





entire county bar none, and after the first time we kissed I knew I wasn't goin' nowhere else. Hell yeah.

Me? I ain't never been called cute. Every other kind of four-letter word, sure, but never cute. I got blue eyes, hair that's nearly black, a mullet... hell yeah, I got a mullet... a fiery glare that can make grown men shit their pants when I get pissed off, and a well-developed sense of wantin' to protect my friends and my gal from the riff-raff crawlin' around town drinkin' beer and raisin' hell come payday. Of course, I'm one of 'em when the mood hits me.

But I had a job... and when I say 'had' I mean I lost it on this flippin' perfect day. I used to be a greasemonkey at Burton 'Toe-' Cutter's auto repair shop. That's right, I'm a mechanic... and a damned good one, too. Ain't nothin' ever busted I couldn't fix with the right tools or my bare hands if I had to. I got many skills and I use 'em all the flippin' time.

Crap, listen to me yappin'. Ain't been yappin' this much since I got high on Mesca once. Before my Saturday turned to shit, it started out pretty dog-gone great...

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The relative peace and quiet inside the sixty-foot trailer home to Rose Kowalski and Billie Jo Tucker was shattered by the electronic alarm clock trying to beep its housing off.

Not yet fully awake, Rose grunted and reached behind her to smack the offending appliance into next week. She only succeeded in smacking it onto the floor where it kept beeping and beeping and beeping. "Crap," she mumbled, trying to scoot away from the wall to reach down onto the floor so she could silence the alarm clock forever.

To reach the floor, she had to slip past Billie Jo's sleeping form. The smooth, bare thigh that her hand came into contact with underneath the covers proved too tempting, and she soon forgot all about the alarm clock.

The clock knew when it had lost the battle, and after a few more beeps, it gave up the unequal struggle and rolled over onto its side to die.

Getting up was the furthest from Rose's mind. It may have been six-thirty AM on a working Saturday - Burton 'Toe' Cutter made his employees work Tuesday through Saturday with Mondays off to compensate - but the nude form lying on her side next to Rose meant so infinitely more to her than work ever could.

Rose's hand crawled up the smooth thigh until it reached Billie Jo's world class rear that simply had to get a little attention. From there, the golden curls that Rose loved so dearly beckoned.

Moving further on and upward, she slid her fingertips across the smooth tummy until they reached the underside of Billie Jo's breasts.

Before Rose could go any further, Billie Jo stirred and smacked her lips a couple of times. She grunted when she realized just what it was that had pulled her out of her dreams. "Honey, you lookin' for more? I thought I gave you plenty last night?" she mumbled, taking Rose's hand in her own.

"Aw, you sure did. Naw, you were naked, and I was naked and... you know, beautiful things happen to naked people," Rose husked back, moving her hand up a little bit so she could reach - and cup - Billie Jo's left breast. While she spoke, she leaned in and began to nibble on the bare shoulder that was right under her nose.

Billie Jo grinned and was about to return the favor when she happened to look beyond her partner and spotted the empty shelf where the alarm clock was supposed to be. "Oh... what's... where's the alarm clock?"

"On the floor, darlin'. Who gives a flip?"

"What time is it?" Billie Jo said and leaned over the edge of the bed so she could see the clock face. "Holy shit, it's five past! Rose, we're late!"

"Ah, don't bother me none. C'mon, let's get down to business," Rose said and tried to hold onto her lover, but the lover in question had other plans.

Billie Jo swept her bare legs over the side of the bed. Taking the covers with her, she revealed Rose's nude form with the full but not heavy breasts, her toned torso and legs, the tattoo of a rose on the right side of her belly, and the neatly trimmed patch of black hair just south of her pierced navel.

"Awwww, baby," Rose whined, but it didn't work. Instead, she grinned as she watched Billie Jo's gorgeous globes wiggle across the bedroom floor and into the short hallway beyond it. When it didn't appear her partner was coming back at once, Rose scooted over to the edge of the bed and sat up.

She yawned and scratched herself here and there for a little while until she figured that she might as well get the day started. Her Lady Boxers - the most dumb-ass product name on the planet according to Rose, but she liked the fit nonetheless - were on the carpet where they had fallen the evening before, and she swiftly eased them on, remembering to slap the elastic band against her skin so she could make sure they were on tight.

Moments later, Billie Jo came back into the bedroom wearing an over-sized T-shirt that just barely covered her rear. She appeared to be looking around for something, but the item of her desire wasn't revealed until she reached down between the bed and the wall and found her old panties. Her expression proved their freshness wasn't too impressive, so she threw them into the laundry basket, opened the underwear drawer and found a new pair instead.

Rose grinned saucily at her squeeze's domestic routines. "Baby, I still haven't given up hope here..." she said and put out her arms.

The honey-blond Billie Jo grinned back and stepped into Rose's arms. "Morning, honey. Thank you for last night."

"Thank me? Hell, thank you! And good mornin'."

Billie Jo leaned in and gave Rose a strong kiss on the lips. "No, thank you. I was so tense all of yesterday, but you made me mellow out."

"Aw, that's me all right," Rose said with an impossibly wide grin. "Ain't no car ever made I can't fix, ain't no woman ever made I can't give some kicks!"

Billie Jo rolled her eyes and let out a condescending snort, but she took the sting out of her response by giving Rose another kiss on the lips. "When we get back from the Monster Truck festival tonight, honey, I promise I'll give you a little trip to heaven."

"Can't wait. Aw hell, I suppose I better get washed up and take a dump before I go to work," Rose said and got up from the bed. "You makin' coffee?"

"Yeah, it's on as we speak," Billie Jo said and pointed her thumb over her shoulder.

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By the time Rose had completed a point-by-point shower - she always went first in the morning, but she knew they didn't have enough water for Billie Jo if she spent too much so she always kept to the basics - she shuffled back into the bedroom to get dressed.

It didn't take her long to put on her underwear, her white muscle shirt advertising a country rock artist from Canada called Buck 65, her black jeans with a brown leather belt and a brass belt buckle, and finally her workboots. As she brushed her mullet in front of the mirror, she couldn't help but flex just to see if she still had it.

With everything in place, she grinned at her reflection and put the brush into one of the drawers before she mashed her indispensable Bulldog Mack trucker hat down onto her black locks. Once it was on just right, she took her wristwatch and her wallet and left the bedroom.

Tying the broad, vintage leather band around her wrist, she went past the diminutive kitchen where the coffee maker was still blubbering merrily. Before she took a mug and filled it to the brim, she cast a brief glance down the other end of the trailer where Billie Jo was sitting at a table eating breakfast and reading yesterday's Herald. "Baby, ya want some more coffee while I'm here?" she said, holding up her mug.

"No thanks! I'm good!" Billie Jo replied, pointing at her own mug.

"Hell yeah, ya are," Rose said with a chuckle as she put some coffee whitener into the mug and snatched a spoon to stir the whole thing.

Billie Jo folded down the newspaper and shot her partner a curious glance. "Whassat?" she said as she reached for her bowl of oatmeal.

"Oh, nothin'," Rose said, grinning in the sort of crooked, disarming way that had become her trademark. She discarded the idea of taking some of the oatmeal that was still in the pot on the stove and settled for cutting off a slice of bread. She quickly slapped some cold sausage onto it and carried everything into the living room.

"Musta been something?"

"Nah," Rose said and sat down on the opposite side of the table.

Billie Jo narrowed her eyes and briefly stuck out her tongue. "ANYway," she said as she scooped up a spoonful of oatmeal, "I just checked the news while you were showering. The weather's gonna be fine tonight. I think J.D.'s probably gonna have to get the water trucks out so we won't choke on the dust out at the fairgrounds."

"Mmmm," Rose said around a bite of the sausage-covered bread, "sounds like there's a buck or twenty to be made there. I'll give him a call later on."

Billie Jo smiled and returned to her newspaper and her oatmeal. Rose smiled back before she let her eyes drift across the small but comfortable trailer she had been invited into one fine evening three years previously.

Though she had made a little bit of a mark on the furniture and the decor, most of her old stuff from her old trailer had been too crappy to carry over so she had left everything for the nice fellow who had bought it.

Billie Jo's solid sense of what was cool and what was tacky was clearly visible by the elegant way the room was arranged. There wasn't anything out of place, and they had even managed to find a spot for Rose's old but functional LazyBoy armchair next to Billie Jo's rather more tasteful two-seater couch that had been a pre-inheritance gift from her mother when she had moved out.

The far wall of the trailer was a gallery with literally dozens of large and small snapshots and honest, framed photographs of their families. Rose's family was only in one photo, a somber affair with four grim-faced people who looked like they could barely stop shouting at each other for the time it had taken the photographer to snap the picture. Unfortunately, it was an accurate reflection of the truth.

As always, Rose got the sour burps from looking at the photo of her family so she quickly looked away and searched for something else to focus on. She found it in the shape of a faded, blue ribbon representing the only thing she had ever won anywhere: a relay running event that had taken place at the Harvest Fair in her hometown when she had been fifteen years old.

She had been too tall and too developed to run in the junior race so she had competed against the adults, some of whom weren't too pleased to see her there. The event had been sponsored by Pabst Blue Ribbon, and the prize for the winning team was a gift certificate for five cases of beer for each of the four runners. Her team won handsomely because of her long-legged stride, and she took home the gift certificate and the ribbon. Her father stole her winnings and drank all her beer, but at least she got to keep the blue ribbon.

Rose chuckled and returned to the present. She chewed down the rest of her breakfast and swallowed what was left in her coffee mug in a single gulp. "Baby, I'm done here so I think I'll go outside and admire my wheels for a little while. Just come out when ya ready to leave," she said, reaching over to tickle Billie Jo's hand that was still holding the newspaper from the day before.

Looking up, Billie Jo reached across the table to give Rose's hand a little squeeze. "Sure. Ten minutes and I'll be there... give or take," she said with a smile.

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Rose opened the front door and shuffled down the portable two-step aluminum staircase that she had bought for seven dollars at a tailgate sale. Outside, everything looked like it always did. The trailer park wasn't the largest she had ever lived in, but it was a good and safe zone where kids could play with each other without worrying about getting snatched by the boogeyman.

There weren't any hedges between the trailers, but the next row wasn't too close so it was still possible to have some privacy. Even so, Billie Jo felt most secure with the Venetian blinds closed whenever it got dark outside and Rose respected that.

After nodding a greeting to both their closest neighbors, Dale One and Dale Two - who had a German Shepherd named Dale Junior just to add to the confusion - Rose strolled over to her pride and joy, her royal blue 1994 Harley-Davidson Heritage Soft Tail Classic that she had bought third-hand from a customer at Cutter's Auto Repair for five thousand dollars. The customer felt the motorcycle had become too old and uneconomical compared to the newer models, but it was everything Rose had ever dreamt of. Because of the loan she'd had to get to finance the Harley even after selling her truck to Burton Cutter, the bank still owned it, but she considered it her property.

Pulling the protective tarp aside, she ran her fingers across the dusty, sculpted tank before she swung her leg over the side of the hog and got comfortable in the saddle. With a grin the size of a 1974 Plymouth, she grabbed the high handlebars and imagined herself cruising down the open road with Billie Jo in the back with her hands and legs firmly wrapped around the rider. The sun would shine, the exhaust would roar, the miles would fly past as they went from nowhere in particular to somewhere else entirely, and everything would be all right in her world.

Rose was so engulfed by the Harley that she didn't even notice Billie Jo coming down the aluminum steps wearing red Capris and a red-and-white polka dotted blouse with a low neckline

and short, puffy sleeves. Billie Jo had spent a good portion of a can of hair spray on her 'do and was looking the part of the drugstore sales clerk.

Billie Jo chuckled and tip-toed over to stand behind Rose. "Now that's what I call a shit-eatin' grin, honey," she whispered into Rose's ear. "You girls wanna be left alone to enjoy your afterglow or what?"

"Haw, haw... it's gonna be great, baby. It's gonna be so great," Rose said and reluctantly climbed off the Harley-Davidson. She soon had the protective tarp back on the hog and stepped away to dust off her hands.

"Tell me again why it can't run cleanly?" Billie Jo said, cocking her head as she looked at the covered Harley.

Rose put her arm around her partner's shoulders and began to stroll over to Billie Jo's red Chevrolet S10 truck. "Well, the fella I bought it from said it ran rough. When I took the engine apart to give it a thorough check, I noticed shavin's in the number two cylinder. Looks like the piston is scrapin' against the wall. Can't have that."

"Noooo, of course not," Billie Jo said, clearly not understanding the finer points of engine management.

The S10 was firmly Billie Jo's so she drove despite Rose itching to get behind the wheel - after all, the proud Rose was a driver-kinda woman, not a passenger-kinda woman. The resulting pout and puppy dog eyes didn't work on Billie Jo who climbed up into the driver's seat and slammed the door shut without a second glance at her partner's impressive efforts.

When Billie Jo turned the ignition key, the engine came to life and purred like a whole pack of kittens. "Thank you for making it run so smoothly, honey," she said as she selected Drive and took off down the dusty, gravelly path to the paved road beyond the trailer park.

"You're welcome. It's purrin' just like you," Rose said and scooted closer to Billie Jo so she could at least cop a feel or two during the fifteen minute drive.

Almost at once, Billie Jo put her foot back on the brake and pulled the truck to a halt. "Hon... you know how I feel about doing something that could take the attention away from the road. Please..."

"Yeah, okay... sorry," Rose said and scooted back across the seat. When Billie Jo still didn't carry on, Rose realized it was because she hadn't put on her seat belt. Smiling, she did so and made sure the honey-blond driver heard the metallic click.

Billie Jo nodded her appreciation and continued down the gravelly path.

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Once they made it to the intersection at the paved road, Billie Jo had to stop and wait for three eighteen-wheelers to go past, a black Mack RS with a silver tanker, a cabover Peterbilt with a regular reefer unit from Richard Olsen Hauling, and a GMC pulling a livestock trailer with three storeys worth of hogs.

"I wonder where they're going? We haven't seen three trucks together for years," Billie Jo said as she drove her S10 up onto the paved road to follow the three semis.

"To the fairgrounds, perhaps? Nah, not with live pigs. Dunno. Hey, ya wanna listen to some music?" Rose said and held a finger ready at the radio on the dashboard. When she got an affirmative grunt out of Billie Jo, she clicked the On button and waited for something to appear on the AM band.

"-Sinners will repent!" - *click* - "-but Jesus touched the crippled man's leg and he-" - *click* - "-version of the Holy Scriptures, yours for only-" - *click* - "-Joseph and the Virgin Mary-" - *click* - "-I was a sinner but Jesus saved me! Jesus saved me! Jesus can save you, too!" - *click*.

She finally found a music station where Johnny, Willie, Waylon and Kris sang about stealing a Silver Stallion, but just as she leaned back in the Chevrolet's comfortable seat to enjoy the music, the song faded out and the station went to commercials. "Okay, tryin' again," she said and clicked one more time. This time, she found a gal with a sexy whiskey voice singing about a Caroline Come-on, and that was more Rose's thing than the endless religious stations.

Agreeing with her partner's choice of music, Billie Jo reached over and turned up the volume to let the stirring country rock song boom through the S10's cabin.

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Five minutes later, Rose noticed that Billie Jo slowly went off the gas and that she glanced a little too much in the rear view mirror. Rose couldn't get a good angle in the wing mirror that was set for the shorter driver, so she turned around in the seat and looked through the Chevrolet's back window.

A cream police cruiser with several CB antennas and a blue-and-red light cluster on the roof followed them at thirty yards' distance, but it didn't seem too urgent. There was only one man in it, but Rose couldn't see if it was one of the deputies or Sheriff Holstein himself.

Billie Jo had the driver's side window rolled down, and though the Chevrolet's own engine and the three eighteen-wheelers they were following made plenty of noise, they could clearly hear the familiar sound of a high performance V8 come roaring towards them from somewhere up ahead. Moments later, a gray, black and red '84 Chevrolet Monte Carlo SS that Rose had worked hard on tuning to perfection came flying past them going the other way - straight past the police cruiser.

"Aw! Coop! Jimmy Cooper, ya dumb dick! The law is right there, man!" Rose said and thumped a fist into the seat. Behind the S10, the police cruiser came to a hard stop as the Monte Carlo

roared the other way on its fat BF Goodrich radials. Soon, the officer spun around and set off after the speeding performance car with the siren wailing and the lights in the roof cluster blinking red and blue.

Billie Jo grunted and slowed down even more as they came up to the Lincoln city limits. "And that's why I only ever go at forty-five," she said as the S10 went past the sign that someone had used for shotgun practice.

She soon had to slow down even further as all three semis pulled over to the side of the road by the Conoco station. As the red S10 went past the tail ender of the three, they spotted the driver of the lead truck up front step down onto the paved road and flag them down.

Billie Jo duly activated her turning signal and pulled over by the black truck.

When Rose could see the driver - who turned out to be a dark-haired woman in her late thirties wearing faded blue jeans and a Coors T-shirt - came up to her window, she rolled it down and stuck her elbow on the windowsill. "Howdy, pardner. Y'all be havin' a problem?" she said, tipping her Bulldog trucker hat.

"Sorta," the truck driver said in a western accent. "We need some juice but the Conoco station appears to be closed. You got another gas station around here somewhere that carries diesel?"

Rose craned her neck to look across the street. The gas station was in fact closed even though it was nearly half past seven. "Naw. You with the monster trucks comin' tonight?"

"No, we're en route to Torrance. We just happened to come together this way. Hey, love ya hat," the truck driver said and pointed at Rose's cap.

"Yeah? Bulldog Mack all the way."

"That's a big ten-four, buddy... five by five, all clean and green," the driver said and held out her fist so Rose could thump it.

After duly thumping the driver's fist, Rose grinned at the perplexed look on Billie Jo's face. She decided to let her in on the CB lingo, but it would have to be a little later. Grinning, she turned back to the other woman. "Naw, we ain't got no other gas station, but tell ya what... Cledus Bradley lives in a propped-up RV out back. I'm sure he's just overslept. If ya knock on the door long enough, he's bound to come out and sell ya some diesel."

"Yeah? Just knock on the door?"

"That's right," Rose said and sat up straight. "Hey, I can do it for ya if ya want...?"

The truck driver waved dismissively but stayed at the S10. "Naw, that won't be necessary. I'll do it in a little while. Thanks a whole lot... uh, I didn't catch your name? I'm Toni."

"Didn't say it, Toni. Hi, I'm Rose, this is my main squeeze Billie Jo. Say hello, Billie Jo," Rose said and tickled the Capri-clad thigh next to her.

Billie Jo chuckled and waved through the windscreen. "Hi!" she said loudly.

"Hi, Billie Jo. Nice to meet you both," the truck driver said and took a step back. "So... just knock on the RV door?"

"Just knock on the RV door, that's right," Rose said with a grin. When they received a big thumbs-up, Rose nudged Billie Jo's thigh again to let her know they could carry on.

Billie Jo checked her mirrors thoroughly before she signaled and drove off further into Lincoln.

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At face value, Lincoln wasn't much of a town. It was really only a single street - appropriately named Main Street - with a long line of two-storey buildings on one side, and the gas station, Cutter's Auto Repair Shop, the county court house, the jailhouse, the Veteran's Memorial Park and three churches on the other.

Each of the two-storey buildings had a store of some kind at street level, but the crisis years and the growing trend of rural depopulation meant that nearly half had been boarded up. Only the basic functions remained, like a high quality mom-and-pop diner, a seedy Bar & Grill where the riff-raff gathered every Saturday night, an all-purpose drugstore slash supermarket where Billie Jo worked, a hardware store, a few clothes boutiques and a large thrift store that had the most business of them all.

In between the stores, several alleys went down to the few houses built beyond Main Street, but they were as deserted as the others.

Billie Jo slowed down and pulled over to the curb in front of the drugstore. After she had turned off the engine, she unbuckled and reached out for Rose's thigh. "Now we can cuddle," she said with a grin, inviting Rose over by wagging an index finger.

"Aw yeah! Except... now we're parked outside where ya work, baby. They'll think I'm takin' advantage of ya," Rose said with a cheeky grin. The pull of her partner became too much to resist, and she scooted over and gave Billie Jo a thorough see-ya-later kiss right on the lips. "Have a nice day, baby. See ya at lunch?"

"But of course... I'll come over with something tasty like I always do," Billie Jo replied around Rose's succulent lips.

Rose made her presence felt by clawing Billie Jo's red Capris. "Yeah? Can't get no more tasty than these here tight pants, baby."

"Oh, you're such a goof today, Rose Kowalski..."

"But I'm your goof, honey-bunny," Rose said and claimed Billie Jo's lips in another kiss, though this one was far sweeter and more heartfelt.

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Crossing Main Street, Rose turned back and waved at Billie Jo who was waiting in the door to the drugstore for just such an eventuality - it wasn't much of a surprise given they did the same thing five days a week.

Rose strolled down Main Street whistling through her teeth when the first of the three eighteen-wheelers came the other way. The black Mack with the silver tanker saluted her by letting its airhorns sing, and Rose returned the favor by waving her Bulldog trucker hat.

It didn't take long for her to reach Cutter's Auto Repair Shop. The rundown and dilapidated driveway to the garage always gave her an acute case of depression. She knew Burton Cutter had plenty of money in the bank, but why he didn't invest some of it into fixing the house, the pavement and the busted-up rolling door that was smeared in graffiti was beyond her.

After taking a brief glance at the three old cars for sale that were parked in front of the building, she went around the corner behind the dilapidated house and moved past the garage itself. A low hut for the employees had been put up in the courtyard, and she kicked the door open to step inside - not out of malice, but because it was the only way to open the darn thing.

Inside the hut, the conditions weren't much better apart from the somewhat new A/C unit that one of Rose's colleagues had traded his entire collection of *Chrome Wheelz* for. The small office she walked into first was a study in non-descript with its bare walls - save for an empty message board and the ubiquitous Playmate of the Year poster - beat-up metal desk and old swivel-chair where the cushion was so threadbare the person sitting on it should watch out for sneak attacks by the springs.

The larger room beyond the office saw a bit more life with several colorful NASCAR and wrestling posters adorning the walls, a mismatched couch arrangement with three different chairs and a broken couch, and a severely scratched coffee table where one of the four legs had been replaced by a spent can of Quaker State motor oil.

On a sideboard up against the wall, a coffee machine was working its magic next to a water cooler, but even that aroma couldn't overpower the familiar smells of oil, gasoline, rubber and old exhaust fumes that came from the garage itself which was connected to the recreational room by a sliding door with a frosted glass window.

Rose looked around for her colleagues but didn't see any of them anywhere. Shrugging, she shuffled over to the sideboard and took a paper cup that she held up under the water cooler. While she waited for the cup to be filled, she glanced up at the posters and found a few old Playmates, a bumper sticker that said 'Vote for Dubya 2000', another one that said 'I got a shotgun. You got a problem?' and a promotional photo from GM Goodwrench of Dale Earnhardt winning the 1998 Daytona 500.

Movement at the sliding door behind her made her turn around and nod a greeting to Johnny Lee Norton, an early twenty-something fellow in olive green cargo pants and a black Lone Star Apparel T-shirt.

A good five inches shorter than Rose and skinny as a greyhound, Johnny Lee was the owner of an impressive mullet and a slightly less impressive mustache that he tried hard to grow though it never seemed to want to go beyond a row of dark, fuzzy downs. "Hey, Rose," he said in a fair voice as he reached out to thump fists with his older colleague.

"Hey, Johnny Lee," Rose said and duly thumped the younger man's fist. "What up?"

"Eh, not much. Darrell Junior called 'bout five minutes ago and said he was gonna come by with his Caddy."

Rose looked up towards the ceiling of the hut and let out a groan at the news that everyone's favorite fancy boy was coming over. To hide her annoyance, she gulped down the cool water and crumpled up the paper cup. "Hell, what's he done to Big Daddy Yates' wheels now? Busted a headlight again? Remember when he did that? Mercy sakes, I never thought I'd hear a grown man whine like that."

"I remember," Johnny Lee said with a chuckle. He scratched his ear as he thought back to the embarrassing situation.

A honking outside pulled the two mechanics back to the present. "Aw hell..." Rose said with a drawn-out groan, "I know that honk... Junior's here already. Where the hell's Harold when we need 'im?"

"Dunno, Rose. He ain't called in sick or nothin'," Johnny Lee said with a shrug.

"Burton's in his office?"

"He was when I got here, yeah. Looked like he'd stay there, too. He was playing solitaire."

Rose looked at her younger colleague for a few seconds. She considered the possibility of telling him to deal with Darrell Yates, Jr., but knew it would be unfair to the young man. Groaning, she patted Johnny Lee's shoulder and pulled the sliding door aside so she could tackle the beast head-on.

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## CHAPTER 2

Rose here... I just gotta add my two cents worth. Now, y'all probably thinkin' that I'm bein' too hard on young Mista Yates, that I'm bein' jealous of his money... scratch that, his Daddy's

money... of his fancy Cadillac Escalade and of his slick appearance that usually includes a huntin' jacket with them fancy patches on his elbows and a dog-gone ascot of all things. The short answer is, no I ain't.

He and his high-falootin' family 've been in this area for decades. They're New Money from up north somewhere. I don't give a shit how they made their fortunes, but I do give a shit how they're treatin' the rest of us hard-workin' folks here. And they're treatin' us like their flippin' housemaids sometimes.

Naw, I ain't jealous of him. I hate his flippin' guts with a vengeance, tho'. And ya know why?

'Cos he made a move on my cutie-pie, that's why. Sure 'nuff, at last year's Harvest Fair, he slipped his sticky fingers onto my Billie Jo's ass cheeks and gave 'em a little squeeze. Now, I told ya I punched a dumb dick's lights out for gropin' my boobs so y'all can imagine what I was gonna do to Darrell Yates, Jr. for doin' that to my girl.

At the very least, I was gonna tie his naked ass to the flagpole down in the Memorial Park and let him hang there upside-down for a couple-a hours. Failin' that, I was gonna send him a rattlesnake by registered mail. I was gonna do plenty of things.

Trouble was I didn't do a damn thing.

Why? Or, more to the point, why not?

Money, son. If I beat Darrell Junior to a pulp - and I still wanna, don't get me wrong - he'd call Big Daddy Yates who'd call Burton Toe-Cutter who'd fire my ass so fast my flippin' feet wouldn't touch the ground.

It ain't the job as such, it's the money. If I don't got no money, I can't support Billie Jo. If I can't support Billie Jo, I ain't worthy of her. It's really quite that simple. With her workin' at the drugstore, she already makes more greenery than I do, but I usually get enough tips and shit on the side to make up that deficit.

So I did nothin'... except turn into a yellow-bellied coward. Now, I regret the decision of doin' nothin' then, tho Billie Jo did give me one hell of a sweet Louisiana Hayride later that night for actin' all mature and holdin' back like a grown-up and shit.

ANYhow, now you know where Darrell Junior and me are at. Ain't life grand?

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Inside the garage, Rose pressed the red button and watched the electric rolling door slide upwards with jerking steps and plenty of squeaking from the chain drive. The old Plexiglas windows rattled and shook like they didn't know whether to stay in or fall out.

Though Burton Cutter wouldn't spend a dime on the exteriors, the tools and accessories they had at their disposal were clean and in good shape. The pneumatic lifts all worked as did the engine cranes and the exhaust hoses - which wasn't a given in that business.

While the door rolled up, Rose glanced around the near-empty garage. The only vehicle in for service was a truck whose owner had abused the automatic transmission to the point where it had stripped a cog. A new auto-box would cost more than the value of the truck so they had been commissioned to do a full renovation of the old unit.

The thirty-three year old Darrell Yates, Jr. was waiting outside in his bronze Cadillac Escalade. As soon as the door had opened enough for the tall vehicle to fit through, he rolled the expensive SUV into the garage and up to the nearest lift like he was in a hurry.

Rose took a step back and let out a long whistle at the sorry state of the once-pristine automobile. The front left of the bumper, the left headlight cluster, the near-side fender and the fancy two-tone lightweight wheel all bore visible battle scars. The wheel wobbled as Junior drove it into the garage so she figured the suspension or the steering rod had been damaged too.

Darrell jumped out of the SUV and rubbed his weak chin several times. As always, he was dressed like he was late for a meeting at the Country Club: dark blue pants, a dark green three-quarter length hunting blazer with fashionable leather patches on the elbows, and finally a cream-colored shirt with wide lapels. His trademark ascot was there as well but the fancy rag was all askew around his throat. His thick, blond hair was heavily gelled as it invariably was, but most unusually, there were several strands out of place.

"Howdy, Junior," Rose said and pushed her trucker hat back from her forehead. "Boy, you sure as shit made a mess of it this time. Whatcha do, misjudge the distance to the wall between the garages out at the mansion?"

Darrell gave her a sideways glance before he looked back at his SUV with a face that slowly turned redder.

"Ya did, didntcha? Mercy, Junior. Hey..." - *sniff, sniff* - "are you loaded? What the hell, man, it ain't even eight o'clock in the flippin' mornin' and ya already hoppin' on brew!"

"I didn't go to bed last night, okay? It's not early, it's late," Junior said and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his blazer.

"Yeah, okay," Rose said and scratched her forehead. "I ain't gonna find a big-city bearded clam sleepin' it off in the back, am I?"

Darrell clearly didn't know what that meant so he turned towards the mechanic and shot her a puzzled glance. "A wh- what? What's a beard-"

"A hooker, Junior. You ain't got no hooker in there, do ya?"

"Lawrd, no!" the man said and immediately put his hands in the air like he was trying to escape from a fate worse than a firing squad.

"Lawrd, no... of course not," Rose mocked, but Darrell was too upset to notice. "Ain't nothin' we got in stock. None of it... but I can beat out the dents in the bumper and the fender awright. Remove the shards and change the bulbs. That sorta shit. I can fix it, but it's gonna cost ya. Caddy parts are expensive. That two-tone wheel alone's gonna cost ya plenty."

"The price doesn't matter," Junior croaked.

Rose grunted and shot him a dark glare. "Yeah, whatever ya say, Junior. That front wheel's another story, tho'. It wobbled when ya drove in here so I'd say the suspension is screwed all to hell."

"It wobbled quite badly on my way down here..."

"I'll bet it did," Rose said and crouched down next to the wheel in question to see for herself. She didn't even need to yank it around all that hard for it to wobble on the axle.

Junior dug into a pocket to find a kerchief that he used to dab his ruddy brow. "But you can fix it, right?"

"Hell yeah, I can. Ya forgettin' who ya talkin' to?"

"No, no..." Junior said and looked around. "Today?"

"Hell yeah."

"Good. I'd, uh... like you to do that. Thank you."

Rose chuckled darkly and tapped her knuckles against the dented fender. The buckled sheet metal didn't pose a problem for her, even if they didn't have the items in stock - they had a great, big sledgehammer that was simply begging to be let loose on such an expensive vehicle. "Why, ya certainly welcome, Mista Darrell Yates, Jr.," she said in a voice that just crept over the line and into mocking her customer.

Darrell didn't notice. Instead, he looked around for something that Rose didn't know what was and couldn't be bothered to ask about. "Uh... Rose... how can I get home? I'm supposed to have lunch with Mr. Yates in a little while."

Rose knew Junior always referred to his father that way; the only person the young whippersnapper treated with any kind of respect - although it was most likely borne of fear rather than hero worship. "Shit, I dunno, Junior. Ask Mr. Cutter. Maybe he can loan you one of the three cars out front. I know the chocolate brown Dodge Coronet's gassed up and ready to go."

"That old, filthy piece of seventies junk? Who the hell would buy such a crap-mobile, anyhow? It's already dead, you might as well take it apart now."

The muscles in Rose's jaw worked hard at Junior's words but she succeeded in keeping her gall inside. "Yeah, well, that car you call a crap-mobile could be a good set of wheels for plenty o' people, Junior... if they could afford it."

"Yeah? What's the price? Twenty-eight dollars and fifty cents? Ah, to hell with that. Can't you drive me home, Rose?"

"I ain't got no wheels, Junior. Sorry," Rose said with a broad, ya-ain't-gettin'-no-favors-outta-me kind of grin.

Darrell seemed to accept the defeat as he stuffed his hands down his blazer pockets and shuffled around on the spot. "All right," he eventually said, nodding. "I'll ask Burton."

"You do that. And while you do that, I'll get started on ya Caddy," Rose said and strode over to pull the nearest toolbox closer to the Escalade.

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An hour and a half later, the garage was bustling after the third mechanic, Harold Young, had brought in a Toyota Tundra hanging off the back of their wrecker truck.

Rose, Johnny Lee and Harold were busy working on their various projects, and the spirits were generally high save for the occasional inventive cussword when a wrench slipped or a bolt was rusted onto a brake rotor.

A boom box was blasting away playing country hits from a home-made CD, and Harold and Rose sang along to the old classics. You Are My Sunshine, Blanket On The Ground, Rhinestone Cowboy and The Most Beautiful Girl in particular were big sing-alongs. Johnny Lee was too young to know many of the songs though he had actually helped Harold with finding them on YouTube, converting the files and compiling the CD.

When a gal with a sexy voice sang about the night they drove old Dixie down, Rose put away the pneumatic wrench and wiped her damp brow with the sleeve of her black, protective jacket that she wore over her white muscle shirt to keep it clean. The dented fender was ready to come off the Cadillac, but she needed a break before she went on. "Hey, Harold?" she said, leaning against the Escalade's door.

"Yeah?" the third mechanic said, moving back from the Toyota's open hood holding a badly frayed V-belt. Harold Young was a handsome man in his late fifties with a neatly kept white beard and graying hair. On the left side of his face from high on his cheek and up to his receding hairline above his temple, oddly colored skin offered visual proof that he had been too close to a bad gasoline fire a few years earlier.

"Would it be possible to get a copy of that CD? That's some mighty fine music right there... just the thing Billie Jo likes to dance to on a Saturday night," Rose said, wiping her sweaty brow on her sleeve.

"I hafta ask the genius first," Harold said with a braying laugh. "Johnny Lee...?"

"Sure thing, fellas," the young man said, sitting at a table where he was using a plastic washbowl and a soft brush to wash and scrub the cogs he had taken out of the automatic transmission. "I made it as an MP3-disc to maximize the music capacity dontchaknow. It's got a hundred and fifty megs on it so it'll only take me a minute or two to make you a copy."

Rose nodded a thank you but her blank stare showed that she was somewhat puzzled by the young man's comments. "Aw yeah, sounds great, Johnny Lee, but... I ain't too sure 'bout that MP3 stuff. Ya think my old CD player will play that?"

Johnny Lee stopped what he was doing and looked at his older colleague to see if she was joking. When he established she wasn't, he grunted and returned to his brushing. "Well, I could make it as a couple-a old-fashioned CD-Rs instead, Rose," he said and briefly looked up.

"Old-fashioned? I'll give you an old-fashioned ass-whoopin'," Rose mumbled under her breath in a good-natured way. She grinned at the young man and prepared to return to the fender.

Before she could go to work removing the dented item, Harold shuffled over to her and leaned against it so she had no choice but to extend her break.

"Rose, ain't you and that good li'l woman o' yours ever gonna get hitched?" Harold said and looked at Rose with a fatherly expression in his pale-blue eyes. "I follow the news, I know it got legal for you gals to marry in this state earlier in the year. I mean, wouldn't there be benefits in askin' for her hand?"

"Yeah, there probably would be, Harold... but a weddin' would be shit-churnin'ly expensive. Can't afford no ring or nothin'. Our finances don't allow it at the mo," Rose said with a despondent shrug.

Harold nodded and moved away from the fender. "I hear ya. But Rose... don't wait too long, ya hear? A doll like Billie Jo won't wait forever."

"Aw, she ain't like that, Harold. We're together."

"Yeah, but wasn't she together with another gal when you met her? And didn't you put a twinkle in her eye that made her reconsider her future? You know damn well it could happen again if ya ain't careful," Harold said with a wink before he moved back to the Toyota.

Rose followed her colleague with a severe squint until she realized he was only speaking the truth. Grunting, she turned back to the Escalade and went to work taking off the damaged fender. "Billie Jo ain't like that at all... she loves me," she mumbled under her breath as she swept her fingers over the bolts to test their power of resistance.

From the boom box, Trouble In Mind, Willie Nelson's uptempo country rock song with Bonnie Raitt and Leon Russell filled the garage and made Rose's worries float away. The fender was soon off and put to the side. When she had a good view of the left front suspension and steering rod, she scrunched up her face at the mess - it was quite literally bent way out of shape.

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The rest of the morning went by fast, and the hands on the wall-mounted clock didn't show signs of slowing down at all. The lunch break was looming large, but Rose was too busy with a rusted bolt to pay any attention to that.

The suspension bolt had been given nearly a whole can of WD40 but it still wouldn't budge. Not even when she had found the special wrench with the two-foot long grip could she get it to move, and there simply wasn't room to poke the pneumatic wrench in there.

Grinding her jaw, she shook her arms to get them to relax for the next attempt. She made a vow to herself to give it her all one last time - and if it still wouldn't budge, she'd call it quits and head for the recreational room where Johnny Lee and Harold were already eating.

She put both hands on the two-foot long wrench and really put her back into her task. Every muscle she had in her arms and upper body - and she had plenty - flexed and were tightened as she pulled the wrench towards her.

With an agonizing creak, the bolt finally gave up the ghost and became loose in a shower of dirt and flakes of rust. "Wa-hey! Gotcha... ya ratty piece o' crap!" Rose cried as she nearly fell flat on her butt when the resistance suddenly disappeared.

The victory marked the end of the first part of her working day, and the grin on her face as she strolled over to the toolbox to deposit the wrench into the special foam-covered drawer and hang her protective jacket on a hook showed that she was looking forward to the lunch break - or perhaps to the special visit she would get during said lunch break.

Inside the recreational room, Johnny Lee and Harold were sitting at the couch arrangement, comparing the lunch packs made for them by their mother and wife, respectively. Johnny Lee had been given a soggy egg salad on rye that he was eager to trade with one of Harold's BLT sandwiches, but he couldn't get a deal.

When Rose entered the room, Harold scooted to the side on the old, broken couch so the tall woman could have her regular seat. Much to Johnny Lee's disappointment, Harold started eating from the BLT sandwich that the younger man had had his sights set on. "Didya get the bolt free?" Harold said around a big bite.

"Sure did. The li'l bastard was stuck fast, but I got it," Rose said and flexed her biceps just to show that she was still the boss. When her flexing only drew a *pfff* and a dismissive wave from her colleagues, she grinned and leaned over the edge of the couch to take one of their old wrestling magazines to kill time until Billie Jo would come over.

Harold grinned back and took another bite of his sandwich while making sure Johnny Lee noticed. "Say, Rose... remember my second cousin twice over, Wynne Donohue? Nice gal living by herself in the desert way out west?"

"Sorta... she's the tall cowgirl ya tried to hook me up with a couple-a years ago, ain't she?" Rose said, holding her thumb on the pages of an interview with the female wrestling star Chyna.

"Yeah, yeah," Harold said with a grin and an embarrassed little wave, "anyhow, she's met someone. A deputy from the Sheriff's Office, believe it or not. A nice gal called Mandy. Looks like it's the real deal for them."

"Hey, that's great."

"Sure is. She sent me a picture of the two of 'em together at her trailer. I kinda forgot it today, but I can show it to ya on Tuesday if ya want," Harold said and took another large bite out of his BLT.

"Yeah, I'd like to see that. Johnny Lee," Rose said and pinned her younger colleague to the spot with an intense blue gaze, "you're just dyin' to ask me a question, aintcha?"

Johnny Lee chuckled nervously and held up his soggy egg salad. "When Billie Jo swings by with your lunch, I was just wondering if you would trade-"

"Naw," Rose said decisively, crossing her arms over her chest though she was mindful of not wrinkling the pretty pictures in the wrestling magazine. A cheeky grin split her face in two as she took in Johnny Lee's hang-dog expression.

Following the conversation, Harold grinned broadly before he took another bite out of his sandwich. "So, how 'bout the big wreck at Talladega, huh?"

Before Rose had time to answer, her eyes became fixated on the pair of tight, red Capris that entered the recreational room from the small office out front. The Capris were soon followed by a red-and-white polka-dotted blouse and the rest of Billie Jo, but Rose had a hard time tearing her eyes away from the lower part of her girlfriend.

A heartbeat later, she jumped up from the old couch and closed the distance between them. "Hey, baby. Wow, I'd forgotten how flippin' great you looked today," Rose husked, leaning in to steal a little kiss as the very first thing she did.

"Oh, we have an audience, honey," Billie Jo said quietly, glancing around Rose's shoulder at Johnny Lee and Harold who both looked down in a hurry.

"And I got the best gal in the land. Don't tell me I can't kiss 'er."

Billie Jo smiled and held up the paper bag that she had bought at the mom-and-pop diner next to the drugstore where she worked. "Got you a pork roast sandwich with fried onions... an apple... and a coffee to go. The good stuff."

"Aw, hell yeah. No pork rinds?"

"No!"

"Ah, don't matter. You're my savior, ya know that?" Rose said and pulled Billie Jo in for a little cuddle. "Been workin' all mornin' on Junior's Caddy. Damn thing playin' hard to get, dontchaknow. Makin' me work for my money."

Billie Jo tried to look beyond the sliding door at the offending vehicle, but she couldn't see anything. "I'll have to take your word for it, honey. So... you wanna go for a little walk or something? I thought we could eat out back by the wrecks?" she said with a sweet smile that proved that eating their sandwiches and drinking their coffee weren't the only things on her mind.

Rose's only reply was a broad grin. One of her two colleagues at the scratched coffee table - she wasn't sure which though she suspected it was Harold - let out a wolf call and a few kissy sounds, but for once, she decided to let it go. "Yeah, we could do that. Harold, hold the fort 'til I get back."

"Sure thing, Rose," the older man said and crumpled up his spent napkin.

Johnny Lee was eyeing Harold's other BLT sandwich, but the older man bit into it before the junior mechanic could even open his mouth to inquire about its trade-ability.

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Soon, Rose opened the back door and held out her hand to give Billie Jo something to hold onto down the two rickety steps. The back pasture had been converted into a wrecking yard where close to a dozen cars and trucks had found their final resting place. Rusted, dented and stripped down to their bare essentials, the vehicles were nothing but hollow reminders of a bygone age.

Tall weeds were growing everywhere between and even inside the cars, but nobody seemed too bothered by it. The yawning hoods and trunks, and the gaping holes where the headlights and the windows used to be gave the wrecking yard a ghoulish appearance.

A '47 Buick Super rubbed shoulders with an '65 Oldsmobile Cutlass that in turn was resting against a '71 Ford LTD's trunk. The bed of a '57 Chevrolet Half-Ton Task Force pickup truck carried a heavier load in the afterlife than it ever had on the road, namely three large truck engines complete with radiators and smokestacks.

The newest car in the yard was a Ford Taurus where the severely shortened front end was covered by a tarp after having been mostly ripped off in an accident just outside of town. The formerly green Taurus still had miles of police tape tied around it, warning people to stay clear.

Looking at the Taurus, Rose had a cold shiver trickle down her back as she remembered how the accident site had looked when she had driven the wrecker truck out there to help the deputies clean up the mess. Shuddering, she steered Billie Jo over to a picnic table with integrated benches that stood like an oasis in the middle of the vehicular graveyard.

Before they sat down, Rose came to a halt and offered Billie Jo a look of such love that the shorter woman had no choice but to stand up on tip-toes and claim the succulent lips of her taller partner. "Hey, baby," Rose whispered, "I've missed you. It's been far too long..."

"It's been five hours," Billie Jo whispered back, winking.

"Far too long. I wanna caress your cheek but my hands are too dirty. How 'bout I just kissed ya senseless instead?"

Billie Jo closed her eyes and cocked her head in such a way that Rose had perfect access to her lips. "Works for me," she husked, but that was all she had time to say.

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Once they were both seated - Rose brushed off the bench where Billie Jo was to place her delicate rear - the mechanic took the paper bag and distributed the lunch items on the tabletop.

"Oh yeah, this smells so fine, baby," she said and unwrapped the pork roast sandwich and the plastic cup with the coffee-to-go. Before Billie Jo had time to answer, Rose stuffed the sandwich into her mouth and began to chew on it like she hadn't eaten for weeks.

"So, are you ready for the big event, hon?" Billie Jo said and unwrapped her own ham-and-cheese sandwich. When it was all lined up, she popped the lid on her own cup so she wouldn't have to drink through the little plastic spout that always made the brown liquid dribble down her chin.

"Aw yeah, ya betcha!"

"I spoke to Mr. Thorkildsen about it, and he said the monster trucks made a really great show last weekend down in Carlotta. They may even do a long-jump record attempt tonight if the ground's up for it."

"Aw, that's so flippin' cool to watch," Rose said around her sandwich. When she had gulped down the next big bite, she reached across the table and clawed the back of Billie Jo's free hand. "Can't flippin' wait, baby. Heard there's gonna be a cheerleader dancin' display and a band playin' and shit."

"So it says on the billboard. They're called Four Flat Tires, a boogie rock band from Texas," Billie Jo said and took another sip of her coffee. "I can't say I've ever heard of 'em!"

"Nah, me neither. But it's gonna be great. We are gonna dance, ain't we?"

"Well-"

"Ain't we?" Rose said with the worst puppy dog eyes ever. When even that didn't seem to make an impression on Billie Jo, she stuck out her lower lip and cocked her head.

Billie Jo leaned her head back and let out a loud laugh at the pitiful sight. "Well, all right, then. Honey, you're such a big baby sometimes. But I ain't gonna be no easy girl tonight, no Sirree. You gonna pamper me plenty. I want popcorn and cotton candy-"

"Baby, I'll buy you the world," Rose husked, once again clawing Billie Jo's free hand.

"Don't need the world when I got you, Rose," Billie Jo husked back. "So... how does the rest of your day look?"

Rose smiled broadly at the undeniability of the Good Thing going on between her and the honey-blond, green-eyed doll sitting opposite her. The smile turned into a shit-eating grin that made her head too large for her trucker hat. With a well-placed flexing of her biceps, she moved the hat back from her forehead. "Aw, I'm gonna whip Junior's Caddy back into shape and take it for a test run if there's time. Nothin' major. We'll have plenty of time to get to the fairgrounds before the crowd builds."

"Good... good. Don't forget to eat your apple, dear," Billie Jo said and pointed at the fruit.

"I won't, dear," Rose said with a broad grin as she buffed the apple on her muscle shirt and sunk her teeth into it.

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The hours went by with leaps and bounds and the hands on the clock crept closer and closer to four P.M. After recruiting Harold and Johnny Lee to give her a helping hand, Rose had managed to get Junior's Escalade ready in time - though the worst was still to come for her.

Gulping, she stepped into the non-descript hallway opposite the door to the recreational room. Before she went all the way down to Burton 'Toe-' Cutter's office, she buffed her boots on the calves of her black jeans, but everything was equally filthy so it didn't really work.

She remembered to take off her trucker hat and fluff her mullet before she raised a hand to knock on the white door.

*'Enter!'* a gruff male voice said from the other side.

Rose resisted the urge to slap some confidence into her cheeks and settled for depressing the door handle. The interior of the office wasn't too impressive considering Burton Cutter's standing in the community, but at least his metal desk was large.

The four walls of the office were all decorated differently. The wall with the door opposite the desk saw a whole range of promotional stickers and posters from the various oil companies and spare part OEMs they worked with, and the next wall was covered by shelves filled with stacks of magazines, workshop manuals and color-coded binders.

The third wall was less interesting, merely the window to the rundown courtyard that was concealed by a pair of drawn Venetian blinds, but the fourth wall - which was behind the desk - was sporting a huge photostat of Cutter's Auto Repair Shop taken from high above.

Rose remembered the day well. Cutter had rented a helicopter and a professional aerial photographer to take promotional photos of the garage and the rest of Lincoln, but the shiny metal bird in the sky had made so much racket it had been near-impossible to get any work done.

The bossman himself, Burton Cutter, sat at the center of the web like a big spider waiting for a fly to fall into his trap. In his early sixties - and surprisingly slim for such an important man - Burton was the owner of a ruddy face, a thick mustache and a pair of bushy eyebrows that time had turned white. The rest of his hair was graying with several patches of white that matched the western suit he was wearing, making him look like a town boss of yore.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Cutter," Rose said and closed the door behind her. As her boss grunted something unintelligible in her general direction, she moved over to stand behind one of the two chairs by the desk.

"Sit down, Rose. Ya givin' me a crimp in my neck," Burton grumbled into his mustache.

"Yes, Mr. Cutter," Rose said and sat down on the chair she had been standing behind. The uncomfortable chair was too low for her tall frame, and she had to glance upwards to see Burton Cutter in the eye - something she had always suspected was intentional. "Mr. Cutter, Mr. Yates Junior's Cadillac is ready. I replaced a bent steerin' rod and recalibrated the trackin'. It's as good as new and all ready to go. I only need your permission to take it off the lot so I can give it a li'l drive around town... ya know, to make sure it's okay," she said, wringing her Bulldog Mack trucker hat between her strong fingers.

Burton locked eyes with his employee but it only lasted for a very short time. The permission came with a curt nod and a grumble that sounded quite similar to "All right, but don't use it to drive your girlfriend out to the fairgrounds."

"Thank you, Mr. Cutter," Rose said and got up from the hard chair. She couldn't get out fast enough, and soon closed the office door behind her.

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In the garage, Harold came towards Rose with an opened can of beer in his hand. "Here ya go, Rose... the day's over," he said, holding out the can.

Rose groaned and slapped her hat back down onto her black locks. "Much obliged, Harold, but my day ain't quite over yet. I gotta take the Caddy out for a spin. Junior's gonna have my ass on the broiler if he can't get the Esca back until Tuesday."

Harold looked at the can and then back at his younger colleague. "Well, if ya don't want it...?"

"Naw, it's all yours, chum," Rose said with a chuckle. On her way over to the Cadillac, she gave Harold's shoulder a little squeeze to let him know she was grateful for the offer, even if she'd had to turn it down.

After putting a protective cover on top of the Escalade's pristine seat so she wouldn't stain it with her filthy jeans, she started the smooth-running engine and reversed out of the garage with great caution. While she was going backwards up the driveway, she was only going at five miles an hour so she wouldn't get any nasty surprises.

Once out on Main Street, she selected Drive and waited for the road to clear up. Just before she hit the gas, she could see Billie Jo's green orbs and hear her sweet voice reminding her to always buckle up. Rose reached for the belt with a grin. "Aw, the things you do when you're in love... unbe-frickin'-lievable," she said and clicked the seat belt in place. Then she mashed the gas and set off with a wild roar - after all, Junior could afford the gas bill.

She quickly reached the other end of Main Street. Everything in conjunction with her repairs had worked just fine, and as she rolled the driver's side window down and leaned halfway out of it to listen for any unwanted sounds, a broad grin spread over her features out of sheer pride for a job well done. Mashing the gas again, she jerked the steering wheel left and right to test for any possible play, but everything felt all right.

Ahead of her, a little girl in a pink dress saw something interesting on the other side of Main Street by the Baptist Church and ran out into the traffic without looking.

Rose saw the danger and knew she had to stand on the brakes to stop in time even though she was only doing thirty-five. The world seemed to slow down to a crawl as she moved her foot to the wide pedal and pressed down. As the heavy SUV dipped hard under braking, a can of beer shot out from under the driver's seat and got lodged underneath the brake pedal.

Crying out in surprise when the SUV suddenly didn't slow down at all, she raised her boot and slammed it back onto the brake pedal with such force the wayward can burst at the seams and sent a shower of golden beer and white foam all over the interior of the Escalade - including every last inch of Rose.

As the beer and the foam splashed onto her face and got into her eyes, she spun the steering wheel to the right to steer away from the little girl. Blinded, she had no idea where she was going, but a moment later, the Escalade barreled over a curb and smashed head-on into a light pole that ended up three feet into the engine compartment.

When the expensive vehicle wrecked with a sound akin to two tin cans being smashed together - and a gurgling groan from the crushed radiator and engine - all seventeen airbags deployed at once, as did the device that tightened the seat belts.

By the time the heavy SUV stopped rocking around the light pole, Rose's ears were ringing like crazy, her nose was tickling from the cordite used in the airbags, and her chest was aching from the rough treatment it had been given by the seat belt.

She leaned back in the seat and looked around in a daze. Though the windshield had been reduced to a jigsaw puzzle, she just caught a glimpse of the little girl in the pink dress running away from the accident.

"Thank you, Lawrd. I owe you one," she croaked while wiggling her various body parts to see if she still had two of everything she needed to have two of - feet, legs, arms, hands and boobs.

With her feet free of the pedals, she kicked at the exploded can and shook her head slowly. "Darrell flippin' Yates Junior... you son of a bitch," she croaked, wiping her wet face with a hand that trembled more than she had expected.

Her trucker hat had been blown off in the accident, but before she could look for it down among the beer suds, the driver's side door was yanked open and Sheriff Seymour Holstein appeared wearing a facial expression that only turned darker when his nostrils were assaulted by the easily recognizable smell of beer.

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### **CHAPTER 3**

It's Rose again. Okay, I know what you nice folks out there must be thinkin'... that this was the low point of my day. Naw. Not even close, 'cos that little girl was able to get home to her mama in one piece and with a smile on her lips. Beyond that, I can safely say that, lookin' back, havin' that wreck didn't even register a One on the shit-o-meter.

Sure, I trashed Junior's Caddy, but hey... 'scuse me while I wipe my dry eyes, man. Darrell Yates, Jr. got money crawlin' outta his ass, he can just buy another damn Escalade... or coax Daddy into givin' him one.

Naw, this wasn't the low point of my day. My low point of the day, week, month, year and flippin' existence was just around the corner. But more of that later. Hey, I explicitly said that shit and me were bosom buddies. I never said this would be a barrel o' laughs, did I?

When I wrapped Junior's Caddy around that light pole, I gotta admit my life flashed before my eyes. I saw my dear old stepbrother kickin' me around for somethin' I don't even remember what was. I saw dear old mommy slappin' me silly for somethin' else I don't wanna remember... and I saw dear old daddy givin' me the ass-whoopin' of my fourteen-year old life for bein' caught neckin' with the cute daughter of our old next door neighbor. I guess she got intrigued by my attitude. She asked me what it was like to kiss a girl and I said, hey darlin', why dontcha just try?

We didn't have a woodshed, but if we had, dear old daddy would have dragged me behind it and beat the snot out of me with a piece of firewood... or the ax, whichever was closest. As it was, his fists and his belt said more to me that afternoon than his lips ever had.

I knew who I was from a young age. I know you're supposed to have teenage angst and anxiety and self-doubt and seventy layers of shit goin' on inside your brains, but I've always been too flippin' dumb to have any of those things.

I knew who I was, and ain't no law and sure as shit ain't no Catholic mommy or drunken daddy was gonna drag me back into the world of bein' groped by boys and told I was gonna like it, or bein' forced into havin' sex across the back seat and end up gettin' pregnant at fifteen like, you guessed it, the cute daughter of our old next door neighbor. No flippin' thank you.

Hell, I'm ramblin' again. Back to the present. My shit-o-meter was about to register a Seven. That was fairly shitty by itself... but it was nothin' compared to what was comin' my way. I had a big storm brewin' but when I needed my friends the most, they left me with my ass cheeks flappin' in the breeze. Ain't life grand?

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"Get your sorry ass out of the Goddamned vehicle, Kowalski... now," Sheriff Holstein said in a gruff voice while he yanked at Rose's arm.

Rose looked at the Sheriff with a pair of confused eyes, but tried to follow his command to the best of her somewhat dazed abilities. She noticed a little too late that she hadn't unbuckled yet and reached down to see if the lock still worked. It did, and she was soon liberated from the cord that had done its work admirably.

Stepping down onto the sidewalk on legs that wobbled more than she had expected, she only needed a brief glance at the Cadillac to know it was beyond repair. "Heh," she croaked, tapping her knuckles on the door.

The very next moment, Sheriff Holstein pinned her against the door and held up a small device that she couldn't recognize in the heat of the moment. She tried to swat it away, but Holstein was insistent.

"It's a breathalyzer, Kowalski. Blow it!" the Sheriff said, pressing the little device closer to Rose's mouth. "You stink like a Goddamned brewery... I'll be damned if I'm gonna let someone so obviously drunk get away with wreckin' a car in the middle of Goddamned Main Street!"

"But Sheriff, I ain't-"

"Shut up and blow into the Goddamned breathalyzer, Kowalski!"

Rose stared at the Sheriff with wide open eyes. Seymour Holstein was a skinny, wiry man with an angular face and intense eyes. Though his physique didn't exactly shout Sheriff material, his work ethic and dedication to the job got him re-elected every time. He was in his late forties and had a hard time accepting he was approaching fifty - as a result, he had turned into an S.O.B. with a mean streak a mile wide.

Rose knew she'd only get into more trouble if she refused the Sheriff so she accepted that she had to blow into the small electronic device. Drawing a deep breath, she puckered up her lips and blew into the breathalyzer's mouthpiece.

She blew and blew until her face had turned redder than a stop sign, but the Sheriff kept holding the device to her mouth to get every last ounce of air out of her. When he was satisfied, he pulled it away with a grunt and strode over to his police cruiser to analyze the sample.

Panting, Rose leaned back against the ticking and steaming Cadillac and wiped her lips. The accident site was attracting quite a crowd, but although Billie Jo wasn't among them, Rose didn't think it would be long for news to spread like wildfire - it always did in Lincoln.

In her peripheral vision, she spotted Burton Cutter's black Mercedes S-Class crawling up Main Street. Her boss parked across the street but kept sitting in the car while he called someone on his cell phone. Along the sidewalk, Johnny Lee and Harold came running. The latter was holding a beer can in a plain brown wrapper which was just about the last thing in the world Rose wanted to see at that moment.

An annoyed grunt from the police cruiser gave Rose a pretty good idea that her day had just gone down yet another notch. Soon, Sheriff Holstein came back holding the breathalyzer. His sour face proved that something had gone wrong, and once again, Rose had a pretty good idea of what that could be.

"Kowalski, I don't know how the hell ya did it, but this Goddamned thing shows you're sober."

Rose pushed herself off the door and wiped her damp brow. "Sheriff, that's what I've been tryin' ta-"

"Shut up, Kowalski," Seymour Holstein said and held out his hand to keep Rose at the Cadillac. "Blow again. Now."

"Mercy sakes, Sheriff-"

"Are ya resistin'?" the Sheriff said, moving his hand down towards his pair of shiny metal handcuffs that he had in a leather pouch on his utility belt.

Rose groaned inwardly and wished Billie Jo was there to speak to the Sheriff. No matter what she said, the cantankerous man would misunderstand it, and he would do so deliberately. She sighed deeply and shook her head. "No I ain't, Sheriff."

The Sheriff nodded and shoved the breathalyzer into her mouth.

Like before, Rose blew into the small mouthpiece until her lungs were on the brink of outright rebellion. Red-faced and aching all over, she gave it her all and hoped it would be enough to appease the law man.

Sheriff Holstein grunted and pulled the device away from Rose. He looked at it with a sour expression on his face before he stomped over to the police cruiser to analyze the second sample.

While Rose recovered from the hard work, Johnny Lee came up to her with her trucker hat that had become even more battered after the wreck. "Here, Rose... it had been blown clear out onto the sidewalk."

Rose stared at it like an unexpected return of an old friend. Smiling, she took it from her younger colleague's hand and mashed it down onto her dark mullet. "Thanks, Johnny Lee. Much obliged. Say... anybody seen Billie Jo yet? She really oughtta be told what's been goin' on up here..."

Harold shook his head and took a long swig from his beer, but Johnny Lee put out his hand and touched Rose's elbow. "Don't ya worry, I'll get her for ya, Rose," he said and took off down Main Street.

"Thanks, son!" Rose said loudly, but the young man was already running across the street.

Sheriff Holstein slammed the door of his police cruiser and leaned against it with his arms crossed over his chest and his face so scrunched up in annoyance it resembled a possum's behind. "Kowalski, you're the luckiest son of a bitch around, ya know that? The breathalyzer's on the fritz. It says you're sober but I can smell you ain't."

Rose opened her mouth to object, but before she could speak a syllable, Sheriff Holstein pinned her to the spot with an intense glare. "Don't you say a Goddamned word! I can't arrest ya, but I'm

giving ya a stern warning. The next time you as much as fart without permission, I'm gonna bust ya up but good. Ya hear me, Kowalski?"

"I hear ya, Sheriff," Rose said with a nod. She wanted to tell Holstein that far better men than he had tried to bust her up, but that no one ever had. She knew it wouldn't improve her situation so she kept quiet.

Sheriff Holstein got into his cruiser and turned off the lights on the roof. Starting the engine, he made a U-turn and drove the cream-colored vehicle down towards the county court house and the jailhouse at the other end of Main Street.

Suddenly, the crowd at the accident site parted like the Red Sea for Moses. In the middle of the group of spectators stood Billie Jo with a shocked look on her face and her hands firmly pressed to her bosom.

Rose let out a deep sigh as she felt the weight of the world fall off her shoulders. Smiling at Billie Jo, she put out her arms and stepped towards her partner.

Billie Jo didn't close the distance between them - instead, she shied back.

At first, Rose didn't understand what kind of perverted reality she had ended up in, and she wondered for a very short while if she hadn't actually died in the accident after all. "Hey, baby..." she said, furrowing her brow.

Then Billie Jo did the unthinkable: with a face that showed she was on the brink of crying, she spun around and ran away from Rose.

"Wh- what? Billie Jo... what the...?" Rose said, throwing her hands in the air.

A surprised - perhaps even excited - murmur spread among the group of spectators around her, but a blue glare with the intensity of a laser beam silenced all but the most foolhardy. Rose stepped forward to go after Billie Jo, but before she could move further than a few paces, she was stopped by Burton Cutter who came up to stand in front of her.

"Mercy sakes, Mr. Cutter... not now... I gotta..." she croaked and pointed at the honey-blond figure who had reached the drugstore some distance down Main Street, but her boss was relentless.

"Rose. You okay?" Burton said with his hands resting on the hips of his white western suit.

"Yes, Sir," Rose said with a sigh, watching the easily recognizable red Capris disappear into Thorkildsen's drugstore. "I didn't get a scratch. It was a-

"I ain't paying you to wreck our customers' cars. Worse still, you just cost me a heap of money with that stunt."

"I know, Mr. Cutter. There was a kid... I had to-"

"And you're drunk."

"The hell I am!" Rose barked, feeling a strong urge to grab hold of Burton's lapels. "I ain't touched a flippin' drop all day! There was a loose can in the car and-"

"I demand that my mechanics are stone sober at work. You know that. You're fired. Come in on Tuesday and clear out your locker."

Rose came to a dead stop and stared wide-eyed at her relentless boss. Inside her, someone turned off the lights and released a thousand-gallon bucket of ice water on her head that she drowned in without coming up for air even once.

The hard man grunted a goodbye and walked back to his fancy Mercedes, got in and drove off.

Sighing, Rose fell back against the wrecked Cadillac that was still ticking and steaming. A small puddle of radiator fluid had gathered around the left front that she had worked so hard on. The wheel was about the only thing not wrecked at the front of the SUV.

After a few moments of staring without seeing anything at all, she raised her head and locked eyes with Harold who was still standing there with his beer. "Damn fine help you was, Harold. I really appreciate it... thank you ever so flippin' much!"

"Yeah... I know. I'm sorry, Rose," her older colleague said, sipping his beer. "But I just can't risk gettin' fired, too. I got a mortgage and I need to save some money for when my kids-"

"Tell it to someone who cares," Rose said and stomped away from the wreck and the man she had thought was a friend.

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Rose was a woman on a mission. She barged her way through the spectators and crossed Main Street with a firm stride. On her way down the sidewalk to get to the drugstore, she cast a brief glance at Johnny Lee who went the other way in the wrecker truck to get the accident site cleaned up. At any other time, she would have helped the friendly young man who had a good head on his shoulders and a strong sense of loyalty in his heart, but now she had more important things to do.

She went past four stores that had been boarded up for good when the financial crisis had hit Lincoln a few years earlier. One of them had been an ice cream shop that she and Billie Jo had visited on their first dates. The ice cream had been exceptional - and exceptionally expensive - but in Lincoln, not enough people were willing to shell out that much money on something as common as ice cream, and as a result, the store simply couldn't keep going.

The next store had closed its doors for good at the start of the month. It had been an independent fast food restaurant who had sold home-made delicacies made in the best southern traditions, but the best southern traditions weren't what they used to be. Now, the owner worked as a dishwasher slash busboy in the seedy bar and grill further south on Main Street to work off his mountain of debts.

At the mom-and-pop diner where Billie Jo had bought the lunch, the married couple who owned it stood in the doorway and looked at the hubbub out on Main Street. The diner's regular clientele of wholesome, upstanding citizens had massed at the tables lining the windows and were pressing their noses against the panes to get all the details and make sure that nothing slipped by them. As Rose strode past the doorway, she tipped her hat at the owners who replied with polite greetings.

Along she went, storming past several stores that were still open and a few more that weren't, but she only had eyes for the drugstore that came up fast.

The current owner, Douglas Thorkildsen, had taken over the drugstore in the late 1980s and had turned it into a thriving business by expanding it into including regular groceries. Essentially, he made it into Lincoln's first supermarket.

Though a Cool-Mart had opened three miles north of Lincoln with five thousand free parking spaces, one hundred and fifty thousand products and a small army of helpers on starvation wages who carried the shopping bags out to the cars, most Lincoln-folks still shopped at Thorkildsen's out of loyalty. It didn't hurt that Douglas Thorkildsen was known to hire the friendliest and most efficient clerks.

Rose locked eyes with one of them - Billie Jo - when she reached the first of the drugstore's storefront windows. She almost came to a dead stop when she spotted Billie Jo's clearly upset face peeking out through the groceries, but she gulped down the lump of nervousness that had formed in her throat and pressed on.

The air-conditioning inside Thorkildsen's store was running at a pleasant temperature compared to the frigid environment that gave Cool-Mart its name. Everything about the drugstore was elegant and well-maintained, even down to the groceries on the shelves that were lined up with military precision.

The floors of every aisle were always recently washed and clean as a whistle - even if a clumsy customer dropped a full jar of pickled cherries, a staffer would be hard at work washing the floor within three minutes.

Rose turned down the aisle with the cereal and other breakfast products. Down at the other end, she just caught a glimpse of a pair of red Capris moving away from the aisle. "Wh- why the hell is she avoidin' me...? What the flip is going on here...?" she mumbled, stopping to wipe her damp brow.

"Hi, Rose," a fair female voice said behind the agitated mechanic.

Rose turned around and watched Tammy Fay Sorenson - one of Billie Jo's best friends - come towards her holding a broom and a dustpan. The somewhat heavy-set twenty-four year-old blonde had an abundance of freckles, shoulder-length corkscrew curls and a pert nose. She was wearing a *Thorkildsen's* apron that had been tied around her waist with an extravagant bow. "Hiya doin', Tammy Fay... uh... listen-

"I don't think Billie Jo wants to talk to you right now," Tammy Fay said in a tiny voice, looking at anything but Rose. The penetrating stench of beer emanating from the taller woman made her crinkle her nose and take a sliding step back.

Rose's shoulders fell even further than the already drooping level they had been at before. She bit down on her lips and continued looking around for Billie Jo. "Yeah. Okay. Thanks, Tammy Fay. Much obliged," she said and moved on without waiting for a reply.

She decided to take a shortcut and turned sharp right at the first intersection to get to the aisle with the beer and soft drinks. Hundreds of cans and bottles of beer were lined up in alphabetical order of their manufacturer, and Rose thought she could hear them mocking her for what one of their relatives had done to her out in the Cadillac.

The soft drinks followed, but by then, Rose didn't have time to pay attention to what they whispered. Another glimpse of the red Capris made her step up the pace and she was soon at a dark brown, wooden door with a circular brass knob at the back of the drugstore. The next problem presented itself immediately: the door was labeled '*Staff Only.*'

"Aw, shit... shit, shit, shit," she said and rubbed her face. Turning around, she tried to appear like she didn't have anything to hide at all. The customers who were standing at the refrigerated counters in the back part of the drugstore all shot her curious glances while they rummaged through the special offers of the day which included two bags of frozen French fries Cajun-style for only four dollars ninety-five.

When Rose felt she had waited long enough, she turned around and tried the circular doorknob. Much to her surprise, the door opened with a click. Looking around with all the stealth she could muster, she stepped inside the room and shut the door carefully behind her.

She found herself in a long hallway that was outfitted with a deep green carpet and brown wooden panels. The hallway was lit up by three strip lights in the ceiling of which one was literally on the blink. Seven unlabeled doors led off from the corridor, three on each side and one at the far end. The one at the end was made of steel and Rose surmised it went out to the small, private parking lot at the rear.

She had no idea what to do or where to go. In her frustration, she took off her trucker hat and slapped it against her black jeans. "Aw, hell... okay. Now wotcha gonna do, ya dumb shit? I wonder if this counts as fartin' without permission like the flippin' Sheriff said?" she mumbled, mashing her hat back down onto her black locks.

With a grunt, she went to work pressing her ear against all the doors to find the elusive Billie Jo.

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Behind the last door on the left, Rose could hear Billie Jo sniffing away tears. Grunting, she stood up straight and knocked softly. When she only heard a muted "Go away," she naturally did the opposite and opened the door.

The small room was only sixteen by sixteen feet and equipped with the same panels and carpet as the hallway. The room was host to an old desk with an anglepoise lamp, a writing pad and a set of plastic trays where the Out-box was full and the In-box empty. A magnetboard was standing on the floor, leaning against the wall with its cord visibly snapped. Various sheets of paper and what appeared to be receipts that were supposed to have been on the magnetboard had been transferred to the walls where they were hanging on colorful nails.

Billie Jo sat on a swivel-chair at the desk. She was looking frail and her face showed clear signs of crying. When Rose entered the small office, Billie Jo turned around and pretended to work.

"Baby," Rose said quietly, moving over to her partner to put a tender hand on her shoulder, "will you please tell me what the hell's goin' on? I've never seen you runnin' away from me before... and hell, I don't ever wanna see it again..."

At first, Billie Jo didn't seem to want to talk, but after a short delay, she took a tissue from a cardboard box on the desk and dabbed her eyes. "You reek of beer... you stink like a bum," she said in a thick voice.

"Yeah, I know... it was the damnedest thing I ever-"

"You promised me you wouldn't."

Rose fell quiet, racking her brain to remember when she had ever made a promise not to drink beer. It was an odd argument to use because just the evening before, they had shared a can at supper. "Well..." she said, licking her lips, "it just so happens I ain't touched a drop. I know I stink, but-"

"Please don't lie to me, Rose. Not... not looking like that," Billie Jo said and performed a tired wave at the beer stains that peppered Rose's muscle shirt and her black jeans.

"Baby," Rose said and knelt down in front of her partner. A cold hand of fear grabbed Rose's heart when Billie Jo shied back from the smell, but she reached out and took the delicate hands in her own regardless. "Baby, please listen to me. I ain't had a drop of beer. I had to slam on the brakes 'cos a little girl ran out onto Main Street. A flippin' can shot out and ended up under the pedal. One of Darrell Yates Junior's beers that the little pecker had forgot to tell me about... that's the honest-to-goodness truth, darlin'. Please believe me."

The look on Billie Jo's face told a very clear story of not believing a word Rose had just said to her. After a little while, she shook her head and pulled her hands back from Rose's. "No, Rose, I can't believe that. You're blaming Darrell Junior for you wrecking his car?"

"Yes, Goddammit!" Rose said sharply. "A flippin' beer can shot out-"

"Don't, Rose. Just don't," Billie Jo said and moved to get up from the chair.

A stunned Rose moved aside and watched her partner walk over to the door to the hallway. Once there, she put her hand on the knob but didn't seem to want to leave just yet.

Sighing, Rose got up and bumped down onto the recently vacated swivel-chair. She took off her trucker hat and ran a hand through her mullet with a dark, depressed look on her face.

Billie Jo mirrored the deep sigh and crossed her arms over her chest in a clear sign of vulnerability. "Rose, you promised me you wouldn't drink and drive. Remember the rules we agreed on at my uncle's funeral? You know, the uncle who was splattered against a tree because he was so drunk he could hardly see the road?"

"Baby-"

"At his funeral," Billie Jo said strongly to cut off Rose before she could start, "we agreed on a simple set of driving rules that would ensure that we wouldn't one day be putting flowers on the other's headstone. Remember?"

"Bil-"

"Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember," Rose said and nodded somberly. "Always drive responsibly. Never drink and drive. Never smoke weed and drive. Always keep my attention on the road and not the phone or the radio or the passengers or whatever shit happens to fly my way... but baby, I didn't-"

"Please don't lie to me, Rose. I hate it when you're not being truthful," Billie Jo said, swallowing. Her throat was hard at work gulping down the emotions that were plainly evident on her expressive face.

Rose narrowed her eyes and shot her partner a dark, intense glare that would have scared off anyone but Billie Jo Tucker. "When the flip did I ever lie to you?" she said in a hoarse, strained voice.

Billie Jo shrugged and looked down at her hands. "I'm sorry, Rose. I didn't mean it like that. But you're lying to me now."

"No, I ain't, baby! Billie Jo, I... I... aw, hell," Rose said and wiped her brow with the palm of a hand, "I'm tellin' ya again... one of Junior's flippin' beers came flyin' out. I smashed the can and then I wrecked his car 'cos I got beer all over the Goddamned place... in my eyes! Not only did I not mow down that little girl, I ain't touched no Goddamned drop today!"

"Harold was drinking beer just now. I saw him. He was drinking it right there..."

Rose scrunched up her face and sent half a dozen silent curses at her older colleague. "Yeah, he was... but I wasn't."

"You've often told me you and he have a couple after the garage closes on Saturdays," Billie Jo said quietly, squeezing her arms closer to her chest.

"Yeah... and then Johnny Lee drives us home. After the garage closes. After work... I wasn't finished workin', baby. I had to test the repairs I had done to Junior's Caddy so he could get it today... otherwise he'd be botherin' us the entire flippin' weekend! And he would have! That's a God-given guarantee-"

Billie Jo shook her head slowly. "Now you're blaming him again-"

The rejection hit Rose like a slap across the cheeks, and she sat up straight and stared at the woman at the door. "I. Am. Tellin'. You. The. Goddamned. Truth. Billie Jo," she said, pronouncing every word so clearly it nearly sounded like she was trying to persuade herself.

As the tension grew in the absence of an answer, Rose gripped the armrest of the swivel-chair harder and harder until it finally reached the point where her fingers turned white. She stared at Billie Jo with a storm slowly building inside her; a storm created by equal measures of anger over losing her job through someone else's foul-up, and of boundless fear of losing the other half of her heart through a misunderstanding that had gained such a head of steam in such a short space of time that it left her soul spinning.

When the silence grew oppressive, Rose slammed her fist down onto the armrest and shot up from the chair. She only made it a single step towards Billie Jo before she stopped dead in her tracks and froze solid on the inside.

Her aggressive move had made Billie Jo flinch and push herself against the door, like she was afraid of being shaken, slapped or worse.

The by now familiar thousand-gallon bucket of ice water once again rolled over Rose like an unstoppable tidal wave. Far too often, she had seen that look of fear in her mother's eyes when her husband had beaten her to a pulp in a drunken stupor. She had worn that look of fear herself many times when her parents had tried to beat some sense into her rebellious head after she had provoked the establishment or pushed the boundaries of conformity just a little too far - but she had never seen that look of fear in Billie Jo's expressive green orbs. Now she had. And she had put it there.

With her nostrils flaring in shame over what she had done, Rose collapsed onto the swivel-chair like her legs wouldn't obey her. Sighing, she buried her face in her hands and let the darkness swallow her. "I'm sorry, baby..." she said quietly, sensing that her thumping heart was but a single beat away from stopping altogether. "I never meant to frighten you. Please forgive me."

Billie Jo's only reply was to leave the room and shut the door softly behind her.

Rose looked up at the closed door and let out a long, slow sigh. She kept staring at it in the hope it would fly open to reveal Billie Jo with a smile on her face and her arms out wide in an invitation for a hug, but it didn't. "Way to go, you stupid asshole," Rose mumbled while she rubbed her face. "How to screw up a happy family in three easy steps... Johnny flippin' Cash couldn't have written that song..."

The door opened and Rose's head shot up, but instead of the hoped-for Billie Jo, it was Douglas Thorkildsen, the owner of the drugstore. The two people stared at each other for a few seconds before Rose found it most prudent to rise from the swivel-chair and put out her hand. "Howdy, Mr. Thorkildsen. I'm Rose Kowalski. I'm Billie Jo's... friend."

Douglas Thorkildsen had just turned sixty the week before but his youthful appearance, his strong handshake and his neatly combed dark brown hair belied that fact - even if the dark hair did come from a bottle rather than good genes. He was taller than Rose and had a strong presence in his dark blue jeans and steel gray flannel shirt. The top two buttons were undone to reveal a few graying chest hairs and a gold crucifix on a leather thong.

Douglas chuckled and shook the buff woman's hand. "You're her partner, Rose. Even I know that."

"Oh. Okay," Rose said and smoothed down her muscle shirt out of sheer nervousness. When Douglas didn't run the drugstore, he was the parish clerk and choir leader of Lincoln's Protestant congregation, a fact that left Rose somewhat uncomfortable - especially considering she still reeked of beer. Douglas didn't seem too concerned with her strong scent, even if he did crinkle his nose as he walked past her.

"Say... you wouldn't happen to have seen Billie Jo anywhere around here, would you, Rose?" Douglas said and moved over to the desk where he began to rummage through a few papers.

Rose didn't want to let the world know of their little tiff, so she shoved her hands down her back pockets and shuffled around on the spot. "Ah, she just left... not a minute before you came in, Sir. I dunno where the hel- where she was goin' or nothin'."

Behind her, the door opened as if on cue and Billie Jo walked in holding a mug of steaming hot tea. It wasn't quite the smile and the hug Rose had dreamt of - Billie Jo was still looking upset - but she was glad her partner had returned at all. Moving over to the door to assist Billie Jo, she let out a sigh of relief that the others didn't hear. "Honey... let me help you with that," she said and took a firm grip on the door so it wouldn't jump back and bump into the frail woman's shoulder.

"Thank you," Billie Jo said in a small voice, furrowing her brow when she noticed her boss standing at the desk. With a faint smile, she held out the mug and offered it to Rose.

The faint smile gave Rose the first warm feeling inside since she had seen Billie Jo run away at the accident site. Smiling back, she accepted the mug and took a sip of the steaming hot tea. It was a standard Earl Grey, her favorite in the rare - it didn't happen more than once a month at the most - occasion of her drinking anything other than coffee, Coke or beer. Savoring the hot beverage, she hoped it represented an olive branch, a sign that Billie Jo had forgiven her or maybe even accepted her story about Junior's loose can of beer.

Douglas pushed himself away from the desk and tapped a fingernail on his wristwatch. "Billie Jo, I'm sorry to break up anything that's going on here, but we've got a whole herd of customers out there who are eager to buy what they need before they head out to the fairgrounds. The monster truck festival, you know..."

"I know, Mr. Thorkildsen," Billie Jo said and shot Rose a sad look that spelled out quite clearly that they wouldn't be going, or at least not together.

"All right," Douglas continued, moving past the two women. "I need you at the check-out PDQ. Okay?"

"Yes, Mr. Thorkildsen. I'll only be a minute."

Rose tracked the elderly gentleman leaving the room before she took another sip of the tea. She looked back at Billie Jo with a hopeful expression on her face. "So...?" she said to get the conversation going again.

"Rose, I forgive you for what happened before," Billie Jo said flatly, looking away from her partner. "I know you love me and that you would never hurt me."

"Damn straight I wouldn't, baby! I would never, ever!"

Billie Jo shook her head strongly which made Rose clam up at once. "But I won't accept that cockamamie story with the stray can of beer. No. I'm sorry, I simply won't. You broke our rules. Therefore-"

"Billie Jo," Rose said, coming closer to flat out whining than she ever had in her entire life.

"Therefore... th- therefore... I'm going to tell you... no... I'm going to ask you to find somewhere else to sleep for the next couple of nights," Billie Jo said, slowly turning to face Rose.

Underneath Rose's workboots, a trapdoor opened and she fell down into a pitch black, bottomless abyss. A strange fatigue fell over her like a shroud, and she sighed deeply as she reached over to put the half-full mug of tea onto the desktop. Inside, her heart felt like it had turned into a pincushion.

Her mind had turned blank by the shock announcement. She wanted to speak up how much the decision had hurt her, but hardly any words would come to her, and those that did disappeared at once into a pit of quicksand. She settled for a somber nod with a face set in stone.

Again, a spark inside her wanted to put up a fight since she was an innocent victim of the most evil conspiracy imaginable, but the spark was snuffed out when another, more mature, part of her knew it would only make matters worse.

"See ya, Billie Jo," she whispered and walked away.

With a final glance at Billie Jo's soft, gorgeous features, Rose left the room and shuffled down the hallway to get as far away from the drugstore as she possibly could.

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## CHAPTER 4

Okay, time for an update. See what I meant when I said wreckin' Junior's car only registered a One on the shit-o-meter? Gettin' fired rated a Seven. Losin' the only woman I've ever cared for past the first hot night rated a ninety-nine-flippin'-thousand.

And I don't give a shit if it was only a time-out or whatever the flip you wanna call it. Not bein' able to sleep next to Billie Jo, not bein' able to kiss her tenderly, not bein' able to hold her in my arms and call her mine is torture. Hell, it's worse than torture.

People think that 'cos I look the way I do and behave the way I do, I don't give a shit about feelin's and all that sensitive, cuddly-wuddly crap... but I do. Hell yeah, I do... I ain't made of stone. I got a hard shell, but inside, I actually got a soul... and my soul's cryin' right now.

I do care about havin' someone close when I'm hurtin' inside. I do care about havin' someone there with a smile and a li'l caress when things are lookin' grim. I do care about havin' someone who'll tell me to be careful and hold the ladder when I crawl up on top of the trailer to fix the flippin' dish... and I do care about bein' there for Billie Jo when she's hurtin' and all those other things. We get on so flippin' great it's almost like our souls were cut apart at birth and Elmered back together later on.

You wonderin' how me and Billie Jo got together?

It's a flippin' beautiful little story. I ain't got time to tell ya everythin' so lemme give ya the highlights: when I came to Lincoln with a duffel bag over my shoulder and generally lookin' like a hobo from travelin' so much, people gave me a wide berth. This was 'bout six-seven years ago, by the way. Anyhow, when I arrived, it didn't take me long to get a job at Burton Cutter's Auto Repair Shop 'cos I knew what I was doin' with my hands and I was willin' to give it that extra li'l ass-kickin' at hours where others slept.

The first year, I had a permanent spot at the local branch of the Y - which is now closed, dammit, I could have used their comfortable bunks - but when I had collected enough money, I rented a trailer outside of town and bought a buncha third, fourth, fifth-hand furniture at the thrift store to put in it.

One night a year and a half or so later, a guy started a fight in the trailer park. A good ol' sock'n'roll with blood and teeth flyin' everywhere. We was watchin', all of us who didn't have nothin' better to do... one of which was Billie Jo Tucker. Holy hell was she a cutie... and I got it bad right there and then. She was with someone else so I didn't act on it.

Well, time passed, 'nother short year went by. We started talkin' regularly, then she became available on the market and we started meetin' regularly. Then we started talkin' and meetin' and makin' coffee for each other inside her trailer. Then one night, she looked at me with those glorious green eyes and asked... mercy sakes, I ain't never gonna forget that... she asked if I wasn't ever gonna kiss her!

We kissed, Lawrdy did we kiss. That first kiss told me everythin' I needed to know about where I was stayin' for the rest of my miserable existence. I shoulda seen it comin' but I ain't never been the sharpest tool in the box. The kiss wasn't even no fiery affair, no Sirree, it was sweet and lovin' and beautiful and honest and... and now she's kicked me out.

Ain't life grand?

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Several hours later, Rose shuffled down Main Street with her hands buried in her pockets and a look on her face that said if anyone addressed her the wrong way, they'd be sorry. She only met a few people but they all made sure to avoid her.

She kept shuffling down Main Street until she was nearly at the city limits sign opposite the Conoco station. She looked at the gas station and remembered the fun incident with the three trucks. "Hell, was that really only this mornin'?" she mumbled, kicking at a rock that was lying very conveniently in front of her right boot. "It feels like it was two flippin' weeks ago... hey... maybe Cledus Bradley got a job for me... can't hurt to ask."

Rose took off her trucker hat and scratched her black locks. With a grunt, she mashed the hat back onto her mullet and crossed Main Street with a purposeful stride.

She went past the courtyard with the fuel pumps and looked over at the porch in front of the small convenience store. Cledus' favorite rocking chair was empty so she changed direction and walked down an alley that wasn't in any better shape than the one leading down to Cutter Auto.

Cledus 'Sarge' Bradley was living by himself in a converted '65 GMC bus that was propped up on a concrete foundation to create a permanent homestead. The green and silver RV wasn't as striking as it had once been, but it was still a better place to live for the Vietnam veteran than the tent he had shared with the other grunts somewhere in the jungles of the Far East, knee-deep in mud, blood and misery.

"Hey, Sarge...? Cledus, ya down here, buddy? Sarge?" Rose said loudly as she walked closer to the RV. Instead of Cledus, all she could hear was the Sarge's guard dog that was barking its head off in a pen a bit further into the alley. When she reached the door, she spotted a hand-written note pinned to it that said, '*Gone to the Park. Back in a while or tomorrow. CB.*'

Rose let out a sigh and rubbed her chin. "Shit. Ain't that just the story of my day? Hell, I guess he's earned it."

Like most people in Lincoln, Rose knew that Cledus Bradley occasionally spent the nights at the Veteran's Memorial Park up at the other end of Main Street not far from where she had wrecked the Cadillac. There, he'd get stoned on weed and talk to the names inscribed on the four memorial tablets from World War II, Korea, Vietnam and the recent conflicts in the Middle East. Rose's stepbrother was listed too, but she never paid him a visit to reminisce.

The sound of a high-performance V8 driving into the gas station out front made Rose snap out of her dark thoughts and stride out there. Jimmy Cooper's gray, black and red Monte Carlo was parked at the gas pumps and Coop himself had just stepped out of the car.

"Howdy, Coop," Rose said with a wave as she came around the corner. "Sarge ain't in. He's up at the Memorial Park. Y'all can just put the gas money in the mailbox."

Jimmy Cooper was in his late twenties though his baby-face made him look a decade younger. To offset that, he was growing a full beard, but since his hair was red, his beard was even redder - as a result, he looked like a teenager with a Halloween-style pirate beard glued onto the lower part of his face.

As always, he was wearing cowboy boots, blue jeans, and a red-and-green checkered flannel shirt over a black t-shirt. On top of his red mullet, he had a black baseball cap adorned with the Chevrolet bowtie in red sitting low over his eyes.

"Howdy, Rose. Whatcha doin' way the hell down here?" Coop said as he took the hose for the Leaded Premium pump.

"Aw, that's a long story, Coop," Rose said and crossed her arms over her chest. She knew exactly where Coop's eyes were, and for a change, it actually did bother her. "Say, y'all be goin' to the fairgrounds a li'l later on, right?"

Coop removed the gas cap and put the hose down into the funnel. When it was ready, he pulled the hose's trigger and watched it spew the gas down into the tank. "Well... yeah. I'm on my way

out there now, actually. Gotta find a good spot before all them huge trucks jam up the lots, dontchaknow."

"Got room for a passenger?"

"Sure thing, Rose. Is the S10 busted? I saw ya this mornin'... just before Nasty-Ass Holstein pulled me over for speedin'."

Rose decided to skip the details and stepped around the performance car that she had spent many an hour working on. "How fast was ya goin', Coop?"

"Aw, dunno. Fifty or somethin'."

"It's a thirty-five zone, dumbass."

"Language, li'l lady," Coop said with a broad grin. His eyes happened to glide down over Rose's rear end as she walked around the car. It only added to his grin.

When the Monte Carlo was fully gassed up, he reached into his pocket and found a ten dollar bill that he put into the mailbox.

Getting back into the car's bucket seat, he chuckled out loud at the sight of Rose having put on the seat belt. "Whassamatter, Rose? Ya gettin' scared or somethin'?"

"I already had one wreck today, Coop. Shut up and drive."

"Yes, Ma'am!" Coop said and turned on the engine. As soon as the V8 came to life, he gunned it and laid down two fat stripes on the flagstones in front of the gas pumps. Once out on Main Street, he repeated the feat until he settled down to a lazy twenty miles an hour in the hope that he'd run into his buddies so they could see just what kind of high-quality 'seat cover' he had in his car.

"So, Rose," Coop said and put his arm across the backrest of Rose's seat in the clear hope that he had reached first base without even trying. "I don't see no Billie Jo around nowhere...? You finally come to your senses about where to look for some sweet lovin'? If ya want to broaden your horizons a little, I'm your man, baby. I hope ya know that. Yeah. 's gonna be a hard, hard job, but I promise I'll give ya all I got to, ya know, give ya a good introduction to..."

Rose rolled her eyes and began to mouth obscenities at Jimmy while he yapped on. Sighing, she looked out at the stores they were driving past and realized they had reached McDowell's, Lincoln's seedy Bar & Grill. She knew that if she went in there, she'd get drunk on cheap booze and even cheaper beer, but she also knew she'd kill Jimmy Cooper if she had to listen to his locker-room inanities for much longer. In the end, the decision was easy: "Stop the car, Coop. I want out."

"What?"

"Stop the Goddamned car, Coop!" Rose roared, pointing at the sidewalk.

"All right, all right! Jesus, talk about blowin' hot and cold! Ya got the flippin' red or somethin'?" Coop said and hit the brakes. He quickly steered over to the curb and pulled the shifter into Neutral.

In two heartbeats flat, Rose bounded from the Monte Carlo and slammed the door shut. She stomped across the sidewalk and over to the entrance to McDowell's without looking behind her, but there was no mistaking the wild roar from the V8, nor the angry squealing from the tires.

Her hand was already on the glass door's handle, but she didn't depress it. Looking inside McDowell's, she could see that life went on as always. Some sat at the tables by the windows eating greasy burgers and even greasier fries, others sat on the bar stools at the counter drinking beer. To the right, Fatty Connelly was wobbling around the pool table chalking his cue and sizing up the young man who was playing against him.

Behind Rose, a pair of rowdy young men parked their truck and went up on the sidewalk. "Hey! Take a shit or get off the can, sister," one of them said, grabbing hold of Rose's shoulder to get her to move away from the door.

Rose spun around and bared her teeth in a sneer. Her pale-blue eyes locked onto the young man's grayish orbs and shot him a glare with such laser-like intensity that he had to take a step back with his hands in the air.

Not wanting to get into a fight, Rose stomped off down the sidewalk until she reached the first alley away from Main Street. There, she turned sharp left and kept walking until she had gone past the first few houses and sheds.

She eventually discovered she was on a metaphorical road to nowhere and came to a sliding halt. Groaning out loud, she took off her trucker hat and fluffed her dark mullet. Inside her, her dark emotions, her frustrations and her growing anger at being so blatantly rejected by Billie Jo even when she hadn't done a thing wrong collided and became a super-storm that needed to come out or else she'd burst at the seams. Spinning around, she kicked the life out of a metal trash can that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The lid of the trash can went flying and landed in someone's garden. Not long after, a dog started barking and an older man appeared in the garden's driveway with an angry expression on his face. "Hullo! You kids better stop kickin' my trash can or I'll send my dog after you!" he said, holding up what appeared to be a cane.

Rose was about to yell at the man that he should stay the hell out of her business, but she changed her mind at the last moment and stomped the other way.

Back on Main Street - that slowly grew busier in preparation for the big event out at the fairgrounds - Rose stomped past McDowell's and carried on for several hundred yards until she

simply couldn't be bothered to stomp along anymore. Groaning, she stopped and turned back around.

The evening service at the Baptist Church across the street had just finished and a few dozen people streamed out onto the sidewalk not far from where Rose had wrecked the Cadillac. Though Johnny Lee had cleaned the sidewalk thoroughly, the stains from the radiator fluid and the oil were still visible.

Several of the church-goers pointed at the stains and at the sorry state of the light pole before they put their heads together and gossiped about the afternoon's major piece of news, a wreck right in the middle of peaceful Main Street.

Rose grunted and shuffled back towards McDowell's in a far easier pace than the one she had used when she had gone the other way. Fifty yards down the sidewalk, she came to a dead stop when she saw a very familiar outfit - red Capris and a red-and-white polka dotted blouse - go over to the glass door of the bar and grill and hold it open. Billie Jo smiled as she stepped aside for Tammy Fay Sorenson. Soon, they had both gone inside.

A jagged knife sawed Rose's heart in two at the sight. Unsure of what to do, she stuffed her hands down her pockets and kept standing on the sidewalk. After a while, she sighed deeply and shuffled over to the curb where she sat down between two cars with her long legs sticking out onto the street.

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Five minutes later - during which Rose had been exposed to a lot of curious glances from the people walking past on the sidewalk - Sheriff Seymour Holstein crawled past in his cream-colored cruiser out on Main Street.

Moments after the cruiser had gone past her, it came to a screeching halt and reversed back to her position on the sidewalk.

The Sheriff rolled down the window and pointed an accusing index finger at Rose. "Kowalski! Get the hell away from there or face the consequences. You hear me?"

"I hear ya, Sheriff," Rose said and got up. She dusted off the seat of her pants and looked around for something else to do while the Sheriff observed her closely. The siren song that reached her ears from McDowell's Bar & Grill was too strong. She caved and began to shuffle down towards the seedy establishment.

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Billie Jo and Tammy Fay were sitting at one of the window seats eating rib burgers and drinking Cokes when Rose entered the eatery. They were chatting and smiling, and Rose had never felt more alone. She kept standing just inside the door and stared at her girlfriend in the vain hope

she'd glance back at her, but Billie Jo didn't. In fact, it became clear it was a conscious decision by the blonde to ignore the tall, sulking woman.

Rose sighed and shuffled over to the bar counter at the back of McDowell's.

The establishment was divided into three sections of equal size: on the left, the jukebox and a cluster of square tables, in the center, a wooden counter with a row of red bar stools, and on the right, the entertainment area with a pool table, a Test Your Strength boxing ball and three electronic arcade machines. Both video poker machines were occupied, but the chair at the video keno was vacant as it invariably was.

The five dinner tables that seated four each had been decorated with checkered tablecloths in red, white and blue, brown glass lamps with room for a tealight, and a tray with salt and pepper shakers, small plastic bottles of ketchup, mustard and Tabasco, and black metal jars that held salt, sugar and ground chili peppers.

The jukebox, built in a retro design to look like a genuine Wurlitzer from the 1950s, was lit up like a Christmas tree. Rose knew at once that Billie Jo had put a quarter in it because it was playing one of her favorites, Lynn Anderson's Listen to a Country Song. These days, the playing came from CDs rather than vinyl singles, but the general function had remained the same.

As in any bar and grill anywhere in the world, the air carried a peculiar scent of fried food, stale beer, cheap perfume and that unidentifiable smell that always hung in the air and stuck to every surface but that nobody could ever pin down.

The row of bar stools in front of the counter was mostly empty when Rose got to it, and she swept up on the one furthest right, opposite the table where Billie Jo sat, so she could sneak a peek now and then. The female barkeep was busy with another customer down the other end of the counter, so Rose glanced around at the neon signs advertising all kinds of beer brands and at the four shelves of colorful bottles across the narrow path where the keep worked.

A bowl of free pork rinds right in front of her was too good to pass over, so she took a few and popped them into her mouth. They were salty and greasy, just the way she loved them. The first two were so good she took another two for dessert.

In the old days, McDowell's would have been enveloped in volcanic clouds of cigarette smoke, but the new world order had reached Lincoln, and the bar and grill had become a no-smoking zone. In a glass display case next to the counter, the owners kept a collection of some of their old ashtrays painted in the colors of the big tobacco companies to show how it used to be.

Behind Rose, Billie Jo moved over to the jukebox and chose another song, Johnny Paycheck's Friend-Lover-Wife. As the provocative song started, Rose peeked over her shoulder but found herself thoroughly ignored.

"Hey, Rose! What can I get ya?" the barkeep said behind the counter.

Turning back around, Rose couldn't help but look down the barkeep's cleavage - it was hard to avoid considering Lynette Cross had her girls pushed up to a couple of inches below her chin underneath her tight, white, plunging v-neck t-shirt. Twenty-seven years old like Rose, the barkeep was pretty and had charming, blond pigtails, but she had an unfortunate tendency to overdo her makeup which gave her an appearance of a ten-dollar prostitute.

"Howdy, Lynette," Rose said with a tired grin as she took off her trucker hat and put it on the counter. "How 'bout a cheeseburger and a cold Headache. Gimme the Headache first."

Lynette shrugged and walked down the other end of the counter where she opened a refrigerator unit and took a can of beer with a green and yellow label from H.E. Fenwyck's Breweries. "Wotcha wanna drink that dishwater for, Rose? I mean, we got so many tasty brands..."

" 'Cos it's cheap, that's why. C'mon," Rose said and tapped her knuckles on the counter top. "Oh, and hold the onions."

"Sure thing, Rose," Lynette said and handed her customer the can.

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By the time the cheeseburger was ready, Rose had already finished the first can of the beer she and others affectionately called 'Headache' for its headache-inducing qualities. Whatever else, it was a good beer if anyone wanted to get drunk quickly.

A young couple had taken over the jukebox and had selected The Legend of Woolly Swamp by the Charlie Daniels Band. The young woman's opinion of her date's odd choice of music was written all over her face.

"Here ya go, Rose," Lynette said and put a plate with the cheeseburger on the counter.

"Thanks, Lynette. Say, how much for the burger?"

"Three bucks."

"Okay," Rose said and reached into her back pocket for her wallet. "Tell ya what, here's ten bucks. This is for the burger and, oh, half a dozen Headaches. Yeah?"

Lynette stared at the dark-haired woman to see if she was joking, but the somber look told her she wasn't. "Half a dozen? Whaddaya think this is... cocktail hour at the Savoy? Girl, I don't wanna be near ya tomorrow. You gonna have one hellacious hangover."

"Whatever. Just gimme all the Headaches at once so ya don't hafta come over all the damn time," Rose said and went to work on her cheeseburger.

Lynette chuckled and did as asked.

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By the time the second and third beer had been consumed, Rose had begun to turn a little hazy. Now and then, she looked back at Billie Jo and Tammy Fay who seemed to have a fun night out in town while they waited for the monster truck festival to start.

In a lull in business, Lynette came over and leaned against the counter. As she moved forward and rested on her arms, her girls nearly fell out of her t-shirt and she had to adjust it accordingly. "Rose, how come you and Billie Jo don't sit together? Trouble in paradise?"

"Eh," Rose said with a shrug. To get away from the potentially hazardous topic, she took a couple of the free pork rinds and popped them into her mouth.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Rose crunched loudly on the pork rinds before she even looked like she wanted to answer. "Eh. I was wonderin', Lynette... where d'ya think I could crash tonight and tomorrow..." - Rose looked back at Billie Jo who promptly looked the other way - "and maybe one or two more nights after that?"

"Oh my flippin' Gawd, are you guys... have you guys...?" Lynette whispered, leaning so deeply over the counter her girls nearly fell out all over again.

Rose shook her head while she cracked open the fourth can of Headache. "Don't wanna talk about it. Any suggestions?"

"Well... I live upstairs, ya know," Lynette whispered with a coquettish smile playing on her lips.

Rose took a long swig before she raised her eyes to look at Lynette's face. "Yeah? Aw, it don't hafta be much, Lyn. Jus' a dirty ol' mattress on the floor or somethin'. I ain't no fancy girl."

"No, no... it would be an honest-to-goodness bed, Rose."

"Keep talkin'."

Lynette eyed Billie Jo before she leaned in so close she could whisper into Rose's ear. "My bed. Just for fun."

"Lynette... no. That ain't gonna-"

"Just for fun, Rose. Come on... I thought you liked girls? I'm a girl."

"No shit?" Rose said and took a long swig from the can. When she put it back on the counter, she shook her head slowly. "Naw. Can't. Won't. Sorry."

Lynette moved back slightly but kept whispering in case any of the other barflies was close enough to pick it up. "Come on, Rose... I've always wondered what it was like. You know..."

"I said no, Lynette... for Chrissakes! No means no!" Rose barked, slamming the can down onto the counter. As a result, white foam burst out of it and ran down the sides and onto her fingers. Groaning out loud over the unfairness of it all, she took a napkin and began to wipe it clean.

Lynette took a step back with a miffed expression on her face. With an insulted huff, she moved away from Rose and began to wipe off the counter down the other end.

With the beer too foamy to drink, Rose turned around on the bar stool and looked over at the table where Billie Jo and Tammy Fay were sitting. For once, she was able to get a single glance out of Billie Jo, but it only lasted a moment.

Grunting, Rose slipped off the bar stool and wobbled over to a small chair arrangement at the pool table with her remaining two and a half cans of beer. Once there, she put the beer down on a round table and headed for the Ladies'.

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Upon her return, Rose stopped at the bar counter and glanced at Billie Jo with a deep, sad look of longing in her eyes. Sighing from the bottom of her soul, she snatched the bowl of free pork rinds before she continued on towards the pool table on legs that wobbled more than a little.

Fatty Connelly was chalking his fancy ebony cue, but he looked up and shot Rose a broad grin when she came closer. "Evenin', Rose. Wanna try a few frames?" he said, pointing his meaty thumb at the table where the colorful balls were already lined up and ready to go.

The man everybody knew as Fatty - his real first name had been lost in the murky currents of time - did his best to live up to his nickname by grossly filling out his dark brown suit with his three hundred and sixty pounds. His thinning hair, meaty cheeks and double chins gave his appearance a certain hint of the late, great comedian from the silent age, Oliver Hardy.

Standing at only five foot six, all that fat had to go somewhere, and that somewhere was his gut. He used to joke that God had chosen a beer barrel as his template, and anyone close enough to see him could only agree.

Though it seemed his bulk and lumbering walk would work against him at the pool table, he was in fact the county's number one hustler - the sharpness of his beady eyes proved it. His preferred style was to lose the first few frames to trick his opponents into having a false sense of security. When they turned too cocky and agreed on a high stakes frame, he went to work and cleaned them out in no time flat.

Rose shook her head and sat down at the table where she had deposited her cans of beer. "Howdy, Fatty. Naw... not right now. Maybe a little later. I gotta get decently drunk before I'm

even gonna attempt playin' against ya." To prove her point, she took the can of Headache that had foamed over before and drank it in a single gulp.

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Fifteen minutes later, that can and the next were empty, and the final can had been opened. By now, Rose's eyes were swimming, but she could still stand on her feet. She had watched Fatty play a few frames against himself and had decided she had sussed him out.

"Yo, Fatty... clear the table, man. I's gonna play now," she said and got to her feet. "What we playin' for, man?"

"Jeez, Rose... you sure you can even hold the cue without scratchin' the table?" Fatty said, fanning his nose to get away from the strong scent of beer that hung around his foggy opponent.

"Hell yeah. Pull up the frame and Imma gonna show ya how this game is played," Rose said and grabbed a few pork rinds on her way over to the pool table.

"Uh-huh?" Fatty said with a chuckle and a barely hidden snort. He did as asked and handed Rose one of the rental cues. "Here ya go. The table's the green thing at the center of the room."

"No shit... watch me dance, buddy," Rose said and pulled the cue back to open the game. Before she could start, Fatty moved the cue ball away from the table. "Hey... now what?"

"The stakes, Rose?"

"How 'bout a Headache and a chaser?"

"No way, sunshine," Fatty said and let out a loud laugh. "Not that H.E. Fenwyck dishwater you're drinking. But okay, a beer and a chaser. Ya better find ya wallet 'cos I want one of the quality brands. And a Hunter's Dream bitter."

"Mercy sakes, Fatty... ya think I'm a millionaire or somethin'? All right. Put the Goddamn cue ball back on the table!"

Fatty grinned condescendingly and put the ball back on the playing field. "Yes, Ma'am," he said, soon grabbing his ebony cue.

Rose stuck her tongue in the side of her mouth and aimed for the rear of the cue ball. Holding her breath, she pulled back the cue to go to war.

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The results were given from the start. At first, they only played a single frame, then best of three, then best of five - the entire match had the inevitability of a train wreck. Rose lost handsomely each and every time the colorful balls were lined up in the frame.

By the sixth frame, even Fatty had had enough. "Naw, Rose... let's call it quits. This is just too ridiculous. You owe me six brewskis and six Hunter's Dreams."

"Goddamn..." Rose croaked and reached for her wallet. When she opened it, she just saw the tail end of a moth flying off in an obvious fit of pique for being disturbed.

"Yeah," Fatty continued as he lumbered over to the small chair arrangement and sat down, "but I'd drop stone dead if I had to drink all that. So... how 'bout you only owe me one beer and one Dream?"

Rose looked at him through watery eyes. She nodded solemnly and shuffled up to the bar counter where she tried to climb up onto one of the red bar stools. After a few attempts, she had to give up and settled for leaning against the counter. "Hey... Lynette? What's the best kinda brew you got?"

"An Old Virginian Dark. It's a microbrewery up near Roanoke, Rose," Lynette said, flipping a rib burger at the stove down the other end of the counter.

"I need one o' those, thanks. And a Hunter's Dream shot. What owe?"

"Fifteen dollars."

Rose came to a jerking halt with her fingers suspended halfway down into her wallet. All she had in there was a twenty dollar bill. That meant she only had five dollars to live off for however long it would take for Billie Jo to calm down and allow her back into her life. "Crap... if it continues like this, Imma gonna be hookin' come tomorrow evenin'. Goddamn, I need a job... Lynette, can ya break a Jackson?"

"Duh," Lynette said and rolled her eyes.

"Aw... just askin'..."

Rose suddenly noticed a very familiar figure standing next to her. In fact, the figure was standing so close their elbows were touching. She looked down at the red Capris, further up at the polka dotted blouse and finally all the way up to Billie Jo's fair face and her honey-blond hairdo that was still marked by the can of hair spray she had used on it the same morning.

"I'd like another small Coke, please, Lynette," Billie Jo said, putting two one-dollar bills onto the counter. She never even glanced in Rose's direction.

"I'll be right there, hon," the barkeep said with a smile.

Rose licked her lips and racked her fuzzy mind to come up with the mother of all pickup lines, that immortal, epic, ground-breaking pickup line that would bring them back together. Unfortunately, all her tongue would say was: "Baby... you so fiiiine tonight." She followed the pearl of wisdom with a beery grin.

Billie Jo shot her but a single look before she turned back to Lynette who had just finished flipping the rib burger.

"So," the barkeep said as she wiped her hands on a towel. "Rose, you first. An Old Virginian Dark and a Hunter's Dream shot?"

"Yeah... yeah. For fifteen bucks," Rose said and put the twenty on the counter.

"Yep," Lynette said and took a shot glass from underneath the counter. It was quickly filled with the murky, hi-proof bitter with thirty-two different spices that hunters seemed to love. Once the small glass was on the counter, she shuffled down to the refrigerator to get a bottle of the dark ale. "Here ya go, Rose. Careful, this is potent stuff... not like the Headaches at all," she said as she took the twenty and put a five dollar bill on the counter.

"Yeah, yeah... thanks," Rose said and took the loose change and the two items. She wobbled over to the pool table without realizing that Billie Jo's eyes were burning two holes in her strong back.

When Rose put the bottle of beer and the shot glass down in front of Fatty with a grunt and a dark glare at the grossly overweight hustler, Billie Jo let out a sigh of relief that she thought she was the only one who could hear - but Rose heard it too, and a brief but wistful smile played on her lips before it was lost to the effects of the Headaches.

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## CHAPTER 5

Rose here. I know what you're thinkin'. You're thinkin' "*What a flippin' white trash loser that Rose Kowalski broad is.*" Right? I musta brought all this shit upon myself for things I've done in the past. Right?

Now I'm sittin' here in the back of the smelly police cruiser with a flippin' nosebleed and scraped knuckles and you're thinkin'... "*I sure as shit am glad that pe-cu-li-ar woman ain't one of my acquaintances.*"

Well, lemme tell you somethin'... I ain't been whorin', I ain't been boozin'... much... and I sure as stink on shit ain't been slappin' my beautiful little Billie Jo around like so many others who live in trailer parks, high-rise apartments or high-falootin' mansions.

I know I ain't got no book sense. I got common sense, but ain't no book sense. School wasn't too good for me. Either the teachers smacked me over the head for talkin' back, or the boys tried ta grope my ass, or the other girls gossiped about me 'cos I had short hair and moved like a boy. I hated school and I couldn't leave fast enough. First chance I got I was outta there like a flippin'

greased lightnin'. Ain't never opened no book since, apart from the occasional newspaper or the instruction manuals at work.

I'm a simple woman. I wake up in the morn, cuddle with my baby, eat, go to Cutter's where I used to work my ass off for a buck or two, go home, eat, cuddle with my baby and go to bed. My weekends are best spent in bed cuddlin' with my baby or in front of the teevee watchin' the Eighty-eight racin' for the 500.

I know I ain't one of them brainy women... often, I ain't got the words to express how I feel, especially not when it comes to my beautiful Billie Jo. I love her with all my flippin' heart, but sometimes I'm worried she ain't really too aware of that 'cos I just can't tell her. I mean sure, I can say the words... any fool can say the words. But does she understand there's real weight behind 'em? I dunno and I am too flippin' scared to ask.

But I got hopes and dreams, too, Goddammit! I was gonna make enough money to support her for the rest of our lives. We were gonna cruise down one of the local Routes on my hog. We were gonna find a quiet spot somewhere and just be together. Just Billie Jo and me and mother nature. We were just gonna be together and love each other... laugh and smile... tease each other and cuddle under the blue sky and everythin' was gonna be all right. Then this flippin' thing happened.

Lemme tell you another story... one about shit. Yeah, shit just loves to accumulate and pile up. Sooner or later, the pile of shit gonna fall down and when it does, ya better wear some good boots, man. I don't care who ya are, if ya standin' in the danger zone, ya gonna be swept away by the brown wave.

My pile just fell down but so did his. Gotta face the consequences of what I've been doin'. All right. It felt flippin' good, but now I know where I'm gonna spend the next couple-a weeks. I did what I had to do and I accept the law comin' down on my ass. Ain't life grand?

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McDowell's Bar & Grill closed early because of the big event out at the fairgrounds. Rose stood by the counter and watched Lynette give the last barflies a few gentle pushes to get them to leave the establishment. When the bosomy barkeep locked the glass door, Rose drained her final can of Headache and scooped up the last of the free pork rinds.

"Rose, darlin'... I think you've had enough," Lynette said with a grin as she turned off the neon signs and moved the slider for the ceiling lights down to the night setting.

"I know, Lyn... I know," Rose said, crunching loudly on the scrumptious pork rind. "Hey... you sure it ain't no hassle to haul my sorry ass out to them fairgrounds?"

"Of course not! I'm going myself, ain't I?" Lynette said and opened the hatch in the counter so she could get over to the refrigerators and the stoves and turn them down.

Rose nodded and pushed the empty can across the counter so Lynette could deal with it. She stepped off the bar stool and had to lean against the counter for a little while. With a sigh, she took her trucker hat and began to shuffle off towards the glass doors.

"Hang on, pardner!" Lynette said and hurried after her morose friend. "I just locked the doors, remember? C'mon, we're gonna exit through the back door. My car's parked out back."

Rose turned around and stared at the barkeep with swimming eyes. She eventually grunted and shuffled the other way.

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The seats in Lynette's cherry red Chevrolet Cruze were so comfortable Rose was on the verge of falling asleep the moment she put her rear end down onto the velvet. With some difficulty, she reached for the seat belt and buckled up.

Lynette closed the passenger side door behind her drunken guest and hurried around the front of the car. When she sat down behind the wheel, it was hard to miss her home-made denim short-shorts and her mostly bare thighs. On her right leg, she had a four-inch long bruise that ran from her kneecap and up her thigh.

Rose stared at the bare skin and at the recent injury, but didn't want to ask about either - in the end, she didn't have to.

"Partner rash," Lynette said and ran an index finger around the bruise. "It was Willard. You should see the ugly one I have on my stomach."

"He beat you?"

Lynette shrugged and started the Cruze.

"What the flip he beat you for, Lyn?"

The barkeep quickly reversed away from the back of the establishment and drove down an uneven gravelly path to get to Main Street. The question remained awkwardly unanswered, but when they had to come to a full stop to wait for a customized truck loaded with teenagers who were clearly on their way to the fairgrounds, Lynette shrugged. "He doesn't like it when I'm flirtin' with the customers," she said, looking at the street instead of Rose.

"Screw him, that sonovabitch," Rose said and held up a middle finger at the man who wasn't there. "You ain't even married. You gotta dump 'im before he thinks you're his property and starts slappin' you around for real."

"Aw, I think we're past that particular point of no return, Rose," Lynette said and drove onto Main Street.

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A mile or so outside of town, the lights from the fairgrounds could be seen illuminating the evening sky. Eight huge floodlights had been put up around the track made for the monster trucks to make it the best event possible.

Up ahead, a different kind of lights flashed from the two police cruisers Sheriff Holstein had sent to control the traffic. The flashes of blue and red shone onto the long line of cars that were stationary across the Route even though several lanes were open at the booths that led to the four huge parking lots.

Lynette slowed down and put on her hazard lights to warn the cars behind that they were about to come to a full stop in an unexpected place.

Though Rose had nearly fallen asleep, the sight of a red Chevrolet S10 truck ten or so vehicles ahead of them made her snap back to reality. The driver was a petite woman with honey-blond hair and a polka-dotted arm that hung out of the window so she could pay the attendant at the booth. Rose gulped and looked down at her hands.

"Hey Rose, this is like a date, huh? My first date with a woman. Ain't that something?" Lynette said to try to lift the somber spirits. "Don't you worry, I got the parking fee and the general admittance. It's twenty bucks a pop, right?"

"No idea," Rose said and picked at a loose seam on her black jeans. The Headaches were starting to gang up on her. She knew it wouldn't be long before they would start doing what they did best, namely giving her a thumping ache somewhere deep inside her brain.

Lynette reached over and put a warm hand a bit too high on Rose's thigh. "Rose... may I ask you a question?" she said quietly, caressing the black jeans.

"Uh... yeah...?" Rose said, staring at the barkeep's slender fingers that gently clawed her leg.

"I heard it's a beautiful, spiritual thing when girls make love. Is that true?"

Rose sighed and reached down to remove Lynette's hand from her thigh. Once the slender fingers were back on the steering wheel, she turned around in the seat to look the pretty barkeep in the eye. "Lynette... it ain't gonna happen. I'm sorry, you're a sexy gal and everythin', but it just ain't gonna happen. Okay?"

The endless row of vehicles finally moved ahead for half a dozen yards, far enough for the cherry red Cruze to drive off the Route and onto the fairground's lot.

"You didn't answer my question, Rose," Lynette said with a wink. "I'm so sick and tired of guys. Maybe I should... you know... try something new," she continued, moving her hand back towards the black jeans.

Rose intercepted the hand and moved it back to the steering wheel before it could touch anything. "Hell yeah it can be a two-hour spiritual event, Lyn. It can also be a five-minute wham-bam if that's what you got the hots for. Look, apart from the obvious, it ain't that much different from wotcha got with guys. You just gotta find a partner who loves ya and treats ya with the respect you deserve. If ya get them things right, magic is made."

"And who the hell of the local guys should that be, Rose? Have ya had a look at 'em lately? Jimmy Coop, that horny li'l bastard, perhaps?"

"Naw, anybody but Coop," Rose said with a beery chuckle.

"Yeah, you said it, Sister. But... I'd... I'd still like to try it... you know... just once... with a woman."

"Aw Lawrdy, can we change the topic, Lyn?" Rose said and rubbed her face where a certain numbness had begun to set in. "You ain't drunk enough to be talkin' 'bout that and I'm way too damn drunk to answer ya."

Lynette scrunched up her face in a mask of disappointment, but they were soon at the parking booth where other matters were more pressing.

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The county fairgrounds just north of Lincoln had originally been built as a staging camp for the local infantry brigades during the Civil War. Following the end of the bloody conflict, the entire area fell into disuse until a shrewd businessman from the next town over bought it from the US government for hardly anything at all.

Within a few decades, it had become the biggest attraction in that part of the state through its tribunes with seating for nearly forty thousand and the vast, flat area that was perfect for traveling Western shows, circuses and fairs. A century and a half later, it was still a major attraction though the paved speedway eighty miles west drew a far larger crowd for its two NASCAR Sprint Cup races.

Rose and Lynette appeared at the central staircase of the west tribune as two tiny dots in the middle of a sea of humanity. Everywhere they looked, families with coolers, kids and cameras flocked around the large tribunes to get to their designated seats. Rose and Lynette soon followed them along the concrete aisles with soft drinks, a large box of popcorn and a stick of pink cotton candy.

Down below, the six hundred foot long monster truck course had been laid out as four adjacent lanes with a small dirt hill as the first obstacle, a large pile of junk cars as the second, followed

by a tricky hairpin, a small dirt hill as the third obstacle and another large pile of junk cars as the final one going to the finish line.

Next to the four monster truck lanes, the organizers of the event, the Monster Truck Racing Association, had created a tractor pulling lane that was to be used in a demonstration of a triple-turbine powered tractor in the half-time show after the cheerleader dancing display. The boogie band from Texas, the Four Flat Tires, came last and the schedule said they would play until midnight.

Lynette found their seats first and tapped Rose on the shoulder to get her swimming date to slow down. The two women sat down in their seats and looked at the final preparations down below. "Aw, this is excitin'!" Lynette said, bumping shoulders with Rose.

"Mmmm," Rose mumbled, glancing at the other spectators instead of down at the field. It didn't take her long to find the familiar red-and-white polka dotted blouse and the shock of honey-blond hair. Billie Jo and Tammy Fay were sitting a row higher some seventy feet to the right of Rose. They were laughing and drinking the same kind of soft drinks and eating the same kind of snacks as Rose and Lynette, popcorn and cotton candy. Rose's face fell when she remembered Billie Jo asking for those very things at lunch.

She looked back down at the field so she didn't have to torture herself with what could have been. Moments later, her right shoulder was bumped into so hard she almost lost her grip on her soft drink. "Whaddahell? Open ya flippin' eyes, man!" she growled, shooting the man who had bumped her an intense glare as she reached up to salvage her trucker hat before it could fly off.

He was a big fellow wearing jeans, a camouflaged baseball cap and an olive green US Marine Corps t-shirt, though his beer gut proved that he hadn't been anywhere near the Marines. His wife next to him was even larger.

"Sorry 'bout that, li'l lady," the man said and put his cooler box down in front of the seat. He popped open the lid at once to reveal he was hauling at least a dozen cans and bottles of beer that were buried in crushed ice. After giving a can to his wife, he took a bottle for himself and twisted off the cap.

"I ain't no lady," Rose growled, sucking hard on her Coke to forget the man's lack of manners.

Lynette let out a squeal and hooked her arm inside Rose's. "You sure ain't. And that's why I love you so, darlin'!" she said loudly before she leaned in and gave Rose a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

"Mercy sakes, Lynette... not now, okay? Not here, neither," Rose whined, rolling her eyes. After she had let out a sigh that came from the bottom of her soul, she happened to cast a glance up at the row where Billie Jo and Tammy Fay were sitting. Billie Jo was looking straight back down at her with a puzzled look on her face.

Rose sent her partner a shrug and a tired grin, knowing that whatever she did, it would be misunderstood. She was relieved when she saw Billie Jo mirroring the shrug and the grin.

Down on the field, the official pre-show business was about to start. A bespectacled, balding man stepped out of the shadows and waited for a spotlight to pick him up. Once it had, he moved into the center of the monster truck course and climbed up onto one of the small dirt hills. "Hello and good evening, race fans," Reverend Bolt said into a cordless microphone, "Before we begin, I shall recite a little prayer and ask our Lord to protect the brave men and women you shall see tonight. Oh, heavenly Father..."

While the Reverend spoke, a respectful silence fell over the spectators. Rose looked at the people nearest to her instead of down at the speaker. Even the wild Lynette had turned into a sheep at the hands of the great shepherd. Rose snorted and stuffed a handful of caramel popcorn in her mouth.

By the time the prayer was over, a retired Sergeant from the US Army Brass Marching Band came out from the shadows and played the national anthem on a shiny trombone. Just as he hit the last note, a crop duster performed a fly-by with a banner advertising Cutter's Auto Repair Shop.

When Rose saw that, she gulped down the bitter taste of gall that had suddenly developed in her mouth.

"All right, everybody!" Reverend Bolt said into his microphone. "Let's get this show on the road! Here they come now! Let's give 'em a warm welcome to Lincoln!"

As the first of the monster trucks rolled onto the field - painted like the General Lee from the Dukes of Hazzard - the crowd went wild and began to clap, cheer and whistle at the fearless gladiators.

Rose put her soft drink between her thighs and stuck her fingers in her mouth to let out a piercing whistle that could have awoken the dead. The trucks that were competing all rolled out onto the field and let their highly tuned engines do the talking. More cheering ensued, especially when one of them belched flames from the chrome exhausts.

*"Aaaaaaand welcome to the monster truck extravaganza!"* the circuit commentator said over the old and croaky P.A. system. *"First up, we have the elimination runs in the fifteen-hundred horsepower class. Please give a hand to our first competitors of the evening, GhoulsRules in lane one and Buccaneer in lane two..."*

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In the first part of the half-time break between the elimination runs and the finals, a selected group of cheerleaders from various colleges around the state performed a colorful, high-kicking show with plenty of acrobatics, pom-poms and gyrating women.

While the music was playing from below, beverage and snack vendors walked up and down the aisles carrying boxes filled with various products. The business was good and they rarely walked alone for more than a few steps at a time.

"Rose, ya want another Coke or somethin'?" Lynette said, leaning into Rose's ear to be heard over the loud and slightly distorted music.

Rose rubbed her mouth with the back of her hand. She eyed the cooler box next to her that belonged to her chubby, and presently departed, neighbors. "Quite frankly... I could use a beer, Lyn."

"Okay. Not a Headache, tho', right?"

"Hell, I could drink a Headache," Rose said with a tired chuckle. "Nah. I can't afford it."

Lynette shook her head and leaned in to bump shoulders with her would-be date. "Rose... for cryin' out loud... it's my treat!"

"Naw. That ain't how the piano plays in this honky-tonk, Lyn. You already gave me plenty tonight. Thanks, but I'll be fine."

"Jeez, your pride's gonna get ya in trouble one day, ya know that?"

Rose didn't answer - there wasn't any point. Instead, she looked down at the cheerleaders and the crazy throws and maneuvers they went through. One of the young women held up a hoop and another jumped through it in a perfect split holding a pair of golden pom-poms. Once the other woman had gone through, she somersaulted and jumped to her feet waving the pom-poms high in the air. The half-time show only garnered modest applause; mostly because the men in the audience were too busy ogling the nubile young women to have time to cheer.

"Anyhow," Lynette said and got up. "I need to pee. You comin', or...?"

"Now you mention it," Rose said and followed the colorfully dressed barkeep along the half-empty row of seats. Though she tried hard not to, her eyes took on a life of their own and slid down to Lynette's short-shorts to follow the sculpted rear and the gently wiggling hips. When she realized what she was doing, she sighed and looked back up.

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The public restrooms were at ground level below and behind the tribunes. Before Rose and Lynette could make it all the way down to the ground, the queues at the twelve restrooms had reached critical level even though the split between the Gents and the Ladies was four to eight.

"Lawrd have mercy," Rose groaned when she realized the group of women standing on the lower rungs of the main staircase formed the tail end of the line to the restrooms. The line snaked its way around the corner, onto the lot, in between the huge pillars that held up the tribunes and finally over to the rows of plastic cabins. In a flash of infinite wisdom, someone had ordered baby blue cabins for the men and princess pink cabins for the women.

Rose rolled her eyes and stepped out of the queue at once. "Lynette... I'm really sorry, buddy, but I ain't got patience for this kinda shit right here. I don't gotta go that fiercely, so... I'm gonna go over to the truck display over yonder-" - she pointed at one of the monster trucks that had been parked just inside the gates so people could admire the engine and inner workings - "and take a peek at the marvel. Okay?"

"Sure thing, Rose. I really gotta pee!"

"You have my condolences, my friend. Really ya do," Rose said somberly, giving Lynette's shoulder a motherly squeeze. A couple of seconds later, she couldn't hold the dark mask and broke out in a beery grin that earned her a mocking snort.

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There were far too many nosy kids for Rose's liking at the monster truck on display so she was quickly back at the main staircase. The queue had moved a good thirty feet in the meantime, and she waved at Lynette who had begun to cross her short-shorts-clad legs.

As Rose headed for the staircase to get back upstairs, she overheard a familiar male voice speaking somewhere behind her. The voice belonged to Darrell Yates, Jr. but it wasn't the speaker's identity that made her stop dead in her tracks, it was the things he was bragging about.

*'Yeah, I had her but good just before the break,' Junior said in a voice so laden with beer and put-upon swagger that Rose nearly tossed her popcorn. 'I knew I'd get that tight little hussy sooner or later. Ever since I groomed her last year, I've been keepin' an eye on her. And tonight she delivered the goods. O-yeah, did she ever. I had her up against the pillars down here while you were watchin' the trucks. Sweet Lawrd Almighty, she knew what she was doin' with her tongue, lemme tell you. I guess that comes from all the carpet she's munched, know what I mean?'*

Sick of Junior's boasting, Rose had begun to move on, but that colorful description made her stop dead. Junior and whomever he was speaking to were on the other side of the staircase wall, so she backed up to be able to hear better.

*'Yeah,' Junior continued, sounding like he was beaming like a little sun, 'I gave her plenty. Yes, Sirree. When I left her with glistening cheeks, she was beggin' for more. I guess that's inevitable when her initials are BJ. Eh? Eh? Ain't that right?'*

An atomic bomb went off inside Rose. The destructive forces started in her heart and soon traveled out to her limbs. She tightened every muscle she had and clenched her fists until her knuckles turned white. The tendons on her neck stood out so clearly they were straining against the upper hem of her muscle shirt. Slowly drawing back her lips into an unrestrained sneer, she slammed her eyes shut. When she opened them again, the pale-blue orbs were gone, replaced by bottomless pools of hellfire.

She moved her right leg ahead and put down her boot in a jerky step caused by her tightened muscles. A second step followed the first. Then a third. Then she broke out in an explosive sprint that brought her around the corner of the staircase like a vengeful spirit.

The look of unbridled shock in Darrell Junior's eyes as he saw Rose come barreling towards him was real. He and his well-dressed group of like-minded friends had been lounging at one of the support pillars below the tribunes, but their little safe haven from the blue collar masses suddenly turned into a deadly battlefield.

Shrieking, Junior dropped the beer he had been holding and tried to run away, but Rose was faster.

"You motherfucker!" she cried hoarsely, grabbing hold of his hunting jacket, turning him around and slamming him up against one of the concrete pillars. Her strong fists tightened around his lapels and tore them loose from the rest of the fancy jacket. Baring her teeth, she leaned in to let him see the fury and hatred that brewed behind her stormy eyes.

Somewhere at the back of her mind, she could hear Billie Jo pleading with her to act like an adult and not beat the stuffing out of Junior, but the sweet voice was drowned out by the growling beast that sharpened its claws.

The other well-dressed men around the fighting pair stepped back and began to disperse, well aware of the fact that Junior's boastful mouth had run off with him once too often.

The muscles in Rose's arms and shoulders were strained to their breaking point as she held Junior's fancy clothes, but she tried hard not to give in to her nature and smack him around. All she wanted was to give him a fright so bad he would wet his pants and never talk like that again about Billie Jo or any other woman. "You know what you and me gonna do, Junior?" she said and gave him a tug. "You and me gonna find Billie Jo and you gonna apologize to her. Yeah? You with me, fishbreath? You gonna apologize-"

Instead of listening, Junior spat in Rose's face.

As the glob trickled down her cheek, she fell silent and began to grind her jaw. A slight smile played across her lips as her inhibitions gave up the unequal struggle with her iron will. Moving at the speed of a striking rattlesnake, she pulled back her right fist and cannoned off a hook to Junior's jaw that sent his head spinning.

The force of the impact shook Junior out of his stupor, and he grabbed Rose around her waist and began to wrestle her. The two fierce opponents were soon rolling back and forth between the pillars, wrestling, kicking, punching, groaning, grappling and grunting.

Around them, people came running from all over to see the wrestling match, including Johnny Lee Norton, Jimmy Cooper with a hot date on his arm, Lynette who couldn't believe her eyes, one of the Dales from the trailer park - the one without a dog - and finally Tammy Fay Sorenson who shrieked and stormed back to the queue for the restrooms with her arms flailing in the air.

Junior's arms were flailing too. Though he stood no chance against the far stronger Rose in a regular fight, he managed to get a few hits in on her cheekbones and her nose simply out of dumb luck. Through more dumb luck, their legs got tangled up and they ended up on the ground with Junior on top. He immediately punched Rose in the gut below the belt, but it only angered her more and she swung her right fist at his head and scored another fierce, cracking impact.

While Junior was stunned, Rose scrambled to her knees and pulled her arm back to deliver the finishing blow to his temple that would send him to cloud nine on the express train. As she wanted to move her arm ahead, she realized someone was holding onto it with all their might.

Growling, she looked over her shoulder with a can of whoop-ass all ready to go for whomever had disturbed her, but came to a dead stop when she stared into Billie Jo's frightened, green orbs.

Down on the ground, Junior wasn't about to let such a golden opportunity pass him by, so he jumped up and got set to kick Rose in the head. A split second before he would have released his leg, he was tackled to the ground by two of his companions.

"Rose," Billie Jo pleaded in a thick voice, "please... please, Rose... no more. Please!"

The fight fizzled out of the scraped, bruised and bleeding Rose. Sighing, she nodded and wiped her aching nose on the back of her hand. Two red streaks across it proved Junior had gotten lucky somewhere along the way. She looked up at her partner whose pale face showed all kinds of torment and conflicting emotions. Billie Jo seemed like she didn't know whether to cry or get mad - but at least she didn't walk away.

Rose grunted and clambered to her feet. Her muscle shirt and her black jeans were filthy and disheveled, as was her mullet. Her Bulldog Mack hat had long since blown off and was lying upside down next to the pillar they had been fighting against. She couldn't stand the uncharacteristic silence that came from Billie Jo, and she knew she had just killed every last chance she had ever had of straightening out the mess she had been dumped into. Sighing, she reached for her hat and mashed it down onto her dark locks.

"Excuse me, Miss Tucker?" one of Junior's friends said. Like most of the others in Junior's circle of companions, he was a well-dressed young gentleman with fancy clothes, fancier hair and a well-groomed mustache.

Billie Jo turned around with pain and torment written all over her expressive face. She tried to smile at the gentleman, but it only turned into a faint crease.

"Miss Tucker, I'm Bryan Rauberman and I need to apologize for the things Mr. Yates Jr. said about you. It... it was inexcusable. We... we realize that now," the young man said and waved at his companions to get them to come over. "Mr. Yates Jr. boasted about... uh... about... uh... having s- uh, sex with you... uh, and that's what... uh..."

"He what?" Billie Jo croaked, zooming in on the sorry Junior who was still pinned down by two of his friends.

"Uh... I'm afraid that's what happened," the young gentleman said. "And your, uh... frien- uh, Miss Kowalski there jumped in to... uh, restore your honor, I guess you could say."

Billie Jo's eyes slid over to the bleeding Rose who was leaning against one of the pillars, nursing her bumps and scrapes. "I see..." she croaked, looking back at Junior who had been moved up into a sitting position in the meantime.

Out of nowhere, Billie Jo let out a roar of indignation and stomped over to Junior. Leaning down, she slapped him so hard across the cheek he fell down all over again. "You pathetic, disgusting little joke of a man! How dare you spread such filthy lies about me?!" she roared, moving her hand back to slap the whimpering Junior one more time.

In a perfect reversal of the earlier event, Rose held Billie Jo back after her point had been made. "Baby... simmer down. I think he got the message. Hey, Junior... Junior, quit cryin', dickhead," Rose said, kicking out at Darrell Jr's shoes. "Tell the lady about the can of beer in the Caddy. G'wan, tell the lady 'bout the flippin' can of beer! You miserable little coward, tell Billie Jo 'bout the flippin' can o' beer that cost me my job, my home and my flippin' girlfriend or I swear to the Lawrd above Imma gonna smack you down so good ya can't piss standin' up!"

The tidbit that Rose had lost her job was a shocking piece of news to Billie Jo who gasped loudly and grabbed hold of her lover's strong arms.

Junior looked from the shocked Billie Jo to the hopping mad Rose. He didn't know which of the two furies would hurt him more so he stayed put on the ground with his arms ready to cover his face from further attacks. "I... I guess I had a couple of loose cans of brew in my Caddy... my Caddy... that you wrecked!"

"The flippin' thing got stuck under the flippin' brake pedal! I nearly killed a kid! I wrecked ya Caddy 'cos of your own flippin' beer, Junior. Ain't that just poetic justice?" Rose said drolly.

Billie Jo stared wide-eyed at her partner. All the emotions and anguish that had blasted through her since she went to the accident site and smelled the stink of beer on Rose came down into a single point that had the gravity of a black hole. "You t- told me the truth? You told me the truth... and I didn't believe you..." she croaked, pressing her hands to her mouth.

"Aw, yeah," Rose said and pushed her trucker hat back from her forehead. A smile of relief spread over her battered lips, and she put out her arms to pull Billie Jo into a hug. "The truth is a weird deal sometimes. Mercy sakes, if I'd been told such a story, I woulda- OOOOF!"

The very next moment, Rose was eating dirt and wiggling around flat on her stomach on the ground. Sheriff Holstein pressed his knee into her back as he grabbed her arms and forced them behind her. When the silver handcuffs were in place, he yanked her to her feet and pushed her around. "Kowalski, you dumb sack of shit. What did I tell you about the consequences of the crap you're doin' around here? You can consider yourself under arrest for assault," Seymour Holstein said and gave Rose a strong jerk.

"No, Sheriff!" Billie Jo cried, throwing her hands in the air in frustration. "You- you can't- Rose- Rose just tried to-"

When she realized the Sheriff wouldn't listen, she tried to step in between them, but Holstein wasn't about to let go of his prisoner.

"Step aside, Miss Tucker," he said and jerked Rose around a bit more because he could. "I'm gonna haul Professor Kowalski here before the judge. He ain't gonna look too kindly upon her sorry ass. This is her second offence... I'll bet she just earned herself a couple-a months behind bars. Let's go," he continued, yanking Rose after him on their way over to the nearest police cruiser.

Rose staggered along trying to keep up with the Sheriff's purposeful stride, but she found time to look over her shoulder and shoot a wistful smile at Billie Jo who was hurrying along after them. "Billie Jo... baby... don't worry 'bout me. Okay? Dontcha worry 'bout me. 's gonna be fine, I promise..."

"Shut up, Kowalski!" the Sheriff barked, yanking Rose closer to him.

At the police cruiser, the Sheriff opened the back door, shoved Rose inside and mashed her trucker hat down onto her dark locks to mock her. Once she was sitting upright in the back seat, he slammed the door shut and pointed an accusing index finger at her through the closed window telling her to stay put or else.

Rose sighed and glanced around the cruiser. Outside, three snotty kids were making faces at her, but Billie Jo was nowhere in sight. "Hung over, bruised, bleedin' and handcuffed in the back of a smelly police cruiser. Ain't this just the flippin' perfect ending to a flippin' perfect Saturday?" she mumbled, shuffling around on the seat in search for a spot that didn't hurt her hands that were still restrained by the silver handcuffs.

Movement outside the police cruiser made her look through the window. When she caught a glimpse of Billie Jo slicing through the crowd of onlookers like a ship's figurehead through a dense fog, she let out a groan of relief and thanked her lucky stars for having such a resilient girlfriend.

Billie Jo had Burton Cutter and the young gentleman who had explained what Junior had said in tow, and they went straight over to the Sheriff and entered negotiations with the bitter, old law man.

Throughout the discussion, Sheriff Holstein shook his head more than he nodded, but he eventually stomped over to the cruiser, yanked the door open and stuck his head inside. "Kowalski, you lucky sonovabitch. You earned yourself at least a month in the slammer for what you did to Mr. Yates Jr., but because Mr. Cutter and Mr. Rauberman have just put in a good word for ya... dunno what the hell Mr. Cutter sees in ya, but that's another story... anyway... you're gonna end up only spendin' a couple of nights behind bars. You'll be out come Tuesday

mornin'... but mark my words, Kowalski. I got your Goddamned number. Ya hear me? Sooner or later, you gonna foul up but good and then I'll be there."

"Sheriff, can I talk to my girlfr-"

"No, you can't, Goddammit!" Holstein said and slammed the door shut. As he strode around the cruiser, Billie Jo ran over to the rear window and blew Rose a frantic string of kisses.

In the back seat, the simple message of love meant more to Rose than a thousand-page book of romantic poetry could. With a heart that hopped, skipped and jumped in her chest out of pure elation for having the most important part of her life back - and possibly her job, too - she puckered up her aching lips and made a few kissies back at Billie Jo before the Sheriff started the car and drove off the lot.

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Hey y'all, it's Rose with a final update. It's a good thing I ain't workin' as a psychic 'cos I sure as hell didn't see that one comin'. Man, I love that good li'l woman... she's the best thing that ever happened to me. Two nights in the slammer ain't nothin' I can't handle... tho' I'm gonna have a hangover come Sunday morn' from those darn Headaches. But that don't matter now.

Hell, I know Billie Jo 'll be waitin' for me when I get out on Tuesday. The two nights we were gonna spend apart when she was angry with me woulda been far, far worse.

Shit, I didn't get to say 'bye and thanks to Lynette... gotta buy her some flowers or shit come Tuesday. Need to talk to her 'bout that creep Willard anyhow. If he touches her again, I'm gonna bust his ass... on second thoughts, maybe I should just talk to 'im instead. The only ass that's gonna be busted if I'm arrested one more time will be my own, and that's gonna be up in the state pen. Ain't gonna expose Billie Jo to that, no Sirree.

With Burton Cutter puttin' in a good word for me... mercy sakes, I wonder if that means I got my job back? I sure hope so. I ain't cut out to be doin' nothin'... I'd kill the grass at the trailer if I had to mow it every day.

Ah, that's for later. First of all, I'm gonna be countin' the hours until Tuesday. Then, me and Billie Jo gonna go home, grab a shower and make love the entire rest of the day. Ooooh yeah, lookin' forward to that already.

If I shuffle around in the seat, I can see Cutter's black Merc drivin' behind the cruiser. In the lights from the passin' cars, I catch a couple-a glimpses of my darlin's beautiful face next to the old man. She's wavin' at me and blowin' me a kiss, ain't that cute?

I try to blow her a couple-a kissies right back but it ain't easy when my lips are grinnin' this broadly. Everythin's gonna be just fine with me and her, and that's the most important thing in my world, now and ever.

The county jailhouse is comin' up so I better sign off. I'm Rose Kowalski and it's been nice talkin' to ya, folks... and hey... ain't life grand?

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**THE END.**

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