotte. We taxied up to the fuel pumps, topped off, and then tied down at the transient line. Our rental car showed up as planned.

We loaded up our bags and got in to drive off. As I turned the car away from the field, I saw another lightplane on final. I pointed it out to Tina. "Isn't that a Cessna?" she asked. "Taildragger. Maybe a 180?"

"Yeah, I get them and the 185's confused. Let's go get that shower," I said.

"Can we stop at a convenience store or something,' she said. "I'm thirsty."

"No problem, baby doll," I said. "I could use a drink myself."

# Chapter 15

The rental car's nav system had our hotel keyed in as we pulled onto the main highway. As we got a little closer to town we stopped in at a Walgreen's to get us each a drink, and while we were there we went ahead and picked up a variety of snacks for the room. Tina was a big fan of cashew nuts.

"You like macadamias," she said. "You get some of those. I'll get cashews. The BIG ones. And ginger ale!"

We took an inordinately long time in a drugstore, in my estimation, and we left with a couple of bags full of goodies.

The path through town to the hotel was not visibly different from any other town: the mix of fast food joints, chain restaurants, strip malls, the traffic, but the GPS was inerrant in directing us to our destination.

I parked the car at one of those 'luck of the draw' parking spots very close to the hotel entrance. Tina and I walked in with her carrying the two overnight duffels and me carrying the hard suitcase and our snacks. There was a guy at the counter checking in. Standing next to him was a young girl, red-head, a bit more than five feet tall.

There was something too familiar about the way the man stood. He said something, and I identified the voice immediately. I knew him! Fellow engineer from a couple of projects back. We'd worked together for most of a year.

Okay, let's make sure. I muffled my voice to imitate a particularly memorable radio call. "Dan Richards, report to the supervisor's office immediately. Your transformer blew up!"

Bingo! He whipped around, eyes wide, and I knew the face.

"Alan Dean Addison! What the HELL are YOU doing here?" he said, extending his hand. I gripped it and pulled him up for a manhug.

The little redhead standing next to him was staring.

"I was going to ask you the same thing, buddy," I said.

Tina looked at me, then him. "Tina," I said, "This is Dan Richards. He and I worked on a job together in Arizona for a year."

Tina stepped up, extending her hand. "Hi, Mister Dan! I'm Tina. Alan's wife!"

Dan looked at me, then her, then back at me, then at the little redhead. She was giggling. He said, "Cindy, this is Alan Addison. We worked together on a project in Arizona. Alan, uh… Tina, this is MY wife, Cindy!"

Now I thought I was hallucinating. She was a cutie, her hair several shades lighter, towards red, than my Tina, and four or five inches shorter, and her eyes were an astonishing shade of green, but she didn't look like she was old enough to be married. Of course, this was coming from a guy with a teenaged wife himself.

She had the poise to extend a hand. "Pleased to meet you," she said, smiling.

"So what are you doing here," Dan asked.

"Tina and I are here for a concert."

The little redhead suppressed another giggle. "Bach?"

"Yes!" Tina blurted. "You too?"

Squeal! Dan's cutie said, "Uh-huh! Tomorrow evening."

"You're checking in?" I asked Dan.

"Yep!" he said. He saw the clerk pushing a form at him and he directed his attention to her and took his room keycards. "Your turn," he said, stepping out of the way.

"Where're you working?" I asked.

"New powerhouse south of Birmingham. You?"

"Plastics plant going in east of Nashville. How'd ya get here? Airline?" I countered.

"Nope," he said. "Remember that plane I was getting rebuilt in Arizona?" he smiled.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Bush plane you bought in Alaska. Cessna 180, wasn't it?"

"Uh-huh. Spent some money, but she's like new."

"Don't tell me you came in at the field east of town…"

"Yep!" Dan said.

"We saw you flying in. Tina and I were just driving off." I signed my name and got our room cards.

"Okay… what room are ya'll in? We need to go drop off bags, then we can catch up if you want to."

I looked at the little folder in my hand. "One-thirteen," I said.

"Four twenty-nine," he said. "What? About fifteen minutes? Our place or yours?"

"Ours," I said. "Fifteen minutes, okay?" I nodded towards our two wives standing back in the lobby, chatting and smiling.

He called to his Cindy, "Let's go put our stuff in our room, then me an' Alan have some catching up to do."

Tina came to my side, grinning. "We'll see you in a little bit. This is gonna be interesting."

They headed to the elevator with their bags as we traipsed up the hall.

"What on earth was THAT, baby?" Tina said.

"I don't believe it," I said. "Honey, that was my best friend on that job."

She took a keycard and let us into our room. We sat the bags down and she wrapped me in her arms. "A room all to ourselves." She surveyed the room. Two queen beds.

I would've preferred a king, but this was fine. Tina and I could make do in a twin bed, cuddled in each other's arms. We kissed.

"So," she said, "Now tell me about this Dan guy. Your age?"

"Within a couple of months," I said. "We're both from Louisiana, graduated from two different colleges, both…

"Engineers," Tina said.

"Worse than that," I said.

"Lemme guess. Electrical engineers." She had that cute smirk that she got when she was right.

"Uh-huh. His wife died in a car wreck. He decided to go on the road about the same time that I went through that divorce…"

"And both of you ended up with young wives. Her hair's redder than mine… but still…" she fixed me in her stare. "And THEY fly their own plane… What is this, Alan?" she giggled, "some kind of virus?"

I laughed. "Worse than that! We had a blast at that project. I should've kept track of where he went. Email… Just kinda tapered off. And NOW!" I looked at those clear blue eyes. "Baby, I know this is OUR weekend…"

She smiled. "But we just ran into your old friend and his wife, who's YOUNGER than me, and she seems nice, so maybe we can hang out together?"

"You're a doll," I said.

"You know, baby," she smiled, "Just another one of those special things that happens to me when I'm with you…" She headed into the bathroom. "Just freshening up," she called.

"I need to do that," I said. "Then we can go…"

She bounced out of the bathroom with a smile on her face. "Baby, don't sweat it, I mean with Dan and Cindy. It's like one of those other weekends, you know. Not even as bad as when we brought Susan. We still sleep together."

"Oh, little one," I said, "I wasn't worrying about me. I was worrying about YOU!"

"Then don't!" she slipped behind me as I washed my face with a damp cloth. Her warms wrapped me from behind and she squeezed me vigorously. "I love you to pieces!"

I tried to turn. She released me and then trapped me again, our faces inches apart. "This oughtta be interesting. I mean, you KNOW the guy. So how does he end up with a fourteen year old wife?"

"She's FOURTEEN?!?!? I knew she looked young…"

"We started talking," Tina said. "She's a sweetie!"

"But fourteen? You go to JAIL for fourteen!"

Tina laughed. "Says the guy who fled Tennessee ahead of the bloodhounds…" Giggle. "Maybe he's into Barbie dolls…"

"Oooooh, you're a snarky little thing, you are… come on! We're having company! You wanna call? Or me?"

She grinned. "Four twenty-nine, right?"

I nodded.

She punched the phone. "Hi, Cindy! We're waitin' on ya! Uh… Yeah! One-thirteen! You an' me'll decide where we eat!" Giggle.

A couple of minutes later there was a knock on the door. I stood up, but I was fast enough to beat Tina to it. She glanced through the peephole and then swung it open. "Come in," she said. "Nice rooms, huh?"

I smiled at Dan and Cindy. "We try to do something like this every two or three weeks. Gets us out of…"

"Don't tell me you guys live in a TRAILER!" Cindy squealed.

I looked at Dan. "Remember when we used to talk about customizing a travel trailer for going to jobs?"

Dan said, "I did it. Works great! This is my second project with it."

"Worked great for me too, until this job." I didn't finish. I looked over my shoulder. Cindy and Tina were sitting cross-legged on one of the beds, chatting excitedly.

Dan looked at me. "Uh, last time we talked, you were divorced. Uh, Tina? How old?"

"Seventeen," I said. "And Cindy?"

Dan looked kind of embarrassed. "Fourteen. B…but we're legally married. Papers and everything. Since the week of Thanksgiving."

I was a little startled. "Day-um!" I said. "Uh, Tina and I, since October."

Another question, Dan said. "What kind of plane?"

I laughed. "Two, actually. We flew down here in a 182. I bought Tina a 150 to get her license with. It's up for sale now."

I heard a squeal. Cindy. "Dan! Tina's got her PILOT'S license!"

Dan shrugged. "So what do you guys do for dinner?"

"We usually just wing it," I said. "Tina, baby, fire up the laptop and see what's around here." To Dan I asked, "Any preferences?"

"Cindy?" he asked.

Cindy was looking over Tina's shoulder. "We're lookin', baby. We'll let you know!"

Tina looked back over her shoulder. "And it won't be fried ANYTHING!"

Cindy giggled. "We're gonna have to help 'em out. They're all giddy."

"Easily confused," Tina tittered.

Dan looked at me. "Alan, the last time we did something together, we built those bowling ball mortars."

I laughed. "I still got mine!"

"Me too," he said, relating an interesting interaction with law enforcement while driving through west Texas.

Cindy popped up. "We got it, guys!"

"Where are we eating, then?" I asked.

Tina said, "We found a neat Italian place. It got good reviews. And it's not far."

Dan looked at me. "She run your life?"

I grinned. "She IS my life, Dan."

"We're two lost son-of-a-guns, then, buddy!" he said.

Cindy didn't let that comment pass. "No you're not, baby! I FOUND you!"

And my Tina: "You might've found HIM, my Alan found ME." She thought for a second, then said, "Who's got the biggest car? We should ride together!"

"Yeah!" Cindy said.

"I have a Ford Taurus," I said. "Free upgrade. As many of the things as I rent."

"You got me beat," Dan said. "But we could all FIT in our little Focus."

I chuckled. "No, we'll take our Taurus. Do ya'll need to go back to your room first, or are we ready to go?"

Dan glanced at Cindy. "She LOOKS ready, but you never know… Baby?"

"I'm ready," Cindy said. She looked at Tina. "You ready, Tina?"

Tina shut the cover on her laptop and stood. "I'm ready. Let's go."

I did a quick inventory of items before we walked out of the door and down the hall behind our wives. They made a very attractive pair. Tina's stride was more of a flow. I think Cindy was close to skipping.

I nudged Dan. "Look," I said. "Cuties!"

"Yeah," he said. "Apparently in my former life I rescued puppies or something to have karma like this."

At the lobby the girls stopped and waited for us. Cindy took Dan's hand and Tina linked up with me and we walked out into the crisp post-frontal air. At the car, Tina said, "Guys in the front, girls in the back. Ya'll are taller." We all got in. I saw Cindy reach forward and lovingly touch Dan.

Dan handled digging up our destination on the GPS. We started talking, he and I, about work stuff, as I pulled out of the parking lot and onto the street. He described his job.

"Sounds familiar,' I said. "You got the generators and large motors and stuff, and I got the distribution and control. The only generation I have at this place is the generator to keep the coffee pot going in the lunchroom."

"Uh-huh," Dan said. "You ever get Tina out there?"

"No. Got a real anal-retentive safety manager. He wouldn't allow it. I'm surprised he's still on the project, as much as he gets in the way of everything. You're telling me that Cindy… " I could see her smiling face in the rear-view mirror.

"I'm the Engineer's Apprentice," she chirped. She turned to Tina. "I have a bunch of pictures on my laptop. You need to see 'em."

Dan asked, "You remember Bill Carmody, don't you?"

"Mechanical engineer. Managed the mechanical on that Arizona project? Good guy."

"He's the project manager on this one. Cindy's like his godchild. She out there almost every week. Sometimes twice."

I saw Tina in the mirror. "Baby, I wish I COULD go visit your job."

"Lemme try another angle on that, baby,' I said. I glanced at Dan. "How's all those visits work with her schoolwork?"

Dan looked awfully proud. Said so. "Uh, Alan, I'm awfully proud of my Cindy. She's sort of unique to be in the eighth grade."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Unique?" Tina questioned.

I glanced at Cindy. She had an enigmatic smile but said nothing.

"She's graduating from high school in May."

"Me too," Tina said. "But I'm a senior. How'd you do that, Cindy?"

She spoke, smiling. "Dan pushed me in school. I took some tests. Got interviewed. And…"

Dan interjected, "She's scary smart."

I spoke. "I got me one a'those. Tina's an honor student, even after dropping out of school for half of last year…"

Tina looked downward. "Long story, Mister Dan," she said softly.

Cindy sensed something and reached over to pat Tina's knee. "Dan an' I know all about long stories, Tina." She sighed. "I got my own…"

I looked at Dan, then back at the road. "Who starts first?"

"I think I'd rather let Cindy decide what she wants to tell," Dan said. "I just sort of showed up at the RV park…"

Cindy started her story. "Me an' Mom were livin' in a trailer in an RV park. It was a bad situation. My mom was…"

Tina's eyes told me that she sensed the connection. "Mine was horrible, Cindy. I lived with my grandma until she died, and then I had to move in with Mom."

"I lived with my mom in a thirty-foot travel trailer," Cindy said. "An' Mom worked in a bar…"

Cindy's voice had a bit of a quiver. Dan caught it. "Baby, you don't have to…"

"Hush, honey," Cindy said. "I want people to know how bad it was before you came along, love. Tina, my momma gave me up when I was fourteen to the nice lady who ran the RV park, just so she could go to Vegas with some dude she picked up at a bar…"

Tina said, "Alan found me about to get the crap slapped out of me by my mom's boyfriend. They were going to meet a guy to do a drug lab in Arkansas. Mom's in jail now. Alan offered me a place to stay until we got things sorted out. I did all kinds of sorting, and he kept showing up on the top of the stack." She smiled and reached her hand forward to caress my neck. "I love you, Alan. D'ya know that?"

"Yes I do, angel," I said.

Cindy continued, "Dan was somebody to talk with, then somebody to help me with schoolwork, then a friend, and then there is no reason it the world that I'd ever want NOT to be with him. I don't know how we lived without each other… He gives me the stars…" She reached up and gave him a loving pat.

"She's my star," Dan smiled. "You oughtta see her onstage."

Tina perked up. "Stage?"

I bumped our way into the restaurant parking lot.

"We can tell that story inside," Cindy said.

We strode into the place as two couples. I think Tina and I looked a little closer to conventional than did Dan and Cindy. She was obviously short and younger looking, but she acted like he belonged to her and he certainly seemed to be quite happy with that fact.

Tina and Cindy did well choosing the place. It wasn't upscale, rather a family atmosphere, perfectly suited to our jeans and sweatshirt ensembles. We got a table in a corner away from traffic, a pretty good find at the beginning of the Friday evening crowd.

"Don't forget us back here," I teased the waitress.

The girls picked a couple of appetizers and we ordered entrees and Tina prodded Cindy to finish her story. I watched her as she talked and easily understood how Dan could get taken by that little girl. I also noted that the vocabulary and mannerisms of her speech were not those of some daffy little airhead.

Cindy addressed me. "Did YOU know he played the guitar, Mister Alan?"

I grinned. "Please, Cindy, don't call me Mister. I'm your husband's buddy. I'm just plain ol' Alan. And no, the guitar thing was a secret he hid." I thought for a second. "Wait! There was that company party. We all had a few beers and ol' Dan took the bass from the guy in the band and played for a while." I grinned at Dan. "But who can tell if a bass player's screwin' up?"

Dan glared at me. "Oh, I can see you still have your impeccable tastes in music."

Tina defended me. "Uh, Dan, we're goin' to the same concert ya'll are goin' to."

Dan chuckled at Tina. "Uh-huh. That just means he married a girl with good taste in music."

Tina smiled. "He was sitting next to me the first time I heard a live performance in my life. It was a chamber orchestra." She paused. "First time in an airplane, too."

"And you got your private?" Dan asked.

"Two weeks before Christmas," Tina told him.

I watched Cindy's face. I knew that at fourteen she couldn't even get a student license, and I doubted that Dan could keep her from the controls. She didn't look like one sit back and let anyone do something for her.

"I'm jealous," Cindy said. She stuck her bottom lip out, exaggerating the feigned pout. "I have to wait until I'm seventeen. It'll be my birthday present."

Dan spoke. "Little cutie wrangled a couple of rides in an Extra. I thought I was gonna have to buy one."

Tina's eyes lit up. We'd done a bit of 'let's fly to THAT airport and see what's interesting' and one of the hangars had an Extra decked out in electric blue. "We saw one of those. You got to fly in one?"

"Hana let me fly it." Cindy smiled at the memory.

"Now I'm jealous," Tina said.

"Oh, I'm sure you guys have your own adventures," Cindy said.

"Yeah," Tina laughed. "Like fleeing Tennessee ahead of the hounds to keep Alan from being arrested for child molestation."

Dan looked at me. "Alan! You were MOLESTING this lovely child?"

Tina giggled. "Actually, \*\*I\*\* molested HIM first. But we thought the age of consent was sixteen or seventeen in Tennessee like it was in Louisiana. It's not. We found out when we signed the papers for the 182. And flew back to Louisiana…"

"I talked with the guy who helped us with Tina's guardianship," I said.

Tina patted my hand. "He was so completely honorable from Day One, guys. He did paperwork so he could be my guardian. And I decided I didn't need a guardian." She smiled.

"We know all about judges and paperwork,' Dan said.

Cindy giggled again. "Yeah. We know…"

The food came, slowing the conversation down a bit. Tina and I ordered different entrees and stole forkfuls off one another's plates. Cindy and Dan just ate halfway through theirs and swapped plates.

He saw me looking at this. "Oh, we don't do this at a 'white tablecloth' place, but in a family restaurant…"

Tina and I shared a dessert, as did Cindy and Dan. Afterward, we ordered coffees and the two ladies got up to make a trip to the ladies' room.

"Dan," I said, " Cindy's a cutie. But fourteen?"

"I know," he said. "A year ago I'd've threatened violence to somebody who's doing what I'm doing. But Alan, for real, she's NOT your standard fourteen year old. She's squared away. Serious. She's seen more than a lot of women twice her age, and she UNDERSTANDS more than women I dated that were three times her age. And what about YOU? And Tina?"

"Guilty," I said. "I thought I was lined up for foster dad or big brother or something. Put her in school, she went to ONE social event, came back early, and my dream came true."

"You rescued her? For real?"

I told him the story as he listened intently.

"No shit?!?!" he said.

"It's all a matter of public record. The deputy who worked the case is the guy who set us up with his uncle to do all our paperwork. And that's the judge who married us."

Dan's concentration was broken by the act of being kissed by a diminutive redhead.

"We're back," Tina announced. "So what'd you say about us."

"Oh," Dan laughed. The waitress was walking up with coffee. "We were talking about our waitress."

She heard the comment, just as Dan intended. "Hon," she said, "I hope it was about my tip."

We sat for another twenty minutes sipping coffee and talking before the argument between me and Dan over who paid the check. He got it only after swearing that I'd get the next one.

"That is, of course, if YOU TWO want to continue hanging out with me and my sweetie!"

Dan and Cindy answered together, "YES!"

The four of us drove back to the hotel, satisfied with our meal, a conversation in the back seat and all I could hear was whispers and giggles. Back at the hotel, we walked into the lobby. Nearing the elevator, Cindy announced, "Tina and I figured this out, guys! We all live in little trailers and tonight's long showers and big beds."

Tina finished, "So we do our own things until elevenish. And we'll get together for lunch." She turned and took my hand, smiling sweetly. "C'mon, THING!"

Cindy punched the button on the elevator. The door opened. She tugged at Dan. "Yeah, c'mon, THING!" and they giggled at their marvelous sense of humor.

We walked up the hall and into our room. By the time I got the door locked, Tina was already out of her shoes and peeling off her sweatshirt.

"Shower, guy," she said. "I LIVE for these showers. We need to get in before Cindy an' Dan use up all the hot water."

I was undressing. "You have a vivid imagination. They may be sitting in bed playing rummy."

"Nuh-uh," she giggled. "Cindy said rummy wasn't in the cards for tonight."

"That's a horrible pun," I said.

"ALL puns are horrible, babe," she smiled, now completely nude and as delicious a dish as my mind could ever imagine.

We showered for half an hour, got out, dried off made love, rested, made love again, were in each other's arms basking in the afterglow.

"She's not exploited, Alan. We talked. She's got her stuff together, and she and Dan, they're happy. Did he tell you that she's interviewed for TWO colleges already?"

"No," I said. "That never came up." I paused. "Are you exploited, little one?"

She kissed me on the nose. "Yep! You exploited me four times in the last hour."

"Serious," I said. "seventeen…"

"And if Cindy can figure it out at fourteen, I can figure it out at seventeen. D'ya think I needed to experience a little more crap in my life? Maybe make a mistake and marry the wrong guy an' end up with two kids and a GED an' a job at Mcdonalds? While he thinks the best thing in life is drinking' beer with his buds and maybe a little bit of tappin' the waitress on the side because I use big words and make him nervous?" she fixed me with a stern eye. "Or should I just fall flat dab silly in love with this guy who treats me like an actual person of worth and possibility and love him like the air that I breathe?"

"Are you gonna introduce me to that second guy?"

"Alan Dean Addison, you are an ass!"

"And I thought you loved me for my mind," I laughed. "Christina Johnson Addison, I love you deeply."

"You already did that," she smirked. She flattened me against the bed. "I love you, deep. Shallow. Whatever. But especially forever." Her eyes twinkled. I knew that meant trouble.

"I wonder if Cindy an' Dan are up to a late night snack?"

"Only one way to find out. If you're wrong…"

She grinned. "I'll just say, 'Ooopssss, sorry!" And she picked up the phone.

"Uh, hi Dan, this is Tina. Where's Cindy?" pause. "Oh, okay." Pause. "Yeah, have 'er call me." Tina got out of bed and went to the bathroom.

Naturally the phone rang. I answered.

"Hi, Alan," Cindy chirped. "What's up?"

"I dunno,' I said. "Here's Tina."

"Hi, Cindy," Tina said. "Wanna do a late snack?" pause. "Well ask 'im." Another pause. "Okay. See you in the lobby in what? Five minutes? Oh, ten? Okay."

Auburn head close to mine. "Get dressed. We'll go have a donut and coffee. Give you a chance to recuperate. Laugh. Talk. Then come back here and do something that makes us BOTH sleep so wonderfully good!"

"I gotta keep telling myself that I married you for your mind," I chuckled.

"Uh-huh. Me too. But the other parts are awfully fun, don'tcha think?"

We walked into the lobby several minutes later to see Dan and Cindy, and Cindy was glowing. Dan was obviously more relaxed too.

"Didn't we just SEE you two?" he quipped.

"My thoughts exactly," I said.

"We have an appetite," my Tina said, looking at Cindy. Cindy bobbed that red head.

"How about you, Dan," Cindy said.

Dan grinned. "Recharging."

"Come on, before we get in trouble," I said. And the happy four of us walked out the front door.

# Chapter 16

There was an IHOP just a bit up the road. I'd noted its location on the way to dinner. We loaded up in the car again, the girls in the back seat giggling in the delightful way that somehow disappears from females as age advances. Hearing it from the girl I loved and her friend was very pleasant.

I looked at Dan. "Didn't expect to be on the road at this hour."

"Me neither," Dan said. "But I learned a long time ago that hanging around with Cindy was gonna result in a few random situations. She's never done this late night snack thing, though."

Cindy made a cute remark, a little double entendre.

"Tina has been talking about Cindy most of the evening." I paused. Dan looked at me, knowingly. I continued, "well, you know…"

"Cindy's been the same way," he said. "She says it's like finding the big sister she never had."

I laughed. "You know, Bud, I never figured that you and I would be marrying sisters."

"Beginning to look that way," Dan said.

"Tina, there talking about us," Cindy giggled.

"That's because we're the most important thing in their lives," Tina replied.

"You got that right!" I said.

Cindy smiled. The kid had a sweet smile. "We'll try not to take advantage of you too badly," she said, giggling at her own joke.

I glanced at the pair in the rearview mirror. Yeah, it didn't take much of a stretch of the imagination to see them as sisters.

Dan was apparently been reading my mind. "They do look like sisters."

We pulled into the parking lot and walked into the little restaurant. We found a booth and I scooted in with Tina next to me. The waitress came up.

Dan said, "it's too late for coffee for me."

I noticed that Cindy nodded in agreement. They are hot chocolate, and a pastry, apiece. The waitress looked at me and Tina and I told her that we wanted the same thing.

Cindy and Tina started back up on the sisterhood thing. Tina looked at me. "Uh, Alan we're not gonna let this thing drop, are we?" She looked at Cindy. Cindy was smiling.

I said, "Yep, sometimes guys are like that. But if Dan had stayed my back pocket, we might've missed you two. It's almost like Dan and I were supposed to meet only job and then take off and separate directions, meet you too, and then run into each other. I mean, if I was sitting here at the table with all of us, I think this was some kind of fiction."

"I gotta agree with that," Dan said. "If we have been working the b, we've been doing just like last time, running the roads and stuff. I would've been hang around the swimming pool…"

Cindy giggled. "Yeah, hanging around the pool, scoping out babes."

Tina looked at me. I know she could tell that Cindy was joking but she feigned a slight outrage. "Uh, Dan! You were at the pool pick a fourteen year old girls?!?"

Dan took a swipe at that one. I think he handed out of the park. "Oh, no, Miss Tina, she was thirteen when I met her." Cindy punched me in the bicep, playfully.

"There you go, Dan, coming off like some kind of child molester."

Dan put his arm around her and squeezed her. "Truth is, we ran into each other at just the right point in time when we both needed someone. I didn't know I needed someone, but Cindy popped up. You know, sometimes you need stuff you don't even know about." Dan looked at Cindy with adoring eyes. "Even cute little redheads."

Cindy sort of filled in the story. "I was livin' in an RV Park. The only time I saw kids my own age that summer was on weekends. And then they only stay for couple of days. I needed a friend. I wasn't even sure what a real friend would look like. In school, it was hard to have friends. A lot of the kids knew about my momma. And even in Alabama, living in a travel trailer puts you at the bottom of the list.

Tina reached across the table and patted Cindy's hand. "You an' me both had mommy issues." She continued, "I had good as long as I stayed with grandma. But when grandma passed away, I had to start living with Mom. Yeah," she snorted. "Supermom. Didn't let teenaged daughter get in the way of her life! We moved ever couple of months, so I had to drop out of high school because I kept changing schools. And when we evacuated for the hurricane I didn't think I'd get back alive. Mom's boyfriend was crazy. I hate to use the term 'batshit' but if it was in the dictionary they've had his picture next to it. And what was worse, some of her of 'friends' were already making little comments about doing things with me."

"Yep," I said, "that's what I'm talking about. If me and Dan had been working on the same job, I would've been driving up the road bitching about the hurricane traffic and I would've stopped for breakfast. You don't know how aggravated I was, first the driving, stop and go for three solid hours, an' then I stopped for breakfast, and some asshole wanted to make a scene. Then I almost got arrested. I figured it was just what I needed to put the finishing touches on a perfect day." I saw Tina smiling. "And that's one of life's little twists, because what started out as a tragedy turned into a really good thing."

Cindy slid up closer to Dan and held his arm. She smiled and said, "you know, best possible outcomes. It's kinda like some weird fairytale where the little castle is thirtysomething feet long and has wheels."

Tina changed the subject. "Cindy, tell Alan about your college stuff."

"I'm afraid I sound like I'm bragging," she said demurely.

"It's not bragging, Cindy. It's really neat. He won't think you're bragging."

Cindy told us that she had to 'gifted' scholarships. "An' I've already interviewed with the deans of engineering schools in Alabama. It's hard decide which one to choose."

A part of a previous conversation came to mind. I smiled. "It's that 'Engineer's Apprentice' thing, ain't it?" I could see the pride in Dan's eyes.

Cindy continued, "Yes, it is," she said smiling. "The first time I saw him Dan in his element, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. An' every time I visit the site, it kinda reinforces that. One day I hope to be an engineer like Dan."

I laughed, "Baby doll, you need to set your sights higher than that."

Dan looked at me with a wry grin. "Jealousy is a terrible emotion," he said. "You know, that's not the worst of it. She got letters of interest from a lot of different schools. Even MIT and Stanford."

"But I want us to stay in Alabama," Cindy said, looking at Dan. "I think it would be easier for him to work down here." She smiled and gave Dan a playful bump. "I think either one of these two universities are just fine."

Tina looked at me then said, "See, that's another one of those coincidences! Me and Alan have been talking about my college. I gave up on college after grandma died. But now, with Alan, and being back in school, well, when he saw how I was doing in school, what we started talking about college. Before I met him, I had no clue about a major. Guess what?!?" She looked at me, grinning. "I got a clue now!"

"See, Dan," I laughed. "You ain't the only one that can delude a young lady!" I continued, "Tina's an honor student, too."

Dan looked at Tina. "Tina, how's your math?"

Tina smiled. "Straight A's. And I'm taking the advanced placement classes."

He smiled, saying "that's great! The math is the toughest part. If you're in AP math, then you're on your way."

Cindy is the one that tossed the challenge on the table. "I think you guys are moved to Alabama," she said. She had a big grin on her face. "If you do that, Tina an' I can go to school together. I think that would be the most amazing thing."

Dan looked at me, a little dazed. Then he looked at Cindy. "Sometimes you amaze me, little girl. No! Just about every day, you amaze me."

Taking that as encouragement she kept on. She looked at me and her husband and said, "Doesn't that make sense? You guys, maybe y'all can work something out, you know, where you worked in what you do." She continued, "Dan's kinda got a job lined up with a new powerhouse. So that's an option. He says it's enough money to keep him in the area, but you guys are good at what you do. Maybe there's a way that y'all can keep on doing what you're doing, you know, going where people need you to get them out of a bind." She paused. Addressing me and Tina, she said, "Dan was gonna do that so he could be around while I was in college. But with me and him and you guys, we'd have our own little community…"

"You know," I said, "she might be onto something."

A giggle came from Tina. "That's my little sister!" Big smirk.

Dan was just shaking his head. Cindy saw that in said, "We don't have to make a decision tonight." She giggled, "I was just thinking. I thought I'd just throw it out on the table."

"Cindy, that's an interesting idea, you know. Like you said, though, we'll have to rush into a decision. We can talk about it, and we can think about it, and we can talk some more. Me an' Dan know a bit about the business, so we can talk to see if we come up with a model that makes sense."

"There you go, talking like an MBA," Dan picked.

This was a hangover from our last job together. I think I'm a bit more organized and methodical, a little bit better administrator then Dan. "You know exactly what I mean," I laughed.

"Yeah," he said. "Let's think about it."

I saw Cindy and Tina exchanging looks. Something told me that a decision was being made right now.

The conversation changed to the upcoming concert, and some of the other concerts that we'd been to in the recent past. Tina was telling Cindy about the live bluegrass music that we'd heard. She smiled at Cindy. "I love the live music," she said, "but I guess that's not the same as being up on the stage." She elbowed me. "Don't you wish you played a musical instrument?"

Actually I did regret that, but I said, "I play several instruments."

Tina looked a little bit surprised. "What instruments, baby?"

"CDs, iPod, and a bunch of ancient instruments that Dan knows about. Things like cassette tapes and vinyl records."

That got Cindy to giggling, got me a day in the ribs, and Tina said, faking sadness, "I fear that I have married a smart-ass!"

Everyone had finished their chocolate and their pastry. It was time to go. Dan and I did our customary arguing over who got to pay the ticket. I won, this time. We were all in a good mood for the short ride back to the hotel. In the lobby, we agreed to meet for lunch the next day at about eleven, then we headed to our rooms.

Tina was ahead of me in the hall, key card in her hand. She opened the door, and I walked in. She closed the door and backed up against it. I don't know what she wanted but I knew what I wanted. I pressed her back against the door and kissed her. The way she put her arms around my neck and held me against her confirmed that she desired same thing.

I locked the chain lock and the deadbolt on the door. When I turned around, she was standing beside the bed stripping off her clothes.

"Baby, what'd you think of Cindy's suggestion?" she asked.

"It's actually very interesting," I said, "if Dan and I can figure out how to make a living, I think it's a great idea."

"I was just thinking," Tina said, "if we had our little community, like Cindy said, then if you are Dan had to go out of town to work for a few days or whatever, we'd have each other, me an' Cindy, to sort of back each other up. That way, maybe y'all wouldn't feel bad about abandoning us for a few days to go off on a project. What d'you think?"

"You know, little brown haired girl, that sort of makes sense. I can't see you and Cindy taken more than four years to get a BA in engineering."

"Got a question, Mister Engineer…"

"A question?"

"Yeah." Pause. "Why'd'you still have all your clothes on?" She was completely naked now. And she had a delightful grin and a twinkle in her eye.

It didn't take me long to match her nakedness. I laughed. "Well, there goes any chance of clear thought. Seeing you naked just wiped out half my blood supply to my brain."

She giggled, eyes twinkling. "You know, sweetie, when we're both naked we don't need to do a whole lot a deep thinking." She smiled. She put her hands on my waist and tugged me sideways, laying down on the bed facing me.

We wrapped up into a full body kiss. I let my hands explore her, my fingertips relishing every bit of her silky skin. If she purred under my touch, I shuddered under hers. She had her right arm under me pulling me against her while her left hand was down at my crotch, her fingers curled delightfully underneath my balls. I would've said 'expertly', but it wasn't a matter of expertise. No, it was a matter of her enjoying the sexual exploration and happily reading my reactions to it.

What her fingers wrapped around my shaft, I was hard as a rock. She pulled back from a kiss, her sweet face inches from mine. "You make me feel so good, Alan."

My answer wasn't a word, it was a shudder. She started sliding downward in the bed, while gently pushing me onto my back. When her cheek got down to my navel, she kissed, teased it with her tongue, then turned her eyes towards me.

"D'ya have any idea what I have in mind?" She said, flicking her tongue, knowing that she was driving me crazy.

"I don't know what you have in mind, but I have some ideas of my own."

Giggle. "What kind of ideas, sir?"

"That hot chocolate and that pastry was nice, but there's a taste I really crave. Sadly, there's only one place in the WHOLE universe that I can get it. It's totally controlled by this young lady."

She giggled, playing the game. "And if this young lady was, like, if she'll let you have that, is there, like, some kind of reward she can have in return?"

"I don't know," I said. "Just maybe, she can find something to entertain herself while he's tasting." I brushed her sleek auburn hair away from her face. What I saw was in my mind, perfection.

"I think the young lady is willing to accept your offer," she giggled. She slid further down the bed, tossing a leg over my face, presenting me with an engorged, juicy pussy. I was starting to move close enough to lick her when lightning shot through my body, caused by her mouth covering my dick. "The young lady says that compensation is adequate," she said with a giggle, her head bobbing downward to return to my dick.

After the initial surge of ecstasy, I had enough presence of thought to start enjoying the pussy there in front of my face. I knew she was enjoying herself because she pushed back against my face, wiggling her hips, urging my tongue to her favorite spot.

If it was just about her, I would've left my tongue right there. But, you know, sex is about both partners, and part of the pleasure I derived was from the sweet, musky taste of her juices, so in between little sessions of teasing her little pink pea-like clit with my tongue and lips, I moved a little further downward on her sweet, pink pussy and helped myself to the juices that I loved.

It didn't take much of this kind of attention for her to start losing control of her hips. I clasped the cheeks of her ass with my hands so I could continue my attentions. I knew she was getting close to the age when she pulled her mouth away from my dick and held it against her cheek as little mewing sounds came from her mouth.

Finally, she said, "oh God, Alan, I'm THERE! Nnnnnnggghhhhhh!" And she went over the edge, her body collapsing on me.

Knowing that I could bring my baby this pleasure was immensely satisfying to me. I gave her a few seconds to ride her orgasm down, then lightly started teasing her with my tongue again.

"Oh God, Alan! Another one!" she said, releasing a long hissing breath.

Again I let her ride her orgasm, lightly kissing the engorged, juicy lips of her pussy, savoring her juices.

Finally, my sweet Tina regained her senses. She rolled sideways off of me and looked at me. "You know, baby," she sighed, "I think I die a little bit when you do that."

"I know exactly how you feel, sweetness," I said.

She looked at me with an adorable grin on her face. "I don't know if you know exactly how I feel," she said with a lilt. "I think you need a reminder."

I smiled back. "Maybe I do, little one," I said. I watched her auburn hair swaying as her head bounced down, engulfing me. This was another thing that wasn't necessarily 'expert'. I preferred other words, words like delightful, ecstatic, enthusiastic, and words they haven't written in the dictionary yet. It wasn't long before her attentions had me feeling rising surges.

She recognized this by the taste of my pre-come as she sucked me, and then as I got closer, the hand that was working on my scrotum detected the tightening. This time, she didn't stop to tell me anything. She just moaned. I felt her "Mmmmmmm" resonate through my body. Lips, teeth, and tongue worked in concert with her happy fingers, drawing me ever closer to orgasm.

My baby knew that I lost control as I went over the edge, too. She kept her right hand encircling the shaft of my dick, making sure that in my ecstasy, I didn't lose control and thrust uncomfortably deep into her mouth.

As I lost control of the movement of my hips, a little giggle escaped from around my dick, and then she continued her efforts, little moans from her signaling that she was enjoying herself. I went over the edge. I could feel her tongue working as she swallowed the first of several spurts. My fingers lightly stroked that short auburn hair as orgasm coursed through my body. Her hands kneaded my balls and stroked my shaft, working in concert with her sucking mouth, relieving me of every bit of juice.

Every muscle in my body seemed to relax as I floated in the post-orgasmic bliss. Tina read this sign too, sliding up in the bed beside me. It took a huge effort on my part for me to roll over and scoop her into my arms. She brought her face close enough to mine so that a tiny effort let me kiss her on the tip of her nose.

"D'ya really think a kiss on the nose is gonna do it?" she purred.

"Who says I was gonna stop with a kiss on the nose?" I said. Her face turned up in our lips met, parted, in our tongues played together. Once again I let my fingers savor the feel of her soft, smooth skin, relishing her farm, not grotesquely muscled, but certainly edging towards the athletic.

We didn't stop with a kiss on the nose. However, I reached over, turned out the light, and then the two of us wiggled together finding a mutually comfortable position, and from there we went to sleep.

Neither Tina nor I were particularly late sleepers. I was drifting blissfully along in the morning and that pleasant zone halfway between sleep and wake when I felt Tina stirred next to me. She rolled onto her back and as is customary for her, to stretch. People who are stretching are not asleep.

I rolled towards her and as I started moving, she perceived the motion and rolled towards me. We had a happy meeting in the middle of the bed. After a few good morning kisses she backed away and said, "why don't we go up the road to that place and get some breakfast?"

"Sounds like a good idea, little one," I said.

We got a couple more kisses before we rolled out on opposite sides of the bed, taking turns in the bathroom. I came out with my face washed and my teeth brushed. And a few minutes later, Tina was out, her hair shining beautifully. We got dressed. Five minutes later we were out the door and in the car.

We retraced last night's path to the pancake house and had breakfast. Our next move was to get back in the car and go back to the hotel. No, we didn't go inside. Tina giggled at my plan. I had her enter the address for the concert venue. Then we timed our trip from the hotel to the destination.

"Baby," she said, "we won't be leaving from the hotel. We're gonna go out to eat and then we're gonna go to the concert hall."

"Yeah, you're right," I said. "But we'll get some idea of the time, and we'll get a lay in the streets, and while we're there, we can look at parking."

"Okay," she said. "I'll buy that. And while we're out, we can kinda look around for a while. We did that, but around 10 o'clock, we pulled into the hotel parking lot and went inside. We knew that we would be going to lunch at around 11 so we took advantage of the hour of free time to work each other up into a state of excitement.

As expected, just before 11 o'clock, Tina's cell phone rang. She looked at the display, then looked at me giggling. "That's my little sister!" She flipped the phone open. "Hi, sis!" Pause. "We're in the room." Pause. "Tee-hee! Noooooo! Not right now!" Pause. "Okay! We'll see you in the lobby in just a bit!"

Tina turned to me. "Put your clothes one, baby. My sister's waitin' on us!"

As I was getting dressed, I asked, "You sure you're not carryin' that 'sister' thing too far?"

I got the 'you know I'm right' stare in reply. "Alan Dean Addison! I'm surprised. The GUY was your friend. He has a unique wife and we hit it off. I feel a connection. Don't you?"

"I didn't want to push something on you, baby. I didn't expect THIS to happen."

The expression hadn't changed. "Okay, baby doll," she said, "exactly WHAT part of our WHOLE relationship did you EXPECT to happen?" Her face broke into a smile and she stuck her tongue at me.

"You have a point there, little one," I admitted.

Bigger smile. "Two of 'em, actually." She was bra-less. "And if I remember from ten minutes ago, YOU seem to like 'em…"

"Oh, sure, use sex to control the old guy…" I quipped.

That statement got me two arms filled with a delightful seventeen-year-old. I could've put lunch off for an hour, but people were waiting on us.

We got dressed and walked out to the lobby just in time to catch a guy questioning Cindy about her red University of Alabama sweatshirt.

She and Dan saw us walk up. I said, "What's wrong, Cindy? Get caught wearing the enemy colors?"

She smiled at the guy, then me. "I forget that people get SERIOUS about this stuff."

"Yeah," I said. "During football season, you can get the crap beat out of you for wearin' the wrong shirt."

Dan said, "Nah! They exempt cute redheads."

Tina asked Cindy, "Ya'll think of something light for lunch?"

Cindy answered, "You bet! I think we can get serious for dinner, before the concert. And after the concert, we can do like last night."

Tina looked at me. "See, babe?!?!? Like sisters!" Cindy crossed the short distance separating them and stood beside Tina.

Yeah, I admitted to myself, they could pass for sisters. "We need to get a camera and take some pictures of this group. Nobody'll EVER believe it!" I said.

Dan said, "yeah, remember how ol' Bill Carmody used to accuse us of collusion? When he sees OUR wives together, he's gonna figure he was absolutely right!"

"Yeah, he will," I said. "How'd he take finding out about you and Cindy getting married? They already knew her out there, didn't they?

Dan's face darkened a little bit. "Yeah," he said. "We'd been out there a couple times. I wasn't the one that named her 'Engineer's Apprentice', that was somebody else. Bill and a couple of the other engineers gave her the name. I mean, she'd been out there couple of times by herself. Well, you know, I brought her out there. And one time she came out with a whole science class. But when we got married, I lost sleep because I thought of might've ruined the relationship I had on the job, but even worse, I was afraid what they would think of Cindy."

Cindy said, "Yep, Mister Bill treated me like his granddaughter and the rest of the guys treated me like a little sister or something like that."

Dan continued, "I mean, they were used to see us together. They see us having breakfast together several times a week. But after we got married, I walked into the Monday morning staff meeting wearing a wedding band. I wasn't gonna say anything until somebody asked, but you know how things go somebody asked. I came right out and told 'em. I halfway expected to get run off the job right then, but ol' Bill just look I was surprised. He said, 'well stranger things have happened. Cindy's bright and smart, and you an' me been working together long time. I know you'll take good care of her, as if you don't, I'm gonna save five bucks on the concrete and the foundation somewhere where they stash your body.' And then he kinda laughed. After that, it was hard for the rest of the crew to say anything"

Cindy said, "The one that had the most problem acceptin' it was my guidance counselor. That's Mister Jim. That's the people we do music with. And before we got married, me and Dan ate at their house. But Mister Jim saw my ring at school an' it shook 'im up, I think."

Dan continued, "When he called me he sounded stressed. I told him that I wanted to keep him as a friend and that I understood how me and Cindy getting married would look. You know, his wife, she's a music teacher at the same school. She said Cindy was married and WASN'T pregnant and they both knew several pregnant middle-schoolers and he oughtta be grateful that Cindy wasn't one of them."

Cindy giggled. "Mizz an asked Mister Jim when he'd ever seen Dan without me right there with 'im. She told 'im we make a cute couple."

Dan finished, "Jim Hardesty's my good friend. He's gone the extra mile taking care of Cindy, testing her, working with the school board so she can rise to her potential. I would've hated losing his friendship."

"So he's over it?" Tina asked.

"Talk about!" Cindy said. "We flew with 'em to Atlanta in Sissy."

"Sissy?" I asked.

"Our Cessna, 'Sissy'," Cindy said. "Just us two COUPLES. We left their kids with their aunt and uncle. Had a great weekend."

I told them about some of the questions and the looks at Tina's open house at school.

Cindy smirked. "We had an open house. Dan got nailed by the librarian. Let him tell you about that."

I listened to Dan's story. "SO that helped?"

"Yeah," Cindy said. "Before that, I was a cross between the devil's spawn an' a poor little troubled child. Now she treats me normal."

I said, "Look, we can continue this conversation in the car, can't we?" and I herded us out the door.

Nearing the car, Tina said "Applebee's? We can do 'light' there."

"My first time at Applebee's," Cindy said. That started a whole new conversation about who did what for food, and our wives mutually recognized that Dan and I had a bit of adventurous taste in cuisine.

"Alan's adventurous," Tina announced.

"Ain't nothing adventurous about an Applebee's, I said. The place wasn't TOO crowded. We got seated immediately, in a booth, Tina and me one one side, Dan and Cindy on the other. We ordered drinks and entrees.

Dan said, "Alan, I'm not being nosey, but how's this work with your daughter?"

"I was worried," I said.

"I wasn't," Tina said. "She and I talked on the phone quite a bit. I was a little nervous, but it was actually FUN! Like (she looked at Cindy) ANOTHER little sister. She's smart, an' she's a cutie, too. I guess a lot of those movies about evil stepmoms and horrible stepkids are wrong. Every time she pushed the rules, though, I pushed back, and we got along fine."

I filled in a bit. "Tina made it a good situation. I mean, I can't think like a little girl. Last year, I took vacation and just did everything she could think of. This year, her and Tina did things together and then we ALL did things together. I think she was happier seein' Tina than me." I explained a few other thoughts.

"How's the relationship with the ex?" Dan asked.

"Bitch be crazy," I blurted.

"Alan! That's coarse!" Tina chided. Then, "But I concur with your evaluation!"

Cindy giggled. Dan said, "It's that whole 'blended family' thing. I hope it works out for Terri."

I looked at Tina. She had a far-away look. "I wish there was a way…"

I sighed. "Her mom'd have to agree to it."

Tina said, "That goes back to your previous statement, baby."

We talked about my family and Dan's family and how they received our non-standard brides.

Tina talked about her life with her grandmother and how she fell in with my family. Cindy was even more enthusiastic. Tina said, "looks like we both ended up with new families."

"Uh-huh," Cindy chirped. "An' THIS weekend, I met my SISTER."

Tina's face glowed at that statement.

I looked at Dan. "IF they're sisters, that makes you an' me brothers-in-law, doesn't it?"

Dan laughed. "Yeah, now I can borrow your tools…"

# Chapter 17

We were scheduled to meet again for dinner before the concert. Tina had her blue dress. Navy blue. Her hair fairly glowed with that color. Makeup? A touch of perfume. This was a healthy young girl. I guess some misguided 'consultant' might've wanted to tone down her freckles and highlight something or emphasize something else, but what I saw standing before me when it was time to leave the room, that was perfection.

Me? A guy in a suit.

We met Cindy and Dan in the lobby. Cindy was wearing some sort of forest green dress that did for her hair what navy blue did for my Tina. She was a stunning little thing. Tina pulled her camera out of her purse.

"Pictures," she said. "Take pictures of me and Cindy!"

I did. And then we roped the desk clerk into taking pictures of the four of us.

Reservations got us into the restaurant without a hitch, and we ate a pleasant meal, not too filling. We enjoyed our conversation, with an eye on the clock.

We arrived at the auditorium and as I'd scouted out before, a decent parking spot. I think Dan and I looked acceptable. I mean, nobody pointed and giggled. Actually, I did 'respectable engineer in a social venue' pretty well, part of the politics of the jobs I'd been on. But that was just us guys.

We walked in with Tina and Cindy. And heads actually turned. It didn't take hours of primping and thousand-dollar dresses and three-hundred dollar coiffures. It took two young girls of natural beauty, dressed tastefully, carrying themselves with poise and grace. Even though Dan's little darling looked like she was on the verge of skipping.

We escorted our wives to prime seats, twelve rows back from center stage. Tina looked at me when we sat down, then at Cindy seated on the other side of her. "This is more than I ever expected in life."

Cindy tittered softly, answering, "Me, too, Tina."

We talked softly among ourselves until the curtain rose on the orchestra. I held my breath as the conductor raised his baton, only exhaling when the first notes sounded. I actually shook with the emotion of the music.

In the midst of the performance, I looked over at Tina. She was smiling, her eyes closed. Her hand reached for mine and I closed it in my own. She gave me a little shake. I looked at her again, this time meeting her eyes, knowing that she was not feigning an interest. Not one bit. I glanced past Tina to Cindy's face. Dan's little darling had a tear sliding down her cheek.

The concert ended to roaring applause and we made our way out of the building with the crowd. I could feel the dampness on the breeze, now coming from the south, presaging the coming front.

Dan was walking hand in hand with Cindy, and I had Tina's arm in mine. "Rain. Tomorrow. We won't be flying," he said.

We loaded into the car, the girls chattering excitedly about the concert.

"I cried. I ACTUALLY cried," Cindy said. "It MOVES me…"

Tina retorted, "It's gonna be hard going back to hearing it off the iPod now." She playfully punched my shoulder. "You just ruint ANOTHER thing for me, Alan!"

"Sorry," I said. "I feel that way, too. Y'know what it means to bring YOU to a concert and see YOU enjoy it, for real, not just putting up with my weird tastes?"

Tina giggled. "I'm PART of your weird tastes, baby doll!"

Dan was laughing with Cindy. "Just like US," Cindy said.

We pulled into the pancake joint a bit after ten and walked in. Late nights in places like this don't usually see the likes of people dressed like our two girls. We were seated in a booth. The waitress passed her eye on our group and said, "Lawd, don't you look GRAND!"

The girls happily replied "Thank you!" at the same time, then giggled at each other.

Dan said, "She could've been talkin' about me an Alan."

The waitress laughed. "Wasn't though." She smiled broadly. "Might've just blown my tip, though."

Cindy said, "We'll make sure you're covered."

Tina was bobbing her head in agreement.

The girls chatted happily about the concert. Dan and I talked about work. I knew Dan, and I knew that look. One part of his mind was on the conversation and the other part was running down lists of possibilities opened up by the idea that our WIVES had apparently connected in a special way.

As a matter of fact, Cindy kept using the word 'sisters'.

Tina said, "We're not letting this thing drop, are we, babe?" she asked, fixing me in the gaze of those blue eyes.

Cindy backed her up. "Yeah, you two didn't too a good job, last time."

"I know," I admitted. "We sort of let things slide." I looked at Tina. "You're a civilizing influence. We'll keep track."

Following our late evening snack, we returned to the hotel. Drips and drizzles of rain speckled the windshield. Flying out on Sunday was getting pretty unlikely. In the lobby, the girls agreed to breakfast together and then some sort of touristy museum day.

Tina and I walked into our room.

"So, baby, what do you think NOW?" she asked, a little smile on her lips.

"What do \*\*I\*\* think?" I asked. "I think you and Cindy are sisters. Apparently Dan and I broke into some parallel universe to get to you."

Giggle. She was reaching to undress.

"No. I get to do that. You look so beautiful. I saw heads turn everywhere we walked, baby."

She came to my waiting arms. "Thank you, Alan. Doesn't matter what anybody else thinks. If YOU think I'm beautiful, if YOU love me, I have what I need."

"Still, little one," I countered, "You're pretty. You were stunning to other people."

She wrapped her arms around my neck and we kissed. Her lips next to my ear whispered, "Undress me."

As beautiful as she was in her dark blue dress, she became MORE beautiful as her clothes were removed. "The music was beautiful, sweet one," I said. "But you exceed that."

She smiled. "Sweet words, sir, will get you… ME!" Grinning, she tugged at my trousers.

Another session of epic joy that was our love-making, then a quiet few moments resting each other's arms. Finally, we got out of bed, showered, and ended up in bed again, this time the session more relaxed, my lover more giggly and less urgent, and sleep overcame us as we were in sexual exhaustion.

Yes, there was a wet spot.

We got up at eight and showered together, teasing, laughing, and at five minute to nine the phone rang. Tina answered it. "Hi, Sis!" Pause. "No, not this morning! You?" Giggle. "Okay! We'll see you in the lobby!" Tina turned to me, smiling. "My sister! And her husband!"

We met our friends in the lobby for a run to breakfast. We were loading up into the car to go and Dan looked at me and said, "Us sad puppy dogs have to stick together." I had no earthly idea as to the meaning of that comment, but it caused two young girls to laugh.

We sat down for breakfast. I looked out the window at the low clouds. Wasn't a day to fly, not with a range of mountains between us and the destination. After breakfast we returned to the hotel. Dan and I stayed in the lobby watching the news while the girls went to our room to put together an itinerary.

They had it planned out. A museum. A German restaurant, per Cindy, because "Dan was in Germany. Said he liked the food." A movie. Dinner.

At the end of the day we simply went back to our respective rooms and enjoyed the full-sized surroundings, knowing that tomorrow would have us back into eight feet wide and thirty-something feet long and a shower for one.

We were up and checked out before heading to breakfast together, this time in two separate cars. After breakfast, our two-car convoy headed to the airport as the cloud cover broke and slid off to the east.

We turned in our rental cars and did a little turn at looking at each other's airplanes, and then we loaded up.

I saw Cindy doing her pre-flight under Dan's eye, and as soon as she finished checking fuel levels, Dan brought me the ladder so Tina could finish our own checks.

"Who's flying home?" Dan asked.

"Me!" Tina chirped. "Alan flew us here!"

Cindy giggled. "I'm flyin' us, too!"

Our wheels rolled before Dan and Cindy's. They trailed us by a safe distance to the run-up ramp. As Tina taxied onto the runway and lined up, she turned to see Cindy's head barely above the instrument panel of her plane. Tina waved, mouthing, "Bye, Sis!" and then pushed the throttle forward. We lifted off and departed, turning to the northwest and home.

After a leisurely climb to altitude, we set up for cruise. "Right into the wind," Tina said. "Gonna add an hour to the trip."

"We have plenty of time, baby," I said.

"Uh-huh. So what do you think about my new little sister?"

"Second-biggest surprise I've had in the last year," I answered.

"Second?" she questioned.

"You are the first," I countered. "Dan, him I figured I'd run into sooner or later, somewhere. Guy's good. And he does these things like I do. But Cindy caught me by surprise."

"She's young, huh?" Tina said, glancing at me for my reaction.

"We talked about that already," I said. "He could've been in jail over her."

"Like a certain husband of mine who was consorting with an under-age girl, huh…"

"Yeah, but that was just in the state we were living. Fourteen is illegal everywhere."

Tina smiled. "They love each other, Alan. You didn't catch the way she looked at him? And he obviously adores her."

"Like I adore you," I said.

"Yeah, like that," she said, doing 'smug' with a smile. "D'ya think me an' her could go to the same college? I think that'd be neat."

"I can see where it would be, baby doll,' I said. "But the 'work' angle. That's gonna take some thought."

"Baby," she said, "Cindy said a community, you know, me an' you an' her an' Dan. I can imagine Dan didn't want to travel if it meant pulling Cindy out of school, and didn't want to leave her alone, and I know you'd be the same way about me. But if we were all together, then if you an' him were out of town for a bit, working, then me an' Cindy would have each other to lean on."

"That's a good point, Tina."

"And the whole idea of the TWO of us both studying the same courses…"

"You start out with your own study group."

"And a couple of interested males who've already done it." She reached over and touched my sleeve. "You ARE giving it serious thought, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am, sugar. I have some ideas."

"Good! You know your business. I think Dan does, too. You two should be compatible. I mean, look at your choice in wives…" another sassy smirk.

For the remainder of the flight we talked about a wide range of subjects, as was normally the case.

Snow. Little girls from south Louisiana don't know about snow. We flew over miles of it, result of the cold front that provided us with the clear skies – good, and the headwind – not so good. The bare trees of winter stood in stark contrast to the white blanket on the ground. The winter up to this point had been revelation to her.

We landed in early afternoon, topped off the fuel tanks and put the plane away. She had the car idling idling, warming up as we closed the hangar up.

When I got in, she flipped open her cellphone. "Callin' my sister to tell her we made it home okay." She held it to her ear. "Hi, Sis! We're home, too." Pause. "Yeah, it was a good flight." Pause. "Okay! Email. Phone. Keep in touch, 'kay?" Pause. "Yeah, Love ya, sis! Bye!"

Leaving me to parse the 'Love ya, Sis' comment. The girls just MIGHT be serious.

Her car. She drove us home. Mizz Lillian was at the office. We stopped in.

She smiled when she saw us. "You got stuck from the weather, I guess," she said.

"Couldn't fly home yesterday. Little plane doesn't do rain an' ice." Tina smiled. "You gotta know it killed us to stay an extra night." She gave Lillian the short version of the story of our unexpected meeting.

"That's really somethin'," Lillian said.

We retired to our little trailer and unloaded our bags., making the needed effort to put things away in their proper place. Her dress and my suit, those went into the hanging closet with the promise of hauling them off to the dry cleaner's early in the week. The heater finally brought our little trailer up to living temperature and we sat on the sofa.

"How about some coffee?" she asked.

"Wonderful. Then we can decide about dinner?"

She was puttering around, making kitchen noises, making coffee. "Do you mind if we do dinner at that catfish place tonight? I don't feel like cooking…"

"Neither do I," I said. "that sounds like a good idea."

"We can go back to bein' all frugal tomorrow," she said. "I can put some beans on to soak tonight, and put 'em in the slow cooker tomorrow before I leave for school."

"That'll work," I said. "How're we sitting on that good sausage we brought back with us?"

"I think we have a couple of links left. We may have to fly back and import some more."

"Two hundred dollars' worth of gas for ten pounds of sausage." I laughed at the thought.

"My guy deserves his luxuries."

"You are my luxury, little one," I laughed.

To kill the hour or so before we could go to dinner, we dressed up for the twenty-degree air and the wind chill and made a couple of laps, walking around the park. This time there were no denizens outside to greet us.

"We need to do a couple of nights at the gym, sweetie," she said. "We sort of indulged this weekend. You don't want a fat little wife."

"I could stand a fat little wife a lot better'n you could stand a middle-aged engineer with a heart attack," I said. "Yeah, let's plan on that tomorrow, before dinner. An hour, then come back home and eat beans and rice."

"Exercise kills my appetite," she said.

"Just for food, I hope," I said, exaggerating a leer.

"Just for food. That other THING…" she giggled, "I NEVER stop wanting YOU."

Finishing two laps, we went into the trailer, warmed back up, stretched out on the sofa together for a while, then it was time to hit the road for dinner.

"Let's take the truck," I said. "I need to drive it."

"'Kay, baby doll," she said.

"Okay," I said. "Lemme go get it warming up." I ducked outside, started the truck up, then came back in. we sat for a few more minutes, talking, then got in the truck for the drive to the restaurant.

Tuesday evening wasn't a big crowd night. Half the dining area was empty, the staff trying to concentrate their attentions on the few tables in the other half. We were frequent clients and ordered quickly, then conversed with the half-busy waitress during the course of our meal.

I kept turning my attention to the noise coming from another table. The occupants were three males, the oldest maybe early twenties, a big guy, the next one younger, obviously a relative, judging from the hair and face, probably a brother, and the third was about the same age as the second, slighter build. And they were loud.

I could see a pretty good reason for them getting loud. The oldest one kept producing a pint bottle of clear liquid, dumping it liberally into their glasses. And they kept getting louder and rowdier and the language became a little bit too coarse for a family restaurant.

"That loud one's in school with me," Tina said. "Real trash. Always in trouble."

That was the middle . He turned to our waitress. "Where's our gahdamned food?" He looked at his partners and added, only slightly lower, "bitch!"

That was all it took. The manager came out. "You boys need to leave. You disturbin' my other customers actin' all loud like that!"

"Ain't got our GAHDAMNED FOOD!" the middle one said, obviously the most inebriated of the trio.

The manager stood his ground, though. "You boys need to leave. Just go. Don't make me have to call the law!" Behind his back he wiggled a finger. The waitress caught the signal and stepped behind the partition and picked up the phone.

I passed my hand around my waistband under my jacket and felt the grip of my little carry pistol. If…

The older of the three looked at the manager and saw enough resolve to make a decision. "Len," he said, "Let's just git outta dis chickenshit place." He stood. The third guy got up, then finally, the middle one.

I was tensed. Tina saw it. Her hand touched my arm, her eyes watching mine. I shook my head imperceptibly. She caught the tiny movement.

The loud guy stood up and jerked the tablecloth off the table, bringing the settings to a crash on the floor. "Assholes!" he spat. "Le's git outta here!" His walk out the door was erratic.

We gave them a few minutes, then paid our own check and got up to leave. I should've waited longer.

When we walked out into the parking lot, the trio were standing by a jacked up pickup truck, passing the glass bottle around. My truck was on the opposite side of the lane through the parking lot. I thought that we were safe, but I still motioned Tina to walk on my left, putting me between her and them.

They saw us. The mouthy one waved and elbowed the big guy. "See thet?!?!? Thet's thet Loosey-anna gal! She's too damn' good to talk to me at school." He started walking in our direction. I turned to face him.

"Friend," I said, "Why don't you go back over with your buddies."

"Naw, mannnn," he said, slurring his speech. "I wanna just talk wit' dat Loosey-anna gal!"

"She's with me, and she doesn't want to talk," I said, trying to defuse the situation. I let him get too close.

He reached out, grabbing the front of my jacket. He was my height, my weight. Younger. And pretty darned drunk. When he reached, he spread his legs for a bit of stability. He had his right hand on my jacket. And his legs were spread. I stepped back, slapping his arm away and picking up my right leg vigorously. The toe of my boot connected with his crotch.

The sneer on his face disappeared as he folded double. I did a second kick, connecting with the side of his head, laying him out on the pavement.

His big (same height, carrying another thirty pounds of flab) buddy came my way, fast. I could imagine that these two never had much resistance from their bullying, because he came at my with his arms spread, intent on some sort of wrestling, bear hug, sort of move. Arms spread. My right arm extended, the knuckles of my hand fitting neatly beneath his chin, striking solidly on his larynx. His shout of "Motherfu…" dissolved into strangled gurgling noises and he was down.

The third guy was standing with his back against their pickup, his hands raised. "Ain't done NOTHIN', mister!"

And the blue flashing lights entered the parking lot.

"Back away from me, baby," I hissed at Tina.

As the second police car pulled into the lot, I stood VERY still, my own hands up.

The officer in the first car was out, his pistol drawn. "What's going on here?" he yelled.

Tina took that one. "These three guys attacked us in the parking lot!"

The second officer was out now. Doofus number one was still writhing on the ground, holding his groin, groaning. Doofus number two was another story. He was gasping, his hands scrabbling at his throat.

"Better get him an ambulance," I said. "He got punched in the throat."

"Brad, cover those guys." The first officer spoke into his radio mike, calling for an ambulance and emergency services.

Brad stayed vigilant at a distance.

The officer approached me, gun still drawn, a fact that made me VERY nervous. "Who're YOU?"

"Alan Dean Addison. And I'm carrying. It's in my waistband on my left side."

The officer's eyes got wide. "Brad, cover this guy. He's packin'." He approached me very cautiously. "Hands behind your back, sir." As he worked around behind me.

I complied. Felt the cold steel as he cuffed me. Then he reached under my jacket and pulled my pistol.

"Round in the chamber. Safety's on," I said.

He dropped the magazine and ejected the chambered round, picking it up off the pavement. He looked at me. "ID?"

"In my wallet. Right back pocket. Louisiana driver's license and concealed carry permit."

"Ma'am," he said to Tina, "You with this guy?"

"Yessir," Tina said. She was standing there, shaking, her arms wrapped around herself. The crowd was filling the parking lot. Alan and Tina had emptied another restaurant.

Emergency services arrived, two guys in turnout gear piling out of a rescue truck. "Big guy got punched in the throat. He's gonna need help quick," I said.

"Mister, you should've let 'im strangle. That's Quincy Hossle. An' his brother, Len."

"So these two…"

He looked at the blonde guy by the truck. "Don't go away, Sammy. You gonna get some a'this, too, yaknow…"

Sammy looked sad.

By this time, the ambulance had arrived, too. Now there was a crew working on ol' Quincy. I always wondered how pleasant it was to get one of those airways inserted while you were conscious. I guess I could ask ol' Quincy. He had one.

Len was cuffed, sitting on the pavement in a puddle of his own aromatic puke. I didn't know how much of that was from too much to drink, and how much was from a vigorous tap in the cods. I hoped it was more of the latter.

Sammy got a pair of plastic tie cuffs for his trouble. He was sitting in the back of one of the patrol units.

Brad walked up to my officer. "Willie," he said, "We need to call somebody to go to the hospital with Quincy. They think he may be there for a while."

They were loading Quincy into the back of the ambulance.

Uh, Willie, is it?" I asked. "D'ya think you could get me out of these things?" I turned my back toward him.

"Oh, yeah, sorry!" he said.

A few seconds later I was massaging my wrists. Tina pushed up next to me.

"So what's the story?" Willie asked.

I explained. Tina added her version. The restaurant manager was there too, and he knew all the parties involved.

"We were on our way," Willie said. "If we'd've got here a little faster…"

"I'm just happy they didn't start more crap in my restaurant," the manager said. "Mister Alan might've done us a favor, though…"

"Mister Alan," Willie said, "can you come down to the station and give us a statement? And you too, Miss, uh…" Willie looked at Tina.

"Tina Addison. Alan's wife." She said. Her arms were wrapped around my left arm. "We'll be there. Follow you?"

"Yes, ma'am, that'll do. Ya'll excuse me while I get this stinky bastard in my car. Gonna have to get a trustee to hose the damn thing out, now. I hate the smell of puke."

I watched Willie 'encourage' Len into the back seat of his patrol car. Len seemed to have a bit of trouble walking.

When Willie got into his car and killed the flashers, Tina and I turned to get into our truck. I had to shake hands with the manager and the waitress. Tina got a hug from the waitress. I got a smile.

We followed the patrol car to the police station. Inside, I collected the forms to fill out for statements, and happily retrieved my pistol from Willie. He looked at me as he handed me the magazine and the single cartridge.

"Wouldn't've hurt my feelings too bad if you'd'a shot 'im," he said.

"Oh, yeah?" I asked.

"Yeah. Bully. Troublemaker. His brother…"

"I know 'im from high school," Tina interjected.

"No, not any more," Willie said. "Got expelled last week. I don't think he's goin' back. Two years in the tenth grade, an' that makes 'im the scholar of 'is family."

"What about that third guy?" I asked.

"Sammy?" Willie said? "You watch those nature shows? What's that little fish that hangs around sharks? Got a suction cup on 'is head?"

"Remora?" Tina said.

"Yeah, that's it. Remora. Hangs around for the scraps from the big fish. Loser. He'll be out in the morning. Misdemeanor public intoxication."

"The Hossle brothers?" I asked.

"Your statement. Miss Tina's statement. Folks in the restaurant. Public intoxication. Aggravated assault. An' I'm sure that when we get their truck over here in the lot, we'll find us a little weed, maybe some meth, that kinda thing. Keep 'em off the street for a couple years, at least."

"I'm relieved," I said. "Bozos like that sometimes decide to get even…"

"Know whatcha mean," Willie said. "You know how to use that gun?"

"Yessir," I said. "And others."

"What about you, Miss Tina?"

Tina looked at me. "No. Alan's been meanin' to teach me."

"Teach 'er, Alan. Lemme tell you where our range is at." Willie sketched me a map. "Not that she's gotta worry about the Hossles. But you never know."

"I'll do that," I said. "Hey, thanks! For everything!" I shook his hand and we left.

We got in the truck. The adrenaline rush was over and I was shaking a little. Tina punched me in the arm.

"Alan! What IS it with you and restaurants?"

"I dunno," I said. "Maybe I should stop meeting you at 'em!"

She flopped back against the seat of the truck. "You did that with your hands…"

"And my feet," I said. "Don't forget my feet."

"I didn't know… I mean, you don't, like, take classes…" she said.

"Used to. Army days. Kept it up for a long time. Decided there were other things to do with my time."

"Baby, that's the second time you've saved me."

"You saved me right back, Tina."

"Not the same thing, baby. And as far as THAT, we saved each other. Wait'll I tell my SISTER!"

# Chapter 18

It was the next day, the next evening before Tina and Cindy were on the phone together again. Tina excitedly related the experience to her friend. It wasn't until later that evening that Dan and I talked about the incident.

It was a standard week, at least as far as work. Things were rolling along pretty much as planned. Tina's reports from school were happy ones. I was glad. I reflected back to the time when we first met, and I was wondering what I was gonna do with a high school dropout. Now, was wondering what I was gonna do with an honor graduate who wanted to go to engineering school. And not only that, she and her newfound 'sister' wanted to go to the same school. The whole situation was amusing, if a little bit unsettling at the same time.

This far into the game, though, I couldn't imagine being happier with my little auburn haired partner. We'd been together for six months now. At this stage of the game, the worst argument we've had to date was over where to eat for supper. And it wasn't because she just automatically gave in to my demands. It seemed that as many times as I was the one that suggested something, there were equally as many times when she took the lead. That was with everything. Where we ate. What the evening's entertainment was. What we had planned for the weekend. Truth was, Tina was just easy to get along with.

Middle of the week. We got home. That is, I got home. She'd been home an hour before me, I walked in and smelled something cooking on the stove.

"How 'bout this," I laughed, "I'm the guy that married Susie Homemaker." Note to self: stay out a range of the big spoon.

"Just someone Grandma's dump soup." She smiled. "It's a 'soup' kind of day, ain't it?" She gave the pot a stir and put the lid on. "Let's give it half an hour. Gives all the flavors time to mix."

We went and sat on the sofa. She picked up her laptop and opened the screen, looking at me. "I'm looking at the weather," she said. "The way it looks, we might be able to make a run down to your home this weekend." Giggle. "We need to stock up on sausage anyway."

"You sure you're up to it?" I asked.

"Not like we're gonna walk there," she smiled. "600 miles. That's a nice flight. And if you're really nice to me, I might let you fly some of it."

I stuck my tongue out at her. "Dan was right! We created monsters. What happened to barefoot and pregnant?"

It was her time to stick out her tongue. "I don't do 'barefoot' until after Easter in Louisiana. And as far as that 'pregnant' thing, we have to get you replumbed. But if that's what you want to do…" She had an enigmatic smile.

I was tempted to let that comment slide, the 're-plumbing' thing. But I didn't. "Have you been thinking about that?" I asked.

Those clear blue eyes gazed into mine. "Yeah, I guess every girl thinks about it. Some. But I really don't know. I mean, after seeing my mom in action, the idea of parenthood…" She sighed.

"You are NOT your mom!" I declared. "I don't PRETEND to know what might've motivated HER, but I see you as a wholly different person."

"I don't wanna be, Alan," she said. "But she didn't start out like that…"

I looked at the serious young lady in front of me. The Tina I knew was thoughtful, logical, intelligent. And at this point in her life, she had options. GOOD options. I told her so.

"Alan," she said, "I understand what you're saying. I just get scared. I don't want to put another child through what I went through. If it hadn't been for Grandma… then YOU…" she was in my arms, weeping.

"Easy, little one… everything's okay. You an' me, right? Forever…"

She turned a tearful face to me, taking a deep breath. "I love you, Alan."

"I love you too, darlin'" I said. "What's all this got to do with soup? Or babies?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I think I know what just happened…"

"What?"

"Period. 'Bout to start… You know how I get…"

"I only know that I adore you, period or not," I said.

"Good answer," she retorted, still in my arms. In kissing range. She landed a couple of good ones. "Sit on the sofa. I want in your lap."

I wasn't about to refuse that. I sat and let her insinuate herself into my arms, her firm rounded butt securely in my lap. "Grandma had confidence in me, Alan. I don't think Mom gave me more than passing thought as to what I'd turn out to be. YOU have confidence in me, though."

"I absolutely do, Christina Addison." I used her formal name when I wanted her to know how serious I was. I was serious. "I think your limit is how much YOU want to do, if we can line you up for it. It won't be your intelligence." I put my face at the curve of her neck and shoulder, a particularly sensitive spot on Tina, and kissed and nibble. "You're more than pretty enough, too…"

She did that delightful shower of little kisses on my face. I was easing her back onto the sofa when her senses returned. "not right now, baby. Let's wait'll after the soup and we take our shower. And take our time. I promise I'll be VERY good…"

'Dump soup' was a sad replacement for what lechery was in my head minutes before. Tina read my face. "I love that I can get you that excited. What YOU don't know is that You do that to ME!" she smiled sweetly. "Always have. I wasn't s'posed to think like that when I got in your truck that day. But I kinda did."

"You never told me that. I thought I was just 'some guy' to you, you know, until…"

"I couldn't tell you, baby," she said. "I didn't wanna act like Mom, you know, just throw myself at you on Day One. And you tried to be so nice…" she looked deep into my eyes, a little smile on her lips. "I thought you weren't attracted to me. You were just a nice guy…" she planted a soft kiss on my lips. That kiss carried every good emotion we shared together. And that is a LOT of good emotions.

Then she bounced off my lap. "Dinner. Then shower. Then fun. 'Cuz period starts tomorrow…"

We didn't rush dinner. Well, maybe just a little bit. It was only seven when I stepped out of the shower. Her hair dryer was going while I shaved. After I toweled off my face, I took her hairbrush and rushed out that sassy auburn head of hair. I finished with a little kiss on the nape of her neck.

She stood up giggling and took my hand. "Bed, mister!" she said. Naked. Smiling.

I crawled in behind her. Couldn't resist the delectable curve of that butt. I grabbed her hips and bit her on her right buttock lightly. Reward for that was a squeal.

"Dammit!" (Her language got only slightly salty in the midst of our sex play) "There's nothing in range for ME to bite!"

"I can fix that," I said, turning in the bed. She KNEW that I liked her biting me, and exactly WHERE I wanted to be bitten. My arms gathered her to my chest and her teeth fastened onto my left pectoral. Hard! Then she released me and immediately kissed me. I clasped her head in my hands. One of her hands slipped down and tugged at my dick.

"I love how you wiggle when I touch you, baby," her voice was husky with desire.

I pushed down a bit and sucked a nipple into my mouth, producing a set of wiggles in her. And a purr.

"Mmmmmmmbabe…" she gasped. "You make me crazy…"

I kissed my way lower, stopping to plow my lips through her pubic hair, relishing the soft brushing against my lips for a bit before my tongue slipped into the forwardmost part of her cleft. She was already twisting around to get to my dick as we rearranged ourselves into a happy sixty-nine.

I love this. Tina's pussy is beautiful and really juicy when she's excited. And she was excited. I could taste a subtle difference in her wetness, something I've noticed before in sessions immediately before her period. It wasn't unpleasant, just different. And it certainly didn't slow down my desire to lick her senseless while satisfying my hunger for her.

And happily, this did not occur in a vacuum. Okay, well, there was this little bitty vacuum, the suction of her mouth on my dick. Her tongue was tapping on the head, her head bobbing, her teeth dragging the sheath skin of my shaft with just the right pressure.

Much more of that and I was going to unload in her mouth. But I wanted in that pussy that was oozing juice on my tongue at this moment. I knew how Tina worked. My tongue flicked her button lightly, then I caught as much as I could between my lips. She couldn't hold herself back with this attention. I felt her pushing herself against my tongue. In a few more sucks of that little pea of a clit, she pulled her mouth off my dick and held it tight, her mouth fastened against the base of the shaft, breathing in pants.

"Nnnnnghh, ohgodAlan! Nnnnnghh!"

My Tina was close. I maintained my efforts, receiving rewards in the form of more juices for me to savor and swallow.

"Ohgodohgodohgod! Yessssss!!!!" she hissed. A final spasm fixed me with a mouthful of plump pink flesh. She collapsed on me. I kissed my prize lightly. The head, yeah, the one that had my dick clutched against it, THAT head, started breathing regularly.

"Baaabyyyyyy," she sighed. "Gets better an' better…"

"You certainly do…"

Languorously she turned around to kiss me, despite the fact that my face HAD to be glistening with her juices. I was still hard, a situation that provided a goal for a hot, wet, searching pussy. Her lips were locked on mine as her hips moved, her pussy looked for something to fill it. Found it, too. I gasped as her opening found the head of my erection. I was leaking pre-come and she was still wet from her own orgasm and one little push and her had me inside her up to the hilt.

She rocked back, astraddle my hips, and looked down at me, smiling. "All the way in," she said. "I love it. I feel it right here!" She pressed above her pubic mound. Then she bounced up and down lightly. "And I feel your balls." She stayed sitting vertically for a minute, enjoying her ability to feel everything connecting us, then she bent forward, her auburn hair framing her soft, rounded face.

I looked at the vision above me. Blue eyes, smile. Her breasts had no sag or dangle. At this angle, they just showed a bit of a different fullness, begging for me to cover them with my hands. I did, playing with her nipples before I grasped her by the waist. Her hips were working magic on me. She read my face and bent over to kiss me.

"Both of us this time, babe," she said softly, then proceeded to make that happen, sliding me in and out of her, her pelvis twisting to get her clitty where it needed to be. Her smile stayed, though it changed to include biting her bottom lip, a sure sign she was getting close. I believe this is the point with Tina where my toes turn luminescent.

"OhgodogodohgodAlannnnnn!" she slammed her pubic bone down against mine and shuddered. And I spurted. God, I spurted. Again and again… accompanied by little involuntary hip movements.

Her second orgasm was generally more intense than her first. She collapsed into my arms. I stayed inside her for a while, relishing the spasms of her pussy as she completed her coming. As I softened, it was those same spasms that squeezed me out in a sticky, wet plop.

I gently turned her face up toward mine and kissed her face lightly, gently, until her eyes opened and a soft smile appeared on her lips.

"If I ever lose you I'll KILL myself, Alan. I love you. All my life I wondered what it would be like to be in love. Now I really know… It feels like US!"

"Yes, little one," I said softly. "It feels like us."

I could feel the chill as our combined juices leaked out of her and slowly flowed over me. I guess I wiggled slightly from the feeling. "Wet, babe?" she asked.

"Somebody seems to have gotten juicy all over me."

She propped up on my chest, grinning. "I had help, lover! I think you gave me a gallon. I think I'd slosh if I tried to walk!"

"Wanna trade ends, cutie?"

"Uh-huh! There's this NEAT thing to suck on…" she said, giggling, as she turned back to sixty-nine.

"I love how you do that, Tina," I sad, as her mouth and tongue started sucking me clean. And then I lapped her and me off the outer lips of her pussy, then placed my mouth in a seal over it, letting my tongue retrieve the results of our coupling from as deep in her as my tongue and some suction could get.

Several benefits came from this. First, it was purely joyful for me. Tina's enthusiasm and love had an erotic content that was very pleasurable when she took care of me. Second, I terrifically enjoyed eating my young doll under any circumstance, that when her pussy was still hot and turgid and soppy after we'd made love, it was even better. And third, Tina had another orgasm. Finally, we both ended up at the right end of the bed, satisfied, kissing each other to collect the last vestiges of our mating.

"Prob'ly won't be able to do anything like this for a few days, baby," she sighed. "y'know, as good as this one was, you'd think I'd be satisfied. But I'm not. I want you every day…"

"You can have some of this," I said.

She rubbed her face against mine. "Nuh-uh. Not on my period. But there's this neat thing I can play with to pass the time…"

Time had a way of passing.

One of the things that passed the time was Tina working with her school's guidance counselor to put together application packages for both the University of Alabama and Auburn. "Cindy says she's not sure right now. I want our options open," she told me.

I couldn't disagree. I suggested that she look into scholarships, too.

"Done!" she said. "But I dunno. A lot of scholarship money is pointed at going to colleges here in Tennessee. I'm tryin', though."

The other thing was her eye on the weather. Evening phone calls to "my little sister" were interspersed with phone calls to my sister. And I was the one who broke the news about Tina's new 'little sister'. She and Elise talked at some length. Made plans for us to pop in before noon on Saturday.

"It's gonna be a flyin' trip," she told Elise. "Your brother ran out of sausage."

At work, the word got around concerning our adventures on our weekend previous. I showed a few pictures of me and Tina, and the four of us, our unconventional little group. And I added the photos to the set loaded into the electronic picture frame on my desk. Well, one of 'em. The one dedicated to family and fun. The other had two people on it: me and Tina. The pictures were either Tina alone, or the two of us. I was the adoring guy in those.

Saturday morning started inordinately early for us, a sort of 'Dawn Patrol' takeoff, headed south-southwest for home.

Once we settled into cruise mode at altitude, Tina called Cindy up on her cell phone and gave her a progress report. "Yeah, we have about three hours of flyin' time to go. I'll call you when we get there." Pause. "Uh-huh. That's a GREAT idea! I'll tell Alan. I'm sure he'll like it!" She hung up.

"I'll love what?" I asked over the intercom.

"Cindy says we oughtta figure out one house or the other an' have us a Louisiana weekend together."

"That's an interesting idea. Wonder if Dan's house has a guest room?"

"And a bed at LEAST as good as the one at OUR house!" she giggled.

"Uh-huh," I said. 'And nice, sound-proof walls,' I thought. Of course, I knew that Dan and Cindy… that 'fourteen' thing hit me again. Damn, Dan! What went on in YOUR head? I imagined all the thoughts that I fought over my precious Tina, and she was seventeen.

We flew on under high, thin overcast as the previous weather system receded southeast, miles clicking away, two and a half in each minute, passing the time chatting about the scenery we enjoyed from our vantage a mile in the sky.

Eventually we were letting down over the farmlands of south Louisiana. Our landing pattern around the periphery of the home airfield gave a chance to spot Elise's SUV as she awaited us. While I attended to the need to top off the plane's fuel tanks, Elise and Tina chatted amiably. After I put the plane on the transient line, the two walked over, Tina helping my tie our wings down.

"I remember you talkin' about that 'Dan' guy, Alan," Elise said.

"Yeah," I said. "Didn't figure runnin' into 'im again, especially not away from work. Maybe a conference or something, but we walked up right behind 'im out of the clear blue…"

"And his WIFE! My new SISTER!" Tina grinned.

Elise smiled. "Yeah, you sent me pictures."

Tina didn't give Elise time to ask the question. "Cindy's fourteen. And she's legally married. She's a certified genius, too."

I could tell from Elise's expression that the 'fourteen' thing was a shocker. She looked at me. "And I thought YOU were crazy." She looked at Tina. "No, baby, now that I KNOW you, I know you an' Alan belong together, but I thought he was crazy when he first told me. Remember?"

Tina giggled. "'Course I remember! You called 'im an old goat an' told me to be good to 'im or you'd hide my body in your garden." Tina giggled.

"Wellll," Elise said, "so far, so good. Ya'll seem happy together. But fourteen?"

Tina looked at me sitting in the back seat. "See, babe? That's why they need to come down here one weekend with us. So we can all get together."

"That'll be an interesting weekend," Elise allowed.

"Cindy's idea," Tina chirped. "Dan's home is what babe? Thirty miles up the interstate?"

"Something like that," I answered.

"I know," Tina said excitedly. "Easter holiday. We can do it on the Easter weekend. You get a long weekend, don't you, babe?"

"I assume so, little one. I'll have to check. Construction jobs aren't like regular jobs. If we're running tight for time, we won't get a long weekend." I neglected to say that if we were running behind schedule, we wouldn't get a weekend at all, but that was just part of the game.

"I hope so." I saw that Tina had a plan. I knew the daily phone call to 'little sister' would solidify things.

Elise dropped us at our house. For the short weekend, actually just an overnight stay, the house was just a place to shower and sleep, the same as any of the dozens of hotel rooms that had provided the same functions for us in the last six months.

"Ya'll gonna be over for dinner, right? 'bout five? Seafood gumbo. Tater salad. And pecan pie."

"You didn't have to do that for me, Sis," I said.

"Don't flatter yourself, bubba," she laughed. "I did it for Tina!"

"And I love you TOO," I laughed.

Tina had her arm around my waist, identifying me as HER possession. She smiled. "We'll be there. Thanks, Elise."

As Elise's SUV disappeared up the road, Tina was gently guiding me back into the house. The door had barely closed before she kissed me. Long. Hard. Sweet. "Damn period!" she said. "One more day."

"It's okay, little one," I said. "I can wait."

She pulled my face down to hers and kissed me. "I don't want you to wait. I'm the one that has to wait." Her hand slid over my erection. Yes, I had one. After those kisses, damn right I had one.

"Mmmmmmm," she purred after a kiss. "We got up so early… Let's go take a nap, hmmmm?"

"Okay," I said. I WAS tired. The nap would be restorative.

In the bedroom, she turned the covers down. "I sleep sooo much better if I get rid of some of these clothes." She smiled. "Wouldn't YOU?"

As a matter of fact, that was true. I was down to my underwear in a matter of seconds. I looked at Tina. She was in bra and panties. She stepped into my arms. "Undo my bra," she said. The flimsy fabric dropped to the floor. That left her in panties, her concession to that 'period' thing.

We crawled into bed and snuggled into the crisp, cool sheets, our bodies quickly warming up a spot as we laid in each other's arms, cooing and kissing. Her hand visited a familiar lump.

"Are you relaxed, baby?" she purred.

"I WAS getting that way…" yes, it was a game. I knew it was a game. She wanted to play it, and I happily played along.

"Well, we just need to see if we can get this relaxed again," she smiled, playing innocent and demure. Thing was, it wasn't that much of a stretch. She WAS innocent and demure only a few months ago.

Her fingers slid into the fly of my briefs, guiding my dick out. "It's CERTAINLY not relaxed, sir," she said. Her blue eyes and sweet smile heightened my arousal. She giggled. "Sir! I think there's MORE of it! I need to free it from this clothing!" She pushed my hard shaft back inside my briefs and started tugging them downward. "Sir," she said, "You must raise yourself to assist me in my task."

I raised my hips and she tugged my drawers downward. My dick popped up at its usual angle, heard enough to chip granite.

She slid her fingers gently over its surface. "Sir, it's SOOO tense…" Her fingers circled it, sliding the skin up and down. She looked at me, her eyes twinkling. This was the farthest her little game had EVER gone before she'd plunged my dick into her mouth, but she played on.

"I fear that I am only making matters worse, sir…" as she stroked me. "Perhaps if I manipulated these…" as her free hand's fingers curled under my sack, gently rolling my balls back and forth. She gave her pretty head a shake. "Oh, no! That only makes it WORSE!"

She was right. I was at the 'scratch a diamond' stage of erection. It wouldn't take much more.

"Oh, sir, help me. I'm sooo unsure of what to do…" she laid her head on my stomach, her soft, moist mouth inches from the head of my throbbing dick. "Oh, look," she said. "It's sad, like me. I see a tear. Let me kiss it away."

The bob of her head to kiss the purple cap of my erection was erotic enough, but the actual contact of her lips was nerve-shattering. And she kept going. Her moist lips spread to encircle me, providing tongue and suction. "Mmmmmm," she said. "I fear I am only making things worse. Does Master wish me to continue my feeble efforts?"

"Ohgodyesssss," I said. "Master wishes…"

"Then your humble servant girl will comply." And she went to work. Took less than two minutes before I was squirting uncontrollably into her sweet suctioning mouth. The spurts gave way to the final fiery flow.

"Mmmmm," she said, releasing me. She dropped the game. "D'you know how powerful, how GOOD it makes me feel that I can do THIS to you…" She went back to gently sucking me.

I stroked her short auburn hair. "Angel, you… words fail me. Nobody… Nothing compares with you…"

She came up to kiss me. I tasted the tinges of my own semen inside her mouth as we traded tongues.

Giggle. "Relaxed now?"

"God, yes, little one. I have YOU." We kissed again, and snuggled into a comfortable configuration, dragging the covers up over our bare shoulders. And took a wonderfully blissful nap, her hand idly squeezing and fondling me. I fell asleep after her, and I know that in her sleep, her fingers still touched me lovingly.

It was nearing four when she stirred, waking me up. She raised her head and looked at me, hair tousled from sleep. "We must've REALLY been tired, guy," she said, smiling.

"That, and the most amazing kindness done to me by a simple young maiden," I said, knowing that she liked to hear a little encouragement over her improvisation.

"The maiden thanks you for your indulgence, sir," she giggled.

"I feel guilty, though… I did, you didn't…"

She propped up on an elbow. "How many times…" Kiss. "Do I have to tell you…" Kiss. "That I LIKE, no, I LOVE doin' you like that. Alan, I LOVE suckin' you." Kiss. "Who started this, anyway?"

"WE did. I was just getting' ready for a nap and this sexy doll undressed in front of me… and after that…"

Kiss. "My pleasure, sir." Giggle. "Alan. Really. It IS!"

I wrapped her almost nude body (just panties!) in my arms. "One more kiss. Then we get dressed."

"It's a fifteen minute trip to Elise's. Takes two minutes to get dressed. Maybe just a few MORE kisses."

We fell back on the bed. Loved each other.

We got up and got dressed and hit the road. Fifteen minutes later we were knocking on Elise's front door. Brother-in-law Joe answered it.

"Come in. Hi, Tina. You're STILL too cute for this guy."

"Hi, Joe," she smiled. "Where's Elise?"

"I trained 'er right. She's in the kitchen." He smirked.

"Does that lotion work?" Tina asked him.

Joe looked quizzical. "Lotion?"

"Yeah, the stuff you use to protect your knuckles when they drag the ground…" She stuck her tongue at him and headed to the kitchen.

Joe looked at me. "Still a cutie, huh?"

"Oh yeah, bro," I answered. "Amazing. Six months. Biggest argument is who decides what's for dinner."

He nodded. "Good for you, man."

Joe knew how my divorce had hit me. He and Elise were most helpful during those dark times.

"Life is good. Was pretty good, you know, but Tina makes me realize how much I was missing. She's… I dunno, it's like we complement each other. I think life is better with her in it."

He leaned close and whispered, "I'd tell Elise that, you know, but she'd take advantage of me…" He laughed.

# Chapter 19

Sunday mid-day saw us back at the airport, loading up to go home, including an ice-chest with my precious stash of Louisiana smoked sausage. After Elise dropped us at the plane, Tina giggled, "Louisiana is KNOWN for good sausage…"

"What's with you, my pretty young wife?" I asked.

"Period's over. We're gonna be in OUR little house tonight." She smiled. "YOU'RE the one that started me on THIS." She walked purposefully to the left side of the plane. "I'm flyin' back…"

"Okay, little one," I said, thinking to myself, 'Why not?" After all, her pilot's license was one bright accomplishment since we'd been together. The flight back was absolutely routine. Miles passed as we chatted. The wheels touched down in late afternoon and we were home just before dark.

It was much, our little trailer in Tennessee, but it felt like our nest. I was unloading bags. She flipped her phone out and said, "I'm gonna let my sister know we're okay!" She grinned. I mulled over that. Sister.

While she was on the phone I sorted laundry and started a load in the little combo washer-dryer. I heard her ending her conversation: "'Kay, Sis! Love ya! Bye!" She looked at me and grinned. "Dinner? Where? Here? Up the road?"

"Choose," I said.

"Catfish place," she said. "An' I hope we don't have to fight our way out of the parkin' lot."

"Sheriff Department says our friends didn't make bail, so we're prob'ly okay," I said. "Let's go."

She was in the driver's seat of her car, warming it up, as I locked our trailer. I slid into the passenger seat. "Saves gas," she said. We drove off.

"So what're you an' Cindy laughing about, baby?" I asked.

"She's bein' recruited. Somebody from Auburn is s'posed to visit her at her school tomorrow…"

"Oh, that'll tickle ol' Dan," I said. "He always did have a sense of the absurd. A college recruiter at a middle school oughtta do it for 'im."

"I sent an application to Auburn," she said. "Can we do that? I mean, if that's where she goes?"

"I think we can, baby," I said. "Money's not a problem. It'd be nice if you got scholarships, but even without 'em, we can do it."

We walked into the restaurant and got immediately recognized as the guy who took on the Hossle brothers in the parking lot. The manager and the cashier that were at work the night of the incident were there tonight, as was one of the waitresses. We were greeted and seated amid quite a bit of fuss, something that was amusing to Tina.

"You're smilin' awful big tonight, hon," the waitress noted.

"Uh-huh! This is the second place Alan rescued me at…"

The waitress looked at me. "You?" I guess I didn't look like the 'ninja warrior' type.

Tina laughed, touching my arm. "Hon, he's a BEAST!"

The waitress walked off, shaking her head. It was bad enough, I was married to a seventeen year old girl, but to have that same seventeen year old girl refer to me as 'a BEAST' might've been overload.

Maybe not. We got good service, although that was customary at this little place. And the manager came by and snagged the ticket. "Just wanna thank you for the other night," he said.

"We appreciate it, but I'd'a fought off a grizzly bear in my skivvies to take care a'her…"

The old guy laughed.

We drove home. Period was over. I had catching up to do. I did by very best. Monday was back to work for me. I answered the usual questions about me and Tina's flying (literally! Hah!) trip back to Louisiana and went through the routines of bringing equipment on line for tests and trial runs. I ended up seeing where I was going to be running a bit late. I watched my watch and as soon as I thought Tina was on her way home, I called her.

"Hi, sweetie," she said.

"Hi, cutie pie," I answered. My technician made gagging noises.

"What's that sound?" she chuckled. She'd met Grady.

"Me stranglin' Grady. He's bein' an ass again." We'd been joined by Grady on more than one occasion, meeting him at the breakfast joint.

"Jealous, huh?" she giggled.

I turned to Grady. "Tina says 'jealousy is a terrible emotion. And…" I stuck my tongue at him.

"Uh, dude… how'd she do THAT over the phone…"

"You know how Tina is…" I returned to the phone. "Babe, I'm gonna be an hour or so late."

"You're dyin' for another round of dump soup, ain'tcha!"

"Either that or we go back to the catfish joint so I can be worshipped by the waitstaff…"

Does "I love you" count if it's proceeded by a raspberry?

Later, as soon as I got in the truck, I called her. "Tina, I'm on the way home."

"Okay, baby," she said. "I'll be waitin' for you…"

I hurried home. Well, NOT too much of a hurry. Several of my co-workers had contributed to the coffers of local government, courtesy of a local police officer whose girlfriend had moved in with a construction worker. It was dark when I pulled into the park.

When I unlocked the trailer door, Tina was ladling soup into bowls for us. "Talked to Cindy after school, baby," she said. "Sounds like she's goin' to Auburn."

"She met the recruiter?"

"She did. An' Dan."

"Might still change 'er mind, baby," I said. "It's a big step."

"So what'd you have to work late on?" she asked.

I explained. We finished our meal. That left showers and then…

On Friday we had a chance to meet with Mike and Kathy, and of course, Susan. That made for a pretty good evening. Mike and Kathy were a happy couple, and bright, genial, blonde Susan was an added amusement. Two couples? Tina and me, Mike and Kathy? And Tina filled in the conversation between us and her friend's parents and her teen contemporary friend.

Of course, there was a second purpose to the evening: another concert, and permission from Mike and Kathy to bring Susan along with us again. These weekend jaunts were fun, and one night in a hotel in a city a mere two flight hours away was fun, even though Susan cut into the 'alone in a big room' time for me and Tina.

I regarded it as part of the cost of marrying a seventeen year old girl, and I didn't want Tina to miss out on having friends in her own age group.

Tina and Susan left the table for a girls' room visit.

Kathy waited until they were around the corner. "Alan, you don't mind, do you? I mean, ya'll live in that little trailer, an' I KNOW you wanna get out every now an' then. Susan's not a bother?"

"Not in the least. Tina loves havin' her around. And I want Tina to have friends. It's weird enough that we're married. She needs friends her own age, too, you know…"

"Susan talks about you an' Tina all the time. Mostly Tina," Mike said. "I think that Tina having a plan for her life, Susan's tryin' to figure out one for hers now. At least college." He smiled. "That's a good thing, we think."

Kathy stepped in. "And what I was worried about," she cast eyes downward momentarily, "that Tina being married at seventeen, well, seems Tina and Susan talk about THAT too."

"I've heard about some of that," I said.

"I was worried," Kathy said. "I don't think Susan's ready for anything like that. I was afraid…" she sighed. "I was afraid that Tina might influence Susan the wrong way. Not intentionally, of course, but just by example. But Susan says that Tina is the most sane and chaste girl she knows…"

"Sane. And chaste. That's my Tina. You have to understand, Kathy… Tina was… well, I was her first…"

"I didn't mean to be nosy, Alan…"

"I wasn't trying to say otherwise, Kathy. Just that Tina is a GOOD girl. Like your Susan."

Mike looked almost amused. "Susan hasn't been falling in love ever' two weeks since her an' Tina started hangin' out."

"Tina told me that. Said Susan still has friends, guys AND girls, but she seems to be handling herself better."

"More confident," Mike said.

"Well, good!" I said. "Susan's Tina's best friend at school, and I LIKE her myself. I want things to go good for HER sake."

We saw Tina and Susan approaching, so we switched the conversation back to college choices and school issues.

"It's beginning to look like I might be goin' to Auburn," Tina said.

"Go ahead,' I said. "Tell 'em how you arrived at that decision."

"I decided I wanted to be an engineer, like Alan, but I wasn't sure what college. And then we took that trip to Charlotte." Tina told the story of her new 'sister'.

The Carters listened, somewhat amused, until they heard Cindy's age. Tina read the expressions on their faces. "Oh, Mizz Kathy, sometimes age is more than a number." And both parties let the topic drop.

"You knew about this Cindy?" Kathy asked Susan.

"Of course. Tina's my best friend. We talk about ever'thing. She showed me pictured of their trip, and the group, an' how WONDERFUL the concert was… I wish I coulda gone with 'em."

"You should know that Dan and I worked together on a big project. He'd lost his wife and daughter in a car wreck. He's a nice guy. They make a great couple. Kinda strange-looking though."

"And ya'll're talking about going into business?" Mike asked. "I mean, you can do that?"

"We're both professional engineers. Both have good reputations. We're looking at how to make it work. I have some ideas."

Tina smiled. "And that way we can have it ALL! Dan an' Alan can do their engineering thing, you know, if they have to be on the road, an' me an' Cindy can stay home an' stay in school."

And Susan was smiling, too, and darned if I didn't think I saw a wink between her and Tina.

We parted ways in the parking lot after our meal, promising to pick up Susan for the concert in the morning. Arriving at the airport, we rolled the plane out of the hangar. Tina smiled all TOO sweetly as I was securing our baggage.

"Whaaa-aattt?" I asked. I love my Tina, but I can recognize when I'm getting ready to be manipulated, too.

"Can YOU sit in the rear seat for this one, baby? So I can let Susan try flying up front?"

"Okay," I said, "but don't you think you'd be better off doin'' that in the little plane?" We hadn't sold her little 152 yet.

Susan smiled. "I don't have to, Tina…"

"No," Tina said. "My first time was in THIS plane, just like this…"

At least they let me drive the rental car. Tina pointed out that the rental agreement didn't allow for drivers under the age of twenty-five.

We enjoyed the concert and the late night snacks afterward, then retired to our room. I was the last one out of the shower, and when I marched my pajama-clad self out of the bathroom, Tina and Susan were sitting cross-legged on one of the two queen beds, giggling.

"Okay…" I said, "Tina, I've been married to you for six months. I can tell when you've got something up your sleeve. And Miss Susan, you couldn't lie if your life depended on it. So one of you needs to spill the beans."

"YOU tell 'im. He's YOUR husband…" Susan said.

"No, YOU tell 'im. I'm his wife. He may beat me…" Tina giggled. She grinned at me. "So, okay, don't say anything until you hear us out."

I sat on the chair next to the bed. "This is gotta be good…"

"I present to you Miss Susan Carter, Student of Engineering at Auburn University…"

Susan's rounded face was smiling. "D'ya think \*\*I\*\* can do that, Mister Alan?"

Tina continued, "Since she won't be livin' with family, she'll be in the dorm her first year, anyway, but her an' me an' Cindy…"

"Oh, come on," I said. I looked at the TWO of them, both bright, happy, and EXPECTANT. "You two are SERIOUS!"

Susan giggled. "Me an' Tina's been talkin'. I mean, I work with Dad in his business, so I'm NOT ignorant about how things work, an' Tina tells me about YOUR stuff, an' how she wants to be an engineer…"

Tina interjected, "Uh, Alan, baby… Know who ELSE thinks it's a good idea?"

"Lemme guess…"

"Cindy! All three of us talked." She smiled. "An' Dan's gonna find out from Cindy."

"Oh, this oughtta be GOOD!" I said. "Susan, have you talked to your mom and dad about this?"

"Not in any sort of detail. But I have talked about where Tina was applying and said that I wanted to apply too. I think I'm gettin' a couple of scholarships that'll help… Plus, Grandpa an' Grandma put back some money in a fund for my college."

"Neat!" I said. I looked at Tina. "You don't have to ALWAYS be so right, you know…"

She bounced across the gap between the two beds and kissed me. Susan was grinning too.

"See!" Tina squealed, "I told you he'd understand…" She looked at me. "You DO understand, don't you?"

"Yes, I do, baby, but realize that college is going to put both of you in contact with a lot of different people. It is likely that you will meet new friends and your world will expand." And when I said, that, a dark cloud drifted across my own mind… Tina… meeting all those people, including a horde of young, intelligent males. That was ONE way I didn't want her world to expand.

At the same time, though, I looked at the smiling, plump blonde Susan and hoped sincerely that she'd find somebody who matched her and deserved the obvious gem she was.

Tina, though, is a perceptive little thing. "You, dear husband, had a dark thought."

"No."

"You did. I saw your face. Tell me. If it's not too personal to tell in front of Susan." Blue eyes. Loving blue eyes. Her hand touched my face. "Okay?"

I sighed. "I just had a thought that I was turning the love of my life loose on a campus full of men her age who'd love to…"

"And they don't stand a chance. None of them risked life for me. Twice. None of THEM risked jail for me." She turned to Susan. "Susan, excuse me for a second. My Alan needs a GOOD kiss." And she kissed me. "I remember a conversation once, about the meaning of 'forever'…"

Susan said, "Gosh…"

"We LOVE each other, Susan," Tina said. "Doesn't mean we're perfect, or that we always get along, but Alan's my best friend an' husband, an' you're my best friend, who's not my husband, and…"

Susan giggled. "Cindy's your sister."

"Yeah," Tina said. "An' I guess we're all gonna be a community. Together. Right, babe?" she looked at me and kissed me lightly.

"Looks like it."

Tina fished a deck of cards out of her bag and we played a game of rummy, three-handed, laughing at each other's misfortunes, at least at cards. I struggled and got pretty soundly trounced. Bad luck, more than lack of skill, but beaten is beaten.

We finally turned out the lights and went to sleep. The next day, we checked out and ate breakfast on the way to the airport. We turned in our rental car and got a courtesy trip to the flightline.

Susan started into the rear seat but Tina tugged the rear of her jeans. "No. You do front seat. Let Alan talk you through a take-off…"

Two and a half hours later we were back in the car, driving Susan home. It was early afternoon. "Come on in," she said. Her cell phone had notified them of our impending arrival. She barged through the door. I got the idea that Susan had been barging through that front door for most of eighteen years.

"Mom! Dad! I'm BAAAACK! Got Tina 'n' Alan!"

Mike was the first one to show up. "Come on in, buddy! Let's have a beer! How was the concert?"

Classical music wasn't Mike's thing, but he was personable enough to want to hear about people enjoying themselves. Kathy came in right behind Mike, and she wanted details. I let the girls (girls? ONE of them was my WIFE!) take the lead in talking about every detail. Well, MOST details. Including the drubbing I'd taken at cards.

And I charged in afterward. "Has Susan said anything concrete about her college?"

Mike took on a knowing expression. "Uh… Auburn, right?"

"How much do you know?"

Kathy said, "'Nother thing about her hangin' around with Tina. I didn't say much the other night because she said THEY wanted to tell you…"

I sat back. Tina knowingly slid a little closer and patted my knee. I looked at her, then Susan. "I guess that makes me the LAST to know…"

"'Cept maybe Dan," Tina giggled.

I sighed. "So you two are…" I asked Mike and Kathy.

Kathy said, "Y'know, Alan, we knew that next fall, Susan was goin' off to school somewhere. Mike's been just dyin' that she was gonna major in Medieval Literature or somethin', and me, bein' a mommy, I thought about my baby girl goin' off to college somewhere by herself, a sheep among wolves."

Mike grinned. "When these two popped this idea out on us, we actually felt relieved. I mean, man, YOU are a 'responsible individual' that'll be right there in town for our Susan. And she'll have Tina right there, too. And she seems to indicate that your friends Dan and Cindy will be there for her. Best world I can build, man!"

"You make it sound like it makes sense." I stammered.

"It does. Really," Kathy said. She stroked her daughter's hair. "She's eighteen. I can't keep 'er forever. And I don't think she'd appreciate us moving to whatever city she's goin' to college in, just so we can watch 'er."

"Mooo-oommmm!" Susan whined.

"Don't whine, dear," Kathy chided, smiling. "You'll ALWAYS be our baby. Alan. Tina. Susan. Works for us. She gets away from mom and dad, but she's got a safety net. Ya'll."

Tina said, "That's what Cindy said when we came up with the idea. It was her that popped up with it first, and it just made sense. We have a little community. Sure, we'll meet other people and make friends, but we'll have us a core support group. From Day One."

"There she goes again," Mike said. He'd heard Tina get on a roll before. He smiled.

"Oh, Mister Mike, I don't mean…"

"'Sokay, darlin'," he said. "I been livin' with two women tellin' me how to live for long enough that another one won't matter. An' me an' Kathy're okay with this, if that's the way it goes down."

"You know Susan gave your shop as one of the reasons she decided on engineering…"

He smiled like a true doting dad. "Yeah, she's all sweet 'n clean now, but Kathy used ta yell at me…"

"For turning my precious little daughter into a grease-stained tom-boy…" Kathy laughed.

On the way home, Tina poked me. "It's gonna be good, baby. LIFE is gonna be good." She paused for a second, thinking. "Alan, you really worried that I'd meet somebody ELSE at college?"

"I worry, baby. I love you more than the air I breathe. I… a year ago, I didn't know you existed. Now I can't imagine ever living without you."

"Oh, Alan, I'm THAT way with you… You're the only man I know that really loves me for ME!"

"I do."

She snuggled against me as we drove home.

As I watched her naked form go into the bathroom, I heard her say, "Only BAD thing about the weekend was I missed us showering together."

"Could've sent Susan down to the hotel gym," I said.

"We couldn't do THAT," she said. "But I miss our showering together."

"Me too, baby doll. Me too."

"Then don't put any clothes on after your shower." Giggle. She came out of the shower quickly, wrapped in her bathrobe against the chill, and started drying her hair while I showered and shaved. I finished shaving and finished brushing her hair out. Yeah, uh… playing with her hair was approaching fetish for me now as she threw her head back to assist me, and I got to see those bright eyes and that smile.

Her hand reached behind her and found me naked. She spun around on the stool and wrapped her arms around my waist, burying her face in my chest. "MmmmmmI love you, Alan!"

"I love you, Tina. Wanna play cards?" I smiled.

"Nope. Not even close. Wanna keep ya nekkid and have my way with you…"

Wasn't gonna argue with that one. Not a bit. Lusty, happy, enthusiastic, orgasm lovemaking ensued. Final score, Tina – 3, Alan – 2. And of such things is nirvana achieved.

I guess I was smiling inordinately broad the next morning. Comments were made, some rather lewd comments. One of my more extroverted co-workers said something. "Louis, ol' buddy, d'ya know the most fantastic sex you ever imagined in your feeble little mind? Hmmm? Well, it's BETTER than THAT!" And applause was heard around the coffee counter. I would've shown him the picture of me standing between Tina and Susan, but I think his head would've exploded.

My two technicians disappeared and returned with a donut carefully centered in a plate. "In recognition of Mister Alan Addison, Chief Engineer, for a put-down, above and beyond the call of duty!" Mackey said, making a flourish of a presentation.

Seven o'clock. Tina and I were just leaving a restaurant after dinner. Cell phone rang. I looked. Dan.

"Hey, brother-in-law," I said.

"Don't start," he said. "I'm used to it now…"

"Me too. So what's new?"

"Three more weeks on the project. We do our forty-eight hour full load run starting tomorrow. After that, it's nothing but paperwork."

I knew my buddy. His fun stuff was almost over. "I have at least through May," I said. "I get to see Tina graduate."

"Yeah, I'm staying here until Cindy graduates, too. But that's not what I called about."

"Lemme guess. Cindy has introduced a girl named Susan…"

"So you already know…"

"You should've seen the two of 'em giggling over the bright idea."

"I get the feeling," Dan said, "That somehow, Cindy's at the front of this."

"I dunno about 'front', but definitely in the middle," I said. "If it helps, Susan is Tina's best friend up here. Terrific kid. Every bit as bright as you'd hope. Gonna be in the top ten of her class."

"Engineer? Another one? Do we, like, have a QUOTA?"

I heard Cindy giggling in the background. "I guess we just go with the flow here, buddy."

"Hi, Mister Alan," I heard Cindy's voice.

"Hi, Cindy!" I answered. It was easy to picture her snuggled into Dan's side. After all, Tina would be welded to mine if we didn't have a table between us.

"Hi, Mister Dan!" Tina said.

"Tell 'er 'hi!" Dan said. "Then you know that Cindy's leanin' real hard towards Auburn," he said.

"So I've been told," I said. "Have you SEEN a picture of Susan?"

"Yeah."

"Evil-looking little thing, ain't she," I laughed. "Her mom and dad are great people. And THEY know about it." I snickered. "Found out before YOU did…"

I heard movement over the phone and then Cindy's voice. "Mister Alan, me an' Tina are makin' plans for us all to get together. And Susan's s'posed to come with ya'll."

"Tina," I said to her, "your sister needs you to get with her for planning again."

# Chapter 20

A week later we were lifting off for a weekend, meeting with Cindy and Dan, and I was passenger in my own airplane, with my young private pilot wife and her best friend occupying the front seats. I didn't mind. It was relatively short flight, Tina was more than capable, and the absurdity of the scene was a bit humorous.

As we neared the airfield, I heard the radio click as Tina made a general radio call: "Jackson Unicom, this is Cessna six-seven-six-five-Golf, five miles out, landing Jackson, runway three-three."

Squelch broke on the radio. It was normal for other aircraft in the vicinity to answer these calls, giving their location and intentions. "Uh, six-five golf, this is Cessna five-five-two-three Uniform. Ten miles southeast, destination Jackson." And a decidedly unprofessional squeal, all voiced by a teenaged girl.

Tina pressed the radio button on the control yoke and acknowledged Cindy. "Roger, two-three Uniform, we'll watch for you. Giggle."

"Cindy!" Susan said. "This is gonna be good!"

It was. The sight of TWO transient aircraft late in the afternoon brought the FBO manager out and he was tickled to note that both planes were piloted by young girls. At least Dan got to sit in the front seat. The rental car I'd ordered for the weekend was awaiting us, a minivan that would provide seating for the five of us.

After the girls finished greetings, Dan and I loaded bags into the van. Greetings. Susan had never actually met Cindy, but when they saw each other, squeals erupted and they hugged like long-lost sisters, joined by Tina. I looked at Dan. He just smiled.

I had an idea that the sleeping arrangements had been planned out by the girls, and I was correct. For the weekend, Susan shuttled back and forth between our room and Dan and Cindy's, giving each couple a bit of time to be alone. Friday night, she slept at Dan and Cindy's, Saturday she was with us. That worked pretty well.

Dan and I got a chance to talk quite a bit about a business model for our future. We both had much the same idea: engineering services with the capability to do hands-on work in installation, maintenance and forensics. That idea meant we needed some good technicians. He had a couple of prospects. So did I.

The surprise for the weekend was that the girls seemingly abandoned the idea of Susan staying in on-campus housing. I guess they were happy with her shuttling between the two rooms. It worked for me. Susan was not a burden. And I wanted Tina to have friends in her age group. Trouble was, aside from the age range, Tina was hard put to find true peers. Susan was one. Cindy was another.

For the weekend's activities, Dan and I quickly found out we were along for the ride. The girls made the decision Friday night for dinner and a movie.

After the evening's outing, we got back to the hotel and it was pleasant surprise when Susan headed to the room with Dan and Cindy.

Tina pushed me backward against the closed door in our room. "We get OUR time in little chunks, baby," she said. "Susan's gonna stay there an' give us a little time…" In an economy of motion, we immediately hit the bed together, clothes barely fluttering to the floor before she drew me in between those muscular thighs, urging me on with little cries from her mouth into mine as our lips merged. It took every bit of restraint I possessed not to just pew my load into her in the first two minutes, but I held off until I felt the first shudders of her ecstasy, then released, feeling her soften in my arms.

As her breathing steadied, I whispered to her, "I love you, Christina…"

"I love you too, Alan, she sighed. We kissed more, and she whispered, "We're gonna leave a wet spot, baby."

"Shower?" I asked.

"Nuh-uh. I wanna, you know…" and she started to turn around.

I loved this. The feel of her suctioning lips closing over my softening dick, her lips and tongue cleaning, gathering the juices of our copulation, that was an ecstasy I couldn't begin to describe, and without fail, my own mouth sucking her empty and licking her clean resulted in a keening little orgasm from her.

After we recovered from THAT, she said, "Now we can shower…"

That got me a spectrum of naked Tina, wet and clean and happy, dry and clean and happy, with a touch of perfume, as if she needed further enhancement. She squealed after she'd brushed her hair to perfection and I mussed it all back up, luxuriating in the feel and smell as I burred my face in it.

Finally we got dressed.

"Thank you for putting up with my flaky friends," she said.

"Who? Susan and Cindy?"

"Yes, baby…"

"Putting up with them? I'm amazed that you have them. I talked with Dan. We're both envious that we didn't have a group like that when we started college. I think it's gonna be wonderful.

"Well, hold that 'wonderful' bit. I'm callin' Susan. We need to give Dan an' Cindy an opportunity…" she smiled.

I shook my head.

"What?" she asked.

"I can't shake the idea of Dan and a fourteen year old girl…"

"We talked about that, you know…"

"About…"

"Sex."

"I don't wanna know…"

"Oh, it's not like THAT, silly," she said. "Neither of us was… We were both virgins. Cindy says that she never imagined…" Her blue eyes twinkled and she leaned over and kissed me. "And I didn't either…" she heaved a happy sigh. "We're both very happy in that regard." She kissed me again. Stared her blue eyes into mine. Touched her forehead to mine. Smiled. "VERY happy!"

She picked up the phone and called Dan's room. "Hi, Sis," she said. "What're ya'll doin?" Pause. Giggle. "Really? I bet he LOVES that! Put Susan on." Pause. "Hey, Susan. Playin' cards?" Pause. "Whenever you wanna come over." Pause. "Okay. Seeya!" She turned to me. "They're sittin' the be bed playin' rummy."

"Ooooo-kay," I said. "You wanna?"

"Works for me. We play for a while, then they call and Susan spends the night in their room."

"And I get a delightfully beautiful Tina all to myself."

"And tomorrow is Dan an' Cindy's night to do the same thing."

I heard a soft knock on the door. Tina jumped up and let Susan in.

We sat in the middle of Susan's unused bed and I started dealing cards.

"Well, what's it like, I mean, Dan an' Cindy…" Tina asked.

"They remind me of you an' Alan, 'cept she's younger. They laugh and carry on like you two. We talked a lot about how things were in school when they found out she was married. You know how that went. That whole 'She's gotta be pregnant' thing an' all that…"

Tina laughed, then considered her laughter. "Yeah, I can laugh now…"

"I know," Susan said. "My mom didn't want me hangin' out with you…" She looked at me, her blue eyes crinkling at the corner, "An' your evil husband…"

We played cards for an hour, maybe a bit more, before the phone rang. I was closest, so I picked it up. "Alan 'n' Tina and a third party to be determined later," I said.

I heard Cindy's laughter. "Hi, Alan! Where's Susan?"

"Right here," I said, stretching the cord to Susan.

"Hi, little redheaded sister," Susan said. Pause. "Okay, I'll be right down. It's harder beatin' Alan at cards." Giggle. "Tell Dan we can start a new game. I'll be right down."

We finished the hand and Susan grabbed her bag and headed off. Tina got up off Susan's bed and went to ours. And smiled at me. I slid into bed beside her and we rolled up into a knot of arms and legs clasping one another as our mouths met.

"You're so unbelievably beautiful, little lamb," I said.

"To you, my guy," she answered. She kissed me, pulled back, smiling. "And I am PERFECTLY happy with it that way! I don't care if any other guy ever gives me a second look. I want YOU." She grabbed her fingers in my chest hair, knowing that I liked the way that move felt.

I cradled her head in my hands, her face perfect in front of me. She moved free and lowered her mouth to my chest, giving me a nip and then a suck on my nipple. I was immediately hard, a condition she verified with her hand. Her lips connected with mine again.

"Ya know, baby, I think it would be perfectly wonderful if we ate each other."

I knew this routine. Delightful sixty-nine. My hands delighted in the smooth curves of her ass as I eagerly lapped, licked and sucked her to orgasm. Right up to the point where she fell over the precipice, she enthusiastically sucked and nibbled me in ways that made me lose my concentration, but at the last minute, while she still maintained muscular control, she pulled my dick from her mouth and held it to her cheek as she gasped the sounds of her orgasm.

I let her ease down a bit, then couldn't resist going back in with my tongue, taking advantage of the sweet, salty, sticky, fragrant juices I'd unleashed. This, I'd learned, usually got her another whimpering, squealing cum.

I usually left her to ease down from her second, and I usually was made aware of the return of her senses by a pair of soft lips closing over the head of my dick.

I felt exactly that. Then she stopped. "Baby," she said, "Can I do this layin' between your legs?"

"Oh, god, yes…"

She knew that this was a favorite to me, giving me a chance to watch her working her lips up and down over my shaft, licking the purple head languorously, grinning at me with those happy blue eyes, nipping the loose skin with her teeth and playfully tugging, and all this was presented to me tonight.

She knew me. One hand circled the shaft of my dick because she knew that when I got close, I wouldn't be aware of how I might thrust into her mouth, and the other hand, that was the one she played with my balls, caressing, tugging, urging me onward.

"Ohgodbaby! Its… I… Auughhhh!" The first spurt entered her mouth. I felt her swallow with a little happy giggle, and she sucked harder, urging the fire out of me. She timed her hand strokes with the thudding pulsations of my dick as my hands stroked that sassy mahogany hair. Her tongue milked me dry and she sucked my until I was as empty and soft as I was going to get, then she climbed up my torso and kissed me.

"My angel," I said, "my lovely, lovely angel…"

"I wanna be here forever, Alan…"

"You will be, angel," I said.

In a rare event, we didn't even put nightshirts on. I managed to reach over and dowse the bedside lamp and put the room into darkness, and we slid into slumber in one another's arms, completely, utterly satisfied. Several times during the night I awoke a tiny bit to find her and snuggle up with her, noting that when I moved towards her, she moved to meet me.

I woke up in the morning when I felt her easing out of bed. I let myself drift on the sweet edge between waking and sleeping as I heard the sounds come from the bathroom, ending in a flush, then soft footsteps to the edge of the bed. Gently she pulled back the covers from me, uncovering my naked body, then she bent over and sucked me into her mouth.

"Oh, god," I moaned. "The way you DO that…"

Her head bobbed up. "'G'mornin, baby," she smiled.

I stood and kissed her, then went to the bathroom myself, relieving the pressure, then washing my face with a steamy washcloth. I was joined at the sink by a cute auburn-haired doll. She washed her own face, then ran a brush through her sassy hair, returning it to order. We brushed our teeth and then kissed again, and went back into the bedroom to get dressed.

Once fully dressed, we sat back against the headboard and channel-surfed. The phone rang. I answered it.

"Hi, Alan," Cindy said. I could see the smile in my mind. "Are ya'll up?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. "been up for a little while."

"Us, too. Susan's getting' dressed right now. We'll meet you in the lobby in a few minutes. Bye!" she said brightly.

I hung up the phone and turned to Tina. She pulled me to her and we kissed.

She released me. "Off we go, baby!" she said. She stood up, grabbed her shoes and put them on, then we went downstairs to meet the crew.

We found a breakfast at a nearby chain restaurant and ate and talked. Dan and I talked about the business ideas, the girls about how life would be when they set up our community, who was driving, apartments, life.

I was amused, but at the same time I kept getting a better feeling about it. Susan said something about 'diversity of scheduling', a term I'd not heard before, and I raised a question.

"You know," Tina said, "with THREE of us in classes, there's a pretty good chance for at least two of us on campus every day, and if there's TWO of us out of three with licenses, then any TWO of us will insure that there's at least ONE car."

Cindy pitched in. "We might not match perfectly, but all that means is that we'll have to be little flexible, you know, doin' library or whatever to match up with our travel times."

Dan seemed sold on the idea. I commented that the biggest problem might be finding housing in a college town that wasn't also filled with the party crowd.

The waitress came by to refill the coffee and clear the plates. I put a ten dollar bill in her hand. "I appreciate your attention. We're liable to be here a while."

She looked at the bill in her hand. "Oh, don't worry, Hon," she said. "I go off shift in a bit, but I'll give a chunk of this to the next gal. Ya'll take yer time."

Dan and I tackled a few details about our proposed business, mentioned some names of prospective staff, came up with a plan, at least more of a plan than we had before. Looked to me like we might just get this thing together.

The girls got up and made one of those mass migrations to the ladies' room.

Dan looked at me when they were out of earshot. "Susan's a good fit for this crew. Bright young lady. Smart. I wish…"

"I know," I interjected, "She's kind of the odd man out. But she's Tina's friend and I like.. we like her folks, and I can't see a way…"

"I know," Dan said. "She's a cutie, too…

"Plump little doll," I laughed.

"And a major league sense of humor when she gets going," Dan said. "Got some of that last night when they were whippin' my butt at cards. She's… I don't think she'll be a problem. She's a good fit."

"Speaking of non-existent problems," I said, "here they come."

We did a park and museum before lunch, a nature trail afterward, and then had a pleasant dinner before a bluegrass concert at a family venue.

"I like bluegrass okay," Tina said. "But I LOVE classical. Bluegrass just feels so ALIVE, though."

"I know," Cindy said. "It's music WE can do. Even though we don't do PURE bluegrass. Dan plays bass guitar, and that uses an electric amp."

We got to see Cindy singing. Dan said she sang. I was impressed. Dan definitely scored when he got her, fourteen or not.

We did a late-night snack at an all-night diner and then went back to the hotel. Susan gamely did the two-room tour again, and at the end of the evening, we had Susan in the bed next to us. I guess it worked out, on the average, because the night before, Tina and I wore NOTHING, and tonight we were both fully clothed.

And pajamas? They aren't bad when a sweet, loving young thing slides her hand inside them to go to sleep while softly fondling you.

The next morning we got up and had another breakfast. The restaurant was full, not usual for a Sunday morning in the Bible Belt, and we took the first seating that came open, squeezing five of us into a booth normally used for four adults. Susan and Cindy squeezed Dan in between them. We didn't dally long this morning before heading to the airfield for the flight home.

I offloaded the luggage and the crew on the flightline before turning in the minivan and accepting a courtesy ride back to the plane. By the time I got back, Tina was finished with the pre-flight inspection and the five of us stood between the two planes, the girls hugging and kissing their good-byes. Dan and I shook hands and I accepted a kiss from Cindy. On the cheek.

Dan got two, one from Tina, another from Susan.

I laughed when Cindy climbed into the pilot seat of their Cessna 180. Dan shrugged. "Monsters. We've created monsters." He motioned toward our plane. Susan was in the back seat and Tina was in the pilot seat.

"See ya, buddy," I said.

We let them taxi out ahead of us, knowing that the visibility over the nose of the 180 made it a bit of a hassle to taxi. Actually, Cindy did a good job of carving a series of S-curves on her way to the run-up ramp.

Susan asked the question about it. I explained. Got another one of those all-girl ideas. "Tina! Me an' you an' Cindy need to go flyin'."

"If you go in HER plane," I said, "Tina needs to get checked out on that tail-dragger. That's quite a bit different for take-off and landing, you know…"

"That's what I heard," Tina said.

"An' you have to wiggle your butt when you're on the ground," Susan laughed. "But we oughtta do that."

"I'm sure that Dan won't mind us getting you checked out in their plane," I said. "So, what's the verdict on the weekend?"

"Great!" Tina said. "I think we have a great bunch."

Susan chirped in agreement. "I had a great time. Cindy's just like she sounds on the phone!" Then she sighed. "I felt kinda lonesome, though… Ya'll got each other. Cindy's got Dan."

Tina spoke first. "Susan, you'll find somebody… don't even give it a second thought. These things happen in due time."

"I know," Susan sighed heavily. "There's NOBODY like that at school."

"You don't want to settle, Sis," Tina continued. "When you look at a guy, ask yourself how he'd fit in with the way WE are. I can't see anybody at school like that, either."

"I know you don't need advice from some old guy," I said, wading fearlessly in, "But you're gonna meet a lot of guys your age at school next year, and if you keep your head together, you might see a better match. Don't force it, baby…"

Susan answered, "Oh, you an' Tina have got me rethinking that whole 'old guy' thing, Mister Alan. And I'm okay. I guess I'm just comin' down from the weekend. I really had a good time, you know. I'm not gonna go out an' do somethin' stupid."

"Good," Tina and I said in unison.

"I pay attention, you know," she continued. "Mom an' Dad show me what a good marriage is s'posed to look like. An, Tina, you an' me, we listen an' we know who's doin' what with whoever at school. How many of those couples are one person USIN' the other for something?"

"Most of 'em," my young wife noted. "That's nothing but a mess. And a lot of adults are as bad. Or worse."

"Yeah, Tina. We talked about some of that." I knew that Tina had explained to Susan her whole history, mom, grandmother, 'uncles', the whole story.

"That's why we talked about going slow. And waiting. What about Ramona?" Tina had told me the story of homely Ramona, good-natured, shy, and how one of the scoundrels at school had decided that Ramona was good for ONE thing, and by paying a little attention to her, had induced her to think he was sincerely THE ONE. Ramona was pregnant, and the baby daddy was three girls further into his quest.

"I'm NOT going to be like Ramona. Or any of those other girls. Six pregnant in our graduating class."

"That we know of," Tina countered.

And this conversation was taking place at two and a half miles a minute, several thousand feet over the Tennessee countryside. Fifteen miles out, Tina pulled the throttle back and dropped the nose, letting our descent keep our speed up. Home field in sight, she made her radio call, as usual, and as usual, heard nothing in reply, and she entered the traffic pattern. In a few more minutes we were on the ground.

Tina took us to the fuel pumps and I topped off the tanks. She then taxied to the hangar and we put our plane away after pulling out my truck.

We dropped Susan at home in early afternoon, stayed for coffee and a discussion of some of the conversations that we'd had this weekend. Susan seemed even more confident of her plans, and her confidence bled over to her parents.

We gracefully declined offers to stay for dinner, mainly because it was so early in the day. On the ride from the airfield to Susan's house, Tina was sitting in the center seat because there were three of us in the cab. Going home, she was sitting in the center seat because she wanted to be next to me. And that's a good thing.

Entering the trailer was the same as getting home. It was necessary, given the restricted amount of space, that we tend to housekeeping swiftly and frequently, so as soon as we got the bags in, I started sorting laundry.

"Dump soup okay, baby?" she called from the kitchen.

"How about hash?" I asked.

"Your call, hon," she said. But I have to TEND hash. Dump soup can simmer while we do other things…" I ducked sideways to look in her direction and she was sporting that quirky grin.

"Soup," I said, succumbing to the more immediate appetite presented by five feet eight inches of happy femininity.

She handled her chore as I loaded the washing machine and started it, then she was pushing me towards the bed where we proceeded to reduce one another to quivering masses.

We ate our dinner together in bathrobes, watched TV while I finished the laundry and she secured the kitchen, and then went through our shower routine before going to bed.

As was often the case when we'd made love earlier in the evening or late afternoon, we didn't have a sense of urgency. We were sitting in the bed, legs crossed, looking through our respective Daytimers, making notes and comments.

"I'd like to see where you work, you know," she said.

"We're supposed to be getting a new safety director, baby. When we do, I can do something about that."

"Well, I do want to see the place where you work. Cindy's a mascot for Dan's project."

"Lemme see what I can do. Might be hard to get just YOU out there right off, but I believe I can get your science class out there. Should've done it a long time ago, I guess. Sorry, baby..."

"I don't mean to make you feel bad. I'm just really interested, Alan."

I regarded her soft face. "Baby, you're my everything. Most wives could care less what the husband does as long as the money comes home with him. I have, you, bright, beautiful, young, and YOU want to follow me, to work alongside me. I should get you into the place. You might change your mind and decide to become a lit. major or something."

"Not even close, baby. But if you can, I'd like to visit."

"'Kay, sweetheart," I said.

She crawled up a little higher and I let my hands wander over her sweet form, lifting the hem of her nightshirt, touching bare skin, warm, smooth, desirable. Her purrs signaled her happiness with my touch. Her face neared mine and she licked her lips. We kissed, her body melting to form against mine.

In the aftermath of our lovemaking, she sighed. "Poor Susan. Alan, she looks at us and wishes she could find somebody."

"Baby," I said, "She's eighteen. She doesn't NEED to find somebody yet. She's a sweet girl. She just needs to hang on for a while. The right one will come along. I believe it. If she doesn't turn herself into one of those brazen, burned out things that so many girls seem to want to do these days."

"She's a good girl, Alan."

"She's got a mom and dad that adore her, and she's got good friends: you and Cindy. She'll do okay."

"Okay, baby," Tina said.

I slid downward in the bed, laying my head on my pillow, and I had Tina's reddish brown brushing against my cheek, little tendrils of perfume wafting into my nostrils. I reached over, started a quiet playlist on the sound system and turned out the lights.

The last thing I said to her was "I love you, Tina."

Monday morning came all too soon and we swung into the routine. I kissed her as I was heading out the door.

"Don't forget me," she said.

"Hah! The stars will all blink out first, little one," I said.

I was at work when I got the phone call. Mackey, my lead technician, was headed home on an emergency, his dad's health hadn't been good, and things suddenly got worse. He apologized, and I commiserated and sent him on his way.

"Stay in touch, buddy," I said. "And good luck!"

"Thanks, Alan. I'll call you." And he left. My next phone call was to Dan.

"yeah, brother-in-law," He answered.

"I'm in a bind," I said. I told him the sad story. "Didn't you say you were losing Jason at the end of the week?"

"Yeah," he said. "Why? You wanna talk to 'im?"

"Yeah. I need somebody for two months, but I'll take what I can get."

I talked to Jason. Made arrangements for him to be on site in three days. That took care of the big hurdle.

Next hurdle. Into Carl's office.

"Whatcha got, Alan?" he asked.

I explained about Tina's science class. "We have enough stuff up and put together to where it'll make a decent tour," I said.

"Lemme talk to the safety department. Management won't care if safety's okay with it. When? Gimme a date."

"I have to talk to the school," I said. "I got an email address. Lemme send one out."

"Okay. I'll get the hurdles down."

"'Preciate it, Carl. Just think of the good you're doin' for the future of our country."

He snorted.

I went back to my office and composed an email to Tina's science teacher.

The rest of the day was as routine as one can get on a construction site. And at the end of it, I went home to Tina.

# Chapter 21

The exchange of email with Tina's physics teacher, Mister Graham, went through a couple of cycles between Monday and Tuesday. I circulated the results to my boss and the game was set: student tour on Friday.

A few sessions around the coffee pot and I and my fellow engineers had an educational itinerary set up that would merge the 'oooh' and 'ahhhh' stuff with a little bit of a look into the world of heavy industry.

Wednesday afternoon I got a call on the radio. "Alan, can you come to the trailer? Your new tech is here."

I buzzed my golfcart back up the road to my office trailer. I walked in the door and heard the administrator say, "That's Alan Addison."

"I told her, "You forgot the 'impressive' part," laughing. The guy standing in front of me had sandy hair and was six feet tall and maybe twenty pounds overweight. To him I extended a hand. "You're Jason…"

"Ellerbee," he said, giving my hand an authoritative shake. "Dan Richards says you need some help?"

"We do. Lost my lead tech. His dad's back home in bad health. He had to go."

"Bad news," he said. "Hate to hear it." He looked genuine when he said it. "So where are we at on the work?"

Business-like, he was. I looked at his feet. "Those steel-toes?" Safety toe shoes were required out in the field.

"Yep!" he said, waving a hard hat. He made a bit of a show of pulling a pair of safety glasses from his pocket. "Let's roll!"

We drove and walked through various areas of the project as I showed him work already done and work left to do. "Dan says you're the guy for this."

"I like to think so. If Dan says good things about me, they must be true. Guy's too darned smart to fool."

I laughed. "He wants you to THINK that," I said.

Jason laughed. "He SAID you'd say that."

Sense of humor. I figured that he was going to a good one.

We adjourned to my office and put together a plan for him to pick up work where Mackey left off.

"So where are you livin' around here?" he asked.

"Me an' my wife live in an RV park fifteen minutes from here."

"Oh, yeah… Dan told me about you an' him an' your wives meeting. He's doin' that too." He paused. "You've, like, MET Cindy?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah. She's my wife's new sister."

"Right. He told me YOUR wife's seventeen. What's with you two and the young wives? Radiation from that nuke job?"

"Parallel development," I said. "What are you doing for a place to stay?"

"Hotel for the time being. Per diem'll cover it. Until I see how long I'm gonna be here. If it's a couple months, I may try an apartment."

"I know a realtor in town if you want some help. She's the mom of one of Tina's friends." Kathy Carter, Susan's mom, was a small-town multitasker: Book-keeping for a few clients, a little real estate sales.

"Great," he said. "When are you going to have an idea about Mackey coming back?"

"I'll give him until the end of the week. He was talking about the family farm." I explained, "Mackey's family was running a farm with his dad supervising the operation. Mackey was the son and heir and was expected to step in. He'd thought he had a few years before his dad needed the help. A stroke ended those thoughts."

"I don't mind doing this," Jason said. "The next one off the block after the Alabama job is somewhere in the Dakotas. Little further from home than I wanted to range. But I don't like to feel like a vulture, either."

"Don't, then. Mackey's a good guy, but he's doin' what sons are supposed to do." We went through the technical things that we needed to cover to provide continuity in the loss of a key player in my power business. I was busy making mental notes to make sure that we didn't let anything fall through the cracks. End of the day came.

We headed back to the office. I shut my computer down. "This desk is yours," I said. "Still got Mackey's stuff in it, though. Just keep track. If he's gone for good, we'll box it up and send it to 'im."

Jason dropped off his hard hat. "What'd'ya do for dinner around here?"

"Oh, there are a few places. Where're you stayin'?" I asked. He named the hotel. "Tell you what… if you go get checked in, there's a catfish place right up the highway from there. We'll meet you there for dinner. Sixish?"

He smiled. "Sounds good."

I followed him out of the gate past the security guard and got on the highway. I pulled my cell phone out and called Tina.

"Hi, baby," she said.

I could picture her smile when I heard her voice. "Don't cook. We're gonna have dinner with my replacement technician, sweetness."

"Uh, Alan, I hope you don't mind if Susan tags along…"

"Susan?"

"Yeah, she's over here and we're working on a research paper. Two of 'em, actually. We were waiting for you. Thinking pizza. But goin' out is okay, too." She paused. "Susan, Alan's meeting a new technician for dinner. You wanna come, huh?"

"Sure!" came Susan's answer.

"Okay. I'll see you two in ten minutes."

"Okay, love of my life," Tina lilted.

Gave the ride home an extra incentive. I pulled up at our trailer behind Tina's and Susan's cars and walked in to see the pair. Tina was up, having heard me drive up, and she met me right inside the door for a welcoming kiss and hug.

"Mmmmm, hey, baby," she purred.

"Hi, Mister Alan," chirped Susan. "Me an' your wife had a fight, you know…"

I looked at Tina. "You and Susan? Over what?"

We had to choose a subject for our research papers and since electrical engineering is in the future, we both chose Nikola Tesla."

"Who won?"

Susan giggled. "Both of us. Teacher said she was gonna read 'em BOTH and they'd better be different."

"Easy," I said. "Tesla did so much…"

Tina interrupted. "Uh-huh. So Susan's gonna do the early life and his AC power stuff, and I'm going to do his later life and the freaky stuff that he was working on in his later years."

"How much do you need?" I asked.

"Ten pages, type-written, with references," Susan said.

"There are whole books on Tesla, kiddo," I said.

"So what time are we meeting this guy?" Tina asked.

"Catfish joint at six. I got time to change shoes and stretch out."

"I'm in the way," Susan said, from the sofa.

"Hardly, little girl child," I laughed. "I'll just stretch out on the bed. You two keep doing what you're doing. We're always happy to have you around."

I pulled my work shoes off and pushed them out of the way, then got horizontal, lying on the covers of our bed, letting my back stretch. I closed my eyes, listening to the two of them conferring over the sound of computer keyboards and mice.

A bit later I looked up to see them shutting computers down. "Let's go," Tina said.

The three of us loaded into my pickup, Tina squeezing against me quite a bit more than the space in the front seat dictated, but I was okay with that. We pulled into the parking lot at the restaurant and I looked around for Jason's truck. It wasn't there. Walking to the door, I called his cell phone.

"I'm five minutes out. Dozed off," he said. "Just get us a table and I'll see you in a bit."

"Okay, buddy. There's gonna be three of us."

"Three?"

"Yeah. Me, Tina, and Tina's friend Susan."

"Okay. Be there in a bit."

We went inside and got seated. Ordered a couple of appetizers and some drinks and spent the time talking. I kept watching the door and I saw Jason walk in. I waved him over.

He walked up to the table. "Jason, this is Tina, my wife. And this is Susan, her best friend. Ladies, this is Jason Ellerbee. He's gonna work with me on the project."

"Hi, Jason," Tina said.

"Hello," Susan said. Her blue eyes brightened and she smiled.

Jason sat down. Susan nudged a basket of chips in his direction.

"Have some. This place has good salsa."

Jason's brow knit. "Chips an' salsa in a southern catfish joint… Hmmm…."

Susan giggled. "Oh we're VERY multicultural around here." She smirked. "An' one of the cooks is named Pedro…" Snicker. "That's 'is wife waitin' tables over there."

And so dinner proceeded. Jason was the new guy, so he got questioned mercilessly.

"Did you go to college?" Tina asked.

"Yes."

"What was your major?" Susan's question.

"Electrical engineering technology."

"Really?" Tina asked, "Why not the whole 'engineering' thing?"

"I listened to bad advice from my loser buddies," Jason said. "Told me that the math was too hard."

"So why don't you go back?" Tina asked.

"Too busy earning a living now," Jason said.

"Do ya WANT to?" Susan asked.

"I've thought about it. Almost could…"

"Why don't ya?" Susan said.

"What is this? Give Jason a break, ya'll!" I said.

Jason smiled. "'S okay, Alan. Sometimes I ask myself the same thing."

"I don't know if Dan explained about this bunch, Jason. His wife, Cindy…"

"Yeah, little redhead. They call 'er the 'Engineer's Apprentice'! Dan says she's graduatin' in May. Fourteen. And going to college in the fall. Electrical engineering."

"Yeah, that's her," I said. "Tina and Susan are her sisters now. All THREE of 'em are going to the same college. All three for electrical engineering."

"Oh!" Jason said, surprised.

"You're looking at two of the top five in their graduating class, a couple of ACT's in the thirty range…"

Jason's eyes brightened. He looked at Susan. "You? What happened to the 'dumb blonde' thing?"

He was shooting back. Good!

Susan giggled. "I, sir, am the EXCEPTION that proves the rule!"

"She has her moments," Tina giggled.

Jason proved to be quite a conversationalist and his presence gave the girls a fresh audience for talking about their 'community' plans.

He looked at me. "So that's what Dan was alluding to? He was being pretty obvious about me coming to work on some new venture."

"That's right," I said. "Wives and Susan in school. Me and Dan in business. We need some good techs that can think on their own."

"Told 'im I'd think about it." He grinned at Tina and Susan. "I don't know, though… pretty scary bunch, this is…"

We finished dinner and went our separate ways. In the truck with Tina and Susan, I said, "Dan spoke highly of 'im. Seems…"

"Quick on his feet," Susan said. "Smart guy."

"That's what I thought," I said. "Dan recommended 'im."

The conversation turned sideways to the differences between engineering and technology degrees. "A guy can make a good living with the technology degree,' I said, and lot of companies will hardly make a differentiation if they're hiring for a staff position, but there's a difference when you go out for business and you represent yourself as an engineer."

"So if I'm a company that calls you an' says I need some engineering work, and you send Jason…"

"I don't represent Jason as THE engineer. Jason is an engineering technician. Eyes and ears. And if he's as good as Dan seems to think, then a client would be well advised to listen to what Jason has to say. And if Jason has to put some changes in place, he's going to use his judgment and put me and Dan in the loop, because in most cases, there needs to be a document signed by a state-licensed professional engineer."

"Oh," Susan said. "I think I see…"

"Has very little to do with actual capabilities, Susan," I continued. "I know some licensed engineers that could screw up a bowling ball with a rubber hammer. But those are the rules."

Tina jumped in. "So what would it take somebody like Jason to get an engineering degree?"

"Probably a couple of advanced math classes, and a bunch of engineering classes. If he wanted to do that, he needs to take his college transcript and go talk with an advisor at the college he's thinking of attending."

"Mmmm-hmmm," Tina said. She snuggled a little closer to me.

"So why would somebody want the other degree?" Susan asked.

"Some people are scared of the theory and the math. Engineering is a bit more strenuous in that regard." I knew a bunch of acquaintances who'd started out in the program and fell off, some quicker than others. But I wasn't going to paint the hurdles more negative than they needed to be for these two. "But I know YOU, and I don't think you'll have anything to worry about if you just pay attention and keep up in class. College is different than high school. You pay your money, and it's up to you to do the work. If you don't, you simply fail, and they keep the money."

"You make it sound almost cold," Susan said.

"Can be," I answered. "But some professors are actually human, and if they see you putting forth an effort, you can get help if you need it."

"Like you'll need it," Tina said to her. "And WE will all be helping each other."

We were pulling into the park. I put my truck behind Tina's little Honda and we got out. Susan gave Tina and me each a hug and drove off. Tina and I went inside.

"So what's the deal with this guy, baby," she asked.

"What do you mean, 'deal'," I said. "He's replacing Mackey. I asked Dan. Dan said he's VERY good, and he was finishing up with them in Alabama. So here he is."

"He's the guy Dan was talking about, for the business?"

"Uh, yeah…"

Tina's eyes twinkled. "Just want to know who all is goin' to be in our community…"

"He's working with us. It's a JOB. Me and him and Dan. Maybe a couple more. Then you an' Cindy an' Susan. School. Two different arenas."

Back in the park, Susan gave me and Tina both a hug and got in her car and left. Tina and I went inside.

I knew she was itching to talk. "Now THAT'S interesting," she said.

"What's interesting?"

"Your new technician." A bell went off in my head. Tina silenced it. "Did ya see Susan's eyes light up?"

"The guy's smart, and he's a good conversationalist, and WE all got along together. That's what I saw."

"Is he married?" Tina asked.

"I have no idea. I didn't ask." I looked into those blue eyes. "And why is that important?"

"I had an idea…" she said as she started undressing for her shower.

"Now don't be going around trying to fix people up, sweetie. For ONE thing, he's ten years older'n her…"

She turned to me, still in her panties. "Not like TWENTY years, is it?"

"Okay, you get THAT point, baby, but what'd Susan say? 'The exception that proves the rule'?"

Smirk. "And Dan an' Cindy?"

Okay, let's try a different angle. "Sweetie, these things have to happen on their own. You can't force 'em. What would you have said if somebody just came up and tried to fix you and me up… out of the clear blue?"

She looked thoughtful. "uh…"

I continued, "I was the victim of some of those 'they'd make a CUTE couple' things, you know…"

"Okay, guy," she said, smiling. "I'll back off. But just sayin'…"

She slipped into the tiny bathroom and I heard water running. In a matter of minutes, it was my turn. Twenty minutes later we were both bathed and I was shaved and we were curled up in bed, reading and talking with music playing in the back ground.

Tina wasn't finished, though. "I still think it'd be funny… In a good way."

I had to counter that. "Baby, can you imagine what that would do to Susan's mom and dad if she started dating a guy YOU introduced her to, and he was ten years older'n her? I can't imagine that conversation going well."

"I know. I just thought of that." She rolled over, dropping her Kindle on the nightstand beside her, and kissed me. "I'll be a good girl. And keep my mouth shut."

Her tongue slid between my lips, searching for mine. She giggled. "I'll keep my mouth shut about THAT!"

I put my own book down and rolled to meet her. We merged into happy love-making and in the afterglow, she was against my side, purring, as I slowly, softly caressed her, my touch feeding me more of the wonderful girl who was my wife.

The alarm was harsh, but not unexpected, and we rolled into our weekday routine, happy with each other, saddened that we were heading in different directions. I walked into my office trailer to find Jason already standing at the coffee pot, stirring a fresh mug.

"Hope I made it right," he said. "Everybody's different with coffee."

"And some of us walk into the office expecting the worst, so everything is good." I poured myself a mug and added the cream and sugar. "Mmmm, better than normal."

He laughed, tossing a bag of Louisiana coffee. "Dan gave me a few pounds from his last trip home. This is the last one."

We sat and plotted out the day's plan. It was pretty easy, actually. Jason had an idea of what he wanted to start on, and it made sense to me.

"How was your room?" I asked.

"Motel room. Seen a million of 'em," he said. "This 'un's a little on the up side of the scale."

"I hear you," I said. "It does get old after a while. That's why I had the trailer built."

"Uh-huh. I saw Dan's. He said you talked about it, he an' you."

"Yeah, my second job with it. Works well."

"Kinda small with you and your wife, uh, Tina?"

"Yeah, Tina wasn't part of the original specification."

About that time, the process engineer stuck his head in the door with questions, interrupting the chat, so Jason waved as he left the office.

I didn't see him again until lunchtime when he walked back in. He put his laptop on his desk.

"You want raw copies of the test reports?"

"Absolutely," I said. Our business was rife with sad stories of weeks of work lost from 'computer slid off the work bench' and 'somebody broke into my truck an' stole EVERYTHING', and one way around that was to take the files from each day's work and put them in multiple locations. From his computer to mine, to the corporate server, and I felt much better.

"What do you do for lunch?" he asked.

"Half the time I bring a sandwich, but I didn't today. Wanna go have one at the diner?"

"Sure," he smiled.

"Let's go, then!" Twenty minutes later we were seated and waiting on two of the lunch specials.

Two working guys chatting, we covered a lot of the standard things: near disasters (funny), real disasters that made two criteria to make them funny (somebody else's fault and no physical injury), people we'd worked with, technology…

"So how'd you end up with Tina? If I'm not bein' nosy? I watched 'er look at you. You're being adored by a what/ Seventeen year old?"

"Nah… There's a bit of talk going around, but lemme give you the short version." I explained a little of the story.

"And she's graduating this year?"

"Yep. And looking at Auburn in the fall. Her and Susan and Dan's little redhead."

"The Engineer's Apprentice. You think stories went around about you an' Tina. People were waitin' for HER to start showin'… Wondered why he wasn't in JAIL!"

"I couldn't believe it myself. But…"

"But they're quite the pair," he said. "I'm jealous."

"Married? Not? Not that I'm bein' nosy," I laughed.

"Turnabout is fair play," he said. "Divorced. Short version? I came home after a week on the road, six twelve-hour days, and the house was empty. Papers on the table. Can't say I miss 'er that much, really. I made money ALMOST as fast as she spent it."

"Ouch! Sounds almost too familiar," I said. "Kids?"

"Thank god, no…" He looked wistful. "Wouldn't mind a kid or two, but thankfully I didn't start with HER." Then he got another look. "What's the deal with the little blonde? Susan?"

"Tina's best friend in school. Out of the three, she and Cindy tied on ACT scores. Both thirty-one. Tina got a thirty-two."

"Smart girl. I could tell by the conversation last night."

"Uh… Jason, Susan's eighteen. Don't…"

"I wasn't, Alan. But I found it nice that she hangs out with you two. Her parents?"

"My best friends up here, well, some of them. Dad has a rental business. Her mom is a realtor and has a bookkeeping business. Susan's their only child."

"Uh, Alan… I wasn't talkin' about anything with 'er. Just, you know…"

"Sorry. I'm kind of protective about her. Tina's friend, you know…"

"Okay…" Jason looked amused. "But she IS a cutie…"

"Let's leave at that. I'm not gonna have to worry about you trollin' playgrounds, am I?"

"No more than I have to worry about you shootin' your way out of the restaurant…"

That evening I recounted the conversation to Tina. Left her smiling.

# Chapter 22

Life was good. We were making good progress at work. I watched Jason pretty closely for the Thursday and Friday of his first week and didn't take long to determine that he was exactly as Dan had represented him: extremely capable and willing to take the initiative in scheduling his work.

I also found it interesting that before we left the office Thursday he asked about the location and hours of the library and what sort of activities he might find that didn't involve bars and clubs. A good sign, I thought. I'd worked with some who'd come to work some mornings hung over and suffering from lack of sleep, and when you're working around high voltage electricity, that's not the best condition to be in.

Friday was the tour. At nine, a school bus pulled into the parking lot and discharged a dozen students and a teacher.

As the boss had said, "You asked for this. They're yours." So I was there, along with the safety director, and we herded the group into the conference trailer. Mister Graham, retired civil engineer, now physics teacher, was the 'adult leadership'.

At least it was an 'honors' class, which meant that a certain percentage of idiots, thugs and other human detritus was eliminated. Instead, I saw before me the academic cream of the crop, but they WERE still high school students.

"Isn't that your husband, Tina?" one girl whispered.

Tina nodded. "Shhhhh!"

"If I can have your attention, please," I said.

The group MOSTLY quieted down.

"I'm Alan Addison. I'm an electrical engineer on this project, and yes, I AM Tina's husband. We at Chambers Group are happy to have you all come visit us. We hope that what you see today will give you an idea of what it takes to keep modern life going, and just maybe it will pique your interest into becoming one of the people who make these things happen."

"I need to tell you, though, that this is a REAL construction site, not an amusement park, and the hazards, while we work very hard to control them, are VERY real. I'm going to turn you over to Mister Gillis for a few minutes. He's our site safety representative (and big anal-retentive asshole, but I didn't say that part) and he will give you a safety briefing and then pass out hard hats and safety glasses and earplugs for your visit. These are things we use every day." I turned to the overweight and overbearing man standing beside me. "Mister Gillis, if you please…"

I'd heard the briefing before, so I stepped out of the room and picked up my coffee cup. Still warm. I saw Tina smile at me as I moved away. And Susan. Susan wiggled her fingers in a little wave, smiling.

Gillis finished his spiel and started passing out the safety gear. After a few bouts with "but it'll mess up my HAIR!" and "I don't CARE what's cool, the brim goes to the FRONT!" and "Yes, EVERYBODY looks just as goofy in the safety glasses" we started off on the tour.

First stop was the control room. It was taking shape now. The operator consoles were in place, although the screens were mostly dead. I got my control engineer buddy to power one up with a preliminary display to show what state of the art controls looked like.

"Dude, I could TOTALLY do THAT!" One kid said.

"Jeremy, Just 'cuz you're a warrior troll emperor on-line doesn't mean you know anything else…" one of his buddies chided.

"Jeremy, if you want to give it a try, you need to call Mister Harris there. He's the controls engineer and he's the guy that built that display."

"And fifty others," Harris said. "Do you do any programming?"

Jeremy back-tracked, "Uh, nooo… But I'm good with computers."

"If you want a closer look, tell your teacher and I'll see if I can't arrange for you to get one," said Harris. "You never know. Might find out that it floats your boat."

Jeremy's face displayed a little bit of thoughtfulness. We did few questions and answers.

"Follow me," I said. I took them into the control equipment room where electricians were busily terminating cables that brought data in from the unit outside. Dozens of multi-conductor cables were strewn on the floor like Technicolor serpents. Others shimmered in foil jackets. "Each of those cables goes from ONE specific place outside, in what we call 'the field', to in here, where it goes to a specific place on those interface cabinets."

"Duuuude…" one of the other students said, obviously impressed.

"And Harris in there has drawings that show EVERY one of those cables and instruments in several different ways. One of these wires coming in will make something happen on his display. And a control change on his display will send a signal out on other wires to make something happen out there. It's not magic, guys. Everything here, somebody had to sit down and think about and design, and now these guys," I pointed to one of the electricians, "Like James here, they have to install them. So that YOU can have all the plastic cups you'll ever need."

We walked out into the huge building. "Who's got a hot car?" I asked. "Not your Honda, Tina."

Titters came from the class. One guy raised his hand. "Got a big pickup truck. It's got a hemi in it. Three hundert ninety horsepower!"

"It's 'is dad's truck!" somebody helpfully added. Snickering ensued.

"Shuddup!" he said.

I patted one of my little motors. "Here's a thousand horsepower. And not just to go up the hill, then back off the gas. This is a thousand horsepower, twenty-four hours a day. For years."

I took them through the production unit, had the process engineer do an overview. He brought out his 'show and tell' board with glass containers of raw materials and finished product, and talked about temperatures and pressures and 'gozinta here' and 'comes outta there'.

Then we headed back into MY world, the electrical substation. Another overview, a few questions asked and answered, and I said, "This is Jason Ellerbee, my lead technician. Jason, can you roll one of those fifteen thousand volt circuit breakers out to show 'em?"

Jason did that, explained a bit about it. Everybody watched. Little blonde in the front watched closer than most. I had Jason show them the safety equipment, the garb needed to work safely around live electrical equipment.

"Why don't one of you try it on?" I looked at the class, picked the guy who was closest to fitting the grey quilted fire-retardant suit, and put him in it, then gloved him up. I put a pen on the floor. "Try to pick up that pen,' I said.

"You gotta be kiddin' me," came the muffled reply. "How do you SEE out of this thing?"

I did my high voltage demonstration with arcing and sparking from a high voltage (but very low power) demonstration unit. We played a bit with the new, electrically dead equipment to show the sights and sounds, then walked through the facility to the substation we had that was live, and showed them that one.

"Notice," I said, "Live electrical equipment looks and sounds almost EXACTLY like dead electrical equipment. And the person who doesn't recognize that is liable to find out in a flash."

Jason was there with me. "Like my old boss says, 'Not only will it kill you, but you'll hurt REAL bad the whole time you're dying.'"

"Remember my sparks, folks. If I hadn't had on gloves rated for twenty thousand volts, I'd be lying on the floor whimpering from just that little bit. A Taser compared to THIS stuff is like a squirt gun compared to Niagara Falls."

We herded everybody through the unloading facility where we took in our raw feedstocks, and the shipping facility where things went out to the world, then we ended back up in the conference trailer. I showed the 3-D models of the plant, all computer-generated, and pointed out where we'd actually walked.

The boss came out to see everybody off, passing out free T-shirts, and the tour was over.

Mister Graham stood in front of the group. "Mister Addison, Mister Greenlee, thank you for the tour. What'd'ya say, people?" he said to the class.

"Thank you…" rang out. I saw Tina smiling.

The tour ended, I went to my office. Steeped myself a cup of tea, with honey. Throat was sore from all the talking. Jason came in towards lunchtime.

"You should do this shit for a living," he said, smirking.

"Oh, I don't know. Might give you the next one. You have stage presence."

"Yeah! I'm practically the Vanna White of high voltage!" he laughed. "So that was one of their advanced placement classes?"

"Yeah. The teacher is a retired civil engineer."

"I heard some of 'em ask some pretty good questions," he said. "Maybe we'll get a few engineers out of the bunch."

"At least two," I said.

"Yeah. I noticed Tina and Susan. You got lunch, or you wanna go catch something?"

"Let's go!"

We took off in my truck, headed for the restaurant and fought our way to a booth.

"Went to the library last night," he said. "Somebody already colored in the book…"

"I expect better out of you than tired old jokes, Jason. That one's so old it's part of the fossil record… Besides, I've been to the library."

"Still," he said.

"And that's why god invented the internet, anyway."

"Yeah, but it's nice to be where books are, sometimes. And other stuff. D'ya know that Dan an' Cindy do concerts at the park where they stay?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "We went to a bluegrass concert a couple of weekends ago and Cindy sang a couple of numbers with'em, just like that."

"Ya'll got anything like that around here?"

"Every now and then. Tina and I used to drive to a concert every time we could. We're into classical, but we've done bluegrass, too. And since we got the plane, we can spread out to cover a bit more area."

So Friday ended and I get off work and as soon as I'm on the road, I flip my phone open and call Tina. She's been out of school for almost an hour by now.

"Hey, babe! " I said when I heard the rustle of phone to ear.

"Hi, yourself, but I'm not the babe you're prob'ly lookin' for," Susan giggled.

"No, but pretty close, I'm sure. Where's Tina?"

"In the bathroom!"

"Our trailer, huh?"

"'Course!"

I heard a muffled sound over the phone. "It's your husband," Susan said. To me, she said, "She KNOWS who it is. She has a unique ring tone for you! I think that's sooooo cute!"

I heard Tina's voice. "Gimme MY husband!" Susan's giggle. "Hi, sweetie! You on your way home?"

"Yep! What're you an' Susan doing?"

"Working on those term papers," she said. "I thought we'd go get something to eat when you got home. If you want…"

"Sounds good," I said. "Although I love your 'dump soup'."

"It gets old, baby," Tina said. "We'll see you in a minute, huh?"

"Yes, baby," I said.

"'Kay, my love! Bye!"

It was a small source of pride that I walked in on the two of them and got assaulted by questions about the life of Nikola Tesla and I was able to answer many of them. He was one of my heroes.

"How does HE know all this stuff, Tina?" Susan asked.

Tina looked at me. I admitted that I'd written papers on Tesla myself.

"Figures," Susan said. "Dad said 'Isn't he that guy with the coil sparky thing?' and Mom didn't have a clue."

"Everybody's not the same, Susan," Tina said. "It's Alan's thing, is all…"

"You two go ahead and do your work. I'm gonna stretch out for a few minutes before dinner!"

"About that," Susan said, "We're supposed to meet Mom an' Dad at the restaurant."

"Okay," I said.

"Dad said, and I quote, 'don't give him any crap about payin' tonight'" Susan said with a giggle.

"Sounds good to me" I said. I kicked my shoes off and lay back on the covers and closed my eyes for a few minutes. Dozed right off. Woke up to Susan's giggles and Tina's wiggles of my sock-covered toes. Life could certainly be worse.

I got up and put on my street shoes and the three of us headed out to dinner. We arrived at the restaurant and saw Mike and Kathy's SUV in the parking lot. The three of us walked in and spotted them sitting at a round table to accommodate the five of us. Mike rose and shook my hand when we walked up.

"How was the tour?" he asked.

"I thought it went well," I said. "But ask them. They may have a different idea."

Kathy eyed Susan. "Well kiddo, you've seen the inside of one of those projects. You still want engineering?"

"Oh, yes! An' Dad! Have YOU ever seen one of those things?"

"In my younger days, baby," he said.

"It's amazing!" Susan exclaimed.

"It IS!" Tina added. "No wonder Cindy gets so excited about it."

"Cindy? Oh, yeah… Ya'll's sister!" Kathy chuckled.

The conversation turned to ACT scores and reaffirmation of college plans. We were sipping drinks and talking when Susan let out a little squeal. We all turned to her.

"That's Jason!"

"Who's Jason," Mike asked.

"He works with Alan."

"My new technician. Lost one for family problems. Got Jason to take over for 'im."

Susan was waving.

Jason saw us. He sauntered over. "Hi Susan! Alan. Tina."

Mike stood. "I'm Mike Carter, Susan's dad. And this is Kathy, Susan's mom."

"Pleased to meet you both. I'm Jason Ellerbee. I work with Alan!"

"Are you meeting somebody here?" I asked.

"No, just me an' my book," Jason said, sheepishly. "Was gonna find myself a table in the corner and eat a meal and read."

"That's sooo SAD!" Susan chirped. "Why don'tcha sit with us!?!?!"

"Yeah, why don't ya?" Tina reinforced.

"Got an extra chair," Kathy said.

"No use in tryin' to escape, Jace," I said. "It's too late!"

"I guess it's better than sitting in a corner," he said, pulling out the empty chair and settling in across from… Susan. He pulled a paperback book out of his back pocket and laid it on the table. "Uncomfortable to sit on," he said.

I looked at the book's cover. It was science fiction. I made a comment.

"Geek fodder" he laughed.

"I wouldn't say that, exactly," Mike said. "I read this stuff."

"Me too," I said. "But then, I've been accused of being a geek an' a nerd all my life."

"Oh, yeah," Jason said. "I know the feelin'."

Tina brought up the day's tour. "You did a good job explaining that big circuit breaker," she said.

"I didn't know that Alan was going to tag me with that," he said. He looked at me. "What if I'd've turned into a tongue-tied idiot?"

"I'd've blamed it on exposure to industrial chemicals," I laughed.

The meal went pleasantly. I already knew how Tina and I interacted with Susan and her parents. I was not too awfully surprised to find that Jason was more than adequately sociable in that setting. He had a dry, self-deprecating, sense of humor, and was good listener as well as not the least bit bashful about jumping into the conversation.

When the meal finished, he was trying to pick up the tab for the whole table, but Mike stepped in. "I told Alan that this one was mine!"

"But Mike, I just barged in here…"

"Nope. You got commandeered. And I don't have any problem with this at all!"

"Okay," Jason said. "But I get the next one!"

We split into three vehicles in the parking lot. Tina slid inside the cab of our truck and snuggled up against me.

"What are you grinning about?" I asked.

"Coincidences," she grinned.

"Jason? Not much of a coincidence. There's what? A half-dozen places to eat in town, and two of those are fast food?"

"And that means exactly what?"

"That on any given evening, we stand a pretty good chance of running into Jason at dinner."

She giggled. "Maybe so, but it was still neat!"

"You need to let this drop, baby!"

"Let WHAT drop?"

"Susan and Jason" I said.

"Whatever do you mean?" she said, smirking.

"You KNOW what I mean, smarty!"

"You know babe," she said, "I'm NOT pushing that. Just thinkin' though…"

"We don't know anything about how Jason is, sweetie…"

"I know, but we know more now than we did before. He's eating by himself on Friday night. He brought a book to read, science fiction, at that. Thinks of himself as a geek. Just sayin'."

"Let THEM figure it out, cutie," I said. "And I don't know about Jason… Just met him this week, and you're trying to set him up with your best friend…"

"I'm not trying to set anybody up. "Just that among our little circle, he's single and compared with the guys at school, he's got a lot to offer."

"You… We don't know WHAT he has to offer. Some guys put up a good front."

"Why would he be puttin' up a front? I mean, if he's a decent person, why would he be puttin' up a front? How old is he?"

"Twenty-six," I said.

"And a geek," she said. "Just for the record, once you've established geek creds, a few years shouldn't make much difference, don't'cha think?"

"Just so he's for real, and not eyeballin' some convenient bit of nookie."

"I know guys like that," Tina said. "I watched Mom. And I pay attention to what goes on in school. And I would personally KILL somebody who hurt Susan. Honestly, sometimes she's so naïve…"

"She's also smart, and in her own way, a cutie, and sometime I don't think she realizes that there are guys who'd take advantage of her."

"I know. And we've HAD that talk."

"Just be careful…" I said.

"By the way, you," she said, "changing the subject, I enjoyed the tour today. I know you tell me about it, and show me pictures, but I got to see it for myself."

"And you still want to be an engineer?"

"Certainly do."

"What did the other kids say about it?"

"Well, you KNOW that Susan was as impressed as I was. And Jeremy wants to see if that controls guys, uh… Harris…"

"Brady Harris?"

"Yeah… him. Jeremy wants to see if he can go back and see what's with that kind of stuff."

"I might be able to swing a return trip for those who are interested. Tell Mr. Graham to email me."

"What if me an' Susan want a second look, too…"

"I'll talk with the boss."

Giggle. "Good! I know I didn't get to go there once or twice a week like Cindy, but I still get excited seeing what you do. And what I'm gonna do."

"Just so it's your choice, sweetness. You're in a position right now to do whatever you want." I said that as we turned into the RV park. We got out of the truck and before I got to the door, I was wrapped up by the arms of Tina.

She turned me around and kissed me in the cool night air. "You know what I want?" she asked.

"What do you want, little one?"

"I want us to run out of town and spend the night somewhere with a big shower and a king-sized bed. But right now, I think I can just get you inside…"

I was unlocking the door in the next second.

Since she didn't push me towards the bed, I guessed she wanted us showered and ready for sleep and I was right. I do love watching her undress, and she knows it. When she stepped out of her panties, she came to me and we kissed, my hands roaming over her sleek form.

"Mmmmm, just get your shower, baby… I've had a wonderful day, and I know how it's supposed to end…"

She stepped into the little bathroom and I heard the water run, stop, then run again. And she was out, a fluffy towel drying her off then she pulled the stool out and started drying her hair as I took my own turn. I finished shaving as she was stowing the hair dryer.

"Gimme the brush," I said.

Giggle. "You like that, huh baby?" she said, as I brushed her hair.

"One thing that floated my boat from Day One about you, little one."

She smiled.

"I got it bad for you, Tina."

"As well you should, Alan Addison. Because I am head over heels in love with YOU!"

NOW she pushed me to the bed at the end of the trailer. Love-making didn't start there. My life was making love with Tina. It just got physical in the bed starting with us in each other's arms, kissing, whispering breathless endearments to each other, our hands coursing over familiar territory on one another's bodies, teasing tantalizing, comforting, exciting.

Tina rolled onto her back, drawing me atop her, her hand stroking my hard dick, our mouths welded together. I felt her leg press against me and I raised to let her slide under me, trapping me between exquisite thighs. I slid inside her, listening to her happy sigh as she welcomed me into her body. I cupped my hands over those delectable little breasts and I looked into those blue eyes, losing myself.

She looped her hands behind my head, drawing me down to complete our union, melding our mouths together. As we kissed, we thrust together, her knees pulling up higher, then she wrapped those legs around me, her heels digging into my calves, urging me on, whimpering into my mouth as we mated. I could feel the fires building in my groin as our mouths separated.

"Oh, yesssss, babyyyyyy!" she keened. "I neeeeeed youuuuuu!"

I kept thrusting, striving to bring her to her peak, and I was rewarded by "Nnnnnnggggghhhhh! Ohgodohgodohgod! Yessss!" and a hard upward buck as she came. A couple of vigorous pushes later I was there with her.

She was easing down from the heights, smiling for me when my eyes opened again. We kissed. A little whisper: "Baby, we need to do something. You made me flood…"

"Turn around," I whispered back.

That meant we sixty-nined each other clean and she got another squealing orgasm before we were cuddled into each other's arms.

"I'm the happiest girl in the world, baby,' she said. "I know what it is to be loved."

"I do, too, little one," I said, softly stroking that sleek, fragrant hair.

"See, baby," she said. "'S all I want… for Susan to be this happy… I know Cindy's this happy. We all should be…"

I nuzzled her tresses. "Mmmmm," I purred. "It would be nice, baby… I never dreamed life would be as good as it is with us…"

She reached over and punched the button on the stereo and soft music filled our ears. We both slid on our nightshirts and with the lights out, we went to sleep wrapped together.

When we woke up, I remembered her request of the previous evening. We packed before we left the house in search of breakfast and then caught a meal on our way out of the area.

On the road, Tina called Cindy and the two of them chatted amiably for ten or fifteen minutes. Finally, she put her phone away.

"They're doin' a concert tonight," she said.

"Listening or playing?"

"Playing. Wish we could catch one, baby. I have the DVD, but it'd be so much better live…"

"Maybe one weekend…"

"I'd love that. Why don't you and her work out a date…"

Giggle. Can we bring Susan?"

"Sure! Why not?" I believe that the three of you can figure out how this is gonna work!"

"You sure it's okay? I think sometimes you let me do too much…"

"Well, I guess I could chain you to the stove, barefoot…"

"Pregnant. You forgot pregnant."

"I'm a little shy in that department."

"'S not a big deal, guy!" she smiled. "But you just smile and let me make all these wonderful plans, Alan. You get to say something, you know…"

"You want me to say something? Okay. I'll say something."

"What, then, baby?"

"That before I met you, I just sort of rolled along, going through the motions. Life was okay. I was happy with my work but I had no real plans. I'd get up every day on the weekends and wonder what to do. Now I have you. I don't have to be alone. You're my best friend, and you bring a whole new life with you with friends and goals and aspirations, and I think it's the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me."

"Gosh!" she said.

"Before you, there was just family and Terri, and that was all there was. Now there's YOU. That doesn't make the rest less important, it just means that YOU are my life."

"You mean it…"

"Yes, I mean it. I'm looking forward to every day with you. And our friends. And our family."

She laid her head on my shoulder. "Good," she said. "But I don't want you to feel like you have to cater to my every wish…"

"I don't, baby. But you seem to be wishing the right things."

"I just wanted life to be normal, Alan. That's all. I wanted to have a home where I could be secure and loved, and where I could share my life with my partner and friends and family. I dunno, I guess I never thought about what that partner would be, until…"

"Until what?"

"Until I came back from Susan's house that night and looked at you. Before that it was just some amorphous generic male. Because it was supposed to be me, married, you know… didn't have a clue about college, just that I was supposed to go, you know, and then career… I dunno…" she squeezed my arm. "And now all those things, they're laid out right in front of me, with you."

"No desire for adventure?"

"I'm sure we'll have enough adventures and surprises, and we'll enjoy what we can an' overcome the rest."

We timed our drive for a noonday meal on the road at a roadside restaurant and our check-in to the hotel left us some play time before dinner and a movie. After the movie was a luxuriously long hot shower together that was a major attraction of the trip, and then love-making that went forever as we reveled in each other's bodies, demanding and giving and sharing.

We slept in until nine and that put us going to late breakfast, but there we were, sitting across from each other in a booth, sipping coffee, waiting for pancakes to show up. As always, I was adoring the blue eyes and the auburn hair and the smile.

"What are you smiling about?" Tina asked.

"Just this gorgeous thing I' m looking at. Everything that I ever desired, she looks like it…"

Her smile broadened. "Thank you. I'm like that about you too, guy."

We finished breakfast and drove home. At ten in the morning, Tina called Cindy to check on her. They spent the normal ten or fifteen minutes, Tina mostly listening this time.

"Concert," Tina told me. "They did another one. Had fun."

"Good," I said.

Drive-through fast food burgers took care of lunch an hour out from home, putting us back in the park in time to take care of the domestic things we needed for the upcoming week.

We slid right back into the routine.

Monday. I talked to the boss and the client's project manager about the idea of giving a few of the tour group a second look. "Just giving a little back to the community," I said.

"Okay, I'll but that," Carl said. "But one of those 'interested kids' is your wife, right?"

"Coincidentally, that's true. But Carl, you know that Tina's headed for Auburn in the fall. Electrical engineering."

"You didn't tell me that," he said. "I knew she was going to college, is all."

I told him proudly about her ACT scores.

"You're not married to a little ball of fluff, are you, Alan?"

"Nope. Needed more out of life than that," Carl. You know me."

"Yeah, I do, Alan. By the way, how's your new tech working out?"

"So far, so good. You remember Dan Richards, right?"

"Yeah, I've worked with 'im a time or two."

"Dan recommended this guy, Jason Ellerbee. If Dan recommended 'im, he's likely a good one."

"Great!" Carl said. "I'll clear things with the safety department. You can make arrangements with the school, I assume…"

Tuesday. Wednesday.

I came in Wednesday afternoon. Tina was at the table, scribbling notes. "Hi, babe," she said.

"Hello, cute little girl. What's the smell?"

"I'm warming up a block of spaghetti sauce from the other day," she said. "Thought we'd have spaghetti and hang out here. But we need to do a walk around the park, or the gym, or something."

"Let's do a walk while that's thawing out," I said. I changed shoes while she turned the burner down under the pot of sauce, and we went out for a couple of laps.

"Talked to Cindy for a long time, Alan. You know what we talked about?"

"I have no idea. You two…"

"Remember Saturday… We talked about the changes I made in your life?"

"Yes, I remember."

"She was asking Dan if he was losing something getting tied down to one place instead of travelling. She was worried that she was taking him from something, too, just like me…"

"And he told her?"

"Just like you… Baby, are you SURE?"

I looked at the blue-eyed cutie striding next to me and I was never as sure about anything as I was at that moment. "I think Dan found his version of what I found, baby. And yes, I'm sure."

"Good!" She tugged my arm, turning me to her, and she kissed me, right there in the middle of the road.

The only other couple out walking was more than twenty years my senior, and I heard the lady laugh. "Hugh," she said, "Why don't you kiss ME like that?"

"Well, Beck, I certainly CAN!"

Tina giggled. "We started something, babe!"

We completed a couple of laps and returned to the trailer, putting on a pot of water to boil for pasta. She called Cindy for their daily update, and we ate our dinner together.

Seven o'clock the next morning, I was just about to go out the door. Tina's cell phone rang. Now it COULD be Susan. Sometimes they exchanged morning calls for reminders.

"It's Cindy," she said. "Hi, Cindy." Pause. "Oh, crap!" Tina said. "How is he?"

"What?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

"Their trailer got shot up. Dan's in the hospital."

My jaw dropped.

"He's gonna be okay. They got Cindy too."

"They're okay? Ask 'er if there's anything we can do?"

Tina asked the question. "No, seriously! If there's ANYTHING!" Pause. "Okay, Sis. I'll call you after school." Pause. Gasp! "TWO?!?!?" Tina looked at me. "Dan got in a firefight and killed two guys."

"Wha…?"

"They shot up their trailer." She returned to the phone. "Shocked Alan. Me, too, Sis!" they talked excitedly for a few more minutes. Finally, there was the standard "Love ya, Sis!" and she turned to me.

"She's gonna call me back this evening." She wrapped her arms around me. "I love you, babe," she said. "Just like that, it could've been over. I love you. Hold me close…"

# Chapter 23

"What?" I blurted.

Tina's eyes were pained as she repeated, "She said two guys tried to get to 'er in their trailer. Said Dan shot one in the trailer an' one outside, but the first guy hit Dan and the second one got her. Dan's in the hospital. Cindy got treated and released. She's with her foster mom now."

"What about Dan?" I asked. I thought I was the adventurous one.

"He's in the hospital, but he's gonna be okay…" She paused. "I'll talk to 'er after school and find out more."

"Okay, sweetie. I'll be at work," I said. "Not much else we can do…"

Tina sighed. "If Cindy says they're okay, then they're probably okay. Still…"

"Still, kiss me, cutie. I need to go." I got my kiss and left with a little more than the usual reluctance.

It was Thursday. Usually Thursday is the day you want to do BIG things on the project, so you'll have Friday to recover if things go bad. I walked into the office to find Jason at his desk.

"You don't, like, keep in touch with Dan Richards, do you?" I asked him.

"Email every now and then," he said. "Why?"

"Cindy called Tina this morning. Couple of guys shot up their trailer. Hit him and Cindy. He killed 'em, but he's in the hospital."

"No SHIT!" he exclaimed. "That's the second time…"

"SECOND time? There was ANOTHER time?"

"Oops," Jason popped. "I thought you knew…"

"Knew what?"

"Guy broke in on Cindy while Dan was working late. She blew 'is ass out the door with a twelve-gauge."

"I didn't know that," I said.

"Uh, maybe I shouldn't've said anything… everybody down there knows about it, though."

"Interesting," I said. "She and Dan never said anything about it."

Jason snorted. "Pretty much all of us that knew about it thought, 'Way to go, Cindy!' Guy was a convicted felon, mental case, the works. Dated Cindy's mom, according to the story. She dumped 'im an' left town, and he came to see Cindy…"

"Apparently not the best of moves," I said.

"I hope they don't get mad at me for tellin'," he sighed. "I thought everybody knew…"

"I didn't," I replied. "Wonder if Tina does?" I glanced at the clock. Time to go to work. "We ready to energize that little motor control center?"

"I've checked, looked at the reports, last thing yesterday was the 'crowbar check'. And MY lock's on the door to the building. We're ready."

"Let's see if we can find one of client engineers and show 'im this thing…" We walked out into the new plant. "Cindy and a TWELVE-gauge?!?!?"

"'S what I thought," he laughed.

The new equipment went on line without a hitch, and from that point we started energizing a bunch of smaller equipment, life getting a bit easier for some people, a bit more exciting for others. By lunchtime I was about ready to strangle the safety coordinator over some equipment isolation issues.

"Dammit!" I said, "You've had the stinkin' procedure in your hands for a MONTH! And NOW you want to change it?!?!?"

He wouldn't back down on his position, so we ended up in the project manager's office. I won. Didn't gloat, not ONE bit. No matter how much I wanted to.

After lunch, a sandwich and an apple, courtesy of the love of my life, I went back to work. Picked up the phone, dialed up the safety coordinator. "Hey," I said, "Wanna get together and see if there's a way we can do this a little better on the next one?" Sometimes I'm just too nice for my own good.

At the end of the day, Jason came in. "You an' the safety asshole were getting pretty loud," he said.

"HE was loud. I was calm."

"Yeah, you're right. Guy's kind of excitable. What's the deal?"

I sighed. "More than one way to skin a cat," I said. "I published a work plan, EVERYBODY signed off, including safety, and then this morning, halfway through it, he decided that he wanted something different."

"Don't'cha just love it…"

"Yeah. That's one word you can use. There are several others."

Jason chuckled. "So, what's for dinner? My treat!"

"What? You and me? Leave Tina at home?"

"Yeah, like THAT'S gonna happen… both of you, of course…"

"Lemme see if she's got other plans." I picked up the phone and dialed Tina. "Hey, baby," I said.

"Hi, guy! You're not working late, are you?" I loved hearing her voice.

"No, but what's the plan for dinner? Have you started dinner yet?"

"Nuh-uh," she said. "Susan and I are working on our term papers. We kinda thought you'd come bring us out to eat…"

"You and Susan…" When I said the name, I thought I saw Jason's face light up. "Just second, baby," I said, "Jason was offering to take the two of us out…"

"I can do three," Jason quickly said. "You're paying me pretty good…"

"Okay," I told Tina. "He's gonna feed you and Susan too." I hung up and turned to Jason. "Uh, Jason… about Susan… I kind of feel responsible for her…"

"Alan, what makes you even say anything?"

"The look on your face when you heard her name."

"Uh, Alan, I would NEVER… It's just the idea that I don't feel like the odd man out…"

"Susan's… Tina says that Susan's kind of naïve… And she's my wife's friend, and MY friend, and her parents…"

"I get the picture, Alan. But I'm not like that…"

"Okay… sorry if I ascribed a motive…"

"No, you're a good guy, Alan. Just being careful. I would be, too, you know… If I was in your shoes."

"Thanks, Jace,' I said. "So where and what time?"

"That Italian place? Six?"

"We'll be there…"

He shouldered his computer bag and made his way out the door. Left me thinking.

I shut my own computer down and went to my truck. Inside the truck and on the highway, I flipped my phone open. "Dan Richards," I said. Was rewarded with ringing.

"Hello, Alan," Dan said. "How's YOUR week?"

"Better'n yours, from what I heard," I said. "You okay?"

"Relatively," he answered. "Punched hole through my calf. Dug a divot out of my ass. A furrow over my left shoulderblade. I saw worse in the Sandbox."

"Yeah, but not in an RV park,' I said. "How's Cindy?"

"Trooper. She was getting ready to nail the guy but I was in the way."

"Uh, Dan, I didn't know about Cindy before…" I said.

"Ooo-oohhhh," he said. "She didn't tell Tina and Susan?"

"No. So Jason's version…"

"What'd Jason say?"

"You working late, guy broke in, Cindy blew 'im out the door with a twelve-gauge…"

"Pretty good synopsis," he said. "I don't bring it up. I let her do it. You can imagine it might be an area of sensitivity."

"But her shoulder…"

"Oh, hers, shoulder, a tear. Another on her ribs. She got lucky. Both of 'em are scratches, kinda like my shoulder blade."

"How about your trailer?"

"Was thinking about totaling it, but Cindy said if there's any way it makes sense, she wants to keep it. Little hardhead said we ain't getting run out of OUR house by a couple of drunk rednecks." He sighed over the phone. "I agree with her. It's OUR home."

"You got a place to stay in the meantime?" I asked.

"Guest room at her foster mom and dad's. More than you and I ever dreamed of."

"Got one more question," I said. "Changing the subject. Jason Ellerbee. Is he a decent person? Not about his technical abilities. Is he good people?"

"I think so, Alan. He's kind of nerdy. We talked about Heinlein and Niven and Pournelle and other sci-fi. I never heard any of the horn-dog stories from anybody about him. Why are you asking?"

"We've run into him a few times when we had Susan with us, and SHE gets giggly, and today when we were making dinner arrangements and I mentioned her name, HIS face lit up."

"Susan's eighteen, Alan…" Dan said.

"Yeah, but she's… you've seen her. Talked to her. You know…"

"She's a young jewel," he said. "I can understand you're worrying. Tell you what: let's use our best tools on this one. I'll talk to Cindy. You talk to Tina. They'll BOTH talk to Susan."

"Good idea," I said. "In the meantime?"

"I think that if she threw her arms around his neck and kissed 'im, he'd pass out…"

I mulled that idea. "He was married," I countered.

"Yeah… we talked about his and mine. He was used and abused… Don't think he's one to dish out the kind of crap he was given…" Dan said.

"You've eased my mind," I said. "So when are we gonna be able to get the bunch together again?"

"Oh, gimme a week before I can use my ass to its fullest potential," he said.

"Oh yeah," I laughed. "Lost a cheek. 50% capacity."

"Nice," he said. "Tell Tina I said 'hi' and that I'm sorry she married an asshole."

"Gotcha, buddy," I said. "Take care!" I closed my phone. How was it that, for the second time in the last few months, I felt like the dad of a teen-aged daughter?

A few minutes later I pulled alongside our little home. I sat in the truck for a minute, thinking of how Dan and Cindy must've felt. Sat too long, because the door swung open and an auburn-covered head peeped out. I smiled at my wife and got out of the truck.

"You okay? You looked like you were a thousand miles away, Alan…" she said.

"Nope, about three hundred south, actually," I said.

"Dan an' Cindy," she said, immediately making the cognitive leap.

I stepped up onto the trailer's step and she turned her face down to kiss me, then she let me inside. Susan was seated at the dinette, her laptop open.

"Hi, Mister Alan," she said. "We're doing our final drafts. When we're done, YOU need to critique 'em."

"I can do that, Susan, but I'm not the best guy for grammar and spelling and editing. I read too fast."

"I do the same thing, you know…" she said. "I overlook all my mistakes. But still, you can do it for content. I can get Mom to do grammar an' punctuation." She giggled. "It'll make her feel good. I've kinda neglected 'er help with my homework since I started studyin' with Tina, you know…"

Tina smiled. "We talked to Cindy while ago," she said. "Dan's out of the hospital. They're both sore, but they're okay."

"I just talked to Dan," I said. "I got the same story. Did you know about Cindy having trouble before? Shooting a guy?"

Both girls looked at me, shocked. "Cindy? Fourteen year old, little redheaded Cindy?" Tina squealed.

"I guess you didn't know, then…"

Tina said, "She was starting to say something about some trouble, but we got on another thing…" She picked up her phone.

"Wait, baby," I said. "Maybe she doesn't want to talk about it…"

"Alan, she's OUR sister. We get to ask." Tina looked determined, and Susan looked just about as determined.

"Our sister," Susan reinforced.

"Where'd YOU hear about it?" Tina asked.

I deliberately looked at Susan when I said "Jason." Yep! Definite twinkle. "He and I were talking today."

"I need to call 'er, then," Tina said. "If Jason knows…" she dialed the phone, punched the 'speaker' button, then put it in the center of the table.

"Hi, Sis," came Cindy's chirp.

"Hi, back at ya, Cin," Tina said. "I gotcha on speaker. Me an' Susan an' Alan are here. You doin' okay?"

"Mmm-hmmm," Cindy said. "Got my Dan back! What's up?"

"Alan was talkin' with Jason today and he said this wasn't the first time y'all had trouble at your trailer."

"Uh… I know… I was startin' to tell you about that on our last weekend, but the subject changed. I'm over it," Cindy said. "The brother of one of the guys from the other night, he tried to break in."

"Jason said…" Tina started.

"I shot 'im when he got in the trailer." Cindy's tone was matter of fact.

Tina looked at me, then Susan. "You…"

"Killed 'im. Sis, he BROKE my door to get in… It was him or me…"

"Oh, gosh, little sister, I don't mean that I disapprove… I just don't know if I could've thought that fast. Besides, MY husband hasn't taught me how to shoot anything…" She looked right at me and gave me her squinty look.

I knew I was in trouble.

Susan asked, "What did the law say?"

"Well, my step-mom's husband is a judge and his son is the district attorney and the guy broke into my house. They mostly said 'Way to go, Cindy!' Seriously, he BROKE in. That makes the use of deadly force in self-defense an option."

Susan sighed. "Gosh, Sis…"

"Do y'all still want to be sisters with a killer?"

"I wanna be sisters with a HERO!" Tina said. "You did what you gotta do, Cin!"

Susan was nodding. "Uh-huh!"

"So now you know," Cindy said. "I shoulda told you before. But it's behind me, and I really don't like thinkin' about it…"

"Sorry, Cindy," I said. "It's my fault. Jason told me today and I asked if your sisters knew…"

"Oh, that's okay, Alan," she said. "By the way, we need to make plans to get together whenever my husband's butt stops hurting…" She giggled.

"Oh, that's just horrible… Your poor wounded husband…" I said. Tina and Susan were smirking.

"He's gonna be okay, guys," she said. "Thanks for caring…"

"You know we care, little sister," Tina said.

"Wait," Susan interrupted, "I got a question…"

"Okay!" Cindy chirped.

And sweet little Susan nailed down any ideas that I might've been mis-reading her reaction to…

"Jason Ellerbee. He's workin' up here Alan now. Did you ever meet 'im?"

Tina arched an eyebrow, a sign I took, in this context, to mean 'don't say a WORD!'. I remained mute.

Cindy answered, "I ran into him quite a bit on the project. He ate lunch with me an' Dan a couple of times. Dan thinks he's the best tech around…"

"Nooo," Susan said, "Is he a nice guy?"

"Gosh, Sis," Cindy said, "I don't have a lot to go on. You need to talk to Dan…"

"No," Susan said, almost sadly. "Never mind…"

Cindy said, "You don't have to ask 'im yourself. I will. I'll call you back when I find out something…"

"Thanks, Sis," Susan said. "Bye…"

"Bye, Sis," Tina added. "We love you. Take care of yourself."

"Love y'all too," Cindy said. "Bye…" Click.

"Susannnn," Tina said, "We talked about that…"

"About what? Or is that something I'm not supposed to know about?" I asked.

Susan gazed at me with those light blue eyes. "Oh, Mister Alan, I just wanted to know more about Jason."

"Susan, I know I'm not your dad, but can I talk to you?"

"Uh-oh, this sounds serious," she said. "Tina, don't go away. I may need moral support."

Tina looked at me. Her face was turned away from Susan's, and she mouthed 'Be careful.'

"I just want to tell you that Jason is twenty-six…"

"Ooo-oooh," Susan said, "And we KNOW that AGE makes a BIG difference."

Tina smirked at me. "Alan 0, Susan 1," she said.

"That's not what I mean, sweetie," I told her. Yes, Susan was like a pet. "You don't know anything about him."

"He reads Heinlein." She pointed at our little bookshelf. "That's a sure sign of child molesters everywhere…"

Another smirk from my beloved. And, "Susan 2, Alan 0."

"I grant you he's a smart guy, Susan," I said. "So was Ted Kaczynski."

Tina looked at Susan. "Susan 2, Alan 1."

"And your point, Alan?" Susan asked.

"Susan, I don't… Oh, hell, I called Dan and asked about Jason…"

Tina giggled. "Told ya he would, Susan. He doesn't miss much…"

Susan wiggled in her seat. "So what did Dan say? What did you ask him?"

"I asked him what he knew about Jason's personal life…"

"Anddddd," Susan prodded, her chin propped in her hand, looking at me.

"Dan says that as far as he knows, Jason is a nice guy… I am not saying any more than that."

"But you know more…" Tina said.

"But I do not disclose personal information about others. Suffice to say, I find none of it disturbing, but it's the kind of stuff he talked about in some level of confidence, and he should be the one who might decide to tell somebody else."

"Party pooper," Susan said. Then she smiled. "But Dan says he's a nice guy."

Tina's eyes flipped back and forth between me and Susan.

"Susan, don't dive into things…" I started.

"Oh, MISTER Alan," she squealed, exasperated. "I'm NOT. But if he was some sleazeball, I wouldn't even entertain the thought of smiling at him."

"She's right, you know," Tina said to me. "She doesn't smile at sleazeballs. Scratched ol' Jeffy off her list completely…"

"Susan," I said, trying one more time, "He's twenty-six and divorced…"

"Ooooo," Susan retorted. "Divorced. That makes him…" She looked at Tina. "Tina, what's YOUR opinion about writing off divorced guys?"

"Susan 3, Alan 1."

I threw up my hands. "Fine! You two encourage each other…"

Susan touched my arm. "Alan, you're right. Tina DOES encourage me. So do you. And Mom and Dad.´ She huffed. "Y'all encourage me to do the RIGHT thing. All I wanna do is have a friend… You know about being a friend, don't you, Alan? Isn't that where things start?"

"I give up," I said. "Let me change shoes and wash my face, and then we'll go…"

I think I heard spirited whispering while I was in the bathroom. I came out to two sets of blue eyes, one from under a set of auburn bangs, the other from a softly rounded face framed by very blonde hair.

"You drive," Tina said. She stood and kissed me. "That's for being a good loser…"

I looked at Susan. "Just be careful what you win, okay?"

Susan tiptoed up to kiss me on the cheek. "Thanks for caring, Alan."

We got in the truck and took off, gabbing about things, and then Tina remembered an earlier snippet of conversation. "You need to teach me to shoot those guns, Alan. Susan, do you know how to shoot?"

"Uh-huh," she said. "Dad taught me, an' he tried to get me to go hunting, but I sort of drew the line at killin' little animals…"

"Does he know of a place we can go shoot?"

"He's a member of the local gun club. They have a range."

Tina squealed. "We need to talk to 'im!"

"I'll put it on the list. Wanna find out how good he can shoot so I can tell Jason how fast to run…"

"Alannnnn!" Susan whined.

We pulled into the parking lot and immediately spotted Jason's truck.

"He's here!" Susan chirped.

I noted that she paid THAT much attention. We walked into the place, spotted Jason sitting at a table, and we joined him. I noticed he greeted Susan first.

Tina looked at their two faces, then at me. I knew my love well enough to recognize the flicker of a raised eyebrow.

Okay, I gave up. Well, at least a little bit. Jason was starting to grow on ME. He was funny, and when you're capable, you can afford to be funny at work, but away from work, he fit right in with two girls who used the English language as a rapier one moment and a sledge hammer the next.

"So you read Heinlein?" Susan asked, "Which one's your favorite?"

"What do YOU know about Heinlein?" he asked.

"The Notebooks of Lazarus Long…"

"Time Enough for Love," he countered.

"I liked that part where he fell in love with Dora," Susan said.

"Dorable," Jason smiled. "What a wonderful name… I liked that part too. Old guy was kinda strange about some things, but that part…"

Susan was in the flow. Tina and I just watched. I felt a knee nudge me.

"It was so sad that he lived on and watched her get old…"

"Yeah," Jason said.

"There ARE other people at the table, you two," Tina said. "And we ALL read the book."

"I particularly identified with the talking mule," I said.

"Buck," Susan smiled. "His name was 'Buck', the first one, the smartest…"

Tina looked at me. "Well?"

"Well what?" I asked her.

"Is Susan right?"

I surveyed the faces at the table. "Yeah, Susan's like you. She's right at most things…"

Jason had his cheek propped against his hand. "Are you two, like, nerd girls in school?"

Tina's mouth started to move, but Susan was hanging on Jason's every word. "We're in a class all to ourselves, Jason. But yeah, I guess… in a way…"

"I was one in school myself," he said. "How is it if you're a girl?"

"Prob'ly not as bad for girls," Susan said. "Girls just form cliques and talk about you. Nerd guys get picked on in so many other ways…"

"You got that right," Jason said, his eyes far, far away.

The waitress delivering our drinks and an appetizer plate broke the conversation and we transitioned into a discussion of some of the work issues and some school issues and various other subjects, enjoying the meal, just four people having a good time.

The ticket came. "I can get this, Jason," I said.

"No, Alan, I said I'd get it. I invited y'all!" he countered.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure…" he smiled. "I enjoyed the company, you know…"

Susan said, "You need to come to Alan an' Tina's for some 'dump soup' and a game of Trivial Pursuit!" She looked at Tina for approval.

Tina nodded her head in agreement.

"What's 'dump soup'? Or do I wanna know, Alan?"

"Tina learned to cook from her grandma. One of her things is to dump a few cans into a pot, doctor it up, add some meat, and POOF! 'Dump soup'!"

Tina smiled. "It's something I can do quick after school. By the time Alan gets home, dinner is ready."

"Makes sense," Jason said.

"Not exactly like cooking from scratch, but I can do that, too… Just not on school days." Tina smiled.

"I can bake cookies," Susan said. "If you come over to play, I'll bring some…"

"Now I KNOW I'm comin' over," Jason said.

We finally left, and I noted that Susan slid beside Jason as we walked through the parking lot. He got to his truck first and thanked us all for the evening. I got a handshake. Tina got a hug. Susan got a hug too, and hers was perceptibly longer.

Tina, Susan and I got in our truck, Tina in the middle.

Tina broke the ice. "Well, that was good evening, don't'cha think, baby?"

"Yeah," I said, "Good friends, a pleasant meal… yeah, a good evening…"

"Mmmm-hmmm," Susan said. "Alan, the guy is smart…"

"And coming from Susan, that's saying something, baby," Tina said.

"Ted Kaczynski," I said.

"Oh, Alannnn," Susan said, "He's smart, an' funny…"

"So where's this going, Susan?" I asked.

"Nowhere," she said, folding her arms.

I thought I heard a whispered "for now…"

We pulled into the park and unloaded from the truck. We all went inside. Susan collected her laptop and bookbag.

"Okay, I guess I'll go home now…" she said. "Be sure and tell Jason that I said thanks for dinner…"

"I'm sure that you telling him sixteen times is enough, Susan," I said.

"Did NOT," Susan protested.

Tina smiled. "Maybe not sixteen…"

Susan's eyes twinkled. "It's just nice. He smiled at me…"

"Lots of people smile at you, Susan." I said.

"Thank you, Alan, but you're my friend, you know…" she said.

"I know, baby, but don't get in a hurry over things."

She flashed her smile. "Oh, I know… It's just nice, though, you know… I didn't feel like the odd man out. And he wasn't acting like he was forced to associate with me. But that's all." She looked at Tina. "Right, sis?"

"Right, sister. "Not gonna mess up, huh? Like all those girls we know…"

"Nope. Gonna do things right." She kissed Tina's cheek and then mine and left.

I looked at Tina and asked her the question: "How come I feel like the father of a teenaged girl?"

"Because she's my friend and YOUR friend and you care what happens to her. Just like you cared what happened to me."

"And look how THAT ended," she giggled.

"Well, I can't marry Susan, baby… got more wife than I ever dreamed of last time I worried about a teenaged girl…"

She swept into my arms and kissed me. "Mmm-hmmm… and all I can wish for is that something happens to Susan that's half as good as what WE have…" Another kiss. "Don't you think we oughtta get showered?"

"Might be a good idea," I agreed.

Showers got us ready for the next wonderful thing of the evening: Bed! Giggles and laughter and love and lust and we were lying intertwined together in the afterglow, those blue eyes looking at me.

"Just a few more months, baby, and then I'm out of high school. I'm getting excited. Aren't you?"

"I am," I admitted. "I want to be with you no matter what you do…"

# Chapter 24

Saturday was US! Didn't fly anywhere because we just wanted a quick run up the road to a hotel with a big shower and a big bed and nobody else around but US. On the road, it was Saturday morning phone calls. Tina spent a bit of time on the phone with Cindy, then we both spent some time talking with Terri for half an hour.

Settled back in the seat, the cruise control taking care of the speed, we rolled up the interstate highway, my arm curled around Tina's shoulder, her auburn hair right there for me to nuzzle if I turned my head just a tiny bit. I did that, a lot.

The hotel was on the edge of a medium-sized town. We had handy restaurants and a movie theater and a whole night together. Passing the movie theater, Tina read off the choices.

"Can you stand a chick flick with me, baby?" she asked.

"Why not. It'll be a break for both of us."

"Let's do the early evening one, then a light dinner, then we don’t' leave the room again…"

"Sounds wonderful. We have three or four hours to kill…" I noted.

"Oh, I wonder whatever we could do to while away that time," she said. Fingers tracing up my leg seemed to indicate that she might have some ideas.

We checked into the hotel and brought our bags to the room. She definitely had ideas. Happily, they were the same ones that I was having. The door was locked behind us and clothes were falling onto the floor and I had this smiling, slender, auburn-haired beauty grinning at me and I fell backward onto the bed with her in my arms.

"God, I love you, Alan Addison," she giggled. "You make me crazy!"

"No crazier than I was, thinking it was a good idea to help a young lady in trouble in Nowhere, Louisiana," I said. "And now it's the best 'crazy' I could dream of. Even better'n that."

The smiling face and blue eyes confirmed that for me. Her finger traced down from the crown of my head to the tip of my nose. Giggle. "I can TELL that you're excited."

"Cutie," I said, "If you're in the room, I'm excited."

"Let's get the covers turned back, baby…" she said.

The bed cleared, we were in the middle of it, our hands exploring, touching, teasing, feeding on one another, our mouths connected in a kiss that was both lustful and loving, and my giggly girl was pushing me over on my back and vigorously attacking me, and I was laughing and the only fight I was able to put up was to get more of her delightful and desirable bits within range for me to enjoy.

"You're distracting me," she tittered.

"I have to," I laughed. "If I don't, it's all gonna be over in fifteen seconds…" and I finally got my face between her thighs. I found I wasn't the ONLY one excited in this room. Tina was slick with juice, tangy, musky, her petal-like pussy engorged, the inner lips just barely peeking out. I attacked her with my lips and tongue and her approving purr resonated through me because it was transmitted through the hard dick that she had in her mouth.

"Don't YOU come yet…" she said. She punctuated her instruction by sliding up a little to give me better access to her juicy center. I knew this was my hint to eat her to orgasm, letting my mouth do her first one, and the second one would be for both of us, coupled together.

It was a plan I could be happy with. I let my hands explore the perfect curve of her ass and thighs as I tongued her to orgasm. I could tell she was close when she pulled my dick from her mouth and mewed, her hip movements becoming little jerks.

"Ohgodohgodohgod" Breathe. "Baaaabyyyyyyy! Ennnnngghhhhh!" She gave her hips one more push against my tongue, went rigid, then relaxed. I gently licked her while she drifted back down. She turned, her face above mine, kissing me, mouth open, tasting what I'd been tasting.

"You almost kill me, baby," she said softly. Her soft, blue eyes gazed into mine.

"What makes you think you do any less to me, sweetness," I answered. I wrapped my arms around her sleek form, closed my eyes. Every lonely night, alone in my bed, even those where the loneliness was accentuated because the other person in bed wasn't there because we were an 'US', all those lonely times disappeared into a happy 'now'. "I love you…"

"I love you too," she said softly as her leg crossed over me. She straddled me. "Weld us together…"

Sometimes our coupling was soft and gentle, sometimes frantic, always satisfying. I curled up to sitting with Tina in my lap, those long legs wrapped around my waist. A couple of tentative movements of her agile hips and she enveloped my member in a place that it was made for.

From a distance of inches, I surveyed her bright face, the blue eyes, the auburn bangs, the smile. Her smallish titties pressed against my chest and her arms were around my neck. This was good. VERY good. I felt her wiggle, positioning herself for her own pleasure and we locked our mouths together.

I let her do her own thing for as long as I could, but at the end, I could no more control my own hips than I could control the tides. I started thrusting upward, pulling her down on me as her eyes sparkled. I knew she was THERE when her eyes closed tight and she bit her bottom lip, nostrils flaring. And I came, burying my face in the juncture between her neck and shoulder. Orgasmic spasms coursed through my body, each one producing a little whimper from my young lover.

Two orgasms. There was no reason for conscious movement. We finally eased sideways onto the bed, still in each other's arms. When I finally felt the need to move, it was to stroke her face, displacing a few strands of soft auburn hair that fell across a freckled cheek. And a kiss.

"Beauty," I said. "You define beauty in my world, little one."

She smiled. "Thank you. You make me feel beautiful. In so many ways." She kissed me softly. "We're just good for each other."

"Perfect for each other," I replied. "Impossibly perfect, little one."

"Perfect enough to stay in my arms for a while?"

"Forever," I said.

"Until it's time for the movie, at least," she giggled. "But just lay still and hold me…"

Well, I started to lay still and just hold her. That lasted until her fingers made their way to the sticky mess of my softened dick.

"Got you a mess there, sir," she giggled.

"Uh… I have an idea where there's another one," I said. My fingers dipped into a pussy still oozing the happy results of our recent coupling.

"Oh, my, little one," I said. "It appears that I am correct."

"You put that in me. YOU oughtta get it out," she giggled playfully.

"If you put it where I can get to it, I certainly will," I played her game.

That got me a hundred and twenty pounds of lovely teen, pussy end at my face, on top of me. And a veritable feast of juices all mixed together and presented in the most delectable of dishes, a dish that started getting mobile under the explorations of my tongue.

That was prelude to another two orgasms for her and a second for me. And then the nap, two naked bodies snuggled together on the big bed.

We got up with enough time to get the first shower of our trip because, as my nymph of a teenaged wife said, "We smell like an orgy!"

We luxuriated in the shower together, then went through our normal routines, leaving me shaved and her dried and her hair a care-free, shining, soft coif that swayed as she moved, drawing me to the neck just below it.

Of course, paying attention to that neck got me a wiggly, giggly mess of a girl, and that's as much a goal as it is a journey. We were getting dressed when her phone rang. I recognized the ringtone. That would be Susan.

"Hi, Susan," she answered. Her eyes flashed at me, the smile on her face matchless. "No, you didn't catch us at a bad time." Pause. "Really? Jason?" pause. "Oh, he's got your mom looking for an apartment." Giggle. "Oh, that's okay. Just be careful, that's all." Pause. "Yeah, I'll tell 'im! Bye!"

I looked at her. "Okay… Susan. Jason. Susan's mom. What's up?"

"Oh, nothing much. Jason called Susan's mom to help him find an apartment. That's all."

"You know, I keep watching Susan and Jason, and it's like standing at a train station, knowing that there's a train coming from each direction."

"Oh, stop worrying. Susan talks to me. She's not going to do something stupid. She's NOT dumb, you know."

"I hope so. Just that sometimes she seems kind of bubble-headed."

"I won't tell 'er you said that."

"Don't. I like Susan. That's why I worry."

"Baby," Tina said as she was tying a shoe, "We, me and her, we see what's going on with the kids at school. We talk about that whole boy-girl mating dance thing."

"That's good…" I said.

"I think so. You know how it goes, the dating and going steady and breaking up, and the people using each other, and a few pregnancies and even a couple of marriages and divorces."

"In high school… wonderful."

"Uh! I'M in high school, and I'M married."

"And YOUR husband has a job and YOU'RE going to college…"

Smile. "There is THAT."

"Come on," I said, standing. "Kiss me. Then we'll go."

"Why? You afraid to kiss me in public?" Laughing eyes.

"Not afraid to kiss you ANYWHERE," I said. "Just that I shouldn't do THIS!" I kissed her, pulling her to me, cupping her ass in my hands. She giggled when I let go.

"Oh, THAT," she smiled. "Yes, I can see that one must maintain ones decorum in public."

We walked out of the room and went hand in hand through the lobby, laughing.

The movie was good, entertaining, but not spectacular. The company made it worth the trip. Sitting there with my arm around the love of my life, that's something that will make a man happy to laugh his way through a 'chick flick'.

Once in the truck, the first sign we saw on the road that wasn't a fast food joint was a national chain restaurant.

"Good enough?" I asked.

"Mmm-hmm," she said. "Something light…"

"Sounds good," I said, making my course good for their parking lot. It was beginning to drizzle when we walked into the place.

"Good thing we didn't fly somewhere," my young wife commented.

"Oh, I dunno," I said. "We could've been trapped for an extra night somewhere, having to put up with each other."

"Oh, yeah… Yuck!"

"Little beast," I chuckled.

"Feed me," she said. "It'll improve my attitude…"

I fed her. Actually, we got the soup and salad deal and split a big brownie for dessert. Conversation is something that draws me to Tina, and we talked about current events and engineering things and yes, the future, ours.

"Terri…"

"What about Terri?" I asked.

"Does she talk to you about coming to live with us?"

"Nooooo," I said. "Did she say something to you?"

"She told me that she knew that you and I were married and she was happy that you're happy, and if she lived with us all summer, would it be bad?"

"In our trailer? That WOULD be something…"

"We touched on that."

"And what does SuperMom say about this?"

"She didn't say. Just asked me the question."

"What does Tina think of that?" That was my immediate concern.

"Ummmm, welllll," she said, eyes soft, "Tina thinks that Terri's a wonderful little girl and that she and Terri could find a way to share Alan." She sighed. "Of course, I was hoping to go on a honeymoon with you this summer after the project's over, kinda like Cindy an' Dan are flying the Rockies before they move to, what is it? Opelika? By Auburn?"

I smiled at the thought of having a honeymoon with Tina.

"But our whole life's been a honeymoon, so far, hasn't it? So if there was Terri, we could just do a family trip…" She smiled. "Couldn't we?"

"Baby, I never asked you to be a mom to Terri."

"I know that, babe. But you told me about Terri even before there was anything between us but conversation and friendship. Don't'cha think I sort of deduced that parenting or big-sistering or whatever sort of went with the territory?"

"Yeah, but full-time?"

"Babe," she said, her eyes serious, "If there's any mixed up couple, uh… blended family, on the planet that can better handle this than you and me, I'd be surprised."

"Should we be doing something different alongside about now? I mean, YOU seem to know more than I do here, baby…"

"Nope. Not yet. But if we drive around the curve and there's this bridge, I want US to be ready to cross it…"

I loved the way she turned a phrase.

"I'd actually like it, Alan. I know what it's like to have a screwy mom. If we can give Terri a better home…"

"Then it's a done deal, if there's a way, baby," I said. "If it doesn't happen until after the project, then when we look for a new place to live, we'll make sure it's got room for Terri."

She was resting her chin on her folded hands, smiling.

I paid our check and we walked, well, kind of RAN out to the truck under cold rain.

"Occluded front," she said. "Gonna be a nasty day tomorrow."

I smiled. "You pay attention to THAT?"

"I had to study enough weather to get my pilot's license," she said. "It's kind of interesting, really." Giggle. "But not nearly as interesting as what's on TV in our hotel room. Or maybe no TV at all…"

We hustled into the hotel with that set of possibilities in mind. Passing the desk clerk, we acknowledged that it was indeed cold and nasty outside, and headed straight to the elevator and then into our room.

Tina's face glowed, reddened by the brief exposure to cold, damp air, and her hair was speckled with droplets of moisture and she just absolutely needed kissing. I kissed her. She returned the kiss. I made a dash for the bathroom. Too much iced tea.

"Don't zip 'em up, baby," she said. "Just take 'em off."

I looked at her, smiling. She was starting to pull the hem of her sweatshirt up.

"We've had a couple of hours to recharge," she grinned. "And I don't NEED to recharge…"

"I don't either, except for that one thing…" We'd talked about this on one marathon weekend. I was hers. If she could work with me to get it hard, it was hers to do with as she wished, and on that occasion, we'd ended up sore. Took a couple of days off, actually. We're still wild about each other, you know, but we've learned to pace ourselves. And be a little gentle. Three a day was well within the limits we'd established.

And we'd already had TWO. The third put us to sleep tangled together, relaxed.

We didn't set an alarm, not for a Sunday morning. I woke up with a tousled head of fragrant, soft hair at my chest. And a full bladder. I hated to move, savoring the sleeping girl at my chest, face like a baby angel, but I HAD to go. I tried to disengage without waking her, but her eyelids fluttered.

"G'mornin', sweetheart," she smiled.

Okay, she's awake. Kiss on the nose. "Mornin', little angel," I said. "I'll be back." The ensuing sound of Niagara Falls from the bathroom provided the reason.

She was standing at the door, wearing her nightshirt, waiting for me to finish. "My turn," she said. "We need to lay off the iced tea…"

"You're so practical… you'd deny me the opportunity to sit across the table from you, staring into those blue eyes…"

Giggle. "If SOMEBODY'S bladder hadn't been FULL, we'd still be in bed so you could enjoy each other's blue eyes up close…"

"But then I'd miss the delightful banter in the bathroom…"

Her answer to that comment was the stripping of the nightshirt over her head, leaving her nude, hair in delightful disarray, blue eyes sparkling. "I'm either getting dressed, or YOU'RE getting undressed…"

I stripped my own T-shirt over my head and chased her to the bed.

Quickie! I had this cutie with her arms around my neck, an excited look in her eyes. "One more, and then we shower and hit the road, okay?" And she was nodding her head in encouragement.

I was gonna refuse, right? Noooo…

She laid back on the bed, legs spread. Giggles. "Sometimes subtlety isn't called for, guy!"

I was hard, she was wet, smiling… I slid in between those sleek thighs, my dick finding its perfect home, listening to her purr. Her mouth fastened to my chest, at first a kiss, then sucking, and finally, teeth, heightening my ardor, and apparently hers as well.

Oh, yeah… Her hips rose up to meet my thrusts, her hands grabbed my butt… I felt as uncontrolled as a horny teen. She WAS a horny teen, mine.

Her breathing changed. She pulled her mouth away from my chest. "OhgodAlan… Nnnngghhhh! Ohgod!" She lunged her hips upward. Paused. Another thrust. She was there. My turn. Full thrusts would play havoc with her orgasm, but the excitement of the moment was almost enough, coupled with the movements inside that tight pussy. A couple of little thrusts and I squirted.

"Mmmmm, I FEEL that, baby…" She put a hand behind my head and pulled me down to kiss her. Perfection.

A subtle push and we rolled over, putting her on top. I loved this.

Eventually we got around to moving out of the bed again.

"Shower before we go?" Tina asked.

Like she even had to ask.

We ate a late breakfast after checking out, not a difficulty on a Sunday morning because most restaurants were set up for dealing with the church crowds. Grits, country ham, eggs and biscuits, and then savoring a cup or two of coffee while staring at those blue eyes.

"I wish we'd have flown in," she said. "Flying is the most astounding thing I got from you, well," giggle, "after that marriage and mating thing…"

"We'd be stuck here, baby," I said. I looked over her shoulder out the window at the drizzling rain.

"And being stuck somewhere is a BAD thing?"

"If you put it THAT way, we can fake it…"

"Uh… Alan Addison, that's the FIRST time since I've met you that you did something even CLOSE to being irresponsible…" She took a sip of coffee. "Are you serious?"

"We sure could. You miss a day of school, I miss a day of work…"

"One of us needs to be sane," she smiled. "But thank you for considering it… Let's go home."

And there in the corner of my brain a little light blinked out.

"I know you're right, baby, but still… If there's a person on this planet that has shaken up my whole outlook on life, it's you."

We walked out to the truck, her bumping my hip with hers on every step, my arm around her waist. Into the cab of the truck, my Tina in her normal spot, the center spot on the bench seat, as close to me as she could get. And we headed home.

The phone rang. We recognized the special ring. "Susan," Tina said. She answered. "Hi, Susan!" Pause. "No, we just got in the truck. Had a late breakfast." Giggle. "Uh-huh… yeah, we'll be home this afternoon. Wanna come over?" Pause. "Sure." Gasp! "HIM!?!?!" Pause. "Uhhh… Yeah, I mean, we KNOW 'im. So why not?" Giggle. "Gonna give Alan a seizure, though…" Pause. "I'll warn 'im…"

"Okay," I said. "What am I being warned about?"

"Dump soup and Trivial Pursuit. You. Me. Susan." She paused. "And Jason." She caught my expression. "Smile, baby… It'll be okay…"

"How'd he get invited?" I asked.

"We invited him the other night when we all had dinner."

"One more time. How'd he get invited? Susan?"

"Her mom MET Jason before, remember? At the restaurant? And then she talked with him yesterday about finding an apartment for a few weeks."

"But baby…"

"Jason's a nice guy. Susan's a nice girl. They're coming to OUR trailer. It's not like we have a closet so they can sneak off an' make out…"

"Just trying to avoid a trainwreck, baby… I don't want Susan hurt. Be careful."

"I will. You know that."

"I guess I'm not worrying about YOU being careful. I'm worried about Susan being careful."

"She's NOT stupid, baby."

I sighed. "Lots of people aren't stupid under normal conditions, but then things get going…"

"And they start talking about ditching work and school an' stuff, huh?"

"Now you're bein' mean," I laughed. "And yeah… that's close enough to what I mean."

We kept driving and talking and listening to the music from Tina's iPod, and those activities made the drive effortless. We pulled up at the trailer and went inside. I was stowing our bags while she was breaking down a couple of loads of laundry and starting the washer.

"Nap? Rainy day. Good nap time," she smiled.

"What time does the game begin?"

"Susan said after four."

"Nap time," I said. By the time I had my clothes off, she had the bed turned down.

Nothing like expending yourself before a nap…

Tina's phone woke us up. She reached over, picked it up, and said "Hi, Susan!"

I yawned and stretched.

"No, we were taking a nap." Pause. Giggle. "Yeah, really! A nap!" Pause. "No, he's going to put clothes in the dryer. Show up any time you want to." Giggle. "Yeah. What time is Jason coming?" Pause. "And HOW do we KNOW that?" Giggle. "Okay. That's legitimate. So your mom knows…" Puase. "Uh-huh. Okay. See you in a bit. Bye!"

She closed her phone and looked at me. "We need to get dressed, baby," she said.

"Whatever happened to lazy Sunday afternoons with no clothes involved?"

Tina giggled. "We just had one, baby. And we'll have some more later. But we have friends coming over."

"Her mom knows about her and Jason?"

Tina looked a little exasperated. "It's NOT her 'n' Jason. We have TWO friends. Both of 'em are coming over to play a game and have dinner. That's all. WE'RE the couple here."

Why did I not feel too convinced?

"Chop us an onion for the soup," she directed as she was plundering the pantry. A few cans found their way to the little counter beside the stove. "I won't start it until Jason gets here. He was interested in the concept."

"I think he was just making conversation. I think he's MORE interested in Susan."

Those blue eyes locked onto mine. "Baby, if they connect, they connect. I'm NOT pushing. Not a bit. Actually, I'm telling 'er to be cautious."

"Good. I don't want to be responsible for her broken heart."

"She's had her heart broken before, baby," Tina said, corralling me at the sofa. "We've talked about it. I think she's a bit past the 'infatuation' stage."

"I hope so, baby. So how's her mom in on this?"

"Her mom was s'posed to show Jason a couple of apartments yesterday, and when Susan found out, she went with 'em."

"Kathy knows… I wonder if Mike knows."

A smile under those blue eyes and freckles. "There's nothing to know, baby. Maybe one day. But not right now."

She sat on the sofa and patted the place beside her. "Let's see if there's anything on TV." I sat beside her as she flipped through the channels, finally selecting something about undersea research. She pushed me to the far end of the sofa and then laid back against me so I could put an arm around her. We were cuddled like that when we heard a car door slam, then a knock at the door.

"Come in," Tina said.

Susan's blonde head appeared. "What're you doing?" she asked.

"Watchin' TV. Doin' laundry. Hangin' out," Tina smiled. "Waiting for friends to show up."

Susan's face had that easy smile of hers. "Half of 'em's here."

I straightened up and Tina sat up to make room for Susan on the sofa.

"Hi, Alan," Susan chirped.

"Hi, Susan," I answered. "How's your weekend?"

"Oh, it's been pretty good. Yours?" She cut her eyes over to Tina and smirked.

"We… Uh… it was a good getaway," I said.

"Don't you make my husband turn red, you horrible thing!" Tina giggled.

"Why would he turn red, Sis? He knows I'm just pickin'!"

"Just remember, little blonde princess," I said, the phrase causing Susan to smile, "what goes around, comes around…"

She leaned across Tina and touched my arm. "You know you're my favorite married guy, Alan…"

I laughed. "You have no idea the joy that comes to me by that statement, Susan… so tell me, did you just come right out and invite Jason over here in front of your momma?"

I think Susan possesses the second most expressive set of blue eyes on the planet, after my Tina, and those eyes twinkled. "See? You're making horrible assumptions as to my character. I merely mentioned Tina's dump soup and a game of Trivial Pursuit this afternoon. He inquired as to the possibility of you putting up with his company as well. And YOUR wife and I have had previous conversation…"

She smiled, looking at Tina, who was restraining her giggle. She enjoyed the banter as practiced by me and her and Susan, and we were getting into it pretty good when I heard the deep sound of Jason's truck pulling up.

Somebody else noticed it, too. Susan's eyes, normally bright, took on an added twinkle, and her dimples deepened.

"Don't be so obvious, Susan," I said.

She looked at me, feigning a glare, mirroring the identical one from my wife.

I got up an opened the door. Jason was standing there, informally and neatly dressed. "Come on in, Jason. It's crowded, but you're welcome to our home."

He walked in, surveyed the surroundings, including the two girls sitting on the sofa, grinning.

"Hi, Jason," Susan said.

"Yeah, hi," Tina added. "We're glad you showed up."

"I wanted to see that 'dump soup' thing you talked about," he told Tina. "And I always like a good game of Trivial Pursuit."

"I waited until you showed up to start the soup. 'Cept Alan chopped the onion already."

Tina busied herself in the little kitchenette doing familiar tasks under Jason's watchful eye.

"It's just easy stuff. Grandma showed me how to cook a few things. This isn't magic. It's just something we could do if I came home from school and she came in from work and it didn't take long. Makes good leftovers, too."

It wasn't long before the pot of soup was simmering and the four of us were in the dinette booth with the gameboard on the table. I knew from previous outs that playing with Susan and Tina was a battle. I worried that Jason was going to be out-classed. I needn't have worried. He fit right in.

Seating arrangements. Tina and I were on one side, Susan and Jason on the other. The game itself was nip and tuck. Early on, I commented about the difficulty that the four of us were having with the entertainment and the sports questions.

"You got yourself a buncha nerds, here, Alan," Jason laughed.

Susan didn't pause for thought. She jumped right in. "Uh…" feigning outrage, "YOU might be a nerd. Me 'n' Tina's just differently prioritied…"

Jason laughed. "Susie, you might wanna dump that plan for engineering. You sound like you're headed for a career in social work."

She stuck her tongue at him. "Bleahhh! An' nobody calls me 'Susie' but my maw-maw."

"I beg your pardon, Lady Susan," Jason countered.

I felt Tina's knee nudge me. When I looked at her, she was smiling.

# Chapter 25

The Trivial Pursuit game was a real contest. I started out worried that Jason was in over his head. I finished worrying that \*\*I\*\* might be. In the middle of the game, we carefully moved the board out of the way and had soup and crackers for dinner.

"You do pretty good with the soup, Tina," Jason said.

"Thank you! It's just a way to get something warm and mostly home-made for dinner. I watched Grandma make it a dozen different ways." She smiled.

"It's something that I could do pretty fast after work if I wanted to stay home," he said.

"Oh, there's all kinds of things that Alan and I do," Tina giggled. "I'm sure you know about grilled cheese sandwiches."

"Oh, yeah," Jason laughed. "And ramen noodles, and other forms of Purina Bachelor Chow."

Susan giggled. "Purina Bachelor Chow?" Her blue eyes twinkled.

"Yeah,' Jason explained, "Stuff that's quick and easy. You know, for one…"

"Oh," Susan smiled.

Tina laughed. She and I had already had this discussion early in our relationship, when I found that instead of the monastic lifestyle I normally had, she was going to be staying with me, and we had to explore how we were going to stay fed.

We finished our meal and the bowls and spoons went into the sink.

"We'll get that later," Tina said. "Let's finish the game!"

We played it out. Susan pulled a lucky draw for the win, amid laughter and accusations.

"Toughest game I've played in, oh, well, since I married Tina," I said. "I need some dumber friends."

"Yeah," Jason added. "I'm not supposed to get beaten by a girl. Much less a blonde…"

Susan reveled in the attention, reading Jason's teasing pretty much the way I guessed he intended it to be taken. She stuck her tongue out at him, giggling, as she and Tina put the game back in its box.

"It's still early, huh?" Tina said. "Y'all want some hot cocoa? Alan makes the best ! From scratch, not that instant stuff!"

"Sure," Susan said. She looked at Jason. "You don't have to run off right now, do you?" She smiled sweetly, something that Susan is good at. Almost as good as Tina.

I couldn't have gotten Jason to leave now if I had a cattle prod on his ass. I got up and started the process of turning cocoa and sugar and milk and cream (oh, yessss, extra cream) into hot steamy beverages for us.

"Sooooo," Tina asked, "Have you given any more thought to coming to work with Alan and Dan?"

I hadn't expected Tina to spear Jason like that, but I saw Susan's eyes on him too. "Tina," give the guy a little time. Dan and I still haven't gotten the plan together yet ourselves."

"Yeah, but you KNOW you're going to do something. While me an' Susan an' Cindy are in school." She smiled confidently.

Susan smiled too. "We're gonna have a great little community, you know. Me and Cindy and Tina, we're all taking electrical engineering, and we're going to support each other, and we have two real good engineers to help us get through college. You could sure be part of it…"

Jason smiled. "I've thought about it. I'm sure that Dan and Alan have, too. We'll see what happens."

Susan didn't let it drop easily. I was at the stove, stirring the pot, and in the little trailer, I was plenty close enough to follow the conversation.

"Well, what are your other options? You're kinda like Alan, huh? A little while in one place, finish, go someplace else… Of course, Alan's kinda gotten sidetracked since Tina showed up."

Jason smiled at Tina. "Uh… they call that 'incentive'," he laughed.

"I started travelling when a marriage ended," I said. "I'm stopping because I'm married. That's incentive enough. Huh, cutie?"

Tina smiled. "Babe, we can do whatever you think is best. Travel or whatever."

"I think it's best that YOU get to college," I said. "And since you have SISTERS…" I looked at Susan, who smiled, "we need to figure out how to make our family work…"

"I defer to your wishes, master,' Tina giggled. "Of course, it's gonna be interesting for a few years."

"Mmmm-hmmm," Susan interjected. "You really oughtta think about it, Jason."

I saw Susan's look. A couple of neurons misfired in my head. I mean, I'd been working with Jason a while by now and I was impressed with him on the job. "Jace," I said. "Maybe you oughtta talk to a counselor about changing that technology degree to full-blown engineering."

Squeal! In stereo.

Jason asked the obvious question. "How's THAT supposed to work? I'm in college, assuming that I'll be taking a hefty schedule, when am I supposed to earn a living?"

"Oh, I'm sure something could be worked out," I said. "You have a few years of hands-on experience, you KNOW things, you'd make a hell of an engineer, bud! Is it something you'd consider?"

"I AM considering it, Alan."

Susan was smiling.

We sat and talked, the four of us, sipping hot cocoa, enjoying conversation and company, and it got late.

"Time for me to go, folks," Jason said.

"Me too," Susan chirped.

I saw Tina's eyes cut to Susan, but Susan looked as innocent as could be. We followed them to the door, saying good-byes.

Tina tugged me back from the door, closing it. "Let 'em go," she said. And she peeked out the corner of the window.

I heard Jason's truck start, then Susan's little car.

"Nope!" Tina said. "They just smiled at each other and took off!"

"What EXACTLY were you expecting?"

"Oh, I dunno," Tina answered. She stepped up to me, tossed her arms around my neck, and kissed me.

I felt the need to kiss her back. "Is Susan telling you something that you're not telling me?"

"Nope. Just that she thinks… Oh, Jason's a nice guy. Kinda nerdy. But then so's Susan." She kissed me again, impressing her body against mine. She smiled, her eyes twinkling with a light I adored. "Let's shower!"

While she showered, I cleaned up the dishes, and when she stepped out, I undressed to take my own shower. Got a lovely grope as I squeezed past her. I showered and shaved and helped her brush her auburn hair. She was wearing her nightshirt, concession to the cool temperatures, and she stood, turned, the thin cotton draping over a pair of perfect young breasts, and I put my hand son her waist and pulled her against me.

Giggle. "Got something in mind?" She wiggled her hips, bouncing a soft, warm mound against the hardness that was pushing between us. "Seems like part of you has a plan." Her blue eyes… my hands came away from her waist and I caressed her face, completely given over to her.

"You love me, Alan. Every time I see that look, I know," she said breathily. "I didn't know how you're supposed to tell if somebody REALLY loves you, but now I know…" She backed away, tugging at my hand. "I want you to possess me." She practically tore the covers off the bed and climbed into it, legs spread.

I knew my own capabilities and made a quick assessment as I regarded the beauty before me. Her spread legs had her perfect pussy opening like a newly blooming flower, moist with the morning dew. She was wet from just a few kisses, but I also knew that if I plunged straight into her, as beautiful as she was, I wouldn't last long enough to get her off. I had a plan for that, and I slid between those thighs and kissed the pink petals before me.

"Ahhhhhhh, baaaaabyyyyyyy," she sighed, her hands touching the back of my head. "You know where…"

I knew where. Right THERE! her clitoris was erect, the hood sliding back just a tiny bit, revealing a little pink, wet pea that produced quivers when I licked it gently. And when I covered it with my lips and sucked…

"Ohgod! Yessssss!" Her heels dug into my back, urging me onward. I kept licking, savoring sweet, salty, musky fluids, bringing her to the edge.

"NOW!" she hissed. "POSSESS ME!"

I crawled up and my dick slid into her like it had a guidance system. It did. It found hot wand wet and wanting and it went right into her. Her hips surged upward like she was trying to weld us together. We humped against each other, breath escaping in gasps as we merged. I knew I wasn't going to last. NOTHING compared with what was going in at the point of our coupling, NOTHING that I'd ever experienced, and she had her arms around me, drawing me against her.

The fervor of her grasping hands told me she was nearing her own point of no return, her hips surging upward to meet my own thrusts. Control? We were BOTH past that point and her orgasm came with with an almost guttural growl, "Urrrghhhhhh! Yeahhhhhhhh!" She captured my lips and sucked the breath out of me with a kiss as I shot the first of a string of fiery spurts into her.

"MMMMMMMMMMNNNNNNGHHHHH!" was as erudite as I could manage. I was amazed that I could verbalize at all. I could, however, move just a little, so I rolled to the side so I wouldn't be dead weight atop her. She didn't let me just roll off. Arms and legs clung to me, so she ended up atop me, her head lolling on my chest as we regained our normal senses.

"What did YOU do, little brown-haired girl?" I finally said.

"I was gonna ask you the same thing, baby," she sighed. "That was… epic!" Another sigh.

I found a nerve still working that connected to one arm, and I stroked her hair away from her cheek. "You are such an angel, Tina."

"What we did just now, what does THAT have to do with angels?" she giggled.

"Only a man in love with an angel should ever expect to find such ecstasy," I said.

"When you say things like that, Alan, you make feel… I know it's only words, and I know that people say things to get other people to do things that they wouldn't ordinarily do, but when you say them, you look in my eyes, and I know you're telling me what's in your heart." She kissed me lightly, softly, like a butterfly landing on a rose.

"I have never lied to you, sweetness. You amaze me in every way."

Soft giggle. "I think we just amazed each other. I didn't know how hungry I was for you."

"I asked myself that question. I… we… you didn't tease me or anything. We just played and talked with our friends all evening. I guess that just living with you gets me that excited."

"I never thought of myself as particularly exciting," she said.

"You are, you know…"

"I don't think so, sometimes. Susan and I talk, and sometimes some other girls, and we know that there's "good" and there's "good enough for NOW" as far as guys are concerned. Me and Susan… Susan and I, we figure we're pretty far into 'good enough for now' with a lot of guys."

"You have some very philosophical discussions, don't you?" I said.

"We're trying to figure out the way the world works, Alan. Susan's smart. You tell me I'm smart…"

"Thirty-two ACT. You ARE smart…"

"I was saying," she continued, "We just try to figure out why people do the things they do. I mean, we did a lot of this after Susan's last heart-break…"

"Breaking Susan's heart. That would take somebody who'd stomp on a kitten."

"I know," Tina said. "But the guy wasn't going for Susan, not the parts we love," she said. "He thought that since he was a football player and… and she's a little plump, she'd be an easy target."

I looked at her face, close as it was to mine.

"Susan's not an easy target. She didn't… Maybe she would've if he'd have been decent to her, but he was all about how luck y she was that he paid attention to her at all."

"I'm glad for Susan."

Susan's a good girl. Like me. For exactly the opposite reason, no doubt…"

"The opposite reason?" I asked.

"Yeah. Susan's mom and dad are loving and caring and decent. My mom… well, you know."

"But your grandmother…"

She smiled. "Yeah, there IS that! Maybe for me, it's a little of both. But I never SAW a couple having a real good relationship. Not like Susan's parents. Not close enough to study."

"You're smart. And you figured out things for yourself."

"Grandma and I talked. Sometimes she cried over Mom, but we talked. Mothers have a different kind of love for their kids, and Mom abused Grandma's love. I never wanted to do something like that, not to somebody who loved me."

"And you haven't, princess," I said.

"And I won't. Alan, you're not just 'good enough for NOW'. You're forever…"

"You are too, little one," I said. She rolled off to my side and I turned to face her. We fitted ourselves together. "See how perfectly we fit?"

"And how we avoid the wet spot," she giggled.

"It's OUR wet spot, you know."

"I know. But I think we paralyzed each other that time. By the time I could move again, it was too late."

"I bet you still have something that I could enjoy, you know…"

"I AM still oozing," she giggled. "I think you pumped a gallon in me."

"You made a gallon. It had to go somewhere," I said.

"And I can't let you go to sleep all sticky," she giggled, pushing me onto my back as she turned around.

My nose filled with her sexy scent and I kissed those pink petals gently.

"Go easy," she said. "If you push me, I'm gonna explode, and I've got this in my mouth. She engulfed my semi-soft dick.

I took her instruction and lapped happily around the periphery, then inside the lips, studiously avoiding her clit, performing two functions, first, cleaning up the sticky remains of our mating, and second, teasing her to the point where she shifted and PUSHED her clit against my tongue, hissing "Do me!"

Damn straight I did her. Because she was doing me. Good. This wasn’t' supposed to happen. I'd just come, and not just a plain old everyday orgasm, but a spectacular one, and as much as I adore getting sucked on by Tina, it was usually prelude, not main event, especially as the second one. But I felt the fire building, the familiar and welcome drawing up of my scrotum as things neared release.

And I had this sweet pussy being pushed wantonly in my face and I was lapping and drinking and savoring and she was THERE. Her keening as she came was interrupted as I released into her mouth. We both knew how to ease one another down after THAT. I knew that her first kiss afterward would be on my mouth, letting me taste myself there, and then the flurry of kisses on my lips, those let her taste herself on me.

And from there, she softly requested her nightshirt. We turned out the lights and turned on the music and went to sleep.

Monday. Off to the races. Except this morning, Tina had an almost dreamy look on her face. Our 'good morning' kiss.

"Alan, last night… Oh gosh… words fail me."

I smiled. "Everything comes together for us, Tina."

She giggled. "Oh, yes, we certainly DO come together."

"You know what I mean," I said.

"Yes I do. Seriously. But… gosh!"

We managed to get ourselves dressed and fed and I headed out to the job, leaving her standing in the door, neat, smiling, perfect.

The next few days were the happy routine at home. Work was work. Until Thursday. Ninish. I was in my office and the phone rang. I picked up, not even glancing at the caller ID. Alan Addison,' I said. "Can I help you?"

"Hi, Alan. Mike Carter. I have a bunch of invoices to deliver. We usually mail 'em, but I thought that I might be able to drop 'em off and drag you out to lunch."

"Sure, buddy," I said.

"Can you get out, like, eleven or so? We can beat the crowd."

"I can do that, short of an emergency," I said.

"Well, good! I won't keep you. See you around eleven."

"Great!" I said. "Take care." I heard the click as he hung up. That was fine with me. I sometimes didn't like to go to lunch with vendors. A lot of them were salesmen at heart, hitting all the smarmy stereotypes, but Mike was not one of those, and on top of that, he was a friend, aside from our commercial involvement.

I put my desktop computer into sleep mode and went out into the new plant, surveying the work's progress. Found Jason with some test equipment connected, running equipment through its paces.

"What's up?" he said.

"Oh, nothing. You didn't stop by the office this morning."

"I know," he said. "I came straight in here. Had this stuff on my mind since breakfast. Wanted to get it in the program before I lost my train of thought."

"Oh, okay," I said. Jason was a step up from the workers who had to punch a time clock. Of course, the gate logs kept by security would verify his arrival and departure times, but I didn't see any need to pursue that. "I just thought you might have something to say about yesterday evening."

He grinned. "Had a good time. Really."

"Well, good! I know we don't exactly offer the Taj Mahal for accommodations."

"Good food. Good company." He connected his eyes to mine. "I shouldn't say anything, because you'll start panicking, but I enjoyed sitting next to Susan. You and Tina aren't BAD company, but Susan sort makes me feel like less than the odd man out."

"Funny," I said. "She says the same thing." Then I realized what I'd just said, my supposition underscored by the brightening of HIS expression. "Man, d'you realize how OBVIOUS you are?"

"Obvious?"

"Yeah," I said. "I just mention Susan and it's like you hit the lottery."

"I'm sorry. I didn't…"

"We've talked about Susan already, Jace," I said.

"I know. Alan, you know that this business I'm in… uh, we're in, the way we do it, it depends on good reputations. I have one."

"Dan told me you're a great technician. I can clearly see that," I said. "And if you take the girl's advice, you'll be a formidable engineer, too. But…"

"I'm protective of my reputation. Not just the technical side." He looked at me. "Serious. Friend serious, Alan."

"Okay," I said.

"I don't talk about it much. Us guys don't, you know. But since we're in this, uh, situation, I wanna tell you some stuff."

"You don't have to explain anything to me, Jason."

"No, I think I do, at least a little bit. You're concerned about Susan. I'm concerned about ME. And that makes me concerned about Susan, too."

"How's that?" I asked.

"I know what it's like to be dumped on by somebody you think you love, Alan. I wouldn't do that to another person. 'Specially one that smiles like Susan. I wouldn't want to look at myself in the mirror if I made her unhappy."

"Jason, she's…"

"Naïve? You may look at it like that, Alan. I see it in a different light. I think of some of the women I've tried to start up with, and Susan is refreshingly UNhardened. I don't wanna use the word innocent, but yeah, I guess…"

I fixed him in what I figured was a harsh stare.

"I'm not the guy who'd take that away from her, Alan. And just so you know, the only times I've talked with her, she's been with you and Tina, or her family. Not a phone call. Or an email."

"Oooo-kayyyy,' I said. "You're telling me this, why?"

"Because at the end of the day, I like people to respect me." He paused. "Like I respect them."

"Ouch!" I said.

"I didn't mean it like that. Like you an' Tina. You're what? Forty? She's seventeen? Or Dan and Cindy? I KNOW she's fourteen." You have any idea of the things that they said behind Dan's back? I mean, most folks are over it now, but man… Now I respect him about HER. Made it easy to understand you an' Tina. But I… if Susan and I did, you know, date, Alan, I'm not trying to get in her pants."

"Sometimes that's not the worst part, Jason. Tina got in my heart…"

"I know exactly the feeling, Alan. Just trust me. Okay?"

"Okay." I drew a breath. "So what about the 'Jason becomes an engineer' idea…"

He laughed. "I thought you wanted me to stay AWAY from Susan, not go to class with her."

We went on about the project, about the tests he was performing, and I continued my tour of the jobsite. I made sure I was in my office before eleven.

I heard our admin clerk say "He's in his office. Last door on the right!" and then Mike's voice.

"Hey, Mike," I said, extending a hand.

He shook it, a solid shake. "How's the project?"

"Great!" I said. "Rolling right along. If you wanna tour…"

"After lunch," Mike said. "Let's go see if we can find some barbecue."

I knew the place he had in mind. We climbed in his truck and took off. Didn't take long for the conversation to end up where I was halfway expecting it to go.

"So what's the deal with this 'Jason' fellow?" Mike asked.

"From exactly what angle?" I countered, playing coy.

"Oh, from the angle of my sweet teen-aged daughter is all 'Jason this' and 'Jason that'."

"Oh boy," I said. "Jason's a great technician. And from what I can tell, and believe me, I asked people that I trust, he's a nice guy. Twenty-six. Divorced. Her, not him. He apparently worked too hard for her lifestyle."

"Uh-huh…"

"Doesn't drink and carouse and chase women. Not that I can see. And not according to the guy who worked with him at his last job. That would be Susan's adopted sister's husband, Dan."

"Okay," Mike said. "I just wanna know…"

"You're her dad. Of course you wanna know. I wanted to know, too, Mike. She's my wife's best friend, and she's my friend and your daughter, and when she's with us, I feel responsible."

"I appreciate that, Alan. She's my baby girl."

I looked at him.

"Oh, I know… eighteen. Can't protect her forever."

"If it's any consolation, Tina and Susan talk and Tina tells me some of it."

"Some?"

"Yeah. Girls have to have their secrets. But I started on Tina about Susan and Jason. Told Tina not to be playing matchmaker and setting them up. You know what she told me?"

"Whazzat?" Mike asked.

"She said SHE'D talked to Susan and YOUR daughter said that she knew what a healthy relationship looks like because she watched her mom and dad. Mike, the loudest lessons you give are the examples you set."

"Damn, Alan. She said that?"

"'S what Tina said."

"Oh, hell, Alan. Kathy and I… we try. I mean, Susan's an only child, could've been spoilt rotten, but she's not. Least not that I can see."

"Doesn't look that way to me. You guys are lucky. She's smart and decent."

"But she's eighteen. And she can do what she wants now. Legally."

"So the only thing you have is what you gave her in the last eighteen years. I think you did pretty good."

"But this Jason… he's older…"

"And got beat up pretty bad in his first marriage. Guy's as nerdy as I was. Fits in with the group. You saw that at dinner, didn't you?"

"Yeah, you're right." Mike pulled into a parking spot and we went inside the restaurant. Ordered sweet tea and a couple of rib plates.

"Look, he was there last night with me and Susan and Tina at the trailer. We played Trivial Pursuit, for heaven's sake. They left at the same time. Tina was peeking out the curtain. Said they waved at each other and took off in two cars. Well, her car and his truck."

"She told me about y'all's evening," Mike admitted. "So what do we do?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. 'Nothing' sounds good to me. Let's say there was no Jason. Your Susan goes off to college. Comes home on break with some slack-jawed loser her age who's all 'General studies, dude!' and says 'Dad! This is Trevor. We're getting' married!'"

"I could say 'No!' and hope she'd listen."

"But if she comes home with a guy who's working full-time, top of his game, pulling six figures, and he's eight years older than her…"

"Might have a point, there, Alan," Mike said. "Still… My daughter."

"I sort of understand, buddy, but she's cute and smart and happy and you KNOW she's gonna get married one day," I said. "What's Kathy say?"

"That we got a good kid and she's got good friends and we love her, no matter what."

"Sounds sane," I laughed.

"She does that more often than I want to think," Mike laughed.

"Happens to me, too, and I've only been married to Tina six months."

Our meal finished on a happier, less concerned note and we were laughing and telling stories on the way back to work.

I walked into my office and Jason was at his desk in the corner. No, I didn't say a word about the conversation I'd had with Mike about him and Susan. We finished out the day and I went home to Tina.

I pulled in beside our trailer and her car. She had the door open before I got out of the truck.

"Hey, babe! Get in here!" She was grinning.

I was smiling as I stepped inside, closing the door behind me, enjoying the arms that immediately wrapped me up. "I missed you, too, sweetie," I said. "What? No Susan?"

"Not today. She's having an evening with her mom and dad."

"Funny. I had lunch with her dad today."

Her expression took on signs of curiosity. "Business? Or…"

"Or what's the deal with this 'Jason' character."

Giggle. "I wondered if Mister Mike would ask you."

I recounted the conversation as accurately as I could.

"So basically you told her dad that there wasn't much he COULD do."

"Legally, that's correct. But worse than that, I told him that she could do a lot worse, not that either of them was doing anything at all, at least for now."

Giggle.

"What's so entertaining?" I asked.

"I ALWAYS find it entertaining when you find out that I'm right." She was smiling broadly.

"You're delightfully evil," I said.

"You get the mate you deserve," she giggled. "By the way, I've finished my homework, so we have all evening…" And the big smile.

"So we need to do something for dinner."

She named a restaurant within range. "Or we could throw something together."

"What's your preference?"

"Restaurant."

"Right now?" I asked.

"No, wait an hour or so. Come sit on the sofa and snuggle."

In each other's arms, we relaxed. She talked of her school day. "Exit exams in two weeks," she said. "Not that it matters to me."

"Doesn't matter to you?" I thought I knew the reason, but I let her verbalize it.

"We took practice exams. I aced 'em. So did Susan. Those things aren't FOR us."

"Have you talked to Cindy? When's hers in Alabama?"

"About the same time. Same thing." Giggle. "She needs to pass it to graduate. Of course, she's fourteen."

"Yeah, there IS that," I laughed. "Sometimes I think about Dan and Cindy and I start laughing."

"Oh, yeah," Tina smiled. "Imagine some forty-year-old guy marryin' a teenager."

"No, it makes complete sense for us, baby. But Dan… He was always so sane."

She snuggled backward into my arms. "Life sure is strange sometimes." She tugged my arms tightly around her. "And soooo good!"

We listened to music and simply held onto each other for an hour before we got out going find dinner.

And tell me that I shouldn't be surprised when we pulled into the parking lot and both the Carter SUV AND Jason's truck were already there.

# Chapter 26

I looked at the person sitting next to me. "You know, this would be a whole lot more believable if you weren't grinning like that."

She smirked. "Whatever do you mean, sir?"

"Okay, princess. I know there are only four restaurants in town, so this COULD be a coincidence, except for that smirk."

"Oh, hush! Let's go see our friends!"

"Oooo-kayyyy," I said. "You got me. Again."

"Yes I do," she smiled, holding my hand as we walked into the restaurant.

Now, I'm not slow. If this had been a coincidence, and there was a tiny shred of a thought that it might be, I'd spot Susan and Jason and Mike and Kathy sitting at a table for four.

They were at a table for six. I looked at Tina. She was smiling. Susan spotted us walking in and waved enthusiastically for us to come over. I noticed that Susan was sitting next to Jason, and Jason was smiling. Kathy was smiling. Mike had a look on his face that I didn't quite parse.

We sat. "We ordered appetizers," Mike said. "I'm wishing they served something stronger than beer, though."

"Problem?" I asked.

"I'm apparently a creature out of his time," Mike said.

"Howzat?" I asked.

"I imagined a lot of things, being a parent, Alan. Some of 'em kept me awake nights, especially since my daughter grew into a young girl."

Susan was smiling innocently. She did that very well.

Mike continued, "But I never, in my wildest dreams, thought that some guy would come out and ask me permission to court my daughter."

"Huh?"

Susan was smiling. Jason was smiling. Tina was smiling. Kathy was smiling, maybe not quite as brightly as the other three.

"Jason just asked for my permission to court my daughter. You know, formally."

"And you didn't pull your pistol and shoot him on the spot?"

"Alannnnnn!" Tina squealed.

I continued, "From the smiles, I guess you gave an answer that is acceptable to this crew?"

Mike sighed. "What the HELL am I gonna do, Alan? You should've seen some of the losers she's dated."

"Daaa-aaddddd! Mom, make 'im stop!" Susan squealed.

Kathy gave Mike 'The Stare'. "Michael Carter! You behave yourself!" I could tell by her expression that she was mostly laughing. To me she said, "My husband is not thinking clearly. This is the first time somebody's made a serious request for our daughter's attention."

"A formal request," Susan said. "Not, 'Uh, so, uh, Susan, you wanna, like, a movie Saturday?' and then he has to come into the house 'cuz Dad won't let me go running out to meet a guy in 'is car."

"Your dad's a wise man, Susan," I said.

"Thank you, Alan," Mike said. "It's nice to have some support. Anyhow, I told 'im that I know where he works and I shoot regular competition."

"Daaa-aaddd!"

"Miiike," Kathy laughed.

Susan giggled. "So now I can do THIS!" She raised her hand above the table. It held Jason's hand, fingers interlaced. And Jason was smiling like he hit the lottery.

Okay, by the end of the meal, it didn't feel nearly as awkward. After all, I'd watched these two like the proverbial moths circling a lamp for a month now. Inside, I felt a little relief. At least it was out in the open.

Okay, so we made it through dinner. And of course, there was the obligatory trip to the powder room by the ladies. Well, not ALL the ladies. Kathy skipped that one. Two girls went, and they couldn't get out of earshot before the tittering started. When they returned, Susan was patting a stray strand of blonde hair back behind her ear and Tina was smiling happily.

In the interim, I looked at Jason. "Bud," I said, "Mike won't have to do it. You hurt Tina's sister, I will personally…"

Jason threw his hands up. "Alan! If I was planning on abusing their daughter, do you think I'd come meet them first?"

"You might be particularly slick."

He looked at me, then Mike, then Kathy. "What? Like Ted Kaczynski?"

Kathy bumped in, "Like in Susan 3, Alan 1?"

"Oh, I see that the love of my life apparently can't keep her mouth shut?"

Mike said, "Actually, Susan couldn't wait to tell us when Jason came over to talk." He smiled at me. "Alan, I'm okay with it. Kathy sort of got my mind right."

Kathy smirked. "The only hurdles that bother me in the least is the age difference and his previous marriage. And it sounds like he got burnt on that one." She looked at Jason. "Sorry! I don't mean to talk like you're not here."

"Okay," I said. "I really give up, folks. And they're back!"

Two smiling teens re-seated themselves at the table. And Susan scooted her chair sideways.

"Tell 'em, Alan," Mike said.

"Oh, for pete's sake," I said. "Okay. Susan. Jason. As my old chief engineer used to say, 'Mazel Tov!' You're both my friends. I look forward to our continued relationship."

Tina punched me. "So formal!"

"Look at it this way, Alan," Jason said. "It'll be good for the environment. We'll come visit in one car."

Susan giggled.

The meal ended, I grabbed the check before Mike could, and this time THREE couples walked out of the restaurant. We did good-byes in the parking lot. I noted that Susan got in her mom and dad's car after giving poor Jason the kind of peck on the cheek that she usually gave me.

I couldn't wait until Tina and I got into our truck. I turned to my smirking wife. "Okay! So tell me what happened, cutie!"

Giggle. "You just surrendered to the inevitable, that's all. So did Mister Mike."

"Baby…" I started.

"Think about it. Two adults. Okay? He's, uh, just LIKE her… You know Susan is, kind of bubble-headed? So's Jason."

"And you know this exactly HOW?" I asked.

"He's called me and asked about HER." She sighed. "I asked him why he wasn't looking at girls his own age. He gave me the same kind of arguments that went through MY head about YOU."

"Oh," I said.

She wrapped her hands around my bicep and put her chin on my shoulder and said softly, "I promise I won't encourage anything between them, Alan. Okay? Hmmmm?" She might've had her hands wrapped around my arm, but she had my heart wrapped around her little finger.

"Okay, little kitten," I said. "I hope it works out with them. I really do."

"Me too. I want 'em happy like us." She playfully bit into my shoulder. "I gotta call Cindy!"

That was one of those giggly phone calls that made me realize that this was a happy girl with happy friends as she and Cindy tee-hee'd for five minutes together. A significant part of the conversation was about Susan and Jason.

Giggle. "He actually asked her dad if he could court her," Tina tittered. Pause. "Yeah, just like a hundred years ago. I think it's soooo cute!" Pause. "I know. Didn't know WHEN or HOW, but you KNEW it was gonna happen." Pause. "I hope it works out for them. They're a cute couple." Pause. "Okay, little sister! We'll talk tomorrow." Pause. "Luv ya! Bye!"

"Baby," I said, "Give 'em a chance. Every time a couple dates, doesn't mean they're destined for marriage."

"I know, silly!" she giggled, still on a Cindy high, apparently. "But I can't help feelin'..."

"Oh, c'mere!" I gathered her with my arm, pressing her against me. One thing about riding around with Tina: I was good at driving with one hand. "You and your sisters just go ahead and do what you think is best. Just remember, baby, you and Cindy, you've got husbands who love you. Susan and Jason, they're real people with real feelings. Care for them. Don't get wrapped up in the cuteness."

"Baby," she said, her tone more serious. "You say you married me for my brain," a significant pause, "too. Don't you think that seriously, with where Cindy and I come from, we ARE thinking about feelings of others?" She put a little wiggle to go with the cuddle, just for emphasis.

"I should have expected as much. Forgive me for supposing otherwise," I said.

"I forgive you." Giggle. "Although I may have to exact a punishment for your behavior."

"I shall accept any punishment Mistress sees fit to exact," I said, playing along. It's a fun game with Tina.

"You know that punishing you causes me much distress, don't you? I often end screaming and shaking uncontrollably." She was into her game.

"I am sorry, Mistress. You should double my punishment."

"I fear that I must. For your own good."

We pulled up next to our trailer and went inside.

"What is my punishment, Mistress?"

"You are required to undress me."

Yes, Mistress." I started to undress her.

"Stop, you insolent person. How dare you undress me while you yourself are fully dressed? You must be naked before me." She tried to look serious, but Tina’s face didn't do 'serious' very well these days.

"I obey, Mistress," I said, and I stripped.

She examined me, her eyes slowly scanning me from head to toe. "See! Even your body parts are insolent!" She grasped my erection.

It was clearly a Moment.

Then she started giggling uncontrollably. "I just CAN'T do that role play thing..." she laughed. "I do pretty good until I get you naked..." Giggle. "Take my clothes off and just ravish me!"

THAT, I could do! A while later, we were in each other's arms, sticky with the results of one heck of a session. I was on my side, one arm under her, gazing into those blue eyes, and I chuckled.

"What's so funny?" she questioned.

"You! You're funny and pretty and smart and sexy and right on down a whole list of delights that I lack the vocabulary to describe."

"And I love you crazy much," she smiled. "I'm sorry that I lack the discipline for role-play."

"Hah! You play the role perfectly!"

"Uh..."

"Yeah," I said, "The role of the most desirable woman in the world."

"You silver-tongued devil," she smiled, "You have me forever."

Reluctantly we got out of bed and showered. Got a little less reluctant when she suggested hot cocoa and started pulling down the fixings. Nothing like a steamy, chocolaty mug of cocoa against the chill of an early spring night. Especially with a cutie who promises to snuggle with you when the lights go out. Or maybe before.

When we finished, I grabbed the mugs and rinsed them and turned out the lights in the trailer. Tina was already kneeling in the bed, waiting. She had me trapped in her arms before I got all the way into bed.

"You're in a good mood," I said.

"There's times when I'm NOT in a good mood?" She looked almost shocked that I'd think such a thing.

She had reason to be. Tina was a naturally happy girl now. "Better than normal," I said.

"I guess I'm happy not worrying about Susan and Jason." She pulled me down on the bed.

# Chapter 27

So two weeks, the next TWO weeks, passed with no negative incidents. Work was, well, work, but we had it going our way.

On the home/school front, the official connection of Jason and Susan actually meant the Tina and I had a little more alone time for ourselves, not that I was feeling particularly uncomfortable with the regular appearance of Susan at our little trailer.

Interestingly, Jason's apartment became one of the regular destinations, Jason and I watching movies while the girls worked school work. And then the exit exams for high school graduates were on us. I always found these things amusing, myself, especially the idea that a kid could get through twelve years of school and not be able to graduate because he failed the exits tests. But then I also knew about social promotions and poor teachers who issued passing grades without a care as to the actual need for an education.

Tina was right, though. Those tests weren't meant for students like her and Susan, bright, eager for an education, able to soak up learning easily.

"Reviews!" Tina had snorted. "I am sitting through REVIEWS of stuff I learned in the eighth grade!"

I knew she was aggravated. "Baby, you gotta remember…"

She stopped me. Make that 'very aggravated'. "I DO remember that, but we're losing WEEKS of opportunity. Why can't they separate those that can and will from those that can't or won't?"

"Because that's gonna require too many people to make decisions that would put them in the gunsights of angry, entitled parents. How would YOU like to be the school administrator to have to tell some mommy that her little snowflake's just not up to the standard for the smart classes?"

"You make a good point. But people need to grow up."

I kissed her on the forehead. "Welcome to the real world, baby…"

Her eyes softened with the kiss and she pulled back to look at me. "I knowwww…" She wrapped her arms around my neck and forced me into another, longer kiss. "Still gets to me, though." Another kiss, and then a giggle. "D'ya know any kind of GOOD way to relieve stress?"

We didn't get out of the house THAT evening.

Other evenings? Jason's apartment, graciously attended by Jason and a very giggly-looking Susan, and that's the first time I actually saw the two kiss. It was just a little longer than a friendly peck, but from the way that Tina glanced at me, I knew she was gaging my reaction.

They didn't make a big deal out of it. They just acted like they were comfortable and happy with each other. Since we got there BEFORE Susan, I surmised that Susan was still very much Daddy's Little Girl, too. I was hoping that, anyway. But I was also becoming more relaxed , or was it resigned, with the idea of those two being a couple.

Note to self. Don't mention that to Tina. The last time I mentioned the age difference, she got the giggles. "There's TEN YEARS less difference than me and YOU!" And a giggle. "And we do pretty darned good, you know…"

"Hah!" I laughed. "I've always characterized us as perfect."

Another kiss. "me too, baby! But we can't tell people that. They'll get jealous!"

The evenings at Jason's apartment we just about the same as the previous evenings at our trailer: games, conversation, food. Jason and Susan made Tina and me sit back while they laughed and argued through their version of Tina's 'dump soup' one time. Another was delivery pizza. And when it was time for US to leave, I noted that Susan left with us after gracing Jason with a sweet kiss while she was standing by her car in the parking lot.

Driving home, I asked Tina, "So, Jason and Susan? They ever been alone in his apartment?"

Tina said, "She says no. She's not rushing, baby. She's known him a lot longer than you knew me, baby, before WE were in bed together."

"You know, little one, that we're exceptionally fortunate to have found each other. We just sort of match, even from the first day…"

"When I was scared and nervous and everything else." She smiled. "I remember. Sometimes that's my daydream, just reliving how it all happened." Little smile. "I just want Susan to be this happy. And Jason too."

"How happy?" I asked.

She caught that. "Having somebody who can actually carry on a conversation, somebody who has interests we can share, and who is just somebody who FITS me."

"You're so wrong, little one," I said. "It's you that fit me."

"Mmmm," she purred as we kissed. "I cannot possibly imagine finding anyone better, babe," she said. "So we're going to the gym this evening?"

"I think we need to. Our dazzling social whirl is too much food and the only exercise, lovely though it is, isn't going to keep me from gaining weight."

"But I really like that exercise," she said. "Just so we can do BOTH!"

As we walked out to her car, I said, "Of course we can. The gym takes care of the body. That other exercise is for my soul."

"Mine too, guy," she said. "You drive."

I knew WHY I was driving. After she buckled in, she wiggled around and started gathering her hair into to miniscule pigtails, one just behind each ear, her fix for 'I can't stand my hair on my neck when I'm sweating."

When she finished, she turned to me with a huge grin. "There! Now I can exercise, and I'll know the whole time that you're lusting after me extra much."

"You know waaay too much about me, cutie," I said.

"I have a whole list, honey," she giggled. "But this one's just strange…" And she laughed.

At the gym, I ran through my routine, a bit of time on the weight machine, some brisk time on an elliptical machine, all the time watching HER, because in a workout outfit that consisted of shorts, a tight top and a sports bra that suggestively showed its shoulder straps, she was a very attractive example of a young girl at the gym. Of course, all the regulars knew that she and I were a couple, and I'd seen her approached more than once by young men (younger than me, for darned sure) with their best smiles, and I'm sure, their best lines, and she just smiled back, shook her head (making sure I got to see those little pigtails wiggling) and pointed me out.

We finished our cool-down on two side-by-side treadmills, then put on warmup suits and walked back into the nasty outdoors to the car. As soon as we got in, I turned the heater on against the harsh nasty weather that had followed a cold front.

"Home," she said. "Shower. Hot chocolate. And lots of snuggles."

"Gladly," I said. "How're you feeling?" We weren't as diligent with our gym visits as we should be, and I could feel a bit of tightness from my own workout."

"I can feel things pulling," she said. "We need to do this more regularly." I laughed inside. That was one of the things that I adored about Tina, that she seemed like our minds were synched together. Her hooking my bicep and resting her chin on my shoulder was another, as we drove along, a CD playing music from one of the concerts we'd seen together.

We pulled into the park and went inside. As was normal, she got first shot at the shower. I took advantage of that to get the makings of two mugs of hot chocolate out, and no, NOT the instant. Real milk. Sugar. A block of that wonderful Mexican chocolate.

The sound of the shower stopped and Tina stepped out. "Your turn," she said brightly.

I jumped into the little bathroom, showering while I heard the hair dryer going. I got out, shaved, then stood behind her to help her finish her hair.

"No, I got this. You do the chocolate!"

I did exactly that, and when it was ready, I handed her a steamy, frothy mug. Her hair was in pigtails. I got to look at THAT picture while we sipped the sweet darkness and watched part of a TV show neither of us was particularly interested in. We finished our drinks a little before nine. The mugs went into the sink. We went into the bedroom.

That got me into the arms of this vision, auburn hair, pulled back into two little pigtails, blue eyes, bangs, freckles… every off-center quirk I ever harbored about what's sexy, there it was in one neat package. She was grinning.

"Oh, you think you have me figured out, don't you?" I laughed.

Her hand gently wrapped around my dick. Her giggle was gentle, too. "Something tells me I'm right, you know." Her blue eyes flashed. "Want me to run down the rest of the list? I know lots of things that'll put you so close to the edge I can sneeze and you'll squirt for me."

She did, too. And she was happy and giggling when she used 'em. Of course, I knew some things about her, too, and while another man might find it disconcerting the have a girl giggling and grinning while he's in the middle of full penetration, I saw it as the most wonderful expression of sharing of each other's bodies imaginable.

That's the fun part. We're in that position that's MADE for me and Tina: I'm sitting in the middle of the bed, legs crossed, she's sitting in my lap, happily impaled on me, we're gently rocking, just enjoying being coupled together, not yet frantic with the inevitable orgasms. It's communion. She's got her arms around me, holding us in position, so my hands can range over her luscious form. They end up cupping her face inches from mine, and our eyes connect and there's love in her look.

"Darn it, Tina, you're so wonderfully beautiful…" I kissed her.

"To you, Alan," she said.

"Yeah, right. That's why I have to watch you at the gym. I see those other guys looking…"

"They'd never get more than a smile, Alan. This" and she gave a wiggle to her ass that took me in mid-breath, "is only for YOU."

"I love you, little dove," I said.

"You love me for everything I am, Alan Dean Addison. I've never thought anything else. There MIGHT be another man on this planet like you, but I have you, so I don't care…" Her lips fastened to mine and we traded tongues. Her rocking became more rhythmic and before long her smile had morphed to flashing eyes, biting her bottom lip, the smile still there at the upturned corners of her mouth, and then as she got even closer, she released her lip and came in short mewing moans and panting grunts and I added my own sound to our sensual duet as I came.

She recovered her giggle as she descended from orgasmic heights. "We're going to have a mess, baby," she tittered. "Apparently pigtails double your semen volume."

"Apparently my marvelous partner drives me crazy," I said. "You wanna towel?"

"Not MY choice," she said. Her choice left us both with sticky faces and her with a second orgasm and then we kissed each other's faces clean.

We lay there in bed, cuddled together. I thought that if we turned the lights out, we'd glow. Yes, it's like that, some of the times are more than others, and tonight was one of the better ones, for no particular reason. We turned out the lights and let the sleep come gently.

Tina's tests at school corresponded with some critical steps in our project. I had all my big power systems taken care of, but now we were dealing with process equipment, and I spent a good part of the time dashing back and forth between the systems programmer and the power center and the equipment room holding the interfaces between them. I had to couple that with a couple of groups for foreign engineers there to set up specialty equipment from Germany and Italy and fortunately my meager German and almost non-existent Italian we sufficient, along with a positive attitude, to keep things on track.

Tina and I met the German crew one night, then the Italian crew the next, for dinner. To say that mouths gaped open at the sight of my seventeen-year-old wife is an understatement. However, her charming demeanor and attitude won them over immediately, making for a pleasant dinner and a pleasant project.

In the truck on the way home, Tina nipped my shoulder. "Baby, d'ya think we can do some travel in Europe?"

"I suppose that might be something we can swing, little one. Let's see how things work out after you graduate. Dan and I have to get a business off the ground and you and Susan and Cindy need to get your college schedules figured out. We…"

"We have to get our housing situation resolved, too. I was talking to Mizz Kathy. She's going through the realtor network, seeing what she can come up with."

"You're doing that?" I was surprised. I guess I shouldn't have been. Tina and I were partners, but I guess there's a part of me that still tends to assume she's as limited as most kids her ages. That was, of course, an error on my part. Tina was brilliant, and she had an eye on our plan.

"Uh-huh. That's okay with you, isn't it?"

"Well, sure, baby."

"I talked with Cindy and Susan, and we all talked with Susan's mom. Cindy said something like a little apartment building might be nice. Mizz Kathy said that if you guys incorporate, then we could buy it under the corporation."

I shook my head at the thought of three teen girls working over the ideas of housing and corporations and a future. "An apartment building?"

"Yeah," she said. "Don't'cha think that the idea works? We buy an apartment building, not a big one, but big enough for two or three families, us and Dan and Cindy and… well, we're looking, okay?

"You don't think that just maybe living in the same building might be a little too much closeness?"

"Do you?"

"I was in the army, baby. I'm used to living with people whether I get tired of 'em or not."

"Didn't you and Dan…"

"Yeah, we rented an apartment in Arizona. Three bedrooms, one for each of us, one for junk. But neither of us was too far off the reservation as far as lifestyle."

Giggle. "So let's see. We can do the inventory. Young wives who get along? Still engineers. Same hobbies. Same tastes in music."

"And your point?" I said.

"We could do that. Separate apartments, but the same building. Have our privacy when we need it, convenient for me and Cindy and Susan to study together."

"This sounds pretty well talked out," I said.

Another giggle. "You expected otherwise?"

"No, not really," I said, shaking my head. I changed the subject. "So how's the testing going?"

That got her going again. "Husband of mine, I got a thirty-two ACT. In a sane world, I shouldn't even be sitting in the room wasting my time."

"So you're telling me that you're not having to work very hard."

"What's that guy say on the radio? 'Half my brain tied behind my back'? It's like that."

"And Susan?"

"Susan almost got thrown out of class for being a disruption."

"Susan? Our sweet little Susan?"

"Yeah. Some of her classmates were whining about the test and how unfair it was that they had to take it to graduate, and she started giggling and almost started a riot." She smiled. "You know who's a lot more confident in school?"

"Susan?"

Tina smiled. "Yeah. You wanna know what I think is part of it?"

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

Another smile. "Jason. All of a sudden Susan's got this guy who's just as proud as all get-out that she's SMART. He's not trying to get in 'er pants, he just wants to have a friend and somebody to talk with and be with, and she's not stressing about all those school relationship things." She looked at me. "Sort of like me, you know. I can concentrate on being a student, not being involved in the chasing and catching and all that stuff."

"I hope it stays that way for her. I never see her at school, so I don't know what you see, but I know that Jason and she are pretty comfortable-looking together."

"And they still haven't gotten to bed, baby. It's not about sex with them, either." She had a smug look. "Susan's a virgin, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"Told you she's kind of naïve, baby. But hard-headed. And knows what she's doing. Her mom and dad taught 'er. So if her and Jason… he'll be getting a real gem, Alan."

"Well, I didn't know that, baby," I said.

"So you're not the only one, baby," she replied. "And just so you know, Dan and Cindy, too…"

"I should HOPE so. Cindy's only fourteen."

"You're missing things, sweetie," Tina stated. "I know girls who were sexually active before they were teens. Maybe it's… Oh, I dunno. What is, just IS."

"Like us," I said. "I woke up one day and got on the road, never ever thinking that I'd meet the love of my life in the middle of a hurricane evacuation."

"Or that she'd be seventeen and you'd have to rescue her at gunpoint."

"And now look at us." We were pulling into the RV park.

"Yeah. You tell me your imagination failed you when it comes to making love with me. Well, baby doll," she said, "Mine failed too. I never imagined that I'd have YOU. Or friends and family like this. I was at the point that I just couldn't see anything any more, baby. And now…" Giggle. "Let's get inside."

"Okay,' I said. Out of the truck, I unlocked the door, let her inside the trailer, then followed.

# Chapter 28

I kissed Tina good bye in the standard fashion, and she wrapped me in her arms. "You're not gonna slip into thinking that kissing your wife is routine," she giggled. The gratuitous grope was more than adequate emphasis.

"I in no way think that you're routine, cutie pie," I said. "And neither is this!" And I squeezed her butt.

Blue eyes flashed happily as I got in the truck to head off to work. I surmise that the stress level of my day was about the same as the stress level of Tina's. I knew she was taking tests. I was running down lists of instrumentation points and comparing them with completion documents until the numbers became a blur.

Jason walked in with his laptop under his arm. He saw what I was doing. "Man, I wish \*\*I\*\* was the project engineer so I could do that," he laughed.

"Gee, thanks for making me feel better."

"How 'bout a cup of coffee? This is my good shirt, so I won't let you cry on my shoulder."

"You're a prince among men, Jason," I said. "What's up?"

"I wanna get you to look over this stuff. I think those guys at the design engineering cave are screwing up."

"How so?"

"Protection's all wrong. Logic's hosed. If the file labels didn't kind of match, I'd think they sent us stuff from the wrong project." He printed out a few pages and we went over them together.

"You're right. You want to work up a list of issues? We'll sent it back to 'em!"

"Okay." He snorted. "We could send Susan and Tina to a class, ONE class, and they'd do better. Or Cindy. Did Dan tell you about Cindy and the session with programming the station simulator?"

"Nooo," I said. "What happened?"

"She sat down with the instrumentation engineer for an hour, and when Dan and I came back in, she was showing us how to map inputs and outputs and use logic elements. I know that Tina and Susan could do the same thing. Smart girls."

"Uh… Susan. How's that working? Not that I'm nosin' into your business, you understand."

"Yeah, like you couldn't ask Tina and get Susan's version."

"So which version am I going to get?"

"Both, probably." His grin foretold his words. "She's smart and bright and seeing her makes me happy. Cute. Funny. Just wish she was a few years older."

"Tina says Susan's happy. Happier. You've got a reprieve."

"Reprieve's ass, buddy! You wanna know what sort of wild acts of debauchery we engaged in on Saturday?"

"Do you have a G-rated version?"

"My whole relationship with Susan is G-rated, Alan. We wouldn't have it any other way."

"Okay, then. What'd y'all do?"

Worked in her dad's rental business. Being an electrical technician, he thought I might be able to straighten out some generators he bought at surplus sale." He smiled. "Bought us dinner."

"Us?"

Me an' Susan, who, I might want you to know, makes a very able helper."

"She helped you?"

"Yep! Diesel engines. Generators. Right there the whole time, unbolting covers, asking questions about the electrical stuff."

"Her dad says she used to help around the shop. Mom says she was afraid Susan was gonna be a tomboy."

He grinned. "Not a tomboy. But you get waaaay past that cute, giggly blonde thing pretty fast."

"Oh, really?"

He whipped out his cell phone. "Look!"

I saw a picture of a Susan in OVERALLS! Smiling. Blonde hair pulled back from her face into a funny knot with a big clip, holding a wrench, a smudge of brown on her cheek. He flipped to the next picture. "Her dad took this one for us." That one had Susan and Jason framed together, looking over the round shell of a little generator.

"Cute!" I said.

"I didn't come up here expecting anything like this, Alan," he said. "You have no idea what a breath of fresh air Susan is."

"She IS a hoot. I'm glad she's Tina's friend."

"Sister," Jason corrected. "Those three really believe they're sisters, just separated by an unfortunate rift in the universe."

"Yeah," I laughed. "Tina and Cindy pretty much latched onto that idea the first time they met. And Susan just fit right into the crew."

"She says she felt like an extra thumb on y'all's weekend expeditions. But she also said that everybody went out of the way to make her feel happy, too."

"We did. That's a smart, funny girl there. Like I said, a little bubble-headed and naïve, but she makes us happy when she's around."

"Me too," Jason said. "Just so you know. And her family, they're good people. If she had a sibling, she'd be perfectly normal."

"Nope, not normal," I said. "She's on the high side of the IQ curve. You don't notice it because YOU'RE like that yourself."

"I wish I'd had friends like she has. Then I might be sitting in YOUR chair."

"My chair?"

"Yeah, if I hadn't listened to my buddies, I could've gotten an engineering degree instead of a technology degree. They told me the math would be too hard." He sighed. "It probably was, for them. I could do it."

"I have no doubt," I said. "Sooo…"

"So Tina and Susan said something…"

"And you're thinking about going back to college?"

"It's a thought. I need to keep up with…" He thought about what he was saying, then said, "I can't get beat by the girls."

"That could sort of be interpreted as meaning you'd be around where you'd know what the girls are doing," I said. "Do I take that to mean you're closer to coming on board with Dan and me?"

"Thinking about it. Lots of reasons. I know Alabama isn't Texas, but the people there are a lot like the people at home. So're the people here."

"Sounds like you're convincing yourself of something," I observed.

"Nah," he said. "Just running down the inventory of pros and cons." He sighed. "Mom and Dad back home in Texas, me here…"

"Doing what you do, buddy, there's plenty of money for you to make in Texas."

"I know," he said. "I was getting tired of this adventure thing, you know. I'm caught up on the mess my ex made of my finances, and I'm putting money in the bank. I was gonna do that job in Idaho, then go back home and…"

"And now?"

"Dunno," he said. "More choices. If I go back to Texas and start in with one of those companies, I'll have to climb that ladder of proving myself all over again. And I know what the work's like."

"I can't guarantee that work with us is going to be much different," I said. "You're a damned good technician, you know, and I try to make sure that you don't have to do the dog work, and this IS a new plant, but what Dan and I might be getting into…"

"Oh, believe me, I know," Jason said. "I know what those sixty-year old facilities are like. And upgrades and retrofits and all that."

"I'm sure you do."

He continued, "But with you guys, I feel like I'm on the point of the spear. Dan never questioned my judgment after he saw me working. Neither have you…"

"Dan said you were good. I take him at his word."

He smiled. "You still watched."

"Not any more," I said. "And we've talked. You ask the right questions, even though you already know the answers most of the time. Your observations are spot on."

"Thank you," he said. "I appreciate being noticed. So how would Jason Ellerbee, engineering student, fit into Alan and Dan Electrical Gurus Incorporated?"

"As long as you sell your body to us every chance you get, I think we'd be crazy NOT to work around you," I said. "You get your degree in engineering, you're already way further up the road than most engineers who got their degrees and then spent their days in the ivory towers and offices. I think you'd be formidable."

"I guess I need to get my college transcripts and talk to Auburn," he said, standing. "I guess that's an email for later. I need to go see how the electricians are coming with those low-voltage feeders."

He was back at lunchtime with his #2 technician. "Come on," I said. "I'll buy today."

Taking the two of them up the road to the restaurant meant that the talk stayed mainly on job-related issues. Almost.

Burt Stanley, my #2 technician, popped up with, "Gee, Alan, If I'd've known you were setting your technicians up with girlfriends…" The word had gotten round about Jason and Susan.

"Are you perchance insinuating that I should have set YOU up? Do you honestly think I want that sweet wife of yours coming after me with an axe?"

Jason laughed. "But you could out-run 'er, being as how she'd be carrying the baby." Burt and Adrienne were the parents of a ten-month-old baby girl.

"And I didn't set them up. That's entirely THEIR fault."

"Alan did his best to keep us from it," Jason said. "Said it was just too big a difference in our ages."

Burt blew tea out of his nose and struggled to stop coughing. When he regained his composure, he looked at me. "Seriously Alan? Don't tell me you actually had the gall to say that? Mister "I married a high school girl" himself."

"Look," I laughed. "I got that same reaction from Susan AND my wife."

"And Susan said they weren't as subtle as YOU are, Burt!" Jason laughed. "You know, we could all get together for dinner one night."

"If we get this next substation on line without blowing the lid off, I'll hit the project up for a little celebration money." There was some of that money in the project, and I was certain that my happy bunch was in a perfect position to draw out a little.

"OH, it's going in with no problems," Jason said. "Burt found those wiring errors and we got them changed and checked out, and it's pretty much nominal now."

"Yeah," Burt said, "I can see it all now. Adrienne is going to be the oldest woman at the table, and she's twenty-two."

Jason chuckled. "I'll make sure Susan calls her 'Granny'!"

"Oh, that'll go over REAL big," Burt laughed.

Our lunch finished off, the trip back was equally jovial, but plans were made.

At the end of the day I went home to my wife. Her car was parked at the trailer. I stepped into the trailer. She turned from the stove.

"Baked potatoes in the oven. Those two little ribeyes we bought the other day. A couple of lettuce wedges." She smiled.

"You changed how life is in this thing, baby doll," I said. "I don't know how many evenings I had a cup of instant noodles and a bag of microwave popcorn."

"Well, I'm glad I am appreciated for my culinary skills," she smiled. "After dinner, we'll take an hour to let the food settle, then off to the gym. Okay?"

"Okay," I said. "How was school?"

She made a face. "Disappointing."

"Still reviewing?"

"It's over. We start testing tomorrow." She sighed. "I'll be so glad to get past this mess."

"You know that most of your classmates are on pins and needles over these things, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. I listen to the whining. D'ya know how many kids think it's unfair that they have to pass this test? If I had a dollar for every time I've heard 'But I've been in school for TWELVE years!' I'd beat the whole 'scholarship' thing. How was YOUR day?"

I recounted some of the conversations I'd had. The lunchtime conversation amused her.

"I like the idea of all of us getting together," she said. "And I will NOT call Burt's wife 'Granny'! So what did Jason say? I'm assuming that he still thinks that he and Susan are a couple."

"I won't answer that until you tell me the latest from Susan's side of the fence," I said.

Tina's eyes twinkled. "Susan thinks they're a couple, Alan."

"She does, huh?"

"Yep! Like a whole new Susan. New and improved. More confident, more assured."

She serious, then?"

That auburn head nodded. "Sounds like it, baby. Now, what's your side?"

Jason's talking about sticking with me and Dan in the business, but YOU two talked him into looking to see what he needs to get his engineering degree at Auburn."

Giggle. "I thought so," Tina said. "Alan, it might be more serious than that. Susan asked me something today."

"Oh? What?" That put my mind to spinning through a whole list of possibilities, some good, some not.

"She asked me how I decided that YOU were the one."

I looked my young wife. "Remember when I told you that watching those two was like watching two trains headed towards one another on the same track?"

"I remember."

"Jason and I were talking after lunch. He asked me pretty much the same thing."

"But he was married before, Alan," Tina blurted.

"I know, and his side of the story is that the ex was a mercenary little thing that saw a college grad who walked off the stage and right into a good job as her ticket to the stars. He seems, uh, he was kind of naïve, too, and when this apparently pretty good looking girl showed interest in him, he just fell head over heels… I'm thinking that Susan's a whole different ball game for him."

Tina looked at me as we sat on the sofa, then patted her lap, signaling me to lay my head down. I complied, appreciating her tender caressing of my face. "Susan says they talked about his history. About how he's dated, before he got married, and since the divorce, and she's told him her stories, too, and I think he's a whole lot more experienced than Susan."

"I'd imagine so, I said. "That ten years, a marriage…"

"She says he's funny and smart…"

"Darned smart. He's a hotshot technician. And you know how he handles conversation," I said.

"Yeah, I know that, but he's also a gentleman. Susan's told me stories about her dates with guys in our age group, and how those have worked out."

"I can imagine."

"Susan's a virgin, Alan. And it's not because nobody tried, either. But she says that Jason has never tried anything. She kissed HIM first." She saw my eyes. Giggled. "That's the approved method, apparently."

"Mmm-hmmm. You kissed me first."

She smiled. "Yes I did. And you'd been treating me like a human being for weeks before I did. Susan knows that much about us. And she says that she and Jason have just kissed and hugged and that's as far as they've gone. And he treats her like a human being. ALWAYS!"

"I'm a lot happier about that than finding out that they jumped straight into sex without having more to their relationship than exchanging names." In my mind, the idea of Susan having sex wasn't as repugnant as the idea of Susan being USED. I said so.

"Susan and I talk about that too, sweetie," Tina said. "We both KNOW girls who are just as stupid about sex as boys are. And we both know about girls who suffer the consequences of getting led into something they weren't ready for. Susan knows that I was a virgin. She says she wants her husband to be her only, too. But do you know how RARE that is?"

"You told me before."

"Rare," Tina said with finality. The timer on the oven dinged. "Go fire up the grill and let it heat up. Potatoes will be done soon."

"Yes ma'am," I laughed. It took me almost no time to fire up the little grill outside our trailer. I was back inside, and wrapped in the arms of sweetness.

We kissed. "Mmmmm," she said. "Life is good, ain't it, babe!" Her blue eyes melted me.

"Yes it is, little one," I answered. A short while later we were seated in the dinette enjoying our meal. Clean-up afterward was fast. One learns not to make big messes living in a tiny space, and two dishes and two sets of tableware clean up fast.

That put us back on the sofa for a little relaxation before heading to the gym. This time I sat and motioned for Tina to stretch out on the sofa. She lay on her back with her head in my lap, giving me a chance to worship her face. She knew what I was doing, because she was smiling. My fingertips traced the features of her face, the pert nose, the bow of her lips, the soft arch of her eyebrows.

I paid a lot of attention to the way her bangs splayed across her forehead. I smoothed them gently, then swept them aside. She purred.

"You do this soooo good," she said.

"What? I'm just petting my kitten."

"You do 'soft and gentle and loving' in ways that I never understood enough to even crave. And now I cannot imagine living without this."

"It's us, babe," I said. Right now we have life pretty much under control. We know what needs to be done now, and what needs to be done next, and how much time there is in between, and you're just so perfectly accommodating."

She sighed, a satisfied smile on her face. "Look at us, guy. You take care of me. We have adventures, we have friends, we have culture, and we have a future that looks good from here."

"You're beautiful, Tina," I said. "And it starts right here." I put my index finger in the middle of her forehead."

"That's because YOU'RE in there. And in here." She pulled my hand over her left breast. "And for me, that means that all those other things just WORK!" She rolled over and scooted up on the sofa, putting her face near mine. "Eyes. Those darned blue eyes," she sighed, kissing me.

I was looking into an equally magnetic pair of blue eyes myself. "That day in Louisiana, when you were standing in the parking lot, cops all around, people staring, you had your arms crossed, your expression was between scared and mad, and I noticed those eyes. And that hair. It has a way of looking entirely charming whether you've just brushed it or you've just been rescued."

"We'd better go, baby. Otherwise I'll stay here and tell you about all the miracles that had to take place to end up in your arms," she said. "And we can do THAT after we go to the gym." And then she nailed me down with a kiss that almost had me tearing her clothes off. And a giggle. Like the tinkling of little bells.

"If we must," I said.

Giggle. "We don't have to, baby. We can just lay around and become that fat engineer and his plump young wife."

"Get your cute little heiney in the truck." And I playfully slapped that luscious heiney with my hand as she moved.

"Eek!" Giggle. "Yes, Master!"

And we drove over to the gym. By the time we got there, she had her hair up in two tiny pigtails, and when she KNEW I was looking, she gave her head a shake.

"You have a little bit of 'tease' in you, you know…"

"Not teasing. Just a little appetizer. Main course is later, love."

We walked into the gym together, went to separate changing rooms, and emerged. I stared. Yes, I STARED. In the greater scheme of things, we were still newlyweds, together less than a year, a mere matter of months, and I don't think I will ever tire of seeing her. And in her workout togs, she was delectable, my opinion frequently validated by me noting the looks from some of the other males in the place.

We each went through our workout routines, Tina chatting with the lady attendant who worked with the women while I chatted with the guy.

"Milestone today, man," he told me as I reset the weight machine.

"Which one?" I asked.

"I just moved up into the master class."

"Congratulations on living until you're forty," I smiled. The guy runs a gym with his wife, and he does competition weightlifting. He's BUILT. A little more muscular than I wanted to be, but he's happy, I'm happy. "You're still gonna compete, right?"

"Oh, yeah. I may back off the hard-core stuff, but I'm going to do it slowly. I know guys who just quit and their bodies when to hell." He glanced over at his wife. She was still talking with Tina. "We both got reasons to stay in shape, huh?"

"Oh yeah," I said.

He took off to help another client and I ran through my routine. Tina and I ended up on treadmills, side by side, doing our cool-downs. Finishing, we put on our warm-up suits and left.

"Three times a week," Tina said. "We NEED to do this three times a week."

"I know," I said.

"You get an added benefit, you know…"

"What's that?"

She took my hand and put it on top of one of those little pigtails. Giggle. "I promise!"

"Like I need the incentive. But that'll work!"

"I love being able to do things that get you going."

"Like breathing?"

She smiled and cuddled against my arm as we drove home.

She had to comb out the little pigtails the next morning.

At lunchtime (for her) I got a text message: "Dinner with Susan and Jason." My evening was thereby planned. I stalked through the plant looking for Jason, found him seated at a desk with his laptop plugged into our system protection equipment.

"Uh, hi, Alan," he said. "What's up?"

"Looks like we have a date for dinner," I said.

"Oh, really? Susan and Tina?"

"Tina texted me."

"Oh. Then she and Susan talked."

"No doubt," I said. "they're almost telepathic. But not quite. But I think Cindy is. Almost certain."

He laughed. "Yeah, that one's waaay different."

"Dan loves 'er to pieces," I said. "And she's crazy devoted to him."

"Yeah, he's got 'im a good one. But they look weird." Jason smiled. "But you know, he was like night and day, from before Cindy and after they got married."

"I thought he was always an 'up' kind of guy before," I said.

"Yeah, but it's like somebody turned on an extra lightbulb or something."

"I probably went through the same thing with Tina," I said.

"No doubt," he mimicked. "Somewhere along here, I'd like MY turn."

"If you're talking about somebody we BOTH know, make sure it's HER turn, too."

"Dan, if you're talking about Susan, I wouldn't do it any other way. I know what it is to have somebody treat you without honor. I know how I felt. I wouldn't do that to Susan."

"So we're talking about Susan seriously then?"

He nodded.

"You're gonna kill me."

"Shouldn't," he said. "Susan and I, we're both your friends."

"Have you…"

"Formally? No."

"So now I have to worry about Jason. Are you sure she's thinking…"

"We've talked. Alan, she's a jewel."

"Have you broached the subject with her parents yet?"

"No," he said. "But they're getting pretty used to the two of us hanging out together. Like I said, last Saturday… Mike and Kathy, they just expect that if Susan goes out, she comes back with me trailing behind her."

I shook my head. "I dunno what to say."

"Good luck would work," He laughed. "Alan, NOTHING would change in anybody's plans. You and Dan, your wives, college, business. You were already angling to bring Susan along. And you already had plans to bring me into the new business. The only thing different is that she and I would be together."

I rocked back in my chair. "You two have only known each other a few weeks."

"I said that to Susan. She reminded me that you and Tina…"

I shook my head. "I am being revisited by my sins…"

"Bullshit, Alan. You and Tina worship each other. And Mike married Kathy after a month of courtship. Susan and I are farther along than that already."

"How much of this am I not supposed to know?"

He laughed. "If Tina doesn't already know more than you about this, I'm underestimating my cutie. And you DON'T underestimate Miss Susan!"

"I think I can maximize the entertainment value if I just play ignorant and see who says what this evening," I said.

Jason glanced at his watch. "Come on! Let's go dig up a couple of burger baskets. I'm feeling magnanimous. I'll buy!"

"Love has softened your head, dude!" I laughed.

We normally went with my other technician, but today, since Jason was paying, we escaped without him. I felt like I was going to lunch with my future brother-in-law.

In the truck, I just had to confirm that the morning's conversation wasn't some sort of strange dream. "So you and Susan are THAT serious."

"I think so," Jason said. "But nothing's gonna happen until she's clear of high school. But you know, she brought up that we really don't need anyone's permission to run off and get married."

"I wouldn't recommend that, Jason. Susan doesn't come alone. You get her parents, too, and only under the worst circumstances would I want to start a marriage with them pissed off or hurt."

"Good point. I like 'em."

"Keep 'em happy."

We chatted pleasantly through lunch. I guess that I was actually a bit more relaxed since I wasn't waiting for the other shoe to drop in the ongoing saga of Susan and Jason. After lunch, we went separate ways, having diverging duties. "I guess Susan and Tina will have our schedule set up for us, huh?"

"You got that right," he laughed.

At the end of the day, as soon as I was on the road, my phone was at my ear.

"Hi, my guy," was the lilting voice from the other end.

"Hi cutie pie," I said. "How as the first day of testing?"

"Puh-leeeeze! I could've passed these things when I was in the ninth grade. Saved myself three years of putting up with a lot of unnecessary crap."

"What we experience makes us what we are, sweetness."

"Oh, that's quite philosophical, but it only slightly mitigates the feeling, sir," she giggled. "Hurry home. The mental strain has made me desire hugs!"

I conceded thirty-five miles per hour to the small-town that I have to pass through. One of their patrol officers is STILL carrying a grudge for losing a girlfriend to a construction worker. I'd heard some snippets of the story. She's a bit of a mercenary little thing and her new boyfriend is free with his money, and a good construction craft supervisor makes a HELL of a lot more than small-town cop. Still, his loss was the town coffers' gain, as many an out of state license plate got stopped for traffic infractions. I wasn't going give him an excuse.

A short while later I parked at our trailer and the door swung open, Tina smiling, waiting. Let the therapeutic hugs begin!

Giggle! "I've got NEWS!"

'Hmmm! Wonder what THAT might be?' I thought, but I kept that to myself. "Good news, I hope!"

"Well, I don't know how YOU might take it, but I think it's good news." She crinkled the corners of her eyes with her grin.

"Well, TELL me!"

"Susan and Jason are talking about marriage."

I tried to act surprised, but I'm married a very intelligent woman who cares about me and who has observed me closely.

"Jason said something." She was still smiling. "Didn't he?"

"Yeah. I fired 'im on the spot. Told him to clean out his desk and we'd mail him a check!"

She punched me in the arm. "You didn't, and you're a horrible person for trying to mess with me."

"I didn't want you getting all smug, that's all. It's a defense mechanism."

She kissed me and I met her passion with my own. Lord, I lust after this doll.

"I just want her to be happy like we are, baby."

"How much did SHE tell you? He says they've talked about it."

"She says they've pretty much decided, but they're not announcing anything just yet. Said that her dad was talking about his new unofficial son-in-law after Saturday. You wanna get showers out of the way? We have time before dinner."

"Let's do that, then. Gets me a naked Tina."

"You get a naked Tina any time you want, guy." She was stripping as she said it, her jeans falling to the floor, slender, shapely legs wiggling to help them slide.

I pushed her back against the bathroom door and started unbuttoning her blouse. She had her hands together behind my neck. Buttons undone, my hands parted her blouse and caressed her torso a bit before sliding around back to unhook her bra.

Giggle. "I just wear it to keep from causing stares at school. I don't have very big titties, but you know how my nipples get."

"You have perfect titties, and yes, those nipples would cause boys to walk into walls." I was at this moment teasing those nipples with my fingertips.

She landed a kiss on me. "Now stop that! You're gonna make me forget that we have people to meet."

I pulled my hands out of her blouse and cupped the sided of that auburn head and kissed her. "Just remember, little one. You started this."

"Yeah! Uh-huh! I had to work sooo hard…" and she disappeared into the bathroom.

Forty-five minutes later I was shaved and she was putting on her clothes. As I was getting dressed, she had her hairbrush out again.

"I just brushed you," I said.

Giggle. "You did good. But I have something in mind." And I'll be darned if she didn't put her hair up in two tiny pigtails. She saw my look and giggled again. "I was telling Susan about this. She's never seen me with my hair this way. I just thought I'd show her."

I swallowed, a move she caught. She grinned. "Of course, guy, there's the added benefit of knowing the whole time that all I have to do is shake my head and you'll get hard."

"You weren't this manipulative when I married you," I laughed.

"I hadn't yet found out how much fun we can have with each other, babe!" She finished brushing and snapped a band on the second pigtail, then smiled and shook her head. "You can have one quick nuzzle. Then we have to go."

I nuzzled her neck, relishing the soft brush of a little pigtail against my cheek as she giggled and wiggled in my arms.

"Stoppppppp!" she giggled. "You're pushing me too far!" She flopped back onto the bed, hauling me down on top of her. That move disconnected me from her neck, but left us a tangle of arms and legs.

"You are the single most exciting thing in the universe, blue-eyed girl," I said.

"I can't be," she sighed, smiling. "Because YOU hold that spot! But we have friends to meet, so let's go. I have plans for later."

# Chapter 29

When we pulled into the restaurant parking lot, I saw Jason's truck.

"They're here," Tina said. "Now be nice! And you don't know much."

"I'm just an old dumb-ass," I said.

The night air was cool, rich-feeling, and I tugged her hand. She turned right into my arms for a kiss before we walked into the restaurant. The manager and cashier greeted us. The cashier saw Tina's hair in those two pigtails and said, "New look, Tina?"

Tina laughed. "I do this for the gym. Susan wanted to see it."

"Ohhhh," the cashier said. "And HE…"

Tina nodded, grinning.

We walked to Susan and Jason's table. Tina shook her head, bouncing those little pigtails.

Susan giggled. "That's what you're talking about?"

"Yep," Tina said.

Susan looked at them, giggling.

"I'm missin' something here," Jason said.

"Yeah, apparently my lovely wife has been confiding tender secrets to her friends," I said.

Susan giggled some more. "Tina says little pigtails drive Alan wild. I wanted to see what they looked like." She looked at me. "Alan, you're warped. Not SERIOUSLY warped. But warped, nonetheless."

"Wait, sweetie," Jason said. "You ought not comment on what gets a guy goin'."

"You're a GUY!" Susan said. "I thought you were nuts when you made that big deal about my banana clip on Saturday."

"Banana clip?" Tina asked.

"Yeah," Susan said. "When we were workin' at Dad's shop, I put my hair up with one of those big grabby clips. Wait!" She dipped into her purse and pulled out an example. "Like this!"

I looked at the three-inch long hair clip and told Jason, "Buddy, don't give me any lip about ANYTHING!"

"She looked cute like that Saturday," he said.

Tina jumped on Jason's slip. "And she doesn't look cute now?"

Jason sputtered as Susan eyed him with feigned horror. "No, my baby's always cute!"

"Good recovery," Susan laughed.

We were digging into appetizers and Susan was visibly more animated than usual. Jason kept smiling, but he looked almost guilty of something.

Finally, Susan twisted sideways in the booth and kissed Jason on the cheek. "Should we tell 'em?" she said.

"Please do! I'm about to explode."

Explode? I knew something was up now. I glanced at Tina, and she didn't seem particularly different. There it was – she knew something. I didn't. Oh, well, if it was bad, she'd have already told me, so it had to be good.

"Should we tell 'em what?" I asked.

Jason lifted his hand to the tabletop, grasping Susan's. "Sunday I'm going to ask Mike for Susan's hand. We want to get married."

Tina's squeal harmonized with Susan's.

"Did you upload all your files to the server today?" I asked.

"Files?" Jason looked perplexed.

"Yeah, 'cuz when Mike hears that, he's liable to shoot you."

"He's nooooottttt!" Susan squealed. "Mom an' Dad like Jason!"

"And he's less likely to tend towards violence right after church," Jason added.

Tina was grinning.

"Oh, you're an evil little thing, keeping secrets from your beloved," I told her.

She giggled. "Only to heighten your enjoyment," she said.

"But you knew. How long?"

"Just today," Susan said. "I told her today."

"When did you two decide?" I asked.

Jason answered, "We've been talking about it for a while."

"The thing you feared has come to pass," Susan giggled.

"I didn't fear, it, Tina's friend, I just didn't want you led astray by some technician with designs on your cuteness."

Susan wrinkled her nose, grinning at Tina. "Alan called me cute!"

"Uh, don't be hittin' on my fiancé," he said.

Tina giggled. "Alan doesn't hit on anybody. I lived in the same trailer with 'im for weeks and he didn't hit on me. I had to sneak up on 'im."

"And all I wanted to do," I said, "was be a nice guy. With you, too, Susan, since you're Tina's friend. But then I brought this… Jason up here…"

Susan wrapped him up. "And he's PERFECT."

"Hear that, boss? I'm perfect!"

"She hasn't had your coffee," I said.

"I HAVE had his coffee," she said. "Doesn't change my mind."

"Okay," I said. "I give up. I sincerely hope the two of you are happy together." They certainly LOOKED happy. "You know that I consider both friends." I sighed.

"Oh, don't sigh like that, Alan," Jason said. "We're trying to do things right."

Susan smiled. "We won't do it any other way," she said. "You know that Tina and I talk about this stuff. And me an' Mom and Dad. That's plenty of good examples. And there are all kinds of examples among my friends and the rest of my family."

"Plus she sees what goes on around us, Alan," Tina added.

"Mister Alan," Susan said, "We're not stupid people. We know what we're doing. And we've been together longer than you and Tina before you two decided to get married, you know…"

"So it's TWO Ted Kaczynski's," I said.

"Not even close," Susan tittered while Tina grinned.

I sat back to let the waitress distribute our dinners. She knew us. "You folks're having fun tonight, I see," she said.

"Uh-huh. Part of THEM having fun is giving ME a heart attack," I replied.

She was my age. "That's what you get for hanging out with a young crowd," she said. "It's all YOUR fault."

"There goes your tip," I said.

Tina smiled at her. "You KNOW better than that. I won't let my husband abuse you."

"Thankya, sweetie," the waitress said, smiling. She patted my shoulder. "You're in good hands, Mister Alan."

"Are you sure that you want this, Jason?" I asked.

Jason smiled. "I don't think I have a problem with waitress abuse, buddy."

I looked at Susan. She was glowing. Tina. Smiling. Everybody else was happy. I just as well join the club.

"So when's the date?"

"Weekend after graduation," Susan said. "That way we're married, we can do a honeymoon because the project will be over, and we'll see what happens after that. College. Work. But we're part of the bunch, you know. That's for definitely."

"A week after graduation? That's not a lot of time to plan a wedding," I said. I picked up a piece of fish.

Susan's blue eyes got serious. "Well, that's a good sign, Tina. He's talkin' about our wedding plans," then she turned to me. "Alan, I am not holding out for a big, gaudy wedding. I think they're ridiculous. My cousin had one last summer. Marriage is already over, by Uncle Jimmy's still payin' the bills."

"Jason,' I said, "Has she shown you a practical side like this?"

Jason had a puppy-dog look on his face. "I told you she's somethin'," he said.

"She's my sister. You gotta know she's different." Tina grinned. "She's Cindy's sister, too. You might wanna keep that in mind. Mess up our sister, we'll hunt you down…"

"Mess her UP?!?! I wanna have her by my side for the rest of my life," Jason said.

"He's deranged, too, Alan," Susan said. "In a good way."

We finished our meal, chatting amiably through dessert, and then headed home. In the truck I asked Tina an obvious question.

"She says 'no', baby. Says they're holding out until the wedding. His idea as much as hers."

"She's worth it. So are you."

Tina giggled. "I kinda didn't let us wait."

"I kinda told you that I considered us married the night you crawled into my bed."

She giggled. "Noooo… you were entirely too scared and worried you were doing the wrong thing. It was the next day, when we went to the motel and consummated our relationship."

"Does Susan know about that?"

"I never told her exactly what happened and when it happened. The time line, you know. She does know that I made up my mind about you after that disaster at her house, the night I went over there to meet up with 'friends'. She knows that we flew to Louisiana to get married." Giggle. "We're, like, a good example. So's her mom and dad. And Jason's a good guy."

"I feel better hearing that."

"I feel better knowing that they're gonna marry," Tina said. "My best friend, besides you. Good things happening.

"I just wonder what her mom and dad are going to say."

"Mizz Kathy told me one time, when Susan was out of the room, that she was worried to death about her daughter. Susan had self-image issues, she said. And being so smart and all. She was afraid Susan would latch onto some loser who'd treat her good until he got tired of 'er." She sighed. "I just can't see Jason getting tired of her."

"That's my impression. I just hope we're right."

I felt her gentle touch on my neck. I tilted my head back, encouraging her. "I live for your touch," I said softly.

"Mmm-hmmm, like you're the ONLY one who loves being touched."

I pulled my right hand off the steering wheel and ran it up the inside of her thigh, sensing the taut skin and muscle. Her right hand trapped mine between her thighs. She slid my hand higher, to the crotch of her jeans. "Just so you don't get the wrong idea," she giggled.

"Wrong idea?"

"You know how you are. You start over-analyzing things and start thinking that I might feel like you just want me for my body." She snickered. "I want you for your body, too, just so you know." She pushed my fingers tightly against her crotch. I could feel the heat and the beginnings of dampness through her jeans.

"Am I that bad?"

"You're that good, Alan. You care. I saw that so early in our relationship. Not just me, but others. I remember you paying that waitress at the restaurant for MY meal. And when it comes to ME…"

"You're my everything, that's all," I said.

"Your 'everything' wants to go spend Saturday night in a motel room after dinner and a movie," she said.

"You got something in mind?"

"Standard procedure. We talked about the movie. It's been out a week, so it won't be crowded. We can go to an early feature, eat, then go to the room and…"

"And I think that's a great idea."

"And we'll be back home in time for the fireworks."

"Fireworks?"

"The explosion when Jason and Susan make their announcement." Giggle.

We did exactly as my princess had said we would. The movie amounted to a not unpleasant thing, dinner was as good as you'd expect dinner to be, although we didn't hit the chain restaurants, opting instead for one that Tina found on the internet. It had good reviews. We found out why. That put us back in the motel room at a bit after eight, into a good-sized shower with unlimited hot water. We retired to the middle of the king-sized bed, both naked, both still hot from the shower. What we did for the next hour and a half insured that we maintained the heat.

Sunday morning. Sleep in a bit, wake up naked in a king-sized bed, revel in love-making, shower one more time together, then a late breakfast and we're on the way home.

We were on the road a bit after noon when the phone, MY phone, rang. I looked at the display. "Mike," I said to Tina.

"Susan's dad. Wants you to post bail, no doubt."

I smiled at her, then answered the phone. "This is Alan. Hi!"

"Hello, Alan. This is Mike. I just shot your technician, burned your trailer down, and sent my daughter off to a convent, and we're Baptist, for heaven's sake." He SOUNDED serious, but the laughter in the background gave him away.

"Am I to assume that congratulations are in order? Or condolences."

"Then you knew. And didn't WARN me?"

"Under pain of everything that my wife could do to me? I know what side MY bread is buttered on."

"Speaking of buttered bread, have you had lunch yet?"

"No, we were gonna stop in a bit."

"Well, eat light. In honor of this occasion, I'm doin' steaks this evening at the house."

Susan's turn:

I brought Jason to church on Sunday with Mom and Dad. No, he didn't have a Sunday suit, but he does have some nice shirts and slacks and shoes, and he wore a tie. I think he looked very nice. The fact that he picked me up Sunday morning at the front door, wearing a tie, that impressed Mom and Dad even more.

They've been impressed by Jason. After some of the guys I brought home from high school, Jason's a breath of fresh air. That's what Mom and Dad think. I think he's who I was made for.

From the first time I met him, it's like we just sort of connected. I mean, he's smart and funny, and he's polite and sweet, but it's not that fakey thing that some guys do in front of your parents, you know, and when they get you around the corner they're all hands tryin' to feel you up. Or they get in front of a bunch of other guys and they start talkin' filthy and acting like you don't matter.

Jason's never been like that. He acts like I'm the center of the universe, at least his. And it's been so easy for him to be mine.

Tina started out telling me to slow down, but Jason and I kept hanging out with her and Alan, and she started seeing what I saw. We just match. At first, I was just happy to have somebody else at the table when I went out with Alan and Tina. I felt like the odd man out. Then Jason showed up, and he wasn't threatening and aggressive. He was just nice.

I remember how nervous I was, though, the first time he asked to meet me without it being the four of us together. That's when things used to fall apart with other guys. In school I never had too much trouble finding guys who wanted to date me. Some of them were pretty good looking, too. But every time, it didn't matter how nice they were in school or when they came to the house, as soon as we got alone, it was like I fell into an octopus tank with arms and hands all over the place.

I enjoy kissing and hugging, and even a little caressing. I mean, Jason and I have done THAT. But come on! Conversation. Socializing! Where'd that go? I'm not gonna be one of those girls who has her legs spread every weekend for some guy. I told one guy "My momma raised me better than that!" and I meant it. Mom and Dad are a good example of how things are supposed to be, but when I tried talking to some of the kids at school, they said that it was totally old-fashioned. One of the girls that told me how old-fashioned I was, not hookin' up, as she called it, every weekend, she's six months pregnant right now and the baby daddy bags groceries.

That's another thing about Jason. He's good at what he does, and it's not playin' video games and goin' muddin' with pickup trucks. Even before I met him, I was interested in engineering, and then Tina and I started talking about it, and then Cindy, and Dad said I could be an engineer, and most of the guys at school think an engineer is the guy at the front end of a train. Jason's not an engineer like Alan or Cindy's Dan, but he's ALMOST there, and now I think he's going to go back to school with us and get his engineering degree. But he's already got a good job and he's got a good reputation doing it. People call HIM to go to work. I wanna be like that.

But I wanna be with Jason. Married. Tied in a beautiful happy knot with another person, like Mom and Dad and Alan 'n' Tina and Dan 'n' Cindy. But every one of them has a partner that just FITS. I think that Jason and I are like that. So when he started talking about marriage, I was already there. Of course I said yes.

I remember that day that he came over to take me out and he walked in. I met him at the front door. Some of the other guys I dated, Dad DEMANDED that the come in to meet him first. But Jason, he'd already met Mom and Dad, and every time he came to get me, he ALWAYS walked in and said 'Hi' to my parents. Mom thought that was classy of him.

But this one day, after he and I had gone out to a movie the night before, he walks in and shakes dad's hand, and he smiles at me and then turns to Dad. "Mister Carter," Jason says, "I really like Susan and she seems to like me. I am formally requesting your permission to court her."

I thought Dad was gonna pass out. "Kathy! Come in here!" he hollered.

Mom came in. "What on earth are you hollerin' about, Mike?"

"Listen," Dad said to Mom, then he turned to Jason. "Son, can you repeat that?"

Jason looked good that day. He dresses conservative, but neat, and he looked so absolutely serious. "Mister and Missus Carter, I would like your permission to court Susan."

I don't know if Mom's knees gave out or what, but she sort of collapsed onto the arm of Dad's chair and put her arm around his neck, touching him on the shoulder. "Mike," she said, "I believe this guy's serious."

Dad's mouth was open. I guess he didn't believe Jason would say it twice.

"Sir," Jason said, "Susan is a bright, beautiful young lady and I would consider it a privilege."

Mom had a tear in her eye. Dad finally got the power of speech back. "Son," he said, "you have our blessing. And good luck."

For the last few weeks it's been Jason 'n' Susan. For everybody. He showed up the next Sunday morning to take me to CHURCH! I know that Mom got questioned about who the guy was with me, and Dad told the pastor that Jason was interviewing for the position of 'son-in-law'.

And that brings us to Sunday at lunch. We usually do a quick lunch, kinda light, after church, then home, and that's what we did. I was riding with Jason and we'd already decided that THIS was the day. I told Tina and she told Alan and she told Cindy, so poor ol' Dad… He was sitting in his chair, flipping through the TV channels when Jason and I walked in.

Jason looked serious. "Mister Mike, could you ask Mizz Kathy to come in here?"

Dad's face. I wish I could've gotten a picture. It was classic. "Kathy! Come in here. Jason's makin' me nervous again!"

This time Mom just automatically sat on the arm of Dad's chair.

I looked at MY Jason. He swallowed. "Mister Mike. Mizz Kathy. I want your permission to marry your daughter. Susan and I want to get married."

Dad really does that 'deer in the headlights' thing pretty good. Speechless. Mom looked at him. "Well, Mike," she said, "Is this one good enough or do we hold out for another one?" She was smiling, though. She slapped Dad on the side of his head. "Mike?!?!"

"My daughter. You want to marry my daughter."

"Yessir."

"Do it. You've got my permission. Right, Kathy?"

Mom smiled. "Yes. You certainly do."

I squealed and kissed Jason, right there. And again.

"Is it safe to show them the ring?" Jason asked me.

"Ring?" Dad said. "You bought her a ring?"

Jason knelt in front of me, reaching into his pocket for that little black velvet-covered box. He's such a nerd sometimes. I held out my hand and he took the ring and put it on my finger, right there in front of Mom and Dad. "You are now officially my fiancée."

He stood up and kissed me. I think I was about to melt. Blue eyes. He has blue eyes. They crinkle at the corners when he smiles. They were crinkled big-time right now. Tina's got pictures of us together. We make a cute couple, and that's just the outside.

Finally, I said, "I need to call Tina."

"No," Dad said. "Let me call Alan. Half this is HIS fault."

That's when I found out we were having them over for dinner. And Mom invited Grandma and Grandpa Elsworth, her mom and dad. And Aunt Mimi, her sister. And Dad's brother and sister-in-law, Uncle Pete and Aunt Lucy.

"Jason, do you know how to grill meat?"

"I can do pretty good," Jason said.

"Good! We're grillin' for a bunch this evening. You're getting ready to meet your in-laws. If you still wanna marry into this bunch tomorrow, you're a keeper. Come on, son-in-law! You an' me need to go buy meat!" And he hustled out the door with my fiancé in tow. Left me standing there looking at Mom.

Who hugged me. Hard. With tears streaming down her face. "My baby girl…"

"Mom, I love you," I said. "And Dad. And now Jason." I guided her to the sofa so we could sit.

"Baby," Mom said, "this is a serious step. Are you sure? I mean, it's been less than two months."

"Moo-oommm, you met Dad and married him in six weeks. Never saw him before. Twenty years later, you're my example!"

More tears, then Mom took a deep breath. "So, sweetie, when's the wedding?"

"Mom, how about the week after graduation? On a Saturday?"

"Doesn't give us much time, baby," Mom said.

"Mom, we're not talking about British royalty here. This is Susan, daughter of Kathy and Mike, and Jason, son of Wallace and Ginger. We can probably schedule the church, and we can invite friends and family, and my Jason and I can stand in front of god and family and we can do this without a lot of hoopla."

"You've given it a lot of thought."

"Yes, Mom. You didn't raise me to be stupid about these things. And I've talked with Jason. He's good with it just like that."

"A dress?"

"Mom, do I really need a fancy dress? I've seen your wedding photos."

"But baby, I wanted you to have better than me."

"Mom, you had Dad. What was more important? I have Jason. Tell you what. We'll go to Nashville one weekend and you and I can go pick out a special dress. But not a wedding gown. Okay?"

"Okay, baby," Mom said. "I just don't want you missing something that I could've given you."

"I understand, Mom. But sinking several thousand dollars into a wedding day is not giving me anything I need. I know you and Dad would do it, but that's not what I want. I want to be having this conversation with MY daughter twenty years from now."

Mom's eyes told me volumes. "You've talked to him about children?"

"Of course, Mom. He's gonna be my husband. Don't'cha think that's something we should know about each other?"

Mom's eyes were all moist. She nodded.

"Of course, it'll be after we get through college," I said.

We kept talking about things. The wedding. No, no big choreographed deal. Mom and Dad would be there. Jason was supposed to call his own parents, but they'd no doubt be there too. And of course my sisters would be there with their husbands.

My phone rang. I looked. Cindy. "Mom, this is my other sister," I said. "Hi, sis!"

The squeal was audible without using the speaker. The news was out. I leaned over to put the phone between my ear and Mom's.

"You're gonna DO IT!" Cindy squealed. "I'm sooooo happy for you, Susan!"

"Me too," I said. "Can you an' Dan put your trip off long enough to come to the wedding?" I told her the date.

"You betcha," she said. "That's gonna be y'all's graduation, MY graduation, then your wedding! 'S gonna be GREAT!"

I could see Cindy's smile in my mind. "And Dad and him are out buying meat for dinner right now. We're having a big announcement dinner this evening." A thought crossed my mind. "Say, d'ya think you an' Dan could fly up next weekend? Me an' Mom an' Tina need to go to Nashville to shop for a wedding dress an' stuff. You NEED to go with us." I stole a glance at Mom. She was nodding assent.

"We'll be there, weather permitting," Cindy said. "Y'all come a day early, and we can all get together! You need to meet Mom an' Dad, anyway."

Giggle. Cindy's happy. Of course, I've never seen Cindy NOT happy. "We'll be there. Dan's right here and I know he's up for it! I'll make reservations. Here's Dan."

"Hi, Susan. Congratulations!" Dan said.

"Thank you, Mister Dan," I said. "Tell Cindy I'll talk… uh, me an' Tina will talk to 'er later, okay."

"Okay, baby," Dan said. "Tell Jason he's darned lucky!"

I could feel my face blushing. "Oh, thank you, Mister Dan! Bye!" I shut the phone.

"Cindy sounds YOUNG," Mom said.

"She is," I replied. "At first I thought it was weird, her an' Mister Dan, but they just FIT! You'll love 'er when you meet 'er! Lemme call Tina and tell her about next weekend!"

Mom kinda pushed me down so I lay with my head in her lap, like I was a little girl. I'm soooo lucky to have great parents. I punched my cellphone and said "Tina". It took a few rings before she answered, and then I realized: Sunday afternoon. Oops!

"Hi, Sis," she giggled.

"Oh gosh, Tina, I'm soooo sorry!"

Giggle. "Don't worry about it! It was bound to happen sooner or later." Giggle. "We'll survive. Just remember, Miss I'm Getting Married, turnabout is fair play!"

Mom saw my face and heard my side of the conversation, and probably Tina's giggles. "You caught 'em, didn't you?"

I nodded. "Uh, Tina, Next weekend, Dan an' Cindy are flyin' in, and me an' you an' Mom are going to Nashville to shop for clothes for my wedding. Can you do that?"

"Oh, I KNOW I can. I guess we can leave our guys together hangin' out while we do that."

"Oh, yeah! Let 'em do some male bonding."

"Yeah," Tina said. "We'll talk later." Giggle. And away from the phone, "Stoppit! I'm talkin' to my sister!"

"Okay, Sis. "We'll see you all around five thirty, okay?"

"'Kay." Squeal. "Bye!" I punched the 'end' button. I looked at Mom. "First time I ever caught 'em!"

"You've caught me and your dad, baby. It happens. Tina'll forgive you."

"So Saturday we all load up in your car and go to Nashville?"

Mom smiled. "That'll work. Lunch there. Then we can come back home. If we get back in time, we can all go out to eat together, or whatever."

"But Friday night, we all eat together, too. Then you can meet Cindy and Dan, too."

Dad and Jason walked in carrying bags of groceries and we all went to work putting together the things for dinner. All of a sudden things just relaxed. I finally let EVERYBODY know how I felt about Jason and how he felt about me and we had another one of those pieces in our puzzle, and I didn't have to tiptoe around Mom and Dad.

And Jason just dove into preparing dinner like he was a member of the family. I know Dad wanted a son, because that's just the way men are. I think I did the best job possible of being a good daughter, and Mom was positively frightened that I was growing up to be a tomboy because I hung out with Dad so much, helping him at the shop an' stuff like that, even fishing and shooting and 'guy' things. But now I'd given Dad something: a son-in-law. He already had a happy daughter.

# Chapter 30

Still Susan's story:

We had as much of a blow-out as this family EVER had.

When Grandma and Grandpa showed up, she walked right past Mom and wrapped me up in a big hug. "MY baby girl's getting married," she said. "That 'Jason' guy."

Jason had met my grandparents a few weekends before, so his face and name were familiar. Grandpa was kind of like Dad about Jason. He was impressed that Jason was a college grad and had a good job, but he was a little unnerved by Jason's age.

Of course, when Jason actually sat down with Grandpa and Dad and carried on a real conversation, a lot of Grandpa's nervousness went away. Dad told me later that Grandpa was impressed.

At that meeting, though, Grandma just smiled. Grandma's seen her share of my previous boyfriends and they were pretty much what you expect from high school boys. Most of 'em could fake being decent and polite for a little while in front of my family, you know.

But today. Today was different. Grandma had me in a hug and Grandpa was shaking Jason's hand and I was looking at Mom for letting the cat out of the bag. Silly me. I thought I'd make a Big Announcement, you, standing there in front of everybody, holding Jason's hand, but once MOM knew, I should've known better. I felt Grandma's tears on my cheek.

"Gramma," I said, "you're s'posed to be HAPPY!"

"I am happy, Susie!"

"Really?!?!?" I asked. "Gramma, he's really great!"

"I'm glad for you, honey," Grandma said. "Your momma sounds happy. I'm happy."

I suppose that Jason was doing okay. He was grinning at Grandpa. Grandpa is totally capable of saying some embarrassing things to my boyfriends. He asked one if he'd ever read books that didn't have pictures in them. I thought I was gonna just DIE that day, but like most of the guys from high school that one turned out to be a jerk and Grandpa was right.

Me and Gramma just untangled when Mom let Uncle Pete and Aunt Lucy in. Uncle Pete's first comment told me that Mom hadn't told them yet.

"What's going on here? Is somebody real sick?" He asked. Aunt Lucy was hovering at his side.

Right on their tails was Mom's sister, Aunt Mimi. Aunt Mimi was, as Mom put it, the 'wild one' of the family. She didn't look like SHE knew, either.

"You wanna tell 'em, or you want me to, Mom?" I asked.

"You need to, baby," Mom said.

"Jason," I yelled, "C'mere!"

He walked in, stood beside me, eyes cast downward. "Yes, Mistress?"

"Stop that!" I said, punching his arm. "This is my Uncle Pete, Dad's brother, and My Aunt Lucy, his wife. And this is Aunt Mimi, Mom's sister…"

"Younger sister," Aunt Mimi interrupted."

"Hush, Aunt Mimi! I'm on a roll here." I turned to Jason, put my arms around his, and said, "This is Jason Ellerbee, who is going to be my husband."

Aunt Mimi squealed in harmony with Aunt Lucy and I thought Uncle Pete was going to rip Jason's arm off shaking his hand.

Dad got the next hand-shaking and we all trooped out the back door onto the patio. Jason sat by me like we're supposed to be together. You know? We are.

Alan and Tina showed up, too, and Tina and I squealed together for the benefit of all gathered, and then I introduced her and Alan to my family. Forty year old Alan and seventeen year old Tina, THEY raised some eyebrows, but Alan and Tina make friends easily. They're just good people, Dad says.

In front of everybody, Alan reiterated his offer to strangle Jason. "I didn't bring 'im up here to lead your daughter astray," he said.

Dad laughed. "I don't think she's quite 'astray' yet, and there's some question as to who led who."

Alan smiled at me and told my dad, "You're probably right."

We were sitting around talking and laughing and I had a soda can on the arm of my chair when Aunt Mimi passed by. She managed to knock it over into my lap.

"I cain't believe I did that," she said. "I'm not even drinkin'!"

"That's okay," I said. "I'll just run upstairs and change!" I stood up after I blotted as much of the liquid out of my pants as I could, and Aunt Mimi followed me to my bedroom.

"I'm gonna jump in the shower or I'll be all sticky," I told her, and I disappeared into my little bathroom with a change of clothes. When I came out a few minutes later, she was sitting on the bed.

"So, are y'all doin' the nasty?" she asked me, giggling.

I was shocked. I mean, Aunt Mimi's kind of got a reputation, you know, but she's never asked me about any of that stuff.

"No," I said. "Certainly NOT!"

"Oh, come on, kiddo," Aunt Mimi said. "That's a good lookin' guy. You know…"

"We HAVEN'T!" I told her. "We'll manage until we get married."

"When's that, baby doll?" she asked me.

"The Saturday after graduation."

"That's not enough time to get your plans together, sweetie," Aunt Mimi said.

"We're not doing a big wedding. We want to be together."

"That's what I'm sayin'," she said. "Y'all can still… you know… even move in together. He's got an apartment, I heard. And do the big wedding in a few months."

"Aunt Mimi," I said. I was a little exasperated. "The wedding's about me and Jason being MARRIED. It means something to Mom and Dad. That's why it means something to me an' Jason. I don't need a five thousand dollar dress and a thousand dollar cake and six bridesmaids to do that. I need me and Jason and our families and friends before God."

"Well, I was going to have so much fun plannin' your wedding…"

"You know lots of people. One of 'em's bound to get married sooner or later." I sighed. "I don't mean to sound offensive, Aunt Mimi. It's just that I have Jason, and things went 'click' and it's going to happen. Okay?"

"Okay, sweetie," she said. She hugged me. "Let's go downstairs."

My Jason was standing at the bottom of the stairs waiting for me. We linked arms and went back into the fray.

The next day was back to school. Tina and I met in the hall before the first bell. Yeah, she checked to see if I had my engagement ring on. Of COURSE I had my ring on. And PEOPLE noticed it.

I got to explain WHO gave me the ring and like ANY girl who gets engaged in high school, you know, answering the question, "Uh… Are you PREGNANT?" Honestly now, are things so screwed up that people think the only reason a girl wants to get married is to give her baby a daddy's name? Worse than that, how many of 'em just go ahead an' have a baby and DON'T get married because either they guy is a massive turd or they don't even KNOW who the daddy is.

Jason and I talked. Babies are serious business. Tina and I talked, too, and I know about Cindy and I know about my Mom and Dad and Jason and I know that WHEN we have kids (a couple, we agreed) we want to do our kids like Mom and Dad did me.

But back to school. I smile and tell everybody 'No, I'm not pregnant. I'm in love. There's a big difference." And I whip out my cellphone and show pictures of me and Jason.

"Uh, he's like, uh… OLDER!" Ashley, one of my friends blurted.

"Duh…" I said. "You and I are in the same AP math class. You KNOW I understand numbers and all. Thankyouverymuch!"

Then she looked at Tina. Everyody knows about Tina now. Tina was smirking. Ashley swallowed visibly. I mean, it was almost like a sit-com scene. She saw Tina looking at her. "But I guess if it's the right person, age isn't that big a deal, huh?"

"Excellent recovery, Ash!" Tina laughed.

Ashley smiled. "Y'all know what I mean! That whole 'old guy chasing young girl thing."

"Uh-huh," I said. "Like, 'I'm dating a college guy!" Ashley had uttered those very words a few months back, and then WE had to support her when she got dumped on her butt.

"Jason's past college. He works with Alan," Tina said. "But I think he's going back to get his engineering degree with us in the fall."

"He doesn't have a college degree?" Ashley asked. Then we had to go through that whole thing about Jason's degree.

"So are you inviting me to the wedding?"

"You betcha," I told her. "But it's not gonna be one of those 'big deal, princess for a day, Dad's in debt up to his ears' things."

That was a whole other conversation. It was still going on when the bell rang for home room. That colored conversations for the rest of the day. Yeah, a few of my school friends already knew Jason. When you go out to eat in a small town like ours, there are only a few places to go, so it's inevitable that we'd run into the school bunch. The news of our engagement rounded out the supposition, conjecture and rumor. My life just got a lot more interesting.

Before, I was a smart, geeky girl. I'm pretty enough, you know, but I have some pounds I don't really need. Still, I never had a problem with finding boys interested in me. It's just it didn't take very long for me not to be interested in THEM. I don't let myself be ruled by my own hormones, so I darned sure aren't gonna be ruled by THEIRS. What Grandpa said: "Books without pictures."

Now, with people knowing I'm engaged to be married and the guy's NOT somebody everybody knows because EVERYBODY in this town has been through THIS high school, that made for a whole different spectrum of conversation. 'Spectrum'. One of Tina's words. And she got it from Alan, no doubt.

And there's still that 'smart' thing. I'm number three in my graduating class. Tina's grades would put her at the top of the class if she'd have been here for four years, but she transferred in. Still, she'll be standing on the stage beside me as an honor student. That's the way it SHOULD be.

Mister Graham, our physics teacher remembered Jason's presentation on the plant tour we took. "That's your new fiance', Susan?"

"Yessir. That's the one."

"He seems to be pretty confident in his arena," Mister Graham said.

"He's one of those guys that people chase down to get him on their jobs," I said. "Smart."

He smiled. "He's getting the smart one, you know."

I smiled. It's nice to be recognized by people you respect. Mister Graham is one of the reasons I even THOUGHT of engineering. "Thank you," I said. Dad said that I'll remember some good teachers from school. Mister Graham will be one of them.

At the end of the schoolday, Tina and I and a group of friends walked to the parking lot to drive home. Yes, I was still smiling. Yes, I'm still happy. And yes, Jason is coming over after school and we're gonna look at my sad bit of homework and then watch a movie with Mom and Dad.

Alan's turn:

Despite the niggling feelings in my gut over the possibility that the whole Susan 'n' Jason thing could go off the tracks and hurt somebody, when Tina and I showed up that Susan's house, things were pretty happy.

I got to meet a few new people, Susan's maternal grandparents and her dad's brother and sister-in-law and her mom's sister Mimi, who struck me as being just a little bit predatory. I played the game long enough to know when I'm being measured. She did an inventory of me. Jason, too, if you want to know. I think Tina caught it, too, because she moved into 'possession' range any time Mimi was around.

We had a good time. I get the idea that Susan's not exactly unfamiliar with being the center of attention, but she very happily shared it with Jason. I was actually a bit proud of both of them, even though I had little to do with their personalities. After all, it happened on MY watch.

Mike and I and Jason and Grandpa and Uncle Pete argued at great length over the preparation of meat over a fire, but at the end of the event, we had some darned good steaks, helped clean up the mess and finally big good-bye and headed home.

Tina was snuggled in beside me as tightly as seatbelts allow. "That was one, huh, baby?"

"One what?" I asked.

"Aunt Mimi. One of those women you talked about."

I was right. I knew my Tina. I didn't marry her because she was slow. "I think so, sweetness. She did a total visual inventory when we walked in."

Giggle. "I can understand her interest. I brought the best-looking guy in the place."

"Flattery'll get you everything, little one," I said.

"Good!" she said. "I want everything. Probably doing a period in the next day or two."

We'd been through a few of these now. First couple of times, she was apologetic. I kept telling her that it was part of life and she was still entirely adorable and desirable and we got through them okay. Tina's emotions tended to swing a bit more during this time, from her normally stable demeanor, so I just tiptoed a tiny bit. I was interested in how the events in Susan's life would look through the filter of a hormonal Tina.

"I know what you're thinking," she said.

I chuckled. "Okay, what am I thinking?"

"You're thinking about that 'fifty percent of marriages end in divorce" line."

"I'm just a bit concerned that two good friends are…"

"That two good friends met and figured out that they match up and want to leap into life together."

"You need to stop being poetic," I said.

"Yeah, Alan Addison. I need to deal with cold, hard facts." She rubbed her cheek against my shoulder. "Nope. Love. And a certain amount of analysis on the part of at least ONE of the parties involved. And I'm sure that the OTHER party is of similar tendency."

"Analysis?" I asked.

"Yep. Susan and I have talked at length about it. She asked questions. Not just me. Her mom. And even Cindy."

I snorted. "Pre-nuptial advice from a fourteen year old."

"Who's the only level-headed genius I know, and who is so darned analytical sometimes that it's scary. All I'm saying is that it's not a spur of the moment, air-headed 'Mommy! He's CUTE! Can I marry 'im?' thing for Susan. She's a lot more sane than she looks. Or acts, sometimes." Giggle.

When you punctuate a statement like that with a giggle, you have to lend extra weight to it. "Okayyyy," I answered. "Really, she and Jason are the LEAST weird of the bunch."

We rolled into the RV park. It was dark and the sky was clear and the air was cool. "Walk a lap?" she asked.

"Yes, I think so. Need to work off that meal." Holding hands, we circled the park, stopping to chat with the one couple still out, sitting under their awning, enjoying the evening. We eventually ended up back at the trailer and as was almost ritual, she stood on the step, turned and kissed me before we went inside.

She giggled as she stripped for her nightly shower. Once she was naked, she stepped into my arms and kissed me, knowing that the dichotomy of me fully dressed and she, delightfully, happily nude, was arousing to me.

"You are such a dream," I said.

"That's what today was about, baby," she said, tip-toeing to kiss my nose. "You get YOUR dream, I get mine, Jason and Susan get theirs." The next kiss would've ignited flammable materials nearby if not properly contained. I did my best.

We swung into the familiar evening routine of sequential showers. After that, we were tending to our little house, tasks Tina uncharacteristically performed while naked tonight.

She caught me staring. Of course I stared. She was my wife. My YOUNG wife. And I absolutely adored her. "Glad you noticed," she giggled.

"You know, cutie pie, on the day of my funeral, when YOU walk by, my head will turn," I said.

"That's a morbid thought," she said. "But I'll keep it in mind. Put those books on the shelf. It's bedtime. And I want you to tell me a story about Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf that ate 'er."

I chuckled, shaking my head. My Tina was about the world's worst when it came to role-playing. I mean, she'd pop up with some kind of story line, play the part just perfectly up to a point, then she'd say, "Oh, never MIND! JUST DO ME!" And as far as I'm concerned, that's the absolute perfect way to play the game.

So there I was, in the bed, covers up to my chin, while she giggled her way through the "What big eyes you have" part of the story.

Her hand snaked under the covers. I was completely nude. Her hand, fingers gently touching, ran down my belly as those marvelous blue eyes focused on mine. Her fingers touched, then encircled my erect dick. "Eeeek! Grandma never had one of THESE!" Giggle. "Oh, hell, Alan Dean Addison! Just DO me! Six different ways, but DO ME!" Squeal!

The squeal was me tossing the blankets off and pulling her slim, nude butt to my face so I could eat that pussy. My concentration was immediately assaulted by her mouth suctioning my dick deep into it, then abusing it with tiny bites.

It went on to fireworks and waves crashing on a beach and every other metaphor for mating there ever was. The aftermath had me flat on my back, this auburn-haired, blue-eyed cutie snuggled up inside my arm against my right side. She was gently kissing my cheek, telling me that she was so sorry she was such a poor Little Red Riding Hood.

"You are the absolute BEST Little Red Riding Hood I've slept with," I said.

"And you make the BEST Big Bad Wolf." Kiss. "I love you, guy."

"I love you too, kitten," I said. And That, friends, is the way to end an evening.

I told my boss that I was needing half of Friday off. He started laughing. "What's so funny?"

"I'm looking at an email from YOUR technician asking for the same thing. Says personal business. I suppose yours is personal business, too? Let me think. What do YOU TWO have in common?" He put his finger under his chin, striking a pose. "Hmmm?"

"Did he say…"

"Word's going around already. Jason's getting married. Local girl. YOUR wife's high school buddy."

"His future wife and my wife and his future mother-in-law and a friend from Alabama are going shopping Saturday. The friend is flying in on Friday and there are social events planned."

"This ain't that Dan Richards, is it?"

"That's the one. What do you know about him?"

"We worked on a project a couple of years back. He'd lost his wife and daughter in a wreck, went on the road. I was damned glad to have him. How's he connected to you and Tina?"

"His wife is my wife's chosen sister. Along with Jason's fiancee'. One big happy family."

"Are you gonna be able to take off Friday without tying up progress?"

"C'mon, Carl, you KNOW I'll make sure you're taken care of."

"I know you will. But with you gone, I had Jason to fall back on. BOTH of you…"

"We'll fix you up, buddy. And Burt's got your back, too."

"Burt's good. Not Jason, but good."

"So we're good, then?" I confirmed.

"Yeah. I don't see why not. Just make sure we have all the loose ends accounted for."

"You know I will, Carl."

"I know something else, too."

"What's that?"

"I want you and Mizz Tina and Jason and, what's 'er name, Susan? I want to take all you folks out to dinner next week. My treat."

"You got it," I said. Good boss. A little nervous at times, but if I was trying to orchestrate what he was doing right now, I'd be a wreck.

I walked back to my office. Jason was in there at his desk, leaning back, smiling.

"What are you grinning about? I mean, besides fooling Susan and her parents?"

"Alan, I'm shocked that you would think such a thing. I am perfectly respectable and honorable. And I'm smiling because I just got an email that my request for Friday afternoon off is approved."

At noon Friday I left the job right behind Jason. Tina was at home waiting for me.

"Let's go to the airport," she said. "Cindy an' Dan'll be getting here before long."

"How are we gonna handle transportation?"

"I'm following you in my car. They can use it."

"That'll work," I said. "As long as Cindy's not driving."

Giggle. "Oh, don't mention that, baby. It's a sore point."

"Huh?"

"She gets upset that she can't get a driver's license yet. Says she'll be the only high school graduate she knows that can't drive."

"Hah!" I blurted. "She's the only one graduating at fourteen!"

"But she flies! Dan says so."

"I believe it, baby. Even though she almost can't see over the instrument panel."

"Oh, by the way," my cutie said, "Susan wants to talk to you about buying the little plane."

We were still holding onto the two-seat trainer that we'd bought for Tina to get her license with. "She what?"

"She wants to buy the little plane. Says that if I can fly, she can fly."

"My head hurts."

"It's better than that. Jason's gonna buy it for her. I told her the conversation that you and I had about how it's not going to go down in value while THEY learn to fly."

"Both of 'em."

"Jason says he'll write you a check."

"We were planning on selling it."

"We can talk," she said. "Let's go!"

I followed her little grey Honda out of the park and all the way to the airport. I wasn't surprised to see Jason's truck already there, and was only SLIGHTLY surprised to see Jason and Susan sitting side by side in the cockpit of the little Cessna trainer. They got out when we drove up, and they walked over to meet us.

"You know you created a monster don't you?" he said to me.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"No, don't be sorry. Susan explained it all to me, how y'all fly places, and how Louisiana is within range for a weekend. So's East Texas. The way she explains it, it makes perfect sense."

"You're lost, Jace," I said. "You're in the clutches of a sensible woman."

Tina punched me in the arm. "Be nice to my brother-in-law." Then she walked to the little plane, turned on the master switch, then the radio, listening for Cindy and Dan. Jason took the opportunity, along with Susan, to get a tour of the simple little aircraft.

"You need to get Tina or Alan to give you a flight, baby," she told Jason.

That was when the radio broke squelch with Cindy's voice announcing their location, five miles out, and their intention to land. "Hobart field, this is Cessna five five two three uniform, five miles south, for landing."

Wasn't exactly legal, but Tina picked up the mike on the little Cessna. "Cessna five five two three uniform, this is Cessna four eight seven five three, on the ground at Hobart, waiting on your arrival. Squeal!"

Susan smiled at Jason. "They'll be here in a few minutes!"

I chuckled to myself as their plane taxied in from the runway in a series of S-curves, Cindy's red head moving as she peered from side to side. When she neared the flightline, I guided her to the tie-down. I saw Dan's face, too, smiling. He was out of the plane as the prop stopped and he hurried to the left door to grab Cindy and lift her to the ground. She was grinning. I never saw Cindy without a smile on her face.

As soon as she got her feet on the ground, she ran to Susan, squealing. She hugged Susan and kissed her on the cheek, then stunned Jason by hugging him and kissing his cheek also. Oh, it was worse than that: Susan gave Dan a kiss and a hug, too. I got a Cindy smooch and hug, and Dan collected one from Tina, and after the melee of giggles and smooches.

Dan announced the motel where they had reservations and Tina handed him the car keys.

"Oh, no," Cindy said. "We'll follow you there! We have catching up to do!"

I dutifully followed Tina's little Honda that was following Jason's pickup truck to the hotel. Dan and Cindy checked in, Dan bringing their luggage into the room, then Tina and Susan ran me and Jason and Dan off to the lobby while they sat on the beds, giggling and talking.

Dan jumped right in on Jason. "Buddy, I thought you were pretty level-headed. You've been up here what? A month and a half? And you're engaged?"

Jason looked at me. "Alan, take up for me. I need defending. Better you should do it now than we should cut the girls loose on 'im later."

I started to say something, but Jason spoke up in a falsetto, imitating Susan. "And how long did you know Tina before y'all got married? Or Cindy 'n' Dan? Or my mom and dad? Hmmm?"

"Her mom and dad?" Dan asked.

Jason laughed. "The answer is six weeks, meeting to wedding. They've been married ever since. Susan's the happy result. And if you want to talk about age difference?" He went back to the falsetto. "Uh, really, how old is Tina 'n' Alan. Or Cindy 'n' Dan?"

"And you're marryin' 'er?" Dan laughed. "You should be running for the state line."

Jason just grinned. "Not on your life, buddy. She's IT!"

We'd already talked about working with Jason's schedule if he decided to go back to school.

"So what are they talking about?" Dan asked.

"Who knows," I answered.

"Wedding plans," Jason said confidently.

"The week after she graduates, right?" Dan asked.

"Uh-huh," I said.

"That's gonna be quite a week. Cindy graduates on a Wednesday night. You guys do the Friday night of the same week. I assume you're getting married the weekend following."

"You'd be right," Jason said.

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," Dan said. "Cindy's been positively giddy over it."

"Me marrying Susan?" Jason asked.

"My little redheaded cutie thinks that you'll make her sister happy," Dan said. "See that you do. The girl can shoot!"

I laughed. "I've never seen anything but a happy Cindy," I said.

"Me neither," Dan replied, "Except in the immediate aftermath of gunplay."

"I can't believe you laugh about that stuff, Dan," I said.

"Compensation, buddy. My way of handling it. Cindy still has episodes when it gets to her. My only concern is her. I was a whole lot more motivated to protect her than I was in Iraq."

My phone rang. I looked. Tina. I flipped it to my ear. "Yes, love?"

"Y'all can come in now," she said.

"Okay, sweetie, we'll be there as soon as we run off the adoring crowds."

She laughed. "You got all the 'adore' you're ever gonna need right there."

"We're on the way."

We got up and headed to the room. I knocked. The door was opened by Susan, her face glowing. Tina was sitting on one bed. Cindy was flopped on her stomach in the middle of the other, one foot waving in the air, smiling. The room was equipped with a sofa and an overstuffed chair, so I slid to one end of the sofa. Tina jumped up and sat beside me.

Jason joined Susan on the vacated bed and Dan sat beside his Cindy, resting his hand in the middle of her back. I could swear I heard her purr.

"So what's the plan for dinner?" I asked.

Jason smiled. "My future in-laws have ribs working at their house. We can go over there whenever."

Susan told Cindy, "Mom wants to meet YOU."

Dan looked at her. "What about me?"

"You're just an accessory." Giggle. Joined by others.

"I'm your biggest fan, baby," Cindy said, rising to kiss him. Dan looked enraptured. And to tell you the truth, so did Cindy.

I collected my own partner and we headed to the door. Three separate cars headed to Susan's house.

With Tina buckled in beside me, we followed the convoy.

"Susan's mom, the other night she sounded like she might have problems with Cindy and Dan. Do you think…"

"Oh, no," Tina told me. "She's curious. Susan's explained all she knows about Dan 'n' Cindy. Cindy's like a curiosity."

"I wouldn't want Cindy hurt."

"Cindy's got a way of winning people, baby."

"Like you, in other words." I smiled.

"I won YOU," she giggled. "I may retire."

"I know I have," I said. "Are the rest of Susan's family going to be there this time?"

"No. Just her mom and dad. And all of us. Just friends and families. It'll be good, you know."

"I know."

She giggled. "You're just worried about Aunt Mimi checking out your heinie, that's all."

"Uh, my heinie is spoken for, thank you."

"Not just your heinie, babe," she laughed, reaching over for a friendly grope.

# Chapter 31

Tina's turn:

Ummm, yeah. Alan's heinie. Think about it. I'm standing in the middle of a parking lot in, as he says it, Armpit, Louisiana (which is actually a nice little town) and we're surrounded by cops and onlookers and I'm looking at this guy standing there in handcuffs. He just rescued me, and I'm thinking 'nice heinie'. I was. And I was not only thinking it, but I was surprised that I was thinking it. I guess the stress of the situation and my period and I was tired, all those things kind of messed with my reasoning.

And since that day in August we've been together, even though the first few weeks we weren't, as Susan says 'TOGETHER together'. He gave me a place to stay while I got my stuff together. Part of the stuff I got together was him.

Today we're going to Susan's house.

Susan played a big part in me and Alan being together. She's a catalyst. In chemistry class, a catalyst is a substance that accelerates a reaction without itself being changed. That’s Susan.

After I went with Alan to Tennessee we set up his trailer (now it's OUR trailer) in an RV park and we got me set up to go back to school. I met Susan. We had advanced placement classes together. She's smart. And cute. Some people might say she's a little plump, but there are thousands of women who'd see Susan and wish they were shaped like her. But she was nice and friendly and I was the new girl in school so we kind of started talking. Next thing I knew, she was having a little get-together at her house for friends. She had a boyfriend and there were a couple of other couples and this guy from my science class as kind of cute and he was acting interested in me.

I remember when I told Alan that I wanted to go to the thing. He tried to hide his feelings but it was like a cloud passed over his face.

I went. I found out a lot of things. First, I found out that Susan was a) trusted by her parents and b) more than a little naïve. And that Jeff Jamison thought I was gonna be easy. It wasn't the first time that I had to fight a guy off, but I think it was ol' Jeffy's most enthusiastic introduction to the word 'NO' that he'd experienced up to this point in life. He was curled up on the floor when I left.

Susan caught hell from her folks when they started finding out about what happened that evening, and Susan caught hell from me for not giving me a real idea of what was going on, but I found out that she was basically snookered. Remember? I said she was naïve. I forgave Susan because I really think that she was remorseful, way more than she needed to be since a lot of that wasn't HER fault.

I went home that night and I was really irate. I walked into the trailer and there was Alan. He listened. He gave me a shoulder to cry on. Fixed me hot chocolate. Watched a movie with me. And he went to bed. I guess he went to sleep that night. I didn't. I laid there for hours. I thought about things I learned from Grandma. I thought about things I learned from Mom. I put all those things together and I looked up the dark hall of that trailer and what I knew about THIS guy who'd shown himself completely honorable and I remembered the look on his face when I told him I wanted to go to Susan's.

Something inside me that night told me that Alan was The One. I understood that he might not KNOW he was The One, and I took a great big risk when I crawled into his bed that night. I was right, though.

Since then, it's been quite a ride. It was fun learning about each other. We started out sharing classical music. The guy's smart and he loves to talk about everything and we can sit there and carry on a conversation. Then I learned he can fly. We bought a plane. And flew to Louisiana to get married when we found out he could go to jail in Tennessee for messing with a seventeen year old girl.

But Susan: now she's my best friend at school, and she's part of my life, and she's getting married to one of Alan's friends and co-workers. And she's my adopted sister.

There's another adopted sister who just astounds people on so many levels, and that's Cindy.

How do you meet Cindy? Oh, you go off for a weekend, flying off to take in a Bach concert, and we walk into a hotel and Alan KNOWS the guy checking in. That's Dan Richards. And he's got this cute little redheaded girl just standing there and he introduces her as his wife. That's Cindy. Fourteen. Genius. Graduating from high school. And a riot to talk with.

That's my bunch here. One of these days I'll tell you about the rest of my family, my stepdaughter, Terri, who's at least four phone calls a week and a really neat kid, and my in-laws back in Louisiana.

But right now we're in Alan's truck following Dan and Cindy who're in my car, and they're following Susan and Jason in his truck, and we're on the way to Susan's house. Susan's dad is barbecuing ribs and we're all getting together this evening. Tomorrow we girls, including Susan's mom, are going to Nashville to shop. Susan needs a wedding dress.

I might buy a few things, but living in our tiny little trailer is kind of a proscription against getting a lot of things and I have a couple of nice dresses that Alan says look really good on me, so I'm set. Thank goodness Susan's not going for one of those full-blown 'princess for a day' weddings with matching bridesmaid's outfits. And I don't think I'm NEARLY as relieved as her dad is.

Susan sounds kind of flighty sometimes, and honestly, there was a good amount of naïve to her, but she thinks things through and she and Jason had the whole wedding thing figured out before they broke the news to her mom and dad. When we get to Susan's house, she charged right in the front door hollering "Mom! Dad! We're here!"

Mizz Kathy showed up almost immediately. Susan introduced Cindy and Dan. Dan got a handshake. Cindy got a hug. Dan tells me Cindy used to be almost afraid of her own shadow. I can't believe that, because ever since I met Cindy, she's confident and has a presence. Poise. Cindy.

We went through the house and sat on the patio. All our guys were gathered around the barbecue pit with Mister Mike. Us females sat under the awning. I knew that Mizz Kathy was interested in Cindy.

She came right out and told Cindy that she was the youngest married woman she knew.

"I'm the youngest married woman \*\*I\*\* know," Cindy said. "Did Susan tell you about what kind of life I was having before I got married?"

"She mentioned some of it," Mizz Kathy said.

Cindy wasn't rude or dramatic, but she told Mizz Kathy a LOT of what I knew. You need to understand that one of the reasons I feel so kin to Cindy is that we sort of share that whole 'crappy mom' story. Cindy wasn't too graphic. I knew the whole story. She and I had talked a lot about it, trying to understand why we were the way we were. Susan hadn't heard the whole story, or even as much as Cindy was telling. Both Susan and her mom were almost astounded while Cindy was talking about her life before Dan.

"But then I got Dan." Cindy said, with that smile.

Mizz Kathy hugged her, almost crying. "I shoulda took Tina and Susan's word for it, baby," she said. Then Mizz Kathy started asking questions about Cindy's high school experience and there was room for me and Susan to jump into the conversation. We, Susan and I, already heard a lot of this, but Cindy was retelling it for Mizz Kathy. We had a lot of fun. I could tell Mizz Kathy was enjoying talking to us. I wonder what my life would've been like with a mom like Mizz Kathy, one that saw her daughter as somebody to love and care for instead of an obstacle.

I try not to think about that too much, and when I do, Alan gets a lot of vicious hugging. We've talked about it. He understands, I think, as much as anyone can who hasn't lived through it. Cindy understands even more.

Finally it was time to eat. Finally. Mister Mike TORTURED us with the smoke from those ribs. The meal was memorable, partly due to the food. Mister Mike's ribs were trophy winners in barbecue cook-offs and this Tennessee where they're nutty about cooking ribs. Mizz Kathy had done some wonderful things with baked beans and cole slaw and garlic bread and there were pies for dessert.

Having a terrific meal with friends and family is a wonderful thing. We all chatted and laughed and carried on. I watched my two sisters. Susan really did glow. Her blue eyes twinkled, her laughter, her smile, all that told me that Jason was a fortunate guy.

What I thought was interesting was that this didn't sound like parents and kids talking. Susan's parents actually talked to us like we were mature. I could easily see that with me and Susan, but it was a little unnerving with Cindy, but Cindy acted like she's used to it. I don't know if it goes with her being married or her being just really smart or most likely, both.

Cindy and Mizz Kathy. You know, I was worried? Susan told me of some of the conversations she'd had with Mizz Kathy when word got out that \*\*I\*\* was married to Alan because of the differences in our ages, and with Cindy and Dan, it was an even bigger distance. But Cindy and Mizz Kathy were chatting like two old friends. Cindy was explaining to Mizz Kathy her entry into the social studies fair back in Alabama. Cindy was proud. She'd competed as a middle school student in an event that was almost ALL high school students and had taken second place.

I joined the conversation. "I can only imagine who beat out Cindy."

"I want to read her presentation," Mizz Kathy said.

I'll send you a copy," Cindy said. "I had a lot of fun writing it. I talked with Dan and Tina and Susan and did a lot of research about the family and church and welfare and education. It's interesting."

"Sounds like it," Mizz Kathy said. "I was going to major in social work in college, but I switched to business." She nodded in Mister Mike's direction. "Thought he needed all the help he could get!"

"I can understand that. Look at 'im," I said. Mister mike was waving a rib as he expounded on something to Dan and Alan and Jason.

"It's up to us to civilize 'em," Mizz Kathy said.

I didn't argue with her. Mizz Kathy's nice. But I never saw my Alan as needing civilizing. He's educated and decent and mature and level-headed. Of course, he DOES have some sides to 'im that lay below the surface. When I saw him handle those guys that night in the parking lot, I was thinking, "This is the guy that's soooo gentle with me?" And he carries a pistol almost everywhere. Says it's his responsibility to protect himself and ME. And he's done that. So I don't think I want him any more civilized.

Anyway, Mizz Kathy's comment was meant to be funny, so I smirked. I know some of the guys at school could definitely use civilizing and I doubted the capability of a lot of those girls to perform that task. Maybe Mister Mike might've needed a touch, you know, when he told us about running a motorcycle into a truck door. But I just couldn't see it applying too much to my Alan. Or maybe Dan or Jason. Of course, Mister Mike seems like a really good dad. All you have to do is listen to Susan talk about him. I'm sad that I really don't have a frame of reference. I never had a dad around, or any guy that Mom brought home that I wanted to call 'Dad'.

It's funny how certain situations make me think about our life together, me and Alan, and about my own life and why I am the way I am. I've thought about the 'dad' thing and I can see where a psychiatrist might say that has something to do with me being so unbelievably attracted to Alan. A pseudo-father figure, perhaps. The first time I put that train of thought together, it bothered me, but you know what? If what I have for Alan is 'abnormal', I don't WANT 'normal'. I know too many 'normal' couples and they can only wish they have what I have with Alan.

When Cindy was writing her thesis for her social studies project, we talked a long time about it. I explained what I was thinking and she said she had some of the same questions. She decided to do a little research, but then she said she talked to Dan about it and she's like me: who gets to say what 'normal' is, and if it's a disease, did we want to be cured?

Alan couldn't WAIT for me to explain to 'im why I called him my infection when he got home. I talked to Cindy after school the next day. She giggled. "Dan's my tumor," she laughed. Things like that make me feel like Cindy is really kin to me. That's not to say that I don't love Susan like a sister too, but there's just too much parallel with Cindy for that to be 'normal' either.

There was one other girl who I shared this sort of stuff with back in Louisiana at the last school it went to before I dropped out. We sort of lost touch. I even emailed her when we got settled in here in Tennessee and she didn't answer back. That's been months ago. Made me start wondering.

"Tina, where in the world ARE you?" Susan asked.

"Right here," I said. "A thought crossed my mind."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing… Just kinda got caught up in being here in the middle of friends and family."

Cindy giggled. "It's ALL family, you know. Me an' you an' Susan's sisters. That makes my Dan and Susan's Jason (Susan smiled so cute when she heard 'Susan's Jason) your brothers-in-law. And Mizz Kathy and Mister Mike your parents."

"Parents?" Mizz Kathy asked.

"Sure," Cindy explained. "Your sister's mom and dad are YOUR parents too, aren't they?"

Mizz Kathy thought for a second. "Yes. I see your point, Cindy."

"Thank you, Mom," Cindy said, and she stood, walked around the table, and gave Mizz Kathy a hug.

At first, Mizz Kathy was kind of puzzled-looking, but then she smiled and tugged Cindy in for a return hug and said, "Mike, you need to come here."

"Yes, dear," he said, shuffling over, feigning submissive posture.

"Mike, Cindy informs me that their acquisition of each other as sisters has made us parents of them all."

"Great! Just what I need. MORE daughters." He laughed. He turned and said over his shoulder, "Dan! Alan! I'm now your father-in-law! I expect gifts! And I don't have the foggiest idea of how it happened but Kathy says it's so."

"Cindy!" Kathy laughed.

"Figures!" Dan said. "Dad! Can I borrow the truck?"

"Don't push it, son," Mister Mike laughed.

That's what I love about my new life: Friends and family. And it's really a blur, because when you get right down to it, the ONLY real family is Alan. And then there's my in-laws and a step-daughter, and those always count as family, but then there's Cindy and Susan and who they bring and it's rather nebulous as to where 'friends' end and 'family' begins and I love it.

It was all that: laughing, carrying on, enjoying conversation and food. Nobody upset, nobody drunk, nobody mad, and at the end of the evening we all went our separate ways after a round of hugs and goodbyes in the driveway.

We left with plans to meet for breakfast in the morning. Then we girls (and Mizz Kathy, but she's a girl, isn't she?) were going to head off to Nashville on my first shopping expedition that DIDN'T have Alan alongside me.

In the truck with the love of my life. I love the bench seat of his truck. I can buckle in right next to him. That's where I was as we drove back to the park.

"Good time, huh, babe?" I asked him.

"Sure was. Mike did some GOOD ribs!"

"Uh-huh! I think Cindy over-indulged. She was goin' after 'em."

"Yeah! Dan says they ride bikes and walk and things to stay active. She's not much bigger than when we first met 'er."

"I think she's getting taller. She's so short compared to Dan, though."

"Like a little doll, though."

I knew that Alan thought she was a cutie. We all did. And despite her being only fourteen, she didn't hang back in conversation. She and I talked about that too. She said she used to be shy and uncertain. Said her husband was what helped her bloom. I told her that I could understand that. I wasn't exactly shy, just never did see myself as particularly special. Grandma didn't see much of that before she started getting sick, before she passed away, and Mom never saw me as much more than an obstacle.

Alan sees me as his best friend and his love and he just encourages me to use the talents and abilities I have. And I watch him and talk to him about how he works and what he thinks and I want to be like that.

Right now I want to get him home and showered and shaved and naked.

Oh yeah. Sex. Actually, with me and my Alan, it's NOT just sex. It's part of our life, our connection on so many levels, and I remember that first night when I crawled in HIS bed, it was what I wanted, but it was not some animal lust, because if THAT was what I wanted, I could've had it with any of a number of guys, starting with Jeff Jamison the night I went to Susan's for the first time.

It just didn't seem right, like something I wanted to ever do, with any guy, not until I met Alan. And when I finally understood that I LOVED Alan, then it was something we were MADE to do.

I mean, I KNEW about sex. Mom wasn't particularly careful about who she did or where she did 'im, and I have ears, so I heard HER. And I listen to the conversations at school, too, and I pay attention, and for that matter, I can READ, so I knew about sex. And until something just clicked about me and Alan, it just wasn't THERE for me.

Then along came Alan. Two of us. Silly people who just bumped together in such an odd circumstance, and then stayed in that silly little trailer acting like there wasn't anything between us. Like HE didn't want to admit it because he was so much older than me, and I didn't want to admit it either and I guess part of it was the age thing and part of it was that I thought he really did just want to be nice and he didn't see me as anything but an unfortunate teenager.

That night I came back from Susan's, it was like ONE of us needed to make the first move, and he's just too entirely nice.

And it's like I was born again. It's like I found new senses. I never imagined that physical love would affect me. Just soooo good! We have power over each other. I know how to make him quiver and shake and he knows how to make me squeal and giggle and just completely pass out and wake up like I'm in a new world.

Sex doesn't rule our relationship, but it's definitely something to relish and enjoy and anticipate. And right now, after a very happy time, I want to end up in Alan's arms, all sticky and still quivering from aftershocks.

I guess it's obvious when my mind drifts like that because Alan said, "My Tina's far, far away!"

I giggled. "Just thirty minutes or so, baby," I said. And my hand sort of roamed up the inside of his thigh.

"You have some cute friends, baby, but I'm taking home the prettiest one," he said.

"I got the best looking guy out of the crowd, too," I said. "And that puts thoughts in my head."

He smiled at me. I know what's behind THAT smile.

"You know what I'd like to do this evening?"

"If it doesn't involve the two of us completely naked just a little bit short of fusion, we need to talk," I giggled.

"Oh, you read minds," he said.

"Good idea?" I asked.

"Perfect. Friends, good food, good times, and at the end of the day I end up with YOU in my arms!"

See! We think alike!

I ran my hand over the back of his head and lightly touched his neck. I could feel him shake against me, just from a light touch. If I was to kiss him there while he's driving, we'd end up in the ditch. He knows places like that on me. I love the explorations we've engaged in, since we became an 'us'. I found out that biting is something we both enjoy. Kinda kinky, I know, but I've certainly worked out WHERE and when and how hard to bite Alan and he's got me pinned, too. He ends up with marks on some occasions. The first time, I guess I just lost control and he had teeth marks on his pectorals. I was horrified when I saw it, but he just laughed it off and told me that it was just another level of intensity, and he enjoyed it.

Our sex life is just GOOD! I haven't talked with Susan about it much except in general terms because Susan is really the proverbial 'good girl'. She tells me she's virgin despite a number of guys who thought she was worth a try, but she fends them off. And now she's got Jason and he's quite happy sitting beside her, smiling and knowing that in a month or so they'll be married and everything that goes with it.

I have talked about it with Cindy. At first, I was really awed by the idea of talking about sex with a fourteen year old girl, but Cindy's just, well, Cindy, and she's got this analytical side that, frankly, is almost eerie. She and her Dan have been connected almost as long as me and Alan, and she says their sex life is, in her words, 'enthusiastic and innovative'. I stole that phrase and repeated it to Alan. He laughed.

"And she adds 'frequent and kaleidoscopic'," I giggled.

"Sounds like us," Alan said. "and it sounds like Dan married a little bit of heaven, just like I did."

But Alan and I, we are the picture of decorum in public. Behind closed doors, well, I abandon all control and let my imagination run and I let Alan have his way with me and I push and tug and wiggle a giggle and sometimes just TELL him what I want him to do to me and what I'm gonna do to him. I reflected on what I knew of Mom's activities and I sort of understood some of the noises I heard when I was living with her, but what I couldn't understand is how she could ignore the connection that sex brought to the union between me and Alan. I mean, aside from sex, he's my very best friend. We match from music to food to entertainment. You could build a classic platonic relationship on what we have. But then we added that 'I love you' thing to it. Still could've stayed platonic. But then we mated. Connected. And I can't even think of ever being with somebody who isn't Alan.

That's what Cindy told me. Funny. We both were hanging out with guys who NEVER made a move on us, and we both ended up just crawling into bed with them.

A kid would be lucky to have a dad like Alan. I know that was what he tried to be. But I saw more to the possibilities, from Day One in that parking lot, looking at his butt.

Speaking of kids: Terri, Alan's daughter. We talk two or three times a week. I am trying to get her for the summer with us, just as soon as we get an apartment. I watched too many of those movies, you know, about the evil step-mom or the kids who resented their daddy getting remarried. Terri's like a little Alan. Alan's ex is a whack-job. Knowing Alan and knowing what I do of her, I didn't know how they ever ended up together long enough to reproduce.

Alan told me the story. She was one of a bunch of girls and he and some of his college buddies would meet with them to study and she latched onto him because he was obviously going to do well as a young engineer and she viewed a meal ticket. It led to that, "Uh, Alan, the Pill didn't work. I'm pregnant," thing and he's just too decent to dump her with a number to an abortion clinic, so they got married. He said he hoped, really hoped, it would work, but that things that are just a little aggravating when you're dating can turn into horrible problems when you're married and she started seeing greener grass elsewhere, like an old high school boyfriend.

The woman's schizoid, I think. One day Terri will call, and everything's just peachy and the next day, Terri's almost in tears, with her mom screaming in the background. I know what moms like that are like. I told Alan that I WANT Terri living with us. No kid should have to live with a mom like that, and we're in a position to give her a good place to live.

But my thoughts are rambling. Back to the night before our shopping spree. We parked right next to our little trailer and went inside. Eight by thirty-five feet. Some people freak out thinking about it, but honestly, it's got ALMOST everything we need. I would've added enough room for a shower for two, that's all, because once inside, I stripped and gave Alan a hug while he was still fully clothed. He knows I do this because \*\*I\*\* know it turns him on. I shower first, being careful not to use all the hot water, then while I'm drying my hair, he showers, then he shaves while his face is still wet, and then he helps me finish drying my hair.

That's another 'giggle' moment between me and Cindy. What are the chances that both of our husbands have fetishes about our hair. I mean, Cindy, sure! She's got this delicious dark copper color. When people see her, they just think 'redhead'. Me, mines a few shades towards brunette from that. It's what people call 'auburn', gets really quite reddish when the light's right, but I've always kept it at a practical pageboy length with bangs because I hate to keep pulling hair out of my eyes.

And Alan loves it. We talked. I offered to let it grow. I offered different colors, different styles, anything, and he just asked me why I had it like that when I met him. "Makes sense to me," I said.

"You're telling an engineer that something is practical and 'makes sense' and you like it and you want to see if HE wants you to change it? You go the wrong engineer, baby,' he replied.

So I started paying a bit of attention. Every night when I showered, he made a point of standing behind me and brushing my hair and every time he did it, I noticed that when he finished, his dick was hard. I noticed that when we snuggled at night, his nose was buried in my hair, and he liked to brush the ends against his cheek. So I have a man with a fetish about something on ME that I didn't have to make an effort to change.

Okay, back to the trailer. Alan's behind me, brushing my hair with one hand, dryer in the other, and we're both completely nude. He signals that he's finished by bending over and kissing the back of my neck, something that makes ME quiver.

"Put that dryer up, babe," I said. I giggled. He was erect. Majorly. When he stood up after closing the drawer, I was still on the stool and I slid off and kneeled on the floor. You KNOW what I was going to do. I did. My mouth closed over that soft purple head. I pushed it just a little bit deeper into my mouth and closed my teeth gently right behind it. That's one of those 'biting' things that Alan likes.

It's not just sexual, you know. This guy, I worship him. I have tied my life to his. And if I can make him happy, whether it's cooking the first meal in this trailer that he didn't cook himself, or it's kneeling in front of him with his dick between my teeth, then I'm for it. Because he's the same way about me.

I can't help it. When I get him in my mouth, the "Mmmmmm" is automatic. As are his hands stroking my hair. I let him go with an audible smack and stand up into his arms. When we turned off the light in the little bathroom, the only light on in the trailer was beside our bed, beckoning.

Two consenting adults naked. Okay, I was still seventeen. Not EXACTLY an adult, but old enough, and MARRIED to the guy who was in bed with me and his dick was sticking up at an angle and it was still glistening from my lips and he was holding me in his arms and I got really close to him and pushed him gently onto his back.

The pair of eyes that looked up at me, blue, like mine, but I get lost looking at those eyes, those eyes adored me. He's on his back. So many possibilities there. Sixty-nine is such a coarse term for such a wonderful activity. But not tonight. Sixty-nine works for both of us. I love it. We start out working on each other. Bad choice of words: "Working on each other." Since when is sucking and licking and biting and lavishing love on my man's dick anything like work? But when we do, he has me coming in a matter of minutes and when I feel the tremors starting I take his dick out of my mouth and hold it against my cheek because I'm afraid that I'll lose control and bite too hard. And then I suck him off. Oh, that's another bad choice of words. I make love to him with MY mouth like he does with his. And when he comes, I fell him pulsing and I'm usually holding his balls and they get all tight and he's just pumping into my mouth. Some girls say that don't like sucking a guy, but I'm not sucking a guy, I'm making love, and even though it is Alan, he doesn't come in strawberry or chocolate, but I suck every bit of it out of him. And that's the way it's supposed to be.

But tonight sixty-nine wasn't going to do it for me. It lacked something: eyes! I wanted to look into my guy's eyes. Communicate with him. Didn't stop me from ducking down there to suck on his sack. He liked that. He also liked when I grabbed the skin between my teeth and tugged, stretching it, and then sucking again. Then I straddled him.

His hands on my body. Sometimes he closes his eyes, like he's intensifying his sense of touch, like he's reading me in Braille. I get to play with his chest. Make that his hairy chest. I noticed that the first day we went for a swim together. Hairless guys squick me out. I can run my fingers into Alan's chest hair and tug just a little bit. He likes that. How do I KNOW? Empirical investigation. I was on top of him, his dick inside me, early into our relationship, and I was fondling his chest. Play with a nipple? Got a moan and felt his dick jerk in me. Run fingers in chest hair? Moan. TUG on chest hair? Moan and a BIG jerk of that hard dick inside me. That's how you learn what your lover likes: you pay attention. And when you make the connections, when you're coming, he's chugging jets of semen inside you that you can FEEL and you can feel your cervix spasming like it's supposed to do to pick up stuff to make babies.

Babies. Alan's 'fixed', as he puts it. Right now, babies are out of the question because I have four years of college ahead of me, but I see Terri and I see HIM in her features, and I see Alan and I can't help but wonder. Would Alan even want a baby with me? How would Terri take it? What's more, how would \*I\* take it. I've babysat. I know what it's like to change diapers and feed and bathe babies, and it's not too bad when you know that in a few hours, somebody else takes over, but what about one that's OURS? Something to think about. And talk. Because HE would need to go get 'unfixed'.

But right now I'm straddling him and his dick is pressed against his belly, and it's lengthwise pressed in between the lips of my pussy and every time I move I can press my button against it. I'm juicing up really good and smearing that juice up and down the hot shaft of his dick, just like it's supposed to do.

"You're HARD tonight, baby," I said.

"I'm in bed with a sexy angel," he said, "after a perfect day."

I raised up and let his dick spring up and I didn't need to use a hand to guide it into me. I can do that with a couple of little wiggles of my hips and then that lovely purple head pushes my lips apart and finds the hole it's made to penetrate and we're mating. Nothing else describes it. Mated. I come like this. I CAN come fast. But not tonight. I ease forward, making sure that Alan stays inside me, so we can hold onto each other. I'm only inches from his face and those EYES! We kiss. Merge. He's cradling me against him, one of his arms holding me, the other caressing my hair, my face, and it's times like these that I can understand why some people write and talk about the spiritual aspects of making love.

I don't remember what words we say to each other now. Some people might think they're silly or sappy or something like that, but Alan and I are completely merged and I really don't care for others to critique it.

We do this quiet thing together for a while. I'm on top, so I'm in control and that means the I get to keep my hips moving slowly, working my pussy on that wonderful dick inside me, keeping him hard and keeping little sparks exploding inside me. I can feel Alan, too, writhing as he pushes up into me in time with my movements and our mouths meet and we're just locked together. We go like this for a while, and then it's just TIME. I push up to a different angle and my button (I LIKE calling it a 'button'. 'Clit' sounds a little too pornographic, and 'clitoris' is too clinical) is just hitting the base of his dick each time I move and with all the sensations I've got, I know that it won't be long.

It's kind of like a buzzing begins, warm, very pleasurable, a fluid happiness that centers not EXACTLY on my button, but that's like the apex of a triangle of good feelings. Some of them are also deep inside, getting moved along by that sliding fullness, and there's the sharp deliciousness that comes when we bottom out together and our pubic bones collide because that's when that plum at the end of his dick is all the way up inside me, against my cervix (clinical again, I know…) and I can't, I don't WANT to stop now and Alan's there with me because he's bucking upward and I know this is gonna be one of those where whichever one of us gets there first, it's gonna trigger the other one.

He beats me to it. I feel, yes, I REALLY feel his dick swell and start pulsing right before I feel the liquid heat deep inside me and the first spurt is like pulling the trigger on a cannon. I close my eyes tight. Sounds stop registering in my ears. All my senses shut down because every nerve in my body right now is over-ridden by the ones down THERE.

The only muscles I have that are still working are inside my pussy. Alan knows how I am and he catches me in his arms and holds me to his chest. That's where I am, and I can feel myself squeezing him as my orgasm goes on and on. His dick has stopped pumping fire into me. I roll all the way out of consciousness and drift back in, feeling Alan showering tiny kisses on the top of my head.

"Mmmmmwonderful, Alan. I love you so much…" Not very profound, but right now my brain's still using most of its processor cycles to handle the orgasm. I want to write symphonies about our life together, and this would be the scherzo movement.

"I love you too, little one," he says. Pet names. I love 'em. I love that when he sees me I'm 'angel' or 'kitten' or 'sweetie' or 'cutie' or 'baby' or a dozen others. I love that when I walk into his vision he smiles.

It's almost sad when I feel a wet plop and I know that he's finally soft and my pussy's tight and it squeezed him out. But I know a trick. Sixty-nine? Good time for it. "I can get a towel or…"

"Don't you dare," he says.

I spin around on top of him and my face is at his dick and his is between my thighs and I come a second time while he's 'cleaning' me.

When we turn out the light, I'm in his arms and there's soft music in the background and my world is as perfect, no MORE perfect than I ever expected it to be.

We're awake in the morning by seven-something. We're dressed and I'm making phone calls to Cindy and Susan. Calling Susan makes sure her mom is on line, and four couples meet up at the diner up the road for breakfast and I'm thinking how relaxed Cindy and Mizz Kathy look and the thought occurs to me as to just what might be the reason.

And after breakfast, we split up, me and Susan and Cindy piling into Mizz Kathy's big SUV and we drive off leaving the guys in the parking lot. Oh well, they're all adults. They'll figure things out and we'll see them this evening.

# Chapter 32

We men took advantage of the open day to spend the day at the range playing with firearms, and because we did that, when dinnertime rolled around, we were the (not too) loud table at the catfish joint, then it was all of us at Mike's house watching guy movies. No, that's not porn, at least not the sexual kind. We had Mike's stash of DVD's and we watched some classic 'guy' movies. We were getting close to the end of "The Wild Bunch" when we were informed of the impending return of our carload of ladies.

We were in the final scene, up to our eyeballs in hot brass machinegun fire and dead bodies\ when the door burst open and our bevy of mates charged in swinging shopping bags. Cindy bounced up to Dan and I got wrapped up in a combination of plastic bags and Tina. Susan kissed Jason on the lips and I noted that his hand went up to stroke her sleek blonde head. Mike didn't get left out, receiving a kiss from Kathy.

Susan announced, "We can each model ONE dress, but I'm NOT showing my wedding dress." She eyed Jason. "It's bad luck, ya know."

The herd disappeared upstairs and in a few minutes Cindy was the first one down. Dan was right. Deep green was HER color. Tina descended shortly after her in basic black, letting the subdued little sheath of a dress flow with her, her face radiant.

Susan and Kathy both chose light blue, and with both their blonde heads, I saw it as an excellent choice.

Appropriate comments were made about the obvious attractiveness of the participants, then the bevy disappeared back up the stair and returned in their shopping togs and we convoyed out to the all-night diner for a late snack. Over pastries and coffee, plans were made for a communal breakfast the next morning, then we split to our separate destinations.

"So, how was a day of girlie overload?" I asked.

She giggled. "You just can't imagine how wonderful it is to have friends I can trust, baby. No judging, no reading things into my life, we just got to laugh and talk and enjoy the company. I had fun. LOTS of fun."

"How'd Cindy work out with Kathy?"

She looked at me, the smile taking over her eyes. "Seriously? How could anybody think a bad thought about Cindy? She and Mizz Kathy talked all the way there and back, right in with me an' Susan. I think Mizz Kathy sees Cindy as a chronological anomaly." Giggle. "That's Cindy's term. Besides, if Mizz Kathy can get over me and YOU, then it's not THAT big a step for Dan 'n' Cindy."

"I just worry. Cindy's your sister."

"So is Susan, and Mizz Kathy's Susan's mom, so that makes Mizz Kathy sort of like the mother to all three of us."

I chuckled. "Logical."

"It is, actually. Susan explained it. And you know, Cindy can take care of herself. And thinks that she and Dan are a binary star."

"So what does she say about Alan 'n' Tina?"

"Same thing, over the phone the other night." Tina hugged my arm. "She thinks like me. That's why we're sisters." She paused for a second. "Did you REALLY like that dress?"

"Yes I did, little one. Perfect! On you, anyway."

"I hope I didn't spend too much…"

"Less than a thousand?" I said.

"Oh, gosh, yes! Not even close…"

"Baby, I appreciate you being concerned, but I never worry about you, not one bit." I didn't, really. She had some credit cards with five-figure limits and we kept zero balances, and she had a debit card to our working account and that had around twenty thousand in it. And she was signatory to our joint savings accounts. I trusted my Tina. She knew it. Questions like this were one of the reasons.

"Get what you NEED, baby. And I want you to have nice things," I said.

"You ARE my nice thing, guy," she giggled. "And I really wanna…"

"Shower, then some power cuddling?"

"Might not wait until the shower for the first one," she giggled.

I loved her giggle. She was alive, energetic, intelligent, and in short, a bundle of everything I ever dreamed of in a mate.

"You have that look again, Alan," she said.

Add 'reads me like a book' to that list. "Just thinking about what I have sitting next to me, princess," I said.

"I do that, too, you know."

"Apparently you aren't as obvious as I am."

She squeezed my arm. "Maybe I just do it so much you think it's normal."

"That thought makes me happy. YOU make me happy."

"Good!" she said. "I have something I want you to do tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? What?"

"Oh, it won't interfere with your work. I was needing a light jacket for school, you know, in the morning when it's just a little chilly?"

"And how can I help you with that?"

Giggle. "I bought a flannel shirt in your size. I want you to wear it to work tomorrow. Then it's MINE! I can go to school wearing YOUR shirt for a jacket."

"Your idea?"

"Cindy's!" Giggle. "Susan's giving Jason a shirt, too."

"Speaking of Susan, has word gotten out about her engagement?"

"Oh yeah… she's getting some of the same treatment that I got when I announced we were married."

"She's handling it okay?"

"You know how I said \*\*I'M\*\* different than I was at the beginning of the year? Well, so is Susan. She says a lot of it's MY fault, but she's more confident and a little more self-assured and she doesn't knuckle under to the peer pressure thing. And she doesn't take crap from people."

"She shouldn't have to take crap. Susan's a good girl."

Tina sighed. "Yeah, and you know, I feel like I'm kind of her anchor. Ever since that disaster of a party, we just sort of hang together and complement each other. And then we added Cindy."

I laughed. "And Kathy herded the whole bunch of you?"

"I dunno about 'herded'. She acted like one of us. Really nice, having a mom who CARES about her daughter. Well, daughters. Really nice." She leaned against me. "I wonder how life would've been if my family had been like that. But I got you, and that's all behind us."

"We both have stuff behind us now, angel," I said. "What's behind us makes us what we are today."

"I know," Tina said, "but some people get messed up from what they go through, and it's not good. If I'm messed up from what I went through, it's in a good way."

"You know, that's the way I feel, too. How come you match me so well?"

"Just an anomaly in the continuity of the universe, babe," she giggled as she punched through the selections on the truck's stereo. "Here! Music!" Mozart. She buried her face into my shoulder until we turned off the highway into the park.

Inside the trailer, we put away her acquisitions. I thought we were finished, but she reached into the bottom of a bag and retrieved a box. "For you," she said. "I hope you like it. I thought it smelled wonderful."

Cologne. My baby bought me a gift. I was going to like anything she wanted as long as it smelled slightly better than the anus of chancroid skunk. I kissed her. "Thank you, sweetness. I will use it tonight."

She smiled softly, those blue eyes drawing my soul forth. "Then I won't wear anything, so I can just smell you."

I don't know if she hurried through HER shower, but I hurried through mine. And yes, I did splash on a bit of that cologne and in the next hour we joyously assaulted one another to a happy peak.

We loped through the week like we were on autopilot.

Susan's mom, Kathy, was tracking down details of an apartment complex in the town of Auburn, Alabama and it looked like it might be what we were looking for. Kathy was doing the legwork for us and as a realtor, she'd catch the commission for part of the sale.

Evenings during the week, well, Tina and I reserved a couple of them for ourselves, but Susan's home became a meeting place for Tina and I and Susan and Jason, and Jason was pretty much 'son-in-law' to a very happy Mike, as in Susan whining, "Daa-aaad! Can I borrow my fiancée? He needs to take me to a movie this Saturday!"

And on Friday as I left work, I dialed up my wife on the cellphone and got an earful of "SQUEAL!"

"That's a happy sound," I said.

"Somebody I thought I lost. I found 'er," she squealed.

"Who?"

"This girl I went to school with. The last school before I dropped out. I'll talk about it when you get home!"

"This is a good thing?" I asked.

"I think so," she said. "I got an email. We'll talk!"

She knew that I didn't like yakking on the phone while I was driving through the four-thirty traffic. Of course, that left me to my own thoughts as I navigated the road to the park. I'm too analytical for my own good, sometimes. I'd welcomed Tina into my life, made her the center of my being. Her smile made me able to breathe. And now here comes this "somebody I thought I lost."

I pulled up beside her little gray Honda and climbed out of the truck. The trailer door flew open and the face that peered out was grinning broadly. "Come in! I got soup on. Lemme tell you who this is!"

I stopped at the door for a welcoming kiss. Mentally, I started uncoiling from previous apprehension. She tugged at my hand. "Sit down and let me get your shoes off," she said.

That was a pleasant thing that I never asked for but happily accepted.

She started her narrative. "At that last school, there was this one girl, Nikki Domingue. She was an outsider like me, and we sat in the same corner of the cafeteria, out of the way. Baby, we had a lot in common. Both of us had crappy moms who left us in the care of our grandmothers and both of our grandmothers were gone. She just couldn't stand thinking about doing the stuff that she thought she would have to do to try to fit in, so she didn't. she hung out with me at school. She was really my only friend there, and when I left school, we lost touch except for a couple of emails." Tina sighed and continued. "When we first got set up here, you remember when I checked my email and sent out a few. One of them was to HER. But she didn't answer. I thought that was it. I still checked that account every week, though, and she saw my email from last August and answered me on Wednesday."

"You're excited."

"Yes I am. I told her about the evacuation and me being rescued, and a couple of months later I wrote another one, in the blind, and told her that we were married and how happy I was and some of the things about us. I never got an answer." Little squeal. "Today I got an answer." She read me the answer.

"Tina - Sister! I hope you get this. I hadn't checked this email since I don't know when. I didn't evacuate for the hurricane. Mom left with one of her guys a couple of days before and they didn't come back for me. I was supposed to catch a ride with my neighbors, but they never showed up. I was in the apartment during the storm and the building blew over and trapped me inside. If my next door neighbor hadn't stayed and then came by the rubble and recused me, I would have probably died there.

Tina, he's amazing. You know how we used to talk about REAL men? My Dan's one of those. He's smart and caring and decent and I fell in love with him. He's the most decent male I've ever met in my life and he loves me to pieces.

I'm back in high school, but you won't believe this! I skipped TWO grades. I'm graduating this year. Married and graduating from high school! I can't believe it.

I hope you get this. I want to hear from you.

Your sister,

Nikki D."

"Sounds like the real thing to me, baby," I said. "You gonna answer her?"

"Already wrote it, love," she said. She read her reply. It was pretty much a synopsis of our meeting and mating and marriage and a bit of our life since then. The way she wrote it, it sounded like something out of a fairy tale.

"You don't mind if I sent it, do you?"

"Of course not." I heard a mouse click.

"Let's eat," she said.

We fixed bowls of soup from the pot simmering on the stove, and added some crusty bread to the meal. We chatted about the half day of school she had and my day, nearing the end of my project. After dinner, we shared in the domestic tasks, then I sat down at one end of the sofa and she sat at the other with her laptop. I had just fired up my Kindle when she split the air with a squeal.

"It's HER! With a phone number." The phone fairly leapt into her hand. She tapped in the number and held it to her ear for a few seconds, then another happy squeal and a giggle. "Nikki! I FOUND you! Oh, gosh, little sister! How ARE you doing?"

I watched, bemused, for the next half an hour. Tina's side of the conversation, the part I could hear, was excited, happy, ebullient.

It ended with, "Yeah, get Skype on your computer so we can see each other. And we'll keep in touch." Pause. "Definitely! We HAVE to get together." Pause. "Soon!" Pause! "Oh, yeah, Nikki! I am SOOO happy to hear from you. I love you, little sister!" And she closed her phone, smiling as she turned to me.

"Sounded like a good thing to me, baby. Another sister?"

"What's your phrase? Parallel development? It's almost like that." She smiled. "The difference was that her mom worked in a bar in the parish back home and got on Section Eight housing and they had an apartment. My mom shacked up with whoever she could tag."

"Baby, that's behind you," I said, seeing the cloud over her face.

"I know, my guy," she said, continuing, "Nikki's mom and boyfriend left her a few days before the hurricane and she was supposed to get a ride out for the evacuation with some neighbors, but they weren't letting anybody back into the parish when they tried to go get her. So they just let the issue drop. Nikki was THERE!" Tina caught her breath. "The storm blew her building down with her IN IT! She was trapped, and then this guy came over and rescued her. Cut her out of the building. He lived in the house next door and he stayed through the storm."

In my head, a little light blinked. "Did she say who the guy was?"

Giggle. "Yeah. You're NOT going to believe this…"

"Try me."

"He's an electrical engineer. Name's Dan Granger."

"I know 'im. We worked together out of college. He stayed back there with another company, and I moved on. I remember him and me talking after one of those big hurricanes, about how it wouldn't be hard to build a house to beat one."

Tina looked at me, somewhat bemused. "Oh, here we go again, Alan. Another one of those strange events that drop into our lives."

"So you've got another sister?"

"My first 'sister', baby. If you listened to our stories, you'd almost think we were carbon copies." Her computer dinged. Email. Squeal! "A picture!"

She opened it. Yep! A few years hadn't obscured Dan Granger. He was identifiable. Him and this delightfully smiling girl, whom I assumed was…"

"That's Nikki!"

"And that's Dan. I know 'im!" I said.

I didn't make the weekend before I called Dan myself.

"Alan Addison! What have we gotten ourselves into THIS time?" he said.

"You tell me, buddy! It seems we're married to sisters."

"Yeah," I laughed. "And it's a big family. Let me tell you what's going on at this end." I told him about the plans for college for Tina and Susan and Cindy, and the business plans for me and Dan Richards and Jason. "Gonna be confusing with two Dans, though," I said. Assuming you're interested. You are interested, right?"

"I dunno," He said. "I got a good deal here. House, job. Nikki's graduating… I could be here…"

"For how long?" I asked. "I know what you do and who you do it for. You could definitely take a step up. And with Nikki graduating…" Tina had told me about Nikki skipping two grades. That was a surprise, but then when I considered her hooking up with Dan Granger, it wasn't too big a surprise. He had a thing for smart girls.

"I know," he said. "I already got the 'We're going to Auburn' thing from, uhhh, Tina and Susan and Cindy. Miracle of modern technology, that Skype thing. Should've never let women use computers."

"Yeah, buddy, I listened in. You're telling me that Nikki would be a candidate for 'barefoot and pregnant'?"

He laughed a familiar laugh. "Yeah. None of them look like candidates for that." We talked about this business idea. He liked it. We talked about the community idea. He liked that.

"But I have a house down here, Alan."

"I heard all about it, buddy! So do I. So does Dan Richards. Yet here we are…"

"Susan said something about an apartment building?" he said.

"She's got an angle on one. It's an eight-plex, and a two-unit storefront. The owner went under, and he's trying to sell. We need to go look at it but it sounds interesting. And it's a 'fire-sale' price."

"Sounds good. And if you're talking about what I'm talking about, we'll need a good office. And the girls will be close to college."

"That's the idea. Our wives know what sort of business we're in, and they figure that if we're on the road, they'll all have each other. And as far as education…"

"I'm trying to get a handle on that idea," Dan said. "Nikki's scary…"

"Wait until you tangle with Cindy. This whole mess is HER idea."

"She sounds so… so CUTE!" he said.

I laughed. "Ain't she, though? But the BRAIN! And she just absorbs the conversation, then pops out with something. This whole 'community' idea came out of her mouth."

"Susan's the normal one of the bunch."

"Ah, Susan," I said. "She's a peach, isn't she?"

"She's engaged to this Jason? Technician?"

"Yeah, and he's probably going back to college with them to flesh out his degree to full-blown engineering. The guy's a really great technician."

"You have a couple more techs lined up?"

"Got some who express an interest," I said. "We need a couple more who aren't just cookbook guys."

"Heh," Dan said. "I might bring one with me."

"Don't go burning bridges, Dan," I said.

"I can burn it. I built the sumbitch," he laughed. "You know how portable a good technician is in this business."

I laughed, remembering the attitude that caused much amusement (and consternation) in the office a few years back.

"We all need to get together and talk about this," he said. "Nikki's dying to see Tina. Matter of fact, the whole bunch of 'em's in on it."

"Tell you what. I think we can slay multiple avians with a single projectile."

"Oh yeah?" he said.

"Yeah, if you're up for it, I can, Tina and I and probably Susan and Jason and Cindy and Dan R, we can ALL fly in next weekend. My house is in the middle. You drive east. Dan and Cindy drive west. We all meet and hash all this out. At least the preliminaries."

"Let's do it," Dan said.

"I'll tell Tina. You won't believe the job they do when it comes to planning and scheduling." It was a source of amusement to hear the periphery of the discussions between Cindy and Tina and Susan about one of our forays. I could only imagine what the addition of another brilliant mind would be like.

Sure enough, but the end of the weekend, we had a plan in place. Susan and Jason would fly with me and Tina. Dan G. and Nikki would meet us at the airport, and we'd meet Dan G. and Cindy at our house.

I got home after this conversation and queried Tina. "How much of this is a surprise to you, exactly?" I asked.

"Nikki says 'you're about to see the power of this fully operational sisterhood'. Baby, you have to understand where we're at. Except for Susan, we're all just finding out what it's like to be heading into the future with REAL friends and families. And think about it! The brainpower!?! Cindy said that between the four of us, we could melt steel at fifty meters."

I had no doubt that Cindy had come up with that. A mere few months ago, I was a single guy headed to a routine project in the middle of Tennessee. Today I was on the edge of the Manhattan Project, that is, if the Manhattan Project had consisted of cute young proto-geniuses instead of hairy old guys.

Tina's eyes twinkled. "you just had one of those thoughts, didn't you? Share it with me."

The little darlin' could read my face. I told her what I thought.

"The Manhattan Project. With cuties?" Wait'll I tell everybody THAT one!" she crawled up the sofa and on top of me. The only way I could save myself from the horrible fate of being smothered with kisses was a pre-emptive strike. Her face glowed. Melted my heart. Hardened another portion of my anatomy.

She recognized the effect she had on me. Probably intentional. She smiled, her face close to mine. "Y'know, I have some really wonderful people in my life now." She kissed me lightly. "And YOU are at the top of the list. I love you."

"Good!" I said. "Because I adore you." I wiggled underneath her. A few months ago, she would have interpreted this as "I'm too heavy" or "I'm hurting you". Now she knew that I was just adjusting myself to make the friction more pleasant.

She nestled herself into me. "Hmmmm, something…" Her eyes sparkled. Love. Lust. A happy and very proper mix of the two. "We got time before we go meet Susan and Jason for dinner…"

"A little rush…"

Giggle. "Just do me. Hard!" she stood and hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her jeans and gave her delightful heinie a wiggle.

That's all it took. I followed her the length of the little trailer, shedding clothes, piling mine atop hers. By the time she turned to me on the step at the foot of the bed, she was naked except for panties and bra, and I was trying to remove socks.

She saw the 'sock' thing and giggled. "I love it! You always have to take off your socks!"

"You have your kinks, I have mine," I laughed. And then I crawled between her smooth thighs, her fingers guiding me into her.

"You light me up," she said, sighing. Her hips thrust up against me and she pulled my face downward to hers, kissing, completing the meld of the two of us. A slight tug told me that she wanted to roll over, a task we accomplished while still firmly coupled. Atop me, I opened my eyes to see her face aglow, that crazy smile lighting her up as she worked herself against my hardness. The giggles and grins morphed into a more serious biting of bottom lip as she worked us both to orgasm. When she went over the cliff, she took me with her, then she dropped into my arms. We lay like that for a while, breathing together.

"Babe," she said softly.

"Yes, little love?"

"We have people who'll be disappointed if we just lay here like we both want to…"

"Just as long as you know we want to," I said.

She kissed me. "Oh, you know I do. How about a rematch after our showers tonight?"

"Good enough," I said.

We got dressed. "I think that the smell of fried food at the catfish joint will mask what WE smell like," she laughed.

In the restaurant, we conferred with Susan and Jason.

"What do your mom and dad say about you taking off for the weekend with Jason?" I asked.

Susan's blue eyes laughed before the sound came out of her mouth. "They trust us. Besides, it's a month until the wedding. And Mom knows we've made it this far." She smiled at Jason. "Don't worry, guy. We are going to have our time."

Jason smiled sheepishly. "I know, sweetie. And we can do just fine this weekend."

"Yeah. Uh-huh," Susan said. "Because we're with our friends and YOU'RE sleeping on the sofa and I'M sleeping in Alan's daughter's room."

"And I'm your chaperone," I said. "I ain't giving Mike a reason shoot ME!" I laughed. "It's bad enough I brought the guy who's hauling off his daughter."

"I am perfectly honorable, thank you," Jason jibed.

"He is," Susan affirmed. That was the story that Tina gave me, too. We talked for the rest of the meal about the plans for the weekend, the progress that Jason and Susan were making towards pilot's licenses.

Susan and Tina both sounded excited about the upcoming adventure. Jason and I were more reserved in front of them, but on the job he'd told me that he was looking forward to meeting the other Dan and solidifying our business plan.

"Mizz Kathy says we need to go down there and look at that building in Auburn, too. Time to get things moving, buddy," he'd said.

"I know. Time has a way of flowing faster than you think. We can make the plans for that move this weekend."

"Yeah," Jason replied. "We need to see where our money is at. If we're going to buy into that building…"

"Cindy's Dan and I already talked about that. We need a number, but Cindy's step-mom and her husband say they'll bank-roll any reasonable amount."

"Businesses sometimes start off slow, you know. Especially…" Jason started.

"I already have a bite on a contract, and Cindy's Dan…"

Jason laughed. "Is that how we're going to have to differentiate having two Dans?"

"Darned inconvenient, isn't it?" I laughed. "anyway, he's got some angles working, too. And I think Nikki's Dan had a handle on work with a major electrical utility."

"Oh, boy," Jason smiled. "I've done some of that stuff. Are we going to buy the test equipment outright, or what?"

"Probably lease, at the beginning." The equipment he was talking about was well into six figures. Guy knew his business.

At the table, though, it wasn't nearly as much about business as it was about other aspects of life.

By Friday, the excitement level was up. Yes, there were evening Skype sessions, but the girls wanted to SEE each other. Saturday morning early we were at the airfield, loading luggage (Pack light, this is a Cessna 182, not a Boeing 747!), backing two cars into the empty hangar, and then loading up into the plane, Jason and Susan in the rear seat, Tina in the pilot's seat, and me beside her.

Enroute, the intercom was filled with chatter.

From the back seat. Giggle. "Jason! Stop! If you want me to move my head set…"

Tina twisted in her seat to see what was going on. Jason was angling towards a nibble on a decidedly giggly Susan's ear. "You two stop that. You're tossing us off course."

She was somewhat correct. Susan and Jason were equivalent to summer afternoon turbulence, as far as maintaining control was concerned. At least control of the airplane. This was the first trip they'd taken together where Susan didn't end up back at her mom and dad's house. I think they were excited to a whole different level. Oh, well… they WERE a couple, destined for marriage. Still, I knew that Susan had set a limit.

The couple in the back seat settled down and Susan noted our track passing across the Mississippi River. "I've never been across the river," Susan said. And a little later, "First time I've been to Louisiana." She thought a second. "Are we going to pass over that town were you two met?"

"No, we're a bit south of that, Susan," Tina said. She smiled at me. "Baby, we do need to drop in and visit those people."

"Yeah, we do," I said. "Good folks. At just the right time in our lives."

Susan said, "Yeah, and some people do you a favor even when they screw up."

Tina giggled. "Uh-huh. I'm glad YOU didn't know how to host a movie night."

"Movie night?" Jason asked.

"Oh, I didn't tell you THAT story, baby," Susan said. She related her story about the night that Tina first went to her house and the impact it had on our lives.

"Oh," Jason said. "Well, that's my Susie! Does good, even by accident!"

She elbowed him in the ribs. "My grandma's the only one who gets to call me Susie!"

"And me. The love of your life."

She smiled smugly. "Well, maybe."

A bit later Tina pushed the 'push to talk' button on her control yoke and made the radio call advising traffic of our intent to land at the little uncontrolled home airfield. By the time we completed our landing pattern, there were three people standing on the apron in from of the hangar office. I knew one was Elise, waiting to take us to our house. The other two were an obvious couple.

"That's Nikki," Tina said. "I recognize that stance!"

"Pay attention to your landing. I don't want this to be TOO memorable," I chided. I noted that as she set up on final, she called out the speeds over the intercom for the benefit of Jason and Susan.

"Ten knots more than your 152," she said, ever the teacher. "But it's a lot more stable. But that means that you need to pay attention to things because it takes more effort if you let things get wonky."

"Wonky?" I laughed. "I just LOVE when you talk technical!"

Multiple giggles over the intercom.

"I'm the PILOT! You will respect my authoritahhh!" she returned. The wheels kissed the runway quite nicely. This plane acts very nice with a load in her.

We taxied to the transient flightline and when the prop stopped, the gang waiting for us came to the plane.

Tina exited and ran to the waiting teen girl, squealing "Nikkiiiii!" They wrapped up in the sort of hug you'd expect from long-lost friends reuniting. "I missed youuuuu!"

After bilateral squeals and hugs, Susan joined in, and I greeted Dan Granger with a handshake and a manly clap on the back. "This is Jason Ellerbee, Dan. Jason, this is Dan Granger!"

By this time the squealing had subsided. I introduced Elise. "My sister, Elise. Dan Granger. Jason Ellerbee."

"I already met Dan and Nikki," she said. "And they filled me in on the madness that apparently runs rampant among electrical engineers."

Jason jumped right in. "I'm not an engineer, so it only hit me lightly. Susan's eighteen. I'm only twenty-six. We're getting married the weekend after she graduates."

Elise got the introduction to Susan, we tied the plane down, and then Tina and Susan ended up in the rear seat of Dan's truck as I rode with Elise back to the house. I could only imagine the conversations in the other vehicle.

"Quite a crew you have there, brother," Elise said. "Dan and Nikki are nice. Odd-looking, but nice. She's such a sweetie!"

"That's what Dan says."

"He said you two graduated from college and worked together for a while?"

"Yeah. And then our paths kind of split."

Nikki told me the story of how THEY met. That's wild. And then how she and Tina we interconnected. That's even wilder."

"You wanna see wild, you ought to see the OTHER Dan and his wife, Cindy!"

She told me about that. So did Tina one time when she called. I couldn't believe it. Getting out of high school at fourteen. But then Nikki's only fifteen. Makes me feel soooo dumb."

"Me too," I said. "And I married Tina, and under different circumstances, well, she's in the same boat. And Susan's…"

"Oh, she's a positive doll, Alan."

"Thank you," Jason said from the back seat.

"I'm not ignoring you, Jason," Elise said. "It's just… it's overload. And your fiancee' is a doll."

Jason beamed. "It's a heck of a crew, though. You're right."

We continued chatting until we pulled up into the driveway. Elise let us out and then left. Dan and Nikki and Tina and Susan pulled in right behind us and we went inside.

"So THIS is the house of Addison," Susan said.

Nikki looked around. "What do they do, teach engineers a course on 'Home Décor for Engineers'? This looks soooo close to our house."

Tina gave them the tour, proudly, actually. "It's OUR house!"

Dan looked at me. "So when do we meet the other Dan and Cindy?"

"They're probably at their house by now. Give 'em an hour before they get on the road." I knew that Cindy and Dan would have a little time to themselves. I knew this because, absent the gang being here, Tina and I would have done the same thing. Instead, we broke out the snacks that Elise had thoughtfully purchased for us and we sat in the living room and talked, several conversations at once as three families merged.

True to my supposition, an hour and a half later, I heard a car pull up into the driveway. The girls charged out the door, piling onto the little redhead, squealing "Cindyyyyyy!"

# Chapter 33

I poked Dan in the ribs. "You're fixin' to see a force of nature, buddy," I said.

He looked at me quizzically. "I gathered that. Every time Nikki talks about the group, Cindy's name pops up in the middle of it. One or twice can be a coincidence. EVERY time, that's a phenomenon."

Nikki, Tina, Susan and Cindy was a big, giggly, huggy-kissy teenaged girl knot. Dan G. saw her.

"Her?"

I laughed. "Like a supercomputer with a 'Hello Kitty' sticker on the door."

Cindy's Dan came over and extended his hand to Nikki's Dan. "Dan Granger, I presume?"

The two shook hands and then watched the giggly scrum of young wives break up. Nikki came bouncing up with Cindy to introduce her to her husband.

"Baby, this is Cindy! Cindy, this is MY Dan!"

Cindy giggled. "Hi, Nikki's Dan!"

"Hi, Cindy," he said. He started to offer a hand, but Cindy trumped that with a kiss on the cheek with Nikki giggling alongside.

"We both have our very own Dans," Nikki giggled.

"Does yours know his master's voice?" Cindy tittered.

Nikki giggled, "Oh, Cin! Like on those old records, with the dog listening to that old record player? Yeah, he knows. Or we can just wave or whistle!"

"So you've trained yours well. Still, we have Nikki's Dan and Cindy's Dan."

Nikki's quick. I learned that early, doing that Skype thing with her and Tina and Susan. She said, "On formal occasions, they can be Dan G. and Dan R."

"Or 'hey, you. No, not YOU! The OTHER one!" HER Dan laughed.

We moved the meeting back inside the house. Naturally, Tina had to give yet another tour, and from Cindy she got yet another 'Home Décor for Engineers' comment.

I thought briefly that next time we're down here for more than a weekend, I'm giving Tina my credit card and free rein. However, in retrospect, I'm sure that my two new partners' wives would sally forth with identical instructions, and the three of them would consult to keep us on the same page yet again, premeditated and on purpose this time.

Tina was by my side and caught the expression, questioning me aloud in front of the assembled crew. When I explained, she laughed. "Well, look around you, buddy! You guys do seem to end up doing things that are amazingly similar."

I looked around the room. Four couples, three married. The three married women were all under eighteen, and the IQ of the three was probably in the top two percent of any reasonable grouping of society short of a doctoral program. Three sets of blue eyes, one of green. Susan's natural blonde hair was the longest, just past her collar, the other three were well above the collar, with bangs. Freckles. Nikki had a few, my Tina had a spattering. Cindy had this little galaxy. Susan was sans freckles. But cuties all. I decided that if I was going to follow a crowd, this was the one to fall in with.

The conversation was jumping all over the place when I heard the sound of another car in the driveway. I got up to check and saw my sister headed to the door with a tray. I opened the door. "Hi, Elise!" I said.

"Hi, yourself. I brought y'all some cookies and brownies." She looked over the room. "Actually, I needed an excuse come back and meet this Cindy that everybody talks about."

Tina looked amused.

Cindy squeeked, "Me?" She stood up, all five feet and a bit of her. "Hi! I'm Cindy!"

"And I'm Dan, Cindy's husband," Dan R. said.

"This is my nosy sister, Elise. She met everybody else at the airport," I said.

"Don't make me sound bad, Alan! Everybody talked about Cindy, so I just had to meet 'er." To Cindy she said, "Baby, you're a doll!"

That's the first time I saw Cindy stopped in her tracks, and it was only for a fraction of a second, then she said, "Thank you, Mizz Elise!" and hugged her. "Does this mean my sisters talked about me?"

Tina smiled. "We told Elise you were the ringleader."

"I'm noooot," Cindy said. "All of y'all get some of this! But I'll be glad to be the mascot!"

"Actually, we're more of a set," Susan said. "Kind of like bowling pins. It just doesn't work unless you have all of us!"

Tina said, "It started with me an' Nikki, friends, and the we got separated, then me an' Susan, just friends, then Cindy made us all sisters, and then I found Nikki again, and…"

"It's really like that, Mizz Elise," Nikki said. " A week ago, THEY were a set, and now all of us are."

"Alan says it's like the Manhattan Project, except with cuties," Nikki's Dan said.

Elise laughed. I knew my sister would catch the joke. I wasn't the only one with brains in the family.

"Cute!" she said. "Uh, does everybody here eat gumbo?"

"Oh, yes!" Cindy chirped. "Dan made a big pot for an event at our park in Alabama."

Susan added, "We do. Alan 'n' Tina made some for us on one of those nasty days."

"Well," Elise said, "if you want, I can bring a big pot over for a late lunch tomorrow so you won't have to do another road meal."

General assent was indicated.

"I'll have it here at one o'clock," she said. She looked at me. "I'll take care of bowls and stuff, Alan. I know y'all don't have enough. And don't worry about the house." Then she reminded me about not booby-trapping the place.

I'd left little 'features' for her to find previously, just to jerk her chain. We had a lot of fun recounting some stories of our on-going battles over the years.

The afternoon was occupied with many different conversations, including some pretty interesting discussions of Cindy and her Dan and their self-defense incidents.

Another interesting line of conversation was flying. Considering that three of the four couples had flown in for the gathering in private planes, Nikki and her Dan decided (well, I think Nikki might've decided for both of them) that learning to fly was a good thing.

When it came time for the trip to the restaurant, two SUV's were enough, but the loads were segregated. All the girls were in one, all us guys in the other.

Dan G. asked, "D'ya think we're being talked about?"

Dan R. replied, "Only in the best possible way. I'll get a report this evening, I'm sure."

"Relax," I said. "They're sisters. They get along together. They're in love. With us."

Jason crossed his arms. "That's a two-way street, you know."

"They do get along together," Dan G. said. "Nikki and Tina, well Nikki said they had a bond from being together in school. But Susan and Cindy jumped right into the middle of that. I listened to some of their Skype sessions, and there's not any of that 'She's MY friend' jealousy that you see sometimes in groups. They're a unique bunch."

Cindy's Dan reacted. "you're looking at a group that was kept on the outside most of their lives. They're finally in a place where THEY all fit in. Susan's the only one who had anything like a normal family life, and she fits in there, too."

At the mention of Susan, Jason perked up. The boy is so obvious. "And Susan just brings another angle to it. She says that she kind of shows what a normal family can be like, at least to Tina and Cindy. I'm sure that Nikki gets some of that, too."

I asked Nikki's Dan, "So when do the flying lessons start?"

"You people are going to cost me a fortune," he laughed, then added, "soon."

"Look," I said, "Five hundred miles. Any weekend. Or more. And for the business we're going to be in, the ability to side-step airlines and all that garbage…"

"Or take a cutie off for a mini-vacation…" Dan R. added.

"Yeah," Jason said, "with a cutie flying, grinning at you the whole time. Alan, you gave it to Tina, and now she's given it to me and Susan. My sweetie's getting wings."

Cindy's Dan sighed, "I gave it to Cindy. I just wish she was old enough to…"

I know she's frustrated about her age, Dan," I said. I told the rest of them, "She gets so aggravated. She can fly, though, as long as Dan's got a set of controls. But she can't get behind the wheel of a car."

Dinner was good. Tina and I had eaten at this restaurant a couple of times before and it was her call, reservations for the gang, and a meeting room. We enjoyed a wonderful meal.

Nikki complimented Tina for her choice, causing her to blush.

We didn't do crawfish, at least not the boiled crawfish. That's something that I like to do in a traditional setting, outdoors, where the inevitable mess isn't a hassle. We did have the conversation, though.

Neither Cindy nor Susan had experienced boiled crawfish, although both had eaten them in various other dishes, including some that were still on the table before us.

"But they grow in a ditch," Susan had remarked.

"No, these are either farm-raised, or the best ones come out of the swamp. And you LIKED 'em in a sauce!" Nikki told her.

"I've seen pictures, you know," Susan said. I observed that Cindy was letting Susan take the lead on this exploration. "When you boil 'em, they're on your plate, lookin' at you…"

Tina was in full giggle mode, having just watched Cindy's husband talk her through eating her first raw oyster. The look on Susan's face as she observed that was filed under 'priceless'. Of course, after that, the conversation swerved into the aphrodisiac effects of oyster consumption.

The crawfish question was settled when Cindy's Dan announced that his sister and brother-in-law were lining up for a proper crawfish boil two weekends from now. "We can all show up at their house. Brother-in-law's won prizes for his outdoor cooking. Does it up right!"

"Mike 'n' Tootie can cook. Take my word for it!" Cindy added.

"Your sister's okay with this?" I asked.

He laughed. "They do it all the time. All they need is a number." Dan R. continued, "Dan, you and Nikki are close enough to drive. The rest of us can fly in."

Tina smiled. "I think we have an opening that weekend."

"Can me an' my guy hitch a ride?" Susan asked.

"Of course," Tina answered.

Another plan.

I dunno. The conversation over food was fun. After the table was cleared, we got down to business. I passed out some papers, we talked about the proposed business, talked about the building we were interested in buying (We all need to show up there for a visit), about who was going to show up whenever, and decisions were close to being solidified. We talked in general terms about our various financial situations and how we'd compensate investments into the building and the business.

Cindy's Dan produced the names of an Alabama judge and an attorney who were ready to work with us on incorporation and legal issues. I thought it interesting that our mates were in the middle of this conversation. I know that Tina and I had talked about every point as I drafted the documents. It was apparent that I wasn't the only one to consider his wife (or fiancée, in Jason's case) an equal in discussions of plans for the future.

I was glad. This was lining up to be a close-knit business, closer than a lot of family businesses. But then… sisters!

We were in the parking lot at ten, again breaking up into two vehicles for the trip back to our house, with the same split, girls in one car, guys in the other.

Part of our conversation was about what THEY were talking about. Another part was groans of satisfaction over the food, and yet another was reiterating the evening's activities. Since our destination was my house (and Tina's) she and I just herded Jason and Susan inside and closed the door after the good-byes were complete.

The house had a bath and a half, so showers were lined up: Susan, then Jason, then Tina, then me. Yeah, I thought about saving water by showering with Tina, but in view of Susan and Jason's unmarried status, I elected otherwise.

A jeans and blouse-clad Susan went into the bathroom and a Susan clad in men's pajamas came out. I notice that Jason's eyes almost made a clicking sound when she returned to the living room.

Jason said, "Tina, you go ahead."

"Oh, thank you, Jace," she said, and she disappeared up the hall.

"She's used to conserving hot water," I said. "And I have an oversized water heater, so we should be good."

We talked about the evening and about the gumbo expected tomorrow for lunch and the flight home.

"So Nikki says that she and her Dan are going to learn to fly," Susan said.

"She said it like that?" I asked.

Jason laughed. "She kinda reminds me of Cindy. Seems to have this idea of the way things oughtta be. And yes, she said it like that."

"Well," I said, "at least she and Cindy are in the same boat. She's too young to be an official student."

"Like that stopped Cindy," Jason said.

We all laughed. We'd all seen their plane taxiing in with that little red head peeking out of the cockpit, S-curving its way to the tie-downs.

"I don't think it will slow her down," Susan agreed. "We need to get Mom to set us up a visit to look at our new building," she said. "Time's getting short. All that legal stuff, you know."

"Cindy and her Dan know the judge and an attorney. If anybody can push it through…" I started.

"We're gonna need a place to stay before long," Jason said. "I can just see me tellin' Mike that I married his daughter and we're moving in with 'im!"

"We'll work on it. Besides, you have that apartment in Tennessee. A regular little honeymoon cottage," I laughed.

"I know," Jason said. "We talked about it. But we'd really like to get going in Auburn, too."

"I know," I answered. I heard the shower stop, then a little thumping around, and Tina appeared in the hallway, pajama-clad, a towel around her head.

"Your turn, Jace," I said.

"Susan, I got a hair dryer in the little bathroom, so you don't have to deal with wet hair," Tina said.

The two of them disappeared as Jason headed to the shower. I heard the hair dryer going amid giggles and unintelligible conversation as I checked my email.

Presently, Jason re-appeared, also in pajamas.

My turn. By the time I'd finished showering, the water had taken a decided cool turn, but I'd shaved in much worse conditions.

I got back into the living room. "Where are our ladies?" I asked Jason. My question as somewhat answered by a clank from the kitchen.

"They're making hot chocolate," he said. "I feel positively decadent. Pajamas. A bath. Shaved. And being waited on by a blonde cutie!"

Susan's giggle. "I heard that. Very good, future husband!"

"It's not the good stuff, babe! We have instant. So we're boiling water," Tina said.

I looked at Jason. "You do know that turnabout is expected, don't you?"

He laughed. "I expect that if I rub her feet, she will consider us even for the evening."

"Good man!" I laughed. I turned to take a steamy mug from Tina.

We sat close together on the loveseat, sipping chocolate. Susan slid to the opposite end of the sofa from Jason and deposited her feet into this lap. He kept his promise of foot rubs, eliciting the occasional giggle in among Susan's purrs.

The girls collected the cups and it was bedtime. Tina gave Jason pillows and a blanket from the hall closet and Susan gave him a sweet kiss and a hug.

Tina and I retired to our bedroom and closed the door.

In the bed, she said, "Well? Good day?"

"Yes."

"I love that restaurant."

"So did everyone else," I said.

Giggle. "Cindy ate her first raw oyster. Did you see the look on Susan's face?"

"Yeah," I answered, "Including the shade of red she turned when she found out about what oysters are supposed to do?"

Another giggle. "And then she unloaded it on Jason. He turned redder than she did. They're a cute couple, aren't they?"

I knew where she was headed. "Okay. Maybe you were right in the first place about them," I said.

I should've known that I wasn't going to catch my Tina on the 'matchmaker' thing. "Whatever do you mean, love? I never encouraged either one of them."

I caught the 'either one' and jumped on it. "Either one? You mean you talked with Jason about them before…"

She was in a giggly mood because I got another little giggle with her answer. "It was soooo cute, baby! He called me like he was in the second grade. 'Does Susan 'like me' LIKE me? Does she talk about me? I think she's cute, you know.' I thought I was gonna bust! He's.. that's when I sort of knew he was going to match up with Susan."

"Devious. You never told me that."

"You never asked. You just said be careful. And I was careful. I didn't push." She smiled. "I never told one what the other said. I told Susan to be careful, and I told Jason that if he hurt my Susan, I'd gut 'im with a butter knife."

"You always did display a sense of subtlety," I laughed. "And yes, they are a cute couple."

"So are we." She rolled into my arms and we kissed. "I'm kinda self-conscious with Susan and Jason in the house, baby," she said softly.

"I can understand that," I said. We kissed some more, and sort of got carried away. Oh well, we had some small amount of practice in quiet sex from the two weeks we'd spent with Terri in the house at Christmas. Of course, she used my chest for a muffler, leaving me with a bruise as she whimpered through an orgasm. I voiced mine through clenched teeth. I THINK we were quiet enough.

My bladder woke me up in the morning. Sunlight was squeezing in around the blackout blinds as I carefully got out of bed, but Tina's hand found its way to brush my butt.

"Mornin', love of my life," she said softly. "I'm right behind you."

I turned and kissed her nose.

"Hurry," she said, "Or you're gonna wait until I finish."

Yes, I put the seat back down. She finished her business while I was brushing the gunk out of my mouth over the sink and I got elbowed out of the way so she could perform the same function.

Apparently our noise (we tried to be quiet) roused Susan because she and Tina exchanged a few words and giggles in the hallway. I went into the bedroom and dressed. That took two minutes. Back in the hall, the two of them smiled at me and Tina gave me a kiss.

"I need me on a'those," Susan smiled. "I know where MINE is coming from."

Jason's a sound sleeper, apparently. He looked like he was still asleep, anyway. And Susan knelt beside the sofa and kissed him gently on the lips, then she showered him on the cheeks little kisses, a bunch of 'em. I know that when Tina does that to me… Wow!

Worked for Jason, too. His hand went around the back of that blonde head, holding her face to his and they REALLY kissed.

I heard a mutual moan: "Mmmmmmmm!"

"Good morning, baby," he said.

"Good morning, honey," she replied. "I hope you don't mind me waking you up…"

"Come on, sweetie," I told Tina in a whisper. "Let me get a drink of water in the kitchen. Jason thinks he's died and gone to heaven."

"You kiss me like that," she said when we got in the kitchen.

And you kiss ME like that," I said. "I imagine it's KILLING him not to be able to…"

Tina giggled, looking over my shoulder. I turned to see what keyed her off. Jason had tugged Susan atop him, a blanket and two pairs of pajamas chastely separating them, but that embrace was HOT!

"Go throw a bucket of cold water on 'em," I laughed. "Hey, you two!"

A squeal, a giggle and a laugh came from the living room.

"Dammit, Alan," Jason said, "I NEVER got woken up like that before."

Susan giggled. "Really! I never found him asleep before. This is the first time we ever stayed in the same place overnight."

Tina cut her eyes to me, smirking, and mouthed "told you!"

"When you get yourselves untangled," I said, "We can run up the road for breakfast."

Susan giggled, "Or You two can run up the road and leave us here."

"Baby," Jason said, "Let's go have breakfast with our friends. Otherwise you're gonna drive me out of my mind."

"You're right, baby…" Susan answered, almost sadly.

Jason grabbed some clothes and headed into the bathroom while Susan retreated to Terri's room. In a few minutes they emerged, Susan brushing her blonde hair, smiling, stepping in front of Jason for a happy collision. He was soon sitting on the sofa putting his shoes on and Susan was right there beside him.

She saw me watching them. "Oh, Alan, you an' Tina are exactly the same way, you know!"

"I know. But it's fun seeing you and Jason like that."

Jason's head popped up, smiling. He put an arm around Susan. "My baby doll." And they kissed a quick peck.

She smiled. "Pancakes, love!"

So we went up the road and had pancakes and coffee.

After breakfast, we drove around the countryside, giving Susan her first ground-level look at my end of Louisiana. Jason had worked in Louisiana, but not around here. I got to play tour guide, describing what went on in the fields and countryside where I grew up.

Around eleven we made sure we were headed back to the house. I got a phone call from Elise.

"I'll be there around one with the gumbo. Make sure you have ice for the drinks."

"I'll stop and get some," I said. "And thanks, Sis!"

"Not a problem, brother. I'm bringing Joe so he can meet everybody. He doesn't believe me!"

A couple more phone calls hit the girls' phones as the sisters checked in on the road, giving ETA's.

"I hope you can stand more giggles," I told Jason.

"I love it," Jason said. "My bunch in East Texas isn't this much fun."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "How'd your mom and dad take the news of you and Susan's approaching nuptials?"

"Better than your sister took YOUR announcement. Tina told us about THAT!" Susan said.

"Remind Elise of that when she gets here," I said.

Jason said, "Actually, they're excited. Mom's comment was 'I'm glad you're over that slut!' and Dad said 'Congratulations, Son! When can we meet her?' They're coming up for the wedding."

I thought for a second. "Uh, Jace, if you were to call them and tell them to meet you at the nearest airport on short notice, would they do that?" I glanced in the rear-view mirror. Susan was in full grin, blue eyes sparkling, and Tina's fingers were on my arm.

"What about work?" he asked.

"We call and tell 'em we'll be on the jobsite at noon."

"That's just crazy," Susan squealed. "Can we do that?"

"Hour flight from here to there. If we leave right after gumbo, Elise will shut the house down for us, and we're off. Tina knows how to make reservations at a hotel. One night, we can manage."

"And we get up REALLY early to fly back," Tina added.

"Jason, all that's IF you want to, you know. I'm not pressing you. It's just that we're a bit over a hundred miles away."

Jason was lost. Susan was bouncing in the seat beside him, her blue eyes glimmering.

"Lemme make a phone call. Maybe we can do dinner with 'em."

He had the phone to his ear. "Mom! How's it going?" Pause. "Oh, yes, ma'am. I'm fine! Yes, Susan's fine, too. That's kinda why I'm calling." Pause. "Well, we came down here for a meeting. We're in Louisiana." Pause. "We flew down in a private plane." Pause. "Well, we want to know if you and Dad will have dinner with us if we fly into Jasper? There's four of us." Pause. "Okay?!? Great! We'll call you when we leave here! You wanna talk to your new daughter-in-law?" Pause. He handed the phone to Susan.

"Hi, Mizz Ellerbee," Susan said. She chatted for a minute, smiling, then said goodbye.

"Another adventure," Tina smiled.

# Chapter 34

Jason's turn:

My name's Ellerbee. Jason Ellerbee. I've always wanted to do that, you know, like "Bond. James Bond."

I honestly sometimes wonder how I got here. What a strange and wonderful situation. Let's see:

I was on this project in Alabama. It's what I do: industrial electricity, but a lot more than an electrician. Not quite an engineer, but almost. I've helped a lot of engineers understand what they're dealing with, me and my technology degree instead of an engineering degree. Over the last few years I've managed to get a good rep, and so when I called about this project, I ended up talking to Dan Richards, a real engineer whom I've worked with before, and I showed up as lead technician on his job. That's fun. Rented myself a little apartment for the duration of the project, and got on with life.

It was a good project. Dan tackled the whole power system, and I was right there with him, along with a couple of other technicians, setting things up, testing them, proving them out. I love my job.

Dan's a good guy to work for, as was Bill Carmody, the project manager.

Dan surprised me, though. A bit into the project, he brings this little redheaded girl in for a site visit. Then there's her whole class, and I help with the show, at least for the electrical stuff. And then he announces that he's MARRIED that fourteen year old red-headed girl. That almost freaked me out. Fourteen is the stuff you go to jail for, but he was MARRIED to her. And she showed up at least once a week, wearing a hard hat with her name on it, and a pocket protector, just like Dan's (and mine). On several of those visits, I went to lunch with them, and I noticed what she talked about and how she questioned things and I understood that to her, Cindy, age was an almost irrelevant number.

So that's Dan and Cindy. My friends.

A fact of life is that construction jobs end, and ours was winding down when Dan sold me off to Tennessee. He'd worked with Alan Addison before and told me what the work was. Wasn't nearly as involved as the powerhouse we'd just finished, but work is work, and it was a lot closer to my home in Texas than what I'd previously had lined up.

So I showed up in Tennessee. I walked into the office trailer on Day One and met Alan. Nice guy. We talked about work. We laughed about Dan a little, and then he invited me to dinner with him and his wife. I thought that was nice.

You see, I'm divorced. That's why I'm on the road, at least one of the reasons. I was married right out of college. I was working hard to make money so that my wife and I could get a nice house and all that, but it meant that I was gone some overnights, some weekends, some long hours, and one day I came home and there was a note on the table. Wife was gone. Along with most of our savings. I wish I could say I was happy about her departure but I wasn't. In retrospect, we never really connected. But we were comfortable. It's nice having somebody to share your space, to be there, even if many weekends she wants to be at HER parents, and all that.

But she was gone. And it wasn't hard for me to make a phone call or two and so I was gone too, and I was going from one project to the next, making good money. But I was single.

I don't do bars. I just can't. I hate the smoke. I hate the fake people. I hate the noise. Mom and Dad raised a good Baptist boy. Plus, I'm, well, I had the word 'geek' sneered at me all through high school. I guess that's why when Abby acted interested in me in college, I fell head over heels for her. So when I moved to the Tennessee job, I figured more library and church social time was in the cards.

But having company for dinner was nice. So I show up at the prescribed place, and I see Alan, and he's sitting at the table with this kind of tall almost redheaded girl, and this shorter, softer-looking blonde thing with the bluest eyes.

"This is my wife, Tina," Alan said, introducing the tall girl, "and her friend Susan."

And when Susan touched my hand to shake it, I thought I'd been scuffing my feet on carpet. It was like a shock. I met Susan.

Now, you understand that Dan's Cindy cutie had already impressed me as to exactly how wrong I could be about people, and how one's assumptions can prove horribly wrong. So here I was, sitting at a table with this engineer whom I'd been told I could respect, and HE'S married to a teenaged girl. Well, at least SHE'S seventeen. And her friend, another high school girl, a blonde, no less. I figured we'd be in for conversations about fashions and social life and contemporary music.

Sometimes it takes me a couple of tries to learn a lesson. First off, Susan used the word 'multicultural' in the proper context. Then she and Tina jumped right in on me, questioning me about my education, and I had to explain why I had a technology degree instead of an engineering degree. "Listened to bad advice from my loser buddies," I said, figuring that I would cap off that line of thought. Wrong again. They asked me why I didn't go back and change it.

I guess Alan saw the look on my face when he explained that Tina and Susan were Cindy's new sisters and that they were in the top five of their graduating class in high school. A little light went off, way back in my head. Cute. And smart. And smiling.

"So what happened with that whole 'dumb blonde' thing," I asked Susan.

She could've taken that wrong. But she didn't. It was, instead, the first time I made her giggle, and she said, "I, sir, am the EXCEPTION that proves the rule!"

Indeed! We had a good conversation and a good meal and I had their idea of a community explained to me: Alan and Tina, Cindy and Dan, and Susan, at least through college. I looked at Susan. She was maybe five-three or five-four, chin height to me. Yes, blonde hair, straight, shoulder-length, and no darkness at the part like she'd bleached it to get that color. She wasn't big-breasted, and she carried probably twenty extra pounds that made her very pleasantly curvy. And she could carry on a conversation.

And Alan's conversation confirmed that I was under consideration for a new business with him and Dan, centered around this community.

I went home that night thinking. Lots of thinking. Because one of the things I was thinking about was this cute blonde high school girl and how her face was made to smile.

The next day, I asked about Susan at lunch, and I think it made Alan nervous. "She's eighteen," he said.

It was strictly an accident that I walked into a restaurant two days later and caught Tina and Alan and Susan and her parents. The girls waved me over to join them. I had a paperbacked book in my back pocket. I'd planned on reading while I ate by myself. I laid the book on the table and we had a good conversation about science fiction and about a dozen other subjects. Susan's mom and dad sounded like 'good people', as my dad would say.

The next time I saw Susan was when I'd invited Tina and Alan to dinner. Alan called Tina from the office and she explained the situation. Susan and Tina were working on their high school term papers together. I wasn't going to be a stick in the mud.

"Uh, Jason," Alan said, "about Susan… I kind of feel responsible for her…"

"Alan, what makes you even say anything?" I asked.

"The look on your face when you heard her name."

"Uh, Alan, I would NEVER… It's just the idea that I don't feel like the odd man out…" I REALLY need to practice some inscrutability, that's what I need.

He explained, "Susan's… Tina says that Susan's kind of naïve… And she's my wife's friend, and MY friend, and her parents…"

"I get the picture, Alan. But I'm not like that…"

"Okay… sorry if I ascribed a motive…"

"No, you're a good guy, Alan. Just being careful. I would be, too, you know… If I was in your shoes."

I met them for dinner at the only Italian restaurant in thirty miles. Yes, Susan was smiling, and yes, I smiled back, and yes, I wondered if some of that smile was because of me. I felt like it was two couples at the table. Susan was engaging, and we had some discussion about Robert Heinlein, among other things.

Over the next couple of weeks it was like that. I kept bumping into Susan and I finally called Tina and asked her the question that I couldn't figure out.

"Hi, Tina," I said.

"Hi, Jason!" she answered, like she was expecting the call. "What's up?"

"Susan," I said. "You're her best friend, right?"

"I think so. We're sisters, actually."

That tickles me, the 'sister' thing. "So your sister Susan… Does she talk about me?"

"A little, I guess," Tina said. "She said it's interesting that y'all read the same books, and stuff like that."

"D'ya think she LIKES me?"

"Oh gosh, Jason, I don't know… yes, she likes you… you're a nice guy," she said.

"I mean, 'likes me' likes me… you know…" I couldn't make myself come out and ask. Nerd. Social skill level zero.

Tina's giggle told me what her words wouldn't say. The next day, Susan told Tina to give her my phone number.

We talked on the phone that night. I explained to Susan that I was very much aware of the difference in our ages. She giggled and reminded me that her best friend was a year younger than her and was married to a guy ten years older than me. Or even bigger gap, Cindy and Dan.

"So you're kind of thinking that maybe we could date?" I asked.

Susan giggled. "Mmmm-huh. I think we could…"

"What would your parents think about that?" I asked. "I don't think we should sneak around."

"Then you ought to come meet them. Introduce yourself."

"I'd do that. You sure you want me to?"

She giggled again. "Yeah. I want you to. Then we can date."

That settled it. The next day after work I drove to Susan's house and knocked on the front door. Susan let me in and took my HAND and brought me to meet her mom and dad in their den.

"Daddy," Susan said, "Jason wants to talk to you and Mom."

Sometimes I get really nervous, usually in social settings. This was one of those times. But I took a deep breath and said, "Mister Mike, Mizz Kathy, I'd like permission to court your daughter."

I did a quick look at three faces. Susan was beaming. Mike and Kathy were shocked. Mike's jaw dropped.

"You WHAT?!?" he blurted.

"I'd like to date Susan. She's smart and nice and pretty and I'd like to date her."

They could see Susan and they could tell that she was expecting a 'yes' answer. Mizz Kathy punched Mike. "Mike, look! He's got a job. He's been to college. His pants fit. He's not wearing his hat sideways."

"I have to ask," I said. "I know I'm a lot older than she is, but I like 'er, and she seems to like me, and I don't want to sneak around. And if you folks have something against us dating, I'd rather find out now…"

Mike started laughing. "Oh, no, son. THAT guy she brought home, what, Susan, two months ago? I had something against HIM. You're a positive trend."

"So that's a 'yes'?"

"That's a 'yes'," Kathy said. "Susan…"

"I know, Mom. He's different." My Susan (yes, I was turning that 'My Susan' thought over in my mind. Why else would I be here?) smiled and hugged her mom. Then her dad. And then ME!

My knees almost buckled.

"Sit down here!" she said, patting the sofa beside her as she sat.

I obeyed. Apparently I was too far away because she smiled and scooted closer. And took my hand lacing her fingers between mine. Seems like Jason now has a girlfriend, and she was not one that was the least bit ashamed to show it.

That evening I drove myself and Susan to dinner at a restaurant. We were in my truck. Her mom and dad were in their car. And we met Tina and Alan there. That's when Alan found out that Susan and I were dating. Apparently Tina had been advised of the situation earlier by Susan.

That's one thing I learned about my girl and her sisters: they happily spread good news among themselves and apparently Susan dating me was good news.

We had a good time at dinner. Nobody was upset, at least not outwardly, about the news. Alan nailed me the next day and I restated my assertion that I was a man of honor, especially towards a kitten like Susan.

"She's kind of naïve," Alan said.

"In some ways, maybe, but she's a world-class mind, and she's cute as a bug, and I'll be damned if I ever do anything to hurt her." I was serious. I know what it's like to be hurt. Alan's a good guy. He worries about people and he has protective feelings for Susan.

So between he and I, we reached an understanding. I would be totally honorable towards his wife's sister. Or he would kill me.

Life got really good for me. I had friends, including this marvelous creature that was, I found happily, just as warped in her love of puns and word-play as I was. And we had Alan and Tina to meet socially, and I found that her mom and dad were REALLY good people.

Sex. Nuh-uh. Susan is a virgin. Yeah, rare, I know, these days for a girl to get through high school with an intact hymen, but Susan said she did. And she set the limits. We could kiss and cuddle and hold hands and get all hot and bothered hugging, but sex was something that she was saving for her wedding night. Make that OUR wedding night, if things progressed as I hoped.

Understand? I did. I was a virgin on MY wedding night. Wife wasn't, but I was. But 'wedding night'? it took us a few weeks before the idea came up, but we almost bumped heads the night we actually broached the subject.

"You mean you've been thinking of it," she asked me when I mentioned the idea.

"Of course," I said. "You're like this unique creature."

Giggle. "And you know how to catch a unique creature?" Giggle. "Unique up on it!"

I stifled her next giggle with a kiss. "So you'd…"

"I'd jump up and down and say yes."

"You don't need to jump. Just answer."

She hung a kiss on me that curled my toes. "Very much YES!"

When Susan brought me back to her house to tell her parents, Mike was in his favorite chair. I asked him if I could talk to him and Mizz Kathy. His response is going to be a happy one to pass on to our kids: "Kathy! Come in here. Jason's makin' me nervous again!"

It was easy passing the word to Susan's family. They had a barbecue.

I called my folks to tell them. "Hey, Dad!" I said.

"Well, hello, my travelling son," he answered. "Still in Tennessee?"

"Yessir. I got some news you might be interested in."

"Since it's not Sunday night, it must be news." I called Mom and Dad every Sunday evening, religiously.

"It is," I said. "Dad, you know I've been telling you about this girl Susan, right?

"Uh-huh. The eighteen year old one?"

"Yessir. We've decided to get married."

"Lemme get your mom. She's gonna wet 'erself." My dad sounded happy. I heard a rustle then Mom's voice.

"Son, your dad's grinning. Does that mean you hit the lottery?"

"Better' n that, Mom. Susan and I have decided to get married."

"Son," she said, "She sounded nice when she talked to me. But this is awfully quick."

"Mom," I said. "It's awfully right."

"You thought that with the… that BITCH!" Mom was not subtle about her dislike of my ex-wife.

"Mom, you've talked to Susan yourself. Her mom and dad, they're good people. You'd like 'em for neighbors. Really. It's NOT the same. She's… Mom, she didn't chase me. I didn't chase her. We just sort of fit together. Like you an' Dad."

"Son, I hope that you and Susan have a long and happy life, and I will love her like a daughter. Unless she hurts you. You're always gonna be my baby boy. An' I'm glad you're over that slut!"

"I love you, Mom. And you'll love Susan like I do."

Dad chimed in. "When are we gonna get a chance to meet 'er, son?"

"It's a long trip, Dad. We'll work on it."

"When are you planning to have the wedding, son?" Mom asked.

"The Saturday after she graduates from high school. Up here in Tennessee. Y'all NEED to come!"

"We'll certainly try, son," Mom said.

That started Susan and me making a twice-weekly calls together. Seven hundred miles might be a physical separation, but I and my fiancé were determined that my folks would KNOW her voice. And pictures. I'd been the one to push Mom and Dad into the digital age and now it paid off. We sent them a lot of pictures.

It didn't take too awfully long before my very protective mother started seeing my Susan as I saw her, instead of the mercenary, conniving bitch she perceived my ex-wife to be.

Dad? I love Dad. He just shook his head and said, "Son, make sure you can live with the consequences of your choice."

When I explained to him my idea (not MY idea, Susan and her sisters' idea, but I didn't tell Dad that) about going back to college, he shook his head. "I thought you should've done that in the first place, but you're a man, son. You make your choice and live with the consequences. "

So, over the period of a few weeks, Mom and Dad bought into the idea of me and Susan, a prospective daughter-in-law. I sort of realized that when I went to get Susan one afternoon after school and she told me that Mom had called HER. Good sign. Susan tells me that she and Mom talked about my childhood and my favorite foods and how her precious little boy needs to be loved and cared for.

That last point was recounted to me as I lay with my head in Susan's lap, being petted like a puppy.

Sex life? Susan was waiting for the wedding night. And I belonged to Susan. And I could darned well wait, because I for gosh sake LOVED the girl. So we kissed and cuddled and yes, teased a little, and we drew our line. We held hands and hugged in public, and kissed chastely. In private, well, it was a bit hotter, but…

So then we come to this weekend when we load into Alan and Tina's plane to travel to his home in Louisiana to meet with the rest of this strange crew. It had grown. From Tina and Susan and Cindy, we'd added ANOTHER sister, Nikki, and ANOTHER electrical engineer, Dan Granger. And we were going to meet down there to talk about a new business, and engineering and technical services company, based close enough to Auburn University in Alabama to support the education of four girls, including my Susan, and another student who was changing a technology degree to electrical engineering: me.

It was the first time that Susan and I slept under the same roof, although she slept in Alan's daughter's room and I stretched out on the sofa. That got me the best wake-up I've had in YEARS when Susan found me asleep in the morning and started kissing me. I didn't have to encourage her too much for her to end up on top of me. Yes, there was a blanket between us, and yes, Alan and Tina were already bumping around the house, so we weren't going to get too carried away, but just so you know that I'm 'normal', decorum dictated that I wait until 'things' subsided before I got up to hit the bathroom and change clothes.

And my sweet, innocent little Susan knew EXACTLY what she'd done.

Wedding night can't come soon enough.

Good friends, good food, good times, that sort of takes my mind off of my baser urges. But Susan and I have discussed it. "Those urges are only base until we're married," I said, and then she giggled and said, "All your base are belong to us!" My baby's a huge nerd with a sense of internet meme history.

So we made these plans… Yeah, I have all sorts of plans tossed at me. Some are pure Susan. And some are the synthesis of her and her sisters. And so we ate this wonderful seafood gumbo. Susan noted the inclusion of oysters. I'm an East Texas boy, and I've heard all the stories about the effects of oysters on the libido. While I was watching my fiancée beside me, yapping about oysters, her, with the blonde hair and that little head-shake thing she does when she's excited and happy, it occurred to me that I needed an oyster like a fish needs a bicycle.

After the gumbo, we shook hands with the guys and I got pecked on the cheek by Cindy and Nikki and we headed to the airpark. This time I and Alan got the front seats.

Neat thing you need to know about the intercom systems on light aircraft: whispering doesn't work. We got the full discussion of Tina's joy with re-uniting with Nikki, and we got the commentary about engineers and their decorating skills, and we got several other discussions as well. The hop from Alan's home airpark to the field nearest my folks' house was less than an hour and we stayed pretty low, getting a good view of the terrain as it transitioned from the marshes and prairies of south Louisiana into the thick forests of East Texas. And Dan turned the yoke over to me for the landing.

"Remember, you have ten more knots of airspeed, and things happen a bit slower and take more control inputs than your plane."

There were more differences than that, and his hands hovered near the control yoke, but I managed to get us on the ground without bending anything, although we did do a bit of bouncing. Practice was definitely needed here.

Mom and Dad and my sister were waiting in two separate cars as we pulled up to the transient tie-downs. While Tina and Alan secured the plane, I grabbed bags and Susan grabbed my arm and we walked over to meet the folks.

"Mom, Dad, THIS is Susan!"

Mom bubbled. "Oh, baby, I'm so glad to finally see you!"

Dad was his normal taciturn self. "Son, good to have you home. Susie's a cutie!"

Susan batted her eyelashes. The girl that told ME "Nobody calls me 'Susie' but my grandma" smiled and said "Thank you , Mister Ellerbee! You've got a cutie for a son, too!"

"Gets 'is good looks from 'is momma," Dad said, grinning. "Brains're mine!"

Susan kissed Dad on the cheek. "And I appreciate both of 'em." We loaded our bags in the SUV behind Mom and Dad and rode with them. Alan and Tina hitched a ride with my sister. Twenty minutes later we all ended up at the house where I grew up.

Alan and I and my dad took a tour around the outside of the place. Dad took a lot of pride in his workshop He'd collected some good tools over the years and I learned a lot of how things worked right there in that shop with Dad. Alan complimented Dad and we talked tools and trades and shops and things.

"Son says you introduced him to Miss Susie," Dad said to Alan.

"Wasn't QUITE like that, Mister Ellerbee…"

"Buddy," Dad interrupted. "Friends call me 'Buddy'."

"Okay then, Buddy. Susan is my wife's friend. They hang out together, and Susan just happened to be over, working on homework when your son showed up. I offered him dinner with me and my wife Tina, and I couldn't very well just send Susan home."

Dad laughed. "Yeah, that's how THAT works! I met Ginger the same way. Just tagging along."

"Works, though, huh, Dad?" Jason laughed. "Alan, tell Dad how you met Tina."

Alan told his story while we leaned on the workbenches, leaving Dad amazed. "You carry?"

"Just about always, if the rules allow. Work doesn't. Airports. Government buildings. But usually."

Dad's a hunter and shooter, and that started another line of conversation and we were deep into it when Susan and Tina peered in the door.

Susan smiled. "Hey, Baby! Hey, Mister Buddy. Mizz Ginger says come in and get ready to eat!" she looked around the shop. "Gosh, Mister Buddy! That's a Bridgeport mill. An OLD one! I bet it's at least sixty years old."

Dad's head snapped around, a questioning look on his face. "Susie! What do YOU know about Bridgeports?"

"Didn't Jason explain what MY dad does? He's been in the rental business, but he's got a full machine shop. And a mill just like THAT one!" She stepped inside the shop, Tina close behind. "And this is an old Atlas lathe. Gosh! It's in beautiful condition!"

Buddy playfully slapped Jason on the back of the head. "Son! This is the ONE! Marry her NOW!"

I guess I had a dumbfounded expression on my face, because Susan giggled. "Oh, Mister Buddy, my dad let me run around his shop all my life. I know a little about these things, and how things work. That's part of the reason I'm gonna be an engineer." She grabbed my arm. "This is another reason." And she kissed me. "Let's go eat!"

The four of us trooped back into the house to see the table set.

I poked Alan in the ribs. "It's not usually this formal here."

Ginger smiled. "It's not often my son brings home his fiancée, either. I thought I'd pull out the stops."

We all sat around the table. Mom's roast was the centerpiece, the rest of the spread was food that I loved.

Dad looked at me. "Son," he said, "Would you say the blessing for us?"

My Susan beamed. We all bowed our heads and I gave thanks for family and love and food and friends. And we said 'Amen!"

Dad eyed Mom. "Ginge, this Susie's a GOOD one."

# Chapter 35

Alan's turn:

I really enjoyed the little side trip to visit Jason's folks. His dad was like mine, just a hard-working decent guy who did his best to care for a family, and his mom was equally a decent sort. That Jason turned out as he did was a testimony to their success.

We dearly enjoyed the food and the friendship, but as the evening went on, sleeping arrangements for the evening had to be figured out. It ended up with Tina and Susan sharing a bed and Jason rolling a sleeping bag and air mattress on the floor in the living room where I occupied the sofa.

"You need your rest. You're flying, you know…" Jason said.

"Uh-huh… I fly a lot less since Tina started."

"And she got Susan going. Or is that YOUR fault?"

"Uh, my wife and your fiancée are perfectly capable of running our lives all on their own," I said.

"You got that right. And I'm damned happy that they are, too."

"Your folks seem to like Susan," I said.

"Oh, she completely torpedoed Dad with that 'Bridgeport' thing. The whole idea that she's not some prissy little ball of fluff, I mean."

"I get the idea that your mom considers Susan to be an improvement over your first wife."

"Susan helped Mom in the kitchen. Volunteered. Walked in there and asked what she could do. Her an' Tina both, really, but Mom… well, the ex never did that. Not like Susan."

"Life is good when your wife gets along with your folks. Especially your mom."

"Yes it is," Jason said. "It will be, indeed."

We got up early the next morning and caught breakfast at a local diner on the way to the airport. We were the only plane in the skies that morning, so we made a circling low pass so that Jason and Susan could wave a final goodbye before we set our heading northeast.

Tuesday morning got us a gentle chiding from the project manager over our day's delay, but when we actually got back to work, things were still happily on track. That was good. Susan and Tina went back to school and started the glide toward graduation. I and the two Dans and Jason did a conference call of a Skype later in the week to reinforce emails.

Life would've been almost idyllic. There was a serpent in our little paradise, though, and it came in the form of MY ex-wife. It didn't even wait for us to get settled in Tuesday evening.

My cellphone rang. The ringtone was an identifiable bit that tagged it as originating at the ex's house. Usually that meant Terri, but as of late, Terri called Tina's phone instead of mine.

I'd laughed with Tina over that little fact. "She doesn't mean anything by it, Alan," Tina had laughed. "She says my number's prettier. Doesn't have sharp points like yours."

"That's an odd observation…" I started to reply.

"That I totally understand, baby," Tina finished. "She's such a sweetie."

But tonight, MY phone was ringing. I punched the 'answer' button and put it to my ear. "Hello," I said, expecting to hear either Terri's voice (good) or Carole's voice (a lot less good). I heard the voice of Martin, Carole's husband, NOT one of my favorite people.

"Alan," he said. "You got time to talk?"

"Sure," I answered. "What's going on?"

"We need you to take Terri for a while."

"Uh… sure. What's wrong?"

"Carole's… well, she's in the hospital. You know she's bipolar, right?"

I was familiar with the claim. I put up with a lot of stuff over our years of marriage because I was trying to deal with her mood swings. "Yeah, why?"

"We been juggling her medications with this new doctor, and it hasn't been workin' real well. She tried to kill 'erself."

"Oh, gee…" I didn't LIKE Carole very much, to be quite honest, but I didn't want her dead. "Is she okay?"

"Depends on what you call 'okay'," he said. "She's gonna live, and there's no permanent damage, we don't think. But she's pretty whacked out, and she's gonna be in the hospital, in some facility, for a while. Uh… I don't think I can handle Terri by myself. She's pretty much a mess right now."

"Terri?"

"Yeah… She's in 'er room right now. Can you guys take 'er for a while?"

"Sure," I said. "We'll work something out."

"Uh… can you send 'er a ticket? We're kinda short on cash right now."

"Gimme your email address. I'll get you something ASAP. Can I talk to Terri?"

"Sure. I'll call you back in a minute." The phone clicked in my ear.

I spilled the news to Tina who was stuck to me, having seen the look on my face.

"We'll do what we HAVE to do to take care of Terri." She cast her eyes around our tiny trailer. "I know families that lived in trailers smaller than this after that hurricane. You and me, we can do it."

The phone rang again. This time it was Terri, her voice strained, tearful. "Daddyyyyyy, Momma's SICK!"

"That's what Martin said, baby. Are YOU okay?"

"Uh-huh… but I can't be with Momma. Can I come stay with you an' Tina?"

"I'm sending you a ticket tonight. Martin will get you to the airport tomorrow, just like you did at Christmas, and we'll be at the airport here, waiting for you when you get here."

"Can I talk to Tina?" she asked, trying to fight back a sob.

"Yes, sweetie. Here she is." I handed the phone to Tina.

"Hey, Terri," Tina said softly. "I heard some of the news." Pause. "Uh-huh. You told me that." Pause. "No, baby. This is as much YOUR home as anybody's. He's YOUR daddy, and daddies are forever." Pause. No, baby, you won't be any trouble. When you get here, we'll be living in our little trailer for a bit. You'll fit right in, I just know. And we're going to get an apartment this summer, maybe sooner." Pause. "No, baby. You WON'T be trouble. And we both love you, okay?" Pause. "I'll tell 'im you said good night. We'll see you tomorrow." Pause. "Bye, baby."

When she closed the phone her eyes clicked with mine. "Alan, She WON'T change things between us. You and I have HAD this conversation. We made it through Christmas."

"I know, love, but this is open-ended."

Tina's brow knit. Her 'I'm NOT moving' look. "And I knew, Alan Addison, that YOU had a daughter before we got married. And I knew that you'd be part of her life. And I learned that I wanted her to be part of MY life, too. This is a GOOD thing, at least for US."

"What about you and the sisterhood?" I asked. I should've known better.

"Ask me a HARD one, husband! You know that I talk with my sisters, don't you? And the subject of MY daughter has come up, been discussed and settled."

"Settled?"

"Oh, yeah. We unanimously figured that Terri belonged to ALL of us, and while I get a daughter, they get little sisters. And we're collectively responsible to see that she grows up in a happy, loving, civilized environment."

"I should've never doubted you," I said. "Sit by me. We need to get her an airline ticket."

That task took a few minutes, following which I emailed the details to Martin.

When I closed the lid on the laptop, Tina took my hand. "Come on. Let's get our showers. And we can talk more after…" She managed a smile.

I wish I was as certain as she seemed to be.

We completed our customary shower routine with me standing behind her, hairbrush in hand, her short auburn locks shining before me. She picked up a bottle of perfume and put a couple of strategic dots on herself, then stood, pulling our naked bodies together in an embrace.

"Are you up for a BIG one tonight, baby?" she asked, smiling.

My love. Here I was dragging her into a thorny situation and she was concerned about how I felt. I kissed her. "Always," I said.

Giggle. "I can tell PART of you is." Her fingers encircled that part of me that was always happy to be with Tina. "Come on!" she said, tugging me toward our bed.

Eight months I'd been making love with this doll and it was like a kaleidoscope, all the same pieces, put together in a myriad of beautiful patterns. Tonight was no different. I found my tongue teasing her to orgasm, savoring the juices, and I had her atop me, straddling, riding, bringing herself a second climax while pushing me into alternate dimensions.

And then we ended up in each other's arms.

"We won't be able to be as uh ... unrestrained, not with Terri at the other end of the trailer," I said.

"No, Cindy told me how that works. She an' her mom lived in a little trailer and her mom..."

"I didn't know that," I admitted. "Knew things were rough for her."

"But this is a LITTLE different. For one thing, we're married. For another, we know how to be quiet. Like at Christmas."

"You're an astounding thing, you," I said.

"Alan, she's your ... OUR daughter. I LIKE 'er. We're more than just unrestrained, uninhibited sex, you and me, even thought that's so terribly, awfully good, but we LOVE each other, and we love Terri, and this is what we HAVE to do, okay?"

I looked at those blue eyes. Here she was, telling me what WE had to do with MY daughter, and it wasn't MY daughter to her, it was OUR daughter. What a remarkable young woman. I went to sleep with her in my arms.

The next day, Jason and I were sipping coffee and looking over a stack of reports. "Alan," he said, "this ain't a problem."

"What ain't a problem?" I asked. I'd given him an outline of the changes in our little family.

"You and Tina and your daughter. It's really simple, you know..."

"Ooooo-kay, buddy. How simple is it?"

He laughed. "We do a little swap. I've got an apartment on a month-by month rent, and it has TWO bedrooms. You have a travel trailer and you NEED two bedrooms. I call my landlord and explain that they'll have a responsible set of renters only slightly less spectacular than me, and you and Tina and uh ... Terri, y'all move into the apartment and I move into the trailer, and the problem's solved. And in a month or two, we ALL move into new apartments in Auburn, Alabama."

"Remind me again why you're not making more money," I laughed. "What's that gonna do to your future wife? She's been so impressed by your classy bachelor pad."

"Another easy one, buddy," he said. "She thinks your trailer is romantic."

"She's warped," I laughed.

"Oh, don't be talkin' 'bout the future Missus Ellerbee," he grinned. "Lemme call my landlord."

He made the phone call, ending with, "Yessir, we'll all come by there after work so you can see what sort of criminals I associate with." His nimble thumbs relays that information as text messages to Tina and Susan. "There! It's a done deal!"

"I appreciate it, brother-in-law!"

"No problem, brother-in-law!" Jason retorted.

One of our caring co-workers leaned backward out of his cubicle. "Why don't y'all just kiss each other!"

"Hey!" Jason replied. "Just because YOU'RE alone and unloved doesn't mean everybody is!"

"Oh, you CUT me deep, Ellerbee. I need to close my door and weep silently."

"Won't happen," Jason retorted. "Assholes don't have tear ducts. But if you can fake competence, you can probably fake crying..."

That last statement created a rush to the coffeepot where a bunch of insults were traded amid laughter.

Mid-morning, I headed out to pick up Tina so we could go retrieve Terri. Then we went to the airport. Flying into Nashville International was not on my list of things I would do for pleasure, but today was the day to do it. I went whole-hog, filed an instrument flight plan so we were sequenced and well-announced in the air traffic control system, and I made a phone call to one of the fixed base operators. Our Cessna 182 was going to be the poor cousin among the business jets they normally serviced, but what the hell...

We were on the way. This time I talked Tina through the procedure for instrument flight, adhering to a pre-specified route and altitude with mandatory communication every step of the way. An hour out of our little airfield we slid out of the sky between a couple of regional jet passenger planes and then taxied for what seemed like miles to park in front of a hangar filled with multi-million dollar executive jets.

Fortunately the guy who met us on the ramp had a sense of humor. "My knuckles're still white," I laughed.

"I know the feeling. I've done this place in a Stearman biplane. I couldn't' go as fast wide open in that thing as that sucker over there (he pointed to a regional airline jet departing) slows DOWN to when it lands. Tower guys say stuff like us keeps 'em on their toes." We followed him inside, introducing ourselves on the way.

"Here's the phone," he said. "There's number for the taxi services on the wall by it. I used to be able to offer a courtesy car, but insurance..."

"I know," I said. "Almost illegal to be nice to people these days."

"Ain't illegal to sneak a couple of cokes out of the fridge, though. Y'all want one?"

"Sure," Tina chirped brightly. "You want one, Alan?"

"Not if I can get a sip of yours," I said.

We waited by the door for the cab, chatting with each other as our attendant went back to his routine. The cab came, dropped us off at the main terminal where we waded through a rather thin crowd to the airline's customer service counter where we made our intentions known. One of the attendants led us to a lounge.

"You can wait here. We'll bring her straight from the flight as soon as she de-planes," the young lady said. 'Young lady'? Probably ten years older than my wife.

Speaking of my wife: "You're nervous, aren't you, Alan?"

"A little, I guess, princess," I answered. "You, me, her..."

She stroked my arm. "We, that's you, me, AND Terri, we'll be fine. Really! It's just going to be different." She stretched up a bit to kiss my cheek. "And if there's one think I know about Alan Addison, it's that he can handle 'different' at the drop of a hat."

I turned to view her face.

"Uh-huh. Like 'different' as in 'driving out of Armpit, Louisiana with a seventeen year old girl. And 'different' as in 'if you don't get married, you're going to jail in this state'. And 'different' as in 'my wife's got sisters'. You do 'different' quite well, actually. And since I've been at your side for all this, apparently I do just as well."

"You shore me up, little one. I lost nothing when I married you, you know. You're more of a wife and friend than I ever imagined, and you surprise me every day. Like just now."

"Then hang on, buddy," she giggled. "We got us a Terri now, and she's gonna bring a whole new color to our spectrum."

"A new chip in our kaleidoscope," I said.

"Funny you should choose that word. Cindy said something about a kaleidoscope the other day. We talked about how they work. And yes, a new chip. Maybe a cool deep blue."

We chatted for half an hour or so before the door opened and my ears were assailed by a squeal of "Daddyyyy!", then "Tinaaaa!" and Tina got the first hug. I was still being hugged as I fished my wallet out to present my driver's license, and then we headed off to retrieve Terri's baggage.

"How'd y'all get here?" Terri asked.

"Our plane's on the other side of the airport, baby," Tina said. "We'll get a taxi to take us to it and then we'll fly home."

Terri turned to me. "Kinda gonna be MY home too, now, huh, Daddy?"

"Yes it is."

"You still want me?"

"Always and forever, Terri-angel."

Terri jerked Tina's hand. "It's different, talkin' to me on the phone, and me livin' here," she said.

Tina fielded that one easily. "Yep. Big difference. I can't tickle you over the phone. Or hug you."

"Good! D'ya think I could get my hair cut? Can you take me?"

Tina smiled and I could see things starting to coalesce. "Tomorrow after school. Me and Susan will take you."

"Oh, yeah," Terri said. "I need to MEET Susan!"

Bags in hand, we did the transfer to a cab, the short ride to the other side of the airport, and then we were loaded into our plane. Tina made sure that Terri was securely buckled into the rear seat, clad in the intercom headset, and then she climbed into the right front seat.

"You're not the pilot?" Terri asked.

Tina smiled. "Not at this airport. Your dad's got a whole lot more experience and this place has crazy traffic. Big stuff."

"Oh, okay..." Terri replied.

"Not a problem. I'll be right there with 'im the whole time. And you'll get to hear all the stuff on the radio. You'll see what we mean." Tina put her own headset on.

I finished the pre-flight walk-around, mounted up, and we threaded the taxiways, letting Ground Control keep us out of the way of the big guys. When we finally got our take-off clearance, Tina was giggling.

"Wow!" she said. "As big as this runway is, you could've took off sideways."

"It's worse than that," I said. "We could be at a thousand feet before we reach the end of the runway."

We didn't do that. We lifted off and I traded climb rate for speed, knowing that we'd clear the area, the heavy traffic and all, and still be almost at our cruising altitude, low because of the relatively short flight.

Terri's nose was stuck to the window most of the way. "I love flyin' in this plane. I can see EVERYTHING! It's just beautiful! You know that I'm the only kid I know who has a parent that can fly?" She paused. "And Tina! I don't like callin' you 'stepmom', Tina. Even though you really are, I guess. But you're more than that."

"Thank you, sweetie," Tina said. "But I have to be a parent along with all the other stuff, you know." Tina's two or three times a week phone calls were a bonding thing that I was happy about, but I'd cautioned her about maintaining a little bit of 'parent' in the relationship.

"I know," Terri said. "But that makes you the youngest parent I know of, at least with the kids I went to school with."

"Speaking of school ... Hang on. I need to check out with Departure Control and close out my flight plan." I keyed the radio to transmit my status and told them that I wanted to close my instrument flight plan. Out of the terminal area of the Nashville airport, I no longer needed the 'help' of the air traffic control system, and honestly, they were probably glad to get rid of my low, slow butt.

I switched the headset back to the intercom. "We need to see about getting you back into school so you can finish out the year."

"Two and a half weeks," Tina said. "That's all that's left. But ... I know, we have to work the system." She looked at Terri in the rear seat. "Not like you're having trouble in school or anything like that..."

"You know I'm not!" Terri stated.

"We can call Mister Jenkins when we get on the ground. He'll know how to handle that." Tina was right. Mister Jenkins with the school board was still somewhat amused and amazed at the whole 'Tina' story. He and I had talked a few times over the past few months. Dumping Terri on him wouldn't be any more shock than anything else we'd done.

Our landing was the customary flurry of activity: topping off fuel tanks, rolling the plane into the hangar, transferring Terri's luggage, and finally we were in the truck, Tina and I on each side with Terri in the middle.

"Just ever' now and then," Terri had said. "I know you like to sit by 'im."

I punched up Jenkins' number and listened to it ring, then got his voicemail. After four. Government worker. I spoke, "Dan Jenkins! This is Alan Addison, Tina's husband. I got a second-grade daughter that just moved in with us. I need to talk to you about how she finishes out the school year. Call me as soon as you can. You got my number."

Simultaneously with MY call, my wife was on HER phone. When I hung up, I heard her say, "Okay. Catfish joint. In an hour." Pause. "No, that gives us time to unload Terri's stuff at the trailer. We'll see y'all then." Pause. "Yeah, love you too! And she's a little doll!" She looked at Terri as she put her phone up. Terri was smiling.

"We're having dinner with Susan and Jason and her parents," she announced. "You're up for it, huh, Terri?"

Terri smirked. "You'll be there to protect me, right?"

"And you'll be my spectacularly beautiful and well-mannered daughter who THINKS before she speaks, right?" I said.

"Alan! She's seven!" Tina said.

"Almost EIGHT!" corrected Terri. "And I shall be everything you wish me to be, Father."

"What sort of books ARE you reading?" I asked, set back by her measured use of stilted language.

"Not the ones in the second grader library," she answered.

We did a quick stop at the trailer. Terri got to see the place. Exploration doesn't take long with two hundred and eighty square feet of floor space. We also got a run at another bottleneck: One bathroom, one toilet. Wait your turn.

Back on the road to the restaurant, we replicated the seating arrangement. I couldn't help but notice that Terri leaned into Tina's side. Tina stroked her shoulder softly, then flicked her fingertips against my arm, drawing my attention, making sure that I noticed.

"Food's better than California," Terri said. "Nobody there knows how to fry catfish. At least not the places I got to visit."

"But they have so many more places to eat, don't they?" Kathy asked.

"But sometimes I just want fried catfish," Terri said emphatically.

I watched the faces of our friends. They seemed taken with Terri. Kathy, though, made the connection between blonde-haired Terri and her own blonde daughter. "Susan looked JUST like that in the second grade."

And Terri captured the whole bunch with her reply: "Then I DO have a chance to grow up pretty!"

# Chapter 36

Okay, so Terri managed to completely melt our Tennessee gang at the restaurant. That’s a good thing. My daughter's got a quick mind. She can be completely disarming. I know she's wrapped me around her finger a time or two. However, at Christmas time, she met her match with Tina and the two of them just sort of merged together. I think that Terri saw Tina as somebody old enough to be 'grownup' but still young enough to be fun. That was one thing. The other was that she saw Tina as somebody to emulate; a female who was assured of her station in life and who loved me as much as Terri does.

Driving back to the trailer the three of us talked.

"Sweetie," Tina told her, 'we're gonna have to put up with the trailer for a few days until we can trade places with Jason, okay? It's gonna be tight, but we can do it. We just need to work with each other."

"I can do that," Terri said. "Uh…"

"Question, Princess?" I asked.

"Yessir. I know that you just have the one bed. I can stay on the sofa. But tonight…"

Tina tapped my arm. "Tonight, if you want to, you can sleep in the big bed with me and your daddy."

Happy squeal. "Thank you, Tina. Dad, I know… adults…"

"It's not a problem every now and then, sweetness," I said. "But it's not a king bed like at home. It's a queen, and three of us is gonna be crowded. But for every now and then, it'll work."

"Good," Tina said. "It's okay for Terri to miss her daddy."

That statement got Tina a trophy-grade little girl hug. "Thank you, Tina. I love you, you know. You're not one of those bad step-moms."

"What do you know about bad step-moms?" I asked.

"Daa-aad, I pay attention. Lots of kids have step-moms at school. And some of them are NOT happy. I tried telling them about how things worked between me and MY step-mom and they think I'm lucky. But one of 'em said that it was one thing when he just visited an' another when he moved in."

Tina looked at the little blonde girl sitting beside her. "Terri, he's right, you know…"

Terri's face fell.

"It's gonna be a whole lot BETTER!" Tina giggled at Terri's expression as it when dark and then lit back up. "You need to realize something. That blonde girl, Susan, that we ate with?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's ONE of MY sisters. And we have TWO more. We'll meet 'em tomorrow on the computer."

"Uh, Cindy and Nikki, right?" Terri said.

"Yep! And sometime this summer, we're all going to move into an apartment building in Alabama. Everybody gets their own apartments, and you and I can decorate your room."

"And the rest of the house, right?" Terri added.

"I'm lost," I said. "Two of you."

"You've been lost since you stopped for breakfast, guy," my Tina said.

Terri bent forward to see me. She was smiling.

We pulled up alongside our trailer and went inside.

I sat Terri down. "A few things we need to discuss, kiddo," I said.

Those blue eyes stared at me in a precocious 'go ahead, Dad' expression.

"We have a whole five gallon water heater. It's not enough for three people to take a shower, one right after another, unless somebody likes cold showers. And we only have the one little bathroom for the three of us, so when you go to the bathroom, don't dawdle."

"I understand, Daddy," she said. "I think we can make it until the weekend okay. I'll try."

"Okay then. I'll let Tina show you haw things work in the bathroom. And you can shower first."

Tina took care of that task, carefully warning Terri about the hot water situation again. She showered after Terri and the two of them were drying hair. I gave the water heater time to recover before I took my turn.

When I got out, the two of them were on the sofa. "The tea's steeping on the counter, baby," Tina said.

Very pleasant, sitting there in the evening with the TV on, sipping tea with the two females I loved most in life.

"Daddy," Terri said, "Is it okay if Tina an' Susan take me to get my hair cut tomorrow after school? I want it like Tina's."

"Makes sense, babe," Tina said to me. "Easier to care for. And she'll be a cutie, still."

I thought about that. Yep! Tina was right. Terri's flowing blonde tresses were beautiful when they were carefully brushed out, but they were attached to a seven year old who didn't know the meaning of 'slow down' most of the time, and I knew what it was like fighting to brush out the tangles. "I'll leave hair styles to you two and Susan." Nine-thirty was bed-time. There was a twinge of regret in my mind (and elsewhere) as I remembered that tonight's sleep would not be eased along by shared orgasms.

I got the middle. Tina on my left, Terri on my right, a little nightlight at the far end of the trailer providing a dim glow, and Tina punched up a playlist that we both liked. Terri recognized it.

"Still listening to good stuff, huh, Daddy?"

"Yes, baby," I said. "Calms your mind so you sleep good."

"It sounds relaxing," Terri affirmed. "I like it. Just like at Christmas."

"That's right. We did this at Christmas."

"She doesn't forget anything, baby," Tina said softly. "Lay down so we can snuggle."

I did. Got rewarded by daughter formed against me on one side, wife on the other, and a sweet kiss from each, a peck from daughter, a little softer, lingering brush of loving lips from wife.

And sleep. The alarm came on with Tina's choice of a wake-up song, a Mozart concerto that started out a bit light and soft and quiet, then crescendoed into full orchestra. Tina rolled over and silenced it, then kissed me. Nine months of kissing Tina first thing in the morning, that's a good thing. My second kiss went directly on the nose of the sleepy-eyed little girl child on the other side of me.

"Let's get up and get dressed. We'll go out for breakfast when everyone's ready," I said. "We have things to do."

Tina was already in the bathroom washing her face and brushing her teeth. She moved aside to accommodate Terri. I took advantage of the private moment to slide into today's trousers and waited my turn. With some small amount of giggling, Terri exited with Tina close behind.

"He'll take a few minutes in the bathroom. We can get dressed with a little privacy," Tina told Terri.

I finished my morning routine and exited to see Terri fully dressed except for shoes, and Tina was brushing out Terri's hair. Tina had her jeans on and he blouse for the day was on over her bra, but the shirt was unbuttoned.

Terri pointed to her hair as Tina brushed. "See Dad? That's why I wanna cut it."

Tina smiled over the top of Terri's head. I pulled my shirt on over my head, tucked it, and fastened my belt, then sat to put on socks and shoes. Terri was sliding into her sneakers. "Here, let me tie those," I offered.

"Daddy, I can tie my shoes, you know."

"Oh," I said, "I thought I was going to do my daughter a favor."

"Sorry," she chirped. "I thought you thought that I couldn't tie my own shoes." She smiled sweetly. Okay, if there was guile, she hid it well. I looked past here and saw Tina's amused smile.

"It's gonna take us all a while to get used to each other. Be happy."

Terri swung her head around to look at Tina. "I am happy. I mean, I worry about Momma, but I'm very happy to be here. You know what I mean."

I arched an eyebrow.

Tina revealed the missing element. "I know, baby. You wanted to come with us after Christmas, but we just can't do that without your mom's okay. Or it's a big mess and a lot of people get their feelings hurt and costs a lot of money. You and I talked about that. This changes things, though."

"I really wanted to be with you an' Dad," she said. She emphasized that statement by hugging Tina.

I looked at the two of them, my wife, the love of my life, and my daughter, the love of my life, one tall and auburn-haired, the other much shorter, and the perfect little blue-eyed blonde. Tina's expression showed no bit of trepidation over her new role.

I stood and we put the trailer into 'sleep' mode for the day and then we all trooped outside. I offered Terri a seat beside me in my truck for the short drive to the restaurant for breakfast. Tina was driving her own car because she had to go to school after breakfast.

"No, Daddy," Terri said. "I'll be with you all day. Let me ride with Tina, okay?"

"Hop in, baby," Tina said. "You're right. You'll be with your dad today."

I just chuckled to myself and got in the truck. After all, I wanted them to bond. As I followed them out of the park, I could see animated head-bobbing. Bonding? Not going to be a problem. I saw Terri with Tina's cellphone. When I pulled into the restaurant parking lot, I saw Jason's truck and Susan's little car there too. This wasn't bonding, this was immersion.

Breakfast was happy. Jason and I did a sidebar conversation about the work he could take care of while I played 'responsible parent' and tried to get Terri into school for the remaining three weeks. Tina and Susan talked with Terri about getting her hair cut. I looked at the two models. I adored Tina's pageboy and bangs, but Susan's shoulder-length blonde wasn't bad, either. Terri's hair was down almost to her waist, beautiful when brushed out, but I knew it was not the best choice for a girl as active as Terri was.

"We'll take Terri to Susan's hairdresser after school, Alan," Tina said. Terri smiled.

After breakfast, I took Terri on a little ride around the area while we waited for the school board offices to open. I figured I'd give them a half an hour after opening time before I showed up with Terri. I showed her my worksite. I showed her Tina's high school. We went downtown and she saw the middle of small-town America.

A bit after eight, and a lot earlier than I really expected, my cellphone rang. I answered it.

"Alan Addison, this is Dan Jenkins. What're you tryin' to do to me this time?" His voice has laughter in it. He'd followed the track of Tina just a bit since we sat in his office and he knew where she fit in the grand scheme.

"My seven-year-old, second grade daughter is with us. I know it's close to the end of the year, but what can we do about her finishing out second grade?"

"Bring 'er in," he said. "I'm sure we can fix 'er up."

"I'm about half an hour out," I said. "We'll be there."

Terri, naturally, was following the conversation closely. I glanced sideways. She was smiling. "My teachers say I'm not really second grade, you know."

"I know, sweetie," I said. "But you gotta remember, we're just showing up here three weeks before the end of school. I imagine they'll call your old school and get your records and see what they can do."

"I guess so," she sighed. "It's just that ever' year (coming from a kid who'd had a kindergarten year and a first grade and a second grade) I start out with all the kids and then I can do things and I'm sittin' there waitin' for the teacher to TEACH me new things an' she's still tryin' to teach the other kids what I can already do. Like readin'. 'See spot run'? Come on, Dad!"

I parsed this as I drove. It's difficult to get a really good assessment of a child's intelligence when you're restricted to phone calls and a couple of weeks in the summer and around holidays. But I had an answer.

"Baby doll," I said, "I'm glad you're smart…"

She didn't let me finish. "My second grade teacher, Mizz Melcashian, she says she thinks I'm smarter than a lot of kids. But Mom an' Mister Martin, they don't pay attention to that stuff."

"We'll pay attention, baby. I didn't know how smart Tina was, either, but when we found out, we started making a way for her to do what she wanted with it."

"I know Tina's smart. We talk."

"I hear you talk. And I hear Tina's side when you and she talk. I think I know a little bit of what goes on. Tina's not going to treat you like you don't exist."

Smile. "She said she always wanted a little sister. Or a daughter." Giggle. "Whatever I am to 'er. Mom says Tina's too young to be my step-mom."

"'Step-mom' is a matter of definition," I said.

"I understand that. And I'll be a good daughter to her. Promise."

"If you do that," I said, "then Tina's going to be very happy with you. She already is."

"ReallY? 'Cuz when I talked to Mom abut this stuff, like Christmas vacation, Mom says I'm really in the way of you an' Tina."

"Baby, your mom made a mistake about that. Tina has never stopped talking about you at Christmas."

She folded her arms. "I LIKE Tina. I think Mom wasn't really happy about that at first. I think she got used to it, though."

"Life is a lot easier if you like 'er," I said.

"I can't help it, Dad. I mean, she's your WIFE now. I had to start likin' Mister Martin when Mom married 'im."

I thought about that. Terri had to start liking Martin for six months between the time her Mom moved in with him and the time the divorce was final so she COULD marry him.

Terri continued. "It's still very hard sometimes," she said in a little girl voice. "Sometimes he's not the nicest person to me."

"It's difficult sometimes for a man to care for kids who aren't his." I said those words, but that sure wasn't what I was thinking.

We pulled into a parking slot next to the school board office and went inside. I told the receptionist that Mister Jenkins was expecting us. "Oh, yes," she smiled. "He said you were coming. This is your daughter?"

Terri smiled. "Yes, ma'am." That's enough to melt most sentient beings.

"Hi, cutie! What's your name?" she asked.

"Terri, ma'am. Terri Addison."

"Not 'Theresa'?"

"No ma'am. Just Terri. My mom chose it. Dad wanted Theresa."

The lady looked at me. "Mister Addison, she's a cutie!"

"Thank you, Mizz Stephens," Terri said.

"How'd you know my name was Mizz Stephens, baby?"

"I read the sign on your desk. And you have a wedding band," Terri answered.

The lady smiled and looked at me. "Oh, you know where Mister Jenkins office is. He'll be glad to see her."

I walked up the hall, holding Terri's hand, and knocked on Dan Jenkins' door.

"Come on in," he said. He looked at Terri. "You're Alan's daughter?"

She let go of my hand. "Yessir. I'm Terri. My dad is Alan Addison, and my step-mother is Tina Addison."

His computer dinged. Email. "Excuse me a second," he said. "oh, that's just Mizz Stephens. You've impressed her, Miss Terri."

"She's nice," Terri said.

"Y'all can sit down. Let's talk," Jenkins said.

We sat.

"This one's kind of fun," he said. "School's almost out. But the law says…"

"I know," I said. "Besides, she wants to finish second grade." Terri was smiling confidently.

"Do you have custody? We KNOW about custody, don't we?" he said, smiling.

"Oh, yes. Joint custody agreement. Got a copy right here." I patted my briefcase.

"Okay. I'll check that off the list. What about her old school information?"

I popped the briefcase open and extracted a sheet of paper, a printed email from Martin. "Here you go. But I got a question."

"What's that?"

"Remember when you did that assessment on Tina when we came in? Can you…"

"Uh, yeah, if you want. But if she's got school records, we don't usually do that. But we can, for like, home-schooled kids. So yes. Terri, are you up for a few tests?"

Terri nodded, keeping the smile. "Yessir."

"Alan, bring her in tomorrow morning. For somebody her age, it's a little different. There's more involvement from one of our teaching supervision, and they'll kind of guide her along."

"I figured as much," I said.

"By the way, Mizz Tina… Auburn?"

"Yep!"

"My Tennessee soul just dies a little bit when I say it, but congratulations. I hear nothing but good about 'er."

"She's had a good year, here, Dan," I said. "Made friends, all that."

"Yeah, I hear about some of that," he said. "Me an' the principal hang out together. Our families have history."

"History?"

"Yeah. I married 'is sister."

"Oh, that's history, alright!" I looked at my watch. "Say, can I pick you up for lunch? Elevenish?"

"Sure," he answered.

"We'll see you then," I said.

We left. "Any ideas now, little angel?" I asked Terri.

"Do they have a library?"

We left the library in time to catch Jenkins for lunch, then went to our trailer to await the arrival of Tina and Susan. I let her play around on the internet on one of my laptops while I took care of work on the other.

A bit after three my phone rang. I knew who it was. Ringtone was pure Tina.

"Is that Tina?" Terri squealed.

"Yes," I said to her, then I answered, "Hi, precious."

"We're on our way, love," Tina said. "How's Terri?"

"Oh, she's still Terri," I said. I recounted the school board visit, including my desire for Terri to get a full evaluation of her standing.

"Oh, that’s a good idea. You know \*\*I\*\* don't think she's a second-grader. It'll be nice to make that official."

"Yeah," I answered. "But since next year she'll be in school in Alabama, this might not make a difference."

Terri's eyes showed me that she was following closely. She didn't know that I'd gotten a very long email form Martin about her mom's status, ending in, "Alan, I don't know if raisin' Terri's gonna be right for 'er." I knew it. And Tina knew it. Heaven knows, I don't keep secrets from Tina.

Tina answered, "You an' me an' Terri need to talk about that. I don't wanna waste that little mind on one of those 'No Child Left Behind' schools. What was Cindy's phrase? A NASCAR engine in the Wal-mart parking lot?"

"Then we'll talk. Where's Susan?"

"Sitting right here beside me. We're in my car. I'll drop her off to get hers after we take care of Terri's hair."

"Okay, punkin! She's waiting on you!"

"I can imagine," Tina laughed. We'll be there in a few minutes. Bye."

I turned to Terri. "Tina and Susan are going to be here soon."

Terri's eyes sparkled. "Dad, you like Tina's hair?"

"No," I said. Terri's face clouded. I shouldn't do that to my daughter, but then she read through me.

"Daa-dddyyyy! Really!"

"I love Tina's hair. Why?"

"It's a pretty color. But the way she cuts it? You like that too, huh?"

I nodded.

"I was thinking about maybe, like Susan's. Her hair's about my color, and it looks so pretty. But then I look at Tina. Do you watch 'er when she shakes 'er head?"

Little darlin' nailed one of my weaknesses. "Yes, I do."

"Me too. And when she shakes 'er head, her hair just goes back where it's s'posed to. I like that. Can I?"

"That's between you and Tina."

Smile. And we heard the crunch of tires on gravel. I went outside with Terri, leaned into the car to snag a kiss from the love of my life, and then watched them leave. I went back to my computer.

The phone rang. I looked at the display. Susan's dad, Mike. "Hi, Mike! What's up?"

"Just as well trot 'er over," he chuckled.

"Who?"

"My daughter's new niece," he said. "I called Jason. He's gonna be here. Kathy's working alchemy in the kitchen right now. Come over for dinner."

"Okay. We'll be there. But I owe you one."

He laughed. "You owe me nothing. Kathy, however… OW!"

"What happened?"

"The love of my life and mother of my child just hit me on the head with a big spoon."

"You could file for spousal abuse," I laughed.

"No, buddy… I'll put up with the occasional whack with a spoon. The rest of it's too good. See you in a bit."

"'Kay. I'll just head that way."

"You do that. I think there's a beer with your name on it. An' Son-in-law will be here when he gets off work." That was a happy thing. Jason and Susan. And Jason was already a member of the Carter family. All he needed was a piece of paper to make it official.

So I was sitting in the living room with Jason and Mike and Kathy, happily recounting my day's adventures when we heard the front door open and Susan came charging in, trailed closely by my sweet teen of a wife and this startling little blonde pixie with a haircut identical to Tina's.

Susan did the 'Hi Mom, Hi Dad' thing as she came through and plopped her self in Jason's lap, kissing him chastely and giggling.

Tina stopped in the middle of the room, motioning Terri to stand in front of her. "Well? Does she look like MY daughter, or what?!?!"

It wouldn't have been nearly as impressive had not Terri backed up and pulled Tina's arms around her.

"c'mere, sweetie," I said, opening my arms. I got both of them.

Tina shook her head. "I went ahead and got a trim, too. It's a little early, but now we're on the same schedule."

Kathy laughed. "Susan?"

Susan shook her head, tossing her slightly longer spun gold locks. Jason buried his face in her hair. "It's shorter," he affirmed.

The next morning we were at the school board office at eight-thirty.

A nicely dressed, matronly lady met us in Jenkins' office. He introduced us. Alan, Terri, this is Missus Callirosa. Missus Callirosa, this is Alan Addison and his daughter Terri."

"Hi, Mizz …" her tongue tripped a bit, but she got it out, "Mizz Callirosa."

Hello. Terri, can you come with me for a while. We're going to do some little tests and talk a bit."

Terri smiled, a bit more shyly than usual, but then it broadened. "Yes, ma'am. Let's go."

"How long will this take?" I asked.

"Oh, most of the morning, Mister Addison," Mrs. Callirosa said.

"Please, I'm Alan, if you don't mind," I answered.

"Yes, of course," she answered. "I'm Mary."

"If you want to come back around lunch…" Dan Jenkins said.

"I'll do that. Can I take you two out for lunch?"

Smiles. I bent over and kissed Terri. "Just be my sweet, polite, ever so wonderful Terri," I said softly into her ear.

I was back at lunch. Mizz Stephens directed me into Jenkins' office. I walked in, and he was by himself.

"They'll be here in a minute," he said. "You know, I need to hang around you more."

"Huh?"

He laughed. "It seems that people who hang around you tend to show up as some sort of intellectual anomalies. Sit down."

I heard footsteps up the hall, one almost skipping, one a little bit more sedate and heavier. And a squeal and a "Dadddyyyy!" and an armful of Terri.

I looked at Mary. "My little one's happy. I take it that's a good thing?"

Dan Jenkins was still smiling. "Tell 'im, Mary. He's used to it."

"Miss Terri's well past any sort of second-grade level subject matter, Alan. I'm writing a report on her, because she tells me that next year she will be going to school in Alabama."

"She told you that?"

Mary smiled. "Yes, you see, I didn't run the entire battery of tests. After she went out the high end of the first set, language skills, I changed my evaluation methodology and worked on her from the standpoint of a precocious intellect."

Terri had a happy smirk on her face.

"Her reading is far above second grade. Sadly I know middle school students who cannot read as well as she does, nor do they have the vocabulary. She can perform mathematically well above grade level as well."

Terri was grinning.

"Naturally, she does not have the science and social studies knowledge for the higher grades, but you and I know that had she read those subjects, she would be there as well. She does seem to know a bit about aviation."

"I told her about our plane and Tina's flying and how she got her license," Terri said. "Tina told me all about it when we talked on the phone. I asked questions."

Mary smiled. "She asks questions. I got asked questions about how I was going to do these evaluations." Still smiling, she continued, "I was in a classroom myself for twenty-eight years and I don't mind answering questions from children who wish to learn. I wish we could have had her earlier in the year, but such is not the case. I don't think there's a whole lot we can do in three weeks to help much, but I am quite satisfied that if she gets the proper situation next term, she will perform quite remarkably."

"So for the rest of this year?" I asked.

"We’ll talk to one of the second-grade teachers and have them take her until the end of the year. And she can sit with you when your Tina graduates." Jenkins smiled and continued. "And if you don't send me progress reports on this one and Tina, I'm gonna be unhappy."

"I can do email," Terri said. "We'll keep in touch."

"And it's close enough to lunchtime," I said. "let's go find a place to eat."

# Chapter 37

Terri nailed Tina on the phone after Tina got out of school. My phone rang. Terri saw the display. "It's Tina!"

"Answer it, then."

"Hi, Tina!" Pause. "Uh-huh!" Pause. "No, they won't let me be in second grade." The last statement was all done up in 'sad little girl'. Pause for effect, then squeal! "The lady, Mizz Callirosa, SHE says I'm WAAAAAY past second grade!"

I heard the returning squeal through the phone.

"Hurry home. I wanna be happy an' YOU need to be here for THAT!"

Okay, you tell me how happy YOU'D be to hear that conversation between your daughter and your teen-aged wife. I know how I am: damned happy.

The weekend came and between me and Jason and our mates, we got US moved to Jason's place and Jason's stuff moved to my trailer.

"I ain't gotta worry about what I might find behind the sofa, do I?" I asked.

"Alannnnnn!" Tina squealed. "I'm SURE!"

"You know how those single guys are," I said, watching Susan for the next reaction.

"The only thing SINGLE about MY Jason is that we have four more weeks. Right, honey?" she said, cooing up against him. Jason looked like he was in heaven. Well, check that. He could see heaven from where he was sitting, and he knew he'd BE in heaven a few Saturdays from now.

As for us, with the move to Jason's apartment, we got to spread out a little bit. All three of us still ended up on the sofa in the evenings, or the recliner. Good recliner, held all three of us, although I was little bit cramped with one of the loves of my life balanced on each leg, leaning into me. Fortunately, Terri stayed for only a bit before bounding away to other interests.

We quickly settled into the expanded space. Tina's school was a downhill slide and so was Terri's. I was interested in Terri's schooling.

"Daddy," she said, and I knew manipulation was taking place, because she was seven (Almost EIGHT!) and 'Daddy' had changed to the much more sophisticated and mature 'Dad'. She was experimenting with the technique this time. "Dad, the teacher read the letter from Mizz Callirosa. I don't think she believed it. Made me read out loud. A SECOND grade book. The only words that had two syllables (Syllables? In the second grade? She figured out "syllables"?) ended in 'ing'." Little darlin' continued, "and addition. If I have two apples and you have two apples, how many apples do we have together. PUH-LEEZE!"

"Angel, please tell me you didn't say that to her."

She tossed me a look from those blue eyes and backed into Tina's arms. "No, daddy. But I've been looking at those things and seeing something."

"Tell your dad what you see, Terri," Tina said.

Terri took a deep breath. "Well, I saw that if you take 2+2, that makes four, right? And 2+4 makes six. So four is TWO twos. And six is THREE twos. And then I tried it with threes and fours. And you know, it just works like that."

Tina kissed Terri on the crown of her head. "Terri, has anybody ever shown you that?"

"Nobody." She shook her head, realized she had THAT haircut, and gave it one more vigorous shake.

Tina looked at me. "Your daughter has discovered multiplication on her own." She sighed. "Whatever you do, don't let her NEAR Cindy."

"Or Nikki," I said. "Both of 'em are scary."

"And YOU'RE not? You and Susan?"

"I'll admit to a bit of that, me an' Susan both, but…"

"Y'all are talkin' like I'm not here," Terri piped.

"Sorry, princess," I said. "I'm trying to put a number to my surprise."

"Uh, Dad," she said, "it's just school stuff."

Tina fielded that one. "Yes, baby, but you have to be careful. A lot of people have a very hard time doing second grade work. You're a bit special, and I'm not using the word 'special' to mean you CAN'T do things, you're special in that you CAN do things."

"That's good, right? I mean, YOU an' Cindy an' Nikki an' Susan, y'all all do things easier than a lot of people."

"Yes, but listen to us, baby. Just because you CAN do that, you've got to be careful not to show off. Just do what you can do and be nice to people. Like Cindy and Nikki do. They both help other kids learn things."

My turn. "Baby, showing off is going to make people unhappy. You don't want to do that in front of most people."

Okay, that was Terri's school issue. Yes, I did get a phone call from her teacher.

"Mister Addison, do you realize how precocious she is?"

"Yes ma'am. Mizz Callirosa said that in her letter."

"I don't think Mary had the whole picture. Terri tells me she will be in school in Alabama next year?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Please tell me you will look into putting her in a good school."

"Thank you for your concern, Missus Sorensen. Did Terri tell you about her step-mom?"

"Noooo, I don't think she mentioned her."

"Her stepmom is almost eighteen. Going to college next year. She, uh, my wife, is brilliant in the tightest definition of the word. She has three friends, one, maybe two, of whom are certified geniuses, and we, me, Terri and my wife Tina, and those girls and their husbands, are starting a new business in Auburn, Alabama this summer. I don't think we'll have a problem seeing that Terri gets an education. We might have a problem getting traditional schools to recognize it."

"I believe you," she said. "I'd imagine she reads better than most of the fifth grade, at least, and math… tell me, did she explain to you about how multiplication works? I didn't teach that. My kids are still doing single-digit addition. She just made a leap…"

"That's my Terri," I said.

"Well, I will try my best to give her SOMETHING, Mister Addison, but she's way past second grade. It's a good thing she likes to read. I let her go into the library."

But that wasn't the only student I had in school. Happily, though, I didn't have to worry about that other one, either. She'd come home with Terri in the front seat beside her, Susan following in her own car, and the three of them would be entertaining themselves when Jason and I got off work.

Half the time, Susan and Jason ended up at the apartment with us, and the other half of the time, they were at Susan's house.

Susan confided in Tina, "I'm afraid that if I go to that trailer with 'im, we won't stop. Tina… it's… getting… very… difficult. But I promised myself. And Mom and Grandma."

Tina told me that one evening when we were in bed. "Alan, she's liable to kill 'im!"

Nah," I said, "He's younger than me and I survived YOU!"

She flopped backward against me so I could encircle her with my arm. "Oh, gosh, yes! We… Oh, baby, it was soooo wonderful…" she sighed. "I hope it's that good with her and Jason."

Fortunately the floorplan of the apartment had accounted for the idea of privacy for the master bedroom, so we could make a little noise when we made love. We still skipped nights, though, when I got the 'Daddy, can I sleep in the bed with you an' Tina? Hmmmm? Please?"

Okay, so that was a minus in the Alan and Tina 'do it every night' score. But then a Saturday came and Susan and Jason announced, "Guys, we're borrowin' Terri."

"Borrowin' Terri?" I asked.

"Yeah," Susan giggled. "there's an animated movie out that Jason wants to go see, and we need Terri so he won't be embarrassed to stand in line and buy tickets."

Terri was looking at me. "Can I, Daddy?"

Manipulated. "Of course," I said. I started to reach for my wallet.

"Nuh-uh," Susan said. "We got it. And we won't be back with her until after nine, because we're gonna go eat first, then the movie. I hope y'all don't get bored." She gave me and Tina a theatrical wink.

Virginal teens should NOT leer like that.

After they left, my young wife pushed me back against the door. "Alan, you know how much I've wanted to scream when we make love?"

I nodded. "Me too."

"Then I think we've been handed the opportunity to make each other scream," she said. "I for one do not intend to let it pass."

And we took advantage of the opportunity. And each other. Several times. Our last one came in a flurry of hot, sweaty, doggie style, something she loved partly because of the animal aspect of it, partly because she knew that it was a guaranteed orgasm for me. And if it was my THIRD of the evening, I lasted quite well.

We were both barely conscious after that one. "It's after eight, baby," she said, her voice groggy. "We should shower. YOU smell like SEX!"

So a bit after nine, there was knock on the door, and a pajama-clad Tina retrieved our daughter. Susan was in the living room. I heard, "I hope you two weren't bored."

Tina changed the subject. "Did Jason enjoy the movie?"

Terri said, "He did. He laughed. He's almost embarrassing."

Susan was smiling. "My guy. What can I say? He's different. In the very best way!"

And it was the last week of school. Tina and Susan finished the final exams. Nothing to do but wait, now. I got Terri out of school with a report card that said that she's satisfactorily completed second grade.

And a hand-written note.

"Dear Mr. Addison-

Terri has been fun. I wish I could have had her all year, but then I would not have had time for the other students. My husband says that it's like having a Formula One racer in the garage and having to drive a Honda Civic to work. She is indeed special. You need to find a way to give her wings.

Please let me know how she fares.

Mrs. Jaqueline Sorensen

"She's a third grader now, Alan," Tina said, stroking Terri's hair. "Third grade, going on high school."

Monday was graduation rehearsals for high school. I endured the squeals of Susan and Tina in their graduation garb.

On Tuesday I went to the airport to check on the plane. I had spent a bit of time locating a kiddie seat for our Cessna 182. It gave us the ability to carry four adults, Terri, and a minimal bit of baggage and be pretty close to the weight limits for the aircraft, but that was good enough. I had to go see the job that Charley had done installing it.

"It'll take care of 'er, Alan," he said. "You can remove it really easy." He showed me, then laughed. "You're an engineer. You can figure this stuff out."

Wednesday at noon we were at the airfield, loading up. Terri was buckled into the back seat, Susan and Jason giggling in the middle and me, I was in the right front seat, Tina being the pilot, me being the loser of 'rock-paper-scissors'. Again.

I paid attention on take-off. "I can feel the load," Tina said. "We're heavy."

"Right under gross. We could've left some fuel, but it's a hassle to drain the tanks." But we were off the ground and climbing, angling to the south, into Alabama to watch a fourteen year old redhead graduate from high school.

"She's really gonna do it," Susan said. "You know how scary that is?"

"Oh, if you'd had your head in the game, baby, you could've done that," Jason told her.

"Oh, I don't know," Susan said. "Did you look at some of the math she's into? I mean, I kinda get a flash of understanding here and there, but Cindy… And Nikki… they're askin' Nikki to go to Auburn the first week of June."

"We're goin' in June," Tina said.

"Yeah, but they want us to take tests. They just INTERVIEWED Cindy." Susan sighed. "But then, I've talked to Cindy about some of that stuff."

"I know," Tina said . "it's like her mind shifts gears from 'Hi! I'm Cindy and I'm fourteen' to, uh, I dunno, some sort of analytical machine."

"And Dan adores her," I added.

"And she adores Dan right back," Susan said.

A couple hours into the flight and we had the radio set on the Unicom frequency because we were letting down from cruising altitude. The radio sounded off. "Holt traffic, this is Mooney 2-8-3-5 Kilo, five miles west, for landing on one-five,"

Tina and Susan squealed in unison over the intercom. "That's Nikki's Dan," Tina said. She keyed the radio to transmit. "Uh, Mooney 3-5-Kilo, this is Cessna 6-5-6-7 Golf, ten miles north, landing one-five at Holt."

"How many of you have a picture of Cindy right now?" I asked.

Jason spoke, "She just transitioned from 'squeal' to 'giggle' mode."

Ten minutes later I observed Jason's prediction to be true. There was a five-way hug going on with the four sisters and Terri. Jason and I met Cindy's foster mom. She wasn't the least bit surprised by any of the proceedings.

She'd provided us with her big SUV, seating for seven, for transport and had further made arrangements for dinner.

"You gotta understand that this graduation day thing is goin' ta get everybody out on the road. You don’t want to even TRY to get into a restaurant, not that we got that many anyhow."

We'd told the hotel to expect late check-in. That freed us up for the evening's activities, and they were packed in pretty tight. We had a big tumble of activities with three high school graduations in three states. Would've been impossible without wings.

Another bright spot was that Bill Carmody was flying in for Cindy's graduation. He and I and Dan R. had worked a project a couple of years back. He'd been the lead mechanical engineer on the job then, and was Dan's project manager on Dan's last project. He considered Cindy to be a foster grand-daughter, and I was looking forward to seeing him again.

As expected, the afternoon and evening were teetering on the edge of chaos. Seven of us, me, Tina, Terri, Susan and Jason, Nikki and her Dan loaded up in Helen Peebles' big SUV and followed Dan and Cindy and Helen in his truck to Helen's house.

Cindy had told Tina it was like 'Tara' in "Gone With the Wind" except with better plumbing. She wasn’t far off. Again, pictures don't tell the story. Cindy's foster mom's husband is a retired judge in his eighties, but he's in good shape. I hope I handle eighty as well.

At any rate, we had a good meal in a formal dining room that handled the crowd quite well, the split into little groups to change cloths for Cindy's ceremony. When everybody was dressed and us guys were all being thankful that none of the girls in our lives were the 'two hours in the bathroom applying makeup' types. I thought about my own Tina: face washed, hair brushed to a sheen, and PERFECT.

We did the obligatory group picture. I remember Dan Richards being a bit of a camera nut, and he had a pretty decent camera on a tripod and remote shutter release. We all stood together on the front steps of Charlie and Helen's home, with Cindy in the center. Then we split up into three vehicles for the trip to the civic center for the ceremony.

The ceremony was pretty much what I expected. For every adult thinking 'solemn ritual signaling a passage into adulthood, there were two kids thinking 'WOOHOO! I'm outta school!'. The school staff managed to bring a bit of solemnity to it, getting through introduction, invocation, National anthem, alma mater, and the valedictory speech.

Then it came to the part that I knew my friend Dan was going nuts about: the introduction of the special honors bunch.

I paid little attention myself until the principal came to Cindy. I pointed out the difference in height between five foot three Cindy and this HUGE black athlete who got a scholarship to a university in Florida.

After the ceremony was over, exiting the building was an exercise in patience. Little auburn-haired cutie stopped short a couple of times in the crowd and bumped a tight, mobile heinie into my crotch. That might've been an accident. The circular wiggle after contact was initiated certainly wasn't. And the giggle confirmed my suspicions that I was being messed with. The blue eyes in a flashing glance back over her shoulder further reinforced my supposition. Somebody's gonna get it tonight in a wonderful contest in which there are no losers.

Across the parking lot I saw Cindy and her Dan and that huge black guy talking. There was a smaller version standing beside him, and what I surmised to be the mom but by the time we connected with Dan and Cindy, the family had departed. Our initial plan was to hit a local diner for coffee after the graduation but Nikki's phone rang. She relayed the change in plans to us and we altered course back to Helen and Charlie's house.

Helen led a bevy of females into the kitchen and shortly they emerged with coffee and a carrot cake.

"Eletha said she was sorry she missed Cindy's graduation, but she left a note and a carrot cake."

"My favorite," Cindy said.

It was good carrot cake, and good coffee. "Dan made me change to the Louisiana stuff. Like to kilt Charlie, first cup," Helen said. "Now he's used to it."

I knew that story. Many bags of coffee had been Fed-Exed to jobsites over the years to satisfy coffee tastes that were part of my own genetic make-up. Coffee and a dozen other subjects graced the conversation. Many of them were directed towards Cindy and her achievements. Some were about business, including Bill swearing that he'd be calling us to work for him in the future.it was after ten by the time we got to the hotel and checked in.

I carried our single bag to the room and let Tina unlock the door to let us in. Susan carried her bag and let Terri in ahead of her.

Yep! Two queen beds. I got Tina in mine. Susan and Terri shared the other.

"I need to go kiss Jason good night," Susan said, slipping back out the door.

Tina cast a knowing look at me. "She's gonna kill 'im!"

I don't think Terri caught the joke. She said, "Tina, a kiss won't kill Jason. It'll make 'im happy!"

"Kisses make YOU happy, Terr," Tina said, scooping Terri up off the floor.

I stepped up and hugged the two of them and between both Tina and I, we kissed Terri into giggles. Didn't take long.

We ran Terri through the shower, then Tina, and by the time Tina was out, Susan was back. Her turn in the shower. Then me. I came out wearing pajamas. Yes, I was a little saddened by the idea that I could not immediately repay Tina for that little tease back at the Civic Center.

When we turned the lights out, she snuggled close to me and whispered, "It's killin' you that you can't get even, huh?" she was petting me gently, softly stroking, as we went to sleep.

Morning was a flurry of activity, but we were out the door, loaded up, and on the road to meet everybody for breakfast. After breakfast and a few travel contortions, we arrived at the airport, bid good-bye and thanks to Helen and gave her back her SUV. This time it was THREE planes in the air.

Nobody in the group had the slightest experience in formation flying. Our 182 was pretty well matched with Cindy and Dan's Cessna 180 in speed, but Nikki and Dan's Mooney was an easy thirty miles an hour faster. Gamely, though, we elected to try to stay, if not in tight formation, at least a comfortably loose gaggle with the same destination. It worked. We arrived at our home field at the same time. Cindy was at the yoke of her and her Dan's plane, and we let them land first, followed by Dan and Nikki, and lastly, Tina put the five of us on the ground.

Charlie Staples came out of the airfield office to see the spectacle as we tied down two planes at the transient line and Tina and I stowed our plane in the hangar.

"Been a long time since I saw this much traffic in this short a time," he said. "Reminds me of Sunday afternoons a long time ago." Charlie had related the same tales I heard from many of the older fliers, how recreational aviation used to make little airfields places for social events centered around flying. The cost of flying had pretty well squelched that these days.

Still, we had our moment. Susan's car was at the airfield. It went to Nikki and her Dan and Cindy and her Dan. Us and Susan and Jason had our own vehicles. We headed in three separate directions with plans to meet at the catfish joint for dinner.

One change. "Terri, you want to come with me an' Jason?" Susan asked. "And you can go home with your dad and Tina after dinner."

Terri looked at me. "Daddy? Can I?"

"If you want. Jason?" I looked at him. He smiled. " We're just goin' to drop off my bag and then go to Susan's house."

"And Mom LOVES 'er," Susan said.

Terri smirked. "I AM quite adorable, you know."

Tina scooped Terri up, smothering her with kisses. "Yes, you ARE adorable. And we will see you in two or three hours."

"THREE hours," Terri said. "It's three o'clock. We're meeting at the restaurant at SIX. Three hours."

Tina kissed her on her forehead and held her so I could plant a kiss on her seven year old (ALMOST EIGHT, Dad!) cheek.

"Okay, punkin," I said. She went with Susan and Jason, between them, holding a hand of each.

Tina and I were in the truck, heading to the apartment. "I owe somebody some payback from the 'I think I'll wiggly my heinie against my husband when he can't do a THING about it' moment."

Giggle. "You should be good and charged up, too. I know I am."

"So whose idea was the Terri goes with Susan thing?"

"Susan mentioned it to Terri. Having Terri around sort of makes it a bit easier for Susan to avoid putting Jason into premature cardiac arrest. Plus, Susan's mom really does like Terri."

"I'm glad of that. I just don't want our daughter to think she's an impediment to our relationship."

"You worry too much. She told me and Susan that she understood that adult couples needed a little private time but she didn't know anyone here that she could go play with. And she looked at Susan. So she's Susan's buddy now. Thinks it's cool."

"Okay," I said.

"Stop worrying about it, love," Tina said. "I love her for a whole bunch of reasons and I want the best for her, just like you do."

"Just remember that when she's a high-maintenance pain in the butt."

"Honestly, Alan! I just don't see Terri being like that. Who's she gonna use for an example? Me 'n' Susan 'n' Nikki 'n' Cindy?"

"TV."

"Yeah, uh-huh. Next time we watch TV let's put one of those Disney Channel pre-teen training films. And see if you can get Miss Terri to give you a running commentary. It's quite insightful."

"huh?"

"Try it. You'll see. Get educated, too."

"Well," I said, "I think that if we both get after it, we can really give the apartment a good cleaning." I turned to her and smirked.

"I dunno about the apartment, but I do indeed have some parts that need attention."

One would do well to ignore the enthusiastic squeals and growls the emanated from the apartment for the next hour or so.

At five, we reluctantly got out of bed and showered, then dressed and went to meet our friends.

# Chapter 38

Tina's turn:

MY graduation. My HIGH SCHOOL graduation! Across the country there are a few MILLION people who are looking forward to this night in their lives, and mine was upon me.

Okay. Let me tell you about this, because mine's NOT exactly standard. First, I'm a year ahead of my age group. Got lucky, even though Alan tells me that luck had little to do with it, and parlayed an unfortunate episode as a high school dropout into a 'skip a year of high school' thing.

Second thing is, of course, Alan Dean Addison, BSEE, fine human being, father and most wonderfully, my husband. Yes, I do indeed think of him in those terms. I've even told him.

Third thing. I'm a mom. No, not one of those poor unfortunate teen moms living with her parents trying to raise an infant at struggling through high school or living in a run down rental trailer with a loser husband. I became a step-mom by virtue of my husband's first wife's horrible mistake of divorcing him, and between them they had Terri, almost eight. She loves when I give her age like that. A year means so much more when you're seven. And what a doll. We started off loving each other, just like her dad and I started off loving each other. And Terri's, well, I never really got a handle on her mom's intelligence, but Terri's definitely got her dad's intelligence. And she's a cutie, little blonde, blue-eyed imp with a smile that must be imbedded in her genes.

So that's what I will be when I graduate. I have a story. And so far, it's got a wonderfully happy ending.

The day was a blur. We started out with breakfast that somebody else cooked at our customary restaurant. Later in the day, we went to the airport to meet the remote parts of our family.

I was not the least surprised to see the Cessna 180 taxi up with Cindy's red head peering out the corner of the windscreen as she S-turned her way to the tie-downs. Nikki and her Dan's Mooney is another story. Nikki's not quite as adventurous as Cindy when it comes to flying and so her Dan was in the left seat, but Nikki was grinning.

Naturally, we end up at Susan's house before the Big Event. That's a good thing. Susan's mom and dad are good people and they accept me and Alan completely now. I know it was a bit of a step for Mizz Kathy at first, but then we hauled Cindy and her Dan in, and when you look at Cindy and learn SHE'S married, makes me and Alan look positively normal. They even took a shine (good Tennessee phraseology, there) to Terri. Of course, it's hard NOT to just melt when you meet Terri.

My step-daughter's precocious. If she had an evil mind, she'd be the formative stages of one frightening evil overlord, but she's sweet as she can be. Analytical, calculating, measured. Behind those blue eyes there's a mind going, in computer terms, parallel processing in the high gigahertz range, but when she knows the answers, she just choses to make people smile. She's only as manipulative as you'd EXPECT a seven-year-old to be with her dad, but her DAD is MY husband, and I manipulate him, too, and he absolutely loves it. Today, for graduation, she's wearing this little dress with simple lines and a solid royal blue color that makes her blonde hair stand out.

I remember her and me and Susan buying that dress. "I have one this color," Susan said. "I like it."

Terri smiled and sidle up against Susan. I swear, if Susan had a seven year old daughter, Terri would be IT. Okay, Susan's blonde hair, and Jason's sandy hair, and I'm looking forward to the result of that union. Alan and I won't likely have our own baby, but we have Terri and we'll have Susan and Jason's.

So we're at Susan's house, all sitting around talking. Each of us girls are perched on the knee of our guys. Terri's squeezed in beside Alan, well within reach of my hand. Grandma used to touch me a lot, a stroke of her hand on my shoulder, my face, my hair, and I always thought of those little touches as constant reminders that I was loved and I was important to her.

Alan's like that. Before we were, well, US, he occasionally put a hand on the small of my back, guiding me somewhere, or something appropriate. He tells me that he almost had spasms NOT touching me, because he was afraid I'd think it inappropriate. After we finally recognized the obvious, that fate had thrown us together because we BELONGED together, he started touching me more, but he asked me if he was touching me too much. You won't believe how I answered that question. Words were part of the answer.

When it got time to get ready, we all disappeared into Susan's bedroom, at least us girls. Alan and the other guys came dressed well for a Tennessee high school graduation. Susan told her mom and dad what Mizz Helen had said about Cindy's graduation: "Dressing up for a lot of these people means buttoning the top button of your overalls." Alan, in his words, 'cleans up pretty well' for things. I know he's worn a suit a time or two in his life. I've seen the pictures of his army days, too, and I know he's done presentations on projects in the big boardrooms over the years.

All cleaned up and dressed up and ready, we assembled the crowd on the front steps of Susan's porch in front of Dan's (Cindy's Dan) camera and after he focused, he stepped into the crowd behind Cindy and using a remote, snapped pictures. Yes, Susan and I were front and center, all gowned up and ready to go. I will have that picture for the rest of my life. It's a rung on a ladder, a ladder that went down into the pit when I lived with Mom, and the first rung out of the pit was the day he pulled a pistol to protect me that bad day in Louisiana ahead of the hurricane.

I didn't get to sit on the stage at graduation. I only had this one year at this school, and before I got here I was a dropout. But I was smiling. One of the sweetest girls in the world was up there on the stage, Susan, and she was glowing, part of it because she was a salutatorian, part because in a week from today, she'd be on her way to a honeymoon with her new husband. I was in the thundering herd. I looked carefully across the crowd. It's easy searching for our group. Just look for the redheads. There aren't that many, and there's certainly gonna only be ONE Cindy, and she's gonna be in the middle of our group. Found 'em. Just a little tiny anchor to my life, that bunch. Nice to have anchors, it is.

If you've seen one high school graduation, you've seen 'em all. We had the Invocation, the National Anthem, the Alma Mater, the three hundred unruly students, their rowdy families and friends, and the principal and the high school staff did their level best to keep the ceremony somewhat stately and civil and solemn. Tried hard. Succeeded only slightly. After the speech by the local congressman and the valedictory speech, they distributed awards to the honors students and to those who had scholarships. My sister Susan was one of those. Glowing.

Then it was time for the 'cattle call', as Alan termed it, where each of us dutifully trooped onto the stage to receive our diplomas. All I can say is that the nation won't be suffering a clown shortage in the coming decades because I saw several aspirants to the trade up there on stage as they received diplomas. You have to understand that tonight was as far in education as a lot of them were going, and with a few of my classmates, I knew that they were the first in their families to graduate from high school.

Finally I shuffled forward to get my certificate. As I reached for it, I remembered Cindy telling me that her knees got weak. Cindy. Little Miss I Don't Know Where I Am in College. Weak-kneed over a high school diploma. And now I know why. I smiled, shook the principal's hand. Got a wink. That was for me. Special. "Mizz Tina, I wish we'd had you longer," he'd told me in the hall a week ago. "You've pushed Susan to new heights, and I really think if you two had collaborated a couple of years, you'd have to do the valedictory speech as a duet."

I told Alan that next year, on the first day of school, we're sending a gift basket to the office.

And the graduation is OVER!

We're in the parking lot, me, Alan, Terri, Susan's bunch, including some extended family we know, Nikki and her Dan, Cindy and her Dan, and I actually had tears running down my cheeks. Yes, Susan and I were going off to college together, but there are a bunch of other kids that I'm gonna miss. Email. Thank God for email. And cellphones and skype.

The next day we stood at the airport and watched Nikki and Cindy and their respective Dans take off, headed for their homes. "I'm flying more of it this time," Nikki said. "Dan watches really close." She giggled.

"Dan still does that sometimes," Cindy said. "He worries about my feet slipping off the pedals."

I'm thinking that when the first starship is designed, either it's not gonna HAVE pedals, or the seat is going to adjust down to fit five foot three redheads.

Cindy did the take-off. She always does a different one. This time she tells us it's gonna be a 'short field' takeoff. The numbers on her Cessna 180 are pretty close to our Cessna 182, and I know she's sitting with less than full fuel and just her and her husband and a bit of luggage, so they're really light. When she lines up on the runway, I see the plane's elevators go up as the engine spins to full power, and she lets the brakes go, and she's rolling. She lets the tail up on its own and tail low, they're off the ground in almost nothing. Nikki's Mooney is right behind them, and it's neat to see that thing take off and after he's at the end of the runway, when wheels go up and off they go. It's neat, too, when Nikki says "it's faster than yours."

After we watch our friends disappear, I guess the gravity of the situation finally struck me. I sort of fell backward against Alan and grabbed his hands and pulled his arms around me.

"Something wrong, baby?" he asked.

I shook my head. That means he buries his nose in my hair. "I… Baby, I'm a high school graduate. It's a milestone. A rite of passage. I can go out and get a job at Wal-Mart and get on with life."

"No you can't," he said. "You're my wife and the only way you'll work at Wal-Mart is if you convince me that it's your life's dream. Otherwise you're going to college."

Susan came bouncing up. "You guys having a moment?" she said.

"Just a little one, Sis," I replied. "Didja think about how many kids there last night have just seen the last school they'll ever see?"

"Some of 'em make that choice, girl," Susan said. "Not us."

"Some of 'em have no choice," I said. "I think of myself before…" I tugged Alan's arms tighter around me.

Alan kissed the top of my head. "Little one," he said, (first time he said that in front of Susan, she almost melted with 'awwwww') "we're not going to solve that one any time soon."

"You solved it for me," I said.

"And that's the way it's supposed to be," Susan smiled. "People do that for people they love." She tugged Jason's hand. "Right, baby?"

"Dan did it for Cindy, you know."

"I know," I said. "And Nikki, her Dan did it for her."

"And in every one of those cases, the guy got rescued, too," Alan said.

"How do you know," I asked as we got in my car.

"Guys talk, too, you know," he said. "I didn't know I needed you until you showed up. And every day that you were around, I felt like I needed you more and more, and I couldn't admit it because of what I told Bill Hurley, that I wasn't rescuing you to make you a sex toy."

"And yet here I am, and if part of my relationship to you is 'sex toy', then you need to understand that such an idea is a two-way street. A girl needs her toys too, you know."

This is a conversation we have pretty often. I felt a certain physical attraction to Alan the day I saw him standing handcuffed in the parking lot of that restaurant and it was the first time I ever remember feeling any sort of physical twinge over a guy. Alan tried to write that feeling off as something generated by the rush of events that day, but I know better. Still, I tried NOT to do anything about it because at the time I just KNEW that he was a nice guy who was doing a good deed. Didn't know that he was fighting feelings too.

But I DO have those feelings, and you know, even though at school I count all varieties of guys as friends and aquaintenances from the wormiest archtype of a bookworm to the top of the team jocks, black white, TWO Asians and an handful of 'Hispanics'.

Yeah, Jose' said, when I used that term, "Oh, no, chica! I'm Hispanic-Mexican and Raul an' Maria, they're Hispanic-Guatemalan. You gotta get it RIGHT, you know. We don't ALL look the same, si'?" Jose's got a journo scholarship. Si'? The accent and the barrio shtick? All fake. His family has been in the country for four generations. Dad is a manager for the utility company. But he's 'Hispanic'.

Anyway, none of those guys caused even a twinge in my mind or my heart or that little tingly place where that thing started with Alan.

Having Terri with us saved him from a particularly violent rape scene when we got back to the apartment. At least until Terri said, "Dad, Tina, I'm goin' over to Shara's apartment!" Shara was a similarly aged neighbor girl. I and Alan had met Shara's mom, single, natch, but a decent sort, one of those poor souls caught up in 'love' until the other party decided that 'love' was overridden by the hassles of a kid hanging around and the need for a steady income.

"I'll call before I come back," Terri said. Sometimes I think she's TOO darned perceptive.

When the door closed, THEN Alan got raped. I tried playing a role, blackmailer exacting payback for some imagined wrong, but I only go so far before I just say, "Forget it, Alan Dean, and DO me!" And I get 'done' quite nicely, thank you.

We just stepped out of the shower when the phone rang. I answered.

"Hi, Tina, is it okay if Shara comes over for a while?" Terri asked. There was giggle in that voice.

"Yes, she can come over, sweetie," I replied, then I turned to Alan. Get dressed nice. Terri's bringing Shara over.

In a few minutes the door swung open and Terri and her little brown-haired friend dropped on the floor in front of the TV, Xbox controllers in hand. Terri turned and smiled at me and Shara said, "Hi, Mizz Tina!"

"Hi, Shara. Is this what you two plan on doing all afternoon?"

Terri giggled. "It's an option. But that other animated movie's out, too and I bet that Jason wants to see it."

"So does your dad, baby."

"What about my beloved step-mom and bestest friend ever?" Terri said.

"Terri Addison, If I go into your room five minutes from now and there are no toys on the floor and your bed is in some configuration that counts as 'being made', I will talk to your dad."

Squeal! "C'mon, Shara. Help me straighten my room! We're goin' to the movies!"

I heard thumps and laughter and giggles and then, "Tina, come check us out!"

An hour and a half later we were at the early feature of the local theater. I had two little kids on one side and one big one on the other and I laughed along with them all, even though Alan's love of these things is just a little bit weird. But it's weird in the best of ways. I love hearing him laugh. What's even funnier is running into Susan and Jason at the same show.

This was the week of Susan's wedding. No, sensible friend Susan wasn't doing the 'princess for a day' style wedding. She wanted a simple, understated ceremony at her family's home church, with a reception in the church social hall. No release of white doves. No fifty-foot gauze train. No limousines, no swarm of bridesmaids in matching taffeta.

The music was a neat duo we knew from high school who could play guitars with the best of them, and had voices like Irish angels.

The dress was white, and SHOULD be white in the traditional sense, because Susan was still a virgin. "But if I spend more'n five minutes in that trailer with 'im, it's liable to be all over," she told me. "I look at YOU and I know what that little smile is when you come to school in the morning, and it's MY turn!" That was Susan talking.

Cindy talking was, "Tina, poor Jason might not live through the honeymoon. Susan's gonna kill 'im."

Me, I think Jason will survive. Alan did. And when we dropped THAT barrier, I remember days of a sexually satisfied blur. And Alan's got fifteen years on Jason.

Bridesmaids? Me and Cindy and Nikki. And we figured that Terri was a little too much for JUST a flower girl, so we acquired a velvet pillow for the ring and made her ring-bearer, too. A seven year old smirk and "I'm multi-tasking, yaknow!"

Me and Susan and Terri and Mizz Kathy spent the week running around getting things lined up for Susan's day.

"It's not MY day," Susan said. "It's as much Mom and Dad's day. It's FAMILY day. It's the tradition that builds Western Civilization. Didn't you read Cindy's research paper?"

"EVERYBODY read Cindy's paper," I said. "It's charming. Makes good points."

"So this is NOT a day for me. It's a day for ALL of us. Jason and I commit to each other in front of friends and family and God, and in doing so, we celebrate the great marriages that have brought us here, and the great marriages around us. Like Mom and Dad, and you and Alan and the rest of the gang."

"Okay," I said. "But you're gonna be the one in the white dress, standing front and center when it's over."

Giggle. Sigh. "Yes. I am." Susan smiled.

And that's why on Friday we were back at the airport, waiting for the same two planes to show up.

# Christina – Conclusion

Christina's turn:

I'm ALMOST on top of the world. I'll reach the peak, I'm sure, when I watch my best friend (holding first place in a tie with Cindy Richards and Nikki Granger) Susan get married tomorrow.

Love. It's meant to be shared. Nine months ago, life as I know it was over. Today I'm standing on the ramp of a little country airport with my HUSBAND and my friends, waiting for more friends to fly in.

Beside me is a neat little seven year old girl that halfway wants to call me 'Mom' and the other half of her wants to call me 'Sis' and I'm happy about that.

I have this family now. We're spread over three different states for the moment, but I have ROOTS that go back to Louisiana and Alabama and, looking at Susan, blonde, smiling, happier that the law allows, right here in Tennessee.

I'm a high school graduate. Nine months ago I was a high school dropout. And I have college ahead of me.

My cellphone rang. I didn't recognize the number. That's unusual. I know everybody who know my number, except for the occasional robocall. I punched it. "Hello, this is Tina."

The voice on the other end was female, with an exotic accent. "Mizz Christina Addison, am I correct?"

Now I was curious. "Yes ma'am."

"I am Aneeta Patel, with the Auburn University School of Engineering. I have your application in front of me."

Cindy! I KNEW this was Cindy's doing. Let's see where THIS was going. "Yes, ma'am. Is there a problem?" By this time, Alan was looking at me, and Susan was too, her face showing curiousity. I mouthed "Auburn".

"Oh, no, Mizz… You like being called Tina?"

"Yes ma'am,"

"Your application does not seem to point your accomplishments. It was in among our normal student applications. Do you know Mizz Cindy Richards?"

"Yes ma'am," I said. Darned right I know Cindy, I thought to myself. And there's no end to what happens in HER universe. "She's my friend, well, we call each other sisters."

"That's a pleasant thing. She called me and requested that I look at your application. Um, do you also know Susan Carter?"

"Yes ma'am. She's standing right here beside me." I mouthed "you TOO!" to Susan. Got a squeal. "She won't be Susan Carter after tomorrow. She's getting married."

"Congratulations to her. I am impressed with both your records. I will be calling her next. We at Auburn would like to get a chance to interview the two of you before July. Is that possible?"

"Yes ma'am," I said. "You tell me when you want me there. Susan's gonna be on her honeymoon next week or so, but by mid-summer, we should be living in Auburn, Alabama."

"The business Cindy tells me about, correct?"

"Yes ma'am," I said. "Our husbands."

Mizz Patel laughed softly. "Cindy tells me some stories. I shall look forward to meeting you in person."

"Oh, gosh, yes!" I squealed. "I've heard about YOU from Cindy. We'll meet soon. Are you calling Susan next?"

"Yes."

"Good! I get to watch. Thank you so much for calling me."

"Oh, don't thank ME," Mizz Patel said. "You might want to thank Cindy, however. Good bye, Mizz Tina. We shall see you soon."

"Good bye Mizz Patel. And thank you." I punched the 'end' button and looked at Susan. "You're next."

Alan smiled. "Cindy again?"

"Cindy again."

Susan's phone rang. She was on the phone when the loudspeaker for the office radio hissed and the sound of Cindy's radio call announced their position.

"This is NOT real," I said, pulling Alan against me. "Life is NOT supposed to be this good. Auburn wants us there for interviews."

"Cindy called…" Alan started.

"Mizz Aneeta Patel, in charge of special recruitment for the Auburn School of Engineering," I said.

"Damn!" Alan spat.

Jason was watching Susan grinning her way through the same conversation I just endured. Susan. Bubbly, always smiling Susan. Holding the phone to her ear, and I KNOW she's straining to suppress that little squeak that she does when she's really happy.

"Uh-huh. Oh gosh, Mizz Patel," she said. "If it weren't for this guy standing next to me, I'd be down there NEXT week!" Pause. "Uh-huh. He's gonna be working with you, too. He's got a technology degree that he wants to turn into a double-'E'." Pause. "Uh-huh. As a matter of fact, He WILL be there. He's gonna bring me." Susan's eyes cut to Jason. "Uh-huh. We have all the stuff that's in his application package, too." She finally lost control of the squeak. "Eeek! Oh, gosh, yes. Uh-huh." Pause. "Yeah, I'll tell Cindy you said 'hi'. " Pause, "Oh, gee, Mizz Patel. Thank you for calling! Bye!"

And that's one of the reasons we almost strangled Cindy when she got out of her plane.

"Like I don't have enough on my mind," Susan squealed.

"Mizz Patel's one of the nicest people you'll ever meet," Cindy said. And why are you worrying? You're ALREADY in! This is just to see if you can get a head start." She giggled. "And I KNOW you can!" The little redheaded pixie got this evil glint in those green eyes of hers when she looked towards Jason. "Unless you're just TOO distracted."

Susan sighed. We knew exactly what Cindy was suggesting.

Nikki's Mooney was taxiing in, and in a couple of minutes she joined us and we caught her up on the phone calls. Add one more to the squeals and giggles.

See! Life just gets a little bit better!

(Author's note: I had to end this story somewhere. This is the end of "Christina" as a separate story. If you've enjoyed her life so far, then I point you to the first chapter of the new story, "Community", published here under my pen name. There you will find Tina and her sisters.

Thank you for reading,

Oyster)